Visual Argument Final Reflection

For my visual argument, I was inspired by recent discussions and indigenous movements around the discovery of thousands of unmarked child graves at residential schools across the U.S. and Canada. Although I am not personally from indigenous heritage, my anthropology background and interest in activism makes me sympathetic to indigenous rights movements as a white ally. Considering this, the purpose of my visual argument was not to argue a particular position, as I felt that would be inappropriate given my social position, but rather to bring awareness to the pain and grief the families of these children, who were murdered by institutions of cultural genocide.

Instead of focusing on the specific atrocities committed at residential schools, my visual argument aims to highlight the sense of loss these communities are experiencing through the use of the color orange, empty space, and symbolism. Using the color picker tool, I selected a shade of orange from the wings of a monarch butterfly and filled the background with this hue using the bucket tool. The color orange is a significant color in the “Every Child Matters” movement, as it indicates indigenous solidarity and a collective expression of grief in the community’s healing journey. In fact, my text, “Every Child Counts” was a derivative of their slogan; however, I wanted to suggest through the word “count” that every unmarked child grave “counts” toward the total death toll of the appalling practices at residential schools, referencing the injustice behind these murders. I personalized the font, size, and spacing to make the best use of visual space. Additionally, the monarch butterflies surrounding the text and spaced throughout my image are references to the symbology of butterflies in many native communities. The butterfly is a symbol of transformation and the circle of life and was often used to decorate children’s clothing and toys in some indigenous nations. I thought the connection between life and death as well as the transformative process alluded to the life that was taken away from the children at residential schools as well as the potential for healing and social reform through bringing awareness to this issue.

On a similar note, footprints were also a significant symbol throughout my visual argument. What are footprints? They are physical markers that indicate that someone existed within specific time and space. The large ink footprints were inspired by the ink footprints provided on birth certificates, making the connection between children and the ephemeral nature of life. I used the fuzzy select tool and the intelligent scissors to extract these images from another file, then used the quick mask and paintbrush tools to clean up the edges of the selections. From there, I rotated and scaled the feet to artistically position them as the focal point of the composition. I also adjusted the hue, saturation, and lightness using the colorize feature to add warmth to the black and white images, which blended well with the orange background. From there, the smaller footprints were selected using the same method and given the same color as the background. I wanted to smaller footprints to “eat away” at the larger footprints, using empty space and repetition to simultaneously convey both existence and loss with the indigenous children. I basically copied and pasted the selection into new layers, adjusting the opacity each time, to create the illusion that the smaller footprints were slowly invading the larger footprints. Those layers were later merged together into one layer for the purpose of editing simplicity. The formation of the starburst pattern was also an artistic choice that I thought created balance through asymmetry, giving the visual a distinct human touch and organic feel. Although my visual argument will only have meaning to those who are informed about this issue, I believe the striking imagery and overall design will spark public interest and awareness about the injustice of the residential school system while giving a visual space for indigenous families and community members to grieve and heal from their collective trauma.