

### **Abstract**

The term Post-Western has been used since the 1970s to refer to books and films that are not Westerns but use conventions of the Western genre to analyze contemporary conflicts and issues. The most important contribution to the establishment of this subgenre has been Neil Campbell’s monograph *Post-Westerns* (2013), in which they are defined as films ‘coming after and going beyond the traditional Western [genre] while engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values’ (31). This article seeks to adapt the concept of post-Westerns to Comics Studies and focuses on a recent graphic work that can be considered post-Western, *Scalped*, a 60-issue comic-book series written by Jason Aaron and illustrated by R. M. Guéra, published by Vertigo between 2007 and 2012. It tells a contemporary story of crime, violence and corruption in an Indian Reservation in South Dakota, where the Lakotas live in an environment of utter poverty, drug abuse and hopelessness. Making use of constant flashbacks and different points of view, *Scalped* makes references to the Western myth and establishes a dialogue with American history and the Western genre to show the contrast with post-Western contemporary nightmares.

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### **'The Art of Surviving': Aaron and Guéra's *Scalped* as a Post-Western**

The term Post-Western has been used since the 1970s (French 1973) to refer to books and films that are not Westerns but make references to conventions and characteristics of the Western genre in order to approach contemporary conflicts and issues. Different scholars (Slotkin 1992, Cawelti 1999, Kollin 2007) have applied the term to the fields of Film or Western Studies, although they do not necessarily agree on the corpus of films or the features defining them. French, for example, uses it exclusively for film Westerns set 'in the present-day West where lawmen, rodeo riders, and Cadillac-driving ranchers are still in thrall to the frontier myth' (1973: 19-20). Cawelti, instead, includes many other types of films made in the present that 'draw on Western themes and imagery but treat the Western tradition in a subversive, ironic, or otherwise critical fashion,' such as films set in the contemporary West, films set 'on the boundaries of civilization' (like the inner city or futuristic settings) and, more generally, revisionist Westerns like *Little Big Man* (1970) or *Unforgiven* (1992) (1999: 119).

Neil Campbell's monograph *Post-Westerns* (2013) is the most ambitious and thorough contribution toward the definition and application of the category. He uses the term for films produced after World War II which are 'coming after and going beyond the traditional Western [genre] while engaging with and commenting on its deeply haunting assumptions and values' (2013: 31). Campbell relates his use of the prefix *post* to words like *postcolonialism*, *poststructuralism*, or *postmodernism*, where the prefix implies a chronological continuation, but also an opposition, a deconstruction and an attempt to transcend or go beyond the antecedent. Post-Western films like John Sayles' *Lone Star* (1996) or the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007), for example, make references to the Western to establish a critical dialogue with the ideological and generic assumptions of the original genre, taking its classic structures and themes to interact, overlap, and interrelate in complex dialogical ways with them: 'post-Westerns constantly and deliberately remind us of the persistent presence of the Western genre, its traces and traditions within the unraveling of new, challenging forms and settings' (2013: 309). Campbell also explains this dialogue with the classics by referring to Derrida's words in 'Law of Genre' (1980) as 'participation without belonging' to the genre itself (qtd. In Campbell 2013: 24), and develops it further using Deleuze's idea of 'minor cinema' as opposed to the major language of the dominant form. In this sense, post-Westerns become 'the "Western" in quotes' as director Jim Jarmusch said of his own 1995 film *Dead Man* (qtd. In Campbell 2013: 37). Post-Westerns deal then with the myths of the West and the American frontier and with the problems of representation of the 'real West' in Westerns. They thus follow the lead of new western historians like Patricia Nelson Limerick or Richard White, who in the 1980s recast the

study of American frontier history by attempting to separate myth from history and focus on race, class, gender, and the environment. These films therefore look at a contemporary West and/or look at the Western past with a critical lens, and they tend to rely on genre hybridity, in particular by using features from the crime/noir genre: post-Westerns like *Lone Star* or *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955), for example, show us a process of investigation that brings to light the hidden crimes of a Western past which is the clue to understanding a troubled present.

Finally, post-Westerns typically focus on minorities that had been misrepresented in Westerns, like homosexuals, women or Native Americans, in order to cast them in a new light. For example, *Brokeback Mountain* (film directed by Ang Lee in 2005 based on a short story by Annie Proulx from 1997) brings to the fore the topic of homosexuality among that most masculine of figures, the cowboy. In contrast with the quintessentially masculine archetype defined in Westerns by actors like John Wayne, Cary Grant or Clint Eastwood, the book and the film depict a post-Western love story among contemporary cowboys, breaking a taboo that had been firmly established in the genre and in the myth of the West. Similarly, *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) tells the story of a caravan crossing the Oregon Trail in 1845, but female director Kelly Reichardt subtly changes the usual gender dynamics of the Western genre by giving the women characters a prominent role and by showing events from a female perspective quite unfrequent in the genre. Thus, like other post-Westerns, the film takes the spectators into a post-Western space of dialogue and reflection where they may question the traditionally submissive role assigned to women in the genre and wonder about the relationship between the myth and the real history of the West. Likewise, other female directors like Courtney Hunt and Debra Granik have also used the Western genre to create powerful, complex female roles in a contemporary situation in the post-Westerns *Frozen River* (2008) and *Winter's Bone* (2010). Finally, we can also find interesting examples of the presence of Native Americans in post-Westerns: *Smoke Signals* (1998), for example, is recognized as being the first feature-length film written, directed, and produced by Native Americans to have reached a wide audience both in the US and abroad. Screenwriter Sherman Alexie and director Chris Eyre present two Native American characters struggling with their 'Indian' identity and fighting against the stereotypes created by the Western genre and myth. Susan Kollin has defined the film as a post-Western 'that acknowledges Hollywood's legacy . . . but that resists this hegemony in an effort to seek another form of storytelling' (Kollin 2000: 142).

This article seeks to adapt the concept of post-Western to the field of comics and, after presenting a brief historical overview of Western comics, focuses on a recent graphic work that can tentatively be considered post-Western: *Scalped*, a 60-issue comic-book series written by

Jason Aaron and illustrated by R. M. Guéra, published by Vertigo between 2007 and 2012. As Maurice Horn pointed out, comics and the American West have always shared a strong affinity: 'Just as the Western pioneers were conscious of opening a new geographical frontier, the pioneers of the comics were quick to realize that they were exploring a new artistic frontier' (1977: 10). After a few newspaper comic strips in the 1920s influenced by early Western films, the tradition of dime novels and the Wild West Shows, we start to find some interesting Western comics in the 1930s, like *Bronc Peeler* (which used a contemporary setting) and *Red Ryder* (which went back to Colorado in the 1880s), both drawn by an artist with actual cowboy experience, Fred Harman<sup>1</sup>. The Western genre had its heyday in film and television in the 1940s and the 1950s, and this popular success was also reflected in comic strips and the new comic books, which in some cases took the characters straight from television shows (like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers) or from radio shows (*The Lone Ranger*). Martha Zan talks about a 'Golden Age of Western Comics' from 1948 to 1952 'when American Western comics reached the pinnacle of their popularity' (2010: 690) and she describes five types of Western heroes in comic books: 'the cowboy, the lone rider/reformed outlaw, the lawman, the (ex-)military man and the Indian' (2010: 686). Of these the first two were the most popular during these years, particularly the 'lone rider/reformed outlaw', which included heroes like *The Lone Ranger*, *Buffalo Bill*, and many Kid-characters like *Billy the Kid*, *Kid Colt* or *the Outlaw Kid*<sup>2</sup>. However, popularity did not equal quality or depth, as Gerald Dean has pointed out, since Western comics 'underwent a process of trivialization in an attempt to make comics more child-friendly ... and thus, westerns lost all veracity, all rawness, and in general failed to display all the rough and tough-ness of the times they were set in; they became little more than Disney versions of the genre' (2012). The popularity of the genre in the USA declined in the 1960s, but it was revived in Europe with comics influenced by revisionist Western film directors like Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone. Probably the best example of this 'neo-Western' in comics is not American but French: *Lieutenant Blueberry*, created by Giraud and Charlier in 1963. Finally, the most important process of revitalization undergone by the genre more recently has been its hybridization with science fiction and horror in order to create the subgenre of 'Weird Western' that has kept Westerns popular in the last few years with comics like *High Moon*, *Sixth Gun*, *Pretty Deadly*, *East of West* or *Cowboy and Aliens*. *Jonah Hex* (1972- ), in particular, stands out as a particularly interesting example of hybrid 'weird Western' comics that also shares the revisionist spirit of Peckinpah or Leone, and develops an antiheroic protagonist with a very personal code of honor.

*Scalped* was published by Vertigo between 2007 and 2012 and it tells a contemporary story of crime, violence and corruption in an Indian reservation in South Dakota, where the

Oglala Lakotas live in an environment of utter poverty, drug abuse and hopelessness. Written by Alabama-born Jason Aaron and illustrated by the Serbian artist R. M. Guéra, it tells the story of Dashiell Bad Horse, an undercover Lakota FBI agent that had left the reservation 15 years before and is assigned the mission of capturing Lincoln Red Crow, tribal chief, casino owner, and gang leader of the reservation. Dashiell's mother, Gina Bad Horse, is also an important character since she is an Indian activist fighting against Red Crow and is the connection with the murder of two FBI agents that had taken place in the 1970s and is at the root of contemporary conflicts. Although the focus is on these three characters, *Scalped* tells the stories of many other inhabitants of the reservation as they grapple with organized crime, rampant poverty, drug addiction and alcoholism, local politics and the preservation of their cultural identity. By making use of constant flashbacks and different points of view, *Scalped* establishes a dialogue between the past and the present, makes references to the Western myth and establishes a dialogue with American history and the Western genre to show the contrast with post-Western contemporary nightmares. The title itself seems to be a reference both to Dash's shaved head and to this troubled past of violence among whites and Native Americans.

*Scalped*'s publisher, Vertigo, is DC's adult-oriented imprint and it is generally thought to have been one of the most important contributors to 'the transformation and new perception of the comics medium in the US since the 1990s' (Dony 2014: 2) after the 1986 publication of *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *Maus I*, and the subsequent generalization of the term 'graphic novel'. Christophe Dony has described Vertigo's postmodernist strategy of 'rewriting' popular genres, and has explained how by 'revisiting old DC material, the pulp tradition, or Gothic elements, a wide array of Vertigo titles have participated in the label's long-running meta- and intertextual meditation on the medium, its status and history' (2014: 17), a process that can easily be related to post-Western films in their questioning of the conventions and assumptions of the Western genre that we have described before. *Preacher* (1995-2000), for example, also published by Vertigo, revisits the Western and the myth of the American frontier mythology, and although it hybridizes horror, comedy and adventure conventions, it chiefly draws on the Western for most of its thematic and stylistic elements.

*Scalped* also mixes genres, in this case crime/noir and the Western (like many post-Western films), since it describes the undercover investigation of an FBI agent in an Indian reservation in the American West. The first obvious hypotext in this case (hinted at by the name choice) is Dashiell Hammett and his first novel *Red Harvest* (1929), which also describes the investigation of an undercover agent in a corrupt environment in the American North West: Personville, a town known by locals and foreigners alike as Poisonville because of its corruption

and violence. Hammett is usually considered the creator of hard-boiled fiction, and he published his first stories (and the first version of *Red Harvest*, titled 'The Cleansing of Poisonville') in a medium that is closely related to comics: the pulps. Dony has actually underlined the relationship between comics and the pulps, and between Vertigo's rewriting ethos and the American pulp tradition:

With their strong focus on genre fiction—including horror, the Western, science fiction, crime stories and detective fiction—as well as their sometimes deliberate old-fashioned aesthetics, Vertigo comics clearly reclaim the cultural heritage of the pulps. (2014: 12)

*Scalped* uses a graphic violence and a language that reminds us of the pulps, and describes the corruption of the reservation in terms very similar to the ones Hammett used in *Red Harvest*. The Continental Op, the unnamed narrator of *Red Harvest*, describes Personville like this:

For forty years Elihu Willsson had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin and guts. He was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the Morning Herald, and Evening Herald, the city's only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance. Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature. Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state. (1980 (1929): 1)

Similarly, Lincoln Red Crow describes his criminal hold on the Prairie Rose Reservation using these words:

You're looking at the president of the Oglala Tribal Council... As well as the sheriff of the Tribal Police Force, chairman of the Prairie Rose Planning Committee, treasurer of the Highway Safety Program ... and Managing Director of this here brand spankin' new casino... all you need to know, boy, is that around here ... I'm the father, the son and the holy fucking ghost all rolled into one. (*Scalped* #1: 10)

The structure of the tale is also typical of a hard-boiled detective story, with the plot structured around an investigation of a past crime that is responsible for the present situation. In *Scalped*, the crime is the murder of two FBI agents by a group of Native American activists in the 1970s. The group was made up of a younger Red Crow, Gina Bad Horse, another activist nicknamed Catcher who actually pulled the trigger, and Lawrence Belcourt, who is falsely accused of the crime and imprisoned for life. Dash Bad Horse performs the investigation by methods as unconventional as his predecessor in *Red Harvest*: 'stirring up' the situation until he

is able to 'cleanse' Prairie Rose and incarcerate Red Crow, believed by the FBI to be responsible for the murders.

From a thematic point of view, the topics in *Scalped* are also typically noir: the pervading presence of crime and corruption, the burden of the past, which creates remorse and vengeance, and a critical view of society. In fact, the reservation is described as 'a third world nation in the heart of America' (*Scalped* #1: 20), a place ravaged by alcoholism, drug addiction, unstructured families, and a social determinism reminiscent of literary naturalism or TV series like *The Wire*<sup>3</sup>. As Kristina Aurylaite points out, these noir themes are highlighted by the visual treatment provided by R. M. Guéra:

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. (2015: 7)

This hopelessness is exemplified by Dino Poor Bear's story (a teenager trying to get away from the 'Rez' who ends up being the new mafia lord) or the impossible love story of Dashiell and Red Crow's daughter, Carol, presented graphically on pages 4 and 5 of issue #42 as the stark contrast between the fictive stereotypical image of the American Dream (the married couple and kid in a beautiful house) and the real nightmares of drug addiction. On page 4 we can see Carol and Dash playing and laughing with their imaginary daughter in five panels painted in pastel colours including a rosy sky suggesting a beautiful sunrise. However, the insert of their baby daughter laughing on page 4 is placed side by side with the close-up on page 5 of a suffering Carol surrounded by six panels without a clear temporal sequence describing the misery of drug addiction with dark colours and gritty realism. The simultaneous presentation of these two scenes on a double page allows the reader to link powerfully dream and reality and suggest the impossibility of the American Dream for this Native American couple.

As Aaron himself has explained, genre hybridity was at the root of his idea for *Scalped*: 'It all really came from me loving both westerns and crime stories and wanting to combine the two.' (Rozier 2010). Therefore, the noir structure and themes are complemented by visual and verbal references to the Western genre: Dash's FBI superior, for example, asks him to 'tell [him he] didn't go fucking Wild Bunch' (*Scalped* #3: 9), and he also explains to his colleagues that Dash should be assigned to a position inside the United States by using a cowboy-related metaphor:

‘Like any good cowboy, our boy belongs home on the range’ (Scalped #5: 12). Of course, nobody misses the irony that they are talking about a full-blooded Oglala Lakota playing the part of the cowboy (and donning the sheriff’s uniform and hat). This irony is brought to light by a car plate we can see at the rear of a reservation vehicle hinting at a parallel Native American history of resistance: ‘My heroes have always *killed* cowboys’ (my italics, Scalped #8: 2). From a visual point of view, the South Dakota location provides a natural background for frequent wide-display panels with horse-riding scenes, as well as close-up panels of characters with cowboy hats or rodeo scenes clearly reminiscent of Western movies.<sup>4</sup> For example, on page 5 of issue #58 Guéra has drawn a panel that could come straight from a Cinemascope Western film: Dash riding a galloping horse followed by a dust cloud and surrounded by iconic rock formations reminiscent of Death Valley.

All these verbal and visual references, as well as the location in a Native American reservation, take the reader into the post-Western space of dialogue and reflection with the ‘deeply haunting assumptions and values’ of the Western genre described by Campbell (2013: 31). Most post-Western films deal with this contrast between the reality of the West and the myth created by the Western genre, whether in a more serious or in a more ironic manner. For example, *Lone Star* and *No Country for Old Men* portray two police officers haunted by the myth of the West, in both cases represented by members of their own family. In *Lone Star*, Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) inherits the legendary memory of his father and needs to find the real facts behind the legend, whereas in *No Country for Old Men*, sheriff Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) feels overwhelmed by the contrast between the contemporary violence he has to struggle with and the mythic times of his father and grandfather (also former sheriffs in the area). *Smoke Signals*, instead, uses humor and irony to deal with this contrast: one of the Native American characters (Thomas) admits having seen *Dances with Wolves* dozens of times, while another (Victor) defines his identity according to the Hollywood cliché: stoicism and buffalo hunting (‘Get stoic! ... you gotta look like a warrior ... like you just came back from killing a buffalo’), even though their own tribe’s past and present have nothing to do with the stereotype (they were actually fishermen).

*Scalped* also deals with the problems of representation by showing the reaction of different characters when they contrast reality with the myth created by Westerns. First, it shows us the persistence of the myth even among Native Americans, by showing Dino Poor Bear’s uncle (a diabetic amputee) ‘sit[ting] on the couch and watch[ing] Westerns all day’ (Scalped #10: 6), just like Thomas from *Smoke Signals*. Then, we are confronted with a sheriff like those from the films mentioned before, but instead of conflicted characters here we find a



character that believes the myth and uses it for his own benefit, the sheriff of the town bordering on the reservation who encapsulates the frontier myth in John Wayne and his movies: 'Rio Bravo, True Grit, High Noon ... my motto is never trust a man who don't like John Wayne' (Scalped #16: 4). He seems to have built his reputation ('I'm the most famous lawman this state has seen'[4]) on lies about the West and Western films (like the spurious presence of *High Noon* in a list of Wayne movies) and his (fake) past in Vietnam. Red Crow, however, had learned the lesson of the differences between the representation of death in Westerns and death itself much earlier: 'First thing you learn when you witness a killing is it ain't at all like it is in the movies. In the Westerns I watched as a kid, a cowboy'd take an arrow in the back and instantly fall over dead. First man I ever killed.... I had to strangle for 11 minutes' (Scalped #22: 19). Finally, there is another character that believes in another Western myth: the myth of the Indian as noble savage and warrior, like Victor in *Smoke Signals*. This is 'Diesel' Fillenworth, a white man who claims Indian ancestry due to his 1/16<sup>th</sup> Kickapoo blood, but Aaron and Guéra show us that the source of the myth is not in the films, but in the Western comics he read as a boy. Page 8 of issue #23 shows us Diesel's memories of his childhood, where we can see him lying inside an Indian tent and reading Western comics like *Jonah Hex* and *Scalphunter*, the comic from the 1970s that Vertigo had planned to revive when they first contacted Aaron. The tent is surrounded by rubbish and a seedy caravan camp, but, like many other kids, Diesel finds refuge in the comics. His own voice-over as an adult tells us of his frustration and his escapist retreat in comics: 'All I ever wanted was to be an Indian ... A real Indian ... Acknowledged. Accepted ... At last' (Scalped #23 8). As the storyline concerning this character later shows, believing in myths often leads to disaster: he will never be fully accepted by the Natives and his resentment over that rejection will make him betray the American Indian Movement.

Like the post-Western films mentioned before, *Scalped* looks at the troubled past in order to understand the conflicts of the present, and therefore Aaron and Guéra show us the historical Western background behind the existence of the reservation: the Battle of Little Big Horn (1876), the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890) and the 1900 relocation in the reservation (Scalped #25, pages 2-4)<sup>5</sup>, showing us that the present situation is the result of traumatic events in the past. Aaron and Guéra use again the space and technique of the double page to present as simultaneous two events separated by fourteen years in time: page 2 of issue #25 shows us the events of 'June 25, 1876 ... along the banks of Little Bighorn', while page 3 portrays what happened on 'December 29, 1890 ... at a place called Wounded Knee'. The upper and bottom panels of both pages are connected graphically by semi-continuous lines and colours as if to stress the relationship between both events and the inevitability of the Indian defeat. As Kate

Polak has indicated, 'Aaron and Guéra use both textual and imagistic historical artifacts as inspiration for this tale of contemporary reservation life, in order to explore how historical trauma results in intergenerational cycles of poverty and violence' (2017: 119). There is in fact a whole issue (# 50) entitled 'The Art of Scalping' that focuses on the history of violent conquest symbolized by the cruel act of scalping. After the defeat of the Sioux, and their subsequent confinement in reservations, the focus is on American Indian resilience and their decision to stay in the reservations as a form of resistance, encapsulated in the new title of 'The Art of Surviving', defined by one of Dash's ancestors like this: 'The spirits have shown me ... No matter what they try to do to us, this is not where we will die, this is where we will live' (Scalped #50, pages. 20-21).

*Scalped* also gives us details about other aspects of Native American subjugation, like the history of corruption within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Scalped #7: 8) and the process of acculturation initiated by the American Indian Boarding School Movement when children were taken to Eastern boarding schools, and forced to take European names and abandon their language and beliefs ('This is for your own good, number six. We must kill the Indian inside you in order to save the man! When are you going to learn that?', Red Crow is told as a child [Scalped #7: 2]). Red Crow, in fact uses this history of bloody conquest and forced assimilation to justify the inauguration of his casino in spite of the associated corruption, drug dealing and mafia tactics it involves:

Ever since the arrival of that syphilitic, 'ginney fuck, Columbus, white people have been flocking to our shores to take without asking. From us Lakota, they took the Black Hills, our sacred Paha Sapa, and the billion dollars in gold that was buried there. They took the herds of buffalo and the prairie where they roamed. They took the pride and the dignity of a once great nation, giving nothing but misery in return. But tonight, all of that ends. (Scalped #7: 20)

Despite his own words of proud affirmation, Red Crow remains a very contradictory character, as explained by Polak: 'He refused to be stripped of his identity as a Lakota, but in spite of that, he is capitalizing on racial caricature within a building that is a monument to greed and gullibility' (2017: 122). In fact, as pointed out by Aurylaite, Red Crow represents a white-centered capitalist model for the reservation that encounters opposition by traditionalists (like Gina Bad Horse) who advocate 'cultural preservation and integrity as well as more careful filtering of outside influences' (2015: 4). Without advocating one model of development or the other, Aaron and Guéra bring to the table the situation of 'a semiforgotten space in American life' (Polak 2017:

118), the American Indian reservations that are the result of a series of dark events in American history that have frequently been forgotten or mythologized, but are 'a manifestation of colonizers' racist ideology and a result of their re-ordering the social space of the colonies' (Aurylaite 2015: 3). By presenting both the historical past and the troubled present, *Scalped* 'seeks to reintegrate [reservations] as central to the American consciousness of what the nation is.' (Polak 2017: 118)

The most important event in *Scalped* from a narrative point of view (the murder of the two FBI agents) is actually a fictional rewriting of another historical event: the occupation of the town of Wounded Knee by the American Indian Movement in 1973, and the subsequent murder of two FBI agents in 1975 during a shootout on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. As a result, Native American activist Leonard Peltier was sentenced to life imprisonment, although he has always maintained his innocence and is considered by some as 'America's Nelson Mandela.' These events are the obvious inspiration for the murder investigated by Aaron and Guéra, with real-life Leonard Peltier as hypotext (and spitting image) of fictional character Lawrence Belcourt. *Scalped* is a good example of what Polak calls 'historio-metagraphics,' a term inspired by Linda Hutcheon's 'historiographic metafiction' that she has created to describe the 'strategies employed in order to both illustrate historical realities and to question the way in which they are represented' in graphic narratives (2017: 5)<sup>6</sup>. Aaron and Guéra show different, slightly contradictory versions of the murder (that has fundamentally altered all the participants' lives) as a narrative strategy (since it is the 'whodunit' at the center of the detective story) but also as a way of highlighting the weaknesses of memory and history. The authors present a series of flashbacks which bring back the vivid but conflicting memories haunting the different characters who took part in the shooting, which therefore 'work as a characterization strategy in addition to offering a version, albeit fictionalized, of what happened at Wounded Knee' (Aurylaite 2015: 6).

Having highlighted the problems behind the representation of facts in traditional Westerns and underlined the historical events mythologized by Westerns, *Scalped* goes on to narrate its own post-Western story by rewriting Western conventions, and by focusing on minority groups that had been misrepresented in traditional Western films: Native Americans, women, and homosexuals. Obviously, the group that is given more prominence is that of Native Americans, since the story takes place almost exclusively in the reservation. Derek Parker Royal has pointed out that the portrayal of Native Americans in comics has always tended to be simplistic and stereotypical: whether they were the savage heathen, the noble savage or the simpliminded sidekick of earlier times (Little Beaver in the *Bronc Peeler* comic strips, Tonto in

the *Lone Ranger*), or the more contemporary Native superhero with a shamanistic connection to the spiritual world or some extraordinary ability to read nature (Red Wolf, Echo, Shaman, Super-Chief, Black Condor, among many others), 'Native American characterization to this day, in comics and elsewhere, remains mired in a laundry list of misrepresentative stereotypes' (Furey 2007). *Scalped*, however, follows in the trail of post-Western films like *Smoke Signals*, *Dead Man* (1995) or *The Exiles* (1961), and rewrites the roles of Native Americans. As Aurylaite has highlighted, 'with its emphasis on and investment in characterization, [it] aims to restore subjectivity to Native Americans, usually depersonalized and objectified by outsiders' (Aurylaite 2015: 15). Over the sixty issues published in a span of six years, Aaron and Guéra manage to develop characters with a distinct Oglala Lakota identity (they often use the Native language, which is left untranslated) that originate in generic noir clichés but go beyond them and become much more complex and 'round'. We have already seen how Red Crow evolved from Native American activist to mob leader and capitalist casino manager, but in the end we find out that he is another victim, 'a conflicted and self-destructive protagonist, fighting against the disruptive forces that he has nonetheless helped to perpetuate' (Royal 2010: 10). Similarly, as an undercover agent, Dashiell Bad Horse is also a multifaceted character, 'trapped in a violent world over which he seems to have little control' (Royal 2010: 9). Dash is an example of a hybrid identity<sup>7</sup> in this very hybrid work, as an American Indian who had decided to leave the Reservation and adopt a 'white' identity as a US soldier and FBI agent, even though he is ironically forced to go back to the reservation in order to recover his freedom. All throughout the series, he is an alienated character with very little agency until the very last episodes, when he seems to recover the moral compass he had lost during most of his time in the reservation. He finally punishes the killer of the murdered FBI agents (and of his own mother) and leaves the reservation after realizing that he is getting away from the only home he will ever have.

In contrast with female representation in traditional Westerns, Aaron and Guéra also present a group of native women empowered in different ways. Granny Poor Bear, for example, is a healer, the spiritual guide and moral compass in the reservation, in contrast with the corrupt male leadership. Gina Bad Horse is Dashiell's mother, a political activist and former member of the Indian Rights Movement, who feels guilty for not having paid enough attention to his son because of her political involvement, and is murdered after her decision to inform about Catcher's responsibility in the FBI murders. Carol is Red Crow's daughter and is presented at the beginning as a stereotypical femme fatale who takes Dashiell into drug addiction; however, she becomes a much more developed character throughout the six years of the series, manages to quit drugs and becomes the new reservation healer with Granny Poor Bear's help. Finally,

Maggie Rock Medicine is the daughter of the former male chief and becomes the new chief of the reservation in the epilogue of the story. The message of this epilogue seems to be that, as in post-Western films like *Frozen River* or *Winter's Bone* (González 2015: 71), if there is hope for this godforsaken piece of land, it probably lies in the hands of sensitive, intelligent women like Carol and Maggie, rather than in the violent male characters.

The third minority given a voice in *Scalped* is homosexuals. Shunka is Red Crow's bodyguard, and a closeted gay who only 'comes out' when he goes away from the reservation and meets a former chief of the Potawatomi tribe who has been expelled from the tribe because of the disclosure of his sexual orientation, and who informs the readers about a precolonial history of sexual acceptance among the different tribes:

You've heard the story of the two-spirits, I assume? You'd be surprised by how many haven't. Once upon a time, most every tribe in North America had special classifications and roles for gay and transgender people ... These were people that were not only accepted by their tribes, but in many instances even revered. (*Scalped* #36: 16)

Shunka's and the former chief's conflicted stories of exclusion and self-acceptance remind us of the cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* and also of Omar Little, the gay stick-up man in *The Wire* that also broke many stereotypes of LGBTQ representation in *noir* narratives. Shunka's story in particular is developed in issues # 36 and 37, and although it ends tragically when he is killed after sharing his feelings for Red Crow, it highlights the presence of this oft-forgotten past of sexual acceptance among Native American tribes.

In order to fully develop these hybrid, complex characters, Aaron and Guéra use a variety of formal narrative techniques. Some of these techniques are literary in origin, like the frequent flashbacks and changes in point of view (which tend to create disorientation in the reader), the repeated use of 'stream of consciousness' narration, and the recurrent portrayal of dreams as a door to the characters' subconscious (like Dash's dream in which his mother takes him through Lakota history in order to get him to face his American Indian heritage). Besides, the creators of *Scalped* also develop two comic-specific techniques that seem to be particularly relevant for character exposition. First, the use of animal totems that some characters seem to be able to see, and that add new personality shades to the characters. For example, Granny Poor Bear's totem (a bear) hints at her strength and resilience in difficult circumstances in spite of her feeble aspect, whereas Dash's totem (a spider) suggests the cobweb of contradictory allegiances in which he is trapped. The second technique is the superposition of contradictory thoughts and speech that reveals the alienation and broken personality of characters like Dash and Carol.

Pages 8 and 9 of issue #42, for example, are an excellent example of what the language of comics can do to describe the complex relationship between these characters. In a succession of 15 crammed panels, we witness a casual conversation between Dash and Carol full of lies and half-truths ('What happened to your hands?', 'Frostbite', 'I'm sorry for...', 'I know. So am I'), whereas the captions painted in different colors show what the characters are actually thinking and feeling ('I miss you', 'I want to make love to you again', 'I'm pregnant with your child', 'You're going to die if you don't get off this Rez', 'I'm pregnant'). The contrast between speech and thoughts shows us not only the inability of both characters to express their feelings, but also the (im)possibility of a better future that neither of them is able to grasp.

These two techniques are good examples of what the comics form can add to the concept of post-Westerns. Robert C. Harvey pointed out that the 'way to fuller appreciation' of comics lies in the interaction of words and pictures to tell a moving story, and therefore

Great comics will be those that tell affecting and powerful stories—but they will tell those stories by exploring to the fullest the unique potential of the art. Although the power of such stories will be rooted in characterization, these elements will be realized in terms peculiar to the comics—in a blending of word and picture and in the sequential nature of that blend (1994: 9)

I believe that we have seen several examples of this sequential blending of word and picture to tell a powerful story in *Scalped*, like the use of animal totems mentioned before, or the scenes of poverty, substance abuse and violence described by means of words but also dirty colors and irregular, crammed panels. A complex graphic novel like *Scalped* needs the reader's active participation in order to put together events from different periods of time, to make sense of contradictory memories, and to fully understand the implications of the juxtaposition of fantasies and reality (like the pages showing us Carol and Dash's unreachable dreams on pages 4-5 of issue #42). The reader needs to provide the closure that Scott McCloud defined as the key to understand the 'dance of the visible and the invisible' that is at the heart of comics:

The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well (1994: 92)

The two pages showing us the contrast between the unattainable dreams and the gritty reality of the drug-addicted couple are also a good example of what post-Western comics can achieve. As Thierry Groensteen has explained, comics operate on a system of co-presence and 'iconic

solidarity', where images exist within the space of the page or double-page (or even the comic-book series) simultaneously, allowing for extremely complex relations between images to be developed by the artist:

the codes weave themselves inside a comics image in a specific fashion, which places the image in a narrative chain where the links are spread across space, in a situation of co presence (2007: 7)

Aaron and Guéra present those two scenes simultaneously and it is up to the readers to combine dream and reality and develop new meanings in their minds. Similarly, we have also indicated how *Scalped* shows us simultaneously two facts of history separated by 14 years: the Battle of Little Big Horn (1876) and the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890), pointing at the unbreakable relation between those two events and the inevitability of the Indian defeat. Those events become *braided*, to use Groensteen's term, just like the juxtaposition of the issues entitled 'The Art of Surviving' and 'The Art of Scalping', as we have mentioned before. By means of this unique combination of representation and absence, visuals, words and voids, and iconic solidarity, *Scalped* manages to become an innovative example of what Polak has called 'historio-metagraphics', the adaptation to comics of Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction by which Aaron and Guéra illustrate contemporary society and past history in order to highlight the weaknesses of memory.

In conclusion, we have seen a powerful example of how the post-Western category can be applied to comics studies<sup>8</sup>. By means of verbal and visual references to Westerns, *Scalped* takes the reader into a post-Western 'space of reflection' in order to consider the troubling assumptions and values of the Western genre. Aaron and Guéra show the problems of representation in Western films and establish a dialogue with Western history to investigate the past roots of contemporary problems: thus, they present the battles of Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee, the FBI murders in 1975, and other confrontations between whites and American Indians as 'historical intertexts' by which present-day life on reservations can be exposed and questioned (Polak 2017). Having shown the inadequacies of the Western myth, the creators of *Scalped* go on to rewrite the stereotypes of the genre in order to correct the misrepresentation of American Indians and offer a post-Western vision of other minorities, like women and homosexuals. Making use of constant flashbacks and different points of view, as well as other comic-specific techniques, *Scalped* makes references to the Western legend to show the contrast with contemporary nightmares. By showing not only the survival and contradictions of the myth of the West, but also the real past of conquest and annihilation,

*Scalped*, like post-Western films, manages to show the enduring potential of the Western as a 'malleable parable for contemporary realities' (Bloom 2001: 214).

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are not negligible strips, they are normally overshadowed by other strips from the 'Adventurous Decade' (as Ron Goulart famously called the 1930s), a time with real classics like *Terry and the Pirates*, *Prince Valiant* or *Flash Gordon*. However, we should not underestimate the 'cowboy adventurers' of the decade: *Red Ryder* in particular, in its over two-decade tenure, was hugely successful, published in 750 newspapers, reprinted in comic books, translated into ten different languages, and reaching a U.S. readership of 14 million (Gravett: 2011, 108).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, we have to admit that this cursory account does not consider the complexities and differences between all these Western heroes, like the diversity between 'Kid' characters, or the different versions of such a well-known character as Billy the Kid. Besides, although some of the characters mentioned by Zan are genuinely 'lone' heroes, many are accompanied by sidekicks, like the Lone Ranger and some versions of Buffalo Bill.

<sup>3</sup> The fictional reservation is inspired by the very real Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, which has been considered the poorest area in the USA, with 80% unemployment, 49% of the population below poverty level and a third-world life expectancy (47 years for men, 52 for women). This reservation also has a casino and similar problems of crime, drug addiction and alcoholism: even though alcohol cannot be sold in the reservation, there is a town on its border which, at the time described in *Scalped*, had only 9 inhabitants but yearly sales of 3.5 million cans of beer ('Pine Ridge Indian Reservation').

<sup>4</sup> Jason Aaron has listed the '19 things that fuel *Scalped*' and evidenced the influence of Western culture, including television ('Deadwood'), literature ('Cormac McCarthy', 'Elmore Leonard's Westerns'), music ('Johnny Cash', 'Hank Williams III'), and comics ('Weird Western Tales'), but has said that Spaghetti Westerns are 'the genre that has had probably the greatest overall influence on the look and feel of *Scalped*' (*Scalped* #21: 20). William Grady has also underlined the 'vital interplay between the comics form and the Spaghetti Western' (233) and provided examples in graphic treatment of scenes from Azzarello and Frusin's *Loveless* (221), Jodorowsky and Boucq's *Bouncer: Raising Cain* (223), and even the later *Lieutenant Blueberry* (223-233).

<sup>5</sup> The original Great Sioux Reservation created by the treaties with the US Government was much bigger than Pine Ridge, but the discovery of gold in the Black Hills created a Gold Rush and a break-up of the treaties, which led to the Sioux rebellion and victory at Little Big Horn. The Native American subsequent defeats (including the Wounded Knee massacre) led to their confinement in the Pine Ridge Reservation.

<sup>6</sup> Metafictional strategies (sometimes called 'metacomics') are certainly not exclusive of high art, but are a fundamental component of a popular medium like comics. And even though the primary function of these devices is usually parodical (as in comic strips like *Calvin and Hobbes* or *Pearls before Swine*), metafiction can also lead to 'demystification' and to an analysis of the problematic relationship between

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'real-seeming artifices and reality itself' (González: 2014, 852), a process at the heart of historiographic metafiction.

<sup>7</sup> As a white man who wants to be admitted by the American Indian community, 'Diesel' Fillenworth is another example of a hybrid identity. His 1/16<sup>th</sup> native blood is not enough to be accepted by the tribe, and his resentment over that rejection makes him betray the American Indian Movement.

<sup>8</sup> Another example of post-Western comics worth exploring is *Un certain Cervantes* (2015), a transnational graphic novel written and illustrated by the French writer Christian Lax. It tells the story of Mike Cervantes, an American war veteran who, like his Spanish namesake, had lost his arm and had been made captive by the Muslims, the Taliban in this case. The references to the Western genre are obvious, since the protagonist acts as a cowboy in a tourist village in Arizona, and a significant part of the story takes place in Monument Valley, the location of many iconic Westerns. In this case, the criticism to American contemporary realities (book censorship, the abuse of corporations over individuals) is articulated by a combination of references not only to Westerns but also to a pre-Western myth: Don Quixote. Mike decides to relive his hero's adventures and rescue the poor from injustice, fighting against contemporary windmills in the form of bankers and televangelists.