



Indigenous Youth Navigating Intergenerational Trauma, Structural Violence, and Relationships in Urban Contexts

¹Lakxana S, PhD Research Scholar,

²Dr. A. Vanitha, Associate Professor,
PG & Research Department of English,
Vellalar College for Women, Erode, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Indigenous youth are a dynamic yet vulnerable group that must navigate the complex webs of culture, identity, and institutionalized violence against them. They represent survival and Indigenous futures based on self-determination, resilience, and social continuity. This research investigates how these native young adults confront and negotiate structural violence, intergenerational trauma, and identity within the urban environment through the indigenous graphic lens of Tasha Spillett's *Surviving The City* and Patti LaBoucane-Benson's *The Outside Circle*. Generally, graphic literature is illustrated stories that combine visuals and dialogue in a sequential pattern to explore themes and convey the meaning effectively. In particular, Indigenous graphic novels utilize plots deeply rooted in their culture to highlight Native perspectives, histories, and worldviews. The author weaves the narrative space by integrating ancient knowledge with modern concerns, such as resistance, identity, and colonization. The visual storytelling portrays youth as carriers of identity, gender diversity, and community-based values, making these depictions challenge the misrepresentation of Indigenous realities in the mainstream media. Therefore, the medium turns into a potent tool for collective healing and heritage reclamation. The ultimate objective of this study is to critically analyse how Indigenous youth encounter and react to systemic oppression and inherited trauma in urban settings, emphasizing how their identities, relationships, and cultural expressions, particularly through graphic narratives, serve as avenues for healing, resilience, and resistance.

Keywords: Graphic novels, Intergenerational trauma, Indigenous young adults, Urban Indigeneity, Structural Violence.

Introduction

Young adults are categorised into the age group from 18 to 25, and it is a transitional phase between adolescence and adulthood. Throughout this passage to adulthood, individuals undergo personal, social, and emotional development and begin exploring their identities, careers, and relationships. This liminal phase offers them independence and self-discovery while challenging them with issues related to mental health, societal expectations, and navigating complex social systems. Indigenous young adults not only have to face problems related to identity formation, independence, education, and relationships like their non-indigenous peers, but they also have to deal with the impacts of colonization, historical trauma, and cultural erasure, which shape their experiences. They are often prone to intergenerational trauma caused by drugs, marginalisation, unavailability of parental guidance, residential schools, and land dispossession. Despite these pressures, these native youths stand as the stewards of their culture, language, tradition, and community knowledge. While all young adults must deal with change and transition, these Indigenous adolescents must reclaim their identities and oppose assimilation within systems that have historically marginalized or oppressed them. So, they have to reach every milestone of their life while dealing with obstacles, both personally and politically.

The struggles faced by these young adults are vividly portrayed in the Indigenous graphic novels *Surviving the City* by Tasha Spillett, illustrated by Natasha Donovan, and *The Outside Circle* by Patti LaBoucane-Benson, sketched by Kelly Mellings. Each, in their distinctive way, highlights the various facets of the challenges that the Native youth community faces in the rapidly expanding urban environment. Both authors employ an illustrated storytelling methodology to help the current generation understand and learn about the unknown aspects of indigenous society. Tasha Spillett is a New York Times bestselling novelist who derives strength from her Trinidadian and Indigenous (Cree) ancestry. She is also a well-known researcher, public speaker, and instructor. Her volunteer work mostly revolves around community-led initiatives that prioritize the emancipation of Indigenous women, women of colour, and build a world that celebrates children's happiness and well-being. This involves discussing, writing, and speaking on Indigenous motherhood, the MMIWG2S epidemic, traditional teachings, and the part played by Indigenous women in political movements. Recognizing that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals are experts in their own lives, Tasha teaches

about decolonization, anti-racism, and how to resist oppression in all its manifestations using a narrative technique and anti-racism theory. She is the author of the multi-award-winning three-volume graphic novel series, *Surviving the City*, New York Times bestselling picture book, *I Sang You Down* from the Stars, and her current visual book, *Beautiful You, Beautiful Me*. *Surviving The City* has won the Indigenous Voice Award and the other two picture books have also received significant recognition among kids and young adults. She restores room for identity, culture, and intergenerational strength through compelling narrative. Her tales compassionately and honestly highlight the living realities of young people of Indigenous descent. By doing this, she gives voice to what has long gone unheard and an avenue to influence the literary world.

Tasha Spillett's graphic novel debut, *Surviving the City*, consists of three volumes: *Surviving the City*, *From the Roots Up*, and *We Are the Medicine*. This series follows the lives of two Indigenous teenagers, Dez (Innnew) and Miikwan (Anishinaabe), as they deal with the challenges of growing up in an urban environment influenced by loss, colonialism, and cultural resiliency. The narrative's central theme is the terrible reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). Miikwan, who was grieving the loss of her mother, is left in shock when Dez vanishes after being threatened with placement in a group home. After her grandmother's demise, Dez enters a group home where she pursues her Two-Spirit personality and forms a new bond. Both girls eventually start their senior year of high school and start making decisions about their futures. The collective anguish brought on by the discovery of 215 children's remains in an abandoned residential school challenges their personal development. It forces them to engage in more in-depth introspection and community activity. In all three volumes, the series deftly explores trauma, healing, queerness, and gender, ultimately reinforcing Indigenous children's survival, resilience, and sovereignty.

While Tasha Spillett explores Indigenous identity through graphic storytelling, another powerful voice in this discourse is Patti LaBoucane-Benson. Senator Patti LaBoucane-Benson is from the Métis community, and she has devoted her thirty years of professional life to helping her people in Alberta, Canada, and the world. Patti's doctoral studies in Human Ecology at the University of Alberta concentrated on the resilience of Indigenous families and communities in the face of various forms of trauma. Patti's insights into this discussion stem from her life-changing Cree ceremony experiences. Her life and her research into the most effective Indigenous healing methods have been influenced by the Cree elders' lessons on love, respect, humility, and honesty. In her works, she establishes a common ground between Western and Indigenous science and builds

a bridge between neuroscience and Indigenous knowledge of child development. This paved the way for her debut illustrated novel, *The Outside Circle*.

It was published in English in 2015 by House of Anansi Press and in French by Glénat Québec in 2023. The narrative follows the journey of Pete, a young Indigenous man involved in gang violence who lives with his mother, a heroin addict, and his younger brother, Joey. One night, Pete and Dennis, his mother's boyfriend, have a heated argument that sends Dennis to the morgue and Pete to jail. At first, Pete stays close to his crew until a fight in jail makes him realize how bad he has become to Joey, which forces him to start a rehabilitation program that includes ceremonies and traditional healing circles. Dr. LaBoucane-Benson's decades of research and engagement with Indigenous men in prison served as the inspiration for this fictional tale. In addition to being a Globe and Mail National Best Seller, *The Outside Circle* also won the 2016 Burt Award for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Literature.

By applying Intergenerational Trauma Theory to these two cultural texts, this research interrogates how past injustices continue to shape present-day realities. The idea that intergenerational or multigenerational trauma is the accumulation of emotional and psychological harm that is transmitted from one generation to the next was initially proposed by Rakoff et al. based on the effects of the Holocaust that were transmitted to their upcoming generation. Past generations' experiences of oppression, prejudice, and violent historical events have an impact on subsequent generations' lives in the form of unresolved grief and chronic trauma. Members of minority groups have suffered greatly as a result of the persistent oppression, the generational accumulation of trauma, and their low social standing. The high rates of sadness, rage, tension, hypervigilance, low self-esteem, and cultural shame, along with the loss of language, culture, and tradition, are all manifestations of the emotional impacts of multigenerational trauma.

Navigating Structural Violence in Urban Indigenous Contexts

An urban area is a location characterized by a high population density, featuring developed housing, transportation, healthcare, and education systems. Similar to a city or large town, it is a place where a large number of people live and work together. It has buildings, roads, schools, and services, and is more developed than rural or village areas. These metropolitan areas are filled with opportunities for progress and growth; however, it is not free of hardships. Unemployment, high cost of living, environmental degradation,

overcrowding, and lack of accessibility to necessary amenities like healthcare and education for low-income groups and migrants are major issues faced by the citizens. For indigenous people, these issues worsen since they are impacted not only economically but also by historical and cultural displacement. Systemic racism, lack of ties to ancestral lands and languages, loss of identity, high rates of poverty, drug addiction, lack of representation, and cultural erasure influence their urban lives. Because of this disparity, the term "urban Indigeneity" was coined to acknowledge the lived experiences, cultural resiliency, and changing identities of Indigenous people in metropolitan areas.

The systematic ways that societal systems deprive or injure people by prohibiting them from fulfilling their fundamental needs are referred to as structural violence. Through the lens of urban Indigeneity, colonial legacies are perpetuated in metropolitan areas, and Indigenous people actively reject and redefine these spaces as places of cultural continuity, survival, and sovereignty. The protagonists of the mentioned pictorial novels are a continual illustration of structural violence. It is an intergenerational trauma that begins not only with them but also with their ancestors, who also settled in metropolitan regions. Both of them have experienced various sorts of violence and make a concerted effort to escape the cycle of violence and build better lives so that they can create a healthy environment for future generations.

Pete from the novel *The Outside Circle* falls into the vicious circle of Systemic oppression. Living in Edmonton's inner city, both Pete and his brother Joey have experienced extreme poverty throughout their lives. They lived with their drug-addicted mother and stepfather, who showed little compassion for their stepsons, and were never exposed to a healthy family structure and values. The initial conversation between the indigenous elder shows the struggles of their community. The elders express fear:

It's hard life in the inner city. Many of our people don't know who they are...Ashamed of their heritage. Many of our brothers don't know what it takes to be a man. I mean a good man... A warrior for the community. Some of our people still struggle with addictions, living in pain and confusion. There are not many choices. Look what it does to our families. Children grow up hopeless and powerless. They have never seen the beauty of our culture. (LaBoucane-Benson 8).

Pete is a young man who lives in an environment where addiction, hopelessness, and gang violence are normalized. Due to a lack of parental or elderly guidance, he tries to make ends meet by getting involved in the

drug market. Due to years of displacement, ongoing structural neglect, and cultural loss, their community has become helpless and forlorn, leaving them surrounded by cycles of trauma. The author makes it very evident that the lengthy history of colonial brutality in Canada has left many young Aboriginal males with significant wounds, in addition to making immoral decisions. The conflict began with the enactment of colonial legislation in 1763, followed by the establishment of Canada Nation-building, which excluded Indigenous people, and the subsequent implementation of the residential school system, in which Child Welfare systems separated the children from their parents. As a reaction to institutional abandonment, Pete and his gang's tattoo is one of the novel's most significant symbols, effectively symbolizing the intergenerational suffering.

Joey is a victim of institutional violence because he is taken away from his mother and is placed in a group home. LaBoucane-Benson, through the illustration of the “Permanent Guardianship Order” by Kelly Mellings, evidently explains the harsh reality of residential schools and their aboriginal residents. The Indigenous children, like Joey, are forcibly removed not only from their families but also from their culture, language, and spirituality. The ultimate aim was to transform them into good Canadian citizens, albeit at the cost of their indigeneity. Child Welfare came into action after the abolishment of these schools, and they also removed these native children from their families without consent and placed them in non-indigenous foster homes without any contact with their parents.

Pete and Joey are portrayed on behalf of many aboriginal youths who are trapped in structural violence. Though Pete ends up in jail and Joey in a group home, their lives are juxtaposed through their feelings of loneliness and loss of their families and identity. They both serve as a reminder that there are still indigenous youths stuck in a system that is never reliable or consumable. Therefore, the path must be paved for navigating the ruthless structure imposed on them by decolonization and cultural healing.

Invisible No More: Two-Spirit Identity and MMIW in *Surviving the City*

The graphic novel *Surviving the City* is written as a dedication to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), as well as serves as a voice for the women, girls, and two-spirit people of the community. Through the struggles of Miikwan and Dez, the author portrays the intersection of gender, colonial violence, identity, and survival in urban spaces. When compared to non-indigenous women, the native women become an easy bait for structural violence and exploitation. The MMIW crisis indicates that these women are often

under-protected by the institutions, legal system, and law enforcement, which leads to high rates of their disappearance. In addition to historical causes like racism, sexism, and the legacy of imperialism, underlying factors like poverty and homelessness also play a role in their victimization. Another factor is the trauma brought on by abuses during Canada's residential school system.

There is widespread anger and sadness in First Nations communities. Sisters, wives, mothers, and daughters are gone from their families without clear answers. There are families whose loved ones are missing—babies growing up without mothers, mothers without daughters, and grandmothers without granddaughters. For Native Americans, this adds one more layer of trauma upon existing wounds that cannot heal. Communities are pleading for justice. (Native Hope)

Here, Miikwan's mother is one of the victims of MMIWG, leaving a huge emotional void in her life. She carries unresolved trauma as she grows up, unable to comprehend what happened to her mother. Being an indigenous girl, she is always conscious of the hazards in the city and knows how she is different from non-native women. Despite being surrounded by people in the city, she always felt strange and isolated since her indigenous identity is misinterpreted and disregarded. She is burdened by colonial aggression, social invisibility, and intergenerational trauma, yet she finds strength in community, companionship, and the spirit of her ancestors. The existence of people who have been taken by colonial violence but are not forgotten is symbolized by the good spirits, particularly the one who resembles Miikwan's mother. These ghosts continue to haunt Miikwan, demonstrating the psychological and spiritual effects of the MMIW issue on individuals who are left behind. The stories, justice, and closure that the living have been denied are represented by the spirits. The dark spirits, on the other hand, visually represent the powers of gendered violence, racism, and the malevolence of colonialism that are responsible for MMIW issues.

Two-spirit(2S) is a modern pan-Indian canopy term used by Indigenous North Americans to refer to their people who fall under the category of LGBTQ. Community. All Indigenous peoples, including Two-Spirit people, were severely affected and damaged by colonization. The establishment of residential schools, which imposed highly heteronormative standards on Indigenous children, had a significant effect on two-spirit individuals. During the colonial process and its tragic aftermath, Two-Spirit people's honour and respect were lost, and their social roles were eroded. The prevalent homophobic attitudes and ideas in society have led to a decline in the way 2S individuals are treated. As a Two-Spirit young woman in *Surviving the City*, Dez

finds herself at an unusual and frequently agonizing nexus of cultural pride and emotional isolation. Even though Dez has a strong connection to her Innineew heritage and was lovingly raised by her kokum (grandmother), she finds it difficult to fit in, particularly since her gender identity goes against traditional gender norms in both mainstream society and some parts of her community. Because of the legacy of imperialism and Christianization, Dez frequently internalizes her anxiety and confusion about how other people would perceive her, especially the community elders or institutions that might not completely comprehend or appreciate her homosexual positions. She eloped from her home after her grandmother fell ill because she was afraid that she would be placed in a group home that lacked the sensitivity and cultural awareness required to accommodate queer youth. Being a Two-Spirit young person, Dez's experience demonstrates how structural violence profoundly impacts Indigenous identity through administrative neglect, family separation, and a lack of societal support. The resilience required for enduring systems that do not acknowledge or safeguard Two-Spirit life is demonstrated by Dez's experience.

From Trauma to Transformation: The Role of Healing in Urban Indigenous Survival

Healing serves as a form of reclamation and is essential to Indigenous survival in urban areas. Reconciliation helps Indigenous people and communities to re-establish ancestral knowledge, spiritual traditions, and cultural practices in the face of historical dislocation, broken kinship structures, and the alienation of modern life. In urban contexts, where colonial erasure is frequently more widespread, healing validates Indigenous presence, restores agency, and builds resilience. This continuing process fosters the emotional, spiritual, and social well-being that Indigenous youth need to flourish in the face of persistent institutional violence, bridges generational divides, and turns trauma into strength. Healing is inextricably linked to having a sense of community. It creates a support system for the difficult days and makes one feel connected to others who might have gone through similar things. The idea of what it means to be Indigenous and to recover from the impacts of trauma and exploitation is completely in contrast with isolation and separation. The characters of the graphic novels, Pete and Miikwan, undergo community healing to discover and better themselves.

Pete undergoes rehabilitation after he was sent to jail. At the therapeutic center, he encounters some indigenous people, like him, who are suffering from the harsh society on an internal level. He participates in the warrior program, led by elders from the Aboriginal community. These elders use customary rituals to assist the young people in healing and comprehending the principles that govern their relationship with themselves.

He undergoes three therapeutic phases to recover from intergenerational trauma and systemic violence. In the first stage, he confronts his negative prejudices and internalized guilt toward his community. The program allowed him to embrace the diversity and adaptability of his culture while also exploring his ancestry and identity. He also makes peace with his spiritual side to escape the vicious cycle of violence and addiction. Through this developing journey, he gains skills that are crucial to his transformation and survival in both his community and urban life, such as compassion, responsibility, and the development of good relationships.

The first step in Miikwan's recovery is admitting that her mother's absence was a direct result of the MMIWG issue. She starts to recover by ritual, companionship, and community. By taking part in marches and cultural events, she can turn individual loss into a shared memory. She demonstrates that healing for her is about respecting and moving forward rather than forgetting by connecting with her mother's spirit, which serves as emotional and spiritual guidance. As an Indigenous girl living in an urban area, Miikwan regains her power via activism and cultural expression. By taking part in rituals and receiving confirmation of her Two-Spirit existence, Dez starts to mend the rift brought forth by both personal pain and colonial institutions. The goal of her healing journey is to rediscover who she is and to reclaim her place in tradition and community.

Conclusion

The effects of colonization have left Indigenous youth in metropolitan settings with a variety of persistent issues, such as intergenerational trauma, systemic neglect, and cultural alienation. *The Outside Circle* and *Surviving the City* are two graphic novels that effectively depict how young Indigenous people deal with these realities in their quest for identification, healing, and belonging. Their experiences show that relationships with one's family, community, ancestors, and self are essential for both survival and personal growth, in addition to being painful. In the end, Indigenous youth's resilience is rooted in their capacity to recover their culture, voice, and space even in the face of metropolitan structures that are meant to eradicate them. Acknowledging their experiences is a step toward justice, visibility, and Indigenous futures based on self-determination, not just representation. The goal of the healing process is to move past trauma and toward a fulfilling existence. Even while connections are still impacted and disrupted by colonization and trauma, these networks continue to provide youth with an amazing amount of strength and support for their resilience. For Indigenous people, their identities are dynamic processes that require cultivation and maintenance; by doing this, they can traverse the territories and their culture affected by colonization.

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