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Spatial Politics and a Native American Reservation: Reading *Red Power: A Graphic Novel* with Author Brian Wright-McLeod

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¹ Critics have acknowledged the potential of comics to address serious and uneasy issues and challenge the ways we view the world through a unique interplay between visual and linguistic modes. J. Maggio (2007) maintains that more important than comics' often uncompromising content is their form, which allows readers a large "cognitive space" and freedom as it challenges them to infer meaning while moving between panels, but also between text and images (Maggio 237-38); in this way the comic "helps create a subversive way of understanding the world" and thus "is extremely well suited for democratic society, which continuously re-evaluates its own ethical positions" (Maggio 238). Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven (2012) contend that comics were "from the start geared towards political representations" (Chute and Dekoven 184). Authors use the medium with "a sharp awareness of the power of visualizing the suppressed and the unspoken," often undertaking "a rigorous experimentation with form," especially since the underground productions of the late 1960s and 1970s to more contemporary developments of the graphic novel (Chute and Dekoven 185). Sean Carleton (2012) observes the genre's "long-standing relationship with radical politics," pointing out that graphic novels, especially those dealing with history, "are fast becoming a popular and accessible tool of activism in the 21st century" (Carleton). Speaking specifically of graphic novels created by African Americans, Michael Chaney (2007) discusses the ways in which the format has been employed by minority artists in order to "reconstitute the political past to intervene in the enduring legacies" of colonialism as well as to counter various manifestations of racism "that haunt the present," such as commodification of African Americans in mainstream culture (Chaney 176).

² The project Chaney sees behind the work of African American graphic novelists has been prevalent, albeit in more traditional genres and forms, in ethnic and racial minority literatures over several decades now. Still, politically-charged and subversive representations of and, more importantly, by Native people in the comics format are not as numerous, even though Native people remain one of the most stereotyped ethnic groups both in the USA and Canada, and even though their images have been appropriated in various contexts and forms including the Western comic.ⁱ Recent years, however, have seen a few important contributions, such as the *Scalped* series by Jason Aaron and artist R.M Guéra (2007-2012) in the USA and *LouisRiel: A Comic Strip Biography* (2003) by Chester Brown in Canada. The major focus of this paper will be the first installment of *Red Power* written and drawn by Brian Wright-McLeod in Canada (2011; Books 2 and 3 in the making). While *Louis Riel* is a historical narrative which traces the biography of the leader of two Métis rebellions in Canada, Louis Riel, and explores his personality, both the *Scalped* series and *Red Power* set out to address issues that reservation-based Native Americans are facing in the twenty-first century.

³ *Scalped* is authored by non-Native persons. It uses elements of Western and *noir* crime narrative but develops, with much psychological insight, complex characters. Drawing on the history of the American Indian Movement, specifically, the Wounded Knee incident and Leonard Peltier's story,ⁱⁱ "political and politically incorrect" (Vaughan 6), *Scalped* follows the story of Dashiell (Dash) Bad Horse, who comes back home to the Prairie Rose reservation as an undercover FBI agent to infiltrate a corrupt mafia-like structure headed by the local chief and former Native activist Lincoln Red Crow. The series opens with Red Crow promoting a new casino project, which puts him in conflict with a group of traditionally oriented people, including his former fellow activists, among whom is Dash's alienated mother, Gina. Dakota-Anishinabe Brian Wright-McLeod's *Red Power*, inspired by real-life events, people, and experiences, also involves Native American activism. It tells the story of how Billy Moon, a young urban Native man, who, together with other Native activists from across North America, gets involved in a struggle to resist the forced removal of indigenous people from their traditional territories on the fictional Star River Amerindian reservation. Aided by federal forces and corrupt Native officials, the removal is initiated by a large American corporation, which intends to start extracting minerals in the reservation territory before it launches a major water diversion project to run through there.

⁴ Central to these texts, I want to argue, are the politics of space and the way identity is articulated through space. Though I occasionally refer to *Scalped* for comparison, my analysis mainly focuses on *Red Power* and is developed around my interview with Brian Wright-McLeod in spring 2013.ⁱⁱⁱ It is also important to note that *Red Power* (2011) is but a first installment, comprising the Preface and Book One, "more of an introduction to a larger story," as Wright-McLeod himself says (Personal interview). Though it is somewhat tricky to speak about a narrative which is not completed, the first installment does spell out the main project of the series. First, the novel sets out to expose the mechanisms through which power structures continue to restrict, probe, disrupt, use and abuse indigenous spaces, for instance by dividing them into reservations or bisecting them with national borders. However, it also seeks out possibilities of unsettling the spatial order imposed upon indigenous people. This is done through the motif of direct confrontation, for instance, by focusing on resistance organized by Native activists from, notably, all over North America. They come to Star

River, “cross[ing] the borders of colonialism”(Wright-McLeod, *Red Power*12) and thereby countering the various forms of colonial parceling of indigenous space: one is the imposition of the political border between the nation-states of Canada and the USA, which cuts through traditional territories of many indigenous tribes and superimposes Canadian or American citizenship over tribal identity; another is confinement of Native people to reservations, which prescribes immobility to indigenous groups and precludes various forms of contact. Moreover, the unsettling of the dominant spatial order is undertaken by suggesting ways of experiencing and being in space that escape colonial ways of knowing and conceiving it and, more importantly, colonial control over it. In this, the novel, as is usual for comics, draws on fantasy and magic, which in this case is tied to the idea of cultural continuity and the empowering potential of indigenous spiritual practices.

⁵ My reading draws on propositions developed in cultural geography, owing much to Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) theorizing of space as a social product and its “socializing role” (Lefebvre 26, 143, 191); more contemporary authors focus on the interdependency of social and spatial structures and their “mutual constitutivity” (Delaney 7): “elements of the social (race, gender, and so on) are not simply *reflected* in spatial arrangements; rather, spatialities are regarded as *constituting* and/or *reinforcing* aspects of the social” (Delaney 7; original emphasis). Analyzing different contexts, David Delaney (2002), Kay Anderson (1987), David Theo Goldberg (1993), Ronald R. Stundstrom (2003), Sherene H. Razack (2002), and Nicholas Blomley (2003, 2004), to name a few, have explored how social categories such as race are spatialized as a result and as an expression of the workings of social relations, which, in their own right, are informed by ideological regimes; and how resulting spatial configurations work to maintain and reinscribe the identity, status, and representations projected onto these categories. Put another way, society undertakes various b/ordering processes to uphold its structures and hierarchies. Identity and politics come into play as individuals or groups on both sides of the borders negotiate their relationship to those borders and to those enclosed by them. Thus, for instance, Delaney suggests considering how the workings of various spatializations are “experienced in body and being” (Delaney 11), and Razack insists on “asking about the relationship between identity and space. What is being imagined or projected on to specific spaces, and [...] on to bodies? Further, what is being enacted in those spaces and on those bodies?” (Razack 128).

⁶ The setting of both *Scalped* and *Red Power*, Native American reservations, are acute examples of such spatializations and spatial marginalizations of race. These racial “enclaves” (Cairns 155, Flanagan 195), as some scholars call them, are a manifestation of colonizers’ racist ideology and a result of their re-ordering the social space of the colonies; they “facilitate the nearly absolute geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized” (Razack 129). This allows a degree of freedom for their residents to practice their traditional lifestyles, even if the space is shrunk and bordered, but also, through the absence of contact, begets stereotypes. Seen from the outside, even today they are often regarded as anomalous structures:

The reservation is the supreme spatial expression of the ambivalent position of the Indian within the American nation-state. Alternately seen as the spaces within the nation that reflect a more authentic, traditional way of life, or as backwards worlds steeped in superstition and frozen in time, the reservation is an enduring reflection of larger dynamics. In more extreme versions, reservations were (and are)

understood as havens of socialist value; as threatening spatial anachronisms.
(D'Arcus 1246)

- 7 Aaron and Guéra's *Scalped* and Wright-McLeod's *Red Power*, on the other hand, offer to share an insider's view as well as to unsettle projections from the outside. Paying attention to everyday realities of reservation life, *Scalped* construes the Prairie Rose reservation as a *noir* wasteland, which owes a lot to the novel's visual structure and style: dirty colors, numerous panels of different size and form crammed into a page, often without the gutter that would afford pauses and in a few cases without a clearly fixed sequence. The effect is that of a chaotic, troubled place, which is plagued by poverty, unemployment, welfare dependence, substance abuse, and violence. However, though less explicitly pronounced in the narrative, the Prairie Rose reservation is a clearly delimited contemporary indigenous spatial segment, which articulates its distinct status, granted it by the federal law, and boasts a degree of economic development through the casino business. Still, Prairie Rose is fundamentally affected and transformed by the laws and norms of the outside, which is most clearly evident in its internalization of the patriarchal order and business values. From the onset, as shown in Volume 1 of the series, *Indian Country*, the central conflict is not racial or between the inside and outside of the reservation; instead, activist-turned-capitalist Lincoln Red Crow has to deal with the resistance of the more traditionally-oriented inhabitants of the reservation, led by his former partner activist and beloved Gina, who advocates cultural preservation and integrity as well as more careful filtering of outside influences.

8 Wright-McLeod's *Red Power*, while also mainly set in a Native American reservation, undertakes, as I aim to show in the remainder of this paper, to expose but also to counter (post)colonial^{iv} politics of space that threaten to penetrate the reservation from outside. The novel foregrounds the continuing disruption of Native spatial and social order by power groups: it explicitly links the contemporary story of Native people's forced removal initiated by capitalist interests to the colonial contact and its destructive effects on indigenous people and space, emphasizing how (post)colonial élites continue to compulsively repeat the same agenda. Wright-McLeod comments:

The colonizing and post-colonial agendas have always been about acquiring space and conquering the people either by absorbing that population or wiping them out. Human existence requires land, and space is limited then rationed unequally through whatever means of commerce. The Native concept regards the land as Mother Earth, a life-giving entity that is central to our existence, as opposed to the European-settler concept of land as property with private ownership that combines industry and finance. The clash of cultures often leads to physical clashes when the power structure requires immediate solutions over negotiation towards harmonious existence. (Personal interview)

- 9 In this passage, Wright-McLeod speaks about and, in the novel, exposes and contrasts conflicting ways of conceiving of and being in space that characterize two culturally distinct – and racialized, as evident in his own usage of racial terms to denote them – groups, which have to share the same physical territory and whose relationship is marked by asymmetrical power relations. In his analysis of social space, Lefebvre singles out what he calls “representations of space,” that is, conceptual and ideological generalizations about how space and a society's relationship to it are (to be) understood or “conceived,” as he puts it; he contrasts these representations with personal interpretations of space and spatial structures by individual users, or the ways they “live” such structures (Lefebvre 33, 38-39). What conceptualizations of space come

to dominate depends on the dominant power structures, which also put into use their modes of production; other ways of conceiving space tend to be marginalized (Lefebvre 38-39), as Wright-McLeod's novel demonstrates.

¹⁰To highlight the contrast between the groups in conflict and their clashing conceptions of space, *Red Power* insists on representing the different characters', both Native and white, social identities and ideological agendas, embedded in their respective collective histories, rather than investing in characterization and personalization. As a result, characters such as a group of Native activists, a Native elder and medicine man, white businessmen, policemen, or an FBI sniper as well as corrupt tribal leaders, can be neatly distributed on opposite sides of roadblocks and barricades set along the reservation border, which spatializes and racializes the conflict in the novel. The contrast between the two groups is also enhanced by the visual markers used in the drawings. Wright-McLeod speaks about the minimalism of the drawings as intended deliberate stylistic choice:

Drawing everything by hand using brush/ink and pencil, the design of settings and characters needed to be as simple as possible yet distinct. Inspired by actual people, each character required a personality visually, such as Billy, who has long hair, or the police chief, who wears a hat and sun glasses. (Personal interview)

- ¹¹ But in addition to facilitating identification of characters, the way the novel distributes images to denote the two opposing sides explicitly suggests power imbalance. The invaders and the Native figures who have joined their side are depicted using explicitly military imagery, and their camouflaged faces, military or police uniforms, bullet-proof vests, and weapons contrast with the vulnerability of the unarmed Native activists clad in casual T-shirts. Wright-McLeod comments:

By keeping the imagery simple and graphically intense [*sic*] serves to convey the respective nature of the opposing sides within a limited number of pages. The contrast between the activists and those of the power structure underlines the social, political and racial divide that exists. There may seem to be that a sense of vulnerability shown in the portrayal of activists wearing jeans and T-shirts standing against the police dressed in body armor and helmets is more than a symbolic depiction of the reality. (Personal interview)

- ¹² This choice of imagery also articulates the collective histories and ideologies behind peaceful resistance on the one hand and armed invasion on the other as it echoes the colonial take-over of indigenous spaces by a technologically more advanced group, depicted in the novel's prologue, where the same military imagery is used to depict the white colonizers (Wright-McLeod, *Red Power* 6, 8). While such pattern of imagery amplifies the power hierarchies and the injustice of (post)colonial practices, it also, by extension, serves to show the space of the reservation as equally vulnerable as the violence affects both the bodies and the space which they inhabit. This is intensely suggested in the scene when shots are fired into the reservation territory: "The gunfire ripped the silence of the morning and in the hills it sounded like the tearing of a great blanket" (49-50).

¹³ As explained in the acknowledgements, *Red Power* is inspired by the land conflict at Big Mountain, Arizona, "where 10,000 traditional Navajo people were facing forcible relocation from their traditional homeland. [...] They won their fight through prayers, ceremonies, and the strength from generations of life on the land" and by "the many other struggles across North America that either made headlines or were hidden from view" (61-62). Drawing on multiple experiences born out of the same impulse to protect

the land, the novel does not limit itself to any given locality or temporality. Unlike *Scalped*, in which the authors make use of place names, both real and fictional, as well as register numerous details about the landscapes, townscapes, and interiors, the setting in *Red Power*, partly due to the minimalist style of the novel's black and white ink drawings, is not as localized, except for the name of the fictional reservation, mentioned towards the end of Book One by a newscaster covering the events (*Red Power* 55). The space constructed in the narrative is a set of spatial patterns rather than a specific place: this is a deliberately generalized account of the conflict between the rural reservation and the city as well as between the Amerindian reservation and the outside, marked by the demarcation line drawn for the conflict at hand. Central to the story is the rural reservation space, which is identified through images of nature, tipis (13, 38, 43), and visual references to traditional cultural practices, such as the ceremonial big drum (38) and a ceremony conducted after sundancing (44). But, unlike in the case of the protests resulting from, for instance, the land conflict at Big Mountain,¹⁴ the narrative does not evoke any particular story of the place that would localize it and would evoke specific layers of memory. Wright-McLeod comments:

The settings are taken from actual places but every image is a combination of imagination and actual locations. The main reason why the geographical locations are fictionalized is to enable myself a larger canvas upon which I can tell many stories of our struggle rather than "sticking to the facts" on one flash point – and given those limits there are other restrictions and boundaries developed in attempting to tell someone else's story. (Personal interview)

- ¹⁴ As a result, the novel develops around the idea of Native space as a general concept rather than suggesting a specific land conflict, which might then imply a unique or exceptional situation. Anonymous, this reservation can be any reservation across North America, all equally vulnerable to the influences and invasions from the outside.

¹⁵ Similarly, the conflict and the plot which develop in *Red Power* are not fixed in any specific temporality. Wright McLeod explains:

Rather than utilizing specific temporality in terms of linear story telling or historicity, the method allows the reader to apply the story of *Red Power* to any situation that they are aware [sic] and to understand that every struggle over indigenous land is unique in character and that all originate from the same source of agitation. (Personal interview)

- ¹⁶ To help clarify how *Red Power* avoids specifying and historicizing space, *Scalped*, which is meticulous in indicating place-names and dates, can serve as a counter example. *Scalped* uses a series of flashbacks which allude to the incident at Wounded Knee in 1973 (June 26, 1975 in the novel) and the subsequent arrest of Leonard Peltier (Lawrence Belcourt in the novel) (Aaron and Guéra 80-81, 98-100, 103-106). The flashbacks are memories that haunt Lincoln Red Crow, who has betrayed his former ideals and friends but is tormented by his choices; and Gina, who now feels marginalized in the new capitalist order that the reservation community has internalized and who alienated her son through her involvement in activism. The flashbacks thus work as a characterization strategy in addition to offering a version, albeit fictionalized, of what happened at Wounded Knee. Wright-McLeod's choice not to displace the narrative line into a specific historical frame, on the other hand, makes it more gripping as events seem to be developing in front of the reader's eyes. This is also significantly due to the reliance of the comic format on dialogue, which creates the impression of immediacy.

In *Red Power*, the effect is not undone even by the heavy usage of the narrator's voice, as the story of resistance is told in present tense.

¹⁷ Nonetheless, having dedicated the novel "To those who know" (*Red Power* 3), Wright-McLeod does draw on specific events and incidents involving Native activism across North America, including the protests organized in the USA by the American Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the Oka crisis of 1990 in Quebec, Canada, to name a few. Wright-McLeod says:

Indeed there are many "markers" within the story and tucked between the story line that point to many of these issues, with details regarding many key individuals and flashpoints. The dedication hints at many underlying issues of historical and contemporary situations that are told between the lines of the narrative and within some of the imagery which alludes to events including the cases of Leonard Peltier, who represents political corruption and the sacrifice of resistance movements for the sake of corporate and political gain, and Anna Mae Aquash, who represents political assassination.^{vi} Other situations such as Oka are referenced by the on-scene reporter who talked about the tear gas blowing back into the police lines, which occurred during the July 11 attack at Oka in 1990.^{vii} (Personal interview)

¹⁸ The one historical moment that the novel does explicitly make use of is that of the colonial contact and the subsequent rearrangement of indigenous space; their depiction comprises the entire five pages of the novel's prologue. There is no revisionist undertaking in the novel, a project that critics such as Graham Huggan (2008) or Helen Gilbert (1998) have noted in much of postcolonial writing, when writers seek to reconsider the historical process of constructing colonial space, and fiction is employed to undo the erasures and inscriptions of the colonial system. Indigenous writing, specifically, often seeks to "undermine the legitimacy of white settlement and assert Other(ed) versions of history" (Gilbert 53). For instance, the colonial encounter is shown as an outcome of the doings of the mythological indigenous trickster, who might have been seeking to educate and improve European culture gone wrong (Maracle 191), or, in more extremely satirical versions, looking for a game partner to escape boredom (King 50-52).

¹⁹ Wright-McLeod's novel, however, employs the flashback to the moment of colonial contact to strongly suggest that the colonial project of appropriation is not over: the agenda behind the question of a European newcomer, "Is there a bounty on these shores?", and the images of an excavator followed by a line of trucks in a sequential panel (*Red Power* 6-7) are echoed in the statement, "The current figures on those mineral deposits down there make Fort Knox look like a middle-income bank account," uttered by the assistant of the head of the mining company about to extract minerals from the reservation territory (13). The straightforward linking of the main plot line with that of the first arrival of the colonizers foregrounds the relentless repetitiveness of those colonial practices that undo the indigenous world. The narrator directly says that "history repeats itself" (50). In his remarks addressed to me in the interview, Wright-McLeod says:

It is obvious that there will be no peace or justice for Native people until all of the land and water are consumed. Therefore, history will continue to be repeated as it has in the past and as it will in the future. In this case a specific historical frame would be redundant since the story is non-specific in its own geopolitical reality but represents a universal narrative. (Personal interview)

²⁰ But the prologue does more than expose colonial greed. Its visual composition shows the undoing of indigenous space: *Red Power* makes use of differently sized panels

throughout, but the prologue introduces a pattern that helps foreground destructive colonial practices. It opens with a splash page, a full-page panel which encapsulates the last moments before the newcomers reach the shore; it is followed by pages already fragmented into multiple panels of different size and arrangement on each page, effectively enacting the destructive collision between the two cultures, which shatters the familiar spatial structures and order. While the images and text in the full page panel do indicate the arrival and the chaos it will beget, showing the shapes of two big ships approaching the shore beneath the narrator's words, "[t]umbl[ing] off their ships; hungry, sick, dispossessed, adventurous, ambitious, lost and determined...," the composition of the panel suggests tranquility. The surface of the ocean is still; the two ships of the settlers are at a considerable distance, their sails blending with the sky, and people in them are hardly visible; the people in a Native canoe heading to meet them do not seem worried, but welcoming (5). Dominant in this *mise-en-scène* is the face of the wolf, the narrator in the novel, which fills the top half of the panel, appearing in the sky and blending with it, the way his words do, not framed by a rectangular box as elsewhere in the book. He is overseeing the scene and exudes confidence and power of knowledge because "their coming had been foretold," despite the two strings of barbed wire across the wolf's face, suggesting captivity (5). Notably, too, the only other splash pages in the book will also feature spatial experiences outside colonizing control and influence, but in touch with ancestral cultural traditions as in the ceremonial space of a ritual at the end of a Sun Dance (44) and Billy's entrance into a different, magical, spatial dimension in the sky, however unsettling the experience is to him (26-27, 30-31).

²¹ The following pages of the prologue make use of multiple panels of different size; here, long shots and close-ups alternate to encapsulate various details and stages of colonial exploration and rapid appropriation of the land, making the reader's eye jump from one to another, especially on the second page, where there is very little text to slow down the process (6). This works to introduce the effect of instability as the space is being invaded and unsettled; it also suggests the disorientation of the narrator and focalizer wolf as well as the subordination of native spatial order to the new invading power. The splitting of what was a tranquil and balanced spatial order, depicted on the first splash-page, into smaller fragments is even more blatantly reinforced in the two last panels of the prologue (9). They demonstrate the complete transformation of the indigenous space through the imposition of the cadastral grid. While the top and the mid-left panels on the page show scenes from pre-contact life, the mid-left panel depicting a row of traditional longhouses and hints of routine human activity in and around them, the panel next to it is a close-up on a fly-swatter, its handle extending into the panel on the left; the fly swatter has hit a surface, that of the village space of the longhouses. The bottom panel beneath them, which spans the entire width of the page, now shows a bird's-eye-view of the space fully rearranged: it is the ocean shore from the opening page, but now presented as a fragment of the urban grid, devoid of human figures; the only suggestion of human presence here are several boats along the pier. The lines of the grid echo the net of the fly swatter, superimposed upon what was a lived space, or, to borrow Nicholas Blomley's description of pre-colonial space, "a network of ancient native villages, resource sites, and symbolic landscapes. [...] trails, patterns of use, and landscapes of ritual crisscross[ing] the area" (*Unsettling* 110). All of these are now erased as are their users: at the top right corner of the fly-swatter panel, there is a human figure sent spinning by the violence of the impact (Wright-McLeod,

Red Power 9). In their place now, as typical for settler cities, are “new spaces of property,” from which indigenous people are excluded as they are disowned (Blomley, “Geography of Violence” 129; Blomley, *Unsettling* xvii-xx).

²²As a spatial configuration, the grid pattern is a product of a particular way of looking at and conceiving space; its demarcating lines regulate inclusion and exclusion. This is looking from above and from a distance, which disentangles a viewer from the grasp of the structures, specificities, and complexities of a particular place and affords the viewer what Michel de Certeau (1984) describes as the look of the “totalizing eye,” which transforms the place in front into a readable, graspable “text” devoid of complexities, and creates an illusion of power (92). Bill Ashcroft (2001) identifies this way of looking as a typical colonial practice, useful in the way it construes space as an abstract, measurable concept, a “topographic system” and a “visual construct,” separated from time and thus from any lived-in quality; this facilitates appropriation and transformation of territories seen in such a way that it renders them lifeless, justifying the disregard for colonized people’s presence and spatial structures (125, 139; see also Goldberg 185-87). Blomley specifically analyzes the practice of the colonial survey, which assumed such way of looking to abstract colonized territories from “lived relations and social relations” and to become “a form of organized forgetting,” which facilitates colonial acts of dispossession and displacement (*Unsettling* xvi, xx, 127, 112). In the prologue of *Red Power*, a newcomer exploring the land he has just stepped on reiterates a similar principle: “Who will care?” (6); the novel’s narrator wolf, commenting on excavations and violence in colonized territories, speaks of colonizers “bury[ing] a memory” and “brush[ing] memories [of colonial crimes] away” (7, 8).

²³When the plot of *Red Power* moves into the narrative present, focusing on a contemporary attempt to take over the territory of the Native reservation, the project is aided by exactly this same way of looking and conceiving space. The first white characters to appear, namely, the head of the mining company and his assistant, are first shown in a helicopter over the reservation (13), which affords them the vantage point identical to that of the colonial survey, and which renders the space beneath abstract and transparent. The panels on the page alternate between long shots of the helicopter at the top and the bottom of the page, and the close-ups on the two white figures inside it, discussing the project, in the middle of the page. In a bottom panel, next to the helicopter, a speech box contains the following statement by the company head: “These people will not stand in our way, clinging to the past like it means something. Glad Hand can use these radicals for target practice, and the feds can take care of the rest.”(13) In a similar scene, this time in a car at a distance from the reservation, he says, this time to the Tribal Council Chairman: “Look, Glad Hand, your clumsy ways aren’t working, and we’re not tying up assets into some long, drawn out stand-off. Talk peace, buy off who you need to, and bulldoze the rest out of the way” (56). The words recapitulate not only the obvious derogatory attitude towards the inhabitants of the reservation, obstacles in the way of his business project, but also show this character assuming the role of the white, invading colonizer depicted elsewhere in the novel. That “the rest” in the quotation, depersonalized and objectified as physical obstacles to be “bulldozed away,” are indigenous people, a polluting racial Other, and that the place in question is a reservation only facilitates the project, which he himself roots in the colonial practices of the past: showing his assistant a ring with what only some Native people know is a magic star stone, he says, “You know, Attaboy, my granddaddy gave me this ring. It’s a family heirloom. He got it from his daddy who

was in the cavalry during the Indian wars out West. [...] Think of it, Attaboy. One of my ancestors took a *single* stone off that land... and I'm going to take the *rest*" (56, original emphasis). His earlier statement, "Don't delude yourself, Attaboy. It's more than just money" (13), further suggests a desire to articulate an ideological agenda behind his business project, in effect, that of (post)colonial "spatial purification," to borrow David Sibley's (1995) term (26).

²⁴In this context, for the white power élites, the reservation land marks yet another frontier to take over in the making of North America and of American selfhood: a spatial segment previously allotted indigenous inhabitants in the colonial grid that has so far escaped physical appropriation, probing, and exploitation.^{viii} Drawing on Anthony Giddens, Blomley defines the frontier as "an outer defensive ring, often linked to physical defensibility, that abuts zones of savagery" and argues that this concept/trope which "separates the West from 'savage' is still powerfully operative," particularly when it comes to Western ideas about property ("Geography of Violence" 136, 124-25). 'Savage' indigenous people are still frequently construed as "mobile and unfixed [...] to force a separation between a population and the space it occupies, rendering a collective claim to this space void, even invisible" (Blomley, *Unsettling* xx). Also, the racialized spaces of reservations are often marked through their difference from normative Western social and spatial practices by highlighting their social pathologies (Razack 144, D'Arcus 1246-47, Flanagan 171, 174-75), which then sanctions the take-over of the lands by various power groups engaged in the (post)colonial civilizing mission. Such appropriations can take diverse forms. For instance, in one of his emails, Wright-McLeod quite emotionally remarks:

And isn't it interesting that more and more Native people are moving in from the land to urban areas which I believe is a test marketing strategy for the unfolding of the United Nations Agenda 21.^{ix} [Some specific] places [...] are a micro test experiment for what will possibly unfold for the depopulation of rural areas in North America. Starve them out and push them off the land for corporate and bank interests at the very top levels of power. (Personal interview)

²⁵In *Red Power*, colonial appropriation takes the form of physical violence. Not only are white characters encouraged by their leaders to "use" reservation people "for target practice," "bulldoze [them] out of the way" (13, 56); scenes of direct brutalization and destruction of indigenous people in the novel are numerous. The pattern is, again, introduced in the prologue, most intensely on page 8, where three panels focus on figures of victimized women, referred to by the narrator as "another daughter of the people" (8). In the first two panels, a woman is lying on the ground, and only her face is visible in close-ups. In the top panel, the expression is that of pain, and next to it is a close-up on a military boot, about to trample her; in the panel below, her mouth is bleeding, and next to the face is medium long shot of a soldier aiming a gun. The bottom panel suggests that the woman's body is fully destroyed as it is transformed into a huge onomatopoeic "BLAM," whose letters are violently splashed on the page. On the right side of each of these panels reemerges the silhouette of a soldier, his rifle at the ready (8). Notably, violence here is gendered as it is racial. Placing these panels after a page depicting excavations in the colonized territories (7) metaphorically connects the woman's body and the land, both equally trampled and battered by the masculine power of colonizers.

²⁶In the narrative present of *Red Power*, the motif is reiterated through the story of Iron Woman, another Native activist. According to Wright-McLeod's intentions, Iron

Woman “represents the survivors of the brutality that Native women have endured ever since the first indigenous/white conflicts began, and the ongoing abuses and prison time they face in statistical proportions” (Personal interview). Upon arriving to the Star River reservation, she shares a story of her imprisonment for having shot a white man who had beaten and raped her: “My lawyer told the judge it was self defense. I got two years for criminal assault” (17). Here, added to the racial and gendered violence of the rape, an ultimate metaphor of colonial violations in much of Native literature, is legal violence, which essentially construes the victimized indigenous woman as a legitimate target of sexual abuse at the hands of the white man. Her racialized body is thus, by extension, another space onto which (post)colonial violence can be projected and, through it, a dominant male (post)colonial identity can be re-enacted. After she is shot, having leaped, unarmed, on two male policemen in an attempt to prevent them from arresting Billy and Shelly Two Stars (50), other policemen, when describing the incident, only focus on the harm suffered by their two colleagues: “Two injured cops: one shot himself in the leg when they were draggin’ that woman out of the bush, and his partner stepped into a bear trap” (58). The violence directed against Iron Woman’s body is again normalized, reducing her to an unexpected obstruction to the functioning of social and spatial structures of dominant social groups. Similarly, Billy and Shelly are described by pursuing policemen as armed and intending to “fight it out” from the woods, despite being unarmed.

²⁷Razack speaks of “a quite specific violence perpetrated on Aboriginal bodies throughout Canada’s history, a colonial violence that has not only enabled white settlers to secure the land but *to come to know themselves as entitled to it*” (128-29, original emphasis). In more general terms, Gail Mason (2002) discusses violence as “a mechanism through which we distinguish and observe other things. In other words, violence is more than a practice that acts upon individual subjects to inflict harm and injury. It is, metaphorically speaking, also a way of looking at these subjects” (11). *Red Power* exposes the same logic behind colonial ways of looking at and conceiving indigenous space and bodies, showing how assessment and categorization lead to exclusion and restriction. To intensify the effect, the novel repeatedly uses images of captivity, such as the prison bars that restrain Iron Woman’s insubordinate body after she has killed her rapist, echoing the barbed wire across the face of the wolf in the prologue, and the cage to which the wolf is confined when Billy Moon is departing to join in the protest and comes to say goodbye (17, 5, 11).

²⁸Notably, too, the white characters in the novel are all male, except for an on-scene reporter located at the US-Canada border and thus outside the conflict; she only appears in one panel (55). The novel thus implicitly suggests a specifically (post)colonial patriarchy behind white invaders. However, the drawings in the panels in which white characters appear prevent the reader’s identification with what de Certeau calls the “totalizing eye” (92). The invading view of the reservation space is implicit rather than something the reader is invited to share in: what the panels depict is the helicopter above, or the car at a distance, or else uniformed or camouflaged people wielding binoculars, but not a view from their windows or through their lenses (13, 56, 37, 49).

²⁹Moreover, the white characters’ exclusive reliance on vision, upon which their understanding of space and bodies in it is based, proves to be ineffective and unreliable. For instance, in one episode, several panels show policemen watching the reservation

through their binoculars when mist falls and, first, obstructs and later completely distorts their vision as “they all saw them: hundreds of warriors from the days of Custer” (49). The narrator wryly comments: “Maybe it was the mist, maybe it was the medicine, maybe it was mass-hysteria astigmatism. Who knows?” (49) That the tribal police chief, who is present at the scene, a Native person, is also duped by his vision shows he has internalized the colonial way of looking and disconnected himself from his own culture; he is also the one who orders the police to open fire (49). In an episode that soon follows, the (post)colonial perception of space as neatly mapped and thus predictable and transparent is upset even more. Here, Billy and Shelly, who are asked to smuggle incriminating documents out of the reservation territory, are followed by policemen and a federal sniper. To escape, they first follow wolf tracks, “a highway,” as Billy calls it and offers traditional tobacco “to pay the toll”; this allows them to cover a very large distance in a short time (53, 59). Then they are helped by magic power of a sky being who enables them to vanish. The federal agent says: “the trail ends here... It’s like they just up and flew away.” (59-60) Interestingly, Wright-McLeod refers to real-life experiences behind these episodes. In one of the e-mails written as part of my interview with him, he mentions AIM activist Steve Robideau recalling “monitoring the police radio chatter [during the Wounded Knee standoff] where they heard the authorities talking about seeing large numbers of warriors in traditional garb, though none were there at the time” (Personal interview); in another interview, he speaks of his own hiking trip with his niece in the mountains in northern California, during which he discovered a wolf trail,

and it was like a highway of many different animal tracks; I put some traditional tobacco down along with a prayer and we traveled over two mountain tops on our hands and knees – and all in a matter of a couple of hours – it was a breath-taking trip – a sacred journey and one I will never forget. (qtd. in “On Writing”)

³⁰These episodes, both in the novel and behind it, suggest ways of being in space – “living” it, to use Lefebvre’s term (33, 39, 362) – dissimilar to those which (post)colonial power groups exhibit. Native characters in the novel are shown to possess a very different spatial competence, connected and responsive as they are to the land through their physical senses, emotions, thoughts, and memories, rooted in cultural tradition. When relying on vision, it is not through the “totalizing eye” that de Certeau describes (92), but with perception to details and complexities that the “totalizing eye” seeks to erase. Wright-McLeod comments:

The European disconnect with the indigenous knowledge and origins to the land of North America have always prevented the understanding of the natural awareness of space, time and experiences associated with the spirit of the land and animals. (Personal interview)

- ³¹ The most intense spatial experience described in *Red Power* involves Billy’s summons by a “sky being,” Thunder, at which point Billy “plunges” into the sky. When there, he is handed a magic star stone and told the story of another such stone, having been lost, first, to bad medicine men and eventually to white people. Billy’s stone is supposed to help restore balance, and he is given a promise to receive guidance in his dreams (24-27, 31-33). Differently from the examples I have given earlier of the mythological figures in Native writing (Maracle 191, King 50-52), *Red Power* does not use the episodes involving mythology and magic to engage in historical revisionism. In Lee Maracle’s (1993) and Thomas King’s (1993) narratives, the indigenous trickster figures are depicted having caused the arrival of the white settlers to North America and,

consequently, its colonization. In their narratives, this motif works to subvert the colonial power-hierarchy and, to some degree, deprives colonizers of agency and self-imposed normativity, even if in both cases the tricksters' projects go awry and prove destructive to indigenous communities. In *Red Power*, instances of magic do not interfere with historical processes and mainly function to give select Native characters assistance in the novel's narrative present as does Billy's "plunging" into the sky and being endowed with power. The sky here is constructed as a secondary world characteristic of the fantasy genre, although this episode is nonetheless firmly rooted in the idea of cultural continuity: Thunder, along with his brother Sun, nephew Fire, and Star Woman, the novel suggests, are important figures in indigenous mythology. The name of the reservation, Star River, is explicitly linked to the story of the star stones. After Billy returns to the human world, his experience, which has "forever altered" his "perception" of – as opposed to a way of conceiving – the sky (25) has to be mediated through a ceremony in a sweat lodge. At this point the novel again refuses to present Native space as transparent and penetrable, and blocks, this time, even the reader's entrance into the ceremonial space of the sweat lodge, even though the reader was invited to share in Billy's encounter with Thunder in the sky, as presented in detail through several full-page and large panels (29-33). This time, the page is split into two parts with two adjacent middle panels painted entirely in black, and only the narrator's voice in the two speech boxes explains: "I can't take you inside. These ways are private, sacred and holy to those who follow this path. I also can't say what was said in there"; still, he offers a brief summary of the exchange of the star stone between Billy and medicine man Tom Bear Foot (40). To further foreground the empowering potential of indigenous forms of knowledge and spiritual practices, the narrator concludes, "Not everything is legend and myth. There be substance in them [...]" (40). This evokes the episode at the very end of the novel, which I have already discussed, when Billy and Shelly are helped to vanish from their persecutors (59-60). Wright-McLeod also highlights this power through the title of his novel:

The title *Red Power* was carefully considered and does not tell the story of the Red Power movement from the late 1960s in America. Red is the spiritual color for Native people and not to be confused with any Left wing political ideology. Power in terms of Native reality is about understanding the universe and the spiritual responsibility attached to our existence. (Personal interview)

³²Interestingly, it is Billy who gets to experience being summoned into a spatial dimension inaccessible to anyone else, although his being an urban resident who lost his parents a long time ago might imply loss of cultural connection (Wright-McLeod, *Red Power* 20). The emphasis however, as Wright-McLeod explains, is on Billy as a representative of "the collective experience of those Native people who have had access to the spirit world in different but personal ways" (Personal interview). In fact, most Native characters central to the novel, the activists, are newcomers to the place they are defending, driven here from different contexts, ranging from the city to jail, both implying displacement and estrangement. Nonetheless, the novel underscores their willingness to reconnect to the space. Shelly says: "I found the movement through some friends who traveled to the Prairies one summer. It made sense what they said about our rights and the land. It hit me. Right to the core." (Wright-McLeod, *Red Power* 20) Still, the novel refuses to simply romanticize the power of indigenous space, though such experiences as Billy's and Shelly's – as well as the repeated confusion of the intruders at the phenomena they encounter on the reservation – might imply as much.

However, overplaying the mysterious and the magic would distort the power imbalance the novel consistently underscores. Overemphasizing the idealism such as Shelly's would detract from the realistic enough portrayal of the Native community and might imbue it with stereotypes of the noble warrior. To avoid this, the reservation in *Red Power* is shown hosting a few corrupt Native characters, such as the tellingly named Tribal Council Chairman Jim Glad Hand and police chief Ed Girlyboy. The activist movement, too, is fractured; Billy will be informed that "there is a split going on in the movement" upon his arrival to Star River (Wright-McLeod, *Red Power*, 16); later, one activist, Six, who was helping organize a protest walk from a city on the West Coast and complained that "there's something screwy about the money," will be announced missing, and a white journalist who was travelling with him will be found murdered (41, 46). But these issues are to be further developed; the first installment of *Red Power* merely introduces these story lines.

³³To be developed as well are the motifs around Native characters' resistance to attempts to invade the reservation space. Wright-McLeod says, "[a]s the story unfolds in Book 2, these issues become more apparent along with the stand that Native people will take as the pressure mounts"; nonetheless, as he makes clear, "*Red Power* is not a training manual or manifesto but an attempt to reveal the humanity and complexity of a given situation" (Personal interview). Still, it is important how, in this context, resistance practices can also be seen as ways of being in and using space. As D'Arcus maintains, resistance is not only a "discourse on inequalities of power and difference," but also "the practical work of recalibrating those relationships [of inequality], [...] including engaging their body with material spaces" that depends on "the role that space plays in shaping the contours of resistance" (1243). This becomes particularly acute when the conflict itself is about land and space: it is not merely the physical territory that is at stake, but the very idea of Native subjectivity and identity, of which the reservation is a spatial manifestation. Rios (2008), discussing the protests organized by the AIM in the 1960s and 1970s, refers to them as "guerilla theatre" (44-45). Wright-McLeod, commenting on how "indigenous resistance to volatile provocation by the outside corporate and government power structures takes on many forms depending on the level of force that must be faced," offers some other examples, some of which have already found their way into the novel, for instance:

In the case of Big Mountain, Arizona, there was a "no arms policy" that prevailed though there was one instance when some urban "supporters" showed up and began to hand out weapons to their cadre and were told to leave and not come back unless they were unarmed. The elders did not want a repeat of Wounded Knee or a Waco, Texas situation, but relied solely on traditional teachings, ways, ceremonies and peaceful beliefs as one people with an historical connection to the land.^x (Personal interview)

- ³⁴ Keeping in mind the power imbalance so distinctly pronounced in the novel and the "no weapons" policy of the activists, it remains to be seen how the Native characters of *Red Power* will use their relationship to space differently from their opponents.

³⁵To conclude, very different in their visual style and the narrative line, both Brian Wright-McLeod's *Red Power* and Jason Aaron and R.M Guéra's *Scalped* explore spatial politics as played out on Native reservations. Both graphic novels grew out of similar impulses: to address Native realities and experiences, which, as Aaron says in an interview for *Newsarama*, are largely unknown to mainstream society, especially when

it comes to Native reservations: “I think part of it is that it’s just something different. [...] You can identify with these characters in a lot of ways, but they’re still from a background and a setting that most people aren’t familiar with” (qtd. in Rogers). Making use of the format which is still often considered a form of popular culture, “the poor man’s movie,” as Wright-McLeod refers to it (qtd. in “On Writing”),^{xi} both graphic novels reach out to wide audiences to seek political and ideological impact, particularly in challenging representations of these still highly stereotyped spaces and their dwellers, without romanticizing or idealizing them. *Scalped*, with its emphasis on and investment in characterization, aims to restore subjectivity to Native Americans, usually depersonalized and objectified by outsiders. The prospective *Red Power* trilogy, on the other hand, begins with exploring the mechanics through which such depersonalization and even demonization is carried out. This is particularly important in the novel’s focus on political activism, part of which inevitably involves, as Wright-McLeod points out, “battling the manipulation of the public’s perception by the media and authorities” (Personal interview). The format of the graphic novel proves to be particularly productive here, making use of visual and linguistic interplay as well as techniques of composition and montage that the media typically uses. Thus *Red Power* effectively foregrounds how ways of looking create spaces that are always deeply embedded in ideologies and cultural traditions, and employs the comic format to boost the spatial experience.

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NOTES

i. For another example, consider, for instance, a panel depicting a city scene in Wright-McLeod's *Red Power*, featuring a white person sporting a Mohawk haircut as an expression, predictably, of a rebellious subcultural identity. As a contrast, in the background of the panel stands the long haired Native protagonist of the novel, who in a later scene is thrown a racial slur, "Get a haircut! Fuckin' Indian!" (10, 12).

ii. Part of a larger Red Power movement, American Indian Movement (AIM), established in Minneapolis in the 1960s, first, to protect the Native people of Minneapolis from police brutality and racism. By the early 1970s it had grown to establish chapters across the USA and is best known for the various protests it organized in the form of guerrilla theatre across the country. The most renowned is the protest occupation in 1973 of the site of a historical massacre of 1890, Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. It resulted in an armed standoff that lasted three month, during which two FBI agents were killed. Arrested, tried, and convicted for the killings was activist Leonard Peltier, who is currently serving two consecutive terms of life imprisonment in a federal prison. He has not pleaded guilty and continues to appeal against the sentence (*American Indian Movement*, D'Arcus, Rios).

iii. The interview was conducted as a series of e-mails over the period of 12 March – 29 April, 2013. Minor language editing was added to the quotations from the e-mails for the sake of stylistic consistency.

iv. The brackets in the term "(post)colonial" are used to foreground the situation of indigenous people in settler countries, such as the USA, Canada, or Australia, who continue living "in a state of colonization as direct and coercive as prevailed two centuries ago" (Razack 134). In Canadian context, Alan C. Cairns comments on the difference between "empire (and its ending) abroad from empire (and its ending) at home" (Cairns 28) and discusses the "imperial mentality" of what he calls "non-Aboriginal Canadians," who quickly outnumbered the indigenous population. Cairns explains how this mentality continues to be perceived as colonizing by Native people: "The end of the Canadian version of empire over Aboriginal peoples, accordingly, could not mean independence for the colonized or the departure of the colonizers" (Cairns 26).

v. *Red Power* also alludes to the Blue Lake case: the drawing of the bottom panel on page 17 of the novel references Robert Mirabal's poem "Starchy Montoya/ Blue Lake." Mirabal's poem is about two Native boys, who, during a bicycle trip, witness a crowd of people celebrating the return of the 48,000 acres of land to the Taos Pueblo Indians by President Richard Nixon in 1970, which

ended their 64 year struggle with the US government people (Mirabal; see also “Blue Lake”). The panel of *Red Power* which references it depicts children, running and riding a bicycle, and includes several speech boxes by a character in the novel, Iron Woman, about her frustration with the continuing destruction of ancestral land (17). I am grateful to Brian Wright-McLeod for pointing the connection out for me.

vi. Anna Mae Aquash, an active member of AIM and close to its leaders, was found murdered in 1976, having disappeared three months prior. The murder remained unsolved for several decades. In 2004 and 2010, respectively, two former members of AIM, were sentenced to life imprisonment for abduction and murder of Aquash (Poliandri, n.p.).

vii. The plot-lines alluding to Peltier’s and Aquash’s stories are to be developed in the subsequent instalments of the novel; for the Oka reference, see Wright-McLeod, *Red Power* 55.

viii. This is not to say that reservations have escaped colonial monitoring. Falling under the federal jurisdiction, they were and continue to be surveyed; until major changes in Native people’s status started taking place in the late 1950s, the presence of Indian agents and religious figures ensured that, for instance, indigenous rituals were banned, and leaving the reserve was regulated, in some cases, allowed only with a special permission from the agent. Now, the monitoring is conducted in the form of economic control as the federal government, for instance, pays salaries to the tribal officials as well covers welfare cheques (McMillan 314, Razack 139, Wright-McLeod, Personal interview).

ix. Sustainable Development Agenda 21, adopted in 1992, as defined on the UN website, is a “comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the United Nations System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment” (“Agenda 21”). Among its objectives is “to improve the social, economic and environmental quality of human settlements and the living and working environments of all people, in particular the urban and rural poor,” and while Agenda 21 states that “[p]eople should be protected by law against unfair eviction from their homes or land” (“Agenda 21: Promoting Sustainable Human Settlement Development” 7.4, 7.9: b), Wright-McLeod’s skepticism is directed at the idea of organized control over the land of what he sees as power groups as well as their potential manipulation of the objectives of the Agenda for their own interests.

x. For the episodes alluding to these events, see Wright-McLeod, *Red Power* 45 and 43- 44. In the interview, Wright-McLeod continues with more examples:

Each situation is vastly different from another, in the 1980s at Mount Currie, British Columbia, the people opted to use pillows and throw marshmallows at the RCMP, I think that today the response from the police would not be as polite and would use the situation to their advantage with a violent response. Again, the Ipperwash, Ontario situation where armed paramilitary police invaded the “occupiers” of the park with lethal force that resulted in the death of Dudley George can happen when unarmed Natives face insurmountable odds. The Gustafsen Lake, British Columbia incident was an unusual situation where demonstrators used traditional ceremonies as a pretext to occupy land lent by a local white farmer for the purpose of holding the ceremony. Their occupation resulted in a deadly stand-off with militant protesters both Native and non-Native who faced paramilitary RCMP units armed with military vehicles and automatic weapons. (Personal interview)

xi. *Red Power* ranked 11th in March 2012 on *Sequential’s* “All-Canadian Top 30” list (Munn).

ABSTRACTS

This paper discusses Dakota-Anishinabe Brian Wright-McLeod's graphic novel *Red Power* (2011), which tells a story of land conflict surrounding a Native American reservation and of a group of Native activists involved in it. Based on an interview with Wright-McLeod and with several references to Jason Aaron and R.M Guéra's reservation-based graphic novel *Scalped* (2007-2012), it focuses on the politics of space and identity. Drawing on propositions from cultural geography about the interdependency of social and spatial structures and their mutually constitutive relationship, the paper analyzes how *Red Power* makes use of the visual aspect of the graphic novel to rearticulate the colonizer-colonized dichotomy of identity politics and expose the mechanisms through which power structures continue to restrict, disrupt, and exploit indigenous spaces. The paper then proceeds to examine how the novel seeks out possibilities of unsettling the spatial order imposed upon indigenous people by focusing on resistance organized by Native activists. It also explores how the novel suggests ways of experiencing and being in space that escape both colonial ways of knowing and conceiving it and, more importantly, colonial control over it.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Brian Wright-McLeod, Henri Lefebvre, Jason Aaron, Michel de Certeau, Nicholas Blomley, R.M Guéra, Sherene H. Razack

Keywords: (post)colonialism, cultural geography, graphic novel, Native activism, Native people, race, reservation, social space

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