

Sarah Russ

David Gaertner

FNIS 100

April 6, 2017

### **Indigenous Representation Within the Comic Universe and Why It Matters**

When people ask why Indigenous representation matters in different media, some easy answers would be that: it allows for people to have strong role models to look up to, it is important for people to see themselves in situations that seem impossible and successfully overcome those situations, and it allows people to see bits of themselves scattered across the world doing amazing things. Representation can be found in books, movies, TV shows, and comic books. Comics are quickly coming back into fashion thanks to their cinematic counterparts and more people are turning to them to find their perspectives represented. For Indigenous people, representation in comic books is hard to come by. In this paper, I will address the lack of Indigenous representation in comic books including characters, writers & illustrators, representation of Indigenous culture and people, and I will address the joyfully arduous task that was finding Indigenous material.

When I was younger, I struggled when trying to identify with my Indigenous heritage. I didn't grow up on the reserve like some of my cousins, I didn't go to many potlaches or ceremonies, and I never saw my heritage reflected in any sort popular media or literature. One of my favourite forms of literature when I was younger, and still is now, was comic books. Although my taste in comics has moved away from Archie, Betty, and Veronica, the genre still captures my interest. When we were assigned this project and I saw that comics were on the list of possible subjects, this feeling of joy overcame me because I thought 'wow, I get to write on one of my favourite things'. I thought it would be easy considering I grew up with comic books.

I thought I would be able to come up with a list of amazing dynamic characters, writers, and illustrators with Indigenous roots. I was very wrong. When I first sat down and began to think about the characters I loved I realized none of them were Indigenous and I couldn't name a single Indigenous writer or illustrator. I was devastated to say the least. So, I delved into the comic universe in search of representation - representation of Indigenous characters portrayed in strong ways and without harmful stereotype. I looked for writers and illustrators expecting to find many, but instead I found very few in comparison to how many writers and illustrators there are out there. One of the first places I looked was within a comic-verse I love and has a very close place to my heart: Marvel. What I found was frustrating and angering all at once.

Marvel produced a comic series starting in 2003 entitled *Marvel 1602* which was written by Neil Gaiman. The series, while entertaining, has one serious and harmful flaw: one of their prominent characters, Rojhaz (Figure 1), is essentially depicted in Red Face. Rojhaz is drawn with braids, feathers, a loincloth, and buckskin pants and shoes. While that depiction is stereotypical and exhausted, it only causes minor discomfort to many readers. However, Rojhaz is actually Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America, and the name he goes by throughout the majority of the comic is an 'Indian-ised' pseudonym of his last name. Steve Rogers is of Irish decent without a drop of Indigenous blood in him and while depicted in the garb mentioned above, he is also drawn with his iconic blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin. This representation of Steve Rogers with the "appropriation of

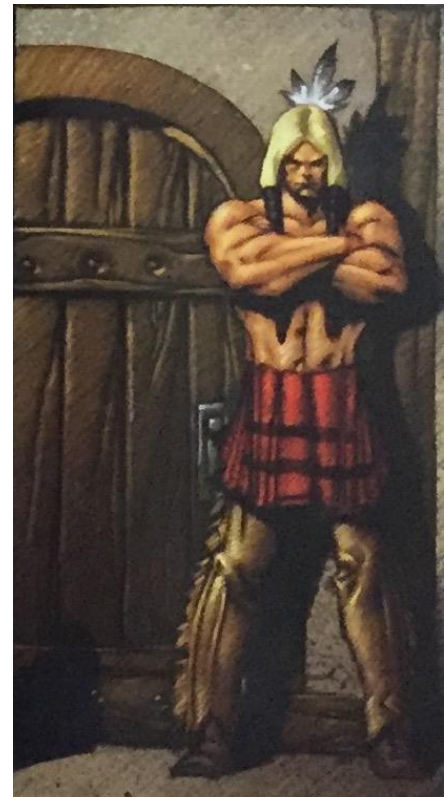


Figure 1: Rojhaz in Marvel 1602

Indianness to produce virile masculinity and physical strength”<sup>1</sup> lends itself to the stereotype that Indigenous people are just brooding, strong, mute, brutes whose culture can be used and abused to further move along a storyline. While harmful, this representation of Indigeneity will help when it comes to the argument of everything Indigenous representation should not be: it should not just be stereotypes, it must respect the culture it is representing, and it cannot be appropriated.

Not really knowing where else to turn, I looked to Marvel again hoping to find some form of Indigenous representation that would win me over and make me believe that Marvel was the best comic-verse out there. I thought I had found it with Red Wolf (Figure 2). He is an Indigenous man who fights crime and embraces his Indigenous heritage. When I further researched the character, I wanted to find out what nation he was from to see if his nation’s culture was properly represented. I was then slapped with the fact that he is nationless. He is not nationless because of

some tragic past that never allowed him to connect with his nation and all he knew was that he was Indigenous. No, instead he quite literally had no nation and was supposed to be an umbrella representation of Indigeneity. As Lita Nadabah Beck, who comes from the Navajo nation, so eloquently states: “[A] character from [a] made-up tribe is no win for diversity”<sup>2</sup>. By creating and promoting a character who does not belong to a nation and is supposed to represent all

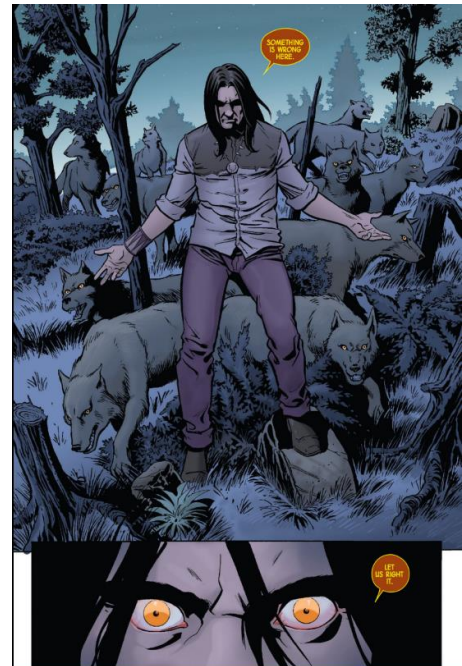


Figure 2: Red Wolf from Red Wolf: Man Out Of Time

---

<sup>1</sup> “When Captain America Was an Indian: Heroic Masculinity, National Identity, and Appropriation” – Chad Barbour

<sup>2</sup> “Marvel Comics brings back Native American superhero” – Renee Lewis

Indigenous people, it sends the message that all Indigenous people and culture are the same. It disregards the fact that tradition and culture differs vastly from west coast nations to east coast

nations and the dynamic differs in different nations in between, above and below the coasts.

With great feelings of disenchantment towards Marvel I took tentative steps outside of the superhero universe and looked for other books. This proved to be a great challenge as it was hard to come by comics with Indigenous characters or that were written or illustrated by Indigenous creators. The first thing I did was look on the internet for comics that fit my criteria. Although the number of Indigenous comics out there pleasantly surprised me, I was disappointed with the accessibility of many of them. I went to my local comic book shop as I thought this would be the best place to find material for my project. I went in armed with a list of comics and the expectation that my wallet would be weeping because I would leave the shop with bags full of new material. Instead, I found three comics from my list and one that wasn't. When I asked the clerks, who are hardcore comic enthusiasts, to help find the comics on my list I was met with the phrase 'I've never heard of this one before' multiple times. I was however told of



Figure 3 (top to bottom): Miiyahbin from Justice League Canada, Chanie from Secret Pat, and Dashiell Bad Horse from Scalped

the numerous characters who were no longer in circulation, depicted in grotesque manners, or weren't carried because the demand wasn't there. Other than an intense sense of disappointment, I left the shop with four new comics: *Secret Path*, *Scalped: Indian Country*, *Scalped: Dead Mothers*, and *Justice League Canada Vol. 1*.

The four comics I left the shop with didn't disappoint and I felt as though I had finally reached a turning point in my hard-hitting research. While the typical association with comics is either attributed to the Sunday morning funnies or superheroes fighting crime with their various abilities, comics are much more than that. Like how novels have a wide arrange of genres like fantasy, fiction, and sci-fi, so do comics. *Secret Path* is a visual biography that tells the story of Chanie Wenjack, an Indigneous boy who ran away from residential school and tried to find his way home. Although *Secret Path* tells the story of one child he was not the only one to try and find his way home and die along the way. This story represents the many children who tried to escape their everyday terrors at the residential schools to try and go home to what they knew only to die. Seeing a comic that is not funny in any way and tells a tragically true story shows the greater population a different side to Indigeneity and a part of Canadian history that needs to be told.

The *Scalped* series, which is full of gritty violence and sexually explicit scenes, tells the story of Dashiell Bad Horse who comes back to his home reservation as an undercover FBI agent. *Justice League Canada* isn't purely about Miiyahbin, the Indigenous protagonist, but has an overarching story that Miiyahbin's is sandwiched into. Her story is rather beautiful and depicts her struggle as he comes to terms with her natural born superhero capabilities. Her powers are activated by a creature, the Whitago, that threatens her community. Miiyahbin is never depicted in a manner that could be offensive. The reader knows she is Indigenous, but her

costume isn't in any way stereotypical with braids and buckskin. There are nods to her heritage but that is not her defining characteristic. She makes her impact with her courage, bravery, and acceptance of who she is. She is an excellent role model as she never falls into harmful stereotypes and provides an example to Indigenous people, especially kids, that stereotypes and what you are told about who you are do not define you. It is your actions and how you choose to deal with what your life throws at you that define you.

At the beginning of this project I began to think about how what I had learned in class would have an impact on my research. The topic that really stood out to me was our discussions on a chapter in Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* entitled "Too Heavy to Lift". The chapter deals with the concept of "Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians"<sup>3</sup>. I found this to be a relevant topic of discussion as I used the definitions Thomas King uses to view the characters in the comics I was reading. I looked to see if they were depicted like Dead Indians or Live Indians to see how artists saw their characters.

While Rojhaz's depiction is upsetting considering who is behind the name, in the context of the story he is not a Dead Indian. The story is set in 1602 and what Rojhaz is wearing is not completely historically inaccurate. If the story had been set in any time post 2000 and he was still depicted as wearing buckskin pants, he would be considered a Dead Indian. Chanie from *Secret Path*, again set in the past, is almost the epitome of a Live Indian as according to Thomas King "North America already had the Dead Indian, Live Indians were neither needed nor wanted"<sup>4</sup>. The characters from *Scalped* and *Justice League United* can be considered as Live Indians as

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King. Chapter 3 – Too Heavy To Lift. Pg. 53

<sup>4</sup> *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King. Chapter 3 – Too Heavy To Lift. Pg. 61

they live in a modern time and the way they are depicted is not what non-Indigenous people may expect when they think of Indigenous characters.

For Indigenous people who are trying to find representation of themselves in the world, comics provide a medium for them to do that. However, they need to be able to see themselves not as stereotypical Dead Indians but as three-dimensional people who have a place in society. The *Scalped* series, *Justice League Canada*, and *The Secret Path* provide authentic examples of Live Indians who are representations of what modern Indigenous people are like or have experienced today.

Indigenous representation in comics is not something that should be taken lightly, as like with other forms of media and literature, the stories told can form opinions and ideas. How individuals are represented within an artistic platform that countless people enjoy gives creators the opportunity to make statements about what it means to be Indigenous and how the world should see Indigenous people. Not as a people whose culture can be taken and placed upon an appealing character for the sake of a story, not as a people who can be represented by one man to represent all the cultures that make up the Indigenous community, and not as thugs who do the dirty work of the rez. Comics should be used to tell the story of a past that people still struggle with today and to honor the memory of those whom we lost. They should be used to give examples to little kids who struggle with identity to know that they are more than stereotypes and that they have the power to defeat the demons of their communities and the demons within themselves. Representation matters and when creators choose to represent such a large portion of the world, it must be done with respect and in a manner that doesn't defame those whom choose they write and draw about.

### Works Cited

- Aaron, Jason., Guéra, R.M. *Scalped: Dead Mothers*. New York, Vertigo/DC Comics, 2007.
- Aaron, Jason., Guéra, R.M. *Scalped: Indian Country*. New York, Vertigo/DC Comics, 2007.
- Barbour, Chad. "When Captain America Was an Indian: Heroic Masculinity, National Identity, and Appropriation." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 48, no. 2, 22 Apr. 2015, pp. 269-284., doi:10.1111/jpcu.12256
- CBC Arts. "Gord Downie's The Secret Path." *YouTube*, CBC Arts, 23 Oct. 2016
- Chavarria, Tony. "Indigenous Comics in the United States." *World Literature Today*, vol. 83, no.3, 1 May 2009, pp. 47-49. JSTOR
- Downie, Gordon., Lemire, Jeff. *Secret Path*. Toronto, Ontario, Simon & Schuster Canada. 2016.
- Edmondson, Nathan. *Red Wolf #1*. New York, Marvel, 6 June 2016
- Gaiman, Neil., Isanove, Richard., Kubert, Andy. *Marvel 1602*. New York, Marvel, 2010
- Hansen, Kathryn Strong. "In Defense of Graphic Novels." *The English Journal*, vol. 102, no. 2, Nov. 2012, pp. 57-63. JSTOR
- Henzi, Sarah. "'A Necessary Antidote': Graphic Novels, Comics, and Indigenous Writing." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 23-38., doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2016.0005>



Jung, Carrie. "Native American Superheroes Take Comic Books by Storm." *Al Jazeera America*,  
Al Jazeera America. 28 June 2015.

King, C.R. "Alter/Native Heroes: Native Americans, Comic Books, and the Struggle for  
Self- Definition." *Cultural Studies ó Critical Methodologies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, pp. 214-  
223.,doi:10.1177/1532709608330259

King, Thomas. "Too Heavy to Lift." *The Inconvenient Indian: a Curious Account of Native  
People in North America*, Anchor Canada, Toronto, 2013.

Lemire, Jeff., Mckone, Mike. *Justice League United*, vol.1. New York, NY, DC Comics, 2015

Lewis, Rennee. "Marvel Comics Brings Back Native American Superhero." *Al Jazeera America*,  
Al Jazeera America, 9 Sept. 2015.

Royal, Derek Parker. "Native Noir: Genre and the Politics of Indigenous Representation in  
Recent American Comics." *ImageTextT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. 5.3  
(2010). Dept. of English, University of Florida.

Sheyahshe, Michael A. *Native Americans in Comic Books: a Critical Study*. Jefferson, NC,  
McFarland & Company, 2016.

Tabachnick, Stephen E. "Introduction." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2015, pp. 285-290.,  
doi:10.1353/sdn.2015.0041