

By

Shayne Lloyd

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Abstract

I have created a template of a graphic novel that is iterative and emergent as a process, building on themes of storytelling, coming-of-age, and introspective explorations. It is a blending of two stories. The first is a personal interpretation of a tale of a lost 1920s prospector abducted by a Sasquatch on the west coast of British Colombia. This was first told to me by my late mother, but it's based on local lore. The second story is a series of autobiographical vignettes, based on personal histories and experiences that I had written about in my journal. The two stories were then interwoven in a single document because I see them as connected; there is a poetic connection with these stories, with overlapping themes of coming-of-age as a settler within small town Western Canada and eventually the far Sunshine Coast region near Lund, BC. These connections arose as part of an investigation into self and positionality as a broader part of the Emily Carr MFA program. I offer stories from the viewpoint of a 41-year-old, Caucasian male currently living in Port Alberni, BC. I have been grappling with growing up in Western Canada, navigating my family and my surroundings, and considering how my artwork and writing can add to reconciliation within my life and those Indigenous communities on whose territory I currently live. This project has pushed me to explore various life experiences with openness and vulnerability. Although not yet completed in final form, it is my intent that this work will eventually add a new individualized viewpoint challenging existing colonialist perspectives, such as those I grew up with.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all the teachers and instructors that have pushed me to believe in myself as a student, from my high school art teacher who urged me to consider art school over the military to my many professors and teachers over the years at Vancouver Institute of Media Arts, North Island College, Vancouver Island University and Emily Carr University. Collectively, they encouraged, inspired, challenged and, more than all, believed in me as an artist and student. I also want to say thank you to my amazing life partner and our two amazing children for their love, support, and faith in me as an artist, student, father, and husband. Thanks to the endless people who showed their support and faith in me along the way.

Introduction

During my MFA experience, I have focused on a semi-autobiographical project of retelling a well-known story that was passed down to me by my late mother while simultaneously intermixing stories of my own history, life lessons, experiences, and struggles. I share the experiences of growing up in a busy family of six, filled with both happiness and disfunction, living in locations from the Yukon to a small coastal town in British Columbia. Additionally, I tell a story, from my mother, of a man who supposedly was abducted by a family of Sasquatch in 1924. The man's name was Albert Ostman, and he claimed to have been abducted near the head of the Toba Inlet on the coast of BC while on his solo prospecting expedition. This story and countless others are part of a tapestry of incredible tales associated with Sasquatch, also known as Bigfoot. The subject intersects with First Nations cultural beliefs. In my discussions with local master carver, storyteller, and elder Tim Paul of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth nation, he explained to me that Sasquatch was considered a guardian of the wilderness with special abilities to travel through portholes and turn invisible. I was inspired to capture the story, because I found it personally relevant both in terms of me living in the region of Sasquatch and being a tale of adversity that I found resonant. Additionally, it could be particularly well told a comic format, with the visuals as a foundation to show my interpretations and providing place-specific imagery showing clear images of the location.

This experience of producing the sequential art of Ostman's account prompted me to review many of my own histories and personal stories. The Ostman account has some odd links to my past: the story took place near Lund, BC (near where I lived), we are both white males whose lives have been directly related to the Pacific coastal rainforest environment of the far Sunshine Coast, and we have both have navigated life as a settler on the same unceded lands. There is sense of optimistic ignorance that I feel I share with Ostman, a desire to pursue ambitious goals with individual determination, facing the unknown with a willing attitude and dealing with the consequences of our decisions as they unfold. Much like Ostman, I feel a reluctance to share parts of my story in fear of the reaction from others. I am conscious of being judged by others for my thoughts, beliefs, and personal histories. Nonetheless, I am intrigued with the content that has been generated through a willingness to look deeper into self. My thesis is an inquiry into self through considering my coming-of-age stories in relation to a life-

changing historical story of another settler. Both folklore and my own memories have a sense of romanticization. I had imagined my histories in ways that were unintentionally elaborated, but through journaling and looking closely at my and my family's experiences, I recalibrated my understanding of the stories with a closer sense of accuracy and truth. Part of my graphic novel is about celebrating the romanticization of experiences, and another part is about demystifying experiences.

The verb "prospecting" has dual meanings; it means to search for mineral deposits in a place, and it also is a more generalized term meaning "to search for or look for". Additionally, it's a word associated with colonization of land and resources. In Ostman's story, it means searching for gold. Ostman then found adversity that redirected his life when encountering the Sasquatch family. In my stories, I'm reflecting on ways that I've overcome adversity and considering how this helps me to come to an understanding of how I want to direct my life. The word "prospecting" connects our stories to colonization, suggesting a lens that may affect the reader's interpretation of the narratives and how our stories take place on unceded lands but from settlers' viewpoints. Through sharing these stories of failures and triumphs, it's my belief that this builds connection as others may read the stories and identify with the sense of overcoming adversity. The trauma experienced by Ostman in his Sasquatch encounter or me with addiction will engage the reader.

Specifically relating to my stories of addiction, I think of a quote from Jane Tolmie's book *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*. She writes "comics about abuse offer a visual network and strategy for bringing together survivors and those interested in raising awareness. They also extend the borders of autobiography about trauma to make us think about the implications of the image in debates about how prose autobiography forces the reader to either identify or disidentify."¹ I am working to articulate, with illustrations and script, anecdotes from my life that share a sense of my upbringing. These examples convey how I navigated my family, activities, and places that I lived growing up. Despite my stories being unique to my own experience, I hope that they resonate with a universal audience. How do my coming-of-age stories create connections between others, past and present? How does the century-old story of a young settler meeting a Sasquatch relate to my own experiences? Illustration, painting, and

¹ Tolmie, Jane. *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*. Pg xii.

storytelling represent the core of my studio practice, while my research centers on investigating relevant themes and creative works, exploring personal and non-personal histories, and presenting the findings as a graphic novel. I am exploring how the creation of my graphic novel can lead to insights and perspectives on how my experience can relate topics such as ways to understand one's position as a settler, mental health issues and human relationships. The overriding theme of this graphic novel is to tell a coming-of-age story, and by interweaving my experiences with Ostman's story, to suggest parallels between contemporary life and folklore while illuminating themes such as overcoming adversity and holding personal information that one is hesitant to share.

In this thesis support document, I will first discuss my methods behind the creative process. The three major themes in my work are: 1) Dual narratives: a historical story and my own experiences, 2) Examining how my relationship to place opens new understandings, 3) My use of the graphic novel format. Each will be discussed in how it relates to my practice as well as in relation to other artists. Inspired by artists such as Jeff Lamire and Jim Terry, I seek a raw and unique way of telling the human experience through sequential art. This graphic novel project has helped give me fresh perspectives of parallels and differences between the people and places from my history in relation to those of my current life.



Fig. 1: Ostman Setting up camp, 2021

Fig. 2: Tree Forts Panel, 2022

Positionality

I was an 80s child and the youngest of four hockey-crazed boys. We called home to various small towns, living in territories and provinces throughout western Canada, from snowy northern communities like Carmacks and Watson Lake, Yukon to the rainy coast of Powell River, BC. Some of my memories are very positive, such as days spent with siblings playing endless hours of hockey on the backyard rink. However, I have also dealt with incredibly challenging situations, including trauma, loss, addiction, and mental health struggles. The loss of my mother was a pivotal point in my life. In my early 20s and living in active addiction myself, I struggled with the fact that she died because of someone's careless decision to operate a vehicle while intoxicated. Yet I was no different. The anger and frustration I felt were turned inward because I acknowledged that I was living a similar life to the addict that killed my mom, and I could have imagined making a similar foolish action.

The political sphere in which I was raised in was a conservative mindset with predominantly colonialist viewpoints. White privilege attitudes were an unignorable reality in my life. Being slapped in the back of the head at dinner and then being told to "eat like a white man" for chewing food too loudly was a jarring memory revisited and unearthed in my journaling process. Reviewing this memory made me better understand why I can't eat when stressed and why I hate eating at formal table settings, and it is a declaration of mindsets that I was raised in. The expectations of balancing your cutlery upside down and parallel to signal that you have finished your meal is a tradition my daughters will never have to endure. The insights that came from journaling stories such as this led me to re-evaluate my personal histories. Through combining personal history and art, I aim to address unresolved personal questions or overlooked experiences. For instance, now that I am a father, re-visiting my childhood relationships with my parents has helped me to consider perhaps what my own parents endured raising children.

When I graduated from high school, I received training in classical animation, and that has been key to my illustrative and painting techniques. I have spent years developing and refining a painting, sculptural and design practice that creatively celebrates and interprets elements of the wildlife, forest, and marine environments where I live. In addition to a studio painting practice, using acrylic paints and pen and ink, my work in illustration led to freelance

design work, mural paintings, and a clothing company I cofounded, *Ursalia Creative*. The designs I create for *Ursalia Creative* are meant to suggest a story and represent an appreciation of nature, place, and history. Below are examples from the current company catalogue.

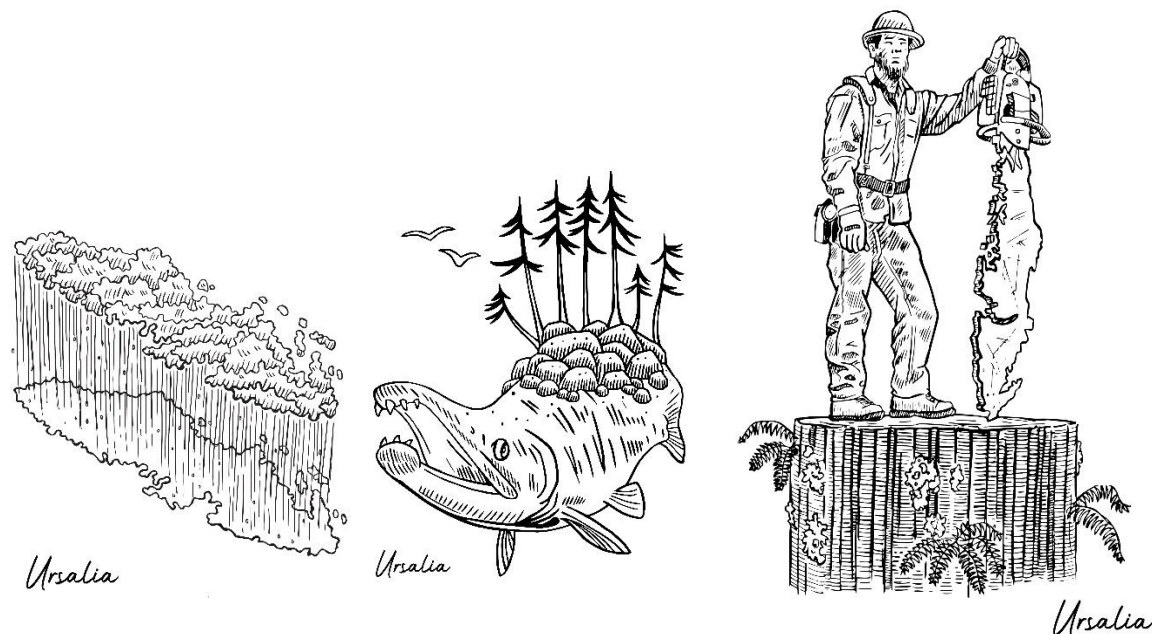


Fig. 3: Ursalia Creative Designs, 2022

Within the MFA program, the content of my studio studies has been progressively introspective, exploring and studying my thoughts and feelings about the challenging aspects of my life experience such as family, mental health, relationships with myself and others. The experience of sharing with an audience has helped me make connections between myself and viewers. I don't feel I need to have an intimate relationship with someone in order to share personal experiences. I have found it is the vulnerability and openness between strangers that has allowed me to get a better understanding of myself. I don't know what parts of my storytelling will benefit others, but I know I must be open, honest, and venerable. My self-evaluation through artistic processes has fostered conversations addressing addiction, trauma, and mental health issues.

Research Questions

- How can presenting a historical legend in comparison to my own experiences help me to gain insight on overcoming adversity, finding humility, and considering how a local folklore story can have resonance in my daily life?
- How can exploring a relationship to place, including considerations of local stories, nature and history, help me to shape my artistic interests, become closer to members of my community, and learn about local Indigenous perspectives?
- How can I use a graphic novel format to create a relationship between two disparate stories and to make my own experiences and histories resonate with readers?



Fig. 4: Ostman Panning, 2021

Methodology

I am a storyteller and an illustrator.

I began creating my graphic novel by focusing on the story of the lost prospector Albert Ostman, the man who claimed to be abducted by a family of Sasquatch. After breaking the story down into sections, I then worked to sequentially illustrate it. While I worked on the Ostman story, I also kept a digital journal where I compiled a series of entries that focused my personal histories and stories. I chose selected entries to illustrate. I further edited the journal entries down, so the critical content most relevant to the story that I was telling was included in the script portion of the graphic novel. Both the Ostman story and my own stories were created in parallel—I intuitively felt a relationship between the two, but I didn't decide how to present them together until later in my process.

In my production, I use both traditional and digital applications. As Scott McCloud states, the two most important tools used in the making of a graphic novel or comic is your mind and your drawing hand². Following his philosophy, I remain flexible and open to a variety of tools and methods in my process. I use a combination of traditional graphite, inks and washes as well as digital pens and illustrating programs. I always begin with rough thumbnails, using paper and pencil, when considering a scene. I then start laying out panels on pre-set templates in Adobe Photoshop. I utilize both stock photography and imagination to construct the rough scenes based off the thumbnail drawings. I print out the artwork to the proper dimensions and begin to redraw the artwork using non-photo blue Cole Erase pencils. My next step is to ink the illustrations using a combination of waterproof illustrating pens and ink washes. Finally, it is then ready to be scanned and digitized so that it may be formatted for print purposes. Essentially my work is a bit of a mix between the digital and analog world. I have found working with analog methods in my production vital to my process because it keeps a traditional authenticity to the style of the finished work.

² McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*, page 207.

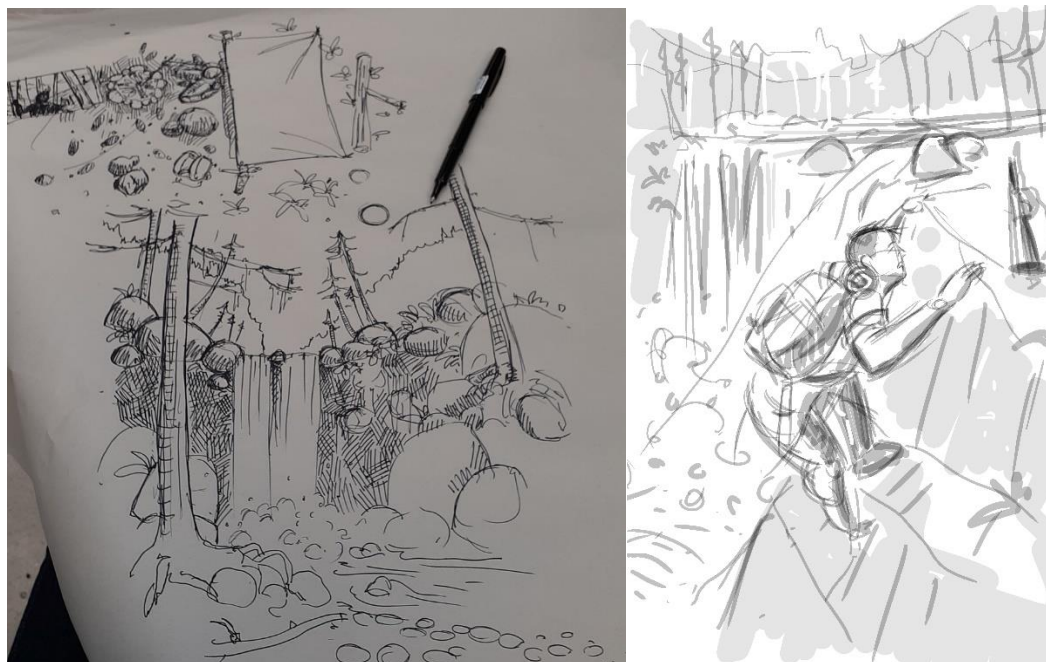


Fig. 5: Waterfall study, 2021

Fig. 6: Ostman Climbing Waterfall, 2021

The storyboarding, layout, and character design skills from my animation training are foundations I have relied upon. The storyboarding process helps to capture the flow of the scenes as the story is told. Remaining loose and drawing fast keeps me from getting caught up in the details before considering the bigger picture. The storyboarding process helps me to determine the camera angle, background, and layout of each scene. I design characters, props, and environments that I can reproduce consistently. I settled on using a handwritten font type because I feel it shows more of the artist's hand in the final work and is also editable (as opposed to hand-written text). I subscribe to Scott McCloud's attitudes towards backgrounds and layout design; I try to think of the backgrounds in my illustrations as environments that the characters exist within.³

This study is my first attempt at a graphic novel, so I am relying on instructional materials such as Scott McCloud's *Making Comics* as a guide and tool in presenting this project.

³ McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*, page 178.

McCloud covers the entire process of making graphic novels and comics, from bringing the concept from mind, to script, to paper and last, to print. I am curious how imagery impacts the story, how line work and values impact the content. I aim to create comic panels that convey a sense of realism, have good pacing, and establish mood. I am honing my own voice as a Canadian graphic novel artist and writer, creating original content based on careful consideration and analysis of subject.

I have spent time developing the stories from my own life through a journaling process. There is no chronological timeline, rather short entries based on memories that come to mind. The unique part of this process is that it naturally triggers other recessed memories that I then want to write about. The short stories have a mix of humor, sadness, struggle, and connections between family and friends. I have interwoven my stories with Ostman's tale. Each section of the Ostman tale begins with an overview page of writing and is followed by multiple pages of textless comic panels. In my personal stories, I chose to combine the writing and artwork together, with text on one page and a single illustration on the adjacent page. I prefer a healthy balance between word and imagery. This balance between words and art is highlighted by Scott McCloud as he states, "In most great comics, that balance is a dynamic one. Sometimes words take the lead, sometimes pictures do, but both work together to propel the story forward."⁴

⁴ McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*, page 128.



Fig. 7: Ostman and Sasquatch Observing Each Other, 2021

Theme 1 : Dual Stories: a Historical Story and My Own Experience

My two-fold project first began with the re-telling of the Ostman story, as passed on to me by my late mother. The last town Ostman visited in the 1920s was Lund, BC, a small coastal community just outside of where I lived in Powell River. My late mother was a teacher at the tiny Lund Elementary school in the 1990s. I only realized years after she had passed that I was linked to Ostman's story in curious ways: geographically, being both settlers, our lives intertwined with our surrounding environment, and facing big obstacles at a similar age. The odd connections to Ostman's story triggered more memories associated to place and family. This led

to a deeper introspective study to revisit, rediscover and reconsider personal history and experiences touching on relationships, traumas, and mental health issues.

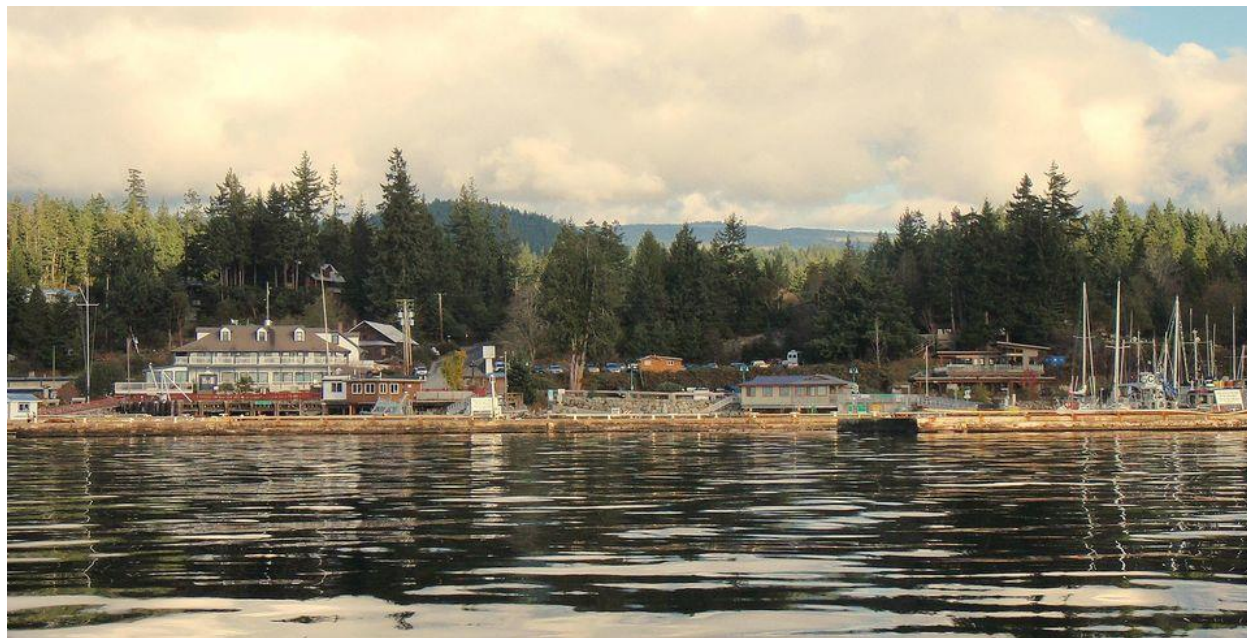


Fig. 8: Lund BC, 2022

Researching information relevant to the Ostman story has been critical to the content of my graphic novel study. I've gathered background information of Ostman's original story through sources such as books like Readers Digest's *Mysteries of The Unexplained* and *Legends Of The Nahanni Valley* and interviews with author Hammerson Peters, who has written of Ostman. This research helped me visualise and prepare Ostman's account. The story of Albert Ostman's incredible experience was first published by John Willison Green in 1957 after he had interviewed Ostman. The story was published in *The Harrison Gazette*, and Green also went on to publish multiple books on the Sasquatch. *Readers Digest* later published a retelling of Green's story in 1985. Gaining an Indigenous perspective of Ostman's account has also been an important part of my research, because the Ostman account is a settler's story that gives reference to Sasquatch. In addition to Hammerson Peter's book and an interview with that

author, I also discussed the subject of Sasquatch with local elder, storyteller and master carver Tim Paul. He referred to the Sasquatch as a mystical being whose role it was to “protect the wilderness”⁵ and possess the ability to shape-shift and travel through dimensions. I believe it is important to recognize Nuu-Chah-Nulth and West coast Salish cultural history because Sasquatch is rooted in regional Indigenous legends, and the Sasquatch legend is now familiar across wider North American culture. It is important to me that I show the Sasquatch in a respectful manner. I acknowledge that some Indigenous individuals feel that the Sasquatch has been victim to cultural appropriation, with many depictions of this sacred and respected spiritual creature portrayed in less-than-flattering circumstances. As mentioned in the podcast *Canadaland*, hosted by Jesse Brown, the Sasquatch has either been portrayed as a mean monster or a clumsy dim-witted oaf lumbering around in the wilderness.⁶ Current pop culture features examples of Sasquatch imagery as a beef jerky mascot, on bottle openers, and in other gimmicky uses for utilitarian objects.

Additionally, through journaling my own experience, illustrating it, and releasing it to an audience, I can better understand myself and make deeper connections with others around me. I select from my writings content that best supports my thesis. For example, I included a story that references my past struggles with alcoholism. I felt that I needed to be vulnerable in order to make a genuine connection with my audience. The illustration depicts an individual trapped inside a bottle of alcohol. The writing has a sarcastic tone of an active alcoholic who is making excuses for his habit. I believe Ostman and I share a slight hubris in the actions of our pasts, getting much more than we bargained for in life lessons because of this. Like Ostman, I have gotten away with close calls. I feel as though both Ostman’s story and my own are coming-of-age stories, two settlers attempting to establish their own lives. Considering the geographical connection to Ostman’s account and my own history and connection to Lund, BC, made the story feel real, as we had walked on the same pathways and looked at the same waterways. I think that combining both histories creates poetic connections and invites interpretation.

⁵ Paul, Tim. *Personal Interview*, April 15, 2022.

⁶ Brown, Jessie. *Canadaland: The True Story of Sasquatch*. Episode 816 Sept 19, 2022.



Fig. 9: Alcoholism panel, pen and ink on paper, 2022

Researching other artists and writers who are discussing similar subjects that I address has been informative. Jim Terry is an artist and storyteller who captures an honest and emotional testimony of his personal memoirs in *Come Home, Indio*. Terry educates the reader on growing up in the Chicago suburbs, feeling at odds with the world, and feeling torn between being half Caucasian and half Native American as he navigates his adolescent years into adulthood. Terry articulates his struggles with alcoholism as well as spiritual triumphs and healing. The memoir is a discussion about social classes, race, and addiction, and it is a tale about recovery and self-discovery. Terry comments on personal relationships and experiences growing up. He has what feels to be an honest portrayal of childhood and adolescence experiences. Terry's insights into his significant relationships, addiction issues and spiritual revival is refreshingly encouraging. He writes and about the adversity he has experienced. There are parts of Terry's memoir that I have not experienced such as racism and bigotry, and there are the parts that I absolutely identify with, such as growing up around alcoholism, feeling like an outsider and turning to art as a personal outlet at a young age. One significance of Jim Terry's work is his vulnerability. It is a sobering reflection of his journey, with struggles and triumphs beautifully expressed through sequential art. I am impressed by Terry's openness and felt inspired to challenge myself to be as open with readers in my own work as he was with his. I was not sure what was appropriate and what was not appropriate to share about my personal life, and I asked Terry, through email, how he decided on what to share as part of his memoirs. He replied, "Absolutely, and there is plenty I left out of the memoir. I nixed anything that might involve someone else who might not want to be made public or would be hurtful to their reputation or the like. As for personal things, I was liberal with what I shared but very aware of HOW I shared it. I found I could insinuate or leave things vague enough to get certain points across without battering the reader over the head about it." ⁷

Terry exhibits a clear understanding of comic book layout and design. His illustrations are expressive and convey a sense of narrative. As an example, one full-page panel in *Come Home Indio* depicts a young Jim and his sister embracing one another while enduring the hostile relationships of the adults around them. This singular image with the children taking cover in the corner of the panel is powerful without additional panels needed to convey the scene. One

⁷ Terry, Jim. *Personal Interview*. June 20, 2022.

difference that I noticed between Jim Terry's approach to work and that of my own was regarding the use of stock photos for reference. I tend to use stock photos to reference and as a base for the foundation of a scene, character posing and prop reference. I asked Terry if he also used stock photos in his studio process, as I feel it is a common practice. To my surprise, he responded: "I rarely use photo reference unless it is to emulate a specific building, piece of machinery or costume. Once I get a handle on it, I will cartoon it from there. To me it doesn't save time and tends to make things a little stiff, though my studio mates use it well and the results are much better than when I try."⁸

I respect Jim Terry's confidence in how he creates almost all his imagery from his mind, rather than utilizing photo references to observe. In my own work, I tend to use stock photography for visual aids in composing my scenes. The great availability and access to reference photos online has proven to be a tool I use to provide a foundation of how an image will look, helping me to create believable scenes, layouts, and character posing.

As Scott McCloud notes in *Making Comics*, "Imagination and improvisation can help you with realistic scenes as well as fantastic ones, but if you're going for a strong sense of realism, you'll also need to do some research."⁹ With a single splash page, Terry conveys a significant amount of storytelling in one panel. I have begun to practice a similar strategy within my own studio practice, where I aim to create a single image that illustrates a story in one compelling frame.

⁸ Terry, Jim. *Personal Interview*. June 20, 2022.

⁹ McCloud, Scott. *Making Comics*. Pg 176.



Fig. 10: Jim Terry, *Come Home, Indio*, 2020

Theme 2—Relationship to place: Interests, Convictions and Thoughts of Reconciliation

The places that I lived growing up influenced me creatively; the scenes and subject matter that I created in art were almost always an impression of the wildlife and personal scenes that I have seen. I noticed the pride that people take in the environments where I had lived. I'd go to a friend's house and see the animals on the walls, and paintings of scenery and artifacts collected from their environments were on display. My studio practice has heavily relied upon and embraced the areas in where I have lived as I create various works of art depicting local wildlife and scenery. My studio practice is not land-based practice; however, I feel the revitalization and attention towards Indigenous educational and artistic strategies like land-based practice has influenced some of my work. I am becoming more focused on my connection and relationship with the land that I live on. The *Community Building Mural* is an example of how I created art through learning about the local Indigenous history of the Tseshaht First Nation. The images were produced based on the Tseshaht people's origins, diverse history and unique relationship to the land.



Fig. 11: *Community Building Mural* 2020, Port Alberni BC: Shayne Lloyd, Tim Paul and Gordon Dick

I was born in Canada, yet I am a descendent of colonists that immigrated to Canada only a generation or two before me. I am not First Nations, and I acknowledge that I live on the land as a guest. In recent years, I have had incredible opportunities to work in collaboration with several First Nations artists, spiritual leaders and elders on two large scale murals. These projects helped educate me in traditional form line styles in addition to some of the belief systems of the Nuu-Chan-Nulth First Nation, which is the traditional territory that I currently live on. Under the guidance of Nuu-Chan-Nulth artist Tim Paul, we discussed and designed the mural, including the traditional designs unique to Nuu-Chah-Nulth form lines. I was sure to follow the exact design when painting to scale, ensuing that I made no deviations with regards to the form lines and design. I was hesitant at first to take on this project, as the form lines are not from my heritage, and it was only after discussing the project with Tim Paul and receiving his blessing that I begin painting.



Fig. 12: *Memorial Mural 2017*: Artists, Shayne Lloyd and Tim Paul.

I have had to navigate some hard conversations regarding using First Nations traditional designs in commissioned work. In the recent past, I was asked to do a First Nations-style mural for a local business. I explained that although I have collaborated with First Nations artists, I am not permitted to simply imitate a traditional style independently. Part of the introspective content of my graphic novel is a reflection on how I situate myself as a descendent of colonialism and how I have navigated my life experiences to date. According to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) website, the commission was initially created in 2008 with the purpose of documenting the history and the lasting impacts of the Canadian Indian Residential School system on Indigenous students and their families.¹⁰ It is also just the beginning of a long social shift taking place in Canada. The word “reconciliation” has been used liberally in politics, news and media now becoming a familiar word in Canada. Despite what the Canadian government intends, some First Nations people that I know feel that the TRC does not do enough nor does the TRC represent the true feelings of Indigenous people. As master carver and storyteller Gordon Dick of the Tseshah First Nation described it, “reconciliation implies there was a relationship before, between the Canadian Government and First Nations, when in reality it was more of a dictatorship that First Nations had to endure”.¹¹ I have come to understand that reconciliation is an action word. Actively working together on various projects has been my direct path to a growing understanding of aspects of the Nuuchahnulth Nation’s culture, specifically the Tseshah First Nation. In various collaborative projects, I have learned about the histories of how five nations amalgamated to form the Tseshah, and this story was portrayed in a mural I worked on. I have also learned of attitudes towards community of the Tseshah Nation as well as art styles unique to the Nuuchahnulth Nations. One way my thesis project had led me toward reconciliation is through establishing closer meaningful connections with Tseshah members as well as through other Indigenous writers such as Jim Terry and Hammerson Peters. I try to offer reciprocity when I can; one recent example was providing knowledge about tee shirt production and printing to Kelly Robinson, a local Tseshah artist.

¹⁰ *The National Center for Truth and Reconciliation*, 2022

¹¹ Dick, Gordon. *Personal Interview*. April, 2022.



Fig. 13: Rain Panel, 2022

Canadian born Jeff Lemire is a prolific artist and author, whose portfolio I have grown to appreciate and study. The graphic novel *Secret Path*, written by Gord Downie and illustrated by Lemire, confronts the harsh reality of the residential school system, a government program enforced by the Canadian government from Confederation through the 1990s. The tragic tale is of Chanie “Charlie” Wenjack, a twelve-year-old boy who died escaping from the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Ontario. The sense of place and environment is crucial to this story, with images of the forest integral to the journey of Wenjack across vast lands. The book brings to light a new way of understanding the horrors of the residential school experience through a graphic novel format. Like many other Canadians of colonist decent, the author and illustrator were not raised being educated of these darker parts of Canadian history. Gord Downie felt obligated to write and tell Charlie Wenjack’s story, and he had the support of the Wenjack family and his Ojibwe community. Downie published an album as part of the *Secret Path* multimedia project and Jeff Lemire produced the illustrations that made the graphic novel portion of the project. There was also a film produced, and a tour was done to promote and educate the public of this part of Canadian history. *Secret Path* is important because it confronts a heinous chapter of Canadian history that demands acknowledgment. Lemire’s work on *Secret Path* is also important because the publication is in a sense an act towards the discussion of reconciliation, confronting uncomfortable truths of our history as part of successfully moving on.

As a nonindigenous artist, Jeff Lemire is able to contribute to reconciliation through recognition of the traumas many First Nations people endured under Canadian rule, and he does this with illustration. The phrase “Nothing about us without us” comes to mind when considering *Secret Path*. It is highly important to recognize that it is unethical to simply tell stories about Indigenous peoples and represent their histories without prior consultation, which is why Gord Downie sought permission and the approval of the family of Chanie Wenjack, who was the main character of *Secret Path* represented in the story. Chanie was escaping from Cecilia Jeffery Indian School in October of 1966.

Theme 3 – Using the Graphic Novel Format

The project now has 67 pages of panels of Ostman's story and my own autobiographical history. I want to tell Ostman's story like a silent film, using comic panels of artwork unaccompanied by narrative or text. I feel that not having the text in the Ostman story references the silent film era, a form of storytelling in Ostman's time, a time inspired by pantomime actors like Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin who masterfully used expressive gesture and posture to act out the story. As part of my animation training, I studied these outstanding actors, with consideration of posture, gesture, and expression of the characters that is directly translatable to key posing in animation and sequential art. I use the artwork panels to slow the reader down and consider what is happening.

I work in of a non-linear fashion, changing my order of operation frequently to attain the best content. I often switch from writing to drawing, drawing to research, viewing documents and photos that stimulate memory, and conversations with others that help ignite memories associated with my autobiographical content. As Professor and author Jane Tolmie describes in *Drawing from Life: Memory and Subjectivity in Comic Art*, "What is at stake in comic memoir and semi-autobiography is embodiment. Remembering a scene with the intent of rendering it in sequential art requires nonlinear thinking and engagement with physicality". Tolmie is stating that the visual work of the artist in a memoir or semi-autobiography needs to be paired with the emotions of the author for it to be effective to the reader.

Autobiographical graphic novels that include life events and history are of significant interest to me. Writer Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, offers a voyeur experience into real life struggles and triumphs of everyday people. I am interested in exploring other people's personal histories as I value identifying and understanding how people deal with adversity in their lives. There is a growing community of artists contributing autobiographical content and there is a growing audience that seeks out this kind of work. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* and Marjan Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* are prominent examples of graphic novelists using autobiographic content. I feel this graphic novel format works well as a representation of an individual's perspective beyond strictly what is achievable with text alone. The visual content brings another layer that adds depth to the readers experience.

I have always valued the technical abilities of underground cartoonist Robert Crumb, regardless of his content. For me Crumb displays absolute consistency in his drawings, and I can recognize a Robert Crumb drawing without seeing a signature. He displayed this consistency in his ambitious publication *The Book of Genesis: Illustrated*. This biblical book is done completely as a graphic novel. The illustrations reinforce the story and keeps the reader turning pages. The craftsmanship and time put into every panel is mind boggling. What I value most in Crumb's work is the obvious time and labour that is put into every drawing. He uses no digital tools in his studio and sticks with the traditional analog tools of illustration. His ability to render with line and cross hatching has been influential to my practice, as I often study how he approaches light's interactions with form.

My own experience in creating autobiographical content has been like opening a can of worms, because memories of my past bubble to the surface and I realise that I am remembering past thoughts and finding content that is relevant and worth sharing. My current thesis project work, which I hope will eventually become a published graphic novel, is still in need of more content. There are more relevant stories and personal perspectives that I feel are need to further represent my experience growing up in western Canada. This includes stories of my mother that expose pain and vulnerability, the sense of patriotism in my family growing up that helps establish part of the tone of my upbringing, and a story from my own experience of observing something that could be considered unexplained and supernatural. I additionally need to still clean up many of the illustrations in my book. I also need to further explore and illuminate relationships between my and Ostman's narratives.

Conclusion

Graphic novels are an efficient way to communicate, inform and investigate. Graphic novels offer a conduit to explore self, personal experiences, and more. My studio practice is informed by my research into both personal and non-personal histories, from the perspective of a colonialist descendent living in Canada in the 21st century. Furthermore, the content I have produced through studio practice and research offers possible new perspectives only made when shared with other readers. Working through images and word, I hope to continue important conversations regarding trauma, mental illness, parenthood, and adolescence to trigger questions that need to be asked and explored.

Regardless of the medium I work with, storytelling is always an essential part of my work. My paintings, carvings, tee shirt designs, murals and the graphic novel all tell stories. The imagery in my studio practice often reflects the places in which I have lived. I feel a connection and relationship with the environments in which I live, and that connection is amplified when I attempt to translate my appreciation for it through art. The work that I focus on in my studio practice often both tells a story and shows a connection between myself and the place in which I live. I feel that including environment into my work connects the work to place, helping to both figuratively and literally ground the work. The graphic novel project has been an opportunity to dive deeply into this content.

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