

An Examination of Children's Artworks from Canadian Indigenous Residential Schools

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Abstract

Residential school students within Canadian schools created imagery that was recently collected by the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (NTRC). Five works were selected from numerous artworks archived. Compositional interpretation and discourse analysis were employed in this study. Using art as *historical recovery*, it was found that these cultural artifacts provided records of the children as witnesses regarding their experiences at residential schools. Additionally, these visual pictures reveal these young students' personal lives, and emotional, political, and societal perspectives. In this research, the images allow viewers to comprehend this historical period full of struggle and allow these cultural artifacts to be communicated to future viewers. Finally, the findings reveal these indigenous children communicated both joy in nature and discourse of powerlessness and oppression by non-indigenous peoples in the face of Canadian colonialism.

Keywords

Visual Art Education, Indigenous Education, Art Teaching and Learning, Art Pedagogy, Art Curriculum Development, Canadian Contemporary Indigenous Art, Indigenous Culture in Canada, Residential Schools, Culture, Education

1. Introduction

The National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (NTRC) recently collected artifacts and texts including indigenous residential children's artworks created in the last two centuries by Inuit, Métis, and First Nations youth from across Canada¹. The NTRC gave these images to the National Centre for Truth and Recon-

¹There are three categories of indigenous peoples in Canada: Inuit, Métis and First Nations and within these there are over a hundred separate entities (formerly talked about as tribes) comprising Canadian indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2021; Parrott, 2023).

ciliation (NCTR) which is currently housing these texts. The intent of this document collection is to provide historical evidence, so that the international public can learn from, create dialogic discourse with, and educate future generations about what occurred to Canadian indigenous peoples. Of import is the recording of indigenous past experiences. Through this ongoing research and education is the hope of the NCTR that a healing process will occur (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2013). These amassed works have created a rich archive yet have not been discussed in art education journals to date because it was only a few years ago, between 2008 and 2015, that these were assembled (Moran, 2021). Why is this art significant? These creative works have been saved and cherished by Canadian indigenous survivors and their descendants from the 1860s onwards and given to the NTRC for safe housing to document and communicate the experiences of Canadian indigenous children (Moran, 2021). The author of this paper presents an analysis of some of the indigenous children's artworks recently gathered from the NTRC. The intention is that through an examination of these images, we can see perspectives from the "eyes" of children created when they were in residential schools.

The rationale for this study is to gain perceptions from youth's lived experiences of a time in which historical genocide was occurring in Canada (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (2016). Eisner (2004) has consistently maintained that children's complex ideas are expressed through their visual art: "Perception is a cognitive event" (xi-xii). Thus, a rationale for analyzing children's imagery is to gain a comprehension of the experiences of Canadian indigenous children during this politically tumultuous and difficult time period within this country. Youths are witnesses to events. Moreover, a further rationale is that we can develop our comprehension as experienced through the "eyes of the child" in which young students depict their world through art creation. These images allow us to understand some of the ways children were affected historically, culturally, socially, economically, and personally.

2. Previous Studies regarding Artworks Created by Children Experiencing Trauma

Studies have been undertaken about children's artworks created by youths in distress who bore eyewitnesses to horrendous historical events. Through examining children's art in a concentration camp during World War II, Pariser analyzes the teaching approach of these youth's educator, Freidl Dicker-Brandeis. Others who focus specifically on children's artworks include such examinations undertaken to include Stargardt's (1998) research on children's art during the Holocaust. Recently, Black and Cap (2009) and Cap and Black (2011) examined Ukrainian children's artworks during the Orange Revolution and after it ended. It is important to note that to date, there have been no studies written about the NCTR's children's artworks that were made by youths who attended Canadian residential schools in the past (Ashbury, 2019). However, recently there has been a curated travelling exhibition of Canadian British Columbian and Mani-

toban indigenous students' art that was displayed at such galleries as the Museum of Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada (Ghoussoub, 2019; McCarty, 2019). Several articles were written about this show. McCarty (2019: para. 5) quoted the curator Walsh from the University of British Columbia who stated, "There's a resilience to these paintings that the school couldn't take away and art allowed them, in these really rare moments, to express what they knew... I think all of the paintings, all the art reflects who the children felt they were at the time, and is a mirror of who they were".

3. A Background: Recent Awareness of Historical Legacy of the Indigenous within Canada

As a result of seminal developments within Canada for the past decade and a half, there have been tremendous advancements resulting in increasing awareness concerning the plight of indigenous children within Canada. These changes reveal the past horrendous, deleterious treatment and current troubles and difficulties of Canadian indigenous people. Specifically, in 2008, residential school survivors, their families, and communities, as well as Canadian churches and the Government of Canada established the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission (NTRC) in order to document the past concerning residential schools, raise awareness for the present, with the intent to build enduring reconciliation between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples (Moran, 2021; NTRC, 2022). The NTRC amassed documentation from over 6500 First Nations, Inuit and Métis residential school survivors, their families, and their communities gathering over 7000 statements and 4 million records, documenting the difficult and often horrendous experiences of over 150,000 indigenous children. This institution obtained records from survivors, their descendants, and witnesses (Moran, 2021; NTRC, 2022; Pepneck, 2019). A year after the NTRC was formed, the former Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper conducted a speech marked down in Canadian history, in which he offered a public apology to the indigenous population identifying significant grief and destruction, and the devastating impact of Canadian residential schooling (Florence, 2016; Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2008). Acknowledged was the long-lasting absence of a formal apology from the Canadian Government which detrimentally impacted reconciliation between the nonindigenous and indigenous Canadian populations (CBC News Canada, 2008). Following this, in 2009 Senator Murray Sinclair was appointed as chairperson of the NTRC until it disbanded in 2015 which is the date it published its influential 94 calls to action (Reid, 2019). The same year the NTRC disbanded as a gatherer of records and transformed itself into the National Center for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), which is currently the place that is safely housing the NTRC's copious documents: it is an archival repository, permanently located in a building within the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, Canada (Moran, 2021). These archives are important as they are not formal anthropological research but storytelling, the sharing of records and experiences of survivors and their descendants through not only

written but audio, visual, and oral texts. Pepneck states these documents are in indigenous peoples', "own languages—and sharing their knowledge more directly through the use of video and audio [and visual imagery]. With its decolonizing and indigenizing approach, NCTR Archives is unique" (Pepneck, 2019: para. 1).

4. Personal Motivation for This Research

4.1. A Prologue

Kovach (2021: p. 144) states that an author's prologue is important and describes it as a means to introduce the researcher, locates the study in relation to indigenous society, and offers reasons that motivate the researcher to conduct the study. As a nonindigenous Canadian scholar working at the University of Manitoba, I have been aware of the great changes regarding indigenous peoples occurring within my country. I come from white settler European roots, and as a child growing up in Canada, I found that little was discussed regarding the Canadian indigenous and their history. My experience was not unusual for most Canadians (Czyzewski, 2011). Consequently, later in life, I was shocked to learn of the findings of the NTRC and their conclusion: explicitly over the course of one hundred and fifty years, a cultural genocide occurred (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2022). This significant and horrendous history was hidden from the general population. Effectively and poignantly explained in the NTCR summation book of the findings entitled *A Knock on the Door* (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016), the actions of the Canadian government were to destroy indigenous governments, disrespect and/or end treaties, overlook and ignore indigenous rights, with the objective to assimilate indigenous peoples into Canadian society through the destruction of their culture and languages.

During the 1800s what occurred was horrendous: settlers' shattered promises in which they unethically broke copious treaties signed while confiscating indigenous land resulting in a huge segment of the indigenous population being placed against their will on reserves throughout Canada. Meanwhile, during this time, the formation of 130 recognized residential schools across the country ensued (Bearhead, 2016; Smith, 2016). Within these educational institutions, many children starved, a far poorer education was provided to indigenous youths in comparison to settlers, while physical, emotional, psychological spiritual, and sexual abuse occurred within the walls of these residential schools (Bearhead, 2016). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2016) writes:

Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group, States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred, and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are perse-

cuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealings with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016: p. 3).

Residential schools played a key role in enabling cultural genocide to occur (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2016: p. 3). Surprisingly, the last residential schools closed down in Canada in 1996 a mere twenty-six years ago (De Bruin, Gallant, & Filice, 2022). Additionally, also astounding to me was the recent discovery that there was a residential school operating between 1958-1972 and is located a ten-minute walk from my house in River Heights, Winnipeg (CBC News, 2017).

One of the key ways that culture and knowledge were destroyed in the past was through residential school education. Conversely, the NCTR authors argue, that one of the significant ways to redress this now and in the future will be in Canadian schools where the treatment, history of indigenous peoples, and their culture will be shared and passed on through successive generations. Through this education, these writers reason, healing can occur. In the *94 Calls to Action* written by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (2015: pp. 69-72) bills 62 - 65 call upon all levels of the Canadian government to fund teacher training to support the development of sound, strong, and age-appropriate indigenous curricula. Added to this is the need to develop, pertinent, and well thought out pedagogical approaches to teach indigenous and nonindigenous people, indigenous culture, history, and contemporary knowledge within Canadian classrooms at all levels from kindergarten to higher education.

Educating the Canadian populace about the history of the Canadian indigenous is key as former Ry Moran, Director of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) at the University of Manitoba reflects:

The challenge is that many Canadian are not even up to speed on the most basic elements of indigenous perspectives on history, and this renders them ill-equipped to understand the rapid advancement of indigenous rights in the province, city, and country... We the people of Canada have created these challenges. We are responsible for fixing them.

(Moran, 2016: p. A7)

Instrumental to the *94 Calls to Action* is hope through reconciliation (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2015). Writers of this influential and seminal text advocate respect and a rebalance through building indigenous and nonindigenous trust, by discussing the truth of what occurred, sharing this knowledge, and teaching it not only to our youths but to the general populace at large. It is argued that eradicating prejudice will occur through the promotion of understanding, and through working together: it is through coaction, these authors argue, that a brighter future for both indigenous and nonindigenous Ca-

nadian people will be formed (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016). Justice Murray Sinclair and his son, Niigaan Sinclair explains that “Reconciliation requires understanding before change can happen... It’s learning about Canada’s history, intergenerational trauma, and indigenous values” (as cited by Piche, 2022: para.18). Of particular note, one aspect that makes Canada unique is its focus on education: in this country, there is definite attention and great effort towards working on healing through teaching and through reconciliation (Bearhead, 2016). Thus, education and reconciliation are interconnected and intertwined.

4.2. A (Prologue) Statement

Living within this historical context motivated me to do this research. As well, I feel it important to honour the voices of so many people who saved their forebearers’ artworks, and in so doing, indicated that they cherished these texts. Additionally, they generously donated these artworks as gifts to the NTCR in recognition that by doing so these cultural artifacts would be saved and shared and thus the former destruction of and repression of indigenous culture would begin to be redressed. I am also excited to study what these children had to say through their drawings about their experiences: I feel compelled to honour their ideas. I have a personal curiosity and I sincerely hope that by examining their art it will enable viewers to look through, “the eyes of the child”. Additionally, it is the researcher’s hope that this will contribute more to the understanding of what students’ experienced, and we will gain further insights into indigenous youth’s thoughts during their mostly tremendously challenging and difficult time within residential schools.

5. The Research Methodology

5.1. Preparation for This Study and Data Collection

My overall research approaches for this study are twofold. Firstly, I employed research methodologies from Western intellectual research approaches using qualitative research methodologies. I kept in mind the sage wisdom of Denzin and Lincoln (2011): I have taken to heart their guiding words which are to pay heed to our critics in light of both decolonizing and seeking inclusion. Secondly, I want to honour the silent voices of children while working with cooperation, collaboration, and respect (x) with the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

In the undertaking of this study, I have travelled for a long time. I took Moran’s (2016) advice to gain historical and cultural knowledge of the Canadian indigenous as a researcher. I began this journey in 2016 which entailed: 1) attending a number of seminars on indigenous Canadians; 2) reading about their past and present histories; 3) providing and experiencing many indigenous cultural workshops at the Winnipeg Art Gallery located in Manitoba; and 4) devising indigenous curricula for my higher education Art Education classes at the Univer-

sity of Manitoba. Finally, in 2018, I began collecting the data working with the NCTR.

It took over a year to choose children's artwork from the NCTR. Imagery was selected based on the following criteria described below. Firstly, the artwork had to have discernable imagery. In addition to this, it was crucial these works were not a product of an obvious step-by-step art school assignment—a type of “cookie-cutter” approach to art making. Importantly, I looked for imagery displaying evidence that students were given the freedom to create artworks personally meaningful. Finally, and most crucial, I chose art from residential students who presented an account through their pictorial representations of either a lived experience or an idea relating to themselves and/or their social circumstances. In other words, I sought artworks in which the students expressed context that was personal, societal, and/or political.

Community is important in indigenous research: working with the NCTR was of key significance. I worked with three archivists from the NCTR: Nicole Courrier, former Reference and Archival Assistant; as well as Karen Ashbury, current Reference, and Access Archivist; and Raymond Frogner, Head of Archives. Working with Nicole and Karen was instrumental in that they provided numerous opportunities to view large amounts of imagery in person, within the NCTR building, and they coordinated with Graham Constant, the Audio and Visual Technician, to take high-resolution digital photographs for this research. Additionally, to Karen, I am indebted as she always provides valuable feedback at every stage of this research.

5.2. Visual Research Methods

I have chosen to use visual research methods. Kovach (2021: p. 46), who provides valuable discourse on ways to approach indigenous research insightfully writes, “...the structure and form of Western research framework language can offer a portal for the inclusion of visual, symbolic, and metaphorical representations of a research design that mitigates the linearity of written text alone”.

Visual analysis was selected intentionally for this study because the scrutiny of the visual for the purpose of comprehending artists' reasons for creating imagery has a rich tradition (Burke, 2001). In addition, pictures are extremely significant to the indigenous as stated by Fitznor (2017) and Kovach (2021: p. 231). Lambert (2014) discusses “historical recovery” in reference to indigenous visual data that can be helpful in healing, be therapeutic, unearth suffering, pain, and identity. She writes, that “Art is a tool for reclaiming, renaming and reframing history” (Lambert, 2014: p. 35).

In studying pictorial imagery, Western qualitative visual research methods were employed and there were many reasons for these being selected. One *raison d'être* is that pictures are a language of communication in themselves, which makes concepts perceptible (Eisner, 2002). Also, art enables understanding of the artist's inner perception and thoughts allowing these to be brought forth to viewers. Additionally, imagery is a way in which to document children's thoughts

pertaining to historical lived experiences (Black & Cap, 2009; Cap & Black, 2011; Herberer, 2011; Pariser, 2008; Volavková, 1993). Of significance, visual imagery is often utilized to comprehend youths who lived during a key period of time to learn about their individual experiences and insights—often pertaining to sensitive issues which have been difficult to express through more traditional oral and written means (Coad & Lewis, 2004). Moreover, Eisner (2002, 2004) advises on the importance of the arts and, the power of the visual image as a research text. If overlooked, we can lose it, it can become ephemeral, and thus important critical data can be lost and with these, vital knowledge. Finally, and of key significance, images can provide a window into young people’s situational, governmental, and societal views (Flick, 2008; Thomson, 2008). In this case, for my research, pictorial imagery is used to comprehend residential school students’ personal ideas and feelings toward their own lived world (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002).

5.3. Analysis

For the analysis, there were two steps employed. The writer turned to Rose’s (2016) theory employing “*compositional interpretation*” which is a process wherein researchers critically examine the visual image examining and describing its pictorial content (such as colour usage, focus, and spatial organization) delineated by artists. Using this tried-and-true art historical methodology allowed me to critically examine residential school children’s iconography to indicate youth’s ideas depicted in their art (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2002; Rose, 2016).

To augment the use of *compositional interpretation*, another method of analysis is used which Rose (2016) advises researchers to do. In this case, *Discourse analysis* (Rose, 2016: Chapter 8) was selected as it makes sense to employ a more overarching method to complement and widen the scope of understanding children’s artworks. This analytical method is often used to comprehend political and societal aspects of visual texts involving a five-part process. Researchers should firstly, focus on details; secondly, use coding to establish key themes; thirdly, examine practices of persuasion impacting viewers; fourthly, discern contradictions and dissenting viewpoints presented in the artworks; and fifthly perceive what is hidden, concealed, and unspoken (Rose, 2016). Of note, these steps do not need to be followed in any consecutive order. Rose (2016), Eisner (2002) argues that people use symbols to create meaning and impart concepts and consequently, these should be paid particular attention to in the analysis. Additionally, researchers using discourse analysis can make interconnections with other children and people in crisis thus providing greater context for the analysis (Heberer, 2011; Pariser, 2008; Volavková, 1993). This will be undertaken in this text.

Finally, a good practice during the analysis is to member check using traditional qualitative research methods. Kovach (2021: p. 215) writes, it is essential and ethical to share the final research before it is disseminated and have the people involved approve the results. To this end, this text was approved by the

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation before it was published in this journal.

5.4. Further Discussion of the Research Experience and Methodologies

This research was affected by the pandemic. I collected the artworks pre-COVID-19 and while writing this research, COVID-19 hit society worldwide in March 2020. During the analysis and dissemination, COVID-19 did not seem to have abated. As a result, it slowed down my latter research stages.

As a researcher, I acknowledge that I am a nonindigenous, white settler examining Indigenous culture and indigenous imagery. I acknowledge that I have never had direct experience with residential schools. One could argue that I should not be undertaking this research because I am not indigenous. However, as [Kovach \(2021\)](#) postulates that indigenous and nonindigenous should work together. What is extremely important are community connections, being knowledgeable, respectful towards each other, caring, and considerate. She comments: “Bridging differences requires the supportive involvement of academics that are not indigenous” ([Kovach, 2021: p. 39](#)). Therefore, I have undertaken this research in light of Kovach’s advice.

I have employed nonindigenous methodologies in my research. One could also contend, on the one hand, that this should not have been done and is problematic because one should employ indigenous methodology in examining indigenous art. However, on the other hand, one can also make a case that there are sound reasons for this approach employed. Again, citing [Kovach \(2021: p. 38\)](#), she states that not all researchers working with and studying indigenous people and/or culture necessitate the use of indigenous methodologies. Following this argument [Kovach \(2021\)](#) further writes that what is key are relationships established and the building of trust and community engagement. I believe I have worked toward this with my relationship with the people working within the NCTR. Moreover, the research methodologies selected make sense: given that the residential school students’ created visual texts, it stands to reason to use visual analysis that will promote understanding of children’s perspectives who were in residential schools. The intricate entanglement of both rationalized and interpretative vision in visual research as discussed by [Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith \(2008: pp. 410-418\)](#) points to key understandings in the analysis of the discourse of race, class, colonization, and hegemony of those in power.

6. Indigenous Children’s Artworks from the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

Five artworks have been selected. They were chosen from copious imagery viewed at the NCTR and are discussed below².

²Note that the children’s backgrounds were not documented by the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission: therefore, in this paper, I am unable to provide this information.

6.1. *Six People in Black* (Figure 1)

The artwork, *Six People in Black*, made by the student “D.M., is a portrayal of Indigenous people”. Five figures with no shadows are headed in one direction walking towards the left side of the frame, while one figure with a shadow is headed in the opposite direction towards the right side of the frame. Some yellow acrylic paint is used apparent behind the third person in the middle as well as some red and yellow pigments are discernable in the second figure from the right. All the people have been depicted with heavy black paint creating a flatness to these figures. It appears that one stencil was utilized to portray these people—like a stamp repeatedly placed on the page—as the figures are not differentiated in size nor body gesture. What is missing in this image are details of figures, and background (including landscape) and this artwork has very limited colour. Of note is the one person placed on the very left-hand side of the picture frame who is drawn using the flip side of the stencil, with discernable lighter black brushstrokes, walking in a diametrically opposed direction from that of the other five figures. This individual is symbolic of importance in either authority or stature.

The interpretation of this image can be twofold: on the one hand, the person who is facing the 5 person group is nonindigenous who holds power; on the other hand, the person could be indigenous and also holds control and influence. If it is the former, it indicates the traditionally dominant role of settlers’ possessing authority, dominance, and repression. If it is the latter, the child is depicting how the Inuit who are actively being oppressed by colonizers still recognize power structures that exist within themselves who have hierarchical structures of subjugation and persecution given by the oppressors. This latter power positioning is similar to the Nazis during WW2 who placed some Jews in



Figure 1. Artist (n.d.) *Untitled—Six People in Black*. [Paper and Acrylic Paint]. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, A2016-088_9, Winnipeg, Canada.

concentration camps in powerful roles to oppress their own people (Weselucha, 1970). Most interesting in this image is that the young child, D.M. recognizes dominant power over other individuals. The thematic idea in this image is thus strength, dominance, and influence: particularly in regard to control and position.

6.2. Hunting Arctic Hare (Figure 2)

George Koverk created the second image, a paper and pencil drawing called *Untitled—Hunting Arctic Hare*. This residential school student drew a person with a gun in his/her hand, pointing it at a running hare. The setting is likely in the late autumn deduced from lack of snow, the stark landscape drawn with fallen leaves, and textured gray rocks. No green is depicted anywhere, and a bleak, brown/black background is framed by a blue sky. A lake is situated at the left-hand side of the image, and rocky hills and brown grass are discernible as well as the inuksuk drawn in the distant background. The animal is created in pencil and is seen running to the right of the pictorial frame indicating this hare's cognizance of the impending firearm threat. A person holding the gun, sitting on a rock, is dressed in a heavier coat with contrasting brighter coloured green, blue and yellow colours in comparison to that of the bleak landscape. Missing is the drawn face of the person depicted and there is little discernable indication of gender; however, it appears that this figure is probably a man as a result of the large, bulky, strong build of the figure. The care taken in depicting the clothing indicates the young artist has respect and care for the details of the traditional clothing worn by northern indigenous people.



Figure 2. Koverk (n.d.) *Untitled—Hunting Arctic Hare*. [Paper and Pencil Crayon]. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, A2016-088_11, Winnipeg, Canada.

In this image, the hunter is alone, and there is no sign of colonization aside from the rifle used to hunt. This image shows isolation but does not represent it in a way that would be viewed negatively to indicate despair or loneliness. Rather this appears to be positive regarding ideas of isolation from Western ideas and cultures. Drawn is remoteness from anything of settler influence other than the gun.

This art has an overriding peaceful sensibility. This image appears to be not about assimilation but about the way in which indigenous peoples survived and thrived for centuries before Western intervention. Hunting is the same, only the modernized Western settler tools have changed. The only contradiction apparent is the use of this gun—rather than the use of more traditional indigenous tools used by an indigenous person for hunting and providing. Colonizers weapons are used for survival. This individual is practicing his/her right to hunt for food and provide for family in a way that is different from western depictions of hunting. The apparent theme is about survival and living on the land. The young student is depicting a hunting scene drawing the land so central to the indigenous way of life in the past (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016).

How did this image of indigenous life come into being by a young artist in a repressive school system meant to colonize indigenous youths? We can surmise that some residential school educators gave their students freedom to create imagery meaningful to their lives that was of personal significance. In the 1950s and beyond a common aim of visual art educators was to promote self-expression and this was fostered by the writings of the seminal writers, Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987): the former Art Educator's ideas gained international influence. Of note, there were some teachers within residential schools who were not repressive, manipulating, controlling, cruel, and encouraging of assimilation at all costs. In the book, *A Knock on the Door*, the authors write that some "...students sought solace in the arts...and were encouraged in their artistic endeavours by sympathetic staff (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2016: p. 102). The power and resilience of some indigenous Canadians are dealt with in this picture. There is more than one way of living that allows indigenous to provide for themselves in their everyday lives. It enables them to employ some of the old traditional ways of being while using westernized nonindigenous tools in their colonized Canadian society.

6.3. Man, Dog, and Bright Light (Figure 3)

Similar to **Figure 2**, this mixed media image, *Untitled—Man, Dog and Bright Light*, is a positive one. It is of a person with a dog watching the bright light that is juxtaposed against a gray background. Figures are thrown into a silhouette and drawn using black paint with little detail provided. Because of the size of the person in relation to the animal, it seems like it is a child or young adult with their dog. The figure and animal appear to have a close relationship as they huddle intimately together watching the sun rise/set; however, the viewer is unsure if



Figure 3. Artist Unidentified (n.d.) *Untitled—Man, Dog and Bright Light*. [Paper, Wax Crayons, and Acrylic Paint]. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, A2016-088_3, Winnipeg, Canada.

it is the sun delineated using a yellow crayon or actually a star symbolically bursting. Apparent is a contrast between the calm person and animal with the cosmic natural force radiating like shooting light.

What is missing in the image is any indication of the time of day or season. Moreover, the image of the person and dog has no details. Added to these factors, are no signs of colonization, religion, or residential school influences. The theme appears to be a classic one of a depiction of the close relationship between man and nature, especially since dogs were so vital to northern life and the landscape was so integral to indigenous ways of life. It is an intimate portrayal of beauty: beauty between a person and his/her dog, and beauty of the natural landscape. Overall, this is an extremely positive image created by a young child of joy and exuberance experiencing nature. It appears to be a depiction of a subliminal personal moment.

6.4. Question Man and Iglu (Figure 4)

Untitled—Question Man and Iglu is a mixed media image created by the young student, Catherine Erkitok. In the foreground a penciled image of a man is drawn in profile with an apparent enigmatic smiling/smirk on his face. Of note, also on his face is a large question mark. This man is wearing a black scarf, blue coat, red-painted pants, and indigenous footwear and is represented walking toward an iglu with a yellow painted road. Behind him, in the middle ground, is painted blue/white snow. There appears a black spear leaning on the right-hand side of the iglu and to its right is a seat. The background has trees which are abstractly painted in red/blue/orange and a discernable red/orange river is placed horizontally below the treeline. Missing are other people or animals in the picture frame nor are there any towns or building structures depicted.



Figure 4. Erkitok (n.d.) *Untitled—Question Man and Iglu*. [Paper, Pencil and Acrylic Paint]. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, A2016-088_7, Winnipeg, Canada.

Even though this image was identified as “a man” by the NTRC it bears a striking resemblance to the former Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliot Trudeau (refer to **Figures 5(a)-(c)**). Indeed, Trudeau visited the Canadian arctic numerous times during the 1960s and 1970s—one visit was recalled by the current Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau recently in the media (McKie, 2017). According to McKie, at that time the Canadian Government had the intent to examine arctic ice for future shipping industries to study potential traffic during the prime minister’s visits. As well, visits were also undertaken to scrutinize the Canadian north as a site of international protection as well as for land and mining exploitation. Trudeau ended up travelling to many locations during these two decades such as Ward Hunt Island off Ellesmere Island’s north coast in a remote northern community of Canada (McKie, 2017; Hodgson, 2022).

Figure 4 is a picture in which the young student depicted an important visit from a powerful and prominent Canadian who had tremendous influence over indigenous lives. Placing a question mark on Trudeau’s face is indicative of the way in which this young person was viewing and questioning the intentions of the then Canadian Prime Minister. The smiling/smirk and question mark indicate this ambiguity: indeed, it would make sense this young indigenous student would be questioning the intentions of an extremely powerful nonindigenous man: this image is a prime example of the threatening societal influence of the colonizer on the colonized.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 5. Hodgson (2022) *Northwest Territories (NWT) Archives*. Images are copyright free from the Canadian government found at *NWT Archives*. <https://gnwt.accesstomemory.org/n-2017-008-0129>.

6.5. *Community Scene with Airplane* (Figure 6)

The last image entitled, *Untitled—Community Scene with Airplane*, drawn by Rhoda K. Awa, is a mixed media work about a small town in the residential school era. The time of day is depicted as a sunrise or sunset indicated by the red on the horizon line. This is a snowy scene typical of the Canadian north. Delineated are buildings, residences, churches, people, two inuksuit in the distance, two iglus, houses, loose running dogs, and what appears to be a lean-to or tent. Using pencil crayons and paper the artist depicted a foreground with figures moving as well as people with guns and a huge mound with a dog emerging. In the middleground are the Hudson’s Bay Company store (indicated by a sign on its roof), a shed, a church/school, and possibly a windmill nearby a residential



Figure 6. Awa (n.d.) *Untitled—Community Scene with Airplane*. [Paper and Pencil Crayon]. National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Archives, A2016-088_39, Winnipeg, Canada.

school. Situated is an airplane in the sky (in the upper middle part of the image): it is the central focal point. Housing settlements appear in the background. Details in the image include a landing strip for the plane located on the right of the picture extending towards the background and a dog with sled running. One figure is in front of the store loading supplies onto a dogsled probably transporting goods on the left hand side of the image, and another figure is walking in front of the church/school in the middle of the picture. Action abounds: two people appear to be pointing their guns at the plane while two other people are either running towards or standing by these people threatening it. It appears one individual is in support and the other is in action perhaps to try to stop the guns from exploding. Other than this interaction, what is missing is any indication of the season, and also interaction of other people in this extreme long shot of a townscape: there appears to be little communication between some of the figures. Moreover, faces of the people are indiscernible.

In this image, life in this community is illustrated as it was perceived by one of the residential school children. While the school is within the community, there is a clear divide between indigenous people and the nonindigenous. Depicted are complex relationships between nonindigenous people and their Western colonizers: contrasting dualities exist. Firstly, there is a clear divide between the indigenous people in parkas in the foreground, the dogsledder by the store, and the lone religious figure by the church. No people are near the school or the church. All of the settler buildings—store, school, church/school seem to be slightly elevated, while the igloos are firmly situated on the ground perhaps indicating the difference and status between the two populations. Secondly, an isolated community is illustrated—one possibly only obtainable by flying in via

airplanes. The large size of this air transportation and it being the image's focal point may indicate the importance of the person/people who are arriving contrasted against the tiny people and traditional dogsled drawn. Guns being pointed at the airplane by what appear to be indigenous people near iglus in the foreground show open hostility to nonindigenous people in this community. Thirdly, the airplane is a significant symbol in this work: transportation is key and a lifeline for goods. Juxtaposed against the traditional dogsled is the 20th-century invention of flying machines. The airplane transported people and goods: pertaining to the former these supplies were sold at the store. While the Hudson's Bay Company is responsible for some of the worst atrocities indigenous people in Canada faced—including resource extraction, territorial exploitation, and wide dissemination of nonindigenous diseases killing indigenous, and their large communities—it is undeniable that their stores in the north were crucial once the western rule was established (Bothwell, 2020; Gismondi, 2020; Kelley & Trebilcock, 1999). The theme through the perspective of Rhoda appears to be separation/opposition of indigenous toward their oppressors.

Overall, this student was able to reflect on and communicate her lived experience concerning power roles and structures between settlers and her people. The airplane as a focal point in this work is symbolic of settlers intruding and imposing on the indigenous way of life. The emotional reaction of the indigenous with guns pointing at this transportation reveals open hostility towards nonindigenous people invading, colonizing and asserting power over the people in this town. Depicted is turmoil and conflict among the colonized towards the colonizers.

7. Conclusion

The writer of this article examined young people's thoughts using the NCTR drawings and paintings as texts created by children who experienced cultural genocide over two centuries by the nonindigenous within Canada. The NCTR (2016, p. 103) writers observed that "On the rinks, the athletic fields, and parade grounds, or in the arts, and handicraft rooms and on performance stages, many students found a way to express themselves...". In the art room, they provided a multitude of artworks that have been saved and a few are discussed in this text. Why is this so important?

Burke (2001: p. 16) insists "... that we ignore at our peril the variety of images, artists, uses of images and attitudes to images at different periods of history". For this research, the author addresses this by writing about residential school students' imagery with the intent to comprehend their world through depictions of their lived experiences. Of importance is the development of knowledge through the examination of art in order to understand the artists' lifeworld (Asiedu, 2004). By examining young children's artworks, viewers can ascertain the positive: the personal joy illustrated in intimate moments with nature (*Man Dog and Bright Light*) and the intimate pride in indigenous ways of being even with the

influence of the colonized (*Hunting Arctic Hare*). However, these children were allowed by their art teachers also to express their intimate fears towards the nonindigenous that held power over them on personal and societal levels (*Six People in Black* and *Community Scene with Airplane*). Additionally, the political theme is embodied in the work where the young artist is questioning the intentions of the Settler (*Question Man and Iglu*). Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008: p. 426) write that visuals "... can provoke thoughtful interrogation of the power relationships among nations, classes, races, and men and women". Indeed, this is the case for some of these young students who expressed control and repression by the nonindigenous.

As a result of this research, the artwork is exceedingly useful and significant as visual texts that express divergent viewpoints. They also serve as firstly, **cultural artifacts** of, on the one hand, children's perspectives regarding tumultuous, conflict-laden, fearful oppression of Canadian indigenous by settlers; yet, on the other hand, they serve as a sometimes extraordinary sublime perspective regarding their association with nature that can be seen through the eyes of the child. These artworks also serve as secondly, **cultural records of the child as witness** that can be re-examined, producing accurate factual accounts and symbolic pictorial evidence of children's lived experiences during their times at Canadian residential schools. For these children, these drawings have indicated that this process is safe within their residential school art class to express both wonderfully sublime as well as painfully difficult feelings. Additionally, through the visual picture, we **have a focus on thirdly, the child's personal lives, their influences, ideas, and experiences**: these visual texts allow them to communicate their ideas regarding the personal, emotional, political, and societal within their lives. Finally, these artworks allow others—both indigenous and nonindigenous to **vicariously comprehend this historical period full of conflict and strife**, which these youths experienced through residential school child viewpoints. Kovach (2021: p. 217) claims that we need to follow UNESCO's pivotal guidance by safeguarding the indigenous arts, protecting and respecting indigenous knowledge creations as these involve crucial expressions and tangible and metaphysical understandings concerning their perspectives towards nature and the universe. This writing is an attempt to add to others' works in order to preserve and pass on these Canadian residential children's cultural artworks to future generations.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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