

# “We the North”: Interrogating Indigenous Appropriation as Canadian Identity in Mainstream American Comics

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Indigenous characters—as appropriated by primarily white mainstream comics artists—are often coded as markers of Canadian identity in mainstream American comics in a larger echo of Canada’s own corporate, institutional, and governmental practice. In many ways, American mainstream superhero comics (and the scholarship written about them) are merely repeating a cycle of convenient and ahistorical appropriation that has been central to the branding of Canada, especially to a global audience, for much of its history. For example, in their 2010 article “Aboriginality and the Arctic North in Canadian Nationalist Superhero Comics, 1940–2004,” Jason Dittmer and Soren Larsen begin a valuable interrogation of the way Canadian identity is often imagined in appropriated Indigenous terms.<sup>2</sup> While their work on the Canadian Whites-era of Canadian comics (sometimes called the Golden Age, through the Second World War) and *Captain Canuck* represents a substantial contribution to the study of comics in this country, which has not often focused on necessary questions of race and representation, their easy framing of *Alpha Flight*, wholly owned by Marvel Comics, as a “Canadian” comic—primarily because its creator John Byrne was Scottish-Canadian—offers grounds for further work. This chapter considers the implications of scholarly assumptions about so-called Canadian nationalist superheroes created and marketed by major American corporations and, more importantly, examines the appropriation of representations of Indigenous bodies to those ends.

## The Canadian Nationalist Superhero and Superheroes Who Just Happen to Be Canadian

The concept of the nationalist superhero is one of the ideas most often discussed with regard to mainstream Canadian comics scholarship, and for good

reason: until the 1970s, the most popular comics made in Canada seemed to be expressly nationalist. Ryan Edwardson, in his article “The Many Lives of Captain Canuck: Nationalism, Culture, and the Creation of a Canadian Comic Book Superhero,” notes that

Distinctively national comic books are vessels for transmitting national myths, symbols, ideologies, and values. They popularize and perpetuate key elements of the national identity and ingrain them into their readers—especially, given the primary readership, younger generations experiencing elements of that identity for the first time.

When the comics are superhero comics, then, the superhero becomes emblematic of the expectations and stereotypes of the nation; their goals as heroes and do-gooders are aligned with the goals of the nation-state. Jason Dittmer notes in “Captain Britain and the Narration of Nation” that Captain America, with his pursuit of “truth, justice, and the American Way,” “can be understood as a foundation for the nationalist superhero genre” (71). Think about the way Captain America is named for his nation-state and draped in its colors, symbols, and flag, and you have a visual representation of nationalist superheroes.

As Bart Beaty outlines in his article “The Fighting Civil Servant: Making Sense of the Canadian Superhero,” “the temptation to provide the Canadian superhero with a distinctly nationalist identity, generally at odds with American-themed superheroes, has been one of the dominant hallmarks of the Canadian superhero genre” (429). This is rooted in the origin of Canadian comics; the Canadian comic book industry only emerged as a direct result of WWII rationing, which prevented the sale of US paper goods in Canada. Canadian publishers took up this opportunity to fill the void left, with titles like *Nelvana of the North* and *Johnny Canuck*. To speak plainly, these comics were simply not very good, having been created by people with passion but very little training or history in the production of comics; when the war ended and comics were once again imported from the United States, very few Canadian readers remained loyal to their Canadian comics. By 1955, the industry had collapsed, and there were effectively no English-language comics produced from 1955 to 1970.

As you might imagine given the time period, these WWII comics, known widely as Canadian Whites because of the paper stock they were printed on, were expressly nationalist in tone and content. Some characters, like *Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, were tasked with protecting Canada at home. Others, like the desperately and unintentionally hilarious *Johnny Canuck*, exist to fight abroad. As Bart Beaty points out, though, in their inherent Canadianness these characters are barred from being too exciting; they could be “active in the war, but not so active as to accomplish much of significance” (430). They were, if there can ever be such a thing, middle-power superheroes. They were nationalist

in that they signaled a direct connection to the interests of Canada as a nation-state and often represented that nation-state, whether at home or abroad.

From 1955 to 1970, as noted, there were no Canadian comics of note published and thus the market was dominated by the mainstream American comics produced by big publishing houses like Atlas/Marvel and DC; this glut of American culture aligned with a Canadian centennial anxiety about the dominance of American culture in all aspects of Canadian life. *Captain Canuck* emerged as a response to this anxiety, and creator Richard Comely was expressly interested in engaging in nationalist sentiment in his comic. Edwardson notes that *Captain Canuck* primarily provides “Canadian comic book fans with a sense of national identity in a cultural arena where New York overwhelms New Brunswick, and one rarely sees a maple leaf” (199), particularly in the 1970s, when no other Canadian comics existed outside of the underground presses in Montreal and Toronto. Comely’s mission in creating *Captain Canuck* was expressly to fill what he saw as a cultural absence and establish an icon of identity. Comely also saw *Captain Canuck* as an opportunity to reinsert religion into a largely secular cultural space; while Captain Canuck didn’t explicitly share Comely’s own Mormon identity, he did pray before every mission and connected overtly his mission to protect Canada with his own godliness. (Later iterations of the character have dropped this religiosity.) It is worth noting that Captain Canuck was far more successful as an idea and as a trademark to be sold than he ever was as a comic book—his representation on a t-shirt has always had greater cultural cache than sales figures of comics featuring him might suggest—but new iterations of Captain Canuck recur every decade or so nonetheless.

As far as mainstream comics go, nationalist heroes were it for much of Canada’s publishing history in mainstream comics. So it’s natural that this area is a focal point for comics scholars interested in trends and expectations in Canadian comic books. But there is a trend in comics scholarship to assume that all superhero comics featuring Canadian characters are necessarily nationalist, and *Alpha Flight* is the series most commonly caught in this, as we see in Dittmer and Larsen’s article. This comes, I believe, from a comment Bart Beaty makes in his article where he notes that, compared to the mandated nationalism of Captain Canuck, Marvel’s Alpha Flight team is actually more broadly representative of Canada, including a linguistic and racial diversity rare in comics of that era (and today, unfortunately) and absent from the bland and blond superheroes of the nationalist comics movement in Canada. But Beaty specifically notes that Alpha Flight and other American-produced Canadian superheroes—characters like Wolverine and Deadpool in the Marvel Universe, for example—actually “undercut [ . . . ] Canadian nationalism” by relying “on some of the most obvious clichés about the nation” and the stories “prove [ . . . ] difficult to quantify as distinctly Canadian” (436–37). Further compounding this issue, Dittmer and Larsen also commit the error of reading too uncritically our nationalist comic



Captain Canuck. From *Captain Canuck #1* (1974): cover. Reprinted by Chapterhouse Archive, 2016.

historian John Bell,<sup>3</sup> who tends to foreground creator nationality over corporate context in outlining the history of Alpha Flight. While it's true that Alpha Flight creator John Byrne lived in Canada and was trained at least in part at the Alberta College of Art and Design, of his own nationality he writes:

I've been a citizen of three different countries. I was born in England, so I got that one the easy way. When I was 14, my parents became Canadian citizens, and I floated in with them. Then, in 1988, after having lived in this country the prerequisite number of years, I became an American citizen. (In full. I do not hold dual citizenship. I do not hyphenate myself.)<sup>4</sup> (Byrne)

As much as there seems to be an inherently Canadian drive to claim all tangentially related cultural figures as our own, it is clear here that Byrne does not see himself as Canadian; his choice of the phrasing “floated in with them” to describe how he acquired his Canadian citizenship suggests a lack of agency in or commitment to that identity.

Alpha Flight is really only Canadian because it was convenient for them to be Canadian, and they emerged at a time when Marvel was trying to expand

the geographic base of its subscribers and diversify (mildly!) its offerings. This was around the same time as the launch of, for example, Captain Britain in the UK. The team was introduced as a foil to the X-Men in 1979, and then quickly achieved their own series. *Alpha Flight* was a viable title as long as it was making money. The most successful comic to feature Canadians—the first issue earned creator John Byrne a record-breaking thirty thousand dollars in 1984—was not a nationalist comic; indeed, as Beaty points out, it “helped to marginalize Canadian concerns within the so-called Marvel universe” in a single title about characters who regularly lost to American superhero teams. (To understand just how expressly *Alpha Flight* was not intended to be a nationalist comic for advancing Canadian interests, one can read the lettercols or letters to the editor from the 1980s and 1990s, where Canadians who write in to complain about geographic or cultural inaccuracies are roundly mocked by the creative team.)

### **We the North: National Identity Via Indigenous Appropriation**

The “We the North” phrase of my title comes from the marketing of Canada’s only (current) NBA basketball team, the Toronto Raptors, and indicates in a relatively minor way that the appropriation of northern and Indigenous identities stands in for discussion of Canadian identity. As we have seen from recent pop culture stories such as the DSquared<sup>2</sup> clothing line D-Squaw, appropriation of Indigenous identity as a signifier of Canadianness, particularly for an international market, is an ongoing issue. DSquared<sup>2</sup> is a fashion label owned by Italian-Canadian twins Dean and Dan Caten that sells a high-end conception of stereotypical Canadian identity to European clients<sup>5</sup> (one season featured a showroom draped in furs and flannel) with Canadianness obviously heavily coded through Indigenous imagery. The DSquaw line, launched early in 2015, was described by the Catens as, “The enchantment of Canadian Indian tribes. The confident attitude of the British aristocracy. In a captivating play on contrasts: an ode to America’s Native tribes meets the noble spirit of Old Europe” (“Canadian Fashion Label Dsquared2 under Fire for #Dsquaw Collection”). This combination, including deeply troubling items like a wedding dress, seem to celebrate colonization and evince a celebratory tone; the sense is that this relationship and the coming together of these “contrasts” results not in rape and genocide, but beauty and fashion.<sup>6</sup> Groups like ReMatriate, a collective of “female fashion designers, singers, models, architects, artists, and advocates,” are working to reframe these kinds of appropriations in explicit colonial terms, noting that for settler populations to treat cultural practices they once outlawed now as part of the public domain is deeply offensive (“ReMatriate Wants to Take Back ‘Visual Identity’ of First Nations”). Further, to call these images, ideas, and artifacts somehow inherently “Canadian” after the Canadian nation-state used generations of cultural violence to attempt

to eradicate them is truly grotesque. But for generations, Canada has sought to have it both ways: to quash Indigenous nations at home while projecting Indigenous iconography as representative of Canada abroad. Take, for example, the branding for the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver: the use of Haida and other Indigenous nations' imagery (including the central logo, the Inuksuk, which is a symbol and practice of the Inuit and shares no territoriality with the site of the Olympics) belied the mass displacement of, for example, homeless youth—who are disproportionately Indigenous—from Vancouver for the Games. And even earlier attempts to brand Canada globally, like the Centennial and Expo 67 use of Oopik, an Inuit handicraft,<sup>7</sup> suggests that this has long been a corporate/government strategy: look to the Arctic North specifically and Indigeneity more generally to represent “authentic” Canada for a global audience.

This desire to appropriate without thought to obligation or responsibility is nothing new. In his *Souvenir of Canada* project, Douglas Coupland, Canadian artist and writer, tells the story of being asked to create a piece of Indigenous-inspired work for one of his first design jobs in 1984. Tasked with creating flash cards—one of which was to display Indigenous art—for a stadium in Vancouver, he writes:

I was told to mock one up quickly for a meeting, so I invented a fake thunderbird-motif flash sequence. The meeting went well, and a week later I was asked to prepare a flash card sequence using genuine First Nations imagery. So I began to do research and generate designs [ . . . ] with none of them looking quite *right* to the committee. [ . . . ] It was finally decided to go with the original fake thunderbird sequence because it looked the most “Indian-y.” (Coupland 95)

This idea of the inauthentic being read as more real than the authentic by ignorant settlers is, Coupland contends, the end result of misunderstanding and mistrust stoked by the government. It also underscores the ways in which Indigenous iconography is appropriated for non-Indigenous use by Canadian corporations and communities. The practice is coming into increasing scrutiny now, but countless organizations over the years have chosen, as Coupland's employers here did, to create for themselves an Indigenous iconography without following community practices and protocols, and often without involving Indigenous people at all.

We must also be mindful of how Canada is often explicitly sold abroad as a nation without colonial history; because Canada has not had expansionist global aims, it is easy to sell or represent Canada as a kinder, gentler face than other English-language nation-states like the UK or the US. Indeed, Canada's former prime minister Stephen Harper, famously speaking to G20 leaders in 2009, asserted that all nations want to be like Canada because of our

unblemished record with “no history of colonialism” (“Every G20 Nation Wants to Be Canada, Insists PM”). This is an obvious untruth, violently eliding the experiences of Indigenous people and the Canadian government’s historical desire for complete erasure of them. This is a mythology that seems to comfortably cross party lines, with Justin Trudeau echoing similar comments (though reflexively complicating the notion by referring to Indigenous people) in 2015 (Fontaine). What this suggests is another version of Canada’s quest for difference from the United States and a sense of how we want to be seen by the world, regardless of reality. In this, as in the comics we will discuss, Indigenous people are treated less as nations and communities with uniquely territorialized histories and experiences, and more as set pieces to use or forget as is convenient to particular expressions of the Canadian global brand.

This is a particular problem in Canadian nationalist comics, where the intersection of a desire to represent the characters as expressly connected to the land and the unbearable whiteness of mainstream comics culture more generally often draws creators to appropriate Indigenous people, especially the Inuit, as symbolic characterizations of the Canadian landscape. The North functions as something of an internal Orient in Canada, comparable in some ways to the use of the American South in American discourse. As Sherrill Grace has noted, the North is “a construction of southerners, paradoxically invoked to distinguish [Canadians] from those who are more southern” (55). Indeed, evocations of northernness are an easy way to separate urban Canadians from urban Americans, even though their day-to-day life is demonstrably similar, though it is worth reflecting that this is often done in terms of lack (like the scathing rebuttal to the American tourist that, no, we don’t all live in igloos and it doesn’t typically snow in July). But the North is also “an archetypically Indigenous and aboriginal place,” as Dittmer and Larsen note, and “aboriginality and northernness are often conflated in dominant Canadian cultural productions” (56).

*Nelvana of the Northern Lights* is a salient example of this. This is one of the comics of Canadian Whites WWII era, popular primarily as an accident of rationing that kept American comics on the southern side of the 49th parallel. Nelvana is, apparently, the daughter of the Inuit god Koliak, who manifests himself as the Northern Lights, and a white woman, but she is depicted as exclusively white throughout the comics. (It is interesting that a recent re-release of the Canadian Whites has colored Nelvana with a deeper skin tone.) She maintains a bizarre relationship with the Inuit people around her who rely on her for protection but are also confused by her: she is treated as a goddess, and her protection and salvation is always mystical, otherworldly. She is Inuit in name only, and in the comics appears as a white savior to, ostensibly, her own people. But she is also hemmed in by the construct of the land: while the other major titles of the Canadian Whites era were involved in the war effort overseas, Nelvana’s role is limited to within Canadian borders and primarily with the protection of

the arctic. She is a nationalist superhero inasmuch as she represents the land and its protection and that her powers—for example, to travel at the speed of the Northern Lights—connect her explicitly to the geography of the arctic. And the history of Nelvana’s character is entirely appropriative: creator Adrian Dingle got the idea from Franz Johnston’s retelling of the real-life story of an Inuit woman from Coppermine, NWT, named Nelvana. Dingle liked the stories about this traditional-living Inuit woman, but didn’t like that Johnston’s photos and paintings depicted her as “an old crone” and so Dingle gave her “long hair and mini skirts” and “tried to make her attractive” (57); of course, in so doing he also makes her features whiter and her presentation more typically southern. Dittmer and Larsen note that Nelvana “herself embodies and constitutes both the categories of a colonial, white south, a colonized, aboriginal Arctic North, and the Canada that purports to unite them” (60). As Will Smith has articulated, “The erasure of particular histories and Indigenous sovereignties, whilst attempting to visualise Native characters, carries the sense of performing Indigeneity whereby vital and meaningful knowledge is sundered from the remaining aesthetic” (Smith).

But Nelvana was created exclusively for a Canadian audience, and her problematic depiction exists within a cultural and historical context. It assumes a certain amount of domestic buy-in—that Canadians do primarily see themselves as part of an arctic nation—as well as Canada’s own founding in white supremacy with the reframing of Nelvana’s story in white-coded terms to be more palatable. But we might hope that Canadians in the twenty-first century have some capacity to read critically these assumptions. We need to consider another layer when this appropriation is designed not to sell Canada to Canadians, but to package Canada for an external audience that may not have even the chance at holding the knowledge and history to contextualize the representations, as we find when John Byrne borrowed from the Nelvana canon to create his character Snowbird, one of the members of Alpha Flight, which launched in 1979 as a foil for the X-Men. As noted, Alpha Flight is not a nationalist superhero primarily intended to tell Canadian stories, but a Marvel comics property for primary sale in the United States. That complicates Dittmer and Larsen’s reading in significant ways.

### **Alpha Flight: Progressive in Its Day, But . . .**

For a superhero team launched in the late 1970s (they would get their own title in 1984), Alpha Flight was in many ways impressive. Alpha Flight has members who are gay and straight, white and nonwhite, federalist and separatist, French and English, representative of every region of the country, and the team is almost half female, with one female character even coping with a significant mental illness. There is no other mainstream comic from its era that tried so overtly



to balance representation long before representation was the subject of lengthy blog posts. But there are only so many points to be awarded for effort, and many of these representations are shallow and underdeveloped. On the issue of representation of Indigenous characters in particular, Byrne made a lot of problematic mistakes. Some Marvel Comics canon is probably necessary here for many readers. The genesis of Alpha Flight, in terms of comics lore, was the Canadian government's contribution to the American Weapon X program, a supersoldier program rooted in technology liberated from concentration camps in WWII. This program in Canada, run by Department H, produced mutants like Wolverine and Deadpool (healing factor seems to be the primary quality shared by Weapon X mutants in Canada). But Department H also oversaw all superheroes in Canada, including Alpha Flight. Alpha Flight is introduced in 1979 when they are sent by then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau<sup>8</sup> to capture Wolverine from the X-Men and return him to the Weapon X facility. In the history of Department H and Weapon X, we see small examples of this appropriation of Indigenous identity in the construction of characters like the Native. The Native was captured by the Weapon X program and code-named Feral, and she was used as a test subject until she escaped, hiding out in a cabin in the mountains of British Columbia where she becomes pregnant with Wolverine's child (the unborn child dies when the Native is murdered by Sabretooth). The Native's origin story is not disclosed and she is not explicitly depicted as Indigenous, though by the time we meet her, she is deeply marked by her time as a test subject and her ethnicity is difficult to ascertain. But her name certainly connects her to Indigeneity, and in her imprisonment and use as a test subject it's hard not to read deep echoes of colonial projects like residential schooling.<sup>9</sup> However, the most significant intersection of the Canadian nation and Indigenous representation comes with John Byrne's development of the superhero team Alpha Flight and the characters of Snowbird, Shaman, and Talisman.

In Alpha Flight, the character of Snowbird is a product of John Byrne being heavily influenced by the Canadian Whites: Snowbird is supposed to be the daughter of Nelvana, though she is perhaps more explicitly depicted as Indigenous (though still the blond-yellow of comic book goddesses for generations), and her power is that she can shape shift into any animal that exists in the Canadian territory. This territoriality is part of how Alpha Flight has, in Dittmer and Larsen's terms, "bound the landscape to the Canadian state" (61): if Snowbird leaves Canada, she is powerless. Her powers are literally bounded by the national borders of the Canadian state. This explicitly codes Indigeneity as Canadian while imposing a colonial border upon Snowbird and universalizing her Indigenous identity as being specifically and exclusively Canadian. In effect, this imposes the colonial structure of the border more explicitly upon Snowbird than any other members of Alpha Flight, who do frequently leave Canada, which considering her Inuit heritage—the Inuit have an established



Shaman. From *Alpha Flight* #6 (1984): 18.

presence in their territories that predates the construction of the Canada-US border by thousands of years—is deeply troubling. This always calls to mind for me the Thomas King story “Borders,” about a Blackfoot mother’s rejection of colonially imposed borders and boundaries that limit her movement.<sup>10</sup> Snowbird is quite literally restricted, and critically wrested of her powers, by these same forces.

Both Snowbird and her mentor Shaman are used as cyphers for an ill-defined pan-Indian spirituality that is also deeply anchored to the Canadian nation: when Shaman doubts his powers, he retreats to “the Canadian Barrens” and to his ancestral homeland known only as the “North Country.” There is an attempt, here, to reflect Indigenous spirituality in a way that might be considered refreshing after the Christian dominance of Captain Canuck, and Shaman himself is an interesting character vis-à-vis the typical stereotypical depiction of Indigenous characters in comics. Shaman’s real name is Michael Twoyoungmen, and in his life before becoming a powered superhero, he was a medical doctor: in fact, he is recognized as the best surgeon in Canada. However, as part of this identity, he fully rejects the mysticism of his grandfather, and fails to heed his lessons until he loses his wife and realizes there is more than medical science. When he acquiesces to the spiritual demands of his grandfather (and, by extension, his elders and his people), he discovers his powers; these powers are connected to an appropriate notion of Indigenous spirituality, with Shaman able to summon objects from a medicine bag and beseech the spirits to assist Alpha Flight. (Likewise, his daughter, Talisman,<sup>11</sup> has the power to act as a channel for the will of the spirits.) Thus Shaman is a complicated figure of appropriation and representation: it is rare to see an Indigenous character connected to science and medicine, but it is troubling that these two halves of his self cannot coexist.

In addition to this spirituality, Shaman is connected to the land; for example, another power he wields is the ability to run at hyperspeed without disturbing the animals or plants on his path. But that doesn’t mean his Indigeneity is recognized as connected to a specific place. Shaman’s nation is defined as Tsuu T’ina, but that nation is not tied to a concrete geographic location in the



Shaman and Snowbird. From *Alpha Flight* #7 (1984): 23.

comic; it is, instead, somewhat generically rural Canadian. Likewise, Talisman's powers include things like the ability to conjure "spirit animals" or control the weather, so her powers connect to the land but again in generic ways. For each of these Indigenous characters, "land" is a generic concept that generally refers to the territory that is now Canada rather than reflecting a specific nation or community. It is an appropriation of Indigenous communities and their relationship to both territoriality and colonial governance to represent Shaman, Talisman, and Snowbird in these contexts, and we need to be mindful of the fact that although *Alpha Flight*'s diversity is laudable for its historical context, it is part of a larger history of white comics artists depicting Indigenous characters for their own thematic ends; indeed, in all of *Alpha Flight*'s renditions, right up to the current day where *Alpha Flight* is in a backing role to Captain Marvel's space defense project, these characters have never been written or drawn by an Indigenous creator. In the case of *Alpha Flight*, this use of appropriation is also about defining Canada in terms that are distinct from the United States. The foregrounding of Indigenous characters suggests a different kind of relationship to the land, nation, and north than is exhibited by, say, the X-Men, the superhero team *Alpha Flight* is most commonly either fighting with or against. The X-Men maintain a clear independence given that they are not expressly nationalist superheroes and are not even always aligned with the American nation-state, and their territoriality is often ambiguously defined largely because as mutants they are often seen as undesirable in America. Even a superhero team like the Avengers, with their explicit connection to the US government in story lines like *Civil War*, or a character like Captain America or USAgent, does not use Indigeneity to make some larger claim for nationalism. This appropriative relationship to Indigenous culture as a form of nation-inscribing branding is certainly a strategy used by the Canadian

government, seemingly with enough success that it is a recognized way of framing Canadianness on the page of a mainstream American comic book.

It is worth noting, too, that Shaman, Snowbird, and Talisman were by far the most visible and popular explicitly Indigenous characters in the Marvel Universe in the 1980s. While their presentation certainly diversified superhero team offerings of the moment, it did so for thematic utility more than anything else. As part of a superhero team specifically located within a Canadian geopolitics, and with the explicitly colonial framing of their powers and physical bodies, the effect is that Shaman, Snowbird, and Talisman are a significant part of coding the Alpha Flight team as Canadian, and therefore other-than American.

### **Justice League Canada, I Mean, United: How to Signal Canadianness**

This question is particularly salient given the 2014 launch of another Canadian superhero—and another appropriation of Indigenous identity—by Marvel’s competitor DC for their *Justice League United* series by Canadian comics creator Jeff Lemire (famous in Canada for his *Essex County* series) with art by British artist Mike McKone. The *JLU* relaunch was originally touted as *Justice League Canada*, but DC backed off from the idea and in the end only gave Lemire the green light to create one new superhero (though he was allowed to retcon—comics lingo for “retroactive continuity”—two others to give them Canadian backstories). In only having the opportunity to develop one new character, Lemire needed to signal the “Canadianness” of this relaunch as effectively as possible, and here we see history repeating itself as once again, we see mainstream American comic representations of Canadian identity coded through the appropriation of Indigenous culture. This time, the character in question is Equinox (birth name: Miiyahbin “Mii” Marten), a Cree teenager who gathers her powers from the Seven Generations.

It’s worth noting that Equinox is a literal appropriation of a real woman, the late Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat. Koostachin was a teenage activist, leading the Attawapiskat School Campaign to lobby for proper academic spaces for her own and other reserve communities in Canada.<sup>12</sup> Koostachin died in a car accident in 2010, just before her sixteenth birthday, and in 2013 Lemire told the CBC, “I think if I can capture some of that heart and some of that essence in this character, perhaps she’ll almost be a guiding spirit in the creation of this character” (“New DC Comics superhero inspired by young Cree activist”). Lemire has since distanced himself from the angle the CBC took on the story and perhaps from his own early comments. In an interview for *Maisonnette Magazine*, Lemire notes:

I actually want to clarify that. When I did the first interview for this project months ago, they asked me about Shannen Koostachin and if she was an inspiration and I



Equinox. From *Justice League United* #5 (2015): 14.

said, “Oh yeah, that’s a very inspiring story,” and from that it sort of turned into, as the story was re-presented online, as though the character was inspired by Shannen. But she actually isn’t, for all the reasons you just said. I would never presume to appropriate a story that is so real and then turn it into a cartoon, especially without her parents’ her family’s, awareness or approval. That’s something I would never do. So when I said she was an inspiration for me in creating a teenage character, definitely, but it’s no way based on her or drawn from her story, much for that reason. As much as I take pride in my work I would never belittle or exploit a story just to tell people some pop culture or popcorn story. Her story is much more important than that so I’m glad you brought it up. (Sy)

Lemire’s careful language here is important in clarifying the origin of the character, but there is no evidence in any of the original coverage from very reputable sources, from the CBC to the *Hollywood Reporter*, that Lemire ever asked for a correction to this misrepresentation be published. Indeed, as late as 2014, when the book was first released, media stories were still linking Koostachin to Equinox, and in the interviews at that time he does not make an effort to correct the misconception. Whether by intent or by omission, then, at least some of the marketing of this character occurred on the assumption or assertion of a connection to a real Cree girl. When we consider the ways in which Indigenous women’s bodies are appropriated, abused, and disappeared by mainstream Canadian society, the use of Koostachin, even if (perhaps especially if) in an accidental way, to sell a comic as Canadian seems both particularly distasteful and particularly apt.

I want to acknowledge here that Lemire’s attempt is certainly more delicate and nuanced than Adrian Dingle or John Byrne before him, and Lemire has partnered this project with some work in Northern Ontario Cree communities to encourage Northern children, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to

create comics.<sup>13</sup> But the construction of Equinox still engages in appropriation to make a thematic connection between the land and Indigenous cultures as a means of distinguishing this Justice League from its American counterpart. Equinox, we are told, is a Midayo, meaning that she can use the seven pillars of Cree life to defeat darkness, and her powers are unveiled to her when she first attempts to speak Cree, something she had no idea she had a capacity for. While Equinox is much more carefully connected to Indigenous land and territory than the *Alpha Flight* characters were—her Cree identity and her community in Moose Factory are explicitly and deeply intertwined, and she is not rendered as generically rural Canadian—we are still told somewhat vaguely that her powers come from the earth and change with the seasons, and Lemire has remarked of his setting that using Moose Factory seemed “more Canadian” than a more cosmopolitan city.

Further, the appropriation still involves the use of a superficially defined understanding of Indigenous spirituality: both *Alpha Flight* and the new *Justice League United* team have to fight Wendigo as a primary villain of the Canadian territory. Indigeneity again stands in as a shorthand for Canadianness when a superficially developed distinction between Canada and the United States is needed. Again, this reflects something of a pan-Indigenous mythology at play in both comics: Wendigo is the cannibal monster common to Indigenous nations of Algonquin-speaking lineage, such as Ojibwe or Cree, but in Marvel Comics—where Wendigo has also had to fight the Hulk, and other heroes, even outside of the nation-inscribing Canadian figures that make up the focus of this paper—it is a curse regional to the woods of Northern Canada, again reflecting a use of Indigeneity to reflect a generalized Canadianness; indeed, in Marvel comics Wendigo has appeared in Hope, British Columbia, and Regina, Saskatchewan, as well as in more traditional Algonquin-speaking territories. In the *Justice League United* run, the figure is called Whitago, but he seems to be connected to the same legend; in this case, he has taken over the body of Equinox’s father, and in confronting him she accepts her powers and role in the Justice League.

In the end, Equinox was not a sales driver (perhaps because the comics in the *Justice League United* series rarely focused on her to the extent the media coverage primed readers for) and the series lasted only nineteen issues. When *Justice League United* folded in December 2015, so too did Equinox: while she remains a DC character—like all Big-2 creations, she is not owned by Jeff Lemire but instead by DC Comics—she has yet to be revived by another title. It is worth, perhaps, playing the thought game of considering what Equinox could look like as a character if she was not being used thematically to signal nationalism, and instead developed fully and empathetically, perhaps (dare one hope) by an Indigenous comics artist.

### **When the Nationalism Is Coming from Outside the Country:**

#### **Brian K. Vaughan's *We Stand on Guard***

*We Stand on Guard* is a six-issue creator-owned comic written by Brian K. Vaughan and published by Image Comics from July to December of 2015. It sold very well in North America, with sales of 78,000 for the first issue and 35,000 for the last; even at its lowest sales, then, *We Stand on Guard* was in the top 75 of books sold in a month, significant for an independent series in an industry that releases between 300 and 400 individual issues each month through the central distributor, Diamond Comics Distributors. The premise of the comics is an old chestnut of Canada-US relations: 200 years in the future, Canada has been invaded by the US (spoiler alert: they want our water, and they're probably going to win) and scrappy Canadian freedom fighters are fighting to take it back. Conveniently, this is the aftermath of a war that began in 2112, making all the predictable and easy War of 1812 references ripe for the picking in this context. Vaughan's position as an American comics creator without even John Byrne's accidental citizenship (though artist Steve Skroce is Canadian) offers an interesting final example for this conversation about the exploitation of Indigeneity as inherently Canadian. In many ways, *We Stand on Guard* is a nationalist comic, for all the reasons *Alpha Flight* never was. Vaughan's comic setting is not postcolonial or post-settler, but instead shifts Canada's colonial position from the Commonwealth—as both colonizer and colonized—to the concerns of American colonialism and power and the erasure of Canada.

Of our protagonists, it is the Indigenous characters whose identities are most explicitly connected to rebellion in Canada. Like other American-published comics situated in Canada, Indigeneity is used as markers for authentic Canadianness, made more explicit in this case by the lack of Indigenous characters on the American side of the battle: as cities are obliterated, the landscape and land become the defining characteristics of nationhood in a fight that is ultimately over the most essential natural resource, water. Two characters in the series are coded Indigenous. One, known only as Mr. Pittialuk, is an Inuit man and greenhouse farmer in Nunavut who gets arrested by the Americans for allegedly sabotaging the water supply. The other, Highway, is one of the group of freedom fighters known as the Two-Four, the Canadian slang term for a case of beer; his Cree identity is discussed in relation to who will lead the next stage of the revolt. The discussion here is about who is more essentially Canadian: the Indigenous man or the grandchild of Syrian refugees. Both Indigenous characters are portrayed in opposition to the United States and essentially connected to the Canadian landscape. There is no mention of Indigenous people south of the border and what their relationship might be to this invasion or the crisis of water shortage; indeed, Indigeneity, like immigration, somehow becomes



Highway. From *We Stand on Guard* #4 (2015): 8.

a uniquely Canadian experience within the frame of *We Stand on Guard* and is used as an unproblematically embraced component of the Canadian identity. The Americans in the narrative cannot make sense of any Indigeneity they come into contact with. For example, the American leader can't keep the “fucked up names” of the places in the Northwest Territories straight and doesn't understand the derivation of Great Slave Lake, thinking Canadians have named themselves after their subservient cultural positioning. (It's worth noting that despite the commitment to a diverse cast of characters, the central figure and primary hero of the story is a white woman, and the final image of the series—depicting a moment of calm before the events of the war destroy the Canadian experience—is of that protagonist's white, nuclear family.) The messaging is that, on these issues, Canada is *good* in contrast to America's *evil*, thus eliding any significant problems with Canada's history and identity.

Vaughan's Canada is idealized through its reliance on largely stereotyped constructions of Canadianness. Because the team faces a more immediate colonizing force to contend with in the shape of a full-powered American invasion, all memory of or reference to Canada's colonial past vis-à-vis the Indigenous characters is effectively erased, as is any racist or homophobic history. This allows for the Canadians to be the unambiguous good guys, but it empties the Canadian community in the text of context and history; as such, it is reminiscent of 1990s “Beer Ad” nationalism typified by the Molson Canadian “I Am Canadian” ads of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Of course, the most famous of these ad spots was “The Rant,” a beer ad so ubiquitous and so beloved it was played at antiseperation rallies in Quebec, performed live on Parliament Hill as part of that year's Canada Day concert, and found its way into the Penguin Treasury of Popular Poems and Songs. “The Rant” makes a



lot of comforting assertions about Canada, all constructed in opposition to the United States: we're nicer, we're bilingual, we're world-respected, we're peace-keepers, we're multicultural. There is no space for critique of this definition of Canadianness in "The Rant" and, by positioning each assertion against an American other, the ad spot explicitly defines Canada as better than America. *We Stand on Guard* does the same thing, making it comfortable reading for settler Canadians, but again the Indigenous characters are used for thematic ends, standing in to define an easily anti-American Canada that feels neither authentic nor meaningful.

### **Systemic Issues: #OwnVoices,<sup>14</sup> Comics, and Representation**

As I have suggested throughout, one of the most significant concerns I have with the ongoing appropriation of Indigenous identity in these mainstream Marvel/DC comics is the fact that Indigenous comics artists are rarely employed by the Big-2. In a thoughtful essay on this topic for *Comics Alliance*, critic James Leask writes about the experience of growing up Indigenous without very many well-constructed representations of Indigenous life in his comic books. Leask writes about the importance of Indigenous people telling their own stories and constructing their own representation, noting:

If aboriginal people were more involved, a few things might change. Someone might let Marvel know that, given that Snowbird is an Inuit demigoddess, having her guardian be Shaman, a Tsuu T'ina man from a Nation a thousand miles away from the Inuit, is kind of problematic. (Leask)

Of all the examples Leask runs through in his piece, I was most grateful to this one for reflecting back at me my own settler-scholar ignorance; even in thinking through how connection to the land for Indigenous characters in *Alpha Flight* is rendered through a generically "Canadian" representation, I missed this idea of the kinship of Snowbird and Shaman that is completely divorced from their respective nations and geography. Instead, Snowbird is mentored by Shaman because they are both Indigenous, which suggests the larger issue of pan-Indigeneity in comics I referenced earlier. Leask's article gives an excellent overview of the paucity of Indigenous creators in mainstream comics, and he reflects on the tension of wanting to see accurate representation without asserting that Indigenous creators—or indeed Indigenous characters—can or should only be one thing.<sup>15</sup>

This paucity is why the thematic and nation-inscribing use of Indigenous characters, especially by settler-creators, is so problematic. In this moment of a national conversation in Canada about reconciliation, both in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the focus on decolonization that

followed Canada's 150th birthday celebrations, would we expect a #OwnVoices Indigenous Marvel or DC Comics hero to unproblematically stand in for the colonial nation-state, to be used as metaphorical fodder for a distinction between Canada and the United States that many Indigenous nations themselves do not recognize? The use of Indigenous characters as symbols is galling precisely because there are not enough other options to counter this representation.

There are excellent comics being created by Indigenous artists and writers outside of the confines of Big-2 publishing. The recently Kickstarted *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection* now has two successful volumes showcasing the work of Indigenous creators, making it easier for readers to find and support their work. And significant contributions to the field by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, David Alexander Robertson, Katherena Vermette, Scott B. Henderson, Patti LaBoucane Benson, with more developing every day, demonstrate the breadth of possibility for Indigenous storytelling in the comics medium. And there are good reasons for Indigenous creators not to choose to work at Marvel and DC Comics: Big-2 comics publishing means giving up control of your characters, potentially perpetuating the kinds of representation issues discussed in this paper. But creator-owned comics distribution comes with its own pitfalls, including cost (a single issue of Katherena Vermette and Scott B. Henderson's *A Girl Called Echo* series costs \$13.95 in Canada, compared with a typical Big-2 floppy priced closer to \$4.95) and accessibility (because those comics are less likely to be found in mainstream comic shops and more likely to need to be purchased at bookstores or online, following a different discoverability path than mainstream comics). It would be nice to see the robust creator-owned world of Indigenous comics supported by a more successfully diverse and inclusive Big-2 ecosystem.

It's worth noting that Alpha Flight's later incarnations have made more explicit attempts to deal with Canada's actual problems, like the 2012 run that sees Alpha Flight fighting a Conservative government and the threat of climate change. But the appropriation of Indigenous identities and practices in each of these contexts is primarily about selling a version of Canadian identity to non-Canadians, and to attempt to remarket historically oppressed and restricted practices as somehow inherently Canadian. This is a convenient mythology that inherently restricts the rights of Indigenous people to represent themselves and their own history, and again further imposes a colonial boundary around and against Indigenous populations. The Big-2 remains a space absent of Indigenous #OwnVoices creators, and creator-owned Indigenous comics represent a tiny percentage of the comics sold annually. It is no secret that mainstream comics have a diversity problem, but when combined with the practice of using appropriative imagery to define Canadianness for international audiences, free of Canada's historical colonial context, the problem of representation is compounded. "We the North" is a comforting way of defining the dominant

Canadian culture as different from the US, but it also appropriates and elides Indigenous Northern communities to serve a national mythology in denial of its deeply colonial roots.

### Notes

1. This chapter uses “America” as a short-hand for the United States of America, as is typical of discourse in Canada where the US functions often as a discursive foil. It is rare to hear Canadian citizens refer to themselves as American, in reference to their continental citizenship, and much of the scholarly criticism and fan discussion on the comics referenced in this paper (as well as, indeed, the content of the comics themselves) follow the popular convention of delineating “Canada” and “America” as the two states sharing the northern two-thirds of North America. I make use of this convention within this chapter without supposing to argue for its correctness in other areas of border and/or hemispheric studies.

2. It is important to acknowledge that there are Indigenous characters in the Marvel universe who are not Canadian or intended to signal Canadianness. This chapter does not examine that history, instead focusing on the ways in which Indigeneity is frequently used—problematically, given Canada’s colonial context—in mainstream comics (and, indeed, culture writ large) to signal Canadianness.

3. John Bell is a historian and archivist with Library and Archives Canada. He deserves much credit for uncovering and archiving Canada’s comic book history, and particularly his sustained interest in superhero comics. That said, as someone deeply invested in narrating the national story of comics, his assessments regarding comic quality are often undeservedly generous and should always be read critically; further, he has a tendency to ascribe his own nationalist aims to all Canadian-affiliated comics artists.

4. Byrne posted these comments in a forum he runs on his website for fans to talk to him about his art and also about cultural/political issues. This post was made in a thread Byrne started about birthright citizenship, a concept he argues against at some length vis-à-vis a fear of “anchor babies.” Political cringe aside, Byrne’s comments here make clear that he sees nationality as a conscious, active choice. Making a play for him as someone enacting Canadian nationalism on the page, then, seems particularly unfounded.

5. For a productive discussion of how queerness functions in Dean and Dan Catens’s work, see Jennifer Andrews’s discussion of the coverage of DSquared<sup>2</sup> in Canadian fashion media, “Queer(y)Ing Fur: Reading Fashion Television’s Border Crossings.”

6. At the time, the Catens did not respond to the controversy. A year later, when DSquared<sup>2</sup> was chosen to design the Olympic team uniforms, public outrage intensified at this national validation of the brand; in a move that looked a lot more like image management than contrition, the Catens did issue a formal apology and scrubbed all reference to the DSquaw collection from their website. But even in their apology they assert that all of their work—even DSquaw—is intended to proudly wave the Canadian flag (“We Are Truly Sorry”).

7. There is complexity to the Oopik story. The federal government trademarked the Oopik on behalf of the Fort Chimo craft collective where it originated, and its brief popularity in the 1960s provided a steady income stream for those artists at the time. But it was also deeply commodified and typically sold to support a notion of the primitiveness of the Inuit and the consequent benefits of colonization to them (Colombo).

8. Interestingly, Pierre Trudeau’s son, current PM Justin Trudeau, would himself be featured in a Marvel Comic in 2016, again shown in control of Alpha Flight. See *Civil War: Choosing Sides* #5.

9. See, for example, Ian Mosby’s work on the nutrition experimentation done on Indigenous children in Canadian residential schools.

10. In the story, the mother and her son are not permitted to cross the Canada-US border because the mother refuses to declare herself as either Canadian or American. When asked for her nationality or citizenship, she asserts repeatedly, “Blackfoot.” In King’s story, the border guards eventually relent and let her through, but it’s probably worth noting that the story was written pre-9/11.

11. Talisman is Shaman’s daughter—her birth name is Elizabeth Twoyoungmen—but he abandoned her in his grief after the death of his wife, leaving her to be raised by a white family who eventually help her to reconnect with her father and discover her own role as a superhero. In my reading, this raises echoes of the official narrative of the 60s Scoop: that Indigenous children were raised by white foster families because their birth families could not care for them. Of course, we now recognize the 60s Scoop as part of a larger project of assimilation and cultural genocide, reframing white families from benevolent caregivers to, at best, unwitting pawns complicit in colonialism. The echoes of that history—uncritically, given the time of publication—are clear here.

12. The campaign built allyship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth by encouraging children across the country to write to the government demanded better academic resources on reserves. The school in Attawapiskat had been closed because of a diesel spill that contaminated the earth, and in her short life Koostachin never attended a proper school. You can read more about and contribute to Koostachin’s legacy here: <https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>.

13. I do think Lemire generally means well. This is, however, not his only project of appropriation. Jeff Lemire was the comics artist on Gord Downie’s *Secret Path*, a project that effectively involved a group of white men getting together to tell the story of Chanie Wenjack, a boy who died in 1966 while trying to escape from his residential school. *Secret Path* has been praised by some and condemned by others, and it’s important to acknowledge that the project has the support of Wenjack’s family and the Assembly of First Nations. But it’s also worth remembering that Lemire took the job of telling Wenjack’s story through his white gaze even as he knows he works in an industry with a paucity of Indigenous artists and storytellers being employed on these kinds of large-scale mainstream popular publications. The general project of reconciliation requires that settlers—especially ones like Lemire with well-established careers—step aside, on occasion, and amplify Indigenous voices instead.

14. #OwnVoices is an online movement, primarily on Twitter, that seeks to encourage, celebrate, and amplify stories about marginalized communities written from within that community. It was launched by Corinne Duyvis in September of 2015, and she defines it as a text wherein “the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity.” More here: <http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>.

15. In an interesting turn in the comments section, Nathan Fairbairn (a mainstream comics creator who has worked with DC Comics and once penned a special story about Indigenous heroes Raven Red and Man-of-Bats) popped in to thank Leask for referencing one of his story lines and letting Leask and his readers know that he considers himself métis, his grandmother having been “a full-blooded Mi’kmaq” and himself having “lived on a reservation for a short while.” He is careful not to use this revelation as a shield for discussions of the limitations in his own Indigenous-centered story lines, noting that he doesn’t expect people to know a heritage he rarely discloses. Indeed, the purpose of his post seems primarily to be to alert Leask to the existence of Indigenous-identifying creators in mainstream comics. It would be interesting and productive to amass a complete list of Indigenous-identifying creators who had worked on Indigenous-centered Marvel or DC Comics titles. By both my and Leask’s reckoning, Fairbairn is the only one.

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