Although there has been a gradual improvement in the representation of Indigenous peoples in the Quebec curricula and textbooks since the 1970s, considerable parts of First Peoples history, and thus national history, are still too timidly studied in the province’s schools today (Arsenault, 2012; Bories-Sawala, 2014; Dufour, 2014). Beyond integration of certain crucial pages of our national narrative into the different curricula, we must remember that the real contribution of this teaching depends not only on the programs themselves, but also on the didactic tools used, the ability of the teacher to transmit this difficult knowledge, and on the student’s dispositions to integrate it (Brodeur-Girard in Dufour, 2015). Considering the first evolutionist and then ethnocentric character of Quebec educational programs and textbooks from yesterday to today (Vincent and Arcand, 1979; Trudel, 2000; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), it seems essential to me that Indigenous memories and stories be transmitted through the use of materials bearing empirical knowledge, capable of generating a true empathetic response conducive to the emergence of a critical reflection on our relationship to the Other. This step is essential to the memory and recognition work, which includes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the cultural security of Indigenous students.

The transmission of knowledge associated with colonial abuse, to name only territorial dispossession, the residential school system or violence against Indigenous women and girls, can be, in itself, a difficult experience for Native and non-Native youth. The transmission of “difficult knowledge” is defined by Pitt and Britzman (2003) as the process by which representations associated with traumatic, historical or sociocultural events are integrated within the pedagogical curriculum. While it is particularly important to perfect the training of teachers in the field of indigenousness (Brodeur-Girard, 2015; Milne, 2017), it is also essential to provide teachers with epistemological and didactic tools enabling the judicious integration of difficult knowledge. It is thus a question of defusing potential feelings of anger or guilt, which can lead to withdrawal, by organizing activities of reflection, discussion...
and dialogue. This article proposes to introduce Indigenous comic strips, and more particularly the corpus of Cree author David Alexander Robertson and the associated teaching guides, as a didactic tool able to facilitate the encounter with the difficult knowledge of Indigenous historical and contemporary realities within the education system. The overview presented here is the result, among other things, of the research begun during my participation in the summer school devoted to Indigenous literature of the Centre d’études et de recherches internationales (CERIUM), the Socioedupop Project, my master’s degree in Anthropology and my research-creation as part of the doctoral program in Education through Arts at Concordia University.

**Indigenous Comic Books and Difficult Knowledge**

Several artistic projects have been created to carry the word and share the stories associated with Indigenous realities in a perspective of popularization and cultural mediation. Within this movement, we note, among other things, the emergence of comic strips, graphic novels or educational graphic memories written by Indigenous authors or in close collaboration with them. These stories include *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* (Hill 2010), *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga* (Robertson & Henderson, 2012a) and *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story* (2012b); *The Life of Helen Betty Osborne* (Robertson & Blackstone, 2008); *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story* (Robertson & Henderson, 2015); *Uneducation: A Residential School Graphic Novel* (Eaglespeaker, 2014); *The Outside Circle: A Graphic Novel* (LaBoucane-Benson & Mellings, 2015); The *Artic Comics* series (Kusugak & Kusugak, 2016) and lastly, the Healthy Aboriginal Network publications.

The first graphic novels emerged within the popular comic book movement in the 1960s. Although controversial and often nebulous, the distinction between these two related supports is generally based on format, narrative composition, visual style and thematic content. The graphic novel would thus be more elaborately designed to address a complex set of themes or themes intended for an adult audience, borrowing from a multitude of literary genres (O’English, Matthews, & Blakesley Lindsay, 2006). Through my research, I use the concept of graphic memories to delimit graphic works «inspired by the direct or indirect experience of contemporary subjects within temporally, geographically and culturally defined universes» (Dufour, 2014; 2016). Through a multitude of approaches, genres and narrative processes, we can distinguish Indigenous graphic memories, which aim not only to counter preconceived ideas or the potential stereotypes of non-Native readership, but also to enhance the cultural pride and identity of Indigenous youth by allowing a better contextualization of the inherent issues in history and the present of Indigenous Peoples of Quebec and Canada (2014). It should be noted that several works recently produced by non-Native authors and illustrators (Brown, 2003; Couture, Duquette, & Lemieux, 2014; Sacco, 2016; Hellman, 2016; Rémillard, 2016; Downie & Lemire, 2016; Lapierre & Tzara, 2017) also help to reverse the stereotyping associated with Indigenous characters within the occidental comic books (Sheyahshe, 2016).

**Case Study: David Alexander Roberston, Prolific Cree Writer**

By its wide accessibility and openly didactic purpose, the graphic corpus of Swampy Cree author, David Alexander Robertson - who was recently awarded a Governor General’s Award for his history book *When We Were Alone* (Robertson & Flett, 2017) - is particularly appropriate to be used in classrooms. His flagship series, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga* (Robertson & Henderson, 2012a), consists of four albums available in English and French (2013). It concerns the Nêhiyaw (or Plains Cree) collective memories from the early 19th century to the present day. Despite its geographic and cultural specificity, it presents many historical and contemporary themes that can be linked to the experience of other Indigenous nations in Canada (for example, major epidemics, the residential school system, the breakdown of cultural transmission, intergenerational sequelae, and self-destructive violence, etc.). These stories are introduced by Edwin’s mother, a young Cree hospitalized because of a suicide attempt. In the hope of restoring his confidence in the future and strengthening his cultural roots, she will tell him four stories associated with their ancestors’ resilience. The integration of these
graphic memories in classrooms is facilitated by the use of a teaching guide, available online, offering turnkey activities and avenues for reflection and discussion. The 7 Generations Teacher’s Guide (Sinclair, 2011), a series primarily aimed at a 13- and 17-year-old audience, was designed by Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Anishnabe Professor at the University of Manitoba and Indigenous comic book Specialist.

For 8 to 11-year olds, Robertson offers the Tales from Big Spirit series (Robertson et al., 2014). The series, illustrated by various graphic artists, features seven Indigenous historical figures from Canada, such as Pauline Johnson, Gabriel Dumont, John Ramsay and Tommy Prince etc. The associated teacher’s guide (Ferguson, 2014) facilitates the integration of these memories into the classroom. The series’ albums, specially designed to foster the creation of historical connections and literacy development, are built from familiar worlds that can be identified by young contemporary audiences. For example, the memoirs of Tekahionwake Pauline Johnson, known as the Mohawk Princess, are introduced through the school research work of Katya, a young student who is passionate about poetry. Robertson is also the author of The Helen Betty Osborne Story (Robertson and Henderson, 2015), an updated version of his first graphic novel The Life of Helen Betty Osborne (Robertson & Blackstone, 2008), on the theme of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. These memoirs focus on the sad story of Helen Betty Osborne, a young Cree student who left her community to pursue post-secondary education but was brutally murdered in Manitoba in 1972 by a group of non-Indigenous youths. This album is intended for an audience of at least fifteen years of age and its study can be optimized using a teaching guide (Wyatt Anderson, 2017), also free download, which offers tracks for animation conducive to reflection, discussion and the empathic reflex, going from the particular to the conceptual.

In short, Indigenous graphic memoirs can be interesting educational tools for teaching different school subjects, such as History, but also French, English, Ethics and Religious Culture, Philosophy, etc. While each of the series appears to be specifically designed to match the educational abilities of certain targeted grade levels, it is important to note that all series can, however, be judiciously used in postsecondary education. Through conceptual and practical suggestions, the teacher’s guides for various school levels are intended to facilitate their didactic use while offering an interesting alternative for teachers who would not feel sufficiently equipped to enrich the perspectives presented in the usual textbooks. We must remember that the juxtaposition of the image and the written word offers many potential perspectives for understanding the narrative and its educational content (Sinclair, 2011). The study of Indigenous graphic memoirs can be relevantly enriched by the testimony of Indigenous guests or speakers, by organizing educational outings or field trips (communities, museums, theatre or other) or, at the very least, by using didactic or artistic materials properly associated with the Indigenous peoples of Quebec.

GRAPHIC MEMOIRS AND PEDAGOGICAL GUIDES CITED
(In order of appearance in the text)

INDIGENOUS AUTHORS

The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book: Gord Hill (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010).


The Life of Helen Betty Osborne: David Alexander Robertson and Madison Blackstone (HighWater Press, 2008).


Artic Comics: Michael Kusugak and Jose Kusuga (Renegade Arts Entertainment, 2016).


Tales from Big Spirit: David Alexander Robertson et al. (HighWater Press, 2014).

OTHERS


NOTES

1 Supervisors: Sarah Henzi and Isabelle Saint-Amand.

REFERENCES


