

CHASING CAPTAIN CANADA: NATIONAL IDENTITY CHALLENGED THROUGH
SUPERHEROES IN CANADIAN COMIC BOOKS

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the connections between nationalism and the superheroic effigy in domestically produced Canadian superhero comics, with an eye on how Indigenous superhero comics published within Canada may enrich or complicate this landscape. Domestically produced comics and/or graphic novels are defined in this thesis as ones authored and published within Canada. Canadian-produced comics often fail to reach the heights they grope towards: an uncomplicated heroism. In this thesis, heroism is separated from Canadian heroism, which is further troubled through visual and textual representations of nationalisms—maple leaves, arctic climates—and expressions and appropriations of Indigeneity as it pertains to the superhero. These Canadian nationalisms, dovetailing with the supposed Canadian inferiority complex, have slowed down the growth of this genre while simultaneously leaving room for it to expand through the Canadian compulsion to trouble its own nationalisms. Unsettled nationalisms, as they appear in superhero comics—a canon that has traveled the spectrum of gentle incredulity to effigy—prompt Canadians to ask themselves if they have a need for superheroes, or if Canadian superheroes can only fill the roles of super defenders.

The thesis examines the superheroes Nelvana from Adrian Dingle's *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* (1941), Captain Canuck from Richard Comely's *Captain Canuck* (1975), Northguard from Mark Shainblum and Gabriel Morrissette's *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* (1984), and Kagagi from Jay Odjick's (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg) *Kagagi: The Raven* (2010). An exploration of these comics, supported by comic book theory, theories of nationalism in Canadian literature, and scholarship on representations of Indigenous peoples in graphic literatures, shows that the text, the art, and the intersections of both express and challenge outlooks on Canadian heroic figures, while the perspectives of Indigenous people living in Canada both adhere to and complicate these conclusions.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
INTRODUCTION: CHASING CAPTAIN CANADA	1
The Hero vs. the Shielded Super Defender.....	3
Could Captain Canada even Exist?.....	7
The Comic Book Form.....	8
Historically Speaking.....	10
Canadian Futurisms and the Longing of Speculation.....	13
Significance and Northernness.....	14
Canadian Sensibilities.....	16
The Maple Leaf Forever.....	18
Indigeneity.....	20
Coming Attractions.....	22
CHAPTER 1: NELVANA: MATRIARCH OF UNCERTAINTY	24
The First of her Kind.....	28
Schrödingerisms: Indigeneity and Cultural Allegiance	30
<i>Nelvana</i> the Comic: Art and Form.....	34
In Other Words.....	37
CHAPTER 2: CAPTAIN CANUCK: FINALLY, A SUPERHERO FOR CANADA	40
Tom Evans the Canuck.....	43
Northern, Arctic, and/or Canadian Futurism.....	46
Authenticity and Pride in Materiality	48

The National Indian.....	50
The Mask Makes the Man.....	52
The Legitimization of Captain Export.....	56
In Other Words.....	59
CHAPTER 3: NEW TRIUMPH: THE RELUCTANT SUPER DEFENDER.....	61
Covers and Costumes.....	63
Metatextuality in Comics.....	65
A Framework: The Denis Lortie Incident.....	68
Space and Place.....	69
Legitimacy and Relevancy.....	71
Manifest Destiny.....	73
Returning to Canada from an unCanada.....	74
The Survival of the Super Defender.....	76
In Other Words.....	78
CHAPTER 4: KAGAGI: LEGITIMACY THROUGH NATIONALISM'S ABSENCE.....	80
Visual Representation of an Indigenous Superhero	86
Matthew Carver as Role Model.....	88
Elder Heroes and Trickster Knowledges.....	92
In Other Words.....	96
CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE CAPTAIN CANADAS.....	100
WORKS CITED.....	104

LIST OF FIGURES

NELVANA OF THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

Fig. 1.1	Cover to the 1945 reprint.....	26
Fig. 1.2	Nelvana prepares to transform Tanero.....	28
Fig. 1.3	Chief Tadjjo summons Nelvana.....	35
Fig. 1.4	Tanero consults with Nelvana.....	36

CAPTAIN CANUCK

Fig. 2.1	<i>Captain Canuck</i> No. 1 front cover.....	40
Fig. 2.2	"That's Canada's superhero. Dummy!".....	42
Fig. 2.3	Utak saves Captain Canuck.....	49
Fig. 2.4	Canuck de-masked!.....	53
Fig. 2.5	Canuck takes his mask off.....	55

NEW TRIUMPH FEATURING NORTHGUARD

Fig. 3.1	<i>New Triumph</i> No. 1.....	63
Fig. 3.2	"Anglo liberation!".....	68
Fig. 3.3	" <i>Mean something!</i> ".....	70
Fig. 3.4	Knowlton Nash on <i>The National</i>	74
Fig. 3.5	Seperatism and Federalism.....	77

KAGAGI: THE RAVEN

Fig. 4.1	<i>The Raven</i> cover art.....	87
Fig. 4.2	Matthew Carver and Janet.....	90

INTRODUCTION: CHASING CAPTAIN CANADA

Comic books consolidate personal and collective identity through the intersection of written word and visual art. Superhero comics both invoke and evoke nationalism through the comic framework. This heroic patriotism spreads outward to represent collective consciousness, which, in turn, promotes nationalism via popular culture, or *pop nationalism*. Canada's superheroes occupy more isolated and sporadic pockets of publication than their American counterparts,¹ and are marginalized within an already marginalized medium. Canadian identity is formed, expressed, constructed, and contested through its own domestically produced superhero comic books.² In my thesis, I will examine the superheroes Nelvana from Adrian Dingle's *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* (1941),³ Captain Canuck from Richard Comely's *Captain Canuck* (1975), Northguard from Mark Shainblum and Gabriel Morrissette's *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* (1984), and Kagagi from Jay Odjick's (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg) *Kagagi: The Raven* (2010).⁴ Through an exploration of these comics, supported by comic book theory, theories of nationalism in Canadian literature, and scholarship on representations of Indigenous peoples in graphic literatures, I will demonstrate that comics text, art, and intersections of both express and challenge the figure of the Canadian superhero, who appears most frequently as a super defender. I will argue further that graphic texts by Indigenous people living in Canada both adhere to and complicate these representations.

Dingle's *Nelvana*, Canada's first nationalized superhero comic, features Nelvana, a super-heroine who descends from the heavens with a variety of godlike powers. Intriguingly,

¹ The modern comic book, as stated by Michael E. Uslan in a 2007 interview with *The New Yorker*, is "a legitimate *American* art form, as indigenous as jazz" (Gustines; emphasis added).

² Here, *domestic* denotes domestic publishing, as in "published within Canada," and so, when used as a qualifier, excludes international or American publications that include Canadian superheroes, most notably Marvel Comics' *Alpha Flight* and Wolverine character.

³ Original copies of *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* issues from the 1940s are rare. For this thesis I will be using the 2014 *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* graphic novel reprint for citations and pagination.

⁴ Of the four texts examined here, all have eponymous titles—*Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph Featuring Northguard*, and *Kagagi: The Raven*—as is the common convention in superhero comics. When the text is italicized, I am speaking of the title of the work; when it is not italicized, I am speaking of the character (e.g. Nelvana is the lead character in *Nelvana*). Additionally, *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* will be shortened to *Nelvana*; *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* will be shortened to *New Triumph*; and *Kagagi: The Raven* will be shortened to *Kagagi*.

Nelvana predates the American-published *Wonder Woman*, and she is sometimes identified as Inuit (a complexity that will be examined later). Comely's *Captain Canuck* presents Canada's longest running, and arguably most successful, Canadian superhero. Canuck has a variety of powers including super strength and stamina. Shainblum and Morrissette's *New Triumph* introduces a federalist superhero, Northguard, who stands in the way of both American invasion and Québec separatism using a personal weapons system known as the Uniband. Odjick's *Kagagi* is the story of an Algonquin teenager who inherits ancestral powers that he uses to protect his friends and family from ancient evil. These texts cover a chronological range of representations and concerns related to what it means to be Canadian or to be producing comics and graphic novels within Canada since the mid-twentieth century. Nelvana, war hero of the Arctic North, has a robust visual arts pedigree through her association with Franz Johnston of The Group of Seven, as it was painter Johnston who first told Dingle stories of a Nelvana whom he encountered in what is now Kugluktuk, Nunavut. Dingle's Nelvana is the first North American female superhero to head her own title and the most iconic hero to emerge from the war years, when super-heroines and Indigenous representation, even through the lens of white, male authors, were scant. Captain Canuck, in his various resurrections from the 1970s to the present, has become shorthand for the figure of a Canadian superhero or a maple-leafed approximation of Captain America. Northguard is directly inspired by Margaret Atwood's observation in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972) that "Canadian history defeats attempts to construct traditional society-saving or society-changing heroes" (170); Shainblum places these words as epigraph on a title gutter between the last sighting of the special operative originally meant to be the hero and the introduction of Phillip Wise, the man who would, through chance of biology, become Northguard in *New Triumph* No. 1 (3). In turn, Northguard is a heroic successor to Captain Canuck, including the red and white spandex, and finds himself fighting for Canadian federalist interests from within—the Québec separatist movement of the 1980s—and without—Reagan-era American takeovers of Canadian resources. Kagagi, the youngest hero of the chosen primary characters, struggles with the responsibility of his coming of age while navigating the acquisition of inherited superpowers. The connective tissue between many of these texts is intersectional in nature and relies on engaging with varying perspectives of comics scholarship, theories of Indigeneity, and the complexities of Canadian

nationalism.⁵

The Hero vs. the Shielded Super Defender

A hero, according to American professor Joseph Campbell, in the often-cited *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), is found in the performance of the structural *monomyth*. The term monomyth in this sense is a synonym for *the hero's journey*, as popularized by Campbell. As part of that monomyth, the hero “ventures forth from the world of the common day into a region of supernatural wonder” (30). But what is a *Canadian hero*? The Canadian heroes under examination here all follow the path of Campbell’s hero’s journey, beginning with a *call to adventure* (49). A Canadian hero is, then, not necessarily found outside the monomyth, but instead within its symbology of the heroes’ presentation to and acceptance by their public. In *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (2004), Eric Varner states that representations of power, heroics, and status, as consolidated in statues, were “prominently displayed in civic, sacred, and domestic spaces throughout the empire and were carefully manipulated and disseminated in order to reach multiple audiences. The power of these images lay in their ability to speak to disparate members of the society, from the illiterate and slaves through the most educated members” (1). These expressions, designed to unite peoples through similar stories of authority and nationhood, are found not only in statues, but also on magazine covers, stamps, and comic book covers. Heroes who wear their nationhood like a second skin are also imperial, colonial, and mythical portraits of the population they are raised above.

The origins of a defender are found in the legacy of knighthood, particularly in the history of illustrative shield designs. In *A Guide to the Study of Heraldry* (1840), James Montagu explains that iconic shields were developed for “The necessity of distinguishing the individual in the joust, the tournament, and the melee of the battle” (3). These heraldic bearings for the knight, effectively the superhero of his day, are the key to decoding a hero’s signification. In *The Heraldry [sic] of Canada* (1916), George Hodgins further notes that the shield, formerly used in war, now “tells the story of a nation’s peaceful progress, and the change has come about

⁵ While the canon of domestic Canadian superheroes is, admittedly, small, there are other Canadian protagonist-hero characters, historical characters, and northern superhero characters, such as Leo Bachle’s *Johnny Canuck* (1942), Rogers Beausoleil’s *Canadian Ninja* (1987), Pierre Charbonneau’s *Heralds of Canada* (1987), Ty Templeton’s *The Northern Guard* (2006), and Jeff Burton’s *The Adventures of Auroraman* (2016).

so gradually and so imperceptibly that no one associates the products of a fruitful land, when shown on the erstwhile warrior's shield, with aught of war or sees anything incongruous in the escutcheon of the knight bearing the emblems of prosperous industrial life" (3). This gradual shift of the purpose of emblematic defense—and, by extension, the role of the *defender*—settles comfortably within the symbolic nationhood of Canada, for the maple leaf is not the country's weapon but its shield. Hodgins claims that the maple leaf "was identified with Canada as far back as the war of 1812. In that war the British and Canadian soldiers, when fighting in the woods, often partially concealed their scarlet uniforms by cutting slits in the breasts of their tunics and inserting leaves and sprays of maple" (8). Here, the maple leaf figuratively and literally becomes the Canadian shield, and the purpose of the shield as an icon, as Hodgins notes, becomes laden with meaning: protective but also ornamental and motionless.

Motion then, is a fundamental part of a hero's character. Campbell says, "Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new" (16). A hero, by basic definition, must move forward; there must be a journey. In the texts analyzed in this study, there is an argument to be made for the heroes' internal journey throughout the initial print runs in which they starred. As nationalized heroes and super defenders, however—with *Kagagi* as the functional outlier—I maintain that these heroes are functionally static. They are ornamental shields—weighed down and immobile.

It should be noted that I am less interested in the journey of the hero than I am in the presentation of the figure of hero itself. However, the Canadian hero's status as a defender and a living shield invites new lines of questioning. Can a hero simply exist, or must there be forward motion? Are heroes who wait for conflict to come to them (the guard, the defensive line, the shield) still heroes? After all, the cheers of the adoring public are not directed in the same manner towards the linebacker as they are to the one who makes the touchdown. Canadians do not hold their super defenders or superheroes in the same regard as heroes who *leave* or ride out (e.g. Jason's quest for the golden fleece, Bilbo Baggins leaving the Shire, or Superman leaving Smallville for Metropolis), viewing them instead as a defensive line. And so, the Canadian heroic archetype performs its function as a shield on the home front, and shields do not vanquish evil; that is the domain of the sword.

Canadian superheroes, as produced by settler-Canadians or Indigenous authors/artists living in Canada, *can* have their journeys traced through the rest of Campbell's framework, but it

is their identities as disposable, effigial defenders that defines them and is at the core of their Canadianness. Here, the adjective “effigial” indicates that the defenders are effigies or likenesses that are mocked, discredited, or otherwise destroyed. While they may have been originally authored to represent “the best” of Canada, they assumed this alternative, ironic role after they were created, for, despite their objective presence in comics, Canadians are still not sure Canadian literary superheroes truly exist.

I theorize that if one is to accept the *idea* of a Canadian superhero, then it is only in the guise of the super defender. The role of the super defender often undermines the genre (here, superhero comics) in which defenders are housed, and instead aligns them with the transnational Canadian identity of *peacekeepers*. The Canadian super defender—a living, heraldic shield—is meant to bear the brunt of invasion and attack, thereby rendering the super defender’s purpose and role to that of heroic victimhood. The uniquely Canadian hero incorporates a heroic victimhood both inside and outside the text. Outside the text, *Nelvana* and its contemporaries were abandoned for more assertive, colourful American heroes when the Canadian comics industry folded after American media was permitted to cross the border again after the end of the Second World War in 1945. Inside the text, *Captain Canuck*’s inaugural promotional image depicts a lumbering Canuck, heraldry made flesh, being jeered at by an incredulous public (No. 1, 1:1). Likewise, Northguard, spiritual son of Atwood’s *Survival*, is the “victim of idiot circumstance” (Atwood 171)—he is an ill-equipped civil servant who happens to be compatible with the Uniband. And *Kagagi*’s Matthew Carver insists that he is “not some kinda super-hero” (Odjick 48). The methods involved in identifying super defenders include both their roles as shields against invasion and a recognition of reluctance, skepticism, cynicism, shame, and other variations on these themes as found in the Canadian readership, authors, and characters themselves.

In focusing on comic books, I investigate manifestations of Canadian identity in a medium of literature yoked to visual art. By analyzing these marginalized, and self-marginalized, texts—many of them dominated by the ubiquitous maple leaf—I draw upon theorizations of the gothic (fear of the land, spaces, history, and people) and an understanding of the historical uncertainty preprogrammed into the literary, Canadian imagination to support the framework in which the Canadian super defender operates. This thesis articulates a relationship between these superhero texts, and a nationalized, reconciliatory consciousness, and the

parameters of inherent contradiction that are found within that relationship between the hero and what, or who, they believe they are defending. If Northrop Frye asks in 1965 in the conclusion to *Literary History of Canada*, “Where is here?” (826)—a provocative prompt that, as Renée Hulan writes in “Who’s There?” (2000), teases “Canadian literary criticism with the promise of an answer, a national punchline that we could all get” (61)—and Sherrill Grace extends that in *Canada and the Idea of North* (2007) with “What and who is here[?]” (xi – xii), then I would like to further the dialogue, by way of anti-Byronic Canadian superhero comics, by asking “Does here have heroes?” If one is fundamentally in doubt over the wheres, whats, and whos of Canada itself, what does one defend?

The Canadian superhero comic, more than any other genre of comic or graphic novel, courts objective incredulity, in that settler-Canadians, myself included, do not believe in what we have committed to paper. Naturally, Indigenous perspectives create further complexities, prompting deeper layers of doubt. Certainly, the heroes implied by Frye’s *here* favour the shield over the sword and embody the capabilities of the super defender as previously mentioned. While the mere presence of these nationalized heroes, presented earnestly and without apparent satire, is proof of an ardent desire for Canadian superheroes in domestic comics, Canadians do not take these characters seriously in the manner that their American counterparts do because Canadians do not create heroes, only effigies of heroes—a creation that, on one end of the effigial spectrum, is easily dismissed or forgotten, or, on the other end, is intended for ridicule or destruction. Campbell confirms that “It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back” (7). In the Canadian hero these counterbalances are one and the same. In other words, Canada is unable to sustain its belief in the image or hero it would like to believe in. The framework of Canadian nationalism and the ideologies of the comic book superhero repel each other like oil and water, and the marriage of these two abstracts creates satire, shame, cynicism, and speculative longing, which results in the creation of narratives where Canadians *could* have heroes—if only they lived in an unCanada. With this disbelief in the idea of Canada itself, Canadian creators continually undermine themselves in an Americanized artform appropriated for the purpose of uplifting colonial, nationalized, Canadian heroes. The Canadian superhero, intentionally or unintentionally, deals in ironies, paradoxes, and self-reflective melancholy, leaving us with super defenders—useful but uncelebrated.

Could Captain Canada even Exist?

A “Captain Canada” is essentially a paradox. The comics that are part of this study, Dingle’s *Nelvana* and Odjick’s *Kagagi*, the former a settler appropriation of Indigenous identity and the latter an Indigenous hero created by an Indigenous author, offer new understandings in how Canadian-published Indigenous superheroes operate within this landscape. Shainblum and Morrissette’s hero Northguard exercises his personal right to question both the ideologies of the superhero and Canada itself. Comely’s *Captain Canuck*—a hero belittled by his own citizenry in his very first published panel—also helps to shape this field, which often flounders to take itself seriously. The landscape is further complicated, or enriched, when Captain Canuck is revealed as (potentially) Indigenous in *Captain Canuck* No. 5 (4:2). Canada’s inability to sustain self-determinacy through its superheroes troubles the approach towards nationalism, as found in these texts, thus rendering the act of creating and sustaining a Canadian superhero an onerous task. Apparently, the cultural understanding of the “Great White North” includes assimilation of superheroinc Indigenous identities, as in *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*. The features of Canadian-settler superheroes and Canadian-published Indigenous superheroes, and how these archetypes come to inform, trouble, complement, and challenge a national identity, will be considered in the chapters to follow.

Canadian-settler superheroes, Canadian-published Indigenous superheroes, and all the intersections and/or divergences from these categories, inform a national consciousness. As Atwood notes, “the Canadian tendency to favour collective heroes rather than individual ones leads to a positive and deliberate undercutting of individual heroics” (173). The singular Canadian (super)hero, raised on the shoulders of an adoring crowd, is a metaphorical blue rose: an unattainable, genetic anomaly. As the only primary text in this study contemporary enough to be considered contextually modern is *Kagagi*, a large part of my critical analysis is a retrospective attempt to trace the contexts of nationalisms from Dingle’s *Nelvana* to Comely’s *Captain Canuck* to Shainblum and Morrissette’s *New Triumph*. These publications metatexualize other texts: *Captain Canuck* recalls *Johnny Canuck*, a Canadian hero from the 1940s (*Captain Canuck* No. 3); in *New Triumph* No. 1, Phillip Wise (Northguard) has his own copy of *Captain Canuck* No. 11 (4:3-9); Odjick has stated that Matthew Carver (a.k.a. Kagagi), like Wise, has an understanding of what heroism is because he is already familiar with the

archetype of a superhero (“Creator Interview” 69); and, recently, the matriarch herself, Nelvana, has been reincarnated as “Nel,” Founder of Camp Northern Lights, in the pages of Jeff Burton’s *The Adventures of Auroraman* No. 0 (2016; second printing) and No. 1 (2016), in which she accepts her role as an instructor and inspirational figure: “This camp was started because I wanted to help young men and women learn to be better heroes!” (36:2). Her appearance in this relatively recent publication closes a chronological circle of reflected heroism.

The Comic Book Form

In a medium sometimes characterized by a deficit of text, or, at least, where visual art often trumps the written word, imagery becomes a key component in the monthly myth-making in which comics indulge. In “Literature and the Visual Arts,” from *Myth and Metaphor*, Frye states that “verbal media internalize the imagery use[d], so that the reader is compelled to build up his own structure of civilization. The illustration relieves the strain of this by supplying a ready made equivalent for the reader’s mental picture: hence its proverbial vividness, as expressed in the journalistic cliché that ‘one picture is worth a thousand words’” (189). Comics, by their very nature, are enriched literatures, for they are the textual nourished by the visual, thus engaging Frye’s “proverbial vividness.” In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen examine the grammatology and syntax of design through which “elements are combined into meaningful wholes” (1). At the same time, they note that visual language and the principles of composition are not “transparent and universally understood” but instead are “culturally specific” (4). In Western and westernized comics, this visual language manifests in reading order (northwest to southeast), and in the meanings attached to these spaces: foreground, background, center, and so on. Additionally, the format of comics employs a unique feature: the gutter. The containers of action and dialogue, the panels, rest upon a gridwork, either overt or submerged, but the gutter—the space between panels—is where the reader moves the narrative through space without benefit of image or text. Comics theorist Scott McCloud asserts that this blank space “plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics” (*Understanding Comics* 66). Often an extension of the panel into the gutter, as will be noted in the *Nelvana* chapter, indicates a certain significance, such as that what is being extended *into* the gutter raises itself above the gutter’s timely nature and into timelessness itself.

While there are still relatively few domestically produced Canadian superheroes, those

that were produced from the 1940s onward have paved the way for the current proliferation of graphic novels, mostly biographical, autobiographical, historical, and ficto-historical. The terms *comic books* and *graphic novels* are now often used interchangeably, but the two genres have different origins, characteristics, and connotations. The American comic book has been around since the 1930s, but graphic novels only became popular in the 1980s. As serialized, short, soft-cover publications on cheap paper, comic books are considered more ephemeral; in contrast, graphic novels—self-contained, book-length publications on more high-quality paper, often with hard covers—can be seen as more difficult to throw away and thus more permanent. While McCloud enfoldes both forms into the singular *comics* in *Understanding Comics* (1993), he separates them in his endnotes in *Making Comics* (2006) by indicating that comic books and webcomics are “mainstream,” while graphic novels are, by nature, “alternative” (241). Whether or not this judgement is accurate, the graphic novel tends to enjoy a higher literary status than its ancestor, the comic. At the same time, the rise of graphic novels has done much to legitimize the medium of comics, a movement observed by Will Eisner: “a new horizon has come into sharp focus with the emergence of the graphic novel, a form of comic book that is currently the fastest-growing literary medium in America” (148). He points out that “For an earlier generation comics were confined to short narrations or depictions of episodes of brief but intense duration” (148); with graphic novels, in contrast, the story is told in its entirety, providing resolution and closure. In their research on the graphic narrative as legitimate literature, Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey argue that while judgements about comic books and graphic novels tend to be inherently elitist (3), the differences between the two genres must be noted, as the graphic novel rests “on a spectrum on whose opposite pole is the comic book” (8). Stephen Weiner echoes the separation of comics and graphic novel as forms of low and high art, respectively, by stating that the graphic novel is just a comic book that takes itself seriously (17).

In this study, I identify *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, and *New Triumph* as comics, in that they were originally published in serialized, comic-magazine format; *Kagagi*, in contrast, was published as a graphic novel. All, however, are visual, sequential manuscripts—chronological fusions of art and text—that connect history, identity, and heroism in order to serve the national, autobiographical impulse.

McCloud lays the groundwork in *Understanding Comics* (1993), *Reinventing Comics* (2000), and *Making Comics* (2006) to show the storytelling power of this medium. He argues

that “Today, comics is one of the very few forms of mass communication in which individual voices still have a chance to be heard” (*Understanding Comics* 197). As can be observed in any comics text mentioned here, but particularly in *Kagagi*, this interpretation is particularly exciting because, as McCloud observes, the medium is dynamic and organic: “the language of comics continues to evolve—as all language must evolve” (208:2-209). Through his assertion that the format itself is not static, McCloud suggests a world of complexity behind how Dingle, Comely, Shainblum and Morrissette, and Odjick convey, defy, or ignore nationhood and heroism and how they are received in and outside of their original panel-work and context(s).

Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985; reprinted 2008) supports the idea of the complexities inherent in these visual narratives, for the comics creator is tasked with a presupposition of the reader’s understanding: “Success here stems from the artist’s ability (usually more visceral than intellectual) to gauge the commonality of the reader’s experience” (39). Here, the shorthand inherent in the medium relies on a supposedly universal understanding. For example, there is an implicit understanding of heroic nationalism when one turns a national flag into a skintight jumpsuit; once one has wrapped oneself in a flag, one becomes a living, national symbol. However, as noted in a further examination of *Captain Canuck* and *New Triumph*, these universal accords, once acknowledged, are then directly troubled within the texts themselves.

Historically Speaking

North American comic book history—including the censorship and McCarthyism of the Fredric Wertham years⁶—informs the theory that comics, and censorship of comics, have cultural power. Comics are particularly vulnerable to this manner of censorship and self-policing, and the Canadian form is investigated through Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert’s *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971) and John Bell’s *Invaders from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe* (2006), among other publications in the small, but

⁶ This era of censorship from 1954 onward will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. It is examined in Les Daniels’s *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (1971), Martin Barker’s *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989), Joseph Witek’s *Comic Books as History* (1989), Alan and Laurel Clark’s *Comics: An Illustrated History* (1991), David Hajdu’s *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic-Book Scare and How It Changed America* (2008), Jared Gardner’s *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling* (2012), and Fred Van Lente’s *The Four Color Comic Book History of Comics* (2017).

growing, field of Canadian comic book studies. These authors explore the identity and iconography of the specifically Canadian superhero comic in both plot and form. Separate, nationalized approaches are encoded within these texts, compelling the question, what makes a Canadian superhero “Canadian” in comparison to American superheroes? Superman, for example, has his ideology tidily laid out—*Truth, justice, and the American way*—so, why is a similar, neatly defined doctrine so difficult for the Canadian comic book industry and its heroes north of the border? Is it, as Frye, Grace, and Atwood have noted, that those of us who live in Canada do not *know* ourselves, or that, perhaps, we do not *want* to know ourselves?

Nationality and iconography intersect with other overarching concerns, such as the form’s alteration through historical censorship and contextual framing of “what makes a Canadian comic Canadian.” Surely the answer cannot be found in maple leaves alone. Indigeneity in superheroic Canadian comics considers the foundational, settler-scripted textual ancestry of comics such as *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck* but also includes Canadian-published Indigenous superheroes, such as *Kagagi*, and the space they occupy in an already underpopulated and isolated landscape. Captain Canuck and Northguard—flag folk—evoke the golden age⁷ of Canadian superheroes, jingoism, nationalism synonymized with heroism; these elements can be seen in *Nelvana* but are relatively absent from *Kagagi*. How is it, then, that all of these texts are arguably or distinctly Canadian?

Nationalism in Canadian superhero comics was born in war—always fertile ground for nationalism—and was formed in the cheaply printed pages of what have been called, by historians, the *Canadian Whites*. Canadian Whites were comics produced in Canada by Canadians to satisfy the demand for illustrated narratives after the War Exchange Conservation Act (WECA) banned all non-essential American imports, including comic books. To streamline, simplify, and economize this new industry, Canadian comics publishers often printed the stories without colour on cheap, off-white paper, thus eponymizing the medium through its means of production. In contrast, American comics were typically printed in colour throughout. The Canadian comic book industry was created in wartime, but subsequently the Canadian Whites

⁷ The American golden age of comics, when modern comic books exploded into the market resulting in a ravenous readership and a rapid publishing turnover, lasted from 1938 to 1956. The Golden Age of Canadian Comics followed in 1941 but had a shorter lifespan, ending in 1946. The term “Golden Age” was first coined by author Richard Lupoff in 1960 and has remained in the vernacular.

burned brightly, then flickered out. From 1955 until the early 1970s, the era of domestic Canadian comics settled into inertia. WECA had been lifted, the creative pipeline opened, and American-made media poured back into the country. American media both over- and de-powered Canadian content, and the Canadian inferiority complex in relation to Canadian media, art, and literary canon(s) was exemplified in the abandonment of its short-lived comics industry.

Canadian superheroes could not compete. However, the sociocultural landscape began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, as Canadian nationalism, buoyed by an eager and sincere interest by Canadians to see their own stories reflected, reached a new zenith. The eagerness to uphold Canadian culture and to differentiate it from American culture was reflected in the findings of The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences led by Vincent Massey, commonly called the Massey Report (1951), which advocated for substantial funding for Canadian arts and culture-making activities, prompted, in no small part, by a desire to avoid American continentalism (“Report of the Royal Commission”). This new wave of national pride, buttressed by the need for national signifiers apart from American influences, did not resurrect the corpse of the Canadian comics industry, but fertilized the ground for the creation of Canadian alternative, independent, and underground comics. As well, the dust was blown off of the Canadian Whites through Hirsh and Loubert’s ground-breaking study *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971), although many Canadian wartime superheroes, and their creators, still floundered in anonymity. In this period of Canadian comics history, domestic comics did not benefit from the prohibition on American media that birthed and nurtured the Canadian Whites of the war years, but instead attempted to celebrate, satirize, question, and explore new icons and rhetorics of Canadianness. I theorize that Canadian superhero texts encapsulate a shared fear of national hubris, and, using these texts, I explore some of the underlying principles through which to read superheroic narratives in order to discover the presence, or absence, of identity, problematic perspectives, skepticism, or even shame in northern, nationalized heroes.

Canadian comics, including superhero narratives, have an intriguing history concerning their legality and legitimization that most American comics only partially share: these texts, for nearly seventy years, were technically illegal.⁸ In 1954, using evidence more anecdotal than

⁸ See: Elton Hobson’s report “Did You Know Comic Books Depicting Crime Are Illegal in Canada?”

scientific, American psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham published *Seduction of the Innocent*, an exposé on comic books and the supposed dangerous cultural malfunctions they produce. American publishers responded by instituting the Comics Code Authority, a measure of voluntary self-censure. Canada anticipated Wertham's moral panic by six years; in 1949 the Criminal Code of Canada—section 163 1b—prohibited the sale, distribution, or ownership of any publication “exclusively or substantially” depicting pictorial crime. This prohibition was part of legislation meant to ban violent pornography and obscene publications, but included a section criminalizing the “crime comic.” By legal definition, graphic narratives published in Canada that primarily depicted crime, horror, cruelty, and violence were deemed obscene. Captain Canuck, the paragon of nationalized Canadian superheroism, often apologized before engaging in any acts of violence. So, too, did his creator, Comely, in editorial asides, perhaps conscious of the requirement that he limit the text's violence. Comic books and graphic literature in the United States outgrew the need for protective self-censure by the 1970s, but the same literature remained illegal in Canada until section 163 1b was repealed in 2018. Believed to be a poisoner of young minds, particularly as a result of Wertham's polemical lectures and publications, comic books continued to exist as a marginalized medium capable of unspoken and unspeakable cultural knowledge. I would argue that Canadians are still somewhat wary of these texts, in part because they are enamored with the idea of Canadian non-violence. Literary censorship—book burning in spirit—requires ardent examination, as does the nature of obscenity (here, crime, violence, and sex) in the Canadian comic book itself. Now that this section of the Criminal Code has been repealed, the question can be asked of the texts under study, who is being punched and by whom, and why is it now legal to do so?

Canadian Futurisms and the Longing of Speculation

A reoccurring premise inherent in these comics is the Canadian impulse to lean, sometimes rather heavily, upon themes of speculative science-fiction in a term best summed up as *Canadian futurism*. It seems incongruent to suggest that a superheroic manuscript, already fantasy by nature, should ascend to a higher tier of fantastical speculation. However, Canadian superhero texts often employ this tactic, as observed in *Nelvana* and *New Triumph*, but even more in *Captain Canuck*, where the text makes it plain that a nationalized hero, who wears the flag as a second skin, could exist *only* in a speculative, future Canada that has become a dominant world power. While no stranger to fantastical adventuring through time and space,

American superheroes are equally, if not more so, at home in their own contemporary cartographies. Marvel Comics house their heroes in real-world locations with real-world problems; Spider-Man, for example, is a New York City dweller and has trouble paying his rent on time. *Nelvana*'s Canada, while firmly placed within its era of publication, invokes an imaginary, mystical image of a Canadian North, replete with demigods, a subterranean world threatened by giant Mammoth Men, and flying Dobermans. *New Triumph*'s urban, contemporary Canada fears an American monotheistic colonization, echoing the concerns of the Massey Report and perhaps previewing the speculative horror of Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Captain Canuck, the most prolific and Canadian of Canadian superheroes, employs Canadian futurism to the greatest extent; Comely places his hero in a then-future 1993, in which Canuck protects the resources and interests of Canada as an enviable, dominant place. In these speculative Canadas—these unCanadas—nationalized Canadian heroes emerge; Canada, as it exists, cannot support such a figure but an unCanada certainly could. This approach enforces Canada as a dreamscape in which Canadian heroism exists in the elseworld or the subconscious. This perspective continues to reach outwards through online spaces in which a popular disbelief in Canada itself cheekily manifests in Google search queries, as of May 2020, such as “Is Canada even real?” While the non-existent Canada meme falls under the category of playful, if not provocative, satire, Canada's disassociation with its own existence has real world implications that continue today, years after the questions raised by the Massey Report and of those theorized by Frye and Atwood in the 1960s and 1970s. These perplexities can be seen in Scott Gilmore's 2018 *Maclean's* op-ed: “if Canada is not a people, not a nation, possibly not even a nation state, what are we?” (“Canada is not a Real Country”), as well as in Alex Green's 2020 *The Outline* article: “Canada is a scam—a pyramid scheme, a ruse, a heist. Canada is a front” (“Canada is Fake”). Canada, it seems, is in a constant state of earnest disbelief and existential dread.

Significance and Northerness

I was motivated to further research the figure of the domestic Canadian superhero not because of proliferation but because of absence. Why do we shy away from this objectively popular form of aggrandizement? Why does the national impulse, particularly in regard to heroes and superheroes, sway towards reluctance? These explorations of the *concept* of northern and Canadian heroes is aided, enriched, and challenged when projected and intersected through

the lens of Canadianist and Northern scholarship in Frye's question of the Canadian *here* in the conclusion to *Literary History of Canada* and Atwood's interrogation of the Canadian hero in *Survival*. I include Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North* (2001) in my exploration of the fraught and often misguided relationships with the colonial "Great White North," its perceived quasi-mythical spaces, and my own uncertainty with these cartographies, particularly in the chapters on *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*.

In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Grace examines the way in which Canada, the nation-state, has used the *idea* of the North and northern spaces in literature and the arts both to represent and unify the *idea* of Canada. She notes that other countries are either larger or have colder climates, yet it is Canada, the "Great White North," that appears to possess these characteristics. Grace invokes the specter of Frye as she examines the perplexity that is Canada: "my love for and desire to understand this stubborn, complex, infuriating place that I call home drives me to ask, not 'where is here?'—Frye's old question—but what and who is here, and how the *here* called Canada has been constructed, represented, and articulated" (xi – xii). For Grace, Canadians, "no matter who, when, or where we are" are "shaped [and] haunted by ideas of the North, and we are constantly imagining and constructing Canada-as-North, as much so when we resist our nordicity as when we embrace it" (xii). North, a concept of "us," is essentialist fiction. There is, perhaps, no "us" as we claim to understand it. This perspective complicates the role of the Northern hero, if we understand that the "Northern us" is, and has always been, speculative. The North, as Grace reminds us is a "fundamentally created status" (15), one that is "multiple, shifting and elastic; it is a process, not an eternal fixed goal or condition" (16). This observation stands in contrast to the understanding of the North by Lester B. Pearson, when he served as the Canadian ambassador to the United States (in 1946), as an explicit *goal*: "Canada is one of the few countries with an unexplored frontier, luring the pathfinder into the unknown. This frontier, with its inevitable effect on the life and habits of the Canadian people, is, however, no longer the West. 'Go North' has replaced 'Go West' as the call to adventure" ("Canada Looks 'Down North'").

With such an emphasis placed upon a new form of pioneerism, it becomes easier to understand Canadian philosopher George Grant's fear of continental policies as examined in *Lament for a Nation* (1965), which are alluded to in *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*, but presented plainly in *New Triumph* when the demagogues of a new version of the American "Manifest

Destiny” (an American terrorist and white supremacist organization that serves as the main antagonist for the series) turn their eyes northward. These concepts of unification through Northernness and whiteness are employed to great effect in both *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*, in which the titular characters are, at first, stationed in large, mystical northern spaces specifically for the purpose of defending the resources of the North from those who would seek to plunder them, be it contemporaneous Nazis or speculative-future communists. *New Triumph* takes an urban approach in stationing its hero, Phillip Wise, on the streets of real-world Montreal; however, in order to transform into Northguard—the guardian of the North—Wise invokes the spirit of Northernness. When he says “Black! Black! Black! White!” (No. 1, 24:7), in thought-bubble or speech-balloon, Wise moves from an amalgamation of all colours—black—to the Canadian absence of colour in snow-filled landscapes—white. Only when Northern-associated whiteness is thusly invoked can Wise become Northguard.

Canadian Sensibilities

In her opening monologue on *Saturday Night Live* (March 30, 2019), actor Sandra Oh riffed on the Canadian character stereotype of self-effacement and meekness. She noted that she was incapable of bragging and alleged that the Canadian way of accepting a compliment is to apologize for having received it, thus continuing the Canadian narrative—tongue-in-cheek or not—of refusing to engage in self-celebration (“Season 44: Sandra Oh/Khalid”). Oh presented a familiar brand of cavalier modesty that is reflective of the Canadian estrangement from idealization; she espoused this for an American and international audience but owned the attitude as a collective, Canadian one. I have found that this fear of hubris and heroic deflection, by way of humor or abject humility, continues to crop up in literature where it seemingly would be out of place but where it leans into this contradiction the most: superhero comics, specifically Canadian ones. In analyzing *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph*, and *Kagagi*, I have found a permeating sense of reluctance within the heroes themselves and their ability to “act the part,” or in the readership’s ability to accept these figures as heroic. Canada has heroes and does not know what to do with them or if it even wants them to begin with. Insight into the climate that contextualizes these narratives will come from further exploring attitudes towards Canadian nationalism and the continual preoccupation of the country’s citizens with the Canadian imagination itself.

In 1951, the Massey Report encouraged the rebirth of Canadian national culture. However, in 1965, Grant followed up on the report's optimistic advocacy for the funding of Canadian culture with *Lament for a Nation*, declaring nationalism dead, in no small part thanks to his absolute disdain for Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (4). For Grant, Diefenbaker's policies eroded Canadian nationalism, a path, Grant asserts, that his kowtowing Protestant, Liberal replacement, Pearson, kept the nation firmly on. Grant believed that Pearson's policies opened a gateway to the American assimilation feared in Vincent Massey's report, and that Liberal supporters "whether they were aware of it or not, ... really paid allegiance to the homogenized culture of the American Empire" (5). As Grant speaks of Canada in the past, he concludes that Canadian nationalism, therefore Canada itself, is already dead. Canada, then, is a specter, yet it still lumbers on.

Grant's fear of the slow roll of Americanization is made plain in the Reagan-era *New Triumph* comics. While Grant speaks of American assimilation as a forgone conclusion, Shainblum and Morrissette entertain it as a future possibility, thus necessitating the creation of a hero to prevent it. These concerns run parallel in literary academia, where, in examining Canadian literature before 1965, Frye proposed that the Canadian imagination became confused not so much with identity as with locality or the "Where is here?" over the "Who am I?" ("Conclusion" 826). How can Canadian heroes defend a nation if they are confused by Frye's paradoxes, which invite a reading of disbelief in one's cartographical placement—a national vertigo? The perplexed hero attempts to solve this problem in several ways: Nelvana and Captain Canuck exist in an unCanada, and so there is no confusion about who or where they are; and Kagagi absorbs both perplexities—"Who am I?" and "Where is here?"—into the body of one teenager who discovers nationhood within, but that nationhood is of an Indigenous nation rather than Canada. However, Northguard best encapsulates the puzzlement of early 1960s Canadianisms, as he faces nothing less than a wave of American death. This type of Canadian literature needs the proxy of American death in order to position itself *as* Canadian, for, as John Gray observes in his preface to *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, "A Canadian never feels more Canadian than when he is in the United States" (13). Against this wave, Northguard, successful as he is early on, feels small, ineffectual, and, ultimately, a timely scapegoat.

In *Survival*, Atwood, whom Shainblum cites directly in *New Triumph* No. 1, takes up the torch of confused, and often pessimistic, Canadians perpetually in search of their own identity

and imagination separate from the United States or Great Britain. Atwood states that a Canadian literary hero is “not so much a hero as one who has allowed himself to be a victim of idiot circumstance, like a man who goes swimming in a thunderstorm. The order of the universe, one half of our schizophrenic Canadian consciousness can’t help feeling, will of course strike him down” (171). Atwood asserts that the Canadian hero, by nature, is preordained upon conception for comeuppance and is, likely, an anti-hero in hero’s clothing. Likewise, in co-writing a play about Canadian First World War fighter pilot Billy Bishop, Gray found the notion of a Canadian hero problematic: “Was there really something missing from the Canadian chromosomal make-up?” (“Preface” 14), to which he answers, in an interview with Jerry Wasserman for *Modern Canadian Theatre* (1994), that the Canadian hero (here, Billy Bishop) cannot be a hero, only “an anti-hero”: “I believe in what Northrop Frye said which is that American heroes are larger than life and Canadian heroes are smaller than life. ... What he meant is that the Canadian hero is an ironic hero, is somebody who does not feel that he himself can beat the devil. He cannot do that. He will not live happily ever after.” In other words, while Canadian heroes can aspire towards what is missing from their “chromosomal make-up”—heroism—they are only truly capable of anti-heroism. Atwood and Gray’s supposition, that the Canadian hero is actually an anti-hero, supports my observation that Canadian superheroes are not so much archetypes of justice as they are unfortunate, unsuccessful fools, through their self-undermining actions or inactions, within or outside of the texts. The Canadian imagination of the 1970s has difficulty conceiving and sustaining a nationalized superhero as a figure of celebration.

The Maple Leaf Forever

In the subgenre of nationalized superhero comics and graphic novels, the maple leaf is both a shield and an important piece of symbology; it presents an unambiguous visual shorthand for a thoroughly nationalized superhero. “The Maple Leaf Forever” (1867), written by Alexander Muir, has been Canada’s *de facto* anthem since Confederation, imbuing maple leaves with a public sense of Canadian identity long before the Maple Leaf was chosen as Canada’s flag in 1965.⁹ In wearing the Maple Leaf as part of their costumes, Captain Canuck and Northguard echo a wider canon of nationalized flag folk, including Captain America and Captain Britain. Just as Canadians are “a unique species of North American” (Grant 3), the post-Pearson,

⁹ If the text refers to the Canadian flag, then Maple Leaf will be capitalized.

Canadian flag is equally unique; there are no other national flags with a maple leaf, whereas there are many with stars, stripes, and variations upon those themes. Curious, then, that the death of Canadian nationalism, as Grant understood it in *Lament for a Nation*, and the birth of the Canadian flag should both occur in 1965. If one (the birth of the nationalized Maple Leaf) is canceled out by the other (the death of Canadian nationalism), then Captain Canuck's maple-leafed entrance into the world, ten years later, would have been less an introduction of a unifying, nationalized heroic figure and more a harbinger of doom and, ironically, confirmation of American homogenization—Canuck does, after all, ape Captain America's aesthetic. The field of white upon which the leaf rests continues to evoke the snowy nordicity with which Grace is concerned. In effect, Pearson's efforts to secure a singular image to represent and unify Canada are in step with Grace's suppositions about the illusory and unifying effect of Northernness on the Canadian imagination. As Pearson stated in a 1963 speech to the Canadian Legion in Winnipeg, "I believe that today a flag designed around the Maple Leaf, will symbolise and be a true reflection of the new Canada" ("The Great Flag Debate").

As iconography, the maple leaf is a congenial choice for a superhero's suit. The grammar of comics requires a visual shorthand that often errs on the side of cartoon rather than photorealism. The reliance on iconography and symbology is essential for the creation of a national, cultural shorthand. The Maple Leaf icon has only eleven points, as opposed to the twenty-three points of the sugar maple leaf found in nature, but this simplification serves in the same way that a smiley face—two dots and a curved line—is easily read and understood as happy human face (see iconography in *Understanding Comics* 26-33). Additionally, as Ann-Maureen Owens and Jane Yealland note, when the eleven-pointed maple leaf flaps in the wind, the points appear to grow in number, and designer Jacques St. Cyr.'s "11-point leaf looks like a real maple leaf when the flag flies on a windy day" (20-21). Comics rely on a similar kind of inferred verisimilitude, and the symbol as used in comics is well-suited as a shorthand for action, Canadianness, and Northernness.

Additionally, the maple leaf, in comics and commercial spaces both, operates as an effective leitmotif replete with repeating themes that transform from space to space in order to better reflect new contexts and cultural narratives. In *Nelvana*, the Maple Leaf is absent largely for pragmatic, historical reasons—it was not yet the flag of Canada—although it could be argued that *Nelvana*, presented as an Inuit demigoddess, would avoid using a symbol of Canada

regardless. In *Captain Canuck*, the Maple Leaf is representative of a new nationalism and the hero's ineffable Canadianness. In *New Triumph*, in contrast, the Maple Leaf represents uncertainty and emptiness, as Wise, gripping the Canadian flag, commands it to "Mean something!!" (No. 1, 14:9). In *Kagagi*, the absence of the Maple Leaf, nordicity, and Canadian nationalisms is telling, because both creator and character are Indigenous; thus, national identity takes on different meanings and creates a dialogue regarding the ways in which Canadian-settler narratives have appropriated Indigeneity in past comics. *Kagagi* does not evoke images of the North, snow, or whiteness that are commercially and colloquially associated with Canadian narratives; the most recent of the primary texts examined here, *Kagagi* eschews the nationalized Maple Leaf and other conventional and colonial symbols for northern spaces, instead focusing on Indigenous cultural pasts and futures.

Indigeneity

Nelvana and *Captain Canuck* implicitly invite a reading of nationalism as a result of the assimilation of Indigeneity into a nationalized, heroic, Euro-Canadian form. Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte's *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009) examines Canadianism(s), history, and historiography through the lens of the gothic in order to challenge the dominant modes of Canadianness that often end up in texts that purport to express Canadianism. As with Grace's examination of how Canada is haunted by its own illusion of Canada-as-North, Sugars and Turcotte assert that the Canadian imagination is haunted by "fears of territorial illegitimacy, anxiety about forgotten or occluded histories, resentment towards flawed or complicit ancestors, assertions of Aboriginal priority, explorations of hybrid cultural forms, and interrogations of national belonging and citizenship" (ix). The Canadian imagination fears not only, as Gray puts it, its own "cultural inadequacy" ("Preface" 10), but also its own illegitimacy, particularly in appropriative texts in which settlers attempt to enfold Indigeneity into Canada itself. These perspectives invite decolonized re-readings of Canadian superheroic texts.¹⁰ *Nelvana*, presented as an Inuit demigoddess and interpreted by some commentators and

¹⁰ Terry Goldie's *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene* (1993) explores the complicated relationship of colonial-settler society with (perceived and re-constructed) images of Indigeneity, and that society's attraction to and fear of these images. Daniel Coleman's *White Civility* (2006) digs into the history and historical implications of Canada's genesis in British colonial whiteness.

fans as Inuit herself,¹¹ has more in common aesthetically with other white superhero characters and Hollywood glamour gals than she does with the Inuit community that summoned her.

In *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (2008), Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo) examines the image of American Indigenous characters in a variety of comics genres, noting that “there is a serious neglect in all [scholarly comics] studies of an extensive and intensive examination about how Indigenous people are represented in this medium” (3) and that this “examination is necessary for both Native American and non-Native comic readers” (2). With the intention of educating the reader, Sheyahshe comes to the conclusion that pervasive stereotypes of Indigenous characters have been present within comics for a long time. Andrew Baldwin, Laura Cameron, and Audrey Kobayashi’s *Rethinking the Great White North: Race, Nature, and the Historical Geographies of Whiteness in Canada* (2011) continues the critical analysis of Canada’s love affair with whiteness that Grace in *Canada and the Idea of North* and Daniel Coleman in *White Civility* engage in by placing this whiteness within historical, geographical, and identity discourses. For Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi, whiteness needs to be decentralized from its default position as the “mainstream” when it comes to an understanding of Canadian identities.

In *The Truth about Stories* (2003), Thomas King (Cherokee) notes that colonialized, historical projections of the “Great White North” have reworked and appropriated Indigenous stories without concern for the power inherent within storytelling: “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (9), so “you have to be careful with the stories you tell” (10). Colonial Canada has not been particularly careful; Captain Canuck, the stoic symbol of Canadian colonialism, is revealed in one comic to be purportedly of mixed European-Indigenous ancestry, yet Canuck’s cultural identity is never effectively used to enrich or trouble the nationalism he represents. In *Captain Canuck*, Comely was able to create a stand-in for the type of Indigenous figure that would serve a dual purpose: a representative of assimilation by way of mixed ancestry and a quiet, Indigenous endorsement of Canada as patriarchal nation-state, or, as King states, a “wild, free, powerful, noble, handsome, philosophical, eloquent, solitary Indian. ... A particular Indian. An Indian who could be a cultural treasure, a piece of North American antiquity. A

¹¹ While presented and illustrated by Dingle as more of a white pin-up model, some contemporary comics scholars and artists have both claimed and portrayed her as Inuit in articles and fanart.

mythic figure who could reflect the strength and freedom of an emerging continent. *A National Indian*” (79; emphasis added). *Captain Canuck* remains relatively quiet on the subject of Canuck’s (Tom Evans’s) Indigeneity, which works in favour of his multi-representational nature: he is male, strong, free, compliant, Indigenous, white, and Canadian. In this way, Canada has a long history of reworking “We are all Treaty people” into appropriative misidentification, rather than the cooperative spirit the dictum invokes. Canadiana appropriates *ideas* of Indigeneity into a monolithic Northerness; in doing so, all Canadians (seemingly) become indigenous. *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*, comics that both (seemingly) embrace Indigeneity and Canadian nationalism, raise these concerns. Alternatively, *Kagagi* disengages from the conventional markers of Canadianism and Northerness. In contrast to the critical vocabulary (maple leaves, northern spaces, aesthetic combinations of red and white, Canadian place names, and so on) that mark publications like *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph*, or even the American-published *Alpha Flight* as decidedly “Canadian,” *Kagagi* focuses on Algonquin cultural history and presents clues about its Canadian origins only in the paratextual publication information. *Kagagi* thus avoids engaging with the nuances of colonial entitlement that plague the earlier entries of this genre.

Coming Attractions

In Chapter 1, I examine *Nelvana*, her history, abandonment, and subsequent resurrection in publishing. Key to *Nelvana*’s unveiling will be an understanding of the comics’ creator, Dingle, and the era of the Canadian Whites in which it was published. Dingle admits to appropriating and reshaping cultural stories into the national hero now known as *Nelvana*, which runs parallel with Frye’s examination of the constructed myth, or stories that are both real and unreal. I will analyze the artwork within the text and how Dingle uses heavy inking techniques and projections outside the panel work, into the gutter, to emphasize action and dialogue. As she is considered to be the first nationalist Canadian superhero, her unsettled affiliations within and outside the text support the theory of a belief in national ambiguity over heroism. Ultimately, the inability to define the aptly named “mystery girl of the Arctic” (Dingle 74) sets a precedent for future confusions over what a Canadian hero is.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the most famous nationalized Canadian hero, Captain Canuck—hero of an alternate 1990s and a decidedly speculative unCanada in which the “Great White North” finds itself a target for invasion. I will examine the history of the initial run of the text

and how Canada's most famous superheroic export is laden with the ironies and paradoxes that characterize the medium. In addition, I will apply McCloud's observations on space and time in panel work to Comely's narrative. Of great interest will be an analysis of Tom Evans: the man under the mask. As Canuck and Evans, he is the embodiment of King's "National Indian" (79), a figure that, much like the idea of the Canadian superhero, does not exist.

In Chapter 3, I study the hero Northguard of *New Triumph Featuring Northguard*. Here, I examine the history behind the black and white comic boom of the 1970s and 1980s as well as the real-world framing of the federalist-separatist divide, as tragically enacted by Denis Lortie's attack on Québec's parliament building in 1984, just before *New Triumph's* No. 1's publication. I observe how Northguard both succeeds and subverts Captain Canuck's legacy as well as examine how Shainblum and Morrissette's visual language renegotiates the signification of Wise's Canadianness. *New Triumph's* metatextuality is noted, for comics exist within the comic and Wise himself is part of *Captain Canuck's* readership. *New Triumph* moves away from *Nelvana's* and *Captain Canuck's* embracing of Canada-as-North, through a dark, metropolitan setting, and Wise struggles with his paradoxical identification as a nationalized Canadian superhero.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I analyze Odjick's *Kagagi* and acknowledge it as an outlier in this canon. The heroism of *Kagagi* is not found in his role as a national super defender, but rather in a traditional coming of age built on cultural knowledge, as Carver reclaims his identity as a member of an Anishinabeg community in order to protect his friends from the mythic figure of the Windigo. I construct my approach to *Kagagi* as the effigial exception based on Odjick's interviews, Sheyahshe's claim that *Kagagi* exists outside the tokenism that traditionally plagues Indigenous comic book heroes, and evidence found within the text. Additionally, I analyze the ways in which Carver functions as a role model for his demographic—young Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers—rather than a personification of the nation-state.

CHAPTER 1: NELVANA: MATRIARCH OF UNCERTAINTY

“We have foiled the evil kablunets’ carefully prepared plan to rob and starve our people. Our hunters will not set their nets in vain, now. But we must rid the Northland of the evil-doers” (*Nelvana* 30:2).

Nelvana of the Northern Lights is a Canadian superhero comic book series first published in 1941 that, alongside its contemporaries, was largely forgotten until it was reprinted in 2014 and again in 2017 due to the interest and efforts of Canadian comics historians Hope Nicholson and Rachel Richey. While the eponymous *Nelvana* is sometimes considered the first nationalist Canadian superhero, and by some commentators the first Canadian-produced superhero of Indigenous representation (here, potentially Inuit), albeit authored by a settler-Canadian, she unsettles herself and her affiliations within the text. In doing so, she twists away from the communities that would lay claim to her, thereby adding more confusion to the paradox of a Canadian hero. *Nelvana* becomes less a hero and more a Canadian super defender, replete with an infusion of what Margaret Atwood calls “idiot circumstance” (171), within readers’ ability to pin her loyalty not to cultural or national ideology, but to the northern land itself. First emerging as a goddess figure, *Nelvana* completes her Canadianization by later joining the R.C.M.P, an entrenched Canadian-heroic trope that predates *Nelvana* and re-emerges in *Captain Canuck* (Mounties and C.S.I.S.) and *New Triumph* (P.A.C.T. and C.S.I.S.), fulfilling Atwood’s point that “Canada must be the only country in the world where a policeman is used as a national symbol” (171).

In this thesis, “*Nelvana*” will refer to the comic book super-heroine and not to the figure in Inuit culture, towards which the comics vaguely gesture, nor to the Canadian animation studio entitled *Nelvana Studios*, named for the comics heroine. Additionally, I acknowledge that some of the language used in both the comics and citations of them is out-dated and racist in nature. In the 2014 release of *Nelvana*, Richey offers an apologetic prologue:

[*Nelvana*] is not perfect. She was the cultural product of a country at war and is inconsistent, as the first model of anyone’s dream is. The book is sometimes culturally insensitive, and for that I am genuinely sorry for both you and myself. However, it is my opinion that had Adrian Dingle been able to write and produce his work without non-artistic influence it likely would have never gone in that direction.... The real tragedy is that *Nelvana* was never given the chance to grow beyond the less-favourable writing. She

was an incredible idea that was manipulated into what audiences at the time wanted, from issue to issue. (8)

Richey's apology and analysis of *Nelvana* acknowledges the text's status as problematic while encouraging a new Canadian readership not to disengage with it based on its dated merits. Instead, Richey invites a further speculation in an attempt to hold up the nationalized Canadian hero from its perpetual and uncelebrated "this is it" status to the higher plane of "this is what it could be."

From Southern Ontario, Adrian Dingle (1911–1974) created *Nelvana* first for his own Hillborough Studios in 1941, and later moved her to the more well-financed Bell Features. Bell Features and their comics, described as "unabashedly Canadian" (Bell, *Invaders from the North* 48), would go on to become one of the most popular publishers of Canadian comics during the war years until finally shutting down production in 1953. *Nelvana*'s re-purposing from cultural story into comic iconography could only have occurred during the war years; the possibility of a domestic Canadian comic book industry was made reality in 1940 by the War Exchange Conservation Act (WECA), as discussed in the Introduction.

In their seminal study *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971), Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert judge that "Canadian comic books existed only during the Second World War, and inevitably war provided much of the books' subject matter. The war stories reflected one of the genuine myths that comic books create: the simplicity of human behaviour. It is only in the medium of comic books that the bad guy is pictured as absolutely inhuman" (139).¹ Their observations that comics lack moral, narrative rigour and, particularly, that Canadian comics existed *only* during the war years, appear prescriptivist but are not entirely inaccurate. The Golden Age of Canadian comics, the initial boom in the industry from approximately 1941-1946, is firmly rooted in lack: lack of full-colour printing and American *panache*, lack of resources, and lack of importable American media. Additionally, the Canadian Whites work unironically well with Canada's international image as "the Great White North," with the word "white" referring to snow, to blank spaces on the map, and to Canada's canon of predominantly "great white literature"—that is, colonial texts for colonizing peoples. Paradoxically, *Nelvana*, one of the most popular forerunners of the Canadian White movement, is immutably colourful: not only

¹ Canadian comics scholars often cite Hirsh and Loubert as the first authors who examined Canadian instead of American comics.

is she a demigoddess, but “the mystery girl of the Arctic” (Dingle 74) is also a champion of an Indigenous culture, the Inuit. Nelvana and her legacy of a new, distinct Canadian literature sprang from Canada’s economic separation from the United States during the Second World War. It is therefore not surprising to find her image gracing Canada Post’s forty-five cent stamp in 1995, signalling continuing unabashed governmental and cultural approval.

While American comics creators often disappeared under pen names, so as not to damage their reputations when they were ready to move on to more well-favoured creative endeavors,² Canadian writers and artists took credit for their inventions, creating an irrevocable *möbius strip* of creator and creation—a move their American counterparts would not indulge in until the 1960s.

These days, one cannot cite a character in comics without invoking, silently or otherwise, the spectre of their creator; comics are a Pygmalion medium.

Dingle was reportedly a quiet man, hard of hearing, and had a grade eight education—not uncommon for a boy his age at that time, as his father died when he was three. Dingle was prolific; according to Ivan Kocmarek, “If there can be said to have been a single artist from this wartime period of Canadian comics who can be most credited for bringing Canadian comic books to their young audience—it was Adrian Dingle” (113).

Of Nelvana, his longest-lasting creation,

Dingle was content to share the credit with his friend, Group of Seven artist Franz Johnston. In a 1973 interview with Dave Sim and John Balge in *Now and Then Times* No. 2, Dingle said,

[Johnston] came back from an Arctic trip and he talked about this deific character called Nelvana. And he showed me a photograph of her. She was a horrible looking old hag who was chewing her mukluks, just about ready for the bone yard.... I changed her a bit. Did what I could with long hair and mini-skirts. And tried to make her an attractive

Figure 1.1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was the cover of the 1945 reprint of *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* by Bell Features and can be publicly accessed on Wikipedia.

² Notably, Stanley Martin Lieber chose to write comics under the name “Stan Lee,” so as not to discredit his name when the time came to move onto “legitimate” literature.

looking wench. (Reprinted in Kocmarek 112)

By his own admission, Dingle appropriated and anglicized a “deific character” to better suit the image of the Westernized glamour gal. As shown in Figure 1.1, a 1945 Bell Features reprint of her adventures, Nelvana’s pale features, long hair, and short skirt better reflect the image of a contemporary, white superheroine (or movie star) than she did an Inuk woman. While she was still a demigoddess, daughter of the fabricated Inuit god Koliak, she was not necessarily Inuit herself.

In his report on the origins of Nelvana, Bell kindly updates and repositions Dingle’s accounting, noticeably doing away with the expletives “hag” and “wench” and revising the figure from a real woman into a mythological figure:

According to Dingle, his friend Franz Johnston, a member of the Group of Seven, contributed to the initial conception of Nelvana. After a trip to the Arctic, Johnston told Dingle about a powerful Inuit mythological figure—an elderly woman called Nelvana. Dingle thought the character had comic-book potential but realized he would have to re-invent her in keeping with the conventions of the superhero genre. (*Invaders from the North* 60)

While Bell reframes Dingle’s creation of Nelvana, Dingle admits to his own personal and cultural ignorance during his time in comics, from the same 1973 interview: “It was a tough school [working in the comics industry], but a very good one. Drawing from imagination, if one can call it that, without very much time for research, has certainly, for me, provided a sort of mental retention” (reprinted in Kocmarek 113). Generally speaking, as evidenced and emphasized by Dingle’s recollection, the comic book industry is not given to lengthy periods of cultural and creative research; creators often have scant weeks in which to turn out a monthly text. This rapid turnover disadvantages the medium, aiding detractors in its delegitimization. Nelvana, as any superhero, particularly those whose positionalities are already marginalized—here: Inuit, Northern, female—falls into the pit of the colonial, quickly-made, national myth. Dingle accomplishes this feat through his appropriated anglicizing of an Inuit figure (Nelvana), developed for a medium characterized for its rapid production schedule (comics), which culminates in the creation of the first nationalized Canadian superhero.

The First of her Kind

Bell makes the distinction between Vernon Miller's Iron Man, from *Better Comics* (Maple Leaf Publishing, *Better Comics*, March 1941),³ as "the first Canadian superhero" (*Invaders from the North* 44) and Dingle's Nelvana (Hillborough Studios, *Triumph-Adventure Comics*, August 1941) as "the first Canadian *national* superhero" (47; emphasis added). Iron Man has since faded into irrelevance, as did the second Canadian hero, Freelance (Anglo-American Publishing Ltd., *Freelance* No. 1, July 1941), while Nelvana's legacy continues for a distinct reason: her position as a *national* hero. As the online encyclopedia *Canadian Animation, Cartooning and Illustration* observes, the team behind Freelance, "appeared to follow the time honoured Canadian tradition of making the hero generic rather than Canadian perhaps in the hope that they would be able to sell in the U.S.A. market. Therefore, Freelance had neither a country nor for that matter a past" ("Freelance"). Nelvana's entry into the newly created Canadian market detached her from her white, male forerunners with her alignment as a national character; she was emblematic of the Canadian, not American, market. Heroes of this nature—Captain Canada (J.R.D. Publishing, *Fuddle Duddle* No. 1, 1971), Captain Canuck (Comely Comix, *Captain Canuck* No. 1, 1975), and Captain Canada (Newfoundland Herald, *Captain Newfoundland*, 1979)—arrived in full force only during the 1970s when Canada was engaging in a new wave of cultural introspection. Nelvana did not wear the flag as a costume, like those later characters, but her connection to her people and her land mark her as decidedly national. Whether or not Nelvana protects the North, as Southern Canadians such as Dingle understood it, or spreads her goodwill to urban centers, like her fellow wartime super-heroine Wonder Woman, who left the sovereign city-state/island of the Amazons to enact her cultural heroism in the United States, Nelvana's deeds

Figure 1.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a round panel, Nelvana prepares to transform her brother Tanero into a Great Dane. Her word balloon reads, "This is the work of the *kablunets* – (evil white ones) and so my brother – you must assume your disguise as no white one must ever gaze upon your human form!" Original source: Dingle, Adrian, *Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, 2014, 22:2.

³ This figure has no relation to Marvel Comics' Iron Man.

are emphatically national in nature. She defends the North and her people from the *kablunets* or *kabloona*, “a distorted romanization of *qallunaat*” (Woo 10), literally southerners or people from the south. In the comic, however, the word is heavily implied to mean Nazi, since it is explicitly defined in *Nelvana* as “evil white ones” (Dingle 22:2; Fig. 1.2). In keeping current with events in the war, Nelvana goes on to defend the North’s interests from potential Japanese invaders. Bell supports the link between the national superhero and war: “Among the numerous American heroes engaged in the struggle against fascism and militarism was a special kind of superhero—the national superhero, who overtly symbolized America’s identity and pride”⁴ (*Invaders from the North* 59). Pointing north of the border, Bell argues that “if The Iron Man and Freelance were devoid of any attributes that could be deemed Canadian, the same was certainly not true of the country’s third superhero and first national superhero, Nelvana of the Northern Lights” (*Invaders from the North* 60). Nelvana’s attributes as a protector of the land, a shield in wartime, and a Canadian super defender, as defined in the Introduction, are the reasons she is held up as a patriotic ideal, even if her ideological framework and internal sense of nationalism are equivocally positioned. As Benjamin Woo asks, “is Nelvana defending Canada from the *evil* white men, or is she defending the *Inuit* from the evil *white men*?” (Woo 10). Woo’s question, and the emphases he places within the question, reinstate a national confusion regarding Nelvana’s loyalties and her enemies.

Perhaps of all the heroes examined in this thesis, Nelvana is the most similar in nature to Superman—the progenitor of the superhero genre proper.⁵ As with Superman, Nelvana has a hyperbolic number of superpowers (she could have stopped the war single-handedly had she so desired) that necessitate her restriction to an area, culture, or place in order to ensure that the sheer power of the character does not render her redundant in a medium where her reason for existence relies on threat. Like Superman, Nelvana heeds a code of heroic conduct with a specific focus on the protection of the people in the land to which she has been summoned (in the

4 The first of these figures was The Shield, who appeared in *Pep Comics* No. 1 (January 1940). MLJ Publications continue their brand of nationalism in comics by publishing *Archie*, also known as “America’s favorite teenager.” *Archie* became MLJ’s flagship title and the company rebranded itself Archie Comics Publications, in order to align itself with its most popular, nationalistic character.

5 Superman was co-created by Toronto-born artist Joseph Shuster and has enough Canadian roots, despite his lengthy tenure in Americana, to warrant “the man of steel” his own 1995 Canada Post stamp alongside Nelvana, Johnny Canuck, Captain Canuck, and Fleur De Lys.

earlier issues, since she later migrates to urban Ontario), in a method laid out for her by a largely absent father-figure from another realm. Her cultural associations, as laid out for her by her earthly creator on her 1945 Bell Features reprint cover, reference the manner of cultural and historical Canadianisms with which Dingle desired to affiliate her. Dingle's use of a double sunset on the first cover (Fig. 1.1) creates the effect of a double halo, which, in essence, sanctifies what the eye is drawn to in the lower southwestern corner: three perennial expressions of Canada and the North, "Eskimos–Mounties–Trappers." Behind Nelvana's outstretched leg rests a jutting iceberg, an intimate overlap of woman and northern land that ties the two together. If early Superman, by way of his animated cartoons, was associated with expressions of American expansionisms—"Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings at a single bound!"—Nelvana is equally bound to nationalized and northern symbols: "Eskimos! Mounties! Trappers! Icebergs!" (Fig. 1.1).

If Superman is fully nationalized as American, while still operating as an ambassador of his home planet Krypton, it stands to reason that Nelvana, a nationalized Canadian hero, is an ambassador of the North. As Bell notes, "This identification is further underscored in issue No. 20 of *Triumph*, in which she travels south and adopts a new identity—Alana North, Secret Agent" (*Invaders from the North* 62).⁶ Even after she migrates to Ontario, Nelvana takes the land (the North) with her in her anglicized name (Alana North); Golden Age comics did not deal in subtleties. However, it is in this migration to southern Ontario, where Nelvana adopts a secret identity (as Wonder Woman later on took on the identity of Diana Prince), that Nelvana becomes progressively more Europeanized. Formerly a "celestial visitor" (Dingle 20:1), born of and at one with the Northern Lights, Nelvana the secret agent, in her later adventures, is dressed in a contemporary fashion.

Schrödingerisms: Indigeneity and Cultural Allegiance

The answer to the question of Nelvana's allegiance is not necessarily found in the Indigeneity or nationalism that was assigned to her, but in her connection to the land itself. In "Inummarik: Self-Sovereignty in Classic Inuit Thought," Rachel Qitsualik (Inuit-Scottish-Cree) states that "the Inuit perspective, rather than running along anthropomorphic lines (the earth as mother, animals as brethren, etc.), tends toward a less poetic yet equally cautionary lens through

⁶ In this passage, *Triumph* refers to the overall title *Triumph-Adventure Comics*.

which to view the Land [*Nuna*]” (24). When Northrop Frye asks, “Where is here?” (“Conclusion” 826), *Nelvana* answers that *here* is a “desolate northland” (24:3). *Nelvana*’s allegiance to the land, a performative discourse of Sherrill Grace’s Canada-as-North (xii), particularly in the first few issues, is expressed through guardianship and a desire to protect the land’s resources from the invasive *kablunets*, but also through an appropriated spiritualism as she “regally [descends] to Earth” once summoned by the Inuit and “alights gracefully upon the snow altar” (Dingle 19:2-4).

In *Native Americans in Comic Books*, Michael Sheyahshe critiques Marvel Comics’ character Shaman (a founding team member of Marvel Comics’ *Alpha Flight* with ties to both the American and Canadian incarnations of *Nelvana*) for his “primary function as a mystic support[ing] the idea that Indigenous people are naturally children of the spiritual realm, based on genetics alone” (68). Similarly, Dingle’s *Nelvana* leans heavily on the romanticized bio-anthropology and familial, spiritual connection that Qitsualik and Sheyahshe speak of. *Nelvana* derives her powers from her kinship with the nebulous spirits of the North. As Bell notes, “Initially garbed in a fur-trimmed mini-skirt, *Nelvana* was a very powerful heroine” (*Invaders from the North* 48), for she drew from a large pool of superpowers. These included telepathy, invisibility, shapeshifting, immortality, the ability to fly on the Northern Lights, the ability to call upon her father’s powers (which gave her control over radio waves and metal), the use of a magical cape to transform the shape of her brother, and generally whatever Dingle and the text required of her in service of the plot. Despite Dingle’s efforts to cross-pollinate *Nelvana*’s action-adventure superheroics with a (now dated) proto-Indigenous-futurism, it is the fantastical relationship she has with the land that most clearly continues “the essentialization of the Canadian North as an anti-modern, quasi-mystical space” (Dittmer and Larsen 52). Issue of the mortal and immortal, she is a demigod—not unlike Heracles, Perseus, Gilgamesh, or Wonder Woman—here, born of an unnamed mortal woman and an Inuit god, Koliak the mighty, King of the Northern Lights (a Dingle approximation of an Inuit Zeus figurehead). Running parallel with source material more Greek than Inuit, her long black hair is held down with a winged headband, reminiscent of Hermes.

While *Nelvana*’s cultural significations remain multiple and indeterminate, it is my position that despite her appearance, *Nelvana* was intended by Dingle to represent an Inuit figure. As the daughter of Koliak, King of the Northern Lights, *Nelvana* embodies the

stereotypical trope of the “Indian Princess,” or in this case the “Inuit Princess.”⁷ In following the protocols of the trope, she is the daughter of a mighty patriarch, has an absentee or anonymous mother, and operates as the intermediary between her people and the encroaching colonial world. Nelvana is liminally aligned; she serves her father, the Inuit people, and the approaching colonial sphere all at once. In the article/interview “Nelvana of the Northern Lights,” Nicole Rubacha speaks with Hope Nicholson, a scholar specializing in Canadian comics literature who also acquired the rights in 2013 to reprint Nelvana’s adventures in their entirety. Nicholson clearly Indigenizes Dingle’s heroine as not only “for the people” but “of the people”: “She’s identifiably Canadian [and her] story is tied intrinsically into the North.... Through the stories and experiences of an Inuit character, ... readers see the racism and prejudices of the war years bleeding through the pages. It’s a fascinating, complex character and story” (quoted in Rubacha 19). However, once summoned by Chief Tadjoo in her inaugural issue, Nelvana places herself apart from him: she says, “We leave you now—oh Tadjoo—to destroy this evil thing that menaces *your people*” (*Nelvana* 24:1; emphasis added). Later she reaffiliates herself when she remarks to her brother, “We have foiled the evil kablunets’ carefully prepared plan to rob and starve our people. Our Hunters will not set their nets in vain” (30:2) and again when she speaks of foiling the plot against “our Eskimo people” (44:6). Bell contests Nelvana’s Indigeneity by stating that although she serves her people, she stands apart, or over, them: “while Nelvana personified the North, she was not Inuit, but rather belonged to a long line of white queens and goddesses. ... These alluring, powerful females tended to have names that ended with the letter *a*, were beautiful and immortal, and usually ruled over more ‘primitive’ peoples (often lost races)” (*Invaders from the North* 62). The appropriative reworking of a previously unpalatable character (as Dingle understood it) to a newer, more youthful, whiter version of herself—a racially charged *crone to maiden* reprocessing—marks *Nelvana* as a solid example of appropriative, colonial literature. Dingle himself seems uncertain what manner of character he created, for she is referred to in a later adventure as “a white woman” (228:2), and Woo notes, “when [she] first reveals herself to Col. Keene of the RCMP she brings ‘news that is of vital importance to *your country*’” (10; emphasis in original). Again, it is ultimately unclear—even within the text—if Nelvana can categorically be considered Inuit or not, but modern fans and critics, such as

7 Her literary sister-trope, the “Jungle Princess,” is usually a character of European origin.

Rubacha and Nicholson, certainly want her to be an Indigenous figure, while Bell and Woo cast her as white, for, as Woo queries, “if Nelvana is an Inuit goddess and, therefore, an Inuit superhero, why does she look so much like Hedy Lamarr?” (11).

The text itself, as penned by Dingle, seems to agree (at times) with the modern perspective of Nelvana-as-Inuit by distancing Nelvana, Tadjó, and Tanero from the settler-invader influence through repetitious othering and invocations of the “kablunets (evil white ones)” who must never “gaze upon [Tanero’s] human form” (22:2; Fig. 1.2). Dingle makes the distinction, however, that there is a difference between the “evil white ones” (war-time invaders) and settlers when Nelvana muses, “They are very kind and hospitable! These Canadians” (232:2). Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte posit that approaches similar to those of Rubacha, Nicholson, and Dingle are symptomatic of the Canadian postcolonial gothic discourse: literature that supports not only the “unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression, diasporic migration, or national consolidation [into] the form of ghosts or monsters that ‘haunt’ the nation/subject from without and within” (xii), but also the literary-colonial framework of abject guilt in association with these practices. *Nelvana* embodies the gothic discourse Sugars and Turcotte speak of. While fantastical, the narrative, particularly surrounding Nelvana herself, is cold and distant, and her association with white men, particularly in the early issues, is troubled; these men are to be avoided. Yet, through an anglicized “make-over,” Dingle appropriates Nelvana for both a Canadian colonial and comic book market, thus eschewing and securing not only her whiteness but her “sexy” whiteness. Comic books and, to an extent, their offspring, graphic novels, have an extensive, almost exhaustive history of sexualizing women, here intersectionally compounded by the sexualization of an Inuit, or Inuit-affiliated, woman

Perhaps Nelvana’s intrigue comes by way of her Schrödingerisms: she is Indigenous, except when she’s not; a woman, written by a man; a northerner, written by a southerner; an immortal hero nearly lost to time; and a Canadian cultural icon who, as noted by Woo, often distances herself from Canadian nationality. As Superman, an avatar for the Jewish-immigrant experience, was “the man of steel,” so was Nelvana “the mystery girl of the Arctic” (Dingle 74). If she remains a mystery, she may also occupy any sociocultural or political space required of her, including that of the effigial Canadian super defender.

Nelvana’s claim to Indigeneity continues to be relevant, as Canada explores the colonial

underpinnings of the Second World War experience—the international trauma that birthed Nelvana—by asking “why did Indigenous people choose to fight for a country that marginalized them?” (“Indigenous Veterans”). The motives and numbers of Indigenous peoples who participated in the war have been increasingly uncovered while, as *Nelvana* once was, the services of Indigenous veterans “are sometimes forgotten and misunderstood” (“Indigenous Veterans”). Scott Sheffield, whose research focus is Indigenous peoples’ role in the Canadian military, observes that Indigenous soldiers of the Second World War “wanted to defend Canada, yes. But they also wanted to defend their own territories, their own communities, their own people” (quoted in “Indigenous Veterans”). Was Nelvana, then, an avatar for the Indigenous soldier’s complex relationship with Canadian nationalism, experiences, and motivations during wartime? It is not impossible, but rather unlikely that Dingle would have made this correlation; however, these connections can be made retroactively.

Understandably, the purported Indigeneity of Nelvana is a problem. I argue that while *Nelvana*, the book, is not an Indigenous or Inuit text, as it was not created by an Indigenous author, Nelvana, the character, can be considered Inuit; however, it is important to address the existing scholarship on why her Indigeneity could be contested. Nelvana as an Indigenous figure who also doubles as Canada’s first national superhero—an avatar for Canada and Northernness itself—creates the effect of puppet-theater, as Thomas King notes when he observes that North America has a long-standing, storyteller’s tradition of creating these dichotomous characters who are, in effect, “National Indian[s]” (79), which Daniel Francis builds upon by declaring that Indigenous peoples, nationalized or otherwise, are already, like Nelvana, imaginary creations, for “[t]he Indian is the invention of the European” (142).

Nelvana the Comic: Art and Form

Even in form, *Nelvana* straddles a spectrum of legitimacy. As explored in the Introduction, the differences between the ephemeral comic magazine and the graphic novel format lies in more than their tactile nature and their respective longevity, as Baetens and Frey note when they discuss the elitism inherent in the divide between the formats (3). *Nelvana* the comic (1941-1947) faded into obscurity after the war ended, until Canada Post recognized it in 1995. However, *Nelvana* the book (2014), a reprinted collection of the comics, and the text I am using here, has ensured her credibility as a Canadian superhero worth analyzing, a condition that (arguably) would not have been met had *Nelvana* remained published only in the cheap format in

which the Canadian Whites specialized.

Scholarship on the Canadian Whites observes that, in addition to her status as the first national Canadian superhero and other various social and political positionalities, Nelvana has gained longevity precisely because of the sophistication of the artwork on her title, as Dingle was “one of Cy Bell’s more mature artists” (Hirsh and Loubert 23). Other publications suffered, perhaps charmingly so, from relative

Figure 1.3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Figure 1.3 was a selection of three panels: (1) In an upper left-hand corner, in a small circular panel surrounded by graphic representation of explosive noise (jagged lines), an Inuit hunter beats a drum. The text reads, “Suddenly—skin drums are beaten furiously.” (2) In a small rectangular panel, people are seen running, and the text reads, “and the People rush to the summons.” (3) In a larger rectangular panel, Chief Tadjo and the People are seen summoning Nelvana, with the text reading, “Nelvana will come” and “Tadjo shouts the good news.” Original source: Dingle, Adrian, *Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, 2014, 17:1-3.

inexperience at the hands of younger, less experienced commercial artists who were eager to be a part of a new Canadian industry. Many of these artists were adolescents, supporting a case for Canadian comics not only as “for us, by us” but as juvenilia for juveniles. Hirsh and Loubert note that Dingle’s artwork stood out in the field, small as it was: “Dingle’s artwork in *Nelvana* is so energetic that it largely compensates for the lack of printed colour in the Canadian Whites” (23). Bell supports this supposition, noting that Dingle’s art “was far more sophisticated than that of most of his Canadian contemporaries. Through *Nelvana*’s run in the comics from August 1941 to May 1947, Dingle’s artwork was distinguished by its elegant, bold design and by his mastery of chiaroscuro” (*Invaders from the North* 62).

Perhaps understanding the power of the stark image in a genre where men could leap tall buildings in a single bound and demigoddesses in mini-skirts flew through the northern night skies, Dingle inked *Nelvana* with harsh, bold strokes. Kocmarek praises the acuity of *Nelvana*’s artwork with the observation that the economic measures that resulted in a cheaper medium (the lack of colour printing that characterized the Canadian Whites) worked in the text’s favour,

noting that Dingle had a flair for heavy inking that “very few other comic book illustrators could [match] and this added extra strength and depth to his telling of a story when the nuance of colour wasn’t available. His pages were always animated and with variegated panels with figures that often extend beyond the panel edges” (113; Fig. 1.3). These extensions beyond panel borders into the gutter, as discussed by McCloud in the Introduction, eschew the prescriptivism of the typical Golden Age comic or newspaper strip. Figure, text, and panel extension, used in this manner, suggest a willingness to extend perspectives, arguably Dingle’s and/or the reader’s, beyond the borders of conventional knowledge.

In order to summon Nelvana, an unnamed and stereotypically drawn hunter beats a circular drum (Fig. 1.3). The image is encased in a circular panel, which then radiates a blooming circle of jagged edges intended to visualize, and accompany, the text that reads, “Suddenly—skin drums are beaten furiously” (17:1). The visualization of the sound explosion is more powerful than the neighbouring panel borders and the sound itself—a visual expression of aural jaggedness—overlaps panels two and three, leading the eye towards Chief Tadjó’s excited announcement, in large diagonal type, “Nelvana will come” (17:3).

Likewise, Nelvana herself presses beyond the rounded border of the panel when she informs her brother, Tanero, that if the evil *kablunets* succeed in their efforts to obtain whale oil and heat-producing metal ores, then “the earth will be *ruled by tyranny*” (48:3; Fig. 1.4). Nelvana emphatically declares what is at stake, should she and her brother fail to protect the land. Dingle could have made panel three a rectangle, thus encasing Nelvana and her statement,

Figure 1.4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a large rectangular panel, Tanero consults with Nelvana in front of a backdrop of stylized icebergs and water. The text box on the left-hand side reads, “Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the north of Tadjó’s domain – Nelvana and her brother Tanero rest upon an iceberg and discuss the secret plan of Commander Toroff.” Tanero’s word balloon reads, “So this plan reveals that Toroff’s government has been sending fish-pirates among the ice-fields to obtain sufficient whale oil to drive the metal monsters used by the *evil kablunets* in their attempt to *rule the world*.” Nelvana’s word balloon reads, “Yes – but they are also trying to obtain a peculiar heat producing metal ore, and if success crowns their efforts, the Earth will be *ruled by tyranny*.” Original source: Dingle, Adrian, *Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, 2014, 48:3.

but he chose to end the panel in a curved line, thrusting Nelvana and her mission statement outside of space and time and imbuing it with both importance and timelessness. By meeting readers in the space where they are meant to construct narrative and spatial awareness (the gutter), Nelvana engages, challenges, and escapes—if only momentarily—the world that was appropriated and constructed for her.

In “The Koine of Myth: Myth as a Universally Intelligible Language” from *Myth and Metaphor*, Frye distinguishes between *story*, *history*, and *myth*: “we have stories that are not intended to possess ‘truth,’ but are ‘just stories,’ which may be fantastic enough to be improbable or so far as we know impossible” (3). This inquiry into the space where the possible and impossible live together coordinates with what I consider to be the Nelvana mythos, as Frye explores form-content and myth: “A myth, in nearly all its senses, is a narrative that suggests two inconsistent responses: first, ‘this is what is said to have happened,’ and second, ‘this almost certainly is not what happened, at least in precisely the way described.’ It is this latter aspect of myth that has given it the vulgar sense of something simply untrue, something that did not occur” (“Koine” 4). *Nelvana* taps into the untrue truth of re-adaptive and appropriative myth-making in the way that only superhero comics, expected to be both taken seriously and not taken seriously, can do. It is on this supposition that Wertham feared that the myth-making power of comics was a precursor to “modern mass delinquency” (13). As James Reibman notes of Wertham’s research, these stories—particularly as they are articulated through the comic form—shape “the moral and social universe” of those who read them (vii). The myth, or Frye’s distinction between what *did* and *did not* happen, lies not only in Nelvana’s superhuman abilities but also in her presentation as a heroine who is both Inuit and not Inuit, operating within both Canada and an unCanada.

In Other Words

What evidence is found in *Nelvana* to assess and inform the theory of the super defender, or the degrees of pride or embarrassment Canada has concerning its domestic, national superheroes? Certainly by placing Nelvana in the quasi-mystical space of a magical and timeless Northern cartography (despite the contemporaneous setting of the Second World War that characterizes the need for a super defender), *Nelvana* is toeing the edge of a Canadian futurism that *Captain Canuck* will later take over. *Nelvana* supports Grace’s research that stories of Canadian Northernness are ultimately performances of Northern identity and discourse in which

both Southern Canadians and those “who live north of sixty” engage (xvi). As Dingle characterizes it, the North is a “wasteland” (46:3) where the “kablunet (white man) is practically unknown” (47:1), despite Nelvana and Tanero’s possible whiteness. *Nelvana*, a superheroic text for Canadians by a Canadian is thus trivialized, and Nelvana is reduced to a super defender of, in Dingle’s words, a “wasteland.” Again, the Canadian hero, or the creators of these heroes, is perpetually at odds with what exactly is to be defended.

I theorize that Canadian nationalized heroes will always be a source of satire, bewilderment, skepticism, shame, or, in the case of *Nelvana*, dismissal, but I do not see this occurring within the text of *Nelvana* itself. The inference that can be drawn is twofold: (1) superheroes created in war are almost always adopted into the sphere of sincere popular culture, and (2) the ridiculing of the nationalized Canadian hero would come later, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s when the figure of the national superhero became fodder for scorn, and the stoic figure of the Mountie (a national heroic figure replete with costume) was cut down to the size of Dudley Do Right. As analyzed by Bell, Kocmarek, Rubacha, Woo, and Nicholson, and as evidenced by Dingle’s own troubled but ardent efforts, *Nelvana* is an earnest piece of Canadiana—an adventure heroine presented with all the dignity the medium could muster. Where my theory of the foolish super defender comes into play is that Nelvana, not unlike Indigenous war veterans who existed outside the pages of graphic narratives, and her contemporaries in the wartime Canadian Whites, such as *Johnny Canuck* and *Canada Jack*, became pieces of lost literature and cerements of a forgotten culture. Once the War Exchange Conservation Act (WECA) was lifted, American comic books and their respective heroes returned to the Canadian market, and the flame of the Golden Age of Canadian Comics burnt out. The Canadian inferiority complex, here noted by the lack of passionate faith in its heroes, as well as a lack of faith in the medium of early Canadian comic books, has resulted in a scarcity of material examples of Canadian Whites, as Nicholson notes that these comics “are some of the rarest in the market. It’s estimated that less than 10 issues exist of each one” (quoted in Rubacha 19).

Ironically, it is the scarcity of those black-and-white mass-media texts that have, once again, made them as socially interesting and valuable as they were in their prime years. The dismissal of these cultural stories, resulting in their near extinction, has enticed a retrospective audience. Nicholson points out that “Nelvana was a significant part of our cultural history that

has been hidden for decades. ... During the war, millions of these comic books were sold. Our grandparents' generation read them avidly, and now we barely can even find mentions of them in history books" (quoted in Rubacha 17). In 2013, Nicholson and Richey crowd-funded the capital required to accomplish Nelvana's rise from the ashes, which was no small endeavour as the original *Nelvana* pages had to be accessed either through the National Archives in Ottawa or through private art collections. Additionally, many of the original plates had been lost (19). Nelvana's wartime heroics, warts and all, were resurrected and reprinted in their entirety in 2014 and again in 2017.⁸ The future for Canadian-settler superheroes and Indigenous superheroes is positive, and Nicholson rests that optimism on Nelvana's back: "Not only do we get these great stories with *Nelvana of the North*, but it means that future Canadian comics have a better chance than ever before of being made" (19).

Nelvana, a cultural icon and a wartime super-heroine of either the North, Canada, or the Inuit community has come to represent something more significant than herself. She set the table for superheroic Canadian and marginal cultural graphic narratives so that others could feast, and she continues to re-emerge, albeit intermittently, in domestic publications as a crowning achievement of Canadian superheroism—a state of being we continually struggle to believe in—as noted by her appearances on the cover of *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971), *Canuck Comics* (1986), the Canadian Superheroes stamp set (1995), and in the pages of *Auroraman* (2016). If the Canadian super defender has come to be a lightning rod for cynicism and shame, then it is not present in the origin of the genre itself with *Nelvana*, but instead in the later treatment of *Nelvana* and its contemporaries, as they disappeared from the canon they created to such an extent that no one knew there were even Canadian comics in the first place. The Massey Report (1951), Hirsh and Loubert (1971), and Richard Comely's *Captain Canuck* (1975) inspired the re-creation of a Canadian literary canon, including in Canadian superhero comics. It is during this resurgence of Canadian nationalism, which later leads to the Canadian Silver Age of comics, that *Nelvana* is rediscovered, acknowledged as forgotten literature, and dusted off accordingly.

⁸ In these reprints, Nelvana's image is sometimes darkened to support a reading of her as an Indigenous character.

CHAPTER 2: CAPTAIN CANUCK: FINALLY, A SUPERHERO FOR CANADA

“Canada finally has her own honest-to-goodness comic magazine with Canada’s very own superhero—Captain Canuck!” (*Captain Canuck* No. 1, 1:1)

Captain Canuck was introduced in 1975 in *Captain Canuck* No. 1, published independently by Richard Comely. Canuck was touted as “Canada’s very own superhero” (1:1),⁹ a claim that supports John Bell’s observation the comics industry “seemed to contain an implicit message: Canada was a backwater bereft of heroes” (*Invaders from the North* 71). *Captain Canuck* is set in the near-future of an alternate 1990s where, by virtue of its natural resources, Canada has become the most powerful nation on Earth. “The Great White North” is now a target for invasion from abroad. The national government has formed the Canadian International Security Organization (C.I.S.O.) in response to these transnational threats, and the living symbol of Canada and C.I.S.O. is Tom Evans, otherwise known as Captain Canuck. Having acquired his powers through an alien ray during a camping trip, Canuck demonstrates, throughout his initial 1975-1981 run, superhuman strength, peak levels of endurance and agility, and an unwavering faith in God, which he uses to protect Canada from raiders, traitors, and aliens. As noted in *Captain Canuck* No. 12, “Tom Evans was now C.I.S.O.’s ‘symbol of authority and power’—a showpiece for Canada” (1). Readers enter Canuck’s speculative realm *in medias res* by following him as he saves a northern radar base from Communist foreign agents, is kidnapped from a hospital by the nefarious Mr. Gold, and is subsequently unmasked, revealing his mixed Euro-Indigenous ancestry.

Figure 2.1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was the cover of *Captain Canuck* No. 1 (1975) by Comely Comix and can be publicly accessed on Wikipedia.

⁹ *Captain Canuck* No. 1 has no observable pagination. My page count begins on the first interior page, includes advertisement pages, and excludes the front and back interior covers. While other *Captain Canuck* comics did use page numbers, they did not count paratextual pages such as “Comely Mail” and advertisements; therefore, my pagination for all of Comely’s issues will follow the same pagination protocol as used for No. 1.

While *Captain Canuck* continues to be published sporadically, with different creative teams and different men under the mask, my interest is in Canuck's initial run as penned and (mostly) illustrated by Richard Comely, with a focus on the first five issues. For contemporaneous readers, particularly those who did not remember the Canadian Whites, this proud, flag-wearing hero on the cover of the first issue was more than timely; it was "about time," and the cover, with its multiplication of Canadian flags—one in the Comely Comix logo, another in the third 'C' of the title, one on the flag behind the hero, one on his belt, and another on his forehead—promised nothing less than absolute nationalistic fervour (Fig. 2.1). I became thoroughly entrenched in, and even enamoured with, the *idea* of the good Captain's authenticity as a Canadian hero when I opened the first issue and beheld the first panel (Fig. 2.2).¹⁰ *Captain Canuck* is rife with intended and unintended ironies, including the near-oxymoronic idea of a Canadian superhero and a citizenry who openly mock the very *idea* of a Canadian superhero, even in *Captain Canuck's* speculative universe. As the Captain strolls through an incredulous and diverse crowd of onlookers (a nod towards the notion of Canadian multiculturalism), one says, "Hey fella. Ya forgot to take off your ... jammies," while another responds, "Thats [sic] Canada's superhero. Dummy!" (No. 1, 1:1; Fig. 2.2). The words of the in-text citizenry may have anticipated Comely's fear of *Captain Canuck's* critical reception from a readership reared on *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Spider-Man*. Defensively, Comely himself creates an effigy of the hero he attempts to elevate before the story even begins.

As a visual and multimodal text, the comic panel follows a (generally) standardized set of rules. A panel, as Scott McCloud observes, is a "general indicator that time or space is being divided"; however, "The durations of that time and the dimensions of that space are defined more by the contents of the panel than the panel itself" (*Understanding Comics* 99:3-4). So, what does that mean for the first panel of *Captain Canuck*? An introductory panel, on the first page of an inaugural issue, establishes the ideologies found within the comic and the comic's methodological approach. The "jammies panel" both foregrounds and destabilizes the central hero who stares out of the frame that he is contained within. In contrast, the citizenry that he

¹⁰ Panel one of No. 1 was originally used as promotional leaflet, or faux cover, in order to advertise the upcoming first issue. Allegedly, it was also destined to be the front cover itself but was relegated to the inside cover of No. 1, effectively operating as a frontispiece before the story begins.

lumpers past are all decidedly gazing upon Canuck and pronouncing their judgments of him. As Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen note in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, the gazes of the foreground and background characters “relate to the themes of the dramatic action” (175). Canuck, read as the personification of Canada itself, does not hold onto power within his first frame despite his foregrounding; that power is assigned to the Canadian people, whose incredulous commentary indicates that they do not believe in what they see. The text is, therefore, instantly propped up in a methodology of chagrin— a cornerstone of Canadian heroic identification—through which the hero is humiliated, by citizenry and author alike, before he can begin his work. We, the readers, do not yet, at this point in the comic, know what Canuck will save us from; we only know that we already believe him to be incapable. The disconnect between the earnest, nationalized front cover (with Canuck standing in front of the waving flag) and the opening panel is viscerally jarring and empowers a sense of national skepticism over national pride.

Captain Canuck was created by Ron Leishman and Richard Comely. The first issue, in July 1975, appeared under Comely’s eponymous Comely Comix label, published independently out of Winnipeg, Manitoba, and then later out of Calgary, Alberta, under CKR Productions Limited. Leishman, who first designed the character as Captain Canada in 1971, eventually left to pursue his Christian missionary work, although he would remain a consultant. Comely took

Figure 2.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a rectangular panel, Captain Canuck strides into the foreground, while five diverse citizens provide commentary behind him, running from left to right: “Hey fella. Ya forgot to take off your... jammies.” “Far out!” “That’s Canada’s *superhero*. Dummy!” and “Good heavens.” Original source: Comely, Richard, *Captain Canuck* No. 1, 1975, 1:1.

over the character, cross-pollinating nationalism, Christianity, speculative science-fiction, and superheroics into *Captain Canuck*. In “A History: English Canadian Comic Books,” Bell argues that the publication of the full-colour *Captain Canuck* No. 1 “ushered in the nation’s Silver Age” (39). Despite Comely’s efforts being “undeniably marred by stilted artwork and scripting,” Bell points out that this was the first Canadian comic-book superhero to carry the name “since the demise of Johnny Canuck, Sergeant Canuck, and Canada Jack in 1945” (39). Dressed in the Canadian maple-leaf flag, which had only been adopted ten years earlier, Canuck rode the wave initially sparked by the Massey Report in 1951, intending to further the agenda of national optimism.

As well as representing national pride, *Captain Canuck* was a personal platform for Comely. Ryan Edwardson notes that “Comely’s interest in conspiracy theories and his Mormon beliefs shaped the comic’s content” (191). In *Captain Canuck* No. 1, Comely promises that “there is nothing within [this comic book] that is degrading or offensive and we’re 100% Canadian” (1:1), thus synonymizing inoffensiveness with Canadianness. Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert also argue that the tendency to transmute the public into the personal is a common occurrence in Canadian comics publishing, claiming that Canadian superheroes “were naive – bound to the personal feelings and wishes of their author, and cast in a bizarre mold by his subconscious fears” (217). While this statement, conflating comics (and the superheroes within) as a product with a reflexive impulse to autobiography, is far-reaching, the approach is evident in the comics analyzed here, particularly in the case of *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*. Dingle and Comely pen stories of conspiracy and invasion but project their fears into unCanadian, speculative fantasy; paradoxically, it is only a hero of supreme Canadianness who can protect this unCanada. While not the first Canadian national superhero to emerge after the Second World War—one is the similarly flag-draped, but oft forgotten, Northern Light (*Orb Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July 1974)—*Captain Canuck* was the most prolific one, continuing to appear, albeit sporadically, in various media from his inception to this day.

Tom Evans the Canuck

Tom Evans was a Canadian secret agent whose “tremendous strength and endurance” was initially reported, in “Comely Mail,” to have come from “a good wholesome diet and lots of exercise” and whose “alertness and determination” similarly arose from “a strong, clean mind” (No. 2, 32). In No. 5, however, Comely rewrote Canuck’s powers as having been gifted from

extraterrestrials, effectively retconning Canuck's power base of clean, Canadian living.¹¹ A superhero's origin story provides the framework for the hero's methodological approach, providing the basis for their perspective on crime, punishment, defense, and justice. Captain Canuck, the most iconic of Canadian national heroes, receives powers not from the land itself but from space; he is pinned to a locality and a national ideology, but his powers (olympic levels of speed, agility, endurance, and superhuman strength) indicate that, on one level, he cannot be bound to these national localities. Nelvana derives her power from the North itself, and is a superhero of specific cartography; Captain Canuck's (initial) powers, alien origins notwithstanding, generically mark him as the everyman's superhero who, were it not for his costumed and etymological declarations, could be from any country. His powers—in essence, his origins—are proverbially universal.

Powers bestowed from celestial sources (here, aliens) can be connected to Christian ideology. Indeed, this particular speculative superhero evokes messiah tropes, and was created by a Mormon artist-writer who might prefer that the power that protects the peace in Canada comes as a gift from the heavens rather than from Canuck's willful, earned commitment to a wholesome lifestyle. His wearing of the Canadian flag indicates that he is representative of a subsection of nationalized superheroes—the flag folk—who are intended to broadly represent not only the sociocultural capital of their citizenry, but also the citizenry itself. He is us.¹² Canada's avatar is both alike and unlike Marvel Comics' Captain America, who also wears a flag and has a national name. The Canadian icon's surname, Canuck, is a communal identifier, self-referential, and, more to the point, self-deprecating. Captain America, a paragon of earnest nationalism, is not a Yank or a Yankee—both historically pejorative monikers that initially referred only to northeastern Americans. In contrast, a Canuck, originally American post-Confederation editorial slang for a singularly personified Canadian (a Johnny Canuck, as opposed to an Uncle Sam) is now simply vernacular for *a* Canadian—ideally one who fits the general, international form of a hockey-playing, maple-syrup-guzzling lumberjack.¹³ Canuck,

¹¹ Retcon stands for retroactive continuity and, in comics and film analysis, often refers to a narrative device that alters, discredits, or changes the content of previously established continuity.

¹² But who is “us”?

¹³ The hockey team, The Vancouver Canucks, notwithstanding.

then, is a word that travels on the spectrum of either being gently dyslogistic or absolutely embraced by those whom it references.

In Canadian comics, the Captain is not the first of his breed, for Bell Features had published the adventures of their Canuck in *Johnny Canuck* alongside *Nelvana*. Notably, Johnny Canuck appeared with *Nelvana* and Captain Canuck in Canada Post's 1995 Superhero stamp series, thus firmly entrenching and legitimizing these superheroes. This observation is confirmed by Edwardson, who states that this move by the Canadian government is "an example of perpetual nation-building, an item of popular culture presenting national signifiers that, following its demise, [are then] resurrected and recycled into a national signifier itself; it was fostered in a period of nationalism, empowered the national identity, and later was integrated into the national myth-symbol roster" (185). In *Captain Canuck*, the Canadian government was able to resurrect and repurpose pop nationalism into a legitimate national signifier. Like *Nelvana*, Johnny Canuck, Northern Light, or either of the Captain Canadas, Captain Canuck could have slid into general obscurity; however, as Edwardson notes, Canuck had the cultural capital that the Canadian government was interested in harnessing in order to further the ideology of united Canadian nationalism—one hero to represent the populous. On one hand, Canuck is simply gracing a stamp; on the other hand, the Canadian government, through this revival, renewed and encouraged a dialogue on Canadian heroism.

While comics texts during the war years such as the Canadian Whites can be read through the lens of the homegrown heroic effigy—texts meant for destruction upon their creation¹⁴—this critical approach is applied with more ease to the canonical texts of the 1970s such as *Captain Canuck*. While in full colour, *Captain Canuck* had the moral fiber of its black and white antecedents, but, unlike his heroic ancestors—*Nelvana* of the Northern Lights, Johnny Canuck, Canada Jack, et al.—Captain Canuck was not tied down to the decade of his creation. Canuck's adventures initially fit contextually under the umbrella of Canadian futurism—the reoccurring impulse to lean on speculation and the reworking of Canada into an unCanada—as discussed in the Introduction. This speculative quality was also found in the Captain Canadas that both preceded and followed *Captain Canuck* — respectively the satirical (and short-lived), moose-antler wearing Captain Canada (J.R.D. Publishing, *Fuddle Duddle*, No. 1, 1971) and the

¹⁴ Also known as "bird cage liners."

otherworldly Captain Canada (Newfoundland Herald, *Captain Newfoundland*, 1979). Nelvana suffered from insular exoticism: a Canadian superhero created by a Canadian artist-writer, but also a northern, arguably Inuit demigoddess created through the lens of a southern, white, decidedly mortal man. In contrast to Nelvana, Captain Canuck appears to stay within his knowledge base: he is a Canadian paradoxically superpowered layman created by a Canadian layman. This “for us, by us” approach granted *Captain Canuck* more longevity and national status than *Nelvana* initially enjoyed.

Captain America’s surname, while a national and nationalized signifier, cannot be individually applied in the same manner as Canuck: America is the governmental us, the United States Senate in spandex; Canuck is me and you, the layperson, the average “Joe on the street.” Externally, Captain Canuck, equally square in jaw and shoulder, typifies the robust, northern alpha male. He wears white, thick-cuffed cavalier boots—a swashbuckling fashion choice that has long been a staple in the Hollywood hero’s closet, visual shorthand for “man of action”—and his flared gloves, providing a symmetry with the boots in shape and colour, are white. As discussed in the Introduction, the maple leaf, particularly in the genre of superhero comics, is symbolic shorthand for the nationalized, Northern superhero and, has been the *de facto* icon for Canadianness since Confederation. Even Alexander Muir’s “The Maple Leaf Forever” (1867) prognosticates the status of this leaf as eternal. Canuck wears the Canadian maple leaf on his forehead as a third eye—an indication that the locus of all his wisdom is nationalized. Interestingly, this maple leaf is also bulletproof, courtesy of C.I.S.O. as revealed in a firefight in No. 6, which invites a reading that this nationalized wisdom is ironclad and impenetrable. The maple leaf makes another appearance on his belt buckle, seated between the two overt plains of masculinity in many action-heroes, circus strong men, or superheroes: the (rippling) abdominals and the groin. The stylized, pointed ends of the maple leaf rise upward like the rays of the sun, and, alongside the obvious placement of the second leaf, the inference is clear: “The symbolism is plain: sun = phallus” (Jung 3). When not in superhero costume, as the every-man or all-Canadian embodiment, Evans is a Northern, if not Nordic, utilitarian fashion plate: denim and work-shirts, shorthand for a man accustomed to manual labour in colder climates.

Northern, Arctic, and/or Canadian Futurism

The premiere issue of *Captain Canuck* occurs, unsurprisingly, in the Arctic North. The physiographics of the “Great White North” idealize a monocartography that all Canadians hold

dear as a representative of a national whole, while also being uniquely isolated and unknowable. As noted by Jason Dittmer and Soren Larsen, “a North that is at once powerful and dangerous [is] also invigorating and unifying for all Canadians” (65). This communal identification with northern spaces has both profitable and literary possibilities: “If the Arctic landscape can be seen as inscribed as a set of economic resources in these [Canadian] comics, it was also alongside another representation of the north as a space of fantasy” (Dittmer and Larsen 60). The bedrock of the heroic Arctic Canadian myth continually presupposes that “the Arctic North is understandable as a landscape of magic and resources that must be protected” (60). Those thematic fears were present in *Nelvana*, and they continue in Canuck’s Canadian futurism, thus entrenching a reliance on this fear into Canadian comics. In *Captain Canuck* No. 1, government agents Captain Canuck and Bluefox travel across the ice via snowmobile (bedecked with maple leaves), having been summoned by a disaster at one of Canada’s northern alert stations, described as “all-seeing sentinals [sic] for the continent” (2:1). Here, the Canadian Arctic is not a detached territory, but serves as lookout for all of North America. Having crashed their vehicles in the ice, Canuck and Bluefox are forced to continue to the station on foot but are attacked by a polar bear, animus of the North itself, and “one of the few animals that deliberately hunts man” (12:5). *Captain Canuck*, the text, may attach itself onto the sociocultural relevance and mythologies of northern spaces, colonizing and embracing that expanse as its own, but Captain Canuck, the man, is in imminent danger of being consumed by elements of the spaces he travels on and through. The fact that an earnest, nationalized hero such as Captain Canuck could not exist within the time contemporary to that of publication, but was propelled into a speculative future and place (future-North) where Canada existed as a world superpower—“certainly a situation that could only occur in a comic book” (Edwardson 190)—is already a diminishment of the hero’s ability to protect the people of the place and time (Canada in the 1970s). Effectively, if Canada is to have a superhero, then a simulacrum in a near-distant future is required. Can a Canadian superhero even exist? Perhaps so, particularly if you create a Canadian unCanada for them to protect.

After Captain Canuck was retconned to have his powers gifted from an extraterrestrial ray-beam, the stories, understandably, began to change. Captain Canuck went freelance, serving two masters: the Canadian government and the Earth Patrol, an international anti-terrorist organization. Canuck’s membership in the Earth Patrol saw him come into conflict with more

phantasmal beasts and aliens, taking the comic out of the geopolitical resource-pirate origins it shared with *Nelvana* and more into step with an Americanized, mainstream audience. In this world, placing adventures in the near-future of the 1990s was moot, and Captain Canuck was portaled in No. 13 (1981) into a contemporaneous timeline: the then-1980s. The un-speculative, modern-day Canuck enjoyed his time as a contrarian man of the times *and* a man of the past, “stranded, standing alone in another world, another time” (No. 13, 26:5) for only one issue before the adventures of Tom Evans ended. Yet, the opening page of No. 13 promised that this was “a story of starting over” (1:1) and in the “Word from the Publisher,” Ken Ryan, CKR Productions’ business manager, told *Canuck*’s readers that the time-shift meant that “a whole new lifestyle has been opened up for Captain Canuck—one that was not possible in the confines of the semi-futuristic period of the mid 1990s” (31). In removing Captain Canuck from his place in speculative Canadian futurism and into the present day, alongside the departure of Canuck’s most ardent champion, Richard Comely (who parted ways with the title after No. 13 in order to pursue freelance work),¹⁵ the title ended; Tom Evans, the humble, superheroic Canadian passivist, could not exist either in the real world or its comic book approximation.

Authenticity and Pride in Materiality

Almost directly in opposition to the economical efforts of the Canadian Whites, the cover and several interior pages of *Captain Canuck* No. 1 were printed on high-gloss shiny paper, resulting in a heavier comic. This move altered the title’s physicality and price point, with the original cost of *Captain Canuck* No. 1 set at thirty-five cents; in contrast, its American peers, with their classic newsprint interiors, sold for twenty-five cents. Comely states, directly addressing the reader on the opening page of No. 2, that as well as noticing that *Captain Canuck* is the only Canadian offering on the newsstands,

Hopefully you’ve also noticed these other features: the better quality paper, and the superior printing. The bright, high quality photo-lithographic colour work, also, the lesser amount of ad ... I’m sure you’re also aware that C.C. [Canadian comics] cost [sic] slightly more than U.S. comics. Sure, the higher quality increases the cost, but this is not the main reasons. The small print runs and the fact that printing costs of comics are

15 Comely returned in 1993 with *Captain Canuck Returns*—a new series with a new cast.

higher in Canada, cause our magazine to cost more than twice as much to produce than the U.S. comic magazines. (1)

Comely's testimony and the sensual materialism of the text itself speak of a tangible pride in the story. This pride, and the willingness to back it up economically, would appear to work against the Canadian inferiority complex and against the satirisms of heroic Canadiana and Northernisms, as evidenced by *Fuddle Duddle's* moose-antler-wearing Captain Canada.

In addition to the vibrant palette, Comely incorporated colour photographs into the hand-drawn artwork throughout the first (Fig. 2.3) and second issues with varying degrees of success, a technique typically employed by the alternative and independent comics press and not often mainstream comics or comics that aspire to mainstream status. Comely, as an independent publisher, took advantage of the alternative/underground/independent comics' *modus operandi* while writing for and appealing to the wider, mainstream audience with a hero who could pass as a member of Captain America's extended family, both in shared powers and costumed appearance. The differences lie in Comely's choice to imbricate hand-drawn art with photographs, as well as the presence of overtly personal ideologies, often in the form of added supplementary and paratextual materials such as personal editorials, essays, recommendations and letter pages, also known as "Comely Mail." While these differences do not necessarily make *Captain Canuck* superior to its American competitors, they do make *Captain Canuck* a unique and innovative entry into the small canon of Canadian comics. Comely's exploratory and creative mixed-media technique in No. 1 and 2 places the visuals of Canadian comics heroism between two worlds: the illustrative and the photo-realistic. Alternative understandings are revealed when an artist engages in multiple mediums. In Figure 2.3, Utak, using his dog sled

Figure 2.3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

In a square panel, Utak and five sled dogs stand behind Captain Canuck. There is no text. The dogs, the sled, and the ground are reproduced from a photograph, while Utak, Canuck, and the blowing snow are illustratively added in by Comely. This panel is a sample of Comely's mixed-media technique in incorporating photographs into the artwork. Original source: Comely, Richard, *Captain Canuck* No. 1, 1975, 12:2.

team, rescues Canuck, but the illustrated men, and the brushstrokes representing blowing snow, are out of place and time—unreal representations of figures absorbed into a photograph of sled, snow, and five sled-dogs. This multimodal straddling of cartooning and photography removes Canuck from recognizability, into the unCanada, and into the gothic uncanny. In the contrast between the reality of the photograph and the cartoonish nature of the character’s representation, Canuck is a hero jarringly out of place.

The National Indian

As nationalized heroes, Nelvana and Captain Canuck share more than novelty via existence; Dittmer and Larsen note that “The earlier Canadian heroes of Nelvana and Captain Canuck articulate with the standard forms of Anglo-Canadian nationalism. In essence, the heroes represent discursive strategies to unify the binary construction of a colonial, white South and a colonized, aboriginal North within the singular Canadian nation-state” (65). As agents of nationalism, both Nelvana and Canuck are the tools and the framework for the unification and protection of the open, “wild” North. In the first issue of *Captain Canuck*, the Captain and his sidekick (later turned traitor) Bluefox are in imminent danger, having been attacked by a polar bear. The two government agents are then saved from their fate by Utak, an Inuit man, who slays the bear with his rifle, a weapon that neither Captain Canuck nor Bluefox seems to carry. The heroes of the North are now completely indebted to this northern hero, as Canuck expresses: “I owe you much Utak. We have come to stop an enemy that have [sic] come to capture *our* lands” (No. 1, 13:5; emphasis added). Canuck, an expression of the nation-state, admits to the weight of this life-debt; indicates not just gratitude but that something is owed; and presupposes a brotherhood with Utak. However, Canuck’s mixed Euro-Indigenous ancestry would not be revealed for three more issues. In the meantime, Utak guides Canuck and his partner to safety and in doing so, Dittmer and Larsen assert that “southern dominance is expressed as a form of friendly subservience” (63).

Utak’s disappearance back into the snow signals that the Inuit and the North are often conflated; as Dittmer and Larsen argue, “In this discursive articulation, ‘authentic Indians’ live only in the North and in fact *are* the North insofar as they are literally seen to embody its dual qualities of savagery-starkness and romantic appeal” (56). This articulation, as evidenced by *Nelvana*, nods towards Dittmer and Larsen’s observation that “Aboriginality and Northerness are often conflated in dominant-Canadian cultural productions” (56). The brief friendship

expressed in the panels between Canuck and Utak could possibly foreshadow Tom Evan's mixed Euro-Indigenous heritage, if only in hindsight. This collaboration is, more likely, evocative of the Canadian colonial patriarchal nation-state (represented here as Canuck) and the need to further the myth, as noted by Dittmer and Larsen, that "Canada treated 'its' indigenous peoples more favorably and honorably than in other settler societies" (56). This falsehood is exposed by new generations of Canadian-settler and Indigenous creators with decolonized historical and ficto-historical graphic novels such as Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, et al.'s *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, Gordon Downie and Jeff Lemire's *Secret Path*, Jason EagleSpeaker's *UNeducation*, Gord Hill's *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*, and David Robertson and Scott Henderson's *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, among others.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in *The Truth About Stories* Thomas King observes that stories are both "wondrous" and "dangerous" (9). Captain Canuck is the realization of the story—"the beginning of the stories that Europeans would tell about Native peoples" (70)—told after first contact when Christopher Columbus wrote of his first encounter with the people of the Americas, "They bear no arms. ... They are generally fairly tall and good-looking, well built. ... They ought to be good servants and of good skill. ... I believe that they would easily be made Christians" (quoted in King 70). King jests that the "good admiral's" reporting is "wishful thinking" (70); however, Columbus runs through an inventory of the same characteristics that can be found in Canuck as he appears in his earlier issues: no weapons, tall and attractive, muscular in nature, a good servant of the Crown, and a good Christian. These traits are affixed onto, and within, the figure of a superhero specifically designed to reflect a growing nationalism. "Wishful thinking" is the bedrock of superheroic design, or, better still, "wish fulfillment." Here, Canuck is the "singular Indian who could stand for the whole" (79), but he is not a real man. If this man is nowhere to be found, then "[North Americans] could make him up. In fact, without knowing it, they had been working on this very project from first contact" (79). Captain Canuck is not, and was not, a historical figure. He is a fabrication, a story, and a stand-in for what King refers to as "a National Indian" (79). Canuck, as a National Indian is "wild, free, powerful, noble, handsome, philosophical, eloquent [and] solitary ... a cultural treasure ... [and] a mythic figure who could reflect the strength and freedom of an emerging continent" (79).

The National Indian shares these qualities with the superheroic archetype, and, therefore,

Captain Canuck represents the merger of two idealized fantasies: an imaginary, Indigenous-Canadian superhero. These qualities are explored in the introduction to Daniel Francis's *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture*, in which Francis supports King's figure of the mythic, National Indian as an imaginary one that can be traced back to first contact: "The Indian is the invention of the European. ... The Indian began as White man's mistake, and became a White man's fantasy" (142). This fantasy, as Francis notes, is a poor simulacrum, for they were only "*images* of Native people that White Canadians manufactured, believed in, feared, despised, admired, [and] taught their children" (142; emphasis added) and, as such, the history of the Imaginary Indian is "about White—and not Native—cultural history" (142). Using Francis's framework of imaginary Indianness, Indigeneity can be all but expunged from the narrative of Captain Canuck. He is an Indian (to use the vernacular of King, Francis, and Comely) who never existed, representing a national populace perpetually mired in existential dread, for, as Mark Shainblum notes, "we wonder if, in the long run, there is any such thing as being a 'Canadian' ("Publisher's Preface" 1). In addition, he exists in the form of a comic book superhero who—most assuredly—never existed to begin with. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Daniel Heath Justice states that the story of the Imaginary, National Indian "wasn't of our making, but we're a part of it now" (4). If Canuck *is* Canada, then he is an Imaginary, National Indian that has not only been assimilated into the nation: he has become the nation—the "symbolic frontier of the settler colonial imaginary" (56-57). Chester Brown may have recontextualized Louis Riel in the comic and graphic novel of *Louis Riel*, for a modern Canadian readership interested in both the power of story, history, and fantasy, but *Captain Canuck* is a fever dream of an imaginary man on multiple planes.

The Mask Makes the Man

The Captain comes to embody a representational problem. In "The Fighting Civil Servant: Making Sense of the Canadian Superhero," Bart Beaty proclaims that "Captain Canuck [as] a symbol for the nation reduces Canada's multicultural heritage and champions the masked face of a heterosexual, middle-class, white, male government employee as the ultimate desire of the populace" (434). Because of his mask, Canuck is assumed to be white. Perhaps in retaliation against this bias, or in order to unify the nation-state with First Peoples, Comely literally rips the

mask off Canuck in No. 4 (Fig. 2.4). At no point during Comely's run as sole artist-writer¹⁶ did Captain Canuck voluntarily shed his "mask-self" (often known as "the secret identity"), thus enabling Canuck's racial invisibility and identity as iconic as opposed to personal. However, once the mask is involuntarily pulled off, Canuck himself, dark hair exposed between rips in the mask and bandages, is no longer his mask-self—he is not fully Captain Canuck anymore.

At the end of No. 3, entitled *Captain Canuck: "The Canadian Connection,"* Canuck finds himself kidnapped by smiling assassins disguised as agents of justice and health, respectively Mounties and doctors. An omniscient narrator advocates for a lack of faith in

Figure 2.4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It featured four panels: (1) A nurse glances up at a needle and syringe protruding into the foreground. The introductory text box reads, "What 'Doc' wants first is information on C.I.S.O. then he wants the Captain eliminated!"

An off-panel word balloon for the phoney doctor reads, "Here *Sweetie!* Stick this in the Captain! That's what nurses are for! Right!" The nurse responds, "I can't do that! I just... can't." The fake doctor replies, "If you don't, I will... *only* I won't be gentle!" (2) In a small square panel nested within the larger panel 3, the tip of a gun is shown, while the word bubble for the off-panel phoney doctor reads, "That's it! Soon.. He'll be talkin'! All right... Now, take off his cowl!" (3) In a rectangular panel, the nurse, now crying, begins to move the needle towards Canuck while he addresses her in a whisper: "Don't touch the mask! ... Let him be.. [sic] the one to reach for it!" (4) In a rectangular panel, the fake doctor has pulled off Canuck's mask in a violent swipe, while pulling Canuck's entire body to the left, and says, "I want his mask off *now!!* Let's see if he's really part Indian like I've heard!" Original source: Comely, Richard, *Captain Canuck* No. 4, 1979, 2:1-4.

¹⁶ After *Captain Canuck* No. 3 Comely was replaced as the title's primary artist. Bell notes that the "new Calgary-based company, CKR, wisely shifted art responsibilities from the merely competent Comely to the brilliant newcomer, George Freeman" ("A History: English Canadian Comic Books" 19).

uniformed authority figures: “One sad truth we learn from issue No. 3 is that you won’t know who to trust in the 1990’s! The Captain battled phony Mounties only to end up prisoner of a phony doctor” (No. 4, 1:1). The issue ends on a cliff-hanger, with the doctor assassin, himself masked, instructing an innocent nurse to “take off his mask!..You’re going to take his picture for me so I can have it for my album! Ha Ha Ha” (No. 3, 17:5). Immediately thereafter, the end title card promises, “Next Issue: We reveal everything in: ‘Behind the Mask’” (17:5). The difference in tone and texture between Comely’s masked Canuck and Freeman’s de-masked Canuck is palpable, and, as Shainblum notes in *Orion* magazine, “the original Comely Comix three issues ... are so different as to almost be a different comic” (No. 1, 9). Interestingly, after Canuck’s new cultural identity is revealed, and Freeman comes aboard as the principal artist, Canuck’s features begin a gradual process of transformation: his face becomes angular, his nose elongates, and his cheekbones sharpen. In other words, the personification of Canada itself, once unmasked, takes on the likeness of conventional Indigeneity as usually expressed through commercial means. The Tom Evans of No. 14 (1981) was nearly a completely different man from his initial appearance in 1975.

Comely’s final issue as both artist-writer and self-publisher ended in a cliffhanger: the de-masking of a superhero is itself a literary device to both rack up the tension and strip the hero of his respective iconography, thus rendering him symbolically powerless. From a contemporary perspective, Canuck’s de-masking, with the doctor’s promise of taking a souvenir, has the hallmark of a racialized scalping. Tellingly, in No. 4 “Behind the Mask,” the first issue not illustrated by Comely, Canuck is, for the first time, mask-less on the cover. The interior (Fig. 2.4) alludes to sexual violence against women and minorities: both to the female nurse also being held hostage, as the phallic syringe (primed with a cocktail of drugs) is jammed into the foreground directly over the nurse’s face, with its dark shadow dissecting her face; and to Captain Canuck, strapped to the bed beside her. The dialogue supports the visual shorthand: “Here Sweetie! Stick this in the Captain! ... “If you don’t, I will... only I won’t be gentle!” (Fig. 2.4).

Canuck’s de-masking is performatively violent: the doctor’s arms now hold the mask (with the maple leaf facing the viewer to indicate what has just been stripped away) and Captain Canuck’s entire body is jerked to the left-hand side of the panel, as if he had just been painfully skinned instead of disrobed. This act is imbued with racialized aggression and the incredulity

that the representative body of the nation-state may not be fully white; the doctor demands to see what's underneath: "I want his mask off now!! Let's see if he's really part Indian like I've heard!" (2:4; Fig. 2.4). The nurse and the helpless Captain Canuck, officially de-masked for the rest of the issue and down to one maple leaf on his belt buckle (nearly de-Canadianized), are then delivered to the true villain, appropriately named (in the spirit of colonial capitalism) Mr. Gold, who informs the newly racialized Captain, "You're cutting into my profits!" (No.4, 4:4).

This violent and non-consensual de-masking of the symbolic Canadian as "part-Indian" stands in sharp contrast to Canuck's voluntary removal of his maple-leafed cowl when, having been thrown back in time in No. 12, Canuck witnesses a vicious altercation between a group of Viking invaders and some surprised Micmac warriors (Fig. 2.5) Here, Freeman's rendering of Canuck is more racialized than Comely's, as Canuck reveals, with the intention of using his Indigeneity to benefit his current situation, a strong, hawkish nose, high cheekbones, a square jaw, and—depending on the print run or digital edition—a darker skin tone (Fig. 2.5). He supports the Micmac people in the fracas and, afterwards, realizes that he will not engender trust if he is draped in the Canadian flag: while the "costume" may seem odd, "if they see that I have Indian blood, they may be more receptive" (No. 12, 19:3; Fig. 2.5). Canuck directly separates

his identity as Canada itself (the costume) from what it covers up (his "Indian blood"). Once unmasked and de-Canadianized, and voluntarily so, Canuck is easily accepted amongst the People.

Figure 2.5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a small rectangular panel showing a close-up of Canuck's face, he pulls off his mask. His thought bubble reads, "The costume must make me seem very strange to them, but if they see that I have Indian Blood, they may be more receptive!"

Original source: Comely, Richard, *Captain Canuck* No. 12, 1980, 19:3.

Comely, as writer, makes a vague attempt to decolonize the personification of the nation-state by making Tom Evans of mixed Euro-Indigenous ancestry, without giving this revelation much weight in the run of the story itself. For Canuck, racial identification and blood quantum are inexorably tied to the maple leafed cowl and the schism between his masked and his civilian identity: when he wears the maple leaf to cover his face, he passes for white, and when he is stripped down to his civilian identity, he becomes "part Indian." When Canuck was revamped in *Captain Canuck Reborn* and then again in *Captain Canuck: Unholy War*, the

mixed Anglo-Indigenous heritage of Tom Evans was separated into a Lone Ranger and Tonto trope: the white hero and his Indigenous sidekick. In *Captain Canuck: Reborn*, Captain Canuck is now Darren Oak, a superhero who investigates international conspiracies with his friend Daniel Blackbird. In *Captain Canuck: Unholy War*, the Captain, David Semple, serves his country as an RCMP constable alongside his police partner, Keith Smoke. The repeated decision to recast the lead character as white man with a secondary partner of Indigenous ancestry undoes the original theme that Comely was gesturing towards in the 1970s: the idealized unification of the settler and Indigenous citizen housed within the same body and under the same flag.

Comely's Canuck united the speculative Euro-Indigenous hero within one body, while later incarnations would physically split them, but, as with *Nelvana*, the threat to Canuck's speculative Canada of the 1990s was external: international attempts to pirate the great resources of the North. As Dittmer and Larsen state, "The North is internal Other: at once a subordinate, anti-modern region whose resources must be protected from geopolitical threats, it also is a powerful and mysterious space that defines what it means to be (Anglo-)Canadian" (65). Comely casts this action in the Arctic—No. 1 is entitled "Arctic Standoff"—and, therefore, metatextually evokes *Nelvana* and the fears in her title of the resource-stealing invaders. Canada, personified by Captain Canuck, fears the same colonization that shaped it into being, as Evans listens to his communist captor explain, "You people will not understand that our methods and systems will save the whole world" (No. 1, 16:3-4). The communist invader's choice of verbiage—"will"—brokers no misunderstanding: "You people," here directed at the prone figure of a personified nation of mixed ancestry, *will* never understand. But, perhaps here, the invader is somewhat correct; Captain Canuck's moral code would not allow for such an understanding: "You are wrong! By taking away ones' [sic] free agency, you put an end to real happiness and progression! You and your leaders only plan to help yourselves! Not mankind" (16:5)—a proclamation rich in decolonial irony. Canuck claims that the invaders know nothing of happiness and progression, for they are only there to take. This accusation, made by the representative/representational body of Canada (Canuck), is devoid of self-critical nuance, for Canada, as we know it today, is the result of an invasive genocide, and Canuck is protecting Canada from what Canada has already done.

The Legitimization of Captain Export

In the 1990s, when Tom Evans' speculative timeline met real-world chronology, Canada

officially began the process of legitimizing the oddity that was *Captain Canuck* into the nationalist canon. In 1992, the National Archives of Canada (NAC) held the *Guardians of the North* exhibition, which was followed up in 1995 with Canada Post's Canadian Superhero stamp set. Edwardson observes that "governments that lay claim to popular heroes, instituting them as representatives and manifestations of national might, validate the national identity and add cultural depth to an institutional hegemonic agent" (196). Bell supports this supposition that nationalized superheroes, as he wrote for the 1992 NAC "Guardians of the North" exhibit, are the "embodiment of our national spirit and identity" (50). This accreditation takes the good Captain light years away from his national debut as a dummy in his "jammies." Canuck's nationalism is overtly political and does not align itself with the vigilantism that is often bound to a personal moral code, such as with non-nationalized superheroes Batman or Spider-Man. Additionally, Bell notes that if Canuck was becoming a representative of settler-Indigenous biracialism, so too was he emblematic of Canada's historic biculturalism: "Captain Canuck comics were increasingly aware of the emergent sense of Canada as a bicultural nation, as the hero fought crime with assistants whose code-names—Redcoat and K bec—reflected Canada's British and French colonial traditions" (Beaty 432). As Canuck represented a blend of European and Indigenous representation, Redcoat and K bec, background agents of C.I.S.O., represented Canada's Anglo and Francophone heritage. These agents, however, did not have much impact on the narrative.

Captain Canuck's Canadian futurism was unable to successfully support itself in the timeline it groped towards, yet it would, in time, develop cultural capital. Beaty echoes this real-world application of the superhero to national worth: "Not only do superheroes serve to protect the national interest within superheroic narratives, but they also serve to illuminate national interests in the real world as iconic signs" (428). To the government that Tom Evans purportedly served, Canuck's true value existed not in his service to peace and order in his textual adventures, but in his nationalized commodification in exhibitions and stamps. Superman, who accompanied Captain Canuck, Nelvana, and Fleur de Lys in that postal set, may have sneaked onto that roster with his "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," but Captain Canuck stood proudly for an alternate stewardship reflected in Commonwealth spaces: "Peace, Order, and Good Government." As Beaty observes, a major "distinguishing characteristic of Captain Canuck was the fact that he shunned violence as a means of effecting change or ending crises,

and worked as a pacifist whenever possible” (432). Nearly every act of retaliation on Canuck’s part is presented as unfortunately unavoidable, for which Comely personally interrupts a story (uncommon in comics) in order to offer justification and an arguably Canadian near-apology: “Yes, there are some scenes of real violence. Although they are not the theme of any of our stories, they are representative of the tragedies of life and should be viewed as such” (No. 3, 15:1). This is certainly a marked departure from the bombastic initial cover appearances of the most nationalized American heroes, Superman, The Shield, and Captain American, shown, respectively, throwing a car (1938), assaulting robots (1940), and punching Hitler in the face (1941) with no apologies. In contrast, Captain Canuck’s first cover appearance was planned to feature Canuck’s infamous “jammies” stroll, which was later amended to the less patronizing and more assertive, albeit static, “flag pose” of *Captain Canuck* No. 1’s cover. His nationalized American predecessors were men of action on their covers. Captain Canuck, however, strikes a stationary pose (Fig. 2.1).

Beaty suggests that the Canadian revival of self-identification in the 1960s and 1970s sought to distance its emergent media in relation to American ones (432). This developing nationalization was a construction of shared space and, effectively, imagined sociocultural politics bordering on an almost haughty Canadian chauvinism. A Canadian superhero, after all, would *never* punch Hitler in the face unless it was absolutely unavoidable, and if he did, one could almost imagine Captain Canuck apologizing afterwards. In comics, and particularly in nationalized Flag Folk, the many are embodied in the one. As Dittmer and Larsen observe, “Canadian nationalist superheroes must function within an existent national spatial imaginary, which they also serve to reconstruct over time” (53). As not only a nationalized hero, but one of a future time, Captain Canuck is a projected monomyth. He is, in effect, a future-Mountie, replete with crimson uniform and nationalized iconography.

In projecting this man into the future, Canadians themselves are encouraged to imagine their own country through a speculative lens. As Edwardson argues, “The image of Captain Canuck has become so associated with Canada that the nation itself has been placed in the costume” (198). The Canadian edition of *Time* magazine, April 28, 1997, placed the Captain, glibly renamed “Captain Export,” on its cover, with the headline reading, “Canada is the new superhero of global trade.” Canada had apparently accepted the fabrication of Comely’s speculative vision, as first penned in the early 1970s, turning Captain Canuck as a hero of an

imagined Canadian futurism into the harbinger saint of optimistic self-fulfilling prophecy, but only in an economic role. Canuck's captor, Mr. Gold (No.4) would undoubtedly be pleased that the hero finally seems to be turning a profit.

Captain Canuck became a spokesperson for Canada—a way for Canada to advertise itself to itself. Francis observes that Indigenous appropriations are a part of this framework, for ultimately “[advertising] deals in stereotypes. Once it began using images of Native people, advertising created a whole new context for the Imaginary Indian” (146). Considering this history, it is unsurprising that Comely admits, in an interview with Mark Shainblum, that Captain Canuck existed first as a t-shirt print before he made it into the pages of his first comic book (“A Conversation with Canada's own Richard Comely” 17). Whether or not Comely knew Canuck would later be revealed to be of Euro-Indigenous ancestry here is unknown. Canuck is used to sell the image of heroic nationalism, and in this context, Comely's attempt to indigenize him as the avatar of the nation-state seems apropos, as Francis notes that “many of the images of Indians which appeared in advertisements were intended to be positive. They reveal a widespread admiration for certain qualities which the public associated with ‘Indianness’: bravery, physical prowess, natural virtue” (147). These qualities are then further fused with Canadianness. The leap to affix the commercial appeal of the Imaginary Indian onto a fully assimilated, nationalized, and Christianized superhero is not such a big one—it nearly markets itself. Here in *Time*, as with NAC and Canada Post, Canuck's value as a national hero is tethered to dominions of economic and national commodification. As Canada rediscovered its superheroes in the 1990s, it also initiated the process “whereby the Canadian comic book industry was repatriated as a part of Canadian nationalism” (Beaty 428), and Canuck finally “became valuable to the government [he] fictionally protected” (Edwardson 199). As they ever were, superheroes are inherently political and, once recognized as signifiers, are easily adopted into the rhetoric of the nation-state. A hero such as Captain Canuck, or Captain America, is one of the broad archetypes that has long since infiltrated the collective subconscious of a nation's readership, from which they obtain communal wisdom.

In Other Words

If my analysis of the Canadian superhero as effigy indicates that there is a measure of cynicism, shame, or satire regarding homegrown superheroes, then *Captain Canuck* appears, at first, to challenge this approach with a sincere and earnest national pride. The Captain stands on

the front cover of his inaugural issue, a muscular, spandex-clad masked man, facing the reader with legs spread apart and hands on his hips—a power pose (Fig. 2.1). His costume is the Canadian flag, but this flag had only existed since 1965. Without even cracking the cover to look inside, the reader can already ascertain that Canuck’s adventures are firmly entrenched in apparent progressiveness. The choice to costume Canuck in the new flag marks the text as solidly forward-thinking: *Captain Canuck* is “a key item in the construction of *modern* Canadian cultural identity and consciousness” (Edwardson 184; emphasis added).

Comely’s placement of the infamous “jammies” panel at the start of No. 1 (Fig. 2.2) may be owing to his general inexperience in the grammatology of comics at the time, but Bell notes that Comely, as with all Canadians of that time, was living in an era of national heroic sociohistorical frivolity. Bell argues that Canadian superheroes from the late 1960s and early 1970s were all “buffoons”: “It was as if Canada’s comics artists and writers recognized the absence of Canadian heroes but couldn’t take such figures seriously” (Beaty 71). If we had heroes, we did not really believe in them. *Captain Canuck* missed the era of nationalized optimism and instead heralded the age of satirical nationalism. Indeed, which medium was more well-suited to dismiss as lacking seriousness than comic books and the heroes who ran around in their long underwear? In correspondence with Edwardson, Comely noted that, “as one fan wrote into the comic, ‘I thought it was some kind of a joke. Who would seriously think of naming a hero—even a comic book hero—‘Captain Canuck’? Even if he is Canadian?’” (2001). The understanding indicated by Edwardson is that “by placing the slang in a culturally positive context, Captain Canuck empowered the term [Canuck], helping to popularize it as a valid nickname for a Canadian” (189). Yet, incredulity was there from the beginning, within and without, for in the inaugural panel a woman behind Canuck’s elbow shouts, “Thats [sic] Canada’s superhero. Dummy!” (No. 1, 1:1; Fig. 2.2) The deliberate separation between “superhero” and “dummy” makes the pejorative equivocal: Is the man who openly mocked Captain Canuck for wearing his jammies the dummy or is Captain Canuck, the lumbering nation-state, the dummy? Finally, Canada had a superhero, but could Canadians truly respect and believe in him?

CHAPTER 3: *NEW TRIUMPH*: THE RELUCTANT SUPER DEFENDER

“You got your chance, kid. You were Superman for a day. What more do you want? Go home!”
(*New Triumph*, No. 3, 6:5).

New Triumph Featuring Northguard was published from 1984-1986 and is set contemporaneously in the Montreal of the 1980s. The main character, Phillip Wise, a young fan of Canadian superhero comics, is seized by Progressive Allied Canadian Technologies (P.A.C.T.) and taken to their tower-base in Vaudreuil, part of the Montérégie of southwestern Québec. Here, Wise learns from the appropriately named Dr. Cape about the faceless conglomerate known as ManDes, an updated incarnation of the nineteenth-century American Manifest Destiny, in this case featuring American right-wing terrorists who desire to take over the Canadian government (*New Triumph* No. 1, 8) in the name of American Christianity and white supremacy. He also learns about P.A.C.T.’s development of the Uniband, a personal cybernetic weapons system that introduces the text’s recipe for instant hero (10-12). Wise is in the unique position of having a brainwave pattern similar to the person (now deceased) for whom the Uniband was originally designed. Wise’s “special brain” places him both as *the chosen one* (like Neo from the *Matrix* series, Harry Potter, or Jesus) and the *surprise hero* (like Peter Parker in *Spider-Man*)—both common tropes in the superhero archetype. Wise realizes that Canada, by way of P.A.C.T., needs him, and he leverages this need to be granted one request: that he be permitted to wield the power of the Uniband as a superhero, thus fulfilling a childhood fantasy.

The Northguard narrative was an eight-part thriller that ran for five issues of *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* (1984-1986) under Mark Shainblum’s Matrix Graphic Series out of Montreal, and was concluded in the three issues of *Northguard* (1989-1990) from U.S. publisher Caliber Press, as Shainblum had run out of the necessary capital to complete the ManDes saga on his own. Despite direct influence and similar costumes (how many ways can one wear maple leaves?), Northguard could not be a more different beast from the wholesome, religious, and right-winged Captain Canuck.

North America in the 1970s and 1980s saw a creative boom of independent alternative, black and white comics publishing.¹ As part of this boom, Shainblum and Gabriel Morrissette, a

¹ This independent black and white comics boom also saw the birth of Dave Sim’s *Cerebus* (Aardvark-Vanaheim, 1977), Wendy and Richard Pini’s *Elfquest* (WaRP Graphics, 1978), Art

young writer-publisher and artist team out of Montreal, developed the next incarnation of Canadian national superheroism in *New Triumph Featuring Northguard*. Shainblum hired a series of different artist-illustrators to provide artwork for the colour covers while Morrissette provided the black and white artwork for the interiors.² John Bell, historian and senior archivist at Library and Archives Canada, declares that Northguard was “The most sophisticated vision to date of a Canadian superhero” (*Invaders of the North* 79). This observation is etched into the civilian name of the hero in question: Phillip Wise. The power of the protagonist’s name is stressed within the text itself, when, in *New Triumph* No. 3, Wise meets Manon Descamps, a woman who will later become the Québec supporter to his Canada as the superheroine Fleur de Lys. Descamps says to Wise, “In some cultures they believe the name is the path-way to the soul. Anyone who knows your real name has power over you, so you only reveal it to your closest friends” (13:1). Etymologically, if the biblical meaning of Phillip’s name as “warlike” is to be taken into consideration, the labeling of Northguard’s alter ego as a wise warrior either problematizes or enhances his status as a guardian of the North (a *Northguard*) and an effigial super defender. Unsurprisingly then, Wise’s first action as a hero in *New Triumph* No. 1 is to create a protective force-field (23:3). Additionally, Shainblum makes it clear that Northguard’s powers are baked into his identity as a national hero—the flag itself coming to life as a super-powered mortal—and while he is emotionally invested in his protective duties he may not and can not be Phillip Wise, only Northguard (24:7-8).

Shainblum had an awareness of the (small) canon of Canadian-made comics and (smaller still) canon of Canadian-made superhero comics, which informed his own magazine, *Orion*—a “‘semi-prozine’ by those fond of jargon” (inside cover). He published a *Captain Canuck* parody called “Captain Canduck” (a fowl-centric, anthropomorphic heroic parody that can be compared to *Fuddle Duddle*’s moose-ish “Captain Canada” parody) with script by John Bell and art by Owen Oulton (*Orion* No. 2, 1982). Shainblum’s knowledge of the canon of Canadian comics, and his direct publishing of a national parody of *Captain Canuck*, roots Shainblum and

Spiegelman’s *Maus* (Raw Books & Graphics, 1980), and Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird’s *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Mirage Studios, 1984).

² Cover artists for *New Triumph* included: No. 1 Peter Hsu (painting) and Gabriel Morrissette (layout); No. 2 David Day and Dan Day (painting); No. 3 Gabriel Morrissette (painting over a photo); No. 4 David Day and Dan Day (painting); No. 5 Thierry Labrosse (illustration); and all three *Northguard: The ManDes Conclusion* Ken Steacy (painting).

Morrisette's follow-up, the gritty and sophisticated *New Triumph*, in parody and cynicism, if only by proxy.

Shainblum and Morrisette ended their involvement with the title in 1990, appropriate because the 1990s moved superhero comics from grim black and white exploration pieces to brightly coloured texts of unreal escapism. One wonders if the earnest and realistic grittiness of Northguard and other superheroes of the 1980s, as evidenced by dour comics eager to explore the ramifications and consequences of synchronous heroism such as the early *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comics (Mirage Studios, 1984), which were initially dark and broody, and the self-critical *Watchmen* (DC, 1986), could survive the fantastical, rainbow-soaked 1990s. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, of course, adapted the hero ethos to suit the needs of a new era through a

colourful, family-friendly rebranding; DC's *Watchmen* disappeared and would not be resuscitated until superheroic deconstructionism would again be chic in the 2000s. *New Triumph*, politically fueled and entrenched in the Franco-Anglo divide, would have struggled to make a home in the 1990s.

Covers and Costumes

A brief glance at the inaugural cover of *New Triumph* invites a view of the maple leaf with the focus of a sharpshooter (Fig. 3.1).³

In *Reading Images*, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen state that placement of visual text, the space occupied, is "affected deeply by our convention of writing from left to right. ... Consequently different values and meanings are attached to such key dimensions of visual space" (4). In comics,

Figure 3.1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was the cover of the 1987 (second printing) of *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* by Matrix Graphic Series. Northguard's entry in Wikipedia features the original 1984 cover, but a search for "Northguard Number 1 1987" brings up the 1987 cover, distinguished by the central location of the Maple Leaf in the logo. In contrast, the original cover has the Maple Leaf on the upper left-hand side.

³ Here I will be primarily using the second printing version, as it uses the Maple Leaf, in the logo, as a halo for Northguard.

Scott McCloud observes, “Readers will assign importance to characters and objects placed in the center ... and some comics artists oblige by putting their most important subjects there” (*Making Comics* 24: 6-8). The western impulse to read the multi-modal *New Triumph* cover image from left to right places emphasis on the northwest publisher logo and the southwest visualized threat, both wielding weapons. However, No. 1’s emphasis is centrally located on Northguard’s inverse Maple Leaf Flag symbol and spirals outward, as guided by the placement of the ensemble cast in their containment bubble and Earth as seen from outer space (Fig. 3.1). This spiral, or circular motion of the eye, condenses time and space, and engages the reader in the desired flow as chronological elements (characters and representational plot points) and symbolic data (maple leaves, weapons, shattered glass) are condensed into one moment within one image. As on the cover of *Captain Canuck* No. 1 (Fig. 2.1), the hero is centrally located. The maple leaf, the central symbol, is thoroughly grounded and perennial, repeated not only four times in Northguard’s costume (boots, chest, cowl) but in the logo above his head, which serves as a halo and a sanctification of Northguard’s nationalism. It also appears in the jagged broken glass behind him that replicates the maple leaf iconography, which in contrast can be interpreted as a condemnation or skepticism of Northguard’s nationalism. For his part, the hero faces and engages the viewer directly, but his expression is one of fear, uncertainty, or grim worry—a hero not prepared to be heroic. His gaze *appears* to be oriented at the person holding the comic—you, me, us—but is pulled down towards the weapon in the southwest corner instead, engaging the viewer in an empathetic response. As Will Eisner notes, the understanding of this response is vital to visual texts, for “Comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience” (7). In other words, readers, like the hero, are also drawn to the gun. Wise, the central, nationalized hero, is not confident or safe, and neither are readers.

Like *Captain Canuck*, Northguard is centrally placed on his first cover, but in body language and nationalized symbology, the latter subverts the former. Northguard is positioned similarly to *Captain Canuck*, mimicking the power pose, but his arms are open and unsteady. Northguard’s primary maple leaves (heart and head)—icons of Canadianness—are inverted in terms of colour: white leaves on a red background. Northguard is, literally and metaphorically, a reversal of the Canadian flag—more John Gray’s anti-hero than Adrian Dingle’s forgotten hero or Richard Comely’s attempted hero. As Northguard is penned into a realistic world, and not an unCanada, Shainblum and Morrissette create Canada’s first domestically produced, nationalized,

and *realistic* superhero (insofar as such a creation is possible in the superhero genre) only to invert him and his maple leaves. Wise's inadequacies are advertised on the cover—for \$2.00 CDN, \$1.75 USA—and his leaves are open and empty. Perhaps northern heroes like Nelvana, Northern Light, Captain Newfoundland, Captain Canada II, and Captain Canuck (or even the farcical Captain Canada I and Captain Canduck) could exist in the hypothetical, but Northguard—the approximation of realness—objectively denies the possibility of his own Canadian existence.

Metatextuality in Comics

Where *New Triumph* truly departs from its antecedents like *Johnny Canuck*, *Nelvana*, *Northern Light*, and *Captain Canuck* is in its overt metatextuality. In Wise's Canada, superhero comics already exist, and he styles his ambition right out of the pages of *Captain Canuck* and *Alpha Flight*. *New Triumph*—an eponymous homage to Adrian Dingle's *Triumph-Adventure Comics* which first introduced Canada to Nelvana—rejects the speculative fantasy of the comics that inspired it and pulls Wise out of Dingle and Comely's unCanada and into the real Canada, making Northguard the first true national Canadian superhero, albeit an ironic one. Northguard's first success as a hero is both contemporary and politically charged: he saves the separatist premier, René Lévesque, founder of the Parti Québécois, from assassination—a more likely scenario, if such a thing exists in superhero comics, than Nelvana's descent from the heavens or Captain Canuck's adventures in a completely unrecognizable 1993.

New Triumph is the first of the Canadian superhero texts under discussion in this thesis to include direct association of the real and the unreal. For Northguard to exist, he has to be aware of the pre-existing master narrative of a Canadian superhero canon, or, simply, of comics themselves. The comics within comics metanarrative is first revealed in *New Triumph* No. 1 when Wise sits down to read *The Comics Journal* No. 100, featuring the pithy headline “Why Comics are Doomed” (4:1-3), an apparent criticism of and self-referentiality regarding Wise's future career in national heroics. Later in No. 1, Wise lays *Captain Canuck* No. 11, *Alpha Flight* No. 11, and *The Fury of Firestorm the Nuclear Man* No. 1 out on his bed, considering his next move after his abduction by P.A.C.T. (15:2-10). The appearance of these texts legitimizes the concept of a Canadian National Superhero canon (small as it may be); expresses an inbuilt anxiety over the Americanization of Canadian heroes; and, in the case of *Firestorm*, foreshadows

and subverts Wise's career as an "instant hero" (Shainblum, personal correspondence).⁴ After consulting with these superheroic texts, Wise's next move is clear to him: he will only participate with P.A.C.T. if he can be a superhero like the ones in his comics.

The narrative of *New Triumph* had begun with Karl Mannings, the soon-to-be murdered agent for whom the Uniband was intended, flushing his gun down the toilet, saying "I don't need this anymore" (3:2). The logistics of such an action—pity the poor plumber!—are largely symbolic and do not diminish the power of the act, performed again in *New Triumph* No. 2 when Cape's dream vision of Mannings drops a bloody gun (1:3-4). Mannings is not the heroic agent Canada appears to need, and the gun he keeps dropping is ineffectual. As Wise discovers, however, heroic nationalism, as enacted through the childhood power fantasies of flag-draped superheroes, is not a simple matter.

Wise tells the members of P.A.C.T. that he will wear the Uniband only if he can be a superhero like the ones in these comics, thrusting toward them a childish drawing of a figure wearing a maple-leaf hero costume. The response is Canadian incredulity through the assertion that what he is asking is "unbelievable. Childish nonsense!" (16:3). Fantasy Canada and real Canada come together as Wise merges the real and the comic world within himself in his reply: "You've broken the barrier between things I always considered to be fantasy and things I considered to be real" (16:5). In a paratextual "Murphy's Lawyer" section in *New Triumph* No. 1, Shainblum then references Warrior and Sun Ray, two hero characters on whom he worked who predate Northguard; their influence can be observed in Phillip Wise. Warrior is reflected in Phillip, in name, as a wise warrior, and Sun Ray is echoed in the iconography of the maple leaf found on Northguard, and, before him, Captain Canuck.⁵

⁴ Additionally, the *Firestorm* comics, although American, eventually featured a villain named Plastique, a Québécois terrorist with an eye on separatism.

⁵ Additionally, these Canadian agents of war and peace, superheroes and super defenders respectively, marked by the iconography of sun rays as a part of the stylized maple leaf, adhere to the Jungian symbology of masculinity, as evidenced by sun imagery, while feminine symbology lies in iconography of the night: moon, stars. It is unsurprising that Québécois superhero siblings Aurora (who suffers from dissociative identity disorder) and her brother Northstar (Marvel Comics' first openly gay character) of *Alpha Flight* (first appearance *Uncanny X-Men* No. 120, April 1979; *Alpha Flight* No. 1, August 1983) are feminized with star imagery as heroes who represent cultural francophone interests, womanhood, mental illness, and homosexuality, respectively. Shainblum and Morrisette's Fleur de Lys, who is draped in the Québec flag, continues the tradition of the feminization of marginal bodies. A later incarnation

When Wise accepts the responsibility to wield P.A.C.T.'s Uniband and *stand on guard* against recolonization (here from the United States), he becomes an instant hero. He sourly cannot bring himself to play into the fantasy as he originally intended, however. As he says when he is about to transform into Northguard for the first time, "I'm supposed to get melodramatic and make some great soliloquy about dedicating myself to truth and justice. Too bad. I can't think of anything" (18:4-5). At first this response may seem to align with the "refusal of the call," in Joseph Campbell's *hero's journey*, for "Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or 'culture,' the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved" (49). Wise has not refused the call, however; he has actively encouraged it while simultaneously confirming the futility of his situation as a nationalized Canadian hero. He is about to become the next great Canadian superhero, and yet he senses there is no "truth or justice" in the act he is about to undertake.

Shainblum lays gentle claim to the Canadian flag folk aesthetic of *guard* when he notes that John Byrne, creator of the American-published Canadian superhero team *Alpha Flight*, also had a maple-leaf-wearing superhero who etymologically stood by the Canadian impulse to protect. He reports that he was anguished when he learned that the Canadian flag character's name would be Guardian, adding, "In the long run I calmed down and decided to go ahead with my plans unchanged" since "aside from the obvious Canadian hero parallel" the two series had few similarities ("Murphy's Lawyer"). Aside from asserting that he had "thought of it first," Shainblum recognized the futility of attempting to divorce Canadian flag-wearing heroes from their duty to "protect and serve." This duty is ingrained in the national psyche—not surprising in a country whose first superheroes were Mounties and Sergeant Sam Steele archetypes.⁶ As noted in previous chapters, these entrenched archetypes re-emerged in *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck* as Mounties and C.S.I.S. agents, fulfilling Atwood's point that the Canadian hero is a glorified policeman. Certainly, the Canadian hero, national or otherwise, takes the defensive guard approach, which furthers an international reputation of Canadians as peacekeepers,

of Captain Canuck (as published by Chapterhouse) also feminized Québec as a leggy blonde bombshell, aptly named Kébec, whereas Comely's original Kébec was male.

6 Also see: Sgt. Canuck (*Big Bang Comics*, Maple Leaf Publishing, March/April 1941), Commander Steel (*Grand Slam Comics*, Anglo-American Publishing, Aug 1944), and Major Mapleleaf (*Alpha Flight* No. 106, Marvel Comics, March 1992).

etymological or otherwise: *Northguard*, *Snowguard*, *Guardians of the North*, *Guardian* (Marvel), and *Guardian* (Spectrum). If we accept or internalize Canada as a land absent not only of heroes, but of superheroes, we can accept the image of a defender, thereby furthering the aesthetic of the super defender, or guard, as a familiar Canadian stereotype. This approach invites the fear of external invasion, as evidenced by the Nazis in the early adventures of *Nelvana*, the communist conspiracy of *Captain Canuck*, and the Americans, joined later by the Soviets, in *New Triumph*. Perhaps indirectly, however, inspiration for *Northguard* would come from within Canada.

A Framework: The Denis Lortie Incident

On May 8, 1984, a heavily armed Corporal Denis Lortie stormed Québec’s legislative building, wounding eight and killing three civil servants. His goal was to kill Québécois politicians (who were not in session at that moment)—to kill the spirit of separatism and the Québec separatist government itself. The scenario of a soldier with villainous vigilantism guiding his traumatic actions initially appears to transpose well into comics narrative, in which heroes and villains alike are driven by strong sociopolitical, personal, and national moral coding. Anglophone and Francophone nationalisms, evident in the surge of national feeling after the attack (and perhaps inspired by the heroic resistance posed by people such as René Jalbert, who ended the attack peacefully before more violence could be enacted), feature heavily in *New Triumph*, which was published in the same year as Lortie’s targeted attack on the Québécois government. This marrying of real-world trauma with comic book superheroism is observed by Walter Ong when the earlier American comics were dealing with the McCarthyism(s) of 1945: “In view of the political bearing of the present hero ideologies, it is particularly interesting that in this strong-arm division of comics there is a marked tendency to project the

Figure 3.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

In a square panel, *Northguard* stands in front of a wall graffitied with the words, “Anglo Liberation! Freedom from French tyranny,” and he exclaims “My God!” In two thought balloons, he continues, “No! I don’t believe it! The maniac I fought was no English Québecker, the accent was all wrong.” Original source: Shainblum, Mark, and Gabriel Morrissette, *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* No. 1, second printing 1987, 8:5.

cult of exuberant violence and muscularity onto the field of government, and often onto the full field of world or even cosmic politics” (37). Comics, taken to their serious conclusions here, create possibilities of impossibilities.

Shainblum describes the Lortie incident in his editorial in *New Triumph* No. 1. He reflects, “My fiction took on a terrible life[, a] feeling it had not possessed previously, and my notions of what constituted ‘Canadian’ behaviour had to be severely re-assessed” (“Murphy’s Lawyer”). Lortie’s murderous push-back against the real-world Lévesque, a target who was not even in the legislature at the time, resurfaces in *New Triumph* No. 1, as Northguard, having just rescued Lévesque’s comics doppelgänger, reads the writing—literally—on the wall: “Anglo liberation! Freedom from French tyranny” (28:5; Fig. 3.2). Northguard, occupying the vertical western space, acts as both the first image read (in order from left to right), and, assuming a defensive pose with the Uniband powered up, a shield between reader and “Anglo liberation” (Fig. 3.2). Lortie himself spoke English poorly and would have struggled to succeed in an Anglophonic world, a fact he angrily blamed on the Québec government. Wolfram Bergande notes that “One could argue that Denis never, not even in his native language, lost his ‘sharp accent’” (“The Père-version of the Political”), while in *New Triumph* No. 1, Northguard mentions that Lévesque’s would be assassin was “no English Québecker, the accent was all wrong” (28:5; Fig. 3.2). Here, Northguard has recognized that the assassin was, potentially, American (Shainblum, personal correspondence), although there is some connective tissue between Lortie’s (perceived) linguistic handicap, mention of accents, and the attempted assassination of both real-world and comic-world Lévesque. As with the first punch in the jaw Captain America delivered to Hitler’s face on the cover of *Captain America* No. 1 (1941), the nationalist Northguard feeds directly from the contemporary trough: “Someone’s trying to reopen old wounds, someone from the outside. Well, I won’t let them! We’ve come too far in this province, I’ll be damned if I let anyone push us back to hate and paranoia!” (28:6). *New Triumph* both invokes and evokes the Lortie incident and attempts to avoid the abstractive approach to Canadian superheroics, rife with self-satire, in the process taking Northguard out of an unCanada.

Space and Place

In their creation of *New Triumph*, Shainblum and Morrissette move away from the magical Arctic, a space that, as Sherrill Grace explains, and as noted in the Introduction, has

shaped the Canadian literary imagination. Save for Northguard’s great white maple leaf, an inversion of the national icon, Grace’s nordicity, in so far as it is conceived in isolated space and place, is absent from *New Triumph*. In this comic book, Canada is urban and dark. Yet, *New Triumph* cannot shake the wide open spaces of the Canadian Gothic, as noted by Sugars, or the ghosts of the 1984 Denis Lortie incident.⁷ The new protagonist, Wise, is isolated: “His family has left on an extended vacation, his friends are unavailable, and he is alone in a big house” (3:8). His isolation leaves him vulnerable, as he opens his door to agents of P.A.C.T. who arrive to abduct him. As the textbox reads, “Childhood terrors well up to seize his conscious mind. Primal fears of the night and the dark and the dangers they hide wash over him” (4:6). While not restricted to the Canadian literary imagination, Sugars notes that gothic structures such as these echo a history of oppression that is often a staple feature of Canadian literature: “This legacy, which appears in the form of unresolved memory traces and occluded histories resulting from the experience of colonial oppression, diasporic migration, or national consolidation, is readily figured in the form of ghosts or monsters that ‘haunt’ the nation/subject

Figure 3.3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It featured a series of six panels largely devoid of text: (1) In a rectangular panel, Wise sits at his kitchen table holding a beverage. (2) In a square panel, Wise begins to walk into a bedroom where a closet is centrally located; above it hangs a Canadian flag. (3) In a rectangular panel, Wise is shown glancing up at the flag, while a poster on the closet can now be read: “Never put off until tomorrow ...what you can do the day after.” (4) In a small rectangular panel, the flag is represented in a close-up oblique angle. (5) In another small panel, Wise is shown pulling something down, presumably the flag. (6) In a square panel, Wise holds the flag in his fist, looks down at it, and shouts, in a word balloon, “*Mean something!!*” Original source: Shainblum, Mark, and Gabriel Morrisette, *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* No. 1, second printing 1987, 14:4-9.

⁷ Wise also cannot escape the ghost of Karl Mannings, the original wielder of the Uniband, who dies on the third page of the first issue.

from without and within” (vii). In keeping close to these Canadian legacies, Wise is afraid before he has anything to be afraid about.

At the end of the eight-part run, bewildered by the events that have transpired, Wise rejects the attempts of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (C.S.I.S.) to continue to draft him, thus rejecting real-world heroic nationalism. This move is foreshadowed in *New Triumph* No. 1 when Wise tears down the Canadian flag from the top of his closet, that has appeared in three previous frames, and screams at it to “*Mean something!*” (14: 5-9 – 15:1; Fig. 3.3), before throwing it to the floor. In effect, he denationalizes his own superheroic methodological approach before he suits up. Is the maple-leaf clad Northguard, then, a nationalized hero? Wise himself is not certain where his allegiances lie, any more than Captain America, who chooses to place faith in people over governments (*Captain America: Civil War* 2016).

In refusing both to be recruited by C.S.I.S. and to pull forth an identity from an abstraction of community, symbolized by the Canadian flag, Wise ends his eight-part run as an isolated martyr; as Frye notes in the conclusion to *Literary History of Canada*, “The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil” (831). As this comparison between *New Triumph* and earlier works of Canadian literature indicates, Wise stands with one boot in a superhero narrative and the other in a postcolonial Canadian Gothic world that, Sugars argues, “charts a largely psychological experience—haunted minds rather than a haunted wilderness,” attesting to a “perception of overlapping realities and temporalities” (ix). Wise complicates his own relationship with his nationality and his dreams of nebulous Canadian glory when he has a one-sided argument with the Canadian flag hanging above his closet. By his own admission, does his performance as a maple-leafed hero “mean something?” Was his argument with the flag a character assassination of himself or his country? Ultimately, Wise’s experience as a Canadian superhero is unfulfilling and his argument with the flag before his career *wearing* the flag begins can certainly be read as the perennial Canadian dictum that not only do Canadian heroes not exist but also Canada itself “means nothing.”

Legitimacy and Relevancy

As with *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph* was sporadically resurrected in other guises and through other publishers. Additionally, Shainblum, alongside Sandy Carruthers and Jeff Alward,

dabbled in another nationalized superheroin narrative, the online comic *Canadiana: The New Spirit of Canada* (2004). Like Northguard, the maple-leafed Canadiana seems to have an awareness of her uniqueness in a “real” Canada (as evidenced by her stroll through a comics convention, for starters); however, as Bell observes of *Canadiana*, “these efforts have had limited impact” (*Invaders from the North* 84). This inertia, coupled with the sporadic publication of most settler-Canadian or Indigenous superhero comic books published in Canada, strengthens the reoccurring themes of *limited impact* and *lack of faith* in Northern heroes that I hold as general foundational principles for the effigial Canadian super defender. Wise himself destroys and discredits nationalism before he dons the maple leaf in service to his country (Fig. 3.3); like Captain Canuck’s inauspicious beginnings, his heroism is nearly over before it begins. For a country that chose to issue an image of Superman as part of a superhero stamp set designed to shine a light on Canadian heroes (1995), this lack of faith in Canadian heroes is unsurprising.

Of efforts by *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph*, and even *Canadiana* to stay afloat, Bell notes that “The goal of sustaining distinctly Canadian superheroes has proven to be an elusive one, even for determined creators such as Comely and Shainblum” (*Invaders from the North* 84). Even the figurehead of Canadian nationalist superheroes, Captain Canuck, was not regularly published; instead, Canadian-made superheroin publishing tended to be seasonal. Bell attributes the Canadian disengagement with domestic hero narratives, resulting in the inactiveness of the aforementioned titles, to both sociocultural complacency and cynicism, arguing that “despite the persistence of Canada’s engagement with superheroes, Canadians are probably too wary of the uncritical portrayal of unrestrained heroism and power for the superhero genre ever to become a mainstay of the country’s indigenous comic art” (84). This cultural wariness, supported by a general unwillingness to boast—a famous Canadian stereotype, mentioned in the Introduction as typified by Sandra Oh’s *Saturday Night Live* monologue—supports Shainblum and Morrissette’s subversive approach to superheroes in the nationalist, flag-draped subgenre that *New Triumph* occupies and lends a certain legitimacy to the strange notion that, perhaps, Canada could have a superhero.

The key to *New Triumph*’s national heroic approach, and to the framework of the text itself, is plausibility. While still a superheroin narrative with all the traits required of the superhero—costume, secret and civilian identity, superpowers, and so on—*New Triumph* leans heavily on the thriller genre, thus facilitating an inherent credibility: this scenario *could* happen,

and if Phillip Wise could be a superhero then you could, too, under the right circumstances. The “right circumstances,” of course, are where plausibility crumbles away, leaving *New Triumph* no more believable than *Captain Canuck*. However, Shainblum and Morrissette’s commitment to realism is directly responsible for *New Triumph*’s ability *almost* to escape an effigial reading. In other words, *New Triumph* strips the Canadian superhero of the fantasy that previous texts such as *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck* required, in order for the Canadian superhero not just to perform but simply to exist. Wise does not live in the magical Arctic, nor does he safeguard a fictional-future Canada; *New Triumph*’s world is contemporary with its publishing and its cartography is Canada’s cartography. His fears of an American invasion are George Grant’s fears and, by extension, the nation’s as well.

Manifest Destiny

While Wise is initially content to live out his fantasy of being a superhero, he is soon overpowered by the forces of ManDes, who intend to use him and the Uniband to serve their own agenda against Canada. ManDes is Shainblum’s shorthand for the historical “Manifest Destiny,” a rallying cry in the 1800s that endorsed the theory that American expansionist fervour to dominate North America was preordained by God. This philosophy was used to further North American expansionism and to forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their lands. As *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck* fear colonial invasion, so too does Northguard, who stands in the way of a new American expansionism, an echo of Grant’s fear that Canada was “rushing towards cultural and economic integration with the United States” (15). However, P.A.C.T. intends to use Wise as a weapon and, as Bell notes, “The superhero-as-saviour is thus transformed into a destroyer” (*Invaders from the North* 82). In *New Triumph*, Shainblum and Morrissette flip the script of the Canadian super defender, if only temporarily.

Twice spelled as “Mandess” in *New Triumph* No. 1 (2, 8), in speech from characters who are trying to understand the meaning of this term, the word can be misread as “Madness,” a misunderstanding that occurred on first reading by both me and my thesis supervisor. This phonetic misrepresentation was intentionally done, so as to guide readers towards proper pronunciation (Shainblum, personal correspondence). How a comic begins its narrative is significant, for the beginning establishes, in text or images, time, place, and ideology. *New Triumph* begins with gun violence enacted by ManDes, and the conglomerate is subsequently positioned as an unending, collective-singular villain—“Where do they keep coming from?!”

(No. 1, 1:2). ManDes’s religious and conservative totalitarianism, as exuberantly chanted by its leader the Reverend and his followers—“Praise *God!* Praise *God!* / Praise *ManDes!* Praise *ManDes!* Praise *America!* Praise *America!*” (13:5-6)—indicates that the threat is not only believable, but on its way en masse.

Wise is made aware that a wave of sinister forces in the United States is sweeping northward, thus empowering the Canadian fear of invasion whereby the established colonizers (settler-Canadians) are then colonized themselves by Americans. Wise blurts out, incredulously, “Are you seriously trying to tell me that someone is plotting to overthrow the *Canadian* government?” (8:7). However plausible the threat—if colonization occurred then why not a subsequent colonization, but this time of settler-Canadians?—the use of the word *seriously* injects us back into the skepticism of the comic book world. America, God, and ManDes are all conflated into one monotheocratic threat to Canadian nationalism (12-13). The threat ManDes poses is made credible by its first target, Dr. Leila Alexander; as one of the ManDes operatives says, “Well, *her*. She’ll tell us what we need to know. No resistance, that kind” (12:11). Dr. Alexander is identified as a Black Canadian, and the agents of ManDes—theological, white supremacists—do not anticipate much in the way of resistance from her (Shainblum, personal correspondence). Here, racism and sexism are framed as American problems—elements of an external threat from ManDes—rather than problems that already exist within Canada itself.

Returning to Canada from an unCanada

The unCanada of *Captain Canuck* may have accessed the Canadian sense of disorientation, but *New Triumph* aspires to no such directional delirium. Shainblum and Morrissette’s Montreal is Wise’s Montreal, as evidenced by the high degree of realism in the artwork. As Bell notes, “While many creators rely on generic urban images, Shainblum and Morrissette photographed numerous Montreal

Figure 3.4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a square panel, the screen of a television is shown, complete with grainy lines indicating a poor signal, with Knowlton Nash hosting *The National* news broadcast. Two word balloons from Nash read, “Good evening. It’s being heralded as the *worst* air disaster in Canada’s history. An Air Canada 767 en route from Calgary to Montreal *exploded* and crashed just moments after takeoff from Calgary’s international airport at 6:07 A.M. Calgary time. All 355 passengers and crew were reported killed in the mishap. Brian Callagher reports form Calgary.” Original source: Shainblum, Mark, and Gabriel Morrissette, *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* No. 1, second printing 1987, 3:7.

locations so that when Northguard entered a building it was usually one that actually existed. This commitment to verisimilitude made their comics all the more convincing” (*Invaders from the North* 80). By contrast, Richard Comely’s collage of photographs and comics artwork in *Captain Canuck* No. 1 have the opposite effect and invoke the Freudian uncanny, “one among many possible manifestations of the Gothic... a key hinging point for expressions of territorial and historical dispossession and inauthenticity” (Sugars ix). Other examples of Canadian architectural iconography appear within *New Triumph*’s pages, such as the Calgary Tower (No. 1, 2:4), lending legitimacy to a medium known for its fantastical nature; even King Kong knew enough to climb up the Empire State Building in order to be taken seriously! Nelvana battled Mammoth Men in Glacia, a hidden underground kingdom below Arctic ice; Captain Canuck made specific Canadian place references but also went to space and traveled through time; Northguard protects the real Québec premier from a situation that (nearly) mirrors concurrent events, and real-life CBC announcer Knowlton Nash hosts CBC’s *The National* as Wise watches and listens to the report of the downing of the plane that carried the man for whom the Uniband was designed (No. 1, 3:6-8; Fig. 3.4). Additionally, Morrissette’s texturing in the Nash panel—horizontal white stripes evocative of television air waves and rabbit ears—take the reader further away from the uncanny and into the real (Fig. 3.4). The appearance of a televised news report is standard in comics, particularly superhero comics, in order to provide exposition and contextualize the situation for the protagonist, but Shainblum and Morrissette’s use of Nash and *The National* presents a further sense of realness and Canadianness, as does the inclusion of Premier Lévesque and the choice to approach his presentation as portraiture: that is, readers see his real unreal face (27:1; see Fig. 3.5). We are not really looking at the architecture of Montreal, nor are we gazing upon Lévesque, but instead realism and legitimacy are verisimilitude.

New Triumph is still a comic, however, and it creates a fictitious-real Canada, as opposed to an unCanada. Ultimately, the text rejects any (obvious) speculation; this is here and now. This heavy lean on credibility enables the central aphorism of *New Triumph* previously missing from Canadian superheroic texts: being a superhero is not magical, nor is it effortless. Shainblum and Morrissette do not indulge in much magical thinking, and they bypass the fantasy elements that propped up their literary predecessors. According to Bell, “By underpinning their work with realism and by examining the cost of heroism, Shainblum and Morrissette were

responsible for the most mature depiction ever of a Canadian national superhero” (*Invaders from the North* 82). Whereas Captain Canuck protects Canada and the world at large in a speculative, future Canada—an unCanada—Northguard performs the unreal in the real and keeps it at the ground level. Yet, even Wise himself questions the believability of his situation when he is abducted by P.A.C.T.: “This is *not* happening. This is *not* happening” (No. 1, 6:1). After all, just because Wonderland seems more likely than it was before, it is still Wonderland, and a young student in Montreal cannot have superpowers.

The Survival of the Super Defender

In her treatise on patterns in Canadian literature, Atwood states that Canadian literature contains only “futile heroes [and] unconvincing martyrs” (161) and that “Canadian history defeats attempts to construct traditional society-saving or society-changing heroes” (170). She further warns that “The attempt to create a traditional individual hero may be misguided in Canada” (172). As noted in the Introduction, in *New Triumph* No. 1, Shainblum places part of this dictum as an epigraph between the title, “And Stand on Guard...,” and the introduction of place and protagonist: “Montreal, Québec. His name is Phillip Wise” (3:4-5). The epigraph frames Atwood’s assertion of Canada as a land “bereft of heroes” (Bell, *Invaders from the North* 71) within the effigial construction of the unhero or super defender. Atwood’s approach is embroiled with Canada’s history, ill at ease with itself and its imagined glories. The Canadian literary imagination has a difficult time creating myth from history (as Shainblum and Morrissette attempt to do) for, as Atwood states, “All Canadian revolutions are failed revolutions, and our writer, searching the past for Hero materials, will find himself almost inevitably writing a drama in which an individual defending the rights of a small group finds himself up against a faceless authority” (170). In Nelvana’s early adventures, this invading authority was represented by the *kablunets*, or “evil white ones” (Dingle 22); in *Captain Canuck*, Comely indulged in the threat of communist conspiracies; in *New Triumph*, this authority is made manifest in ManDes, represented, literally, by men in business suits gathered around a boardroom table in a dimly lit room—a Reagan-era, American threat.

Atwood states that “The American way of death, as demonstrated by both history and literature, is death by violence: assassination, lynching, murder, an upsurge of individual or mass maniacal destructiveness in defiance of law” (168). These manifestations of the American way of death are performed by the agents of ManDes that Northguard finds himself standing in

opposition to. First, Karl Mannings, the agent for whom the Uniband was originally intended, is killed, along with all the other passengers of an Air Canada 767 (3:7): murder. Next, Dr. Leila Alexander, chief scientist at P.A.C.T., developer of the Uniband project, and Black woman about whom racial slurs are used, is captured and assaulted by a hired thug: a stand-in for the lynching of marginalized bodies. Then, Northguard thwarts the attempted execution of Premier Lévesque: assassination. Finally, the organization of ManDes itself is revealed, with the abbreviated name working just as well as shorthand for Atwood's "mass maniacal destructiveness" (168) as it does for "Manifest Destiny."

Northguard faces a wave of American death, suggesting that this type of Canadian literature needs the proxy of American death in order to position itself *as* Canadian. Against this wave, Northguard, successful as he is early on, feels small, ineffectual, and, ultimately, a timely scapegoat. If Canada seeks to shape a heroic archetype from the clay of its history, then, Atwood says, it does not have much to work with for "[Canadian history] cannot sustain elation in the face of the irony of history" (170). Effectively, Wise is on his own against ManDes.

However, in *New Triumph* No. 1, Wise does have a positive effect on politics within Canada. The fractured nationalisms of Québec are mended somewhat through concerted bilingual efforts. Since Wise is explicitly named in English as a defender of the North, there must be a French-language parallel. Dr. Cape asks him what he will call himself in French, since "'Northguard' hardly works" and "'Guardien du Nord' is too cumbersome. What about just 'gardien'?" (20:4). Wise rejects that appellation, but comes up with his own French name when

Figure 3.5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. In a rectangular panel, Northguard leaps to the left, pulling Premier René Lévesque out of the line of gunfire. A word balloon for Northguard reads, "A terre Monsieur Levesque!", while Lévesque responds, "Hein, quoi!? ...ouf!" Large expressive text indicating gunfire rests on the right-side of the panel: "Blam Blam Blam Blam Blam." Many of the *blams* are cut off by the panel edge. Original source: Shainblum, Mark, and Gabriel Morrissette, *New Triumph Featuring Northguard* No. 1, second printing 1987, 27:4.

Northguard—mask *on* in full embodiment (or reversal) of the Canadian flag—rescues Lévesque from an assassin. When Lévesque asks who he is, Northguard replies, “Appellez-moi Le Protecteur” (27:5), thereby furthering splitting Wise not only from his unnationalized civilian-self and his nationalized mask-self, but also his English-self and his French-self. As with Captain Canuck, Northguard can only truly represent the political (Canada) and not the personal (Wise) when he is his mask-self. And only in the act of federalism shielding separatism from American invaders trying to destabilize the nation by *pretending* to be fundamentalist federalists, can Northguard name himself, in French, as a defender. In the previous frame (Fig. 3.5), the representations of their respective ideological nationalisms in the form of Québec and Canadian flags—the Fleurdelisé on Lévesque’s pin and the reversed Maple Leaf on Northguard’s cowl—visually rest side by side (27:4; Fig. 3.5). If Canada, as represented by the maple-leafed Northguard, is a political body distinct from the political body of La Belle Province, represented by Lévesque, then the Federalist hero shields French sovereignty from Anglophonic zealotry. *New Triumph’s* gendering of the provinces (Canada/Northguard as male hero and *Québec*/Fleur de Lys as female sidekick) equates Lévesque, to a certain extent, to a damsel in distress; however, Shainblum and Morrissette attempt to distance Wise from the violent intolerance perpetuated by the Denis Lorties of the world, for Lortie’s goal was not to save the body of Francophone fundamentalism, embodied in Lévesque, but to extinguish it.

In Other Words

Northguard, super defender of the North, is less a superheroic narrative and more a Canadian thriller featuring, almost by accident, an instant hero who, like Neo in *The Matrix* (1999), can figuratively and literally “plug into” higher powers. Thus, Shainblum’s publishing company, Matrix Graphic Series, seems a fitting label in hindsight. Stepping away from the speculative fantastical of Canadian futurisms that propelled earlier maple-leafed heroes like Northern Light and Captain Canuck, *New Triumph* entered the canon with a counter-narrative: what if these texts set aside the aliens and time travel and instead placed a collective fear in a resurrection of Manifest Destiny, a direct threat from the United States on Canada and its culture? These fears were certainly invoked post-Nelvana and pre-Captain Canuck by the Massey Report, which recognized that Canadian culture needed more advocates, and by Grant, who foresaw the Americanization of Canada, for “American society has always demanded that all autonomous communities be swallowed up into the common culture” (22). Could ManDes, a

pseudo-Christian theocratic dictatorship married with white supremacy, make it this far north, and is a man dressed in maple leaves enough to stop it? Shainblum lays the blame for the non-existent Canadian superhero—“a beast that has been called ‘extinct’ on a number of occasions” (“Captain Canuck: The Triumphant Return of the Canadian Hero” 9)—on geopolitical cartography: “Canadians have an inferiority complex born of living next door to the most powerful nation on Earth. Anywhere else in the world ... Canada would be an important regional power and would have a number of remarkable achievements as a nation which could be pointed to with pride” (“Publisher’s Preface” 1). More cinéma vérité than its antecedents, *New Triumph* throws out the corniness often inherent in national superhero comics. However, despite *New Triumph*’s psychosocial cultural investment, Canada’s national superheroes, as scribed by Canada’s authors, continue to be the shield instead of the sword. In an effigial reading of the paradoxical Canadian hero, shields are considered disposable, ineffectual, and thereby are open to a skeptical gaze. Shainblum attempts to rescue the fantastical Nelvana from her invisibility by echoing part of the name of her title in *New Triumph Featuring Northguard*, but her invisibility weighs heavily on a readership who did not know enough of her to forget her. Captain Canuck’s jammies, and the role they play in undermining the Canadian hero before he performs his duties, also cast a long shadow over Northguard, himself a wearer of maple-leafed long underwear. Shainblum and Morrissette do not deconstruct the unlikely idea of a Captain Canada as much as they attempt to construct it for the first time, despite the both agreed upon and contested bias that such a creation is, perhaps, impossible.

CHAPTER 4: KAGAGI: LEGITIMACY THROUGH NATIONALISM'S ABSENCE

The graphic novel *Kagagi: The Raven* was created by Jay Odjick (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg) and published by Arcana Comics in 2010. The text opens with a prologue that begins, “Long ago, in the days when the Anishinabe were among the only people living in what we call North America” (i: 1), and goes on to tell the story of the Windigo, the “eater of human flesh” (i: 2). In this way, the mythological creature is framed as the text’s antagonist, while young protagonist Matthew Carver’s superheroism is located firmly within his culture. His story is told through an Algonquin lens, instead of through the Canadian national lens evident in *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, and *New Triumph*. The Windigo is returning, moving from prologue to text proper, and Matthew has to become the next Raven in a long line of Ravens, as penned through the #OwnVoices perspective. As Kayla Whaley explains in “#OwnVoices: Why We Need Diverse Authors in Children’s Literature,” “books with diverse characters that are written by people who share those identities” are needed because “Time and again, marginalized people have seen their stories taken from them, misused, and published as authentic” (“#OwnVoices”).¹ This position is a counterpart to *nothing about us without us*, the expression of a principle with foundations in sixteenth-century European politics that has been adopted by marginalized communities in order to ensure more ethical practice(s) in all creative and social research. As Jessica Ball notes in “Enacting Indigenous Research Ethics Through Community-University Partnerships,” “‘*Nothing about us without us*’ expresses the principle of participation around which considerations of ethical practice involving Indigenous peoples in Canada now pivot” (“Enacting”). She points out that “most research about Indigenous people continues to be done by non-Indigenous investigators and students,” a point that describes and critiques my own efforts as a settler-Canadian who is analyzing Odjick’s *Kagagi*.

Kagagi has had three incarnations: Odjick’s initial three-part, self-published *The Raven* series (Darkwing Productions, 2004), independent, black and white comics meant for an older audience; the 2010 graphic novel; and the 2014 thirteen-episode animated series that re-envisioned the graphic novel for television. The subject of this study, the graphic novel, begins with a framing story of the Anishinabe people encountering the cannibalistic creature known as the Windigo that Odjick was “told a few years ago” (“Kablogi”) before he began work on the

¹ Whaley speaks here of the need for more authors with disabilities writing about people with disabilities.

project. The text begins, “Our people were plagued by a creature that knew no fear and destroyed everything in its path” (Ojick, *Kagagi* i: 1). After the legendary warrior Wisakedjak, the culture hero of many North American Indigenous groups, slays many of the figures associated with the beast but refuses to slay the beast itself, a group of Algonquin warriors form a partnership with the Pagwoudj-Inini, or “the little people of the forest,” to battle the Windigo and his minions. The forces of man and Pagwoudj-Inini defeat the Windigo, at great loss of life, but this opening story notes that the Windigo will return one day and the Anishinabe will need another hero (viii: 4). The contextualizing legend ends on this note, which aligns the hero figure in the subsequent contemporary narrative not only with the re-envisioned trickster, but also with the often-used superheroic archetype of *the chosen one* or the *instant hero*, as previously evident in *New Triumph*.

Ojick’s reasoning for prefacing *Kagagi* with the framing story of the Windigo goes beyond finding the tale, as he puts it, “pretty badass” (“Kablogi”). Ojick wonders “Why so few of us were familiar with the story,” and notes that he “wanted to do something about that— and at the same time, create something new. The question to me was, what happened after [the first battle with Windigo]?” (“Kablogi”). His reasoning was that ancestral stories not only need to be brought to light, but also need to be applied to the People as they live now; the story had not ended, and thereby refused to remain an artifact of the past. The Windigo had been defeated, but the Pagwoudj-Inini had stated that the beast was now a human problem, and “the little people of the forest” would render no further assistance (Ojick, *Kagagi* viii: 3-4). Space was opened not for a modern retelling of the Windigo saga, but for an extension of it that answers the question, how are the People going to survive when the Windigo returns? Ojick’s foundational set-up seems tailor-made for the superhero narrative, as superhero stories, from *Beowulf* to *Batman*, are myths with which humans persistently identify. As Ojick states, *Kagagi* has the “elements of superheroics, horror, good old fashioned teenage angst, mixed with a traditional Native legend in comic form” (“Kablogi”).

Once the frame is established, *Kagagi* moves to the modern day; the clothes worn by the characters tie the world established within to the date of publication, 2010. Carver, an orphan previously adopted by a couple, both of whom are now dead, and living with a foster mother who was the housekeeper of his adoptive parents, is the only Indigenous kid in a diverse and unnamed urban high school. He struggles with how to fit in with his peer group, how to avoid

conflict with jocks and bullies, and how to navigate his giant crush on his classmate, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, midriff-baring Cassie. Once the foundation of teenage angst is built, Carver is approached by a motorbike-riding Elder who is identified first as Jack (Odjick, *Kagagi* 1:8), and then later as Wisakedjak (36:6). Wisakedjak attempts to inform Carver that he is the next Kagagi/Raven, and that his mortal enemy, Windigo, has returned. The young man is not interested; his life has enough problems. However, when it becomes clear that the evil creature is interested in attacking those for whom he cares, beginning with Cassie, the teenager soon has no choice but to accept that he is the past and the future; he is the Kagagi. He embraces this destiny, but the learning curve is steep.

Ultimately, *Kagagi* is a short and simple superhero graphic novel—the text travels no further than Carver’s first encounter with Windigo while ending on a cliffhanger that portends further adventures.² However, the graphic novel delivers a powerful story about transforming oneself in the face of systemic oppression and resistance to responsibilities and destiny. It fits within the well-established format of the superheroic *bildungsroman*, evident in *Kagagi*’s forerunners such as Billy Batson/Captain Marvel (*Whiz Comics* No. 2, Fawcett Comics, 1939), Dick Grayson/Robin (*Detective Comics* No. 38, DC, April 1940) or Peter Parker/Spider-Man (*Amazing Fantasy* No. 15, August 1962). Odjick enhances the reductive format of teenage *instant hero*, however, by placing him within an established Indigenous framework. In deference to the Anishinabe teachings from which he pulls inspiration, the story of Matthew Carver is not as easily resolved as one would expect. Windigo is not captured, sent to jail, or ultimately defeated; he will return again. The result of *Kagagi*’s open ending is not a presentation of might makes right or good versus evil; instead, Carver’s encounter with Windigo serves as the catalyst for cultural learning, self-knowledge, and an opportunity to seek wisdom, as Carver, in *Kagagi* form, objectively and metaphorically leans on Wisakedjak after the battle with Windigo and indicates his newfound willingness to work with his Elder to learn more, saying, “We got some work to do. I have a few questions” (*Kagagi* 48:5). Carver, figuratively, emerges from the darkness.

² Matthew Carver would go on to have further adventures in the 2014 *Kagagi* animated series. Odjick notes that while the cartoon series uses the graphic novel for its source material, the *Kagagi* cartoon is ultimately an adaption both similar to and different from the comic (Odjick, personal correspondence, 2020).

Kagagi offsets and corrects North American Indigenous superheroes created by non-Indigenous peoples that range from unsatisfactory to offensive, such as Thunderbird (Marvel 1975), Apache Chief (DC Comics/Hanna-Barbara 1977), Shaman (Marvel 1979), American Eagle (Marvel 1981), Warpath (Marvel 1984), and Butcher (DC Comics 1990). The pioneering nature of *Kagagi* lies in its relative simplicity; as Michael Sheyahshe notes, “While other comics may portray Native people with child-like intellects (*White Indian*) or as wizened sages with intrinsic knowledge of the spirit world (*Alpha Flight’s Shaman*), [Odjick] simply presents a story with a Native protagonist” (150). As a coming of age story, the narrative can be understood by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. This cultural reclamation is apparent when Odjick introduces himself, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek way, in his personal blog: “I’m a comics creator living in Canada. I am from the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin reservation; I’m First Nations, Native, Aboriginal, Indigenous, Indian or whatever new term they have for us today” (“Kablogi”).

Kagagi ushers in a new era in Northern superhero publishing with a leading Indigenous character based on Anishinabe teachings and language. The general impossibility of superheroism aside, Odjick scribes a believable superhero by focusing on *Kagagi* through a representational Indigenous lens, in so far as one can realistically present a teenage superhero. Critically, regarding the mainstream superhero comics industry, the issue is not only with character diversity and/or the Indigenization of northern comics, but with who has control over these leads. Odjick maintains control over his intellectual property, beginning with the first contact point of self-publishing; in short, he reclaims storytelling through a dynamic medium. *Kagagi* allows readers like me to engage critically with Indigenous superheroes created in Canada by Indigenous creators. Tellingly, there are very few that satisfy these conditions.³ *Kagagi* and Odjick have unique positions in a small canon of Canadian and nationalized Canadian superhero or Northern superhero literatures. As *Kagagi* demonstrates, Indigenous knowledges and storytelling can combine extraordinarily well with the form and format of superhero stories by Indigenous creators living in Canada.

While Canadian national superheroes still struggle to overcome a sporadic publishing

³ Other Indigenous superheroes created and distributed within Canada have included Barney Pattunguayak and Peter Tapatai’s *Super Shamou* (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, 1987) and the cartoon *Tshakapesh Superhero* (2019), co-produced by the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and Radio-Canada, respectively. Both properties, however, are primarily television shows.

history in order to remain present and relevant, the legitimization of comics and the graphic novel medium runs parallel to a modern, post-millennial movement of Indigenization in comics. In other words, as the medium continues to attract and encourage scholarly research, the interest in featuring the voices and stories of Indigenous peoples, and not colonial approximations by colonial authors, grows. Many modern publications feature historical or ficto-historical subject matter—decolonization, north of the American-Canadian border, by way of reclamation of Indigenous stories by Indigenous voices and allies of Indigenous voices. Recognizing the intersectional importance of graphic novels and comics to literature, the arts, academia, media, and Indigeneity, Québec’s Heritage College has a separate webpage for graphic novels and notes that “Indigenous comics and graphic novels have two aims: to counteract the misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in mainstream graphic works [and] to offer relatable, realistic, and positive representations of Indigenous characters” (“The Indigenizing Project: Graphic Novels”). Texts that have received praise include Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel* (1999); Scott Henderson and David Alexander Robertson’s (Swampy Cree) *7 Generations* (2010) and *Sugar Falls: A Residential School Story* (2011); Patti LaBoucane-Benson (Métis) and Kelly Mellings’ *The Outside Circle* (2015); Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire’s *Secret Path* (2016); Katherena Vermette (Métis), Scott Henderson, and Donovan Yaciuk’s *A Girl Called Echo* series (2017); and the collaborative *This Place: 150 Years Retold* (2019). However, it should be noted that in contrast to the principle of “nothing about us without us,” *Louis Riel* and *Secret Path* were authored and/or illustrated by non-Indigenous people and cannot be considered Indigenous texts. In the new millennium, Canadian comics and graphic novels enjoy a resurgence that involves decolonial biographical and autobiographical reclamation, as observed by Heritage College: “The graphic novel form is one that is particularly popular amongst First Peoples writers and artists as it provides an opportunity to visually work through cultural trauma while also connecting with younger generations who often enjoy this form more than traditional novels or even orature” (“The Indigenizing Project”). In other words, comics represent activism through visual literature. Yet, even given the recent Indigenization of Canadian comics and graphic narratives, *Kagagi* is unique: it presents Canada’s first independent, Indigenous-created, mainstream comic-book Indigenous superhero that I know of.⁴ As of the writing of this thesis,

⁴ The character Super Shamou had his roots in film and broadcasting, with his comic created as a giveaway to supplement the *Super Shamou* live action series of the late 1980s. As such, the

none have followed.

In an interview with Ad Astra Comix, a publisher specializing in comic books with social justice themes, Odjick expands upon his frustrations with the lack of identifiable, Indigenous characters in popular culture: “I also didn’t understand why there were so *few* native characters on TV or in comics. Only later did I kind of begin to theorize as to why that was, and want to create a superhero character who *did* look and act like the Native people I knew. . . . Basically, I thought there was a need for a cool, hip, modern native hero—one who native kids could relate to or who could resonate with them” (“Rise of Kagagi”). While *Kagagi* may be published in Canada by an author residing in Québec, the book’s aesthetics are not of the North, in contrast to those of *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*. Instead, other than the introductory framing narrative, the novel’s aesthetics are, like *New Triumph*, firmly fixed in urbanity. They are opposed to the concept of the “Great White North,” which as Baldwin, Cameron, and Kobayashi argue, “weaves history, geography, aesthetics, science, and even comedy into a national imaginary that invokes a metaphor of nature’s purity to reinforce norms of racial purity” (1). The further down the chronological rabbit hole one travels, with regard to Canadian superheroes and superheroes published in Canada, the more urban and melancholy the setting. Through this transformation over time in an admittedly small canon, Canada is represented as urbanized, and the central narratives as unconcerned with white, wide open spaces rife with attractive resources.

Odjick’s pedagogy of superheroism through cultural teachings extends further, as evidenced through his diverse cast within *Kagagi* itself: “My thinking with *Kagagi* was always—he’s a superhero who is Native—and that plays a role in who he is, of course, but you should be able to come into this world without a lot of knowledge of Native culture or what indigenous experiences are like” (“Rise of Kagagi”). Sheyahshe notes that Carver’s locality and lack of cultural knowledge through urbanization “speaks to another element that breaks common stereotypes. Because he exists in the present day, the central character is not a product of history nor does he descend from an extinct species” and that, simply, “His existence demonstrates continuance of Native people into modern times” (150). Likewise, as Carver’s presence in modernity is itself a statement, so is his placement in superhero comics, which is still a young

Super Shamou comic (Burns 1990) did not follow the lines of distribution that other superhero comics did and did not reach store shelves, rendering it more anomalous than a mainstream comic book.

medium having only come into existence in the 1930s with the arrival of Superman. As Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice argues, “By virtue of their very existence Indigenous literatures affirm Indigenous experiences, presence, and possibility” (208). Renée Hulan anticipates this declaration when she concludes in “Who’s There?”: “What is at stake in CanLit is a question of who speaks or, more precisely, who controls who speaks, and who’s there to listen” (68). The sociopolitical nature of the superhero comic book medium itself—Who is in power? Who defends whom? Who is villainous and who is heroic?—means that an authentic Indigenous protagonist, legitimized through Indigenous creation and storytelling, is a form of activism.

Visual Representation of an Indigenous Superhero

The visual elements of *Kagagi* range aesthetically from gothic darkness to a noticeably bright and vibrant palette—from the mythological, dark fantastical to the brightly lit domestic interiors of school and home life. Nearly absent from the pages is the stereotypical palette of leather browns and forest greens; this is not the spectrum of Carver’s world. Odjick explains his artistic methodologies: “In terms of visuals, I decided to steer clear of the stereotypes or tropes we tend to see associated *with* native super-people. I didn’t—and still don’t—believe a super person in buckskin will resonate with younger readers or maybe even readers my age. . . . If we want to create native superhero characters who resonate with native kids, we have to speak the same visual language in the media forms they’re accustomed to” (“Rise of Kagagi”). In choosing to tell the story of Carver as Kagagi in comics, and later on in cartoons, Odjick focuses on the formats he finds most attractive: “As a kid, it was hard because many people wanted me to work in more traditional native arts—my father especially. He discouraged me from pursuing comics, but I was what I was” (“Rise of Kagagi”). Odjick and Patrick Tenascon (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg), an inker whom Odjick hired for the graphic novel, express themselves in this medium through amalgamations of dark aesthetics featuring brick, bone, and blood. Swelling clouds and smoke merge with Kagagi’s shadowy costume, portrayed in the cover artwork (Fig. 4.1).

Carver, as Kagagi/Raven, is featured prominently, occupying the near entirety of the cover frame as he displays his figurative plumage. Like Captain Canuck and Northguard before him, the protagonist is depicted not in his civilian identity (Carver) but as his mask self. Instead of transforming into a living Maple Leaf, however, Carver is corvid-like: cloaked in black, he

loses his pupils and sprouts claws, while long hair and ribbons flap around him like feathers. If the mask selves of Captain Canuck and Northguard were the embodiment of Canadian nationalism—an unchanging story Canada tells about itself to itself when flags cloak flesh—then Kagagi’s mask self is, culturally and literally, the Raven, the embodiment of transformation and change shifting with the times and teller. Odjick’s gothic stylings on the cover combine superheroic pomp with Indigenous Raven trickster stories. In “Personal Totems,” Sonny Assu (Kwakwaka’wakw), from *Troubling Tricksters*—a selection of critical conversations about trickster figures that features an illustrated superhero on its cover—speaks of the transformative pop-modernity of Raven: “Raven, in my work, transforms into these objects/icons of pop culture to stay in the loop. After all, he is the creature that brought light to the world by knocking up the Chief’s daughter after turning himself into a pine needle. A win-win situation, if you come to

think of it: he gave us light and got the virtue of the daughter at the same time. Very James Bond” (149). In short, traditional Raven stories can run parallel with Western action narratives, as typified in comics and movies with a focus on action and adventure, as well as with art and pop culture itself—Raven is, or can be, everywhere.

Raven stories differ among cultures but include some constants. The Raven is a cunning, magical, transformative trickster. Raven stories are moral in nature, and while the Raven can be a hero or a cautionary tale, he is always both an amusing and a powerful figure who can transform not only himself but also the world—in short, he is a kind of superhero. Carver is able to transform into a superheroic Raven—replete with stylized

Figure 4.1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was the cover of the 2010 *Kagagi: The Raven* graphic novel published by Arcana Comics, featuring Kagagi at night standing in front of the moon while smoke drifts around him. *Kagagi*’s Wikipedia page showcases a different cover intended to promote the animated series, but an internet search for “Kagagi: The Raven comic” brings up the cover image used here.

claws, feathers, and a pronounced crotch reminiscent of a beak (Fig. 4.1)—and back again into his human form. In noting this, I am not suggesting I have the cultural knowledge to fully disseminate Raven trickster stories properly; however, in applying generalized observations, I acknowledge the pedagogical purpose and seamless translation of these narratives into this superheroic text.

Aesthetic choices render Kagagi in dreamy darkness and stand in contrast to the vivid colour palette used to represent Carver's civilian life, such as his school day or his interactions with his foster parent, Janet. Thematically, *Kagagi's* visual presentation relegates the hero character into a pensive, subconscious world—a fireside tale both grotesque and engaging. *Kagagi's* aesthetics feel as if they intend to escape the restraints the comics medium places upon them.

Matthew Carver as Role Model

The protagonist, Matthew Carver, emerges from the colourful dreamscape of not-knowing. Initially in *The Raven* comics, Carver was presented as an Algonquin male of indeterminate age; however, when the time came to reformat *The Raven* into the *Kagagi* graphic novel, a format designed for broader circulation, Carver was presented as a sixteen-year-old high school student. The change was significant in that Odjick intended that Carver should serve as both a superhero and an ambassador, primarily for Indigenous youth who were in search of cultural connection. Odjick takes this aim and crosspollinates it with the power of visibility. As noted in the Introduction, the superhero figure is a powerful vessel of modern myth whose cultural function, regardless of gender, class, or race, is sociopolitically and culturally embedded in the figure of the role model.

Frederic Wertham, a comics polemicist from the early to mid-1900s, feared this power and championed a campaign of censorship against comics and superheroes in order to protect comic-book-reading children. As Wertham expresses it, children will inevitably connect with the figure of the superhero, and “In the individual case this superman ideology is psychologically most unhygienic. The would-be supermen compensate for some kind of inferiority, real or imagined, by the fantasy of the superior being who is a law unto himself. ... The superman conceit gives boys and girls the feeling that ruthless go-getting based on physical strength or the power of weapons or machines is the desirable way to behave” (97). Wertham fears what he has dubbed the “superman conceit” and notes that children, in order to feel empowered in their own

lives, will identify with and emulate those who take the law into their own hands. In contrast, modern comics scholars such as David Reynolds critically engage with the modern myth of the “superman” as a social power not necessarily to fear but to harness for positive ends, since ultimately, “Superhero tales function as tools for moral education” (16), an approach Odjick endorses.

In an interview regarding his role as the voice actor for Matthew Carver in the *Kagagi* animated series, Eric Wilson (Xwémalhkwu) says the role is important because “Matthew Carver creates that positive role model that may not always be physically available to youth around the country. This is the kind of guy that keeps his cool and is an all around respectable human being. There are First Nations legends that can be inspiring, empowering and spoken about to make people happy, not afraid” (quoted in Odjick, *Kagagi* 70). For Wilson, the connection between Indigeneity and superheroes is as strong as it is obvious: “I think that as First Nations people, we are all warriors in our own way. We are survivors, protectors, artists. I believe there is a super hero already inside all of us that surfaces at times, much like Kagagi surfacing in Matthew” (70). In *Kagagi*, superheroism is not something to strive towards, or that results from Atwood’s observation of the Canadian hero’s “idiot circumstance” (171); it is a latent, pre-existing condition. Captain Canuck and Northguard, heroes who capitalize on visual nationalisms, must don their flags to enact their heroisms, but for Kagagi (and, arguably, Nelvana) heroism is already inherent within them. Ultimately, the superhero, a power fantasy made flesh that is nearly always a role model, aligns well with the traditions and knowledges inherent in Indigenous storytelling in which, as Justice notes, “education is valued as an expression of tradition, not in opposition to it” (148). Superhero narratives and Indigenous knowledges intersect as educational modes.

If Carver works as an avatar for Indigenous youth, his life bears some autobiographical connection to Odjick himself who, like Matthew, was once an Indigenous youngster living off-reserve in an urban community. Odjick’s early childhood years were spent in urban Rochester, New York, a direct result of his father leaving the Kitigan Zibi nation in search of employment in what was known, at the time, in sociological circles as *Native urbanization* (Frideres 195). When Odjick was five, his parents moved back to the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg community just outside of Maniwaki, in Québec, Canada. Odjick’s protagonist, in contrast, remains in an undisclosed urban metropolis which, during the initial run of *The Raven*, was known as New

York City. Carver’s diasporic experience represents what Odjick’s life could have been. While struggling to navigate these issues, Carver is gifted with Janet, his non-Indigenous foster parent, with whom he is shown to have a loving relationship. In contrast to the darkly mythological cover artwork (Fig. 4.1), Carver’s interior life at home is brightly lit and projected through the narrative lens of simple and compassionate domesticity (Fig. 4.2). The visual language used in *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, and *New Triumph* makes no illustrative distinction between Nelvana and North, Canuck and Evans, or Northguard and Wise; however, this separation

Figure 4.2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. Figure 4.2 was page 20 of *Kagagi* in its entirety and featured eight panels, in a variety of rectangles and squares, showing Matthew Carver and Janet in dialogue outside their home. (1) Janet approaches a morose Carver and says, “They’d be very *proud* of you.” (2) Carver stares ahead, in a profile shot, and does not respond. (3) He turns to the right and asks, “Are you?” (4) Janet places her hand on his shoulder and replies, “Of course! You’ve grown into a fine young man. I worked for your parents for years before they adopted you. I knew them as friends. I know you are not my son, Matty but...” (5) In a close-up shot, Carver glances over at her and responds, “I know. It’s okay.” (6) In an angle echoing panel one, but with overlapping word balloons, Janet says, “You should go,” to which Carver responds, “*Huh?!?*” Janet replies, “To the dance,” to which Carver concludes, “No, that’s not really my thing, you know?” (7) Janet, in a close-up shot, replies, “Oh, of course not. Kids do not have fun these days!” (8) In the final panel of the page, Carver continues to engage her by replying, “That’s not what I mean, I just...,” which she interrupts, in a series of word balloons, with “This is what you need, Matty. Go. Have *fun*.” Original source: Odjick, Jay, *Kagagi: The Raven*, 2010, p. 20.

between the cultural mask self and the North American civilian self is apparent in *Kagagi*. Carver’s dialogue with Janet, while supportive in nature, bisects Carver as a complete individual: neither character is presented as an entire human from head to toe, backgrounds are minimalistic and skewed, and the gutters—the open space between panels that enables the flow of time—are blacked out (Fig. 4.2). This presentation is a visual technique meant to draw the viewer into a scene that favors dialogue over action, but it also has the added effect of presenting Carver as out of step with the domestic world around him. Carver is twice removed from his Indigenous community via adoption and through fostering, and his distance and isolation are foregrounded

in the narrative. His home life is similar to that of Joshua Kane in Richard Wagamese's (Ojibway) novel *A Quality of Light*, in which an Ojibway boy is adopted by a loving, white Protestant family. While both Kane and Carver escape the abuse and unhappiness that many Indigenous adoptees experienced, both boys navigate the complexities of cultural isolation and un-belonging.

The Kagagi figure manifests when Carver transforms from a young man into a mature, masked and muscled super-male (Fig. 4.1). This transformation has antecedents: young Billy Batson transforms into the adult Captain Marvel (later known for legal reasons as Shazam), and Peter Parker seemingly moves between his chronological identities as Parker (a high school student) and Spider-Man (a fully grown vigilante). Batson, Parker, and Carver do not change in maturity or somehow magically access a wealth of experience(s) once they have transformed into their fully-grown adult superhero forms; internally, they are still adolescents, but they are now boys in possession of the powers and the form that will enable them to enact their righteous power fantasies to reform their worlds in ways that they deem acceptable and just. Indeed, what child would not jump at the chance to don a temporary adult skin enhanced with world-changing powers?

In particular, Kagagi manifests from within Carver when his crush, Cassie, is threatened by the Windigo, thereby linking loyalty, love, and defense to Carver's superheroic cultural awakening. As a child who grew up with a cultural understanding of what a superhero is—like Phillip Wise in *New Triumph*, Odjick notes that Carver “grew up reading comics, watching pro wrestling 'n horror movies” (“Creator Interview,” *Kagagi* 69) and is aware of comics and comic book superheroes—Carver's Kagagi persona is a representation of this cultural understanding right down to the rippling abdominals. Carver's Indigeneity, however, also shines through in his Kagagi costume, which exemplifies perceptions of what a North American superhero and an Indigenous cultural superhero could, together, be. Odjick notes that “Matthew is a kid who doesn't know a lot about his culture or background, [and] it's interesting that ... his hair grows when he transforms into *Kagagi*. It perhaps is meant to symbolize, deep down, how he *feels* he should be connected with his traditional culture” (“Rise of Kagagi!”). When Matthew is the uncertain, young civilian, his hair is short, but, tellingly, when he is a superhero, his hair is long and free-flowing—a visual statement of how, in many cultures, there is both pride and power in

uncut hair.⁵

Odjick affectionately refers to Kagagi as “old long hair” (“Bonus Material,” *Kagagi* 50), noting the connection between the hair and Carver’s understanding of a culture within himself and older than himself: a place of belonging that, as “just Matthew” he does not have. Additionally, the use of “old,” in this case, directly connects to Carver’s switch between the short-haired boy that he is to the instant maturity of the long-haired man he becomes when he embodies the Raven. Carver’s schoolmates note his generally morose demeanor; as one of them says, “One of these days you’re gonna crack a smile and me and Tommy ain’t gonna recognize you!” (7:3). The school bully, Eric Kavanaugh, is more cruelly forthright in addressing Carver as a “poor, little *Indian* orphan” (12:4). It is textually apparent that Carver is the only Indigenous student in a diverse school, and while his friends and his foster parent are warm and welcoming, he is isolated and missing a sense of community. His foster mother attempts to get to the root of the matter, but it is Jack, later revealed as Wisakedjak, who identifies Carver’s problems: “Had any weird things happen to you lately? Lose your temper? Maybe some time here and there?” (17:1). Wisakedjak identifies these changes in Matthew not as connected to adolescence but as directly related to the heroic powers of the Raven within, as Kagagi struggles to emerge. He tells Carver that “the temper flare ups” signal that he has “started to turn. I’ve felt it. And if I’ve felt it... others have” (17:3). Carver’s encounters with Wisakedjak are central to the emergence of Kagagi, and the pairing of these two characters, both of whom satisfy the conditions of a hero in *motion* as discussed in the Introduction, and of an Indigenous culture hero, is key.

Elder Heroes and Trickster Knowledges

The culture figure Wisakedjak is himself something of a superhero. Cultural teachings often portray Wisakedjak as a humorous but benevolent trickster character. As Justice points out, these transformative tricksters are designed to “disrupt complacency and order,” for these figures “break down the established social order, but in so doing also disrupt inequitable power relations, frozen ideologies, and unhealthy traditions” (92). Odjick’s Wisakedjak is portrayed as a friend of humankind, as Windigo expresses to Kagagi, “I will never understand the sad love Wisakedjak feels for your pitiful kind. Hahah! Or for that matter, your willingness to *serve* him” (Odjick, *Kagagi* 46: 3).

⁵ Interestingly, this long hair presented logistical problems when it came time to move Kagagi to animation; there, it was tied back into a ponytail.

While the details of Wisakedjak stories fluctuate between different communities, a central thread tying the stories together is that Wisakedjak was designed by the Great Spirit to be a teacher. As a warrior and instructor both, *Kagagi*'s Wisakedjak fulfills the obligation of the elder hero or role model who passes down essential knowledge to new generations of young heroes, particularly those who are only wearing their adult-hero skins temporarily. For example, Billy Batson is guided by the wizard Shazam, Peter Parker adopts the phrase “with great power comes great responsibility” from his Uncle Ben as a personal mantra; and Matthew Carver is guided towards his destiny as *Kagagi* by Wisakedjak. Wisakedjak's appearance in *Kagagi* does more than just help him undertake the journey of the bildungsroman superhero; here, the Elder warrior is required as a guide because the text states that Carver, an avatar for present-day Indigenous youth, has lost all connections to his Indigeneity. As the Elder is also the adult figure against whom the young hero rebels in the traditional bildungsroman, Carver initially rejects Wisakedjak's approaches: “Listen, pal. They used to warn us about guys like you” (16: 4). Not only is Carver disenfranchised from his Indigeneity and the self-knowledge Wisakedjak represents, but also the young boy considers the older man possibly perverse, evoking the contemporary fear of the male sexual predator, as Wisakedjak realizes, when he replies, “Guys like *me?* / What do you... Oh, *hey*, no! *No!*” (16: 4-5). Carver's Indigeneity—his identity as a Raven in a long line of Ravens—is so alien as to seem deviant.

Carver is unaware of the Windigo or that the Windigo has returned, for he does not know the stories that the reader, by way of Odjick's preface, knows. As Alexander Wolfe (Saulteaux), notes, “there would be a need for the *Anishnaybay*⁶ to know of their descendancy and history, their language and culture. Without this, future descendants would become lost and would be in confusion” (xiii). As Canada is a “backwater bereft of heroes” (*Invaders from the North* 71), Carver is bereft of these knowledges and, therefore, in a position of danger. The elder Wisakedjak knows that it is imperative that Carver *listen* to him for, “the grandfathers felt that listening was important. ... The teachings that instruct a person in their identity, their purpose in life, their responsibility and contribution to the well-being of others are put in the memory for safekeeping” (Wolfe xi-xii). *Kagagi* is prefaced by the story of Wisakedjak and the Windigo in the contextual supposition that *Kagagi*'s young Indigenous readers (the target audience) and non-

⁶ “*Anishnaybay*: Indian, singular” (“Introduction” Earth Elder Stories)

Indigenous readers might be unfamiliar with the framing story. These stories, as Harvey Knight (Saulteaux) expresses, are told “to mainstream North American society, and to aboriginal people who have become isolated from their culture, [and who view] Indian oral tradition [as a] thing of the past” (vii). Odjick expressly joins *Kagagi*’s contemporaneous timeline with a prologue of traditional stories in order to securely and interdependently connect one timeline to another, thus exorcising the isolation Carver feels and, by extension, that of any young Indigenous reader who identifies with the lead character.

In the story, an unnamed orator of the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin community states that Wisakedjak roamed the lands for years, slaying all Windigos except for the original one: “For reasons even our Elders do not know, Wisakedjad [sic] stayed his hand. Allowed the beast its life” (Odjick, *Kagagi* iii). If it was unclear to the Elders, it remains unclear to the readers, the recipients of the story, why the original Windigo remained alive. The fallout from this decision, however, was that “The Anishinabe knew then that [their] people were in grave danger” (iv). Through the perspective of contemporary superhero comics scholarship, the reason he is spared seems clear: superheroes or super defenders require an ever-present and omniscient evil to mandate their existence. Nelvana, Captain Canuck, and Northguard face a never-ending, faceless supply of Nazis, communists, and American monotheocratic right-wingers. *Kagagi* draws its water from a different well of antagonists, one that requires the presence of named, singular villains, despite the Windigo’s ability to multiply. In the end, Wisakedjak does not kill the original Windigo for the same reason that Batman can, arguably, never bring himself to slay the Joker: these heroes require the existence of their darker halves in order to define themselves.

Kagagi’s focus, however, is on Carver’s reclamation of his Indigenous identity and, despite its status as a superheroic text published within Canada, he has no discernable connection to the figure of the nationalized superhero. Instead, Carver serves as a positive role model for Indigenous youth who identify with his diasporic un-belonging. However, the abuse of Indigenous children adopted and fostered in non-Indigenous homes is a non-issue within the graphic novel. Not only does Carver appear to be fond of his dead adoptive parents, but also his foster parent Janet serves as the Aunt May proxy—right down to her wardrobe and hairstyle!—to Carver’s Peter Parker figure (Fig. 4.2). Spider-Man is a superhero defined by his cartography; as Kevin Kuhlman argues, “No superhero is more connected to a real-world location than Spider-Man is to New York City” (“You Mess with Spidey”). The un-nationalized Spider-Man *is* New

York City—not the city of our world, but the speculative city of the Marvel Comics universe, much in the same way that Captain Canuck protects an idealized and thoroughly speculative unCanada.

As the Raven is also a trickster figure in some cultures, in pairing Kagagi with Wisakedjak, Odjick presents the reader with two culture heroes, Matthew and Jack. This doubling has the effect of splitting the trickster figure into separate roles: one is the teacher and the other is the student or the listener. However, both are heroes—Wisakedjak of the past, Kagagi of the present and future—as befits the superheroic archetype. In “What’s the Trouble with the Trickster?” Kristina Fagan (NunatuKavut) writes that the trickster figure can be “read as a metaphor of postmodernism, challenging stable categories and forms” (6) and that, over time and stories told, the trickster “moves away from an ‘embodied’ figure with roots in Indigenous lives towards a trickster that is primarily a metaphor for a particular theoretical stance” (7). In *Kagagi*, the doubling/splitting of the trickster narrative in the modern medium of comics and graphic narratives confirms that cultural stories and their supporters, both inside and outside of the text (here, Odjick and Wisakedjak/Raven), are truly at home in these contemporary media: comics, television and movies, and video games.

In “Gasps, Snickers, Narrative Tricks, and Deceptive Ideologies,” settler-scholar Jennifer Kelly explains her approach to trickster narratives: “I share with many non-Indigenous people what I would call a generalized—and grossly simplified—understanding of trickster narratives as both entertaining and pedagogical, with each story part of a much broader cycle or series of stories, and of tricksters as imperfect figures with incredible abilities, from whose foibles and successes listeners learn fundamental values and ways of knowing” (101-02). In Kelly’s generalized approach, Kagagi and Wisakedjak embody these values: they are flawed, cyclical heroes with great power, in a story designed to teach and impart cultural knowledges and morality. Taking these ideas into account, I argue that the trickster narrative, as framed for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, works well with a superheroic framework—a model that Odjick uses in order to bring *Kagagi*’s intersection of traditional stories and superhero comics to a wider North American readership. Superheroes are imperfect beings with amazing abilities. Of tricksters and double tricksters, Yale Belanger, in *Ways of Knowing*, states that “Trickster tales are both entertaining and moralistic, and have always been useful tools for teachers educating the young; they remind those who are older of a universe that is in constant

transformation” (12). The schism between teacher and student is indeed found within the pages of *Kagagi*—a story intended for a younger audience in which Jack and Carver’s interactions are both entertaining and instructive. Kelly continues her observations: “In my understanding, traditionally, each trickster story is part of a much longer, complex, and integrated system of narratives. In some trickster stories, the trickster emerges as rather heroic, as helper, for example; in others, the trickster’s foibles and errors become an object lesson in how *not* to behave” (109). Following Kelly’s observation, *Kagagi*’s prologue narrating Wisakedjak’s heroism, and his choice not to slay Windigo (a decision that would have disastrous consequences for humankind), is not the story on its own but a part of a larger set of stories that necessitates the need for Raven—another hero figure with flaws of his own. In *Kagagi*, the story of Wisakedjak is not only one for mortals to learn from, but a narrative device to find and instruct further generations of culture heroes.

In Other Words

Shining light on *Kagagi* through the lens of my previous discussions of the figure of the Canadian national superhero presents a problem. I have argued that Canadian superheroes operate on a bedrock of cynicism, embarrassment, or shame. Superheroes, as penned by Canadians, question whether a Canadian and a superhero could exist within one mortal body; thus, my approach seeks to challenge or complicate the idea of the Canadian hero. *Kagagi* does not fit well within this theoretical approach. *Kagagi*’s position as exception, rather than rule, could be because the author is an Indigenous man *living* in Canada, rather than necessarily identifying as a Canadian. Moreover, as settler scholar Laura Moss argues, “many scholars question the very concept of nationalism in Canada because it is so often predicated on the dissolution of the First Nations” (10). In other words, decolonizing theorists in Canada critique the nation-state because of the colonial history of nationalism itself. Can an Indigenous superhero, then, also be a national superhero? If so, of which nation are we speaking—the nation of Canada, or a particular Indigenous nation within its geographical boundaries? Nationalized Indigeneity in the figure of the Canadian superhero appears within the pages of *Nelvana* and *Captain Canuck*, both as afterthought and foregone conclusion with which the comics never critically engage. In investigating and challenging the idea of the colonial in Canadian literature, Moss emphasizes that “Looking at Canada as a settler/white colony in opposition to an invaded/indigenous population is ... ineffective,” because this perspective

“places Native populations in a constant state of opposition rather than separation” (11). If Moss suggests that examining settler culture in opposition to Indigenous culture on the basis of invader versus invaded is potentially harmful, then settler-created texts, such as *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, and *New Triumph* are even more likely to collapse under their own weight. In contrast, Carver is a hero with a foot in each world—settler, Indigenous—with the #OwnVoices legitimacy required to support this position.

Is *Kagagi* a Canadian text? *Kagagi* may very well be a superhero, but is he a Canadian national superhero or even just a Canadian superhero? The answer would appear to be “no,” and thus *Kagagi* successfully navigates past the inherent satire and heroic modesty that characterize the national super defender. This claim cannot be tested for veracity against other Indigenous authors producing Indigenous superhero comics and graphic novels destined for the direct (mainstream) market within Canada, because Odjick and *Kagagi* are, to my knowledge, unique. While *Kagagi* adheres to many standard tropes found within North American superhero comics and graphic novels—such as its treatment of oversexualized and underrepresented female characters, skin-tight clothes on heroes and civilians alike, easily resolved moral and physical battles, and the hypermasculinization of the lead hero—it also eschews an effigial reading. Carver was not created to be knocked down either intentionally or as a by-product of Canadian existential dread. *Kagagi* embodies his Indigeneity, not the nationalized cartography of his publication; therefore, the ridicule that is heaped upon his maple-leaf wearing predecessors in their efforts to represent the ideologies of a colonial nation-state melts away. This escape from the easy parody and satire common to the Canadian national superhero is what makes *Kagagi* particularly exciting, as not only does this text present a domestically produced, Indigenous-made superhero, but also it arguably presents the first example of a superhero, made in Canada, who manages to emblematically exhibit his pedigree without, knowingly or unknowingly, challenging it.

Kagagi enters a medium—comics—in which Indigenous peoples are often portrayed as tokenistic stereotypes, and a genre—superhero comics—in which they are given almost no space to exist. The exception is if they adhere to the metonymies that typify their predecessors in western comics, such as speaking in broken English; operating within sexualized or stoic binaries; or wearing pantribal leather, warpaint, fringe, and feathers. Often non-Indigenous creators will create their own speculative comic book Indian (an iconographic amalgamation of

Indigenous cultures and a bedfellow to the more well-known Hollywood Indian) in order to both diversify and control these identities. These characters and stories, even if told with the best of intentions, are, as Justice kindly notes, “not so good. These are imposed upon us from outside. They belong to the colonizing populations that claim and dominate our homelands—populations from which many of us are also descended and with which we must navigate our complex relations as well” (2). Indigenous characters have existed in comics for a long time, but Indigenous superheroes, by their very nature, are a rare breed and almost never headline their own titles. Scarcer still are Indigenous superheroes created by Indigenous creators.

These concerns are why *Kagagi* is a rejuvenating entry into superhero comics made within Canada and even North America. Carver is a lead Indigenous hero in a medium that simply does not feature lead Indigenous heroes. Featuring Carver prominently, not as a token character, is shockingly and radically decolonial, for as Justice notes, “Colonialism is as much about the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peoples as the displacement of our physical presence” (xviii). Carver is not a sidekick or a team member, and it is through the uniqueness of his position that he, as Kagagi, is able to convey complex cultural, colonial, and sociopolitical knowledges, engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers on aesthetic, cultural, historical, and educational platforms. *Kagagi* navigates the expectations placed on Carver, whether it is how he should behave as a fine, upstanding young citizen—as Janet expresses in a moment of simple domesticity, “[Your parents would] be very *proud* of you /... You’ve grown into a fine young man” (Odjick, *Kagagi* 20: 1-4; Fig. 4.2)—or how he should act as an Indigenous hero figure—as Wisakedjak says, “You’ll need to learn not only about what you are capable of, but who you *are*. Your culture. What you’ve inherited” (36: 5). He has the approval and guidance of his deceased parents, his foster parent, and his cultural liaison and instructor, Wisakedjak.

It is lamentable that *Kagagi*, like Matthew Carver, stands isolated. As Justice argues, “fantasy matters ... and if we believe in the power of literature to liberate both imaginations and bodies—then abandonment of these genres isn’t a sensible or even ethical option. If we’re reading these works, they belong to us, and we can change the genres to reflect *our* imaginations, *our* fantasies, and not just those of an oppressive worldview that sees us as walking anachronisms” (151). Ultimately, it is imperative that more Indigenous creators living in Canada are given the support to further publish the stories of their traditional cultural heroes in domestic comics and graphic novels, for it is in this legitimate authorship that the Canadian superhero, or

superhero produced in Canada, seems to have finally found itself removed from the cartography of an unCanada and has itself taken seriously, even in the role of the super defender.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE CAPTAIN CANADAS

By analyzing the nationalisms inherent in domestic Canadian superhero narratives, this thesis demonstrates that the understanding of a collective Canadian self suffers confusion when national identity is affixed upon an ideal. Superheroes are expected to represent the best of Canadians and those living within Canada, to act as romanticized and unrealistic stand-ins for a complex populace. In examining *Nelvana*, *Captain Canuck*, *New Triumph*, and *Kagagi*, I conclude that while these self-destructive nationalisms have typically been evergreen—the “Maple Leaf Forever,” indeed—there is room for growth in this small canon. Existing scholarship, considered alongside my current explorations, presupposes an unavoidable Canadian inferiority complex that manifests itself in a variety of ways through the Canadian literary imagination, but nowhere more overtly than in the genre of the Canadian superhero, a canon that has traveled the spectrum of gentle incredulity to effigy.

These works of Canadian literature—the much-maligned superhero comics—continue to present difficulties in closing the gap between the performative nature of the hero, enactor of the monomyth, and the Canadian superhero, the latter a notion that discredits itself upon conception. The shields Canadians, and those living within Canada, have carried since Confederation—the ubiquitous maple leaves—have become too heavy and too ornamental, relegating domestic, Canadian heroes to the status of super defenders.

The Canadianness these narratives continually set out to disprove—through their white-knuckled grip on imagined, Northern cartographies; continual shame over colonial history and the gothic anxieties that result; settler-Canadians’ continued impulse to appropriate Indigenous identities and stories; and the supposedly ardent belief that Canadian heroes can only be heroes in speculative unCanadas—rest at the core of Canadian superhero narratives. A Canadian superhero is a shield but also an avatar for the nation, and the nation does not believe in its own avatars. As examined in my thesis, the methodology of this communal disbelief in Canadian superheroes has taken various forms, and when I recognize this Canadianness in these texts, I identify the recurrences of reluctance, skepticism, cynicism, shame, and other variations on these themes as found in the Canadian readership, authors, and characters themselves. Therefore, these heroes do not read as superheroes but as super defenders—useful, but unchanging and wholly unbelievable. The archetype of the Canadian unhero-hero, or the super defender,

continues to be pervasive in modern media that operate as a cousin to the superhero comic (movies and parody comics), whether in the satirical, province-specific *Saskatch-a-Man* (2015)—a buffoonish, flag-wearing football enthusiast reminiscent of *Fuddle Duddle*'s Captain Canada—or the Maple-Leaf clad Duke Caboom—a toy Canadian version of Evel Knievel who undergoes extreme frustration and self-doubt because he never works as efficiently as the advertisements promised him he would (*Toy Story 4* 2019). The well-meaning but ineffectual Canadian super defender continues to be a prevalent trope worth investigating.

The self-effacing narratives and characters of these texts themselves support this belief, at least to a degree. Moreover, the small size of the domestically produced Canadian superhero canon supports this supposition. *Nelvana*, the first of her kind, laid the foundation for the nationalized Canadian superhero through ambiguity: possibly Indigenous, possibly stationed in Canada or an unCanada, and, for the better part of the twentieth century, forgotten. The text of *Nelvana* itself did not direct readers towards the rectification of any confusions, something that appears decidedly Canadian. *Captain Canuck* continued the legacy of Canadian heroism, as a super defender within a new unCanada, and extended the confusions inherent within *Nelvana*; now Captain Canuck—the man who represents Canada—was an Indigenous-non-Indigenous flag man and a hero in whom no one could believe, right from the first page. As within the pages of *Captain Canuck* No. 1, *New Triumph*'s heroic incredulity toward Northguard as a Canadian superhero is always evident, supported through a direct quotation from Margaret Atwood's dissection of the Canadian hero, through the paratextual admissions and experiences of Shainblum, and of protagonist Phillip Wise himself, who both wears the Maple Leaf and screams at it for its meaningless. *Kagagi* follows this path to an extent, for young Matthew Carver is unable to place faith in his latent superpowers. But *Kagagi* functions as the outlier of the texts examined here. The more maple leaves, aesthetically or metaphorically, that are heaped upon Canadian heroes, the less the readership believes in them, or, possibly, the less they believe in themselves. Odjick removes these burdensome Canadian nationalisms from his Indigenous superhero, resulting in a direct superhero narrative reflective of Indigenous mythologies.

Ultimately, the identifiable hallmark found within the domestically produced Canadian superhero genre is the fear of invasion and recolonization. This fear is found even within *Kagagi* as the Windigo returns to plague humankind and assimilate citizens into creatures of his own making. Once antagonists are established within the narrative—in *Nelvana* (Nazis, and other

axis powers), *Captain Canuck* (communists), and *New Triumph* (right-wing American supremacists)—the hero becomes a shield in order to prevent these projected invasions. This move dates Canadian super defenders by dating their antagonists to reflect the transnational anxieties of the day; superheroic Canadianness is rendered moot once Nazis, for instance, are no longer a threat. *Kagagi* ignores the transnational invasion narrative and thus is arguably the most innovative text, for *Kagagi*'s heroism is born of cultural teachings and inheritance while the other texts base Canadian heroism on the defense of a particular cartography, be it Canada or an unCanada. In serving as Canadian Shields, these other heroes are easy both not to take seriously and to forget. Canadians' faith in their inability to process their collective identity through a superheroic filter supersedes the belief in Canadian superheroism itself; ultimately, settler-Canadians are not truly themselves unless they are *certain* that they do not exist as they ideally envision themselves to be. Once this identity crisis is in place, a proper disbelief in Canadian heroism can flourish. As Gray argues in his interview with Wasserman, "The Canadian hero knows that eventually everybody dies. And so that, really, this myth of walking into the sunset and living happily ever after is just that: it's a myth and it's a phoney one too. The Canadian hero can't really get out from under that. ... You are not bigger than life. You are smaller than life." The readers of heroic texts are socioculturally detached or even hostile towards the heroes, or the texts enact the anxieties already inherent within their readers, thus supporting Gray's assertion of a naturalized Canadian fatalism or, at the least, the desire both to express and to disregard these Canadian myths.

The notion of a unified Canadian readership is questionable. The research conducted here suggests that there is a growing market of Indigenous readers who are fans of graphic narratives, but not of the nation-state nationalism, running the gamut of anemic to offensive, that accompanies many of these texts. Ultimately, interest in Indigenous-produced and Indigenous-orientated graphic narratives and comics has continued to grow in the historical and ficto-historical categories among Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers alike, but not in superhero comics. Since divorcing superheroes from their national identities is difficult—including *Captain Canuck*, *Captain America*, *Captain Britain*, and *Captain Italy*—the superhero figure becomes emblematic of colonial and neocolonial ideologies. Renée Hulan observes that the seed of Canadian literary existentialism itself—Northrop Frye's infamous *here*—excludes an Indigenous perspective: "It does not seem to have occurred to Frye ... [that Indigenous] people

might have something to say about those attitudes. Frye's 'here' never included an indigenous view of the land" (63). If the omission of Indigenous perspectives was inherent in the origins of this ongoing Canadian confusion, as expressed in Frye's riddle, then this failing becomes more apparent in Canada's nationalized superheroes. In a Facebook post on May 31, 2020, Odjick states that "Nationalism is just a more socially acceptable and thus modern form of racism. Just another way in which people can feel a false sense of superiority." This perspective, coupled with the superhero's tangled links to nationalism regardless of cartography, succinctly provides one reason why the Indigenous-produced superhero genre has failed to gain traction.

The Canadian superhero, domestically produced within Canada, continues to tread water. I argue that more support should be given to this genre—in readership, scholarship, and in publishing—in order to further the Canadian superhero that stands outside of nationalisms. A proliferation of these texts would do much to forward the cause for Canadian superhero comics as a whole, for, as it stands, Canada's continual experimentation in pop nationalism, as projected in this manner of literature, continues to fail. In setting aside their maple leaves, even temporarily, Canadian-produced superheroes, once denationalized, would be in a better position to critique, challenge, trouble, and even embrace the honoured Canadian queries of "Where is here?", "Who is here?", and "What is here?". In other words, nationalism is not Canadian super defenders' shield; it is their crutch.

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