Ilustrating Racism: Challenging Canada’s Racial Amnesia with Comics


It has been ten years since Chester Brown challenged Canadian historians to think more carefully about comic books with the publication of Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography.1 Over the past decade, comics with historical content have become increasingly popular resources for people to learn about the past.2 Yet many historians remain uncertain about the value and legitimacy of the emerging field of historical comics. This hesitancy is understandable; many comics practitioners make interpretive choices that disrupt disciplinary practices, often blurring distinctions between fact and fiction as well as popular and professional history. Historical comics are also rarely the products of archival research and are not subject to a peer-review process. Yet, prominent scholars such as American historian Paul Buhle and Canadian education historians Michael Cromer and Penney Clark argue that there is great pedagogical potential in engaging with comics in the history classroom.3 Cromer and Clark suggest that comics are “multilayered” and encourage students to “marry print and visual representations in order to read in ways that are deeply meaningful, because the narrative is incomplete without both dimensions.” Moreover, they contend that the process of

2 Works such as Louis Riel, and others that I will examine in this essay, are often referred to as “graphic novels”; I use the terms “comic book” and “comics,” as do many practitioners and comics scholars. For more on the terminology and theory surrounding the study of comics, see, for example, Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Douglas Wolk, Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What they Mean (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007); Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, eds., A Comics Studies Reader (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).
reading comics, which requires readers to piece together the story through their own interpretation of the visual and textual material provided, has the potential to increase students’ “tolerance of ambiguity and appreciation for the nature of history as interpretation.” The scholarship of Buhle, Cromer, and Clark has sparked a much-needed academic conversation about the merits of comics as history. To add to this discussion, I offer a review of three recent Canadian history comics that make significant contributions to Canadian social history and warrant critical attention: David H. T. Wong’s *Escape to Gold Mountain: A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America*, Zach Worton’s *The Klondike*, and David Robertson’s and Scott Henderson’s *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story*.

Each of these works, like Brown’s *Louis Riel*, draws attention to Canada’s hidden histories of racism. Despite the fact that racism has deep roots in settler societies, it is commonly believed that racism did not, nor does not, exist in Canada. Sherene H. Razack calls this forgetting a racial “amnesia.” Although attitudes toward race are socially constructed, their material and historical consequences are not. “‘Race’ is a mythical construct,” Constance Backhouse reminds us, “‘Racism’ is not.” *Escape to Gold Mountain*, *The Klondike*, and *Sugar Falls* illustrate for readers how racial differences have been “pressed into service” to justify, rationalize, and reproduce asymmetrical social relations to the benefit of settlers. By examining Chinese immigration to North America, the dynamics of race relations during the Klondike gold rush, and one student’s experience in a Manitoba residential school, these historical comics demonstrate the effects of racist practices in Canada. Far from being silly or irrelevant, these historical comics contribute to Canada’s complex social history and can be used to challenge Canada’s racial amnesia. Comics, then, might be used by historians as another tool in an increasingly diverse toolkit.

**“A time of great and unspeakable hurt”: *Escape to Gold Mountain***

David H.T. Wong’s *Escape to Gold Mountain* examines the migration of poor Chinese people to the United States and Canada in the mid-1800s and their struggles to create new lives for themselves and their families. While Wong’s story is fictional, the artist borrows from his family’s real-life experiences in “Gold Mountain”—a term many Chinese used to refer to North America during the nineteenth century gold rushes—for inspiration. The central focus of the comic book is on how different generations of Wongs (used to symbolize all Chinese immigrants) experienced racism and overcame its consequences. Though it is problematic to assume that the Wong’s family story can stand in for the experiences of all Chinese immigrants, it is an effective narrative device that allows the reader to connect to various characters’ experiences of racism. Early in his text, Wong explains that, “our pioneering ancestors were subjected to

---

incredibly harsh discrimination and unspeakable atrocities from ordinary folks and from legislated racism” (p. 11). *Escape to Gold Mountain* highlights for readers the many episodes of racial discrimination and brutal violence that the Wongs (real or imagined) and their fellow immigrants endured in the United States and Canada. Telling this story in a comic book format allows Wong to illustrate the complex history of racism and Chinese immigration for a popular audience.

*Escape to Gold Mountain* begins by depicting a white child coming across a museum display of the infamous canning machine the “Iron Chink.” The boy pulls at his eyes in a racist gesture and proclaims, “I can’t believe it says it! It says...Iron Chink!” A horrified elderly Chinese woman then tries to educate the child: “This old iron machine speaks of another time. A time of great and unspeakable hurt... I used to wish that I had not been born Chinese. We had to endure so much prejudice” (pp. 29-30). Wong uses this episode to frame his story of Chinese immigration. In what follows, he sets out to provide an essentially historical account of the “great and unspeakable hurt” that many Chinese people were subjected to and overcame by tracing the dramatic experiences of the Wong family.

The opening frames of *Escape to Gold Mountain* illustrate the links between Chinese immigration to North America and Britain’s devastating imperial policy in China in the 1830s and 1840s. Wong shows how opium, imported by the British to poison and destabilize Chinese society, was part of an effort to change the balance of power and coerce Chinese loyalty to Britain. As the opium trade and subsequent wars to control its supply continued to wreak havoc in Chinese society, Ah Gin Wong becomes a stowaway on a ship bound for San Francisco. This sets in motion the process of intergenerational migration that *Escape to Gold Mountain* traces. When Ah Gin Wong arrives in San Francisco, he is welcomed by Indigenous peoples and Kanakas (Hawai’ian labourers); however, competition for jobs increases and tensions erupt into racist acts by whites that include physical violence against the so-called “celestials” (p. 61). After the gold rush, many Chinese people leave San Francisco to work on the Central Pacific Railroad where they are similarly greeted by hostile crowds: “Dirty rat-eating Chinamen... We don’t want your kind here!!” (p. 75). Following the completion of the railway in 1869, Chinese workers were fired and many migrated north to Oregon and into British Columbia seeking employment. There, they encounter more open violence, including the burning of many Chinatowns and the lynching of some Chinese people by whites (Figure 1).

Readers of *Escape to Gold Mountain* must piece together the details of the difficult experiences of early Chinese immigrants by relying on the gruesome and gory images of the comic book. In interpreting such frames as the lynching of the Chinese worker featured above, readers are given the opportunity to confront historical acts of racism and develop an awareness and appreciation for immigrants’ past sacrifices. Wong’s account of the blatant racism and brutality that Chinese people suffered at the hands of white immigrants will no doubt shock and horrify some, but his examination of the tense relations between Chinese and whites shares much with the works of Roger Daniels, W. Peter Ward, Patricia
Figure 1: A mob of angry whites attack and lynch Chinese workers, 1872. Source: Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, p. 91. Used with permission from Arsenal Pulp Press.
Figure 2: Chinese workers strike. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, p. 123. Used with permission from Arsenal Pulp Press.
Moreover, Wong consciously tries to highlight how race and class overlapped. White capitalists are portrayed as frequently selecting Chinese workers and using their “race” as justification to pay them less, “Chinamen, they work cheap. Yeah! We can pay them half an Irishman’s wage… And the Chinese can pay for their own living expenses. Good Idea!” (p. 108). But Wong also shows how race and class could converge in empowering ways. He demonstrates how high wages and a promise to cover the funeral costs of a fallen worker lured many Chinese to Canada and to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. However, as Chinese workers realized that the CPR had little intention of keeping such promises, they flexed their economic muscle and withdrew their labour power: “Throw down your tools….We Chinese are not going to work until CPR honors our agreement” (pp. 123-24). Images such as these depict the strength of Chinese workers and offer readers an illustrated account of the intersection of race and class as well as immigrant agency and resistance.

Wong’s comic book remains an optimistic interpretation of Chinese immigration that emphasizes individual enterprise and determination to overcome adversity. Unlike many comics, *Escape to Gold Mountain* is grounded in academic historiography. Wong provides an extensive list of references and notes that contextualize his use of specific language and phrases. Notable scholars such as Patricia Roy and Jean Barman are even credited as consultants on the project and their expertise on Canadian race relations no doubt added historical depth. Yet, there are notable omissions of key critical scholarly works. For example, Wong could have drawn explicitly on the studies of Kay Anderson, Gillan Creese, and Renisa Mawani which offer insightful and critical examinations of “race” in relation to the history of the Chinese in Canada. Wong’s use of such works could have sharpened his analysis of the systemic and institutionalized racism in Canadian society that hard work could not erase. Moreover, Wong does not do enough to problematize the relationships between Indigenous and Chinese peoples in the comic book, falling prey to narratological errors that, intentionally or not, marginalize Indigenous peoples. Wong’s comic book largely ignores Indigenous peoples, the question of colonialism, and only includes a few brief encounters where he implies an unproblematic relationship between Indigenous peoples and Chinese migrants based on a presumed solidarity of the racially oppressed.

But perhaps the most problematic element of *Escape to Gold Mountain* is an interpretive one. Despite the vast majority of the comic book focusing on Canada’s long and sordid history of racism, Wong chooses to end his work on a positive note.

---


He rationalizes his choice in a concluding note at the end of the comic book: “I did not want to aggravate readers over historic injustices and ignite fresh diatribes based on a person’s skin color” (p. 224). While his idea that “old grudges need not be continued” is a good one, it does not match the racist reality of Canada’s contemporary society (p. 225). Ultimately, Wong does a disservice to the “great and unspeakable hurt” he wants to illustrate by disconnecting Canada’s racist past from its ongoing present. In choosing to downplay contemporary racism, Wong adopts a kind of liberal multicultural position that intends to make the reader feel hopeful for a presumed post-racist present and future. It may be true that Chinese people do not face the same kinds of racial prejudice today as they did, say, in the nineteenth century; however Wong misses the opportunity to use his comic book to inform readers that racialized peoples, including many Chinese, continue to struggle with the very real consequences of racism, and to encourage people to actively fight to end racial discrimination today.

“I’m white, Jim…Therein lies the difference”: The Klondike

Zach Worton’s The Klondike is an illustrated account of the Yukon gold rush between 1896 and 1899. The Klondike is both a documentation of the events of the gold rush as well as a comment on early white social formation in the north and the many conflicts that defined its development. The Klondike is beautiful and grotesque; Worton’s style is raw, ragged, and rough. Throughout his work, Worton juxtaposes violent skirmishes among miners and deadly racial conflicts with images of hauntingly desolate northern landscapes that suggest the social order in the Yukon was anything but stable. Overall, The Klondike complicates the romantic histories of the Klondike gold rush by considering the faults and follies of those who flocked north in an attempt to strike fame and fortune.

Like Wong, Worton uses the lives of a variety of fascinating figures, both real and imagined, to explore the Klondike gold rush. Among these figures is George Carmack (“Lying George”), a wealthy miner who took a Tagish wife and lived among local Indigenous peoples. Carmack’s actions bring constant condemnation from racist miners such as Robert Henderson. While inundated with miners, other figures such as “Big” Alex McDonald and Belinda Mulrooney seek to make their fortunes by providing miners with gear and goods at extravagant prices. The ad hoc social development of the Klondike created a vacuum of power in emerging mining camps and towns that was exploited by criminals like Soapy Smith. As a result, the Royal North West Mounted Police and officers Charles Constantine and Sam Steele were dispatched to the region to enforce the authority of the Canadian state. Characters such as Sam Steele are based on historical figures; however, Worton purposely (and problematically) does not reveal which characters are based on real people and which individuals are purely fictional. As a result, there are questions of historical accuracy that only play into the myth and mystique of the gold rush era. Nonetheless, the conversations of Worton’s cast of characters trace the chaotic contours of social formation in the region.

Worton comments extensively on early race and gender relations in the Yukon. Unlike Wong’s comic book, The Klondike does not include any scholarly
references. However, the nuances of Worton’s analysis support the findings of such scholars as Sylvia Van Kirk, Julie Cruickshank, Sarah Carter, and Adele Perry who suggest that race and gender were intricately linked on the frontier.9 The rugged masculinity of miners and the homosocial spaces they carved out in camps and pubs, as discussed by Perry in the British Columbia context, are on full display in the comic book. Only a few women, such as Belinda Mulrooney, disrupt this manly environment. Worton is able to explore the links between racial and gender privilege through the character of Carmack, a miner who is depicted as “going Native.” Carmack married to a local Indigenous woman and drew the ire of other miners such as Henderson who are depicted as jealous of his intimate knowledge of the area procured through his family ties. While Carmack ultimately has the last laugh by striking it rich with his Tagish brother-in-law Jim, he grows increasingly troubled by the conduct of his wife, Kate, who frequently abandons him and their daughter, Graphy, to get drunk in Dawson City. Carmack explains to his brother-in-law: “I am starting to have bad feelings toward Kate. I want to be rid of her” (p. 295). Like the work of Van Kirk and Carter, the following dialogue between Carmack and Jim highlights the complexity of marital relations and the notions of white racial superiority that were at play at the time:

George: “The laws of the Tagish don’t apply to me, Jim”  
Jim: “You’ve lived as an Indian! You’ve married as an Indian! The laws of our tribe still apply to you, George!”  
George: “I’m white, Jim. Therein lies the difference. Your laws don’t mean shit to me anymore. I’m through with this. The only law I’ll bend to here is the miners’” (p. 296).

In crafting this scene, Worton clearly wants readers to think critically about miners like Carmack, the relationships they forged with Indigenous women to make it rich, and how ideas of racial superiority could be mobilized to dissolve such unions if they were seen to no longer benefit men like Carmack directly.

Worton also shows how male Japanese stevedores working the ships coming from San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver faced extreme racial prejudice, and even death upon their arrival in the Yukon. Again, it is unclear if Worton is using real examples as inspiration or taking liberties with the historical record to emphasize the racial tensions that plagued the gold rush. Nevertheless, Worton depicts a gruesome conflict between Japanese workers and white union stevedores over who has the right to unload the ships coming into port before winter. When the Japanese workers are ordered by their captain to continue unloading a ship,

they are shot and killed by the workers on the dock. When the captain loses his temper and demands to know why the Japanese workers were shot, one of the white stevedores shows no remorse: “Why?! Not like I killed a human being!” (p. 162). As the white workers board the ship to unload the cargo, images of the dead Japanese worker floating in the water depict the deadly consequence of racial conflict. This scene also illuminates the power of the ideals of racial superiority invoked by white workers to protect their privilege.  

10 This has been discussed by Gillian Creese. See Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity?”
Japanese were not treated much better in the mining camps and communities and that attempts to bring whites to justice for racially motivated violence were often unsuccessful.

While Worton’s illustrations and dialogue draw the reader’s attention to the racial conflict of Yukon gold rush, there are still instances where *The Klondike* reinforces troubling tropes. Worton’s treatment of Indigenous issues often restricts Indigenous people, and especially Indigenous women, to the margins of history. Indigenous people are, with only a few exceptions, erased from the illustrated landscape. Worton’s beautiful but bleak images of the north at the beginning of certain chapters suggest the emptiness of the area and depoliticize the mass migration of non-Indigenous peoples. Though Worton problematizes the coming of non-Indigenous gold seekers in an opening encounter between George Holt and “the Chikoot Indians”, he ultimately leaves the politics of making claims to unceded Indigenous lands unexplored. Moreover, Worton denies the only Indigenous female character any sense of meaningful agency. Indeed, George Carmack’s wife Kate is only briefly depicted in the comic book, and the reader is mostly left to piece together her character from rumour and hearsay about her behaviour from men, including her husband. Although Worton could have more carefully explored the complicated racialized and gendered relations of the Yukon gold rush, *The Klondike* demonstrates that comics are able to successfully and accessibly grapple with difficult and complex aspects of Canada’s past.

“Telling these stories is how we will create change”: *Sugar Falls*

*Sugar Falls* conveys the story of one girl’s strength, courage, and survival during her time in a Manitoba residential school. Based on Cross Lake First Nation Elder Betty Ross’s real survivor story, this historical comic book documents how Canada’s residential school system profoundly shaped the lives and communities of Indigenous peoples. As a result, *Sugar Falls* can play an important role in confronting Canada’s racist history by raising awareness about the legacies of residential schooling for a broad audience. In *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, Paulette Regan contends that the Canadian government’s apology to residential schools survivors in 2008 was not so much the closing of a sad chapter in Canadian history “but rather an opening for all Canadians to fundamentally rethink our past and its implications for our present and future relations.” In order to achieve new and meaningful relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, Regan asks that Canadians confront their amnesia about race and racism and work toward an “unsettling” pedagogy that challenges unequal power relations. *Sugar Falls* is an important historical work that can be used as a profoundly “unsettling” political tool of decolonization.

*Sugar Falls* begins in the present with a non-Indigenous high-school student, Daniel, receiving an assignment from his teacher; he is to learn more about the history of residential schools by seeking out a personal account from a survivor.

---

Daniel’s Indigenous friend April organizes a meeting with her grandmother or “Kokum” Betsy. Betsy is an Indigenous social worker living in Winnipeg and she is happy and honoured to share her story, for the first time, with her granddaughter and her friend. One afternoon, Betsy welcomes Daniel and April into the safety of a round room and performs a smudge before Daniel asks: “Why did you have to go to residential school?” (p. 5). Betsy answers the question by recounting her personal history.

The comic book traces Betsy’s story and shows how her life was marked by the racism and abuse suffered by many Indigenous peoples. At a young age, Betsy was abandoned by her birth mother who was also a residential school survivor. After being taken in by another Indigenous family, her new father had a vision of impending darkness in his daughter’s future and decided to take Betsy to Sugar Falls, a favourite family spot. While at the falls, Betsy’s father instructed her to always remember the importance of relationships: “that’s where we find our strength as a people. The beat of the drum represents the strength in our relationships… Knowing this will keep you strong. Always remember these teachings by thinking of our time here at Sugar Falls” (p. 12). Shortly thereafter, the foretold darkness came for Betsy. A priest arrived by canoe at the family’s residence to escort her to the nearby residential school. Despite Betsy’s resistance—she even struck the priest in the head with a paddle—her father reluctantly encouraged her to go with the priest: “I have no choice in the matter… It’s the law… Just remember everything I told you” (p. 16). To survive at the residential school, Betsy recalled both her memories of Sugar Falls and her father’s teachings.

Sugar Falls brings to life the horrors of the residential school system and offers an accessible, illustrated account of the myriad forms of abuse pupils endured. The illustrations depict the racism faced by many Indigenous children in these schools that historical research and films like Muffins for Granny have documented. For example, when Betsy was admitted to the institution, she was stripped naked and roughly bathed to scrub all the dirt from her skin. Her hair was cut short and she was made to wear western clothing. When Betsy and her classmates were not working in the fields or cleaning the school, the comic book depicts them as attending mass or spending half-days struggling to learn Latin. When they made errors in class or tried to speak to each other in their own language, they were caned and beaten by the nuns. This violence and physical harm are constant threads in Sugar Falls.

One day, when Betsy attempted to speak Cree, a nun beat her so badly that she bled and lost her hearing in one ear. Because readers must make sense of the story through their own interpretation of the text and accompanying disturbing images, engaging with passages such as these allows readers to actively reconstruct the violent confrontations that many students endured. Through such exchanges,
Figure 4: A nun attacks Betsy for speaking Cree. Robertson and Henderson, Sugar Falls, p. 29. Used with permission from Portage & Main Press.
readers are able to learn about the often horrific experiences of residential school survivors.

Robertson and Henderson establish, as does the scholarship of J. R. Miller and John Milloy, that children like Betsy were never safe from abuse in these schools. Readers learn that the priest fetched different girls to satisfy his sexual desires. Betsy explained that the “[priest] called them ‘Happy Rides’ when he came for us and made us sit on his lap” (p. 28). As a result, some students tried to run away from the school and escape; however, their attempts often ended in death, as was the case with Betsy’s close friend Flora. Throughout her harrowing experiences, Betsy continued to draw on her father’s words about the importance of relationships with each other and the earth for comfort: “When the darkness comes, let […] the memory of Sugar Falls] be a light…so no matter how hard they try to tear you away from our ways, they will fail…because you are strong” (pp. 36-37). In drawing on her father’s teachings, Betsy was able to survive her time in residential school and move on with her life. The comic book concludes with Betsy thanking Daniel for asking to hear about her residential school story. Betsy claims: “Telling these stories is how we will create change. We need to look at the past to teach others our stories and then look forward, together with knowledge and healing” (p. 40). Like Escape to Gold Mountain, Sugar Falls ends on a hopeful note. Robertson and Henderson suggest that perhaps the racist ideas that in part motivated the schools can be left behind, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada can work toward reconciliation.

While Sugar Falls is a significant historical comic book, it is not flawless. Robertson and Henderson do not explain either in an introduction or a bibliographic note how they constructed their narrative. Therefore, like Escape to Gold Mountain and The Klondike, it is difficult to determine what aspects of Sugar Falls actually conformed to Ross’s life experience, what experiences were culled from the broader historical record, or what frames were simply invented. A detailed list of references would have greatly enhanced Sugar Falls’ historical and pedagogical value. Sugar Falls also flattens the historical record by treating all Indigenous peoples’ experiences in residential schools as being represented by Betsy’s. Problematically, Robertson and Henderson chose to tell their story in a linear fashion that suggests that Canadians have moved from a racist past to a present pregnant with reconciliation. However, not everyone has emerged from residential schools and their damaging intergenerational consequences as strong as the semi-fictional character of Betsy. Real life is, of course, more complicated. The unintended consequence of ignoring the diverse experiences of real survivors is that readers may deduce that those who have succumbed to addictive or harmful behaviours to numb the pain of their experiences are somehow not as strong, courageous, or as culturally connected as Betsy. Such a narrative can slip too easily into a kind of victim blaming that diminishes the responsibility of governments, churches, and Canadians generally to actively reconstruct their relations with Indigenous peoples for meaningful reconciliation. In the end, Sugar Falls is a helpful introduction to residential schooling that illustrates the horrors of racist institutions and is capable of sparking an “unsettling” conversation about
forging new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the future.

**Comics and Canada’s Racist Past and Present**

Racism continues to shape the lives of many people living in what is now Canada and comics can help increase awareness about racism’s historical and ongoing consequences. Collectively, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, *The Klondike*, and *Sugar Falls* eloquently illustrate how racist ideas have been “pressed into service” by white settlers throughout Canada’s history to protect their power and privilege to the disadvantage of other racialized peoples. Comics ask readers to actively interpret stories by piecing together limited text and images, and, in doing so, they provide an opportunity to connect with histories in ways that can challenge their beliefs. As popular historical resources, comic books that examine racism can play an important role in confronting Canada’s racial amnesia and developing peoples’ awareness about its harmful effects. Historical comics can encourage us to change our practices, our relationships, and our societies: they are important tools to help us think *and* act differently in the world.

Sean Carleton

*Trent University / London School of Economics*