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# "Good Relationships Mean Good Lives": Warrior-Survivor Identity/ies in David Alexander Robertson's 7 Generations

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# "Good Relationships Mean Good Lives": Warrior-Survivor Identity/ies in David Alexander Robertson's *7 Generations*

## **Abstract**

David Alexander Robertson's graphic novel *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, illustrated by Scott B. Henderson, moves backwards and forwards through and overlaps time in order to connect remembered stories and current experiences to Indigenous identities in Canada. This graphic novel, rendered in colour, was first published as four individual black-and-white comics with coloured covers: *Stone*, *Scars*, *Ends/Begins*, and *The Pact*. The series follows the protagonist, Edwin, as he listens to the stories his mother and father tell him about his Plains Cree ancestors and family in order to help him heal after his attempted suicide. Although the stories embody the personal histories of Edwin's ancestors, they may also be understood as representative of the stories of many Indigenous peoples in Canada. The narrative spans across more than 200 years of Canadian history: the first issue unfolds primarily in the early nineteenth century; the second progresses through the smallpox epidemic of 1870-71; the third follows Edwin's father in a residential school in the 1960s; and the final issue continues Edwin's father's story and concludes, full circle, in 2010. At the end of this fourth book, *The Pact*, Edwin and his father, James, walk alongside a river, which becomes the site of their reconciliation. In this essay, I argue that Edwin's warrior survivor identity is shaped in an interrelationship with the river that embodies his past and present ancestors.

## **Keywords**

mean, relationships, good, warrior, survivor, identity, ies, david, alexander, lives, robertson, generations, 7

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## "GOOD RELATIONSHIPS MEAN GOOD LIVES": WARRIOR-SURVIVOR IDENTITY/IES IN DAVID ALEXANDER ROBERTSON'S *7 GENERATIONS*<sup>1</sup>

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David Alexander Robertson's graphic novel *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, illustrated by Scott B. Henderson, moves backwards and forwards through and overlaps time in order to connect remembered stories and current experiences to Indigenous identities in Canada. This graphic novel, rendered in colour, was first published as four individual black-and-white comics with coloured covers: *Stone*, *Scars*, *Ends/Begins*, and *The Pact*. The series follows the protagonist, Edwin, as he listens to the stories his mother and father tell him about his Plains Cree<sup>2</sup> ancestors and family in order to help him heal after his attempted suicide. Although the stories embody the personal histories of Edwin's ancestors, they may also be understood as representative of the stories of many Indigenous peoples in Canada. The narrative spans across more than 200 years of Canadian history: the first issue unfolds primarily in the early nineteenth century; the second progresses through the smallpox epidemic of 1870-71; the third follows Edwin's father in a residential school in the 1960s; and the final issue continues Edwin's father's story and concludes, full circle, in 2010. At the end of this fourth book, *The Pact*, Edwin and his father, James, walk alongside a river, which becomes the site of their reconciliation. In this essay, I argue that Edwin's warrior-survivor identity is shaped in an interrelationship with the river that embodies his past and present ancestors.

*7 Generations* can be situated within a larger body of work by Indigenous authors and illustrators in Canada, who use the graphic novel to represent and advocate for

a variety of social justice issues that pertain to First Nations peoples. Between 2008 and 2013, the Healthy Aboriginal Network published fourteen comic books dealing with a range of issues including gambling, bullying, sexuality, and health. In 2009, David Alexander Robertson published his first graphic novel, *The Life of Helen Betty Osborne*, illustrated by Madison Blackstone. In 2010, Haida artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas published *Red: A Haida Manga*; in December 2011, David Alexander Robertson and Scott Henderson collaborated on their second graphic novel *Sugar Falls*, based on the residential school experiences of Betty Ross, an Elder from Cross Lake First Nation; and in 2014, Robertson published the six-book graphic novel series *Tales from Big Spirit*.

One of the guiding questions I have been asking myself while studying this body of work, and *7 Generations* in particular, is why so many writers turn to the medium of graphic novels in order to tell these stories. What can graphic novels do that other media cannot? In *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*, Rocco

40 Versaci argues that there are three main reasons to understand comics as a sophisticated art form, and I take a combination of these reasons as a starting point for the work that graphic novels do:

1. the marginalization of the form allows creators to be subversive;
2. the self-consciousness of the form's "graphic language" invites a close engagement with the text;
3. the graphic language "operates with a unique poetics" (Versaci 13-14).

I address all three of these reasons in my discussion of *7 Generations*, specifically in relation to the way that they intersect with each other. In other words, I analyze how the subversive self-consciousness of the graphic novel's poetics informs one of the main philosophical imperatives of the series: that the past and present occur simultaneously to help shape healthy identities. In this case, *7 Generations* subverts a linear and singular notion of history/ies and identity/ies by inviting a close-reading practice that also refuses linearity and singularity.

In order to analyze how *7 Generations* summons this practice of simultaneous reading, I look at the cover of the first comic in the series, *Stone*, and then follow some of the cover's key signifiers that flow throughout the series. The cover illustrates how the past and the present, the dead and the alive, the spiritual and the physical occupy the same space and time and in that simultaneity depicts one of the fundamental tenets of Plains Cree Indigenous philosophy: that relationships—between people and between people and the environment regardless of time—are central to wellbeing. Cora Weber-Pillwax, a Cree Métis academic, summarizes this idea in her article "Orality in Northern Cree Indigenous Worlds":

The relationship between the environment and the different lifestyles and belief systems that evolved over the centuries for the Cree people is direct. The northern Cree deem their relationship with others and the land, including all aspects of the physical environment and its inhabitants, as one of the most powerful factors affecting and even determining the quality of their daily lives. Good relationships mean good lives: noth-

ing complex, a principle of beauty and simplicity to guide everyday living. In a general sense this principle seems to reflect a commonly shared belief or attitude among most Indigenous peoples of the planet. [...] Social interactions include relationships with animals, fishes, birds, plants, trees, water, other people, spirits of those who have died, spirits of all created beings, as well as the Creator spirit and the grandfather and grandmother spirits. (152)

This belief system is one to which Edwin's mother alludes at the beginning of the series, Edwin's father summarises at the end, and the illustrations convey throughout, and while this belief may now be known widely, understanding its impact *across* time and *in* time may be difficult to comprehend in verbal language only. The graphic novel's visual and verbal poetics allows for the representation of this simultaneity and Henderson's illustrations in *7 Generations* demonstrate this connection through his breakdowns, and most explicitly through his use of divided and undivided polyp-tychs, and parallel and mirrored pages.

In *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Charles Hatfield discusses how comics represent time either through seriality or synchronism. Seriality, or breakdown, means that "a sequence is represented through a series of contiguous panels" and synchronism occurs when a "single panel represents a sequence of events occurring at different 'times'" (52). The cover of *Stone* serves as the first instance of synchronism and establishes that Edwin's connection with the river includes the past and the present. This cover is an undivided polyptych—"a single, undivided frame that represents an extended span of time synchronistically" (53). Hatfield argues that "polyptychs tend to be used when time or space become [*sic*] the thematic concerns of the narrative itself" (53), which is precisely what we see throughout the saga.

The cover of *Stone* portrays Edwin as he appears in all four books: wearing blue jeans, red runners, and a black t-shirt. Edwin crouches in profile in the lower left corner of the illustration, one hand touching the ground and the other clutching his forehead. An open pill bottle lies on the ground in front of him, pills spilling out of the bottle. The trajectory of the pills moves upwards diagonally to the right and becomes pebbles and then rocks that serve as stepping stones across a river for the eponymous male figure Stone, who moves to the left of the cover while looking over his shoulder to the right. In the background, linked vertically with Edwin, is another male figure, this one riding a horse, both of whom glow with the same blue sheen as the full moon overhead. Behind the moon, the outlined profile of an eagle, which is echoed in the amulet that Stone wears around his neck, fills the whole night sky. Significantly, Bear, Stone, and Edwin face to the right, which signifies a movement to the future, to Edwin's implied narrative future and to the reader's future engagement with the book as she opens the cover on the right to begin reading.

Edwin's and his ancestor Stone's bodies mimic the shape of the river as it winds behind them and washes over the bedroom floorboards and, therein, serves as a metaphor and visual motif for connection and for healing, for "good relationships," to recall Weber-Pillwax's words. The river flows towards and away from Edwin as a

symbol for his potential future. The colour palette links the river to the moon and to the eagle and to Bear, a complex signifier who straddles the spirit and physical worlds, life and death, present and past. He embodies the dead warrior who lives on in Stone and now Edwin. Edwin's potential future flows both ways: he mirrors Stone as a living survivor and Bear as a dead—but still alive in spirit—warrior.

In his article "The Graphic Novel as Metafiction," Paul Atkinson argues, "[t]he multi-frame structure of the graphic novel spatially contains all the narrative elements—a character or a sentence is always placed within a large visual whole—and allows the reader to look forward such that there is a sense in which the past, present and future coexist" (124). Atkinson's statement addresses the self-consciousness and poetics of which Versaci also writes, and which Hatfield points to when he discusses the page "(or *planche*, as French scholars have it, a term denoting the total design unit rather than the physical page on which it is printed)" (48). This sense of the graphic novel generally and the page specifically as continuous wholes illuminate an

42 Indigenous worldview represented throughout *7 Generations*, but especially on the parallel and mirrored pages that visually place Edwin in the same time and space as his ancestors. The cover of *Stone* anticipates this connection because, spatially and environmentally, the "large visual whole" includes a portion of the interior of Edwin's bedroom, the floorboards upon which he crouches, as well as the land, sky, and river.

This use of the river as a mirror that connects people in the past and present is even more explicit on the 2012 cover of *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, the full-colour graphic novel that combines the four comics into four sections of one book, and the text with which I shall engage for the remainder of this essay. This cover depicts Edwin in the same posture as on the cover of *Stone*, but instead of in profile, Edwin's body faces toward the viewer as he crouches on the bank of the river and gazes into the water. One hand clutches his head, and the other hand extends towards the water, the eagle amulet—which ancestors and then he passes on through the generations—in his open palm. Edwin's sepia-toned reflection in the water is that of his father, mirroring his exact stance, their fingers, knees, and toes, so close as to be almost but not quite touching. A silvery full moon sits directly above Edwin's head in the black sky, and the outline of an eagle, bear, and snake emanate out from and are simultaneously part of the moon. The rock upon which Stone will sit as he listens for the return of his dead brother, beside which White Cloud in "Scars" will speak with his dead father, and in front of which James will meet with his dead brother in "The Pact" occupies the space over Edwin's left shoulder and becomes the fourth entity radiating from the moon.

This cover suggests that Edwin's and his father's identities are both united and separate, and, indeed, the entire narrative may be read as Edwin's healing journey to reconcile with his father. In this cover illustration, Edwin sees his father when he looks at himself, in a gesture that parallels the first page of "Scars" in which Edwin hunches over a picture of his father, which he holds in his hands. When Edwin's mother finds him looking at the picture and crying—his tears a river down his

cheek—she lays a hand on his shoulder, and he says, "I hate him," to which she replies, "I know" (35). Edwin's admission moves her to tell him the story of White Cloud's survival during the smallpox epidemic of 1870. Indeed, in each of the four sections of the graphic novel, an acknowledgment of Edwin's pain moves Edwin's parents—his mother in the first two sections and his father in the second two parts—to tell him the stories of their past, which inform his present.

The first section, "Stone," sets up this structure by beginning the narrative with a specific date, March 25, 2010, shifting the story to the "beginning of the 19th Century" (8), before interspersing the narrative of Edwin's present with the story of his ancestors, Stone and Bear. My verbal summary of this temporal aspect of "Stone," however, reveals some of the problems that occur with representing simultaneity in written text only, which the medium of the graphic novel addresses. For instance, my summary suggests that the story moves between present and past and then combines the two, but, instead, Edwin's mother narrates the story in the present, while the dialogue—via word balloons—and the visual story take place between individuals in the nineteenth century and therein combines past and present in one visual space.

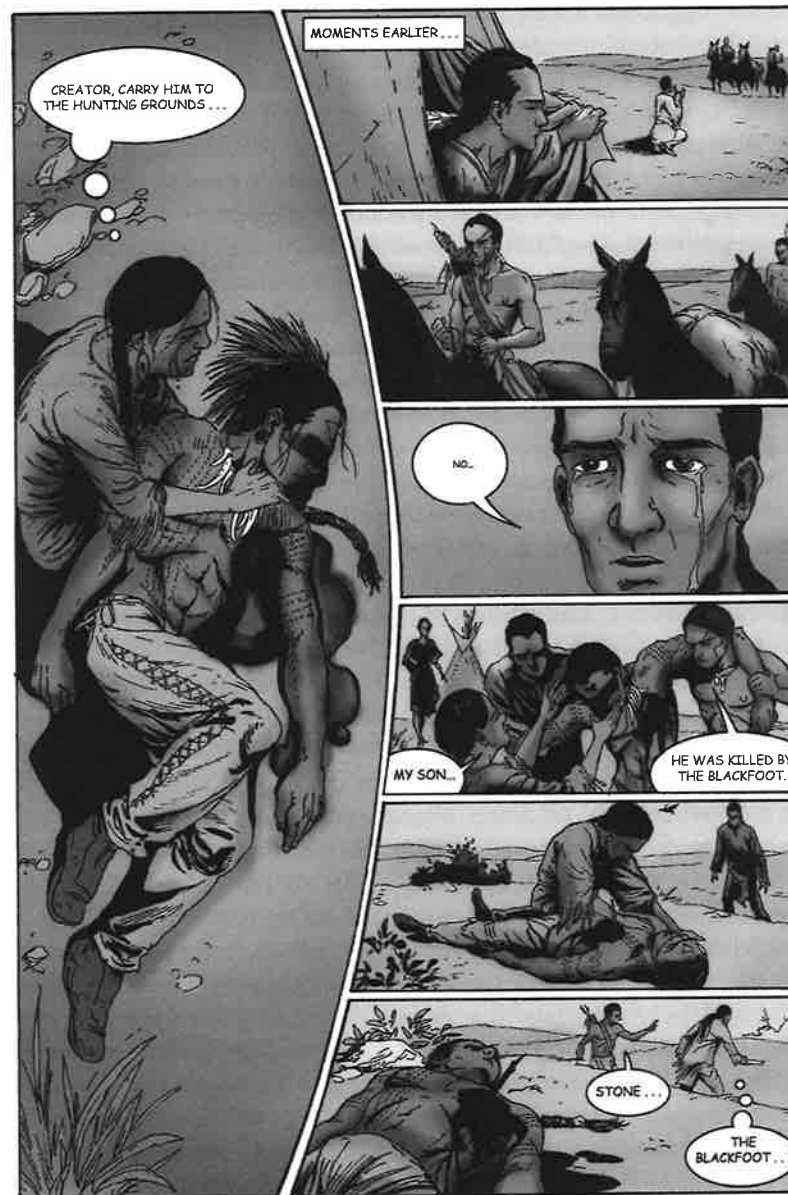
This interaction between the past and the present occurs throughout the saga, but the healing imperative is most overt in the scenes that occur when Edwin and/or his ancestors engage with each other in synchronicity with the river. In "Stone," the significance of the river unfolds over five double-page spreads (14-23), which establish Edwin's identity as warrior-survivor and then flows through the rest of the saga. The first of these double pages depicts the brotherhood between Stone and Bear as they good-naturedly compete and pit their skills against one another. The final panel shows Stone and Bear standing on top of a cliff overlooking a river. Stone promises Bear that he will "dance to become a brave" (15) and, unbeknownst to either of them, this conversation is their last. In other words, the river bears witness to Stone's promise to become a warrior.

The next double-page breakdown (16-17) makes explicit the embodied connection between Stone and Edwin. The two pages parse the narrative into a parallel series of events: the left-page breakdown occurs in the nineteenth century as Bear says goodbye to Stone before going to fight the Blackfoot; and the one on the right page takes place in 2010 with Edwin in his hospital bed after his suicide attempt. This six-frame parallel breakdown equates Stone with Edwin as survivor and warrior-to-be, and Edwin's mother with Bear as the teacher and healer. Significantly, although Edwin recovers in a hospital bed, the river still flows and informs his identity in a painting that hangs on the wall. This visual mnemonic appears again in "The Pact" in a heart-wrenching bleed page that shows Thomas—James's brother—dead in the snow, which becomes the white of the hospital room wall that forms the backdrop to where Edwin lays in the same pose as Thomas. Thomas's foot beneath the snow melds into the frame of the painting, so that the painted river flows between Thomas and Edwin via James, who sits huddled beside Edwin's bed.

Between the second and third two-page layout in "Stone," Bear dies. In the most



Figure 1. David Alexander Robinson, *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga* (16-17).



Courtesy of Portage and Main Press.



overt use of mirrored panels in the saga, Edwin moves from paralleling Stone to mirroring Bear as he lies dead in the arms of his mother (18-19). Henderson illustrates Edwin's possible future as fallen warrior through the use of concave and convex panels that suggest a circle bisected by the novel's spine, which functions as a double gutter that both connects and separates the two men. Significantly, each page divides into seven panels, with the number seven suggesting the seven generations of the title. Along the curved edge of the elongated panel that runs the length of the spine, the page divides into six small vertical cells. The left page panels follow Edwin's mother as she runs down the hospital corridor and enters Edwin's room to comfort him, and the right page depicts Bear's mother and Stone watching as warriors bring Bear's body home. In the third and fifth panel on the left page, the painting of the river can be seen on the hospital wall, the blue of the river the same blue as the blanket that spills over Edwin on his hospital bed and as the tears that flow down Stone's cheeks.

46 These mirrored pages invoke seriality in the six panels that flow vertically down the page, and synchronism because all seven panels on the two pages reflect each other. More radically, however, the six small cells also refuse seriality and a sequential reading because they move vertically down rather than horizontally across the page. I suggest that these panels invoke a scrolling seriality that drops down through time. The combination of six small scrolling cells and two elongated central panels provides what Hatfield calls—in relation to the work a polyptych does—a “second-degree tension” that “assumes a sophisticated reader, because it requires that reader both to choose and to defer choosing: *I can, indeed must, read this image or set of images in more than one way*” (53). Perhaps more than at any other time in the novel, the two-page layout invites a simultaneous reading of each page individually, of the central divided circle panels that contain Edwin's and Bear's bodies, of the scrolling cells serially (that is from right to left to follow the parallel narratives), and of the entire two-page tableau.

The page layout for the following two pages (20-21) also challenges a single-page reading. An image of the river fills the top half of the left page and flows over the spine onto half of the right page. The narrative boxes that contain the voice of Edwin's mother hover around the edges of each frame as she explains the significance of the river to Edwin: “The Calling River. / Here the Plains Cree believed their loved ones could be heard from the Hunting Grounds. The river's sounds and the valley's echoes were their voices... / ...the mumbling shores... / ...the wind through leaves like faint whispers. / He listened with keen ears... / ...prayed that his brother made the journey” (20-21). In these words, the ellipses become pauses in her speech and mimic the stones and the pills that appear and reappear throughout the book. The “he” who listens is ambiguous in the verbal story, but the illustration shows Stone perched on top of a large stone, in the same stance that Edwin assumes on the cover of *Stone*.

Bear then appears to Stone, and in the ensuing conversation on the following page, Bear makes explicit another way in which the river signifies their relationship to it. Bear says, “Life is fluid like the river. / Each one of us is a ripple, then gone. / We are

part of the circle. / Rage will cloud you. / You need patience” (22). This reference to the circle recalls the central rounded frames from two pages earlier, which places Edwin within this river circle, and within the circle of Bear's words. As Stone leaves the river, he moves back to the camp and into the embrace of his beloved, in a gesture that implies that his conversation with Bear alongside the river has moved Stone from rage to love.

The river appears twice more in “Stone”: first, when Stone avenges Bear's death by killing the Blackfoot man who killed Bear; and second, the final time that Bear and Stone meet. In this final moment, the visual and verbal texts function in the same way as when Edwin's mother began her story. Her voice in the present again appears in text boxes, and the illustrations show Stone kneeling beside the calling river, in a stance that mirrors Edwin's posture on the cover of the book. In this case, though, Stone's finger touches the surface of the water, which ripples out from his finger and suggests that he remembers Bear's words to him. The main difference from the first instance, however, is that now Stone and Bear do not share the same panel. Instead, Stone touches the water in a long vertical panel on the left side of the page, while the right side contains three cells: the top features a close-up of Stone's face looking down the river to the right; the second moves back to a medium shot that shows Stone's full body crouching beside the river on the left margin of the panel while the river fills the foreground; the third depicts the spirit of Bear in the right foreground with the river flowing between the full moon and Bear. The horizontal panel that grounds the page shows Stone lying inside a tepee playing with his child. The way that this page exists in perfect balance unto itself while also referring back to Stone's earlier conversation with Bear implies that the river features as a touchstone, a constant to which Edwin and his ancestors return to remember their pasts in the present and to ripple outwards to a hopeful future.

47 In the second book, “Scars,” set in 1870, the river serves as a site of survival. Initially, White Cloud escapes to the river when smallpox kills his father and two of his siblings, then as the site beside which many of his people camp, and later, as the place where the spirit of his father guides him to other Plains Cree people, who have not been affected by smallpox. The final image of the river appears in a similar page layout to that in “Stone.” A long vertical panel running three-quarters of the way down the left side of the page depicts White Cloud setting forth to find his people. To the right, the page divides into three sections. In the top, a long shot establishes White Cloud in the landscape walking beside the river. The middle moves back into the present to the crucial moment when Edwin's mother places the eagle amulet around Edwin's neck and says, “The amulet that Stone and White Cloud wore has been in our family for seven generations. / It has the power of our culture within it. / It will help you on your journey of healing” (60). In the bottom panel, White Cloud, wearing the amulet, stands beside the river and splashes water on his face. In the middle and bottom panels, Edwin and White Cloud are linked in a strong vertical as they occupy the same part and portion of the left side of the frame and in a similar posture with

their heads lowered—Edwin's to receive the amulet and White Cloud's bending to the water. These two illustrations establish a connection between Edwin and White Cloud, and they anticipate the saga's concluding conversation when Edwin and his father walk beside the river, at which time Edwin's father also reflects upon the healing that will take place over seven generations.

In "Ends/Begins," the river symbolises happiness and appears only twice throughout the narrative. In this section, Edwin's father, James, tells Edwin the story of his childhood and of being taken to a residential school. He tells his story orally in text boxes and the accompanying illustrations depict his life in 1964, which begins with him playing with his brother, Thomas, beside a river (72). The river appears only one other time: when James and Thomas go home during the winter. In a full-page landscape bleed and divided polyptych, James, Thomas, and Lauren walk beside the frozen river (82). Three vertical sub-panels overlay the landscape and show Lauren and James holding hands, walking ahead of Thomas, who plays in the snow. In his oral commentary, James states, "We were home together for the last time that winter," while speech balloons show the conversation between James and Lauren. When she asks James what it is like to be at the school, he differentiates between the quiet of the school and the quiet of home. He says, "It's not the same, though. / There, it's loneliness. / Here, it's peace" (82). The top two panels of the facing page show James talking to Edwin in the present saying, "That was the last time we were home together... / ...the last time I saw him smile like that, like a kid should" (83). In the left panel, James looks down at his hands in the foreground and the right closes in on his face, down which tears flow, an echo of the once flowing and now frozen river.

James continues and concludes his story in the final section of the saga, "The Pact." In this section, the river becomes the site of healing when James and Edwin reconcile, and Edwin leaves James beside the river to make peace with himself over the death of Thomas. This final two-page layout brings the story into the immediate present in a conversation between father and son. James says to Edwin, "All our ancestors live within you, our ways and our history. / We call this 'blood memory'" (126). James's words appear in word balloons, in a small square panel that depicts James and Edwin getting out of the car to go for a walk beside the river. The page's central image, however, is the most striking in its suggestion that the river itself speaks and heals. In a frameless horizontal panel, the river occupies the middle space that runs the width of the page, and the now tail-less word balloons that drop in an angled vertical down the page continue James's speech but imply that the river speaks: "The elders say what was done to us will touch us for 7 generations. / So, too, the healing we do now will mend our people over that time. / What happened to you doesn't define you. You define you. We are not our yesterday. We are our today, our tomorrow" (126). The river's "you" and "we" extends to Edwin, James, and implicitly to the reader, when, in the final panel of the left page, Edwin gazes directly at the viewer—the only time in the entire saga—and extends his hand with the amulet into the extreme foreground.

When Edwin extends his hand to the reader but says, "Dad," James signifies all

people who may require forgiveness and healing. The last breakdown of the novel contains mostly Edwin's words as he hands the amulet back to his father, says that he forgives him, and then leaves his father beside the river in order to embark upon his own vision quest, like Stone did before him. In a final unframed tableau, James crouches beside the river, in a stance that echoes Edwin's earlier posture, as the spirit of Thomas approaches him. This image circles back to the opening cover illustrations and suggests that the next healing journey, the next ripple in the river, may represent James's life.

The name "Canada" never appears in *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, but symbols and language locate the simultaneous stories in a Canadian city and in a Cree language group. That posters for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers football team and the Manitoba Moose hockey team hang on Edwin's bedroom wall (4) and that Edwin's mother translates Stone's and Bear's stories from Cree (10) indicate that this story of Edwin and his ancestors connects Nēhiyawak, or, in English, Plains Cree peoples' identity/ies to their physical environment, to each other, and to a Cree First Nation of warriors and survivors. Stone, Bear, White Cloud, James, Thomas, and Edwin all embody both warrior and survivor, for the spirits of the dead survive in the living through dialogue that occurs between generations. The river functions both as a literal landscape that exists through time as a site of emotional encounters and as a visual motif that links stories and people and becomes tears that flow down cheeks, a blanket that covers a suffering man, and a painting that brings the river's healing spirit into a sterile hospital room. Through a sophisticated poetics, this graphic novel demonstrates that one man's metonymic healing journey parallels and mirrors the experiences of his ancestors, past and present, and that "good relationships" mean living in synchronicity with people and places, and especially, in this story, the river.

## NOTES

1. I presented early versions of this essay at the 2012 Child and the Book conference and at the 2012 British Association for Canadian Studies conference. I thank the University of Wollongong and the International Council for Canadian Studies for the financial assistance they provided, so I could travel to and participate in these conferences.
2. The Nēhiyawak or Plains Cree are one of eight sub-groups that make up the Cree Nation. The Plains Cree live in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Montana (Sinclair 7). For more information about the Plains Cree, consult the excellent *Teacher's Guide for the 7 Generations Series*, which is available as a free download at [www.pandmpress.com](http://www.pandmpress.com)

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## SEEING AND NOTHINGNESS: MICHAEL NICOLL YAHGULANAAS, HAIDA MANGA, AND A CRITIQUE OF THE GUTTER

Richard Harrison  
Mount Royal University



Figure 1. Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas in *The Gutter*.  
Reprinted with permission of the artist.