

# Aboriginality and the Arctic North in Canadian Nationalist Superhero Comics, 1940-2004

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This paper explores the construction of aboriginality and the Arctic North in the constitution of Canadian identity through an analysis of Canadian nationalist superhero comics from World War II until 2004. While there are continuities such as the essentialization of the Canadian North as an anti-modern, quasi-mystical space key to the national territory, there are also variances over that time period, such as changes in the representation of the indigenous population to reflect shifts in the post-colonial politics of Canada. By historicizing these representations of the Arctic North we seek to add nuance to an often monolithic portrayal of the region's role in Canadian national identity.<sup>1</sup> Further, by focusing on the nationalist superhero genre, this paper undermines easy assumptions about the nature of Canadian nationalism as the opposite of muscular, boisterous American patriotism.

This paper begins by outlining the particular salience of nationalist superheroes to studies of national identity before reviewing the literature on the importance of Northernness and aboriginality to dominant southern constructions of Canadian-ness. Afterwards the paper shifts to the empirical analysis, highlighting the representations of the Arctic and aboriginal populations in the visual and narrative representation of Canadian nationalist superheroes. Finally, the conclusion presents evidence for a distinctive variation in the expression of Orientalist discourse through Canadian comics.

## Superheroes and the body politic

Superheroes belong to a particular genre of literature and film in which society is defended by a hero who masks his or her real identity behind a mythic costumed exterior, and who has above-average skills and powers.<sup>2</sup> Nationalist superheroes are a sub-genre in which the mythology encoded within the hero's costume, name, and personal values are explicitly tied to a national mythology. The most famous of these heroes, although not the first, is Captain America, who was created in 1940 prior to American intervention in World War II.<sup>3</sup> Nationalist superheroes are

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notable for their purported embodiment of national values, effectively rescaling the complex and excessive nation-state into a single, reductive body politic. As Rasmussen and Brown argue:

The turn of phrase [body politic] works because of the familiarity of the term and a perceived shared understanding that “body politic” metaphorically stands for a common political and social space. It is an implied or explicit comparison between two things, in this case between a polity and a human body. The human body, on the other hand, is proximate and a part of immediate experience. We all have bodies and, significantly, we experience them as a whole, usually unified, unit. The familiarity of the human body allows the polity to be represented in simplified form. The confusing set of connections among people, institutions, and ideas is condensed into and represented by the human body.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the nationalist superhero body works to smooth over national difference and imagine it as a coherent subjectivity capable of thought, moral decision, and action. Given the visual nature of most superhero media, this reductionism also requires this coherent subjectivity to occupy a specific body, one that is gendered, raced, and super-powered.

Because superheroes are distinct from other heroes in part through their use of super-powers, political analysis of the genre has often focused on the last of those three bodily qualities – the ability of superheroes to function as vigilantes to protect the dominant social order.<sup>5</sup> In particular this has led to an association of superheroes with the country of their generic origin – the United States.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the rise of superpowers in the world of comic books parallels the rise of the United States as a *superpower* from the start of World War II onwards, with each type of superpower (the comic book conceit and the nation-state of global reach and ambition) becoming more powerful over the latter half of the twentieth century. However, more important for the purposes of this paper are the first two bodily qualities described above – race and gender. Because nationalist superheroes are meant to serve as rescaling icons for nations, the visualization of the body politic as raced and gendered is particularly important. This paper now shifts to a review of the theoretical context in which this research is grounded, as well as the specific context of Canadian territoriality and identity, arguing that Canadian nationalist superheroes must function within an existent national spatial imaginary, which they also serve to reconstruct over time.

## Aboriginality, the Arctic North, and Canadian national identity

The discourse analysis presented in this paper derives from post-structural work that examines national identity as a spatial construction. In this line of thinking, the nation is interpreted as “an imagined political

community" based not on regular face-to-face interaction but instead on discursive practices that link interpersonal activities to institutional contexts.<sup>7</sup> These practices culminate in contextual "structures of expectation"<sup>8</sup> that comprise relatively stable schemes of perception, conception, and action through which novel and everyday events are interpreted and hegemonic understandings of national identity are generated. The notion of the nation as an imagined community reveals that power is just as manifest in the everyday production of national representations as it is in the enforcement capabilities and reifications associated with the organizations dedicated to government. The analytical focus on discursive practice suggests that the national space is primarily *social* and not just some inert physical terrain claimed and defended by the state.<sup>9</sup>

The production of a national social space hinges on the discursive differentiation and positioning of self and Other. In Said's analysis of this process for modern Europe, the Orient was constructed as a "contrasting image, idea, personality, [and] experience" against which the Occident was defined.<sup>10</sup> Although Orientalism was a unique historical development, its internal logic is similar to many other expressions of national identity in western modernity, where cultural differences are typically arranged into sets of binary oppositions reinforced through institutionalized conception and practice. The result is that both "self" and "other" are essentialized into relatively stable identities, a structure of expectation which, in turn, reproduces state power by disciplining lived experience to sanction only certain forms of collective interpretation, action, and enforcement. The process of "othering" is not restricted to interstate or interregional relationships but also finds expression within the nation-state as certain regions are constructed as "domestic,"<sup>11</sup> "nested,"<sup>12</sup> or "internal"<sup>13</sup> Orient. Internal othering is similar to Orientalism: the cultural-material exploitation of a subordinate region is rendered discursively as a hegemonic identity that exorcizes the unflattering or unwanted traits associated with the sub-region from the national character.<sup>14</sup> Jansson, for instance, has argued that the American South is the quintessential internal Orient in the production of national space for the United States.<sup>15</sup>

The Canadian North would seem to qualify immediately as an internal Orient, but a closer examination of its discursive construction shows a great deal of complexity. The most basic observation in this regard is that while the American South and similar othered regions typically display negative qualities only,<sup>16</sup> the Canadian North is imbued with characteristics that range in quality and value. In her book *The Idea of North*, Sherrill Grace<sup>17</sup> brings this diversity of northern imagination to light, using a variety of formal and popular media to illustrate how Canada's North has been constructed as both dangerous, foreboding, and stark as well as friendly, livable, and inviting. Grace goes on to argue, however, that these countervailing ideas are integrated into a powerful discursive formation that ultimately privileges Canada's southern urban interests over those of northern residents while also providing southern residents with a way of distinguishing themselves nationally from their even more southerly neighbors

in the United States. As she put it: “[the North] is, above all, Other, and as such emphatically a construction of southerners...paradoxically invoked to distinguish [Canadians] from those who are more southern.”<sup>18</sup> While the North is valued differently and therefore not easily arranged into a set of positive-negative oppositions that sanitize national identity, southern narratives of the north are similar in that they all serve to structure and normalize the vastly uneven geography of power constituting the Canadian state.

The North has also been seen as an archetypically indigenous and aboriginal place. The terms indigenous, aboriginal, First Nations, and Native are anchored in specific twentieth-century political developments concerning the notion of sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> Their popularization resulted from the internationalization of indigenous activism during the postcolonial (post-World War II) era through forums such as the United Nations and various legal cases and treaty settlements in settler societies such as Canada. The effort was to replace the invidious colonial labels of Indian, savage, and aborigine with terms that were in line with an emerging postcolonial sovereignty discourse and politics of resistance. The singular problem with this strategy was that it disciplined the diverse and fluid experiences of indigeneity under fixed labels that, because they were positioned against the dominant identity, tended to reproduce a binary struggle of opposites instead of contributing to the emancipatory possibilities associated with new and flexible forms of indigenous practice.<sup>20</sup> In other words, these terms can be seen as modern constructions involved in a binary logic similar in form and function to that of Orientalism. According to Spivak’s notion of the “self-consolidating Other,”<sup>21</sup> the dominant cultural position (“whiteness”) is universalized by constructing a coherent aboriginal Other as the social object for an indiscernible subject. One contemporary trend among aboriginal people is to self-identify by referring to a specific community, regional, or linguistic affiliation, connections that may overlap or “nest” as identification scales down to dialect, village, or even lineage.<sup>22</sup> This move has the productive poststructural effect of challenging the hegemony of a “self-consolidating Other” by refusing to offer a coherent or stable subordinate position for essentialization.

In Canada, the colonial practices of domination associated with reducing social life to binary form are evident in the earliest legal attempts to define a category of “aboriginal” as inferior and subservient to the state; the *Act for the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes* (1857) and the *Indian Act* (1876) are notable examples in this cultural politics. The latter piece of legislation set legal standards for defining the “Status Indian” and also placed these individuals under federal jurisdiction (the Department of Indian Affairs) as “wards of the state.” Bonita Lawrence<sup>23</sup> has highlighted the deleterious effects of this “divide-and-conquer” approach by showing how it separated people of similar ancestry and background into different legal categories: “Status Indians” have political and residential rights (that is, the right to live on reserve) that non-Status individuals do not, and the legal and discursive implication is that the former category comprises the

"real" or "authentic" Indians. In a country where over 50 per cent of aboriginal people live in cities and therefore do not qualify as "Status Indians," the law effectively removes one-half of the nominally indigenous population from the possibility of identifying itself in this way.<sup>24</sup> It also marks out certain bodies and territories as indigenous, which illustrates the material effects of Orientalism at work here. The cultural production of "indigenous" is complicated further, however, because in Canadian history a discourse of "benevolent paternalism"<sup>25</sup> and a "mythology of racelessness"<sup>26</sup> dominated the representation of aboriginality. The assertion is that Canada treated "its" indigenous peoples more favorably and honorably than in other settler societies. Whereas violence characterized the frontier narratives concerning encounters between settlers and aboriginals in the United States,<sup>27</sup> for instance, heroes typically bring peace to Native and non-Native alike in local and national Canadian histories.<sup>28</sup> Despite these superficial narrative differences, the dominant narratives in both Canadian and American history share the binary logic of colonial practice that naturalizes the conquest, removal, and marginalization of aboriginal people. Again, it is important to point out that these discursive constructions have material, embodied impacts that range from the social (e.g., dispersal of entire communities, chronic poverty, suicide and depression) to the biological (e.g., malnourishment, disease).

Aboriginality and Northernness are often conflated in dominant-Canadian cultural productions, a move that relegates Native people and identities to the northern side of a binary form produced largely by southern interests.<sup>29</sup> 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. A central part of this conflation is the idea of immortality and immutability: despite the many different qualities attributed to it, the North is indigenous and therefore a stable referent counterpoised against the myriad changes that characterize the modern urban south. The trope connecting indigeneity, Northernness, and immutability holds the conflation together as one end in a cultural form that includes the dynamic, urban, and modern Canadian south as the opposition. This binary set can then be positioned at the interstate scale as a way of defining and asserting a coherent Canadian national identity.<sup>30</sup>

The colonial oppositions described above (north-south/aboriginal-white) have increasingly been challenged over the last half of the twentieth century as indigenous activism intensified and postcolonial literatures revealed alternatives to binary western discourse. This change is evident in the notion of "hyphenation" in Canadian national identity.<sup>31</sup> Especially after the promulgation of Canada's Multicultural Policy in 1971, one dominant version of Canadian nationalism took the form of hyphenation: the original ethnicity of an immigrant population was affixed to the dominant national identifier, as in describing Olympic sprinter Ben Johnson as "Jamaican-Canadian".<sup>32</sup> The hyphenation not only subsumes the immigrant identity within an Anglo-centric Canadian nationalism (Anglo is the

ethnic prefix that does not normally require attachment to Canada via hyphenation), but more specifically inverts the negative characteristics of the Orient via linkage to the national character.<sup>33</sup> Recently, however, the hyphen has been reinterpreted to highlight the possibility it offers for “betweenness” in identity construction.<sup>34</sup> The hyphen becomes a point of departure for constructing identities “in-between” those provided in official policy discourse. In similar fashion, Grace’s far-ranging book<sup>35</sup> on the idea of North in Canada shows that this space, while certainly functioning as an internal Orient in most contexts, also holds out possibility for creating myriad, heterotopic spaces “in between” where hybrid identities and dialogs emerge and take shape culturally and politically. This is nowhere more evident than in the book’s last section in which aboriginal people “write back” against the hegemonic idea of North to disclose alternatives beyond an internal Other for southern interest(s).

### Canadian nationalist superheroes

In the late 1930s, the hunger for the newly invented superhero genre in Canada was initially sated by the consumption of American comics, which had numerous market advantages that prevented the development of a Canadian comics industry. However, the Canadian passage of the War Exchange Conservation Act in 1940 restricted the import of non-essential goods in an effort to maintain stocks of American hard currency. By cutting off the flow of comics from the south, suddenly a niche was made available for Canadian industry to fill. Four companies emerged – Maple Leaf Publishing, Anglo-American, Hillborough Studios, and Bell Features & Publishing (although Hillborough soon failed).

Early Canadian attempts at the superhero genre were not obviously nationalist; this changed with the creation of Nelvana of the Northern Lights.<sup>36</sup> Produced from August 1941 to May 1947 by Adrian Dingle (first with Hillborough and later with Bell Features), Nelvana seems an unlikely superhero: Dingle’s friend Franz Johnston, who earlier had been involved in the Group of Seven landscape painting school, gave Dingle the idea for Nelvana after a trip to the Arctic North – telling Dingle of an Inuit mythological figure named Nelvana who took the form of an old “crone.” Dingle adapted the figure to conventions of the new superhero genre, commodifying and domesticating indigenous culture: “I changed her a bit. Did what I could with long hair and mini skirts. And tried to make her attractive....Then we had to bring her up to date and put her into the war effort. And, of course, everything had to be very patriotic....”<sup>37</sup> She was the daughter of the god Koliak (who is manifested on earth as the aurora borealis) and a mortal woman. Nelvana was almost omnipotent – she could fly and travel at the speed of light on a ray from the Aurora Borealis. Other powers drawn from the Northern Lights include invisibility, shape shifting, blasting with Koliak’s ray, and possibly immortality.

The 1951 lifting of the wartime import restrictions led to the collapse of this foundational era in Canadian nationalist superheroes (Nelvana had

been joined by others, such as Canada Jack and Johnny Canuck), and indeed in all comic book production. The 1960s reemergence of the superhero genre in the United States led to a flood of American-produced superhero comics in Anglophone Canada (and French-produced *bande dessinée* in Quebec):

For English Canadians, comics had become an American medium: the heroes were American, the settings were largely American, and even the alluring comic-book ads for toy soldiers and sea monkeys were American. Like U.S. television, comics seemed to contain an implicit message: Canada was a backwater bereft of heroes, bereft of guardians.<sup>38</sup>

By the time the Canadian comic book industry was ready to try again, the impact of this marginality for Canadian readers' national identities was apparent: "One measure of the U.S. domination of the comics medium during the fifties and sixties is that when Canadian superheroes finally did return during the 1969-1974 period, the first characters were buffoons. It was as if Canadian comics artists and writers recognized the absence of Canadian heroes, but could not quite — after a twenty-year diet of foreign comics — bring themselves to take such figures seriously."<sup>39</sup>

The 1970s saw several attempts at creating new Canadian nationalist superheroes, including Northern Light, who had powers similar to those of Nelvana (but without the mythological connection) and Captain Canuck, who is perhaps the most long-lived (if sporadically published) Canadian nationalist superhero.<sup>40</sup> Captain Canuck, in his original incarnation (he has had several), served as a superpowered government agent in a future in which Canada was the world's dominant power. Arguably the most successful Canadian nationalist superhero comic is *Alpha Flight*, which also originated in the late 1970s, receiving its own U.S.-produced comic in the 1980s. Alpha Flight, created by Canadian John Byrne, is a Canadian superhero team that exists in the same universe as the other superheroes published by U.S.-based Marvel Comics.

Early in his career, when still in Canada, Byrne had spoken of his desire to create Canadian heroes. Ironically, he had to wait until he was firmly established in the U.S. comics industry before he was able to fulfill his dream. When Byrne finally did turn to the creation of Canadian heroes, he brought to the process an explosive, pent-up energy, which resulted in his portraying not one, but numerous characters, including Aurora, Northstar, Sasquatch, Shaman, Snowbird, and the character who most closely resembled a national superhero — Vindicator (later Guardian).<sup>41</sup>

The original lineup were from all the regions of Canada and included English Canadians, French Canadians, and First Nations within the team (see Figure 1). Through the reliance on the "superhero team" conceit Byrne was neatly able to sidestep the problem of a singular body representing a

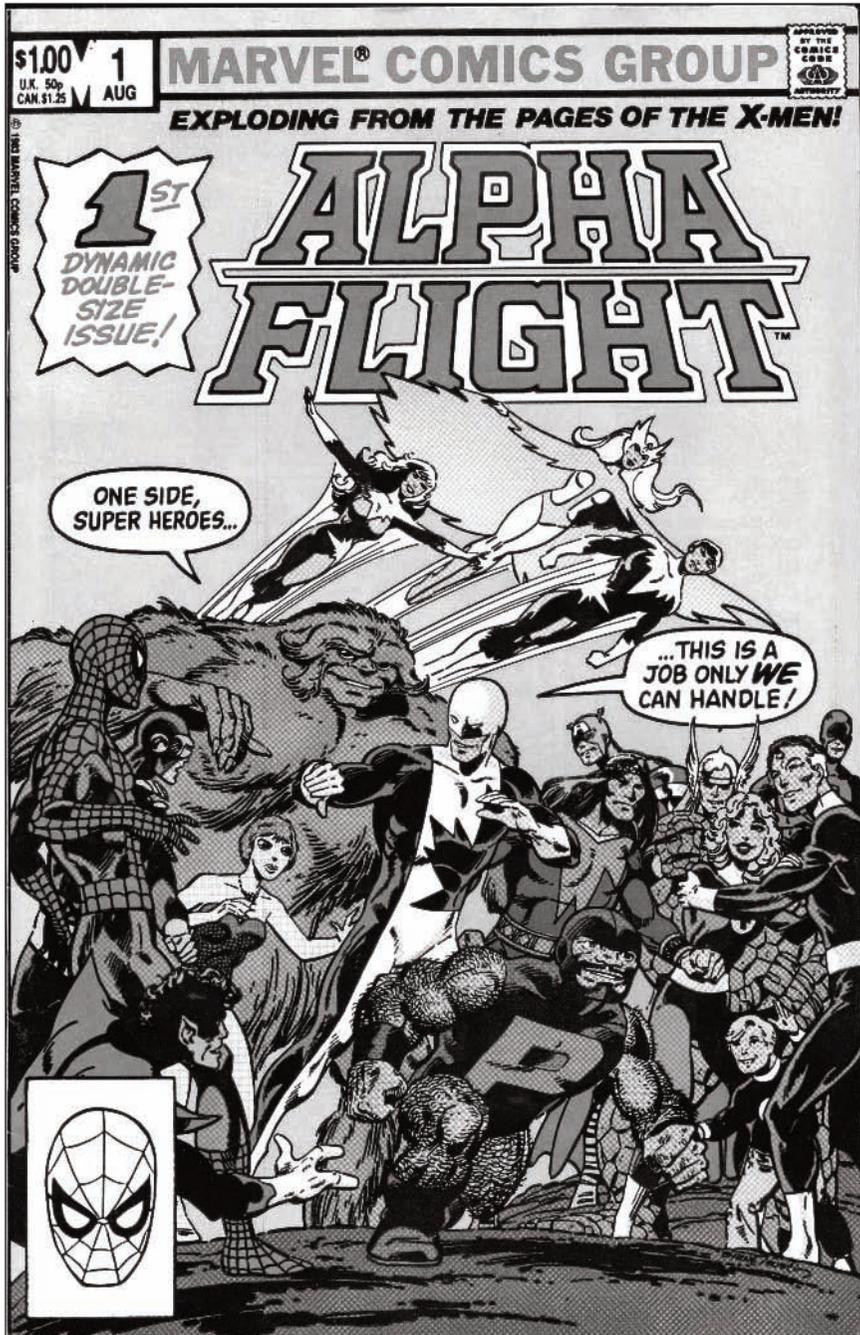


Figure 1. The cover of *Alpha Flight* #1 shows the new team muscling past its American counterparts. In the center is Guardian, the nationalist superhero from Ontario. To the right is Shaman, the First Nations hero, and to the left is Sasquatch. Flying overhead in the middle of the formation is Snowbird, the daughter of Nelvana. © 2009 Marvel Characters, Inc. (used with permission)

diverse nation as well as building in sources of dramatic conflict among the team members.<sup>42</sup> Byrne would leave the comic after twenty-eight issues, and *Alpha Flight* would become a more “mainstream” American series, lasting for 130 issues.

## Illustrating the Canadian Arctic

The character of Nelvana of the Northern Lights herself embodies and constitutes both the categories of a colonial, white South, a colonized, aboriginal Arctic North, and the Canada that purports to unite them. It is notable that Dingle felt that the powerful Inuit mythology of Nelvana needed to be whitened in order to fit the genre conventions. This simple act recast the Inuit demi-goddess as an agent of southern supremacy over the Arctic North: “From the outset, it was obvious that Nelvana was intended to personify the North (she even drew her powers from the Northern Lights). This identification would be further underscored in issue No. 20 of *Triumph*, in which Nelvana goes south to civilization (Nortonville, Ontario) and adopts a new identity: Alana North, secret agent.”<sup>43</sup> While Nelvana continued her mythological role as protector of the Inuit, the threats to the Inuit seemed to always originate from non-Canadian attempts to exploit the resources of the Arctic. For example, Nelvana repeatedly defeats German Commander Toroff’s attempts to whale and otherwise exploit the sea life of the region, as well as his attempts to mine for zirconium. Similarly, the Japanese dump oil into the North Pacific Ocean and light it on fire in order to guide their bombers to land; the Inuit suffer via the loss of seal populations. In these ways, Nelvana represents the inverse of a purportedly-Inuit term used in the comic to describe Toroff and his like—“Kablunets.” Kablunets are “evil white men,” which tacitly inscribes Nelvana as a non-evil (if also not male) white defender of the Arctic environment and its peoples.

If the Arctic landscape can be seen as inscribed as a set of economic resources in these World War II comics, it was also alongside another representation of the north as a space of fantasy. For instance, Nelvana is sent by Koliak, her father, to the land of Glacia, which is accessible through a crevasse at the North Pole. Glacia has been frozen underground for five million years, and its inhabitants are unaware of the vast passage of time because they lie dormant, waking when the world thaws and experiencing the ice age as a brief nap. There Nelvana is wrapped up in palace intrigue, fighting dragons, yeti-like beasts, and human-mammoth hybrids. Later, the Arctic North is the site of the appearance of a representative from Ether World, which is tormented by the earth’s radio broadcasts and threatens war. Thus, the Arctic North is understandable as a landscape of magic and resources that must be protected by Nelvana and other representatives of white Canada, such as Corporal Keene of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

These themes were continued decades later in the pages of *Alpha Flight*, which was informed by John Byrne’s affection for Nelvana. One of

the original members of Alpha Flight, Snowbird, is Nelvana's daughter (with a white archaeologist, delivered by a Sarcee mystic) and can, among other things, shape-shift into the form of any animal found in the Canadian Arctic. Her personal mission is to battle the seven mythological beasts of the Inuit – including Tundra, a monster who manipulates the landscape, Tanaraq the Sasquatch, and Kolomaq, the "living embodiment of winter." Just as Nelvana discovered the hidden world of Glacia beneath the North Pole, Alpha Flight enters the mystical world of the Beasts through a crater in the far north referred to by the Inuit as "the eye of the world." Dangerous and powerful, the Arctic North acts through these stories as a double-edged blade, a source of power for good and evil. This notion is even evoked through the use of poetry, such as Robert Service's "The Spell of the Yukon," quoted in *Alpha Flight* #14:

...there's the land, have you seen it?  
 It's the cussedest land that I know.  
 From the big, dizzy mountains to the deep, deathlike valleys  
 below.  
 Some say God was tired when He made it, some say it's a fine  
 land to shun.  
 Maybe. But there's some as would trade it for no land on earth,  
 And I'm one.<sup>44</sup>

The power of this landscape was bound to the Canadian state through two narrative maneuvers. First, Snowbird (the team member with the most obvious connection to the North, as daughter of Nelvana) lost her powers when she left Canada, and only regained them upon her return: "She feels the radiant power of the north flow up to her, reach out to her like warm, enveloping arms, protecting her."<sup>45</sup> This next quote illustrates this intersection of magic and nationalism while hinting at the second narrative maneuver:

The spell Shaman cast when he delivered a god-child bound me  
 to the land – the Canadian land! My powers wane as I fly farther  
 from Canada! I cannot overtake the Hulk – and why should I?  
 Let America deal with a monster of its own making! Alpha  
 Flight's duty is to defend the Northland – is it not?<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, Alpha Flight is more than just a super-team of Canadians – it is a Canadian super-team. While its relationship with the Canadian government was variable, the team nevertheless saw its role as defending Canada from aggression. This perspective is rather unique, as compared to American superheroes' support of the American state, which is usually tacit in their defense of American society rather than supporting an abstract territoriality:

*Gary Cody, Canadian government liaison to Alpha Flight:* "The new administration has finally accepted the reality that,

like the super heroes of the United States – Alpha Flight can play a strategically important role in Canada’s defense plan.”<sup>47</sup>

Through these two narrative maneuvers, the Arctic North was bound to the state. First, the region was portrayed as a space of magic and fantasy that provided resources for both heroes and potentially villains; heroes like Nelvana and Snowbird explicitly receive their powers from the Arctic North, and engage with naturalistic elements of the region, such as the aurora borealis, the tundra, and the climate. Both for them and the “southern” heroes like the remaining Alpha Flight members, the North is a site of adventure and magical possibility to be secured with the rest of Canada from outsiders, such as Commander Toroff or American super-villains. The landscape of the Arctic North therefore becomes a central element of the Canadian territorial imaginary.

### Illustrating indigeneity in Canada

As described above, the conversion of Nelvana from Inuit “crone” to a young white woman subverted the Inuit mythology by turning the notion of divine protection into colonial paternalism (or in this case, maternalism):

In choosing to portray Nelvana as white, Dingle was consciously casting her in the same mold as the many white queens and goddesses that had appeared in popular fiction since the publication of H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1886). Typically, these figures had names that ended with the letter “a,” were beautiful and immortal, and ruled over “primitive” peoples (often lost races).<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Inuit characters in Nelvana’s comics are portrayed as vulnerable – while they worship Nelvana, they are easily subverted by a Nelvana look-alike named “Chicago” Sade who uses Nelvana’s reputation to trade expensive furs for alcohol and trinkets. More dangerously, this vulnerability is a weak link in Canadian defense as Japanese soldiers endlessly try to turn the Inuit against their colonizers with gifts, only to be caught by Nelvana and her friends:

*Japanese officer:* “We realize that you have many problems – we are your friends, so we wish to warn you that the white man builds roads through your country, you will be enslaved. We are distributing these ‘fire-sticks’ and food to enable you to destroy the white man! Go! Spread news that your liberators have come.”

*Narrator:* “To the simple Eskimo, the red disc symbol of the rising sun means one thing now – friendship! Did they not give him food and ‘blow-up’ sticks to protect his family?”<sup>49</sup>

By the 1970s a different dynamic is on display in *Captain Canuck*, with less anxiety about the betrayal of northern aboriginal populations. The first issue, for instance, takes place in the Arctic North. Captain Canuck and Bluefox (his sidekick and soon-to-be traitor) are racing towards Alert Station P1.4 across the ice when their snowmobile crashes into hidden rocks. They decide to make the rest of the trek on foot, but soon are attacked by a polar bear: "one of the few animals that deliberately hunts man."<sup>50</sup> Shortly before the two are to be devoured, Utak, an Inuit man who also was headed to the station on a dog sled, kills the beast with his rifle:

*Captain Canuck*: "I owe you much Utak. We have come to stop an enemy that have come to capture our land."

*Utak*: "I hear great noise from Alert Station. Utaks [sic] friends at station! We will make it a swift journey with my [dog] team!"<sup>51</sup>

Subsequently, Utak safely guides the two heroes over the treacherous ice and delivers them to the station before disappearing into the snow. In this case, southern dominance is expressed as a form of friendly subservience.<sup>52</sup>

Alpha Flight was, as mentioned before, a multicultural team, with two Quebecois team members and one (later, two) aboriginal members. This somewhat progressive decision simply pushed the essentialism further down the scalar ladder. The First Nations representative, Michael Twoyoungmen, also known as Shaman, was portrayed as both a very skilled medical doctor and also an aboriginal mystic. His mystical powers however dominate the narrative, with his abilities linked to his bottomless medicine pouch and his study of Sarcee magic. When he came to doubt himself, Shaman headed into the "North Country," to commune with ancestral spirits. His grandfather's spirit told him to test himself via a "spirit walk" across the mystical northern landscape:

*Narrator*: "The Canadian Barrens. It is, as naturalist and anthropologist Farley Mowat has described it, '...a mighty land and a strange one. As geological time is reckoned, it emerged only yesterday from under the weight of the glaciers—and today it remains almost as it was when the ponderous mountains of ice finished grinding their way over its face. A land...planed to a shapeless uniformity by the great power of the ice.' A hard yet harshly beautiful land...where a man may find his courage—or his death."<sup>53</sup>

In the course of the spirit walk, Shaman realizes that he has lost his confidence because he has violated his aboriginal territoriality: "Now the purpose of the spirit test becomes clear to me! I had lost touch with the spirits of the land—the true strength of my people!"<sup>54</sup> Thus, Shaman realizes his essential self via a re-connection to the land of the "North Country," a truth that could only be understood by experiencing the land itself. This fundamental connection to the land is, similarly to Snowbird's northern identity, incorporated into Canadian identity through Shaman's willing

participation in Alpha Flight, the avowedly Canadian super-team.

A final step in the representation of Canadian aboriginality can be found in *Captain Canuck: Unholy War*, a 2004 series in which the hero's police partner, Keith Smoke, is distinguishable as aboriginal only because of his name and very slight visual cues. While this is a notable difference from the multicultural essentialism of *Alpha Flight*, the friendship of Captain Canuck and Keith Smoke itself can be read as a set of claims about the relationship between Canada and its aboriginal population. Keith Smoke is a minor character, but is shown to be a family man living in suburbia, as well as a good friend and colleague to David Semple (the new, non-super-powered Captain Canuck). He briefly assists Captain Canuck by giving him a clue in his investigation, and later has his house blown up by the villain for being friends with Captain Canuck.

In the first scene of the storyline, David Semple and Keith Smoke are working their beat in Surrey, a suburb of Vancouver. The image of the white Semple (from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan) and the aboriginal Smoke both working as constables of the RCMP is significant for its break from previous images of the relationship between the Mounties and indigenous populations, such as Nelvana's Corporal Keene, who occupies an outpost in the Arctic to both paternalistically protect the Inuit and exercise white-Canadian sovereignty in the region. "The Anglo-Canadian, British, and American Mountie popular fictions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aided and abetted white empire/nation building, representing the Mountie as an idealized sign of a masculinized imperial order whose job was to expel Native peoples and 'foreign' villains."<sup>55</sup>

Eva Mackay begins her book with the description of a postcard that shows a Mountie and Chief Sitting Eagle, sitting across from each other in their respective "uniforms" and shaking hands:

The image of the Mountie and the 'Indian Chief' places a representative of the state and a representative of minority culture — coloniser and colonised — in a friendly, peaceful and collaborative pose. Aboriginal people and the state are represented as if they are equal: as if the Mountie did not have the force of the crown and the military behind him, shoring up his power.<sup>56</sup>

The contrast between Mackay's postcard and the image of David Semple and Keith Smoke in their patrol car is marked. The very invisibility of Keith Smoke's aboriginality within the storyline, and within the symbolic presence of the Canadian state (the RCMP), makes the claim that the relationship between Canada and its exotic internal others has changed — they are no longer exotic, no longer other at all, but are now living in the suburbs, fully assimilated. To this can be added the complete absence of the Arctic North in the *Captain Canuck: Unholy War* trilogy. While the absence of something is hardly evidence of its insignificance, it is notable in comparison to the other Canadian nationalist superhero comic books described earlier. It would appear that the creators of the comic book are trying to promote a new vision of Canadian nationalism.

## Conclusion

The shifting representations of aboriginality and the Arctic North in Canadian comics can now be read against the historical evolution of Canadian nationalism over the postwar period. The idea of a coherent Canadian identity is rooted historically in a distinctively Anglophone-Canadian nationalism that stems most immediately from the 1960s as a response to internal (the prospect of Quebec secession; increased power for the provinces) and international (postwar American ascendancy) pressures.<sup>57</sup> In this discourse, the internal ethnic and regional diversity that threatens a coherent nationalism is subsumed under a unifying federal structure and also positioned against a northern internal Orient that serves to integrate and synthesize differences by showing their shared relation to a common Other, that is, a North that is at once powerful and dangerous but also invigorating and unifying for all Canadians. Once disciplined, this diversity can then be positioned positively against the construction of a bland and homogenous “American” counterpoint.<sup>58</sup> Historically, the strong patriotism associated with this Anglo-Canadian nationalism was characteristically, but paradoxically, expressed in a hesitant and understated way, creating what Millard et al. call the “myth of diffidence.”<sup>59</sup> The result is that while Canadians are routinely polled as some of the most patriotic citizens in the world, this is a “soft” nationalism often used to differentiate Canada from the perceived aggressiveness and boorishness of American nationalism.

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. 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. Indigeneity is conflated with North in this internal Orient: both are raw, strange, and unpredictable. The quality of “Canadian-ness” is described as an ongoing encounter with, and ultimately possession of, this world. As is most readily evident in the Nelvana character, the superhero extends dominion over this space by acting on behalf of the colonial south as an intermediary to the autochthonous inhabitants and by securing the region and its resources from outsiders. This can take different forms: in *Alpha Flight* the conceit of the superhero team neatly assimilates difference under the Maple Leaf, whereas in the original *Captain Canuck* Utaq quite literally assists the hero in his mission to protect what is represented as *their* land. The discursive effect, however, is the same: the North is internalized as an Other whose anti-modern qualities can be used by southern interests to support a variety of sometimes contradictory but distinctively modern projects — development schemes, environmental protection, or as is directly evident in the comic storylines, defense of national security.

Beginning in the 1980s, the success of First Nations in mobilizing an agenda of indigenous sovereignty and nationalism (e.g., section 35 of the 1982 Constitution Act, which formally recognized aboriginal sovereignty) again threatened the vision of Anglo-Canadian nationalism. One response to this ascendancy was to argue that indigenous people were “already Canadian” and therefore not qualified to receive separate rights or distinctive sovereignty over land and resources.<sup>60</sup> The discursive effort was to establish a firmer claim over the internal other by assimilating it into the dominant, southern cultural form; the hyphenation “Indigenous-Canadian” represents one rhetorical extreme. The *Captain Canuck: Unholy War* series illustrates this de-coupling of indigeneity and Northernness: Keith Smoke lives in a southern suburb, works as an RCMP Constable in Surrey, British Columbia, and is ethnically anonymous. Smoke’s partner is David Semple, the new, “West Coast” version of Captain Canuck characterized by physical weakness, social humility, and a penchant for apologizing to enemies. In both storyline and character development, Smoke and Canuck are presented as similarly unobtrusive, self-effacing, and therefore recognizable as distinctively Canadian. In the new version of *Canuck*, the referents of North and aboriginality disappear into an articulation of Canadian identity as a form of national self-deprecation and diffidence.<sup>61</sup>

We are not suggesting that the *Unholy War* series represents a conscious response to the rise of aboriginal sovereignty in Canadian politics. Nor are we arguing that this representational form correlates to a specific historical or political development; southern anxiety over a strong indigenous presence is by no means a new phenomenon. Rather, the analysis presented here illustrates a distinctive variation in the discourse of internal Orientalism in Canadian comics: in one form, the North and the Indigenous are conflated into an internal other that can be positioned discursively by and for southern interests; in another form, aboriginality is de-coupled from Northernness and assimilated within the dominant socio-cultural forms of the Canadian South. Both expressions represent the effort to construct a southern, white Canadian identity over a space in which there are many distinct possibilities for nationalism. In this sense, the construction of a “soft” Canadian identity as diffident and self-deprecating has a tremendously powerful discursive effect—it erases aboriginality altogether from the national superhero narrative—and in this way is politically consonant with the conventional form of internal Orientalism in Canadian comics that recognizes indigeneity but denies its modernity.

## Notes

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