

Sites of Similarity, Sites of Difference: Constructing Canada in the Graphic Narrative

by

Shandi Leadbetter
BA, University of Victoria, 2006

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in the Department of History in Art

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University of Victoria

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ABSTRACT

Canadian superhero comic books represent a politically significant opportunity to study popular conceptions of national politics, cultures, and identities. Canadian superheroes are 'others' in the shadow their American neighbours, but embrace this 'Not-American otherness' as a central factor defining Canadian national identity. The diversity of Canadian multiculturalism collapses into a monolithic white/male/Anglophone identity produced in the tensions created by the binary relationship between 'self-as-other' and 'American' articulated by the texts, creating one universalised and naturalised "Canadian" identity.

This thesis seeks to politicise existing surveys that ignore the political implications of the comic book texts, and to critique other problematic methodologies in the comics discourse: tendencies towards canon-building, and resistance to interdisciplinary methodologies. I forward a social/cultural/political analysis that draws equally on my multiple backgrounds and subject positions as a university-educated art historian, a popular culture critic, a Canadian, and a (feminist) reader and fan of superhero comic books.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people, without whom this project would never have been finished. In no particular order:

Don McCaskill, who not only assured me it was okay to be a comic book geek, but who took it upon himself to feed my addiction at every turn.

Marcus Greatheart, who provided a sounding board, editorial feedback, mental and emotional support, and caffeine. Lots of caffeine.

Christopher Thomas for the initial push, Justin McGrail for the second wave of excitement, Lianne McLarty for trusting me to find my way through, and Dennine Dudley for eleventh hour interventions. Because all of it, really, is their fault.

Colin House, for putting up with every time I have yelled at my computer, thrown books across the room, growled through writers block, spoken to inanimate objects as if they were sentient, and generally behaved as though I was losing my mind. I would have, if not for you.

Mark Shainblum, for being as excited about this project as I was about his comics.

Gareth Gaudin and Lloyd Chesley at Legends Comic Books in downtown Victoria, who were invaluable in helping me track down back issues of comics no one else had ever heard of.

My Crew: Robbyn, Sarah, and Catherine, and Emily. We made it: here's to the next bright thing.

Kaylis, Sam, and Jo: because sometimes a cat is the only thing that gets you through the day.

And perhaps most importantly, all the smart, critically-minded women who blog, go to conventions, read comics, and watch movies; together we prove that Feminism and Fandom are not mutually exclusive.

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

In Canada, there is much discussion about ‘Canadian Content,’ and the American domination of cultural production and the mass-media. This desire to ‘protect’ Canadian culture from the encroachment of outside forces is very much linked to notions of national identity and independence, and a desire to assert our difference from the United States. The creation and assertion of a distinct national identity leads to the construction of what Roland Barthes called “mythologies;” that is, culturally and historically specific systems of values and ideals naturalised by the dominant forces in society to appear normal, as that which “goes without saying.”¹ Like culture, these mythologies are not static and unchanging, but dynamic and in constant flux. While, on one hand, creating national mythologies helps to produce a unified sense of identity – a task that has plagued Canadians since before Confederation – they can also operate to exclude ‘undesirable’ minorities, and to obscure uncomfortable historical realities. Given the precarious and contingent nature of identity, particularly Canadian identity, and a legacy of colonialism that, for some, calls into question the very legitimacy of Canada as a nation, the ideological process of creating and perpetuating these mythologies represents an important area of interrogation.

Scholars have come to understand mass-produced, visual consumer culture as a site of insistence and resistance; a space where competing meanings and identities are always being contested and negotiated. Central to many people’s everyday lived

¹ Roland Barthes, Mythologies (London: Paladin, 1973), p. 11

experience, film, television, and popular literature help inform many individuals' notions of the 'acceptable' parameters of (Canadian) identity. As Althusser notes, cultural texts take their structure as much from what is absent as from what is present; the meaning of any given cultural text comes in part from the implicit assumptions that underlie these inclusions and exclusions.² This thesis uses this understanding of culture to explore what the study of Canadian national superhero comic books can bring to the discourse.

When I asked a fellow comic book fan why Canadian national superheroes seemed to sell so poorly compared to their American equivalents, he replied, "America owns the world;" comic books are often presented as "America's major indigenous [sic] contribution to world culture"³ – this in spite of the fact that the first superhero was created by a Canadian (though for an American publisher),⁴ and that the first female superhero made her debut in a Canadian comic book.⁵ Critical and scholarly analysis of comic books is undertaken primarily by American writers, and focuses almost wholly on American texts. The three Canadian authors that have entered the discourse about comic books are unabashedly nostalgic;⁶ while their enthusiasm is contagious, they provide little critical analysis that would satisfy scholarly curiosity. While the Canadian industry has mirrored the American industry in many ways, it has made culturally distinct and historically significant contributions that deserve critical study in their own right.

² See John Storey, "Marxisms" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (London: Prentice Hall, 2001), pp. 94-103.

³ Thomas Inge. *Comics as Culture* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990). p. xi

⁴ Superman; *Action Comics #1* (June, 1938)

⁵ Nelvana; *Triumph Adventure Comics #1* (August 1941). It should be noted here that there is some disagreement among scholars as to whether Nelvana or Wonder Woman was the first female superhero; this relates in part to publishers releasing comics a few months before the date on the imprint, to give them a longer shelf life on the newsstands.

⁶ These authors are John Bell, and the team of Michael Hirsch and Patrick Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Toronto: Richardson, Bond and Wright Ltd, 1971).

Canadian comic books represent a politically significant opportunity to study and understand popular conceptions of Canadian politics, culture, and national identities. The Canadian superhero is an 'other' in the shadow of his or her American neighbours. I will argue that Canadian national ideology, as expressed in superhero comic books, operates to embrace this 'Not-American other-ness' as a central factor defining Canadian national identity. Further, the ways in which 'national values' like peacefulness and tolerance of difference are figured in the graphic narrative act to both obscure and naturalise power differences and discrimination inside our own borders. The supposed diversity and multiplicity of Canadian multiculturalism collapses into a monolithic white/male/Anglophone identity produced in the tensions created by the binary relationship between 'self-as-other' and 'American' articulated by the texts. This forces an erasure, or at least an obscurance, of all other identities behind one, universalised and naturalised "Canadian" identity.

This is not another call to arms to take comics more seriously. I work with the assumption that comic books – a mass-produced, commercial, and popular art form – constitute a significant part of Canadian visual culture and, as such, are a valid topic of art historical study. As Mila Bogncoco states, "Implied in this analysis is the belief that popular culture matters: it has clearly mattered to those who have sought to classify and control it, and should now matter to those who seek to challenge existing social, sexual, and cultural relations."⁷ It should be remembered that, the consumption of culture is never passive, reading comic books requires readers to actively invest themselves in reconciling words and images in order to resolve the narrative. Further, the interaction

⁷ Mila Bogncoco, Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic books (NY and London, Garland Publishing, 2000) p. 42.

between reader-consumers and creators through letters included in the publication itself specifically encourages this process of continually and deliberately contesting and negotiating meaning.

The process of creating a national superhero requires naturalising the singular as the universal – the process of modernist ideology itself. However, in the comic series *Northguard*, Mark Shainblum and Gabriel Morissette use postmodern narratological structures as a strategy of resistance in the face of American cultural hegemony – as a means of articulating the difference of Canadian identity. While Bongco observes that comics tend to be “hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts,”⁸ and Thomas Inge suggests that the superhero lives in “a world in which both might and right are on the side of morality,”⁹ I argue that comics, due in part to their marginalised position, also offer the possibility of a sustained and systemic critique of the very traditional values they are said to uphold. Because *Northguard* is neither wholly progressive nor reactionary, neither modern nor postmodern, it also provides a locus from which to mount a critique of the binary relationships implicit in the superhero genre (i.e. male/female, hero/villain, Us/Them).

Broadly stated, the goals of this thesis are to politicise and nuance John Bell’s archival, survey history that largely ignores the social and political implications of the texts he examines. Further, I seek to critique some of the problematic methodologies I see in other aspects of the comics discourse: tendencies towards canon-building, a reluctance to politicise comic books as cultural texts (itself a political decision), a resistance toward interdisciplinary methodologies, and what Bart Beatty referred to as “the search for

⁸ Bongco, p. 87

⁹ Inge, p. xiv

comics exceptionalism.”¹⁰ I attempt an analysis that uses social/cultural/political analysis, critical theory, and formal analysis – in short, an analysis that draws equally on my multiple backgrounds and subject positions as a university-educated art historian, a popular culture critic, a Canadian, and a (feminist) reader and fan of superhero comic books. Finally, although I dispute the need for a canon in comics, I would like to firmly establish that there are Canadian superheroes worth talking about, and that if the canon must persist, it must also expand beyond its present Amero-centrism.

Here, I feel it is important to acknowledge that my access to primary source material is limited to that which I have in my own collection, and that which is in the McPherson Library at the University of Victoria. Even though by law every publication produced in Canada must be deposited with the National Library, this requirement doesn’t seem to extend to many of the independent, alternative, small press, or counter-culture comics, comix, and ‘zines.¹¹ For this reason, the most complete collections of Canadian comic book art are once-private collections now in the holdings of American universities. It may seem that I place undue emphasis on *Northguard* over, for example, *Captain Canuck*, and even that I neglect to mention some titles (i.e. *Alphaflight*) at all. This is not intended to imply that these other works are somehow ‘less Canadian.’ Due to the serial nature of comics, it can take several issues to fully reveal and develop the characters and the narrative; it is therefore difficult to forward what I would feel to be a well-grounded analysis of a series based on just two or three issues of a comic. *Captain*

¹⁰ Find citation.

¹¹A note on terminology: in order to distance themselves from the juvenile “animal funnies”, or the squeaky-clean mags that adhered to the Comics Code, counter-culture artists referred to their publications as “comix”. Today the term tends to be associated with publications that deal with more mature or “non-traditional” comic-book fare, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* – an autobiographical account of his relationship with his father, and their coming-to-terms with his father’s experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp.

Canuck is simply a Canadian national superhero comic book. *Northguard* seeks to problematise received notions of ‘Canada’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘superhero’, and as such, makes a more useful source for this particular type of analysis.

METHODOLOGY/LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last twenty years in the United States, a growing body of critical literature has dealt with comic books as a “serious” cultural phenomenon. After introducing the general types of scholarship, I will come back to examine specific examples. Within the discourse around comic books, there are four main types of scholarship: historical surveys examining the chronology of developments within comic books; monograph publications examining particular artists or characters; works primarily focused on the formal analysis of the artwork; and works seeking to explore the social/historical meanings of comics. A fifth, but curiously under-represented type of scholarship examines the ideological implications of comics within the frameworks of literary and critical theories.¹² Few authors examine the roles comics can play in creating and revealing the social constructions of gender, race, national identity, political relations, and dominant economic systems. Fewer still consider Canadian contributions to the industry – in fact, successful Canadian artists included are often assumed to be American.

Comics scholarship is a young discipline, and a diverse and contested field of inquiry. As such, scholars working on comics are actively engaged in discussion about terminology, methodology, and theoretical issues. The debates tend to be entrenched,

¹² There is another category I would call “fan scholarship” often published in ‘fanzines’ or on web pages (*Ain’t It Cool News*), or distributed as podcasts (*iFanboy*). While the best contains ‘insider information’ of a kind rarely available anywhere else, references and citations are often absent or incomplete.

vociferous, and often polemic affairs, as scholars (and fans) negotiate the processes of legitimation that new areas of study and new art forms tend to go through before achieving mainstream recognition. The similarities between Renaissance treatises arguing for painting to be considered a liberal (not manual) art, and Giorgio Vasari's look at the great geniuses of painting in his "Lives of the Artists," and contemporary books chronicling the history of comic books and artists cannot be ignored.¹³ The problems and limitations with using the canon and biography as the only framework for studying cultural production have been identified and explored by art historians for more than thirty years.¹⁴ These same problems arise in the context of comics studies.

Many authors are concerned with establishing a canon of 'worthy' comics, selecting works significant for their literary or artistic achievements, and separating them out from the lesser "mainstream" works considered "mass entertainment." Others have pointed to deficiencies in the canon, and have attempted to address these weaknesses through a method best described as "Add (insert under-represented 'minority' here) And Stir." Few have gone so far as to question the existence of the canon, or the ideologies that inform how it is constructed. Few grapple with the extent to which the industry, based as it is in commodity culture, shapes the comic books being produced, and thus the material available for inclusion in the canon. No one has questioned why histories of comic books separate North American production from European and Asian production – or, as most concerns me here, why Canadians are left out of the story almost entirely. Further, no one has considered the "also-rans" – the books that, for whatever reason, escaped widespread critical and financial success. It is my contention that the books that

¹³ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1987).

¹⁴ See, for example, Jonathan Harris's book *The New Art History* (NY: Routledge, 2001).

do not count themselves amongst the 'worthy' have as much, if not more, to reveal about the economic and ideological underpinnings of our society.

For myself, I have tried to bring a critical eye to bear on these discourses in an attempt to locate myself, my training as an art historian and a critic of popular culture, and my scholarship in relationship to the broader field of comics studies. I do not offer this as a complete taxonomy of all the available methods of approaching the critical study of comic books. Nor do I seek to provide solutions to all the unasked questions and problems posed by the current state of the discourse. Instead, my goal is to map out some of the terrain currently inhabited by comics scholars in an attempt to locate my own interests, and to align my individual compass within the landscape of comics scholarship.

Historical Surveys tend to be written by historians who work out of libraries, archives, galleries, private collections, and art history departments. They are primarily concerned with archival research, and with identifying and recovering the lost or marginalised histories of these ephemeral documents and their often-anonymous creators. Like a modern-day Vasari, each author constructs a historical timeline (Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age) and a canon of 'worthy' artists. Arguments rage over the attributions of unsigned work, and who was 'the first' to accomplish a particular artistic feat (i.e. non-traditional panel formats) or reach a particular 'milestone' (i.e. the first gay superhero). This work is central to creating a foundation for further research, and the enormity of these kinds of undertakings cannot be underestimated. However this approach often results in the erection of largely arbitrary canons and categories which both help and hinder further inquiry into the historical record. The sheer scope of material

covered often precludes detailed discussions of individual texts, and rarely reserves room for discussion of the visual images themselves.

Monographs are a term I borrow from an art-historical setting to mean a book written on the works of a single artist. However, I also want to extend the definition to include printed collections of artwork associated with a particular comic book title, character, or genre.¹⁵ In the comic book industry, any given title may outlive the tenure of the artist who created it, and one artist may work on a number of titles over the course of his or her career. Also situated within this genre are exhibition catalogues, and a number of “Illustrated History of...” books. These books tend to be a goldmine of hard-to-find or out-of-print images, sometimes accompanied by essays, letters, interviews, or photographs of the artist. While these books tend to be excellent sources of primary sources and images, the accompanying text (if it exists at all) often varies widely in the scrupulousness of references, the verifiability of citations, and the level of objectivity attempted or achieved.¹⁶

Formal Analysis is another term borrowed from the art historical lexicon that I am transposing to this discussion on comics. Like Heinrich Wölfflin, these authors focus on the artwork of the comic book, and the styles of individual creators, similar to the connoisseurship school of art history.¹⁷ Their argument is that, as a visual medium,

¹⁵ I am excluding from this group publications like graphic novels, or trade paperback reprints collecting a year's worth of one title's issues.

¹⁶ Of the three works to be written on Canadian comics, two fall into this category; I have included neither of them in this review. The first, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* published by Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert (Toronto: Richardson, Bond, and Wright, 1971), is simply a compilation of pages and covers from comic books published during World War II with no substantive accompanying text. The second is a catalogue written by John Bell to accompany a 1992 exhibition called “Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-book Art,” staged by the National Gallery of Canada. The text of this catalogue appears in an only slightly revised form as a chapter in his book *Invaders from the North*, which I consider in my section on historical surveys.

¹⁷ In this category I would also tend to include the various ‘How To’ books which discuss ‘the dos and don’ts’ of ‘good’ comic book art, manuals concerned with the instruction of ‘proper’ artistic practice.

primacy should be given to formal analysis of the images, both to illuminate how a particular artist's style and visual vocabulary tells a story, and to determine the level of success or skill achieved by the artist. Often these authors will compare the strengths and weaknesses of different artists working on the same characters, or will seek to ascertain the critical elements that 'define' an individual artist's style. These authors and scholars often provide valuable information in terms of identifying unknown artists and attributing works, as well as analysing how various visual elements (framing, style, shadows, colour, etc) forward the narrative. However, this is often accomplished at the expense of situating works within their larger social, political, and economic contexts. These authors rarely acknowledge that tastes and styles are culturally, geographically, and historically specific, and thus subject to particular and specific ideological agendas.

Social History accounts relate the story of the comics to the collective concerns or anxieties of the historical, political, and cultural context in which it was produced. These scholars might also examine how these comic books functioned within communities of fans as a kind of currency, to produce or reinforce individual identity, and to create a sense shared of identity. They may also explore the relationship between the values and the politics expressed in the comic and the extent to which they align or subvert the values held by the dominant, primarily 'adult' society. Primacy is given to the work's reception inside and outside these shared fan communities. However, less attention is given to the actual artistic or literary content of the texts they examine. Additionally, these authors often see the ways in which the ideology expressed in comic

While they tend to reproduce the ideological agendas of their respective contexts, making them an interesting area of future inquiry, they are somewhat tangential to my current interests in comics scholarship.

books reinforces the dominant ideology, but often underemphasise or ignore works which seek to critique, subvert, and disrupt the status quo. Further, few explore how individuals might exercise their agency to produce a subversive reading of a text that, while perhaps counter to the intentions of the writer or artist, aligns with the reader's own system of values and interests.

Critical and Literary Theorists discuss comics in terms of their signs and signifiers, and attempt to deconstruct the ideological framework underpinning the work. Because they adopt the frameworks of literary or critical theory, these comics scholars, like many film scholars, tend to be housed in English departments. Feminists may critique the works for sexist or racist content; Marxists may discuss the work in terms of the degree to which artists are alienated from their labour, and the relationships between the books, the readers, and the industry – for example, how the mechanisms of distribution and the commodification of the capitalist system shape artistic output.

Other ancient and contemporary philosophical issues and theories may be explored. These historians tend to be the most 'scholarly' in terms of their mode of analysis and their emphasis on citation of sources. Primacy is given to the script of the story, and the themes, issues, and concerns raised or implied in and by the narrative. One downfall of this approach is a tendency to interpret the texts within a sort of vacuum, without reference to their historical contexts. Sometimes there is a distinct gap between comics-in-theory, and comics as both social objects and lived discursive practices and texts. There is also a tendency to discuss "Comics as Philosophy" or "Comics as History," instead of examining comics on their own terms.

EXAMINATION OF SPECIFIC TEXTS

Of most relevance to my study is John Bell's historical survey Invaders from the North: How Canada Conquered the Comic Book Universe.¹⁸ Meticulously researched, this book is the product of over two decades of personal and institutional collecting, interviews, archival research, exhibitions, and networking with fans and artists. To date, it is the only formal study that has been published examining Canadian comic book art. His broad historical survey spans more than 150 years, a tall order for a book with only 223 pages, including illustrations, endnotes, and an index. While I appreciate and admire the immensity of this undertaking, the scope of the project precludes a detailed discussion of any given text. To Bell's credit, he reserves some discussion for the visual images themselves, though mostly in the context of individual artistic style for the purposes of constructing a canon; to this end he constructs eras in a historical timeline of comic book titles and publishers (Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age) and selects a group of 'worthy' artists. He is primarily concerned with archival research, but more specifically with identifying and recovering the Canadian contributions to the industry previously ignored in the discourse. This book is the result of an enormous amount of groundwork that will be invaluable to both future scholars and the general public.

However, his unclear definitions and lack of nuanced analysis are problematic and essentialising. While John Byrne's (a Canadian artist working for an American company) work is dismissed as being too 'typically American,' Bell lauds another Canadian newspaper strip drawn by an American artist. I was left unsure about what (for Bell) constituted "Canadian Comics." Also troublesome was a lack of criticality and sensitivity

¹⁸ Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006.

around issues of racism, colonialism, and sexism; not only does Bell sidestep the problematics of what Bradford W. Wright calls the “dreadful” jungle queen genre (discussed in more depth below), he actively depoliticises the so-called “satirical” national superheroes deployed by anarchist cartoonists agitating for social change. Throughout his work there is a sense that he subtly twists the texts to fit his constructed, and somewhat strained teleological historical narrative; i.e. comics start as a medium for children and “mature” to being a serious art form for adults. Sometimes, this happens in ways that distort both the works and expressed artistic intentions involved. This is probably in part a symptom of singing unsung praises to a ‘mainstream’ audience: he is not just writing in defence of popular culture, but of Canadian popular culture.

Similarly, in Comic Book Nation Bradford Wright creates a chronological survey beginning with WWII, and ending with postscript on how artists used comics to respond to 9/11.¹⁹ He adopts the tools of the social historian, relating the story of the comics to the collective concerns or anxieties of the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they were produced. He explores how these comic books functioned within communities of fans to act as currency, to produce or reinforce individual identity, and to create a sense shared of identity. In one section, he explores the shift in the values and the politics expressed in Vietnam-era comic books, and how they gradually came to subvert the values held by “the establishment.” Wright carefully locates his texts in the sociopolitical contexts of their time, connecting trends in comics with trends in music, movies, and popular constructions of youth social identity. He notes the dialogic relationship between lived society and commodified material culture. Of particular importance to my work is

¹⁹ Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

the attention he pays to the comics' letter pages, which offered a forum for otherwise alienated, disconnected, and disenfranchised youth. He adopts John Fiske's ideas of subcultures as "disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race."²⁰ for my purposes, this might be extended to include nationality, to examine the degree to which Canadian superheroes simultaneously reinforce and subvert the American-established generic conventions.

However, Wright does not fully address the political implications of the comic book texts. While he notes the problematic tendency toward two-dimensional and disempowered female characters, he attributes this to male writers and artists being uncomfortable producing for the "female perspective." Similarly, he posits that minority characters were scarce because producers found it difficult to create characters that were not offensive or paternalistic. What he does not discuss is the systemic prejudice in the comic book industry against women, gays, and artists of colour, who may have been able to create more nuanced characters that would have appealed to fans. Perhaps this kind of deliberate politicisation of popular culture is considered too "heavy-handed" for a general interest audience, but it certainly forms the backbone of my own analytical work.

Mila Bongco's book, Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000) has been key in the formation of my own methodology. Bongco approaches the study of superhero comic books with critical, literary, and feminist theoretical frameworks. Her adoption of 'genre criticism,' the study of generic conventions and the way in which they are constructed and subverted, is useful for the study of superhero comic books. I think this is particularly true for Canadian comics, as artists self-consciously grapple with these conventions to

²⁰ Find citation

critique the naturalisation of American heroes and urban landscapes, and the ideologies implicit in that naturalisation, in order to approach the problem of how to create a recognisably 'Canadian' hero. Also interesting are her notions of "intertextuality" and "texts in use," the terms she uses to describe the dialogic relationship between different comic book series, between the books and their fan bases, and between the books and the larger landscape of popular culture. Her assertion that the superhero inherently represents a kind of crisis of faith in traditional sites of authority is central to my own research and analysis.

However, while she states that comics should not be treated as "an artefact to be analysed in some contextless purity" (p. 88), her analysis tends to be precisely that. She constructs an essentialised 'superhero comic book' with particular traits, and makes particular claims based on this construct. She does this without reference to specific examples; doing so would undermine her argument. Her insistence that comics tend to be "hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts" (p. 87) and her emphasis on the formulaic nature of the plots misrepresents the diversity and subversion present in many superhero texts. For me, it also begs the question, "Formulaic compared to what?" Action films? Television sitcoms? Soap operas? Pop music? In her introduction, she asserts that the study of popular culture matters, however at times her tone suggests a slightly smug position of superiority in relation to her object of study.

Geoff Klock's How to Read Superhero Comics and Why also figures into my analysis, because it examines American superhero titles generally regarded as the first to be 'post-modern,' though they were published slightly later than *Northguard*.²¹ Klock's "modest goal" was to create, "a different paradigm for recognising the 'third movement'

²¹ Geoff Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics and Why (NY: Continuum Press, 2000)

of superhero comic books [1979-97] and to avoid, at all costs, the temptation to refer to this movement as ‘postmodern,’ ‘deconstructionist,’ or something equally tedious.”²² Instead, he opts for the frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” theory of poetics, to work out a theory of what he refers to as “revisionary heroes.”²³ For Klock, this is the point at which the collective superhero narrative achieves sufficient density, becomes fully conscious of its history, develops anxiety of influence, and becomes literature.²⁴

He asserts that heroes exist in a permanent temporal ‘now’ that is always changing relative to contemporary society; because different artists and writers put their own ‘stamp’ on the title, the history of the character is rife with discontinuity and contradiction. However, he asserts that the ‘third movement’ of comics is comprised of a few “visionary storytellers” whose work “consciously organises the tradition in such a way as to comment on 45 years” of comic history.²⁵ He presents a number of works in “a superhero mini-canon where *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen* are the strongest work in the tradition;” later, he states “[Warren Ellis’s] *Planetary* is the apex...it is the height of the superhero narrative.”²⁶ He declares these books special because each is “a comic book whose ‘meaning’ is found in its relationship with another comic book,” something I took to be a property of all texts.²⁷ He considers each of his selected comics revisionary, “in that it exposes the construction of its own narrative, and superhero narratives in general, through several key reflexive moments and metaphors.”²⁸

²² Klock, p. 2

²³ Klock, p. 16

²⁴ Klock, p. 25

²⁵ Klock, p. 28

²⁶ Klock, p. 153

²⁷ Klock, p. 25

²⁸ Klock, p. 53

This sounds similar to what is at work in *Northguard*; it also sounds suspiciously post-modern. I find his resistance to the term curious and confusing. In Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes, Lillian S. Robinson writes, “In short, the dude has written a postmodern critical study of a phenomenon to which he applies only an ordinal label, on the grounds that calling it postmodern would be ‘tedious.’ He’s got to be kidding – doesn’t he?”²⁹ I think she was reading my mind. While “modern” and “postmodern” are loaded and complicated terms, if clearly defined, I argue that complicated and nuanced ideas require complicated and nuanced language – particularly when the creators of the works in question explicitly identify themselves using those terms. Why, then, is Klock so resistant to use them?

The answer might be found in his interest in constructing a canon. To define canon, he quotes Bloom’s assertion that “Canon formation is not an arbitrary process, and is not, for more than a generation or two, socially or politically determined...poets survive because of inherent strength.”³⁰ For me, this is where his resistance to applying the term post-modern to works which clearly fit the bill starts to make sense. If these texts were post-modern, it would imply moving beyond the teleological, universal narratives of reified geniuses of which modernism was so fond. I think the question of whether or not a given comic is ‘literature’ or ‘belongs in the canon’ is moot, except in cases where extreme fan reactions have an impact on changing the story arc.³¹ In other disciplines, the assumptions underlying the creation of a canon, and even the very need to

²⁹ Lillian S. Robinson, Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes (NY and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 95-96. She goes on to observe that “third movement” sounds like “something that starts halfway through a symphony, or less than halfway through a day of stomach flu.”

³⁰ Klock, p. 16

³¹ Examples of this might be the death and resurrection of a character, or a “re-boot” in the story arc – that is, when fan irritation or editorial whim prompts a decision to return to a kind of system restore point in the narrative, and the story picks up as if the previous action had never occurred. Fans and editors do not always agree on which texts can be considered canonical.

perpetuate a canon, have come under scrutiny and cross-examination, and the acknowledgement that canons change.³²

However, I find his idea of the ‘revisionary’ superhero interesting; he makes it clear this is not to be understood as revising past narratives, but as “re-visioning” – seeing anew. This re-visioned hero prompts the reader to re-examine the texts s/he has read previously in a new light; they are confronted by the violence censored or made invisible (I would say natural, or unproblematic) by previous texts. While *Northguard* does not have the decades-long back-stories of Marvel and DC heroes, the creators have a sense of a uniquely Canadian hero, and attempt to negotiate the histories of convention and representation to articulate a recognisably individual identity that both perpetuates and resists dominant conventions. By mobilising post-modern artistic strategies – focusing on the specific rather than the general, questioning or subverting binary relationships instead of reinforcing them, and insisting on difference instead of homogeneity – Shainblum and Morissette reach for a national superhero (and by extension, a national identity) that tries to be free from American cultural hegemony, but also attempts to resist (though not always successfully) Canadian ‘multi-cultural’ ideologies that sometimes operate to erase difference.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Louis Althusser’s ideas of analysing ideology in cultural texts are central to my theoretical framework. Althusser defines ideology as “a system (with its own logic and

³² Well, acknowledged by people who are not Harold Bloom. In his rhetorical fight to “save” literature, he once implied it was better for children not to read at all, than it was for them to read J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books and risk the slippery slope into reading Steven King novels (“For the World of Letters, It’s a Horror,” *LA Times*, September 19, 2003. Online at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/sep/19/opinion/oe-bloom19>). To quote Nin Simone, ‘Nuff Said.

rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts).”³³ In cultural production, this system of representations acts – in an unconscious process – to help obscure the differences between the real, lived conditions of existence, and the ways in which we represent those conditions in mass culture. Ideology creates an imaginary unity or coherence of identity; it operates to make constructed relations appear natural; and it works to reconcile contradictions to the established order. For Althusser, reading the content of the text itself was important, but it was equally important to examine the assumptions and underlying ideas which provide the structure of the text; these assumptions are revealed as much by what is absent as by what is present. Because ideology is a closed system, it can only ask the questions it has the tools to answer. Deconstructing the problematic in a “manifest text” exposes the underlying assumptions and reveals the “latent text” – that is, the ideological processes of representation. In other words, the task of cultural criticism is both to articulate what is being represented in the text, but also to give voice to that which is silenced or repressed in the text itself, and the processes of ideology that make those absences mandatory. The point is not to reveal the “ultimate meaning” of a text, but to examine the conflicts that arise between its multiple meanings.

My analysis also owes a debt to Gramscian and neo-Gramscian ideas of hegemony, not as a top down imposition of cultural norms, but as a series of negotiations that occur between dominant and subordinate classes on multiple axes of oppression (including, but not limited to, class, race, and gender). These processes of resistance and incorporation often involve the appropriation of commercially produced commodities to create oppositional or subversive meanings, and the reappropriation of these symbols

³³ Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 231

back into the cultural mainstream.³⁴ As John Storey notes, “popular culture is what men and women make from their active consumption of the texts and practices of the culture industries.”³⁵ What begins as a kind of resistance must always be reincorporated back into the mainstream if the dominant ideology is to maintain power and control. As such, popular culture can function as a sort of ideological safety valve that offers the illusion of resistance or revolution, defusing tensions between dominant and oppressed groups, and allowing for the continued supremacy of the dominant ideology.³⁶ This also means that popular culture is a site of sometimes contradictory values, meanings, ideas, and motivations; my interest is in excavating the nuances, contradictions, and intersections of meaning produced by national superhero narratives.

I also draw heavily on theories about horror film. Robin Wood’s ideas about reactionary (modern/affirming cultural norms) and progressive (postmodern/critiquing cultural norms) horror films overlaps with my ideas about modern and postmodern superheroes. While the superhero genre can largely be understood as “postmodern” in that the superhero would not be required if the traditional sites of authority could maintain law and order, the national superhero specifically is a modernist figure in that it naturalises the singular (the superhero) as the universal (national identity). That is, the national superhero – who is most often white, English-speaking, able-bodied,

³⁴ For example, the punk movement appropriated the safety pin, a domestic symbol of child-rearing within a heteronormative nuclear family unit, as a means of critiquing conservative family values as oppressive social structures. Punk aesthetic was later reappropriated and commodified in consumer goods made for mainstream consumption.

³⁵ Storey, p. 105

³⁶ To return to the example of punk aesthetic, and quote MC Lars, “Hot Topic uses contrived identification with youth sub-cultures to manufacture an antiauthoritarian identity and make millions. That \$8 you paid for the Mudvayne poster would be better spent used for seeing your brother’s friend’s band. DIY ethics are punk rock! Starting your own label is punk rock! GG Allin was punk rock! But when a crass corporate culture feeds on mass consumer culture, then spending Mommy’s money is not punk rock!” (MC Lars, “Hot Topic is Not Punk Rock,” 2006.)

heterosexual, and male – comes to stand for the nation itself, erasing the diverse cultural identities that actually make up the nation. Further, the superhero typically functions to affirm the values associated with the traditional sites of authority, while also positioning those authorities as unable to cope with threats to the social order. As such, I suggest that the superhero genre collapses the modern/postmodern binary, and reveals the limitations inherent in such a framework. Instead, I turn to an examination of the modern and post-modern strategies used in superhero narratives to accomplish progressive or reactionary ends.

Barbara Creed argues that horror films are an expression of our desire to “eject the abject,” and that the function of the monstrous is “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.”³⁷ The symbolic order acts to repress or contain elements deemed undesirable under the dominant ideology; that which is most disavowed in the self is projected onto a monstrous Other in order to be trivialised, reformed, or if necessary, annihilated. If the superhero is to be understood as an expression of national identity, the villain functions as that which threatens to reveal that identity as a mythic construction – that is, everything that is repressed by the myth of national unity. An examination of the values threatened and upheld by particular superheroes and villains will reveal which iteration of the national myth the creators are working from – or looking to critique. Given Canada’s sometimes contradictory legacies of colonialism, immigration, institutionalised racism, diversity, multiculturalism, and tolerance, the figure of the Canadian national superhero allows us to examine the question, “Whose Canada are we talking about, here?”

³⁷ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Imaginary Monstrous Feminine” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 40

In this analysis, I will move from the general to the specific. I will start by laying down some background information on the American comic book industry, as a framework for discussing current notions of 'mainstream' and 'alternative,' where Canadian comics fit in that larger context, and how that position in the industry helps shape ideas of 'Canadian-ness' in comic production. I will continue with an overview of comics as popular culture, and how, as a medium, they differ from other forms of cultural production. Then I will examine some of the generic conventions of the superhero comic book, examining the similarities they share with horror films in terms of constructing villains (the monstrous) relating to social anxieties repressed by dominant social norms. Then I will examine how the Canadian national mythology of 'The Peaceable Kingdom', built in contrast to that of the United States, works to construct a popular conception of the nation, and explore how that difference is expressed at the visual, the linguistic, and the ideological levels in the graphic narrative of superhero comic books. I will first ground this discussion primarily in a socio-historical survey of Canadian superheroes, and how those heroes (and the attendant social values and notions of Canadian identity) have changed over time.

Finally, I will turn to an examination and analysis of the national superhero series *Northguard* by Mark Shainblum and Gabrielle Morissette, to show how they simultaneously subvert and reinforce both the generic conventions of superhero comics, and ideas about what constitutes Canadian values and identity. I will make references to other titles (both Canadian and American), and will also rely on observations from fans and artists in letter columns and interviews about what they believe a Canadian comic hero 'should' be. I will examine how *Northguard* figures evil, what that reveals about

Canada's culturally specific anxieties, and how Canadian national ideology operates to naturalise existing power structures, and to neutralise internal and external threats to that order. Part of this discussion will relate to constructions of race and ethnicity; gender, particularly femininity; the ways in which sexual and cultural difference are conflated; and how these internal differences are ultimately subsumed into and erased by a dominant, universalised "Self-as-Other" Canadian identity.

THE COMIC INDUSTRY

Mainstream American comics are a for-profit industry; production has been organised to be as cost-efficient as possible, and the financial bottom line is generally privileged over the creator's artistic autonomy, individual expression, and personal interests. The comic industry is corporate: "The Big Three" companies (Marvel, DC/Vertigo, and Image) choose what to print based on potential profit, rather than on opportunities for their stable of artists to engage in self-expression and artistic exploration. Before the advent of specialty shops and direct sales in the 1970s and 80s, comics were distributed through the news stands resulting in wide availability but low profit margin. This tended to result in publishers striving for quantity over quality; Bradford W. Wright notes that this has "promoted an incessant search for narrative formulas that can be easily duplicated with minimal variation and expense."³⁸ Artists were paid not by the hour, but by the page; this encouraged speed of production, not quality. Work was often anonymous, and sometimes even credited to someone else – a far cry from the cult of celebrity surrounding today's artists and writers.

Mainstream comics both participate in, and perpetuate, North American society's dominant capitalist ideology of production, consumption, collection, and disposability. Since the mid-1980s, some artists have made headway in asserting their rights either through independent publishing or through association with companies like Image that ostensibly put creator rights at the forefront of their mandate. Still, few retain full ownership of the characters they create, or receive royalties when those characters appear

³⁸ Wright, p. xv.

in reprints or become the subject of major motion picture deals and their associated marketing franchises. In his book, Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels, Richard Sabin notes that:

The traditional American working method was to split the creative task down among artists, writers, inkers, and letterers, and this both guaranteed anonymity and militated against collective action...in general comics creators were considered factory workers on an assembly line.³⁹

This is a division of labour typical of a modern factory – members of the creative team still collaborate, but at the discretion and for the mandate of the Editor in Chief.

However, in the hands of a team creating an ‘alternative’ comic, what was once a disempowering and alienating division of labour has the potential to become a means of introducing more collective and co-operative approaches to artistic work and editorial decisions.

Alternative comics, a category which will become important when I turn my discussion more specifically towards Canadian comic production, tend to be much more concerned with freedom of individual artistic expression, overtly creator-owned characters and stories, and collaborative effort. They explore and negotiate concerns often considered too ‘grown-up’ for comic books; which is to say that instead of hiding their ideology behind a façade of ‘mere’ mass-produced entertainment, they often deliberately and self-consciously foreground their political agency and agenda. Like the underground comix and ‘zines of the 1960s, they overtly or covertly comment on or protest war, censorship, the oppression and marginalisation of racial and sexual minorities, and other

³⁹ Roger Sabin, Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels (London, England: Phaidon, 1996), p.41.

social issues arising from the 'bankrupt' values of dominant ideology. They grapple with the narratives present in 'real life.' Charles Hatfield notes,

These publications participated in a burgeoning movement of so-called independent comics, but stood out even within that context because of the animating influence of the undergrounds, which inspired them to flout the traditional comic book's overwhelming emphasis on comforting formula fiction.⁴⁰

Along with this rejection of dominant social values and fictional narrative forms comes a rejection of the dominant comic book aesthetic. Instead of full-colour pages, alternatives often publish in black and white.⁴¹ Mainstream comics focus on hyper-able, hyper-gendered, and 'perfect' bodies, airbrushed colours, and a realistic aesthetic that simultaneously insists on the fantastic or supernatural; the reader understands that action takes place in an imagined three-dimensional space. Alternative artists tend to deliberately use a 'primitive' and abstract style; a gritty, linear, and hyper-realistic style; or an exaggerated and grotesque 'cartoon' style; and they tend to emphasise the two-dimensional, graphic quality of the image. In comic books, as in film and other arts, style can signify the political position of the artist; feminist artists might do comics celebrating the beauty of a variety of body types, instead of privileging the dominant aesthetics of patriarchal culture. I suggest that in alternative comics, the decision of style has more overtly political and ideological implications – simply because the decision must be made, it is not taken for granted.⁴² In this way, the visual idioms of mass-produced consumer culture become a site of simultaneous insistence and resistance; a space where

⁴⁰ Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. x

⁴¹ This is also a practical measure that brings down the cost of production, and allows for increased distribution.

⁴² Taken for granted in that it perpetuates either a fashionable trend, or 'house style' (like with Disney animation).

meaning can be continually contested and negotiated, deconstructed and reconstructed, subverted and (re)produced.⁴³

This discussion suggests that alternative and independent comics are marginalised, and to an extent this is true. Independent titles often face obstacles in publishing and distribution not encountered by larger publishers, like securing financial capital, or being relatively unknown and thus considered a 'high risk' investment for retail outlets. For fans in comic book culture, there are tensions between the alternative and the mainstream similar to those between popular notions of 'high art' and 'mass entertainment' that hold currency in our broader society. While those categories and the binary relationship between them are arbitrary and highly constructed, many fans are still highly invested in maintaining these categories, in part because these notions are so bound up with individual and group identities.⁴⁴ Some might hold that fans of independent comics are elitist (much like some may regard fans of opera), others regard the superhero with scorn and disdain (like Trekkies, or fans of 'trashy' soap operas); some go so far as to state that the superhero genre is an obstacle that comic art must transcend in order to realise its full potential as a medium. Warren Ellis once remarked,

I've said before that the superhero's cultural and economic dominance of the medium is the same as walking into a bookstore to see nothing but novels about nurses as far as the eye can see. I don't doubt that there are excellent nurse novels in there. But the fact that in our nightmare bookstore, 90% of all books published everywhere are about nurses tends to choke off all other genres and a literary mainstream.⁴⁵

⁴³ See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

⁴⁴ See Matthew Pustz, "From Speculators to Snobs: The Spectrum of Contemporary Comic Book Readers" in *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999)

⁴⁵ Warren Ellis, "Come in Alone" #52, December 29, 2000. *Comic Book Resources*. Available online at: <http://www.comicbookresources.com/columns/index.cgi?column=cia&article=768> (accessed December 1, 2007)

All of these factors have an impact on Canadian comics – particularly Canadian superhero comics. They exist within these tensions between the centre and the margin for several reasons. First, though perhaps not the most obvious, is the chosen method of production; Canadian comics are often physically different from their American counterparts. American comics – like films, television, and magazines – are produced in full colour with high gloss, and distributed on a massive scale; for the purposes of advertising and distribution, most American companies treat Canada as a part of the domestic market.⁴⁶ The cost of competing on those terms has been prohibitive throughout the history of Canadian comic book publishing; a local industry could only start with the aid of the protection afforded by Mackenzie King's War Exchange Conservation Act.⁴⁷ As a result, Canadian comics are typically alternatives, meaning that they are independent or small-press productions printed in black and white, with smaller print runs and more limited distributions. Similarly, Canadian graphic novels tend to be distributed through the book trade, not through comic distribution companies catering to the direct market – meaning that often, while they have better distribution, they rarely see the shelves of most comic book shops.⁴⁸ Before DC Comics started their alternative imprint Vertigo, and before the creation of independent companies like Image, Avatar Press, and Dark Horse

⁴⁶ Paul Audley, in his book Canada's Cultural Industries: Broadcasting, Publishing, Records and Film (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co. in association with the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy, 1983), notes that the 1980s, the largest 8 or 9 U.S magazine distributors accounted for 90% of news stand sales, and that these firms are all owned by U.S. publishing companies (p. 73). He also notes that publishers tend to use the same distributors for both the American and Canadian markets, in effect, treating all of North America as a single domestic market (p.72).

⁴⁷ The War Exchange Conservation Act (introduced on December 6, 1940) restricted the importation of non-essential goods into Canada, including fiction periodicals and comics. John Bell notes that without these restrictions, "[p]rinting costs, market size [and] distribution obstacles...[would have] militated against the possibility of a Canadian firm wrestling any appreciable portion of the market from American publishers." (*Canuck Comics*, p. 23)

⁴⁸ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Comic book stores facing increased competition from brick-and-mortar book stores, as well as online giants like Amazon, Chapters, and Barnes & Noble, have been forced to find their niche in order to stay competitive. Still, it probably safe to say that one is more likely to find Canadian content in Canadian stores.

in the 1990s, 'mainstream' and 'American' were one and the same; you could be American and alternative, but you could not be mainstream without being American. For this reason alone, Canadian comics had to be 'different.'

However, the superhero genre has, since its inception, been a part of the mainstream industry – the majority of mainstream comics are superheroes, with crime and war comics holding a distant second. The Canadian superhero is then a sort of bizarre hybrid; a mainstream genre forced to the alternative margins because of its geographical location, and (supposed) limited appeal outside Canadian borders. Writers and artists struggle to identify a specifically Canadian space outside of the American generic conventions that presume readers and characters are American. Further, Canadian superheroes have had to negotiate their position in terms of their relationship to the industry itself, competing with more widely known companies and characters to establish their place in Comicdom.

COMIC BOOKS AND VISUAL LITERACY

Comic books possess particular aesthetic qualities which allow the artist to interweave layers of complex symbols and imagery in ways that other forms of visual culture cannot. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud uses the graphic novel format to make a case for these unique narrative qualities and abilities of the graphic medium of comics.⁴⁹ This book was fundamental for many artists and fans (though heartily resisted by others), both as a step towards defining what comics actually are, and for establishing a framework to consider their art work as an ‘important’ contribution existing within ‘high’ cultural production. Dylan Horrocks notes that the book, “constructs a way of talking about comics that affirms and supports our longing for critical respectability and seems to offer an escape from the cultural ghetto” – in short, a kind of origin myth for comic books.⁵⁰ For the purpose of my analysis, these kinds of value judgements or justifications are irrelevant; further, I have serious reservations about the essentialising and universalising nature of some of his statements. However, McCloud – like Heinrich Wölfflin, for the traditional art historians in the room – insightfully deconstructs the formal properties of graphic sequential narrative, illustrating how various elements and styles combine to forward the visual and textual narratives. In so doing, he became one of the first authors writing about comics to make the jump from being popular with fans (or

⁴⁹ Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. 1st Harper Perennial edition. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994. Originally published Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993

⁵⁰ Dylan Horrocks, “Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud’s Definition of Comics.” *The Comics Journal* #234, 2001. (Viewable online at: <http://www.hicksville.co.nz/Inventing%20Comics.htm>)

anti-comics protesters) to being taken seriously by the academy. By choosing to make his book a self-referential graphic novel, the media is the message.

McCloud suggests that, as a visual medium, primacy should be given to formal analysis of the images, both to illuminate how a particular artist's style and visual vocabulary tells a story, and to ascertain the level of success or skill achieved by the artist. Artists, like movie directors, make deliberate aesthetic choices which shape the narrative at least as much as the storyline itself. While issues of skill and intentionality are not the point of political analysis or ideological critique, the extent to which stylistic choices can signal political or ideological positions makes an examination of these elements, from both an art historical and a comics studies perspective, important to any analysis.

In chapter one, McCloud defines comic books as "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" – or more simply, "Sequential Art."⁵¹ He conveys as much about his definition and his assumptions through the images he uses, as with his words; for example, this definition is arrived at through a conversation with an audience, a dialogue which allows for multiple opinions and ideas to be traded, and the definition to be refined. This allows for the creation of a definition that is broad enough to be inclusive, but not so broad as to be meaningless. McCloud explains that Comic books are made up of a series of panels of varying sizes, separated by a white space known as "the gutter." Taken individually, these panels are just images, but as part of a sequence they are "transformed into... the art of comics."⁵² These images are read from left to right (or

⁵¹ McCloud, p. 20

⁵² McCloud, p. 5

right to left if the work is Japanese), top to bottom. The meaning of the text is formed through the relationship between one panel and the next.

In chapter two, McCloud explores the relationship between realism and abstraction in comic art, defining the process of cartooning as “Amplification through Simplification.” He says:

When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating the details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.⁵³

His suggestion is that the “universality” of these simplified images makes it easier for viewers to identify with the characters and situations in the text.⁵⁴ He proposes that all things we experience in life belong to either the realm of the concept, the location of ideas and our identities, or the realm of the senses, the world that exists outside of ourselves. Through “traditional realism” artists can portray the exterior world; he asserts some form of realism is required to portray “the beauty and complexity” of the physical world. However, with a nod to Marshall McLuhan’s theory of hot and cold media, he contends that the comic book artist’s use of abstraction emphasises the idea of form over

⁵³ McCloud, p. 30

⁵⁴ McCloud’s use of “universality” here is problematic. DeWitt Kilgore notes, “McCloud’s ‘universal’ formulation of character design – despite the liberalism of his political hopes – hails the reader as white and male, no matter who he or she might be as a subject raced and gendered in American life.” (Kilgore, DeWitt. “A Touch of Grey: Black Cartooning and the Problem of Universality” *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The American Studies Association, Philadelphia Marriott Downtown, Philadelphia, PA*, Oct 11, 2007.) (Abstract viewable online at: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p186723_index.html . accessed September 12, 2008). While Kilgore notes the gendered and racialised aspects of the “universal” reader, both he and McCloud, unsurprisingly, identify the reader as “American.”

the appearance of the physical world. This places the art of the comic book in the realm of concepts, instead of the realm of the senses.⁵⁵

Drawing further on McLuhan's ideas of non-visual self-awareness, and of how inanimate objects become extensions of our bodies, he notes that "in every case, our constant awareness of self flows outward to include the object of our extended identity."⁵⁶ McCloud compares these simplified conceptual images to the abstracted images employed by comic artists, and suggests that it is precisely their simplified, abstract nature that allows readers to identify so easily with the characters, concepts, and stories presented. This notion of amplification through simplification, and the relationship between realism and abstraction is much more complicated than it might initially appear. While McCloud is specifically referring to the kind of photorealism once cultivated by European art academies, 'realism' takes on a slightly different inflection when one is discussing worlds inhabited by characters who can scale walls, run faster than a speeding bullet, or generate lightning with their bare hands. As 'realism' in Canadian superhero comics is one of the things consistently praised by fans, and isolated as one of the qualities that separated them from their more fantastic American counterparts, these alternate modes of realism are important to consider as one of the elements that help articulate Canadian national identity in the graphic narrative.

Also important for my discussion, however, is that the minimum level of abstraction necessary for comic art requires readers to invest themselves in the process of reading the comic in order to understand it. Words and images are both ultimately

⁵⁵ This is one of several problematic binary oppositions McCloud uses in his text. Elsewhere, (*First Nations Graphic Narratives: "The Invisible Art"*), I use the work of Haida artist Michael Nicol Yahgulanaas to deconstruct the essentialist assumptions and ethnocentrism underlying McCloud's work.

⁵⁶ McCloud, p. 39

abstract forms of communication, and when they exist on a page together, each modifies the meanings of the other. In a comic book, whether a statement is intended to be serious or sarcastic is conveyed not by tone of voice, as in a film, but by the style of the lettering and the nature of the image accompanying the text. A full-size 'splash-page' (industry term for a one- or two-page spread) will convey an entirely different mood than a series of tightly packed panels with jagged edges. A page divided into three wide, horizontal panels will 'slow' the narrative and create a sense of atmosphere, or build suspense, while a series of tall, thin vertical frames will increase urgency, the speed of reading, and build intensity.⁵⁷

Rather than a narrative film's continuous procession of images occurring over time, panels in a comic book are more like snapshots that leave the reader responsible for resolving the narrative. By their very format, comic books require viewers to invest themselves in the activity of consumption in order to produce meaning. Readers cannot passively absorb a comic book; words must be reconciled with (sometimes conflicting) images, the gaps between panels must be filled in, implied action occurring outside the frame must be imagined and integrated with what is explicitly shown in the frame, and the pages must be turned to continue the story. Meaning is not merely resolved in the mind of the viewer; the viewer actively creates that meaning through the process of consuming the text. Peter Kuper, co-creator of *World War Three Illustrated*, observed that:

[W]hen they read the comic book, it asks them to participate. They have to read it, and look at the pictures, and go from panel to panel from one to the next and make

⁵⁷ For more on how specific aesthetic strategies are employed to forward the narrative, see Will Eisner, *Comics & Sequential Art: Principles & Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form* (NY: Poorhouse Press, 1994).

all the connections. That's all a part of the process. It's a very interactive form.⁵⁸

Comic books sometimes reject strict systems of perspective based on Euclidean geometry, empirical objectivity, and notions of absolute truth. They deny a one-to-one correspondence of 'real space' to pictorial space; in fact, they often assume that space is subjective, and employ multiple views to express the passage of time, but also chains of events or associations. Primacy is given to the reader's experience of the work; the responsibility for creating meaning falls on the individual. Warren Ellis writes, "We all enter comics on our own. Moving into the fictional world of a graphic novel is not a group pursuit. It is the act of one reader, with one copy of one comic." He goes on to say that in America (and England, to an extent) comics are not a part of the shared cultural landscape, like films or best-selling novels. He observes that, "the American exchange of thoughts about art begins and ends with lawsuits, these days. No-one wants to talk about the work, and very few people want to talk to us, the creators of the work."

This returns to the issues I raised earlier about the tensions in the comic book industry between the centre and the margins. It must be remembered that, in spite of the recent success of several films adapted from comic books, the industry itself resides on the margins of popular culture. Outside fan communities there are no broader cultural conversations about comics taking place. Ellis observes,

When you pick up a novel, you know that many other people are doing it too, or have done. You've seen the reviews in the newspapers and other culture magazines. You're experiencing it in the context of a culture simultaneously experiencing it and conjuring general conversation about it. As a marginalised medium, we're in a far different condition: I create for you a world that you

⁵⁸ Erik Farseth. "Interview with Peter Kuper" in *Walk The Plank*, 2002. available online at: <http://www.angelfire.com/punk2/walktheplank/peterkuper.html> (accessed December 15, 2004)

enter into as a solitary reader of a form cut off from the cultural conversation. You come in alone.

One thing worth considering about all these analyses by McCloud, Ellis, and Kilgore (see note 24), is that they completely erase Canadian comic creators and audiences. While comics are a marginalised medium, Canadian production exists on the margins of the industry. Further, historical accounts of Canadian comics exist on the margins of the discourse, and critical or scholarly analyses are obscured at best, and nonexistent at worst. It seems that, for Canadian comics in particular, “We come in alone because, by and large, no-one else gives a toss.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Warren Ellis, “Come in Alone” #2, December 9, 1999. *Comic Book Resources*. Available online at: <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=13138> (accessed September 12, 2008)

GENRE

In Superhero: The Secret Origins of a Genre, Peter Coogan argues that a superhero can be identified by their M.P.I: their pro-social Mission, their Powers, and their Identity – that is, the code name and costume s/he assumes to fight the forces of evil.⁶⁰ He asserts that the hero’s “fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of a society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda.”⁶¹ If a national superhero is, by Bell’s definition, “the embodiment of national spirit and identity,” this figure should, then, convey the values and ideals assumed to be shared by the dominant majority.⁶² Similarly, Coogan notes that the villain often represents an inversion of these values, or “a displaced aspect of the hero that the hero struggles with;”⁶³ in other words, what Freud might refer to as the ‘return of the repressed.’ The villain in such a narrative represents the overt and covert culturally and historically specific anxieties held by the dominant group in a nation – this might be economic insecurity, the tenuous stability of Canadian unity, and the difficulties of preserving our cultural distinction in the face of US economic and cultural imperialism. However, the process of othering the villain also involves projecting the nation’s covert or repressed anxieties – institutionalised racism, colonialist attitudes, unnecessary violence, and the attempted erasure of First Nations – onto the figure of the Other.

⁶⁰ Peter Coogan, Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre (Austin: Monkey Brain Books, 2006), pp. 30-60.

⁶¹ Coogan, p. 31

⁶² Bell, *Guardians*, p. 50

⁶³ Coogan, p. 103

Superheroes are a mainstream comic book genre; they arose during World War II in response to a threat to the established order, and national superheroes in particular arose in response to threats to a nation. They function as a means of expressing and controlling personal and collective social anxieties through the medium of the graphic narrative. Mila Bongco notes that the very existence of superheroes “expresses a desire for a fiercer and purer authority that would arise to punish evil,”⁶⁴ and this suggests that, like most post-modern texts, they stem from a profound crisis of faith in traditional sites of authority. However, superheroes often work in tandem with law enforcement, the military, and the government to maintain the stability of the status quo. Coogan suggests that the superhero’s prohibition on killing stems from their position as reactionary, their task of “responding to crime and working to support the criminal justice system by turning criminals over to the authorities for trial and punishment.”⁶⁵

The villain, on the other hand – whether a monster, a mastermind, a mutant, or a mad scientist – is a proactive force for chaos; s/he is an agent for the disruption of the status quo. The struggle of hero and villain typically ends with the (temporary) defeat of the villain, and the (temporary) restoration of ‘law and order.’ Perhaps this is what prompts Bongco to observe that comics tend to be “hegemonic and sometimes overtly authoritarian texts,”⁶⁶ and what prompts Thomas Inge to suggest that the superhero lives in “a world in which both might and right are on the side of morality.”⁶⁷ However I want to suggest that comics, due in part to their marginalised position in popular culture, also

⁶⁴ Bongco, p. 103

⁶⁵ The role of the Comics Code in erasing explicit physical violence, however, cannot be ignored. See Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998)

⁶⁶ Bongco, p. 87

⁶⁷ Inge, p. xiv

offer the possibility of a sustained and systemic critique of the very traditional values they are said to uphold.

Here it is useful to turn to theorisations of the monstrous in horror films, for the parallels that can be read in constructions of the villainous in superhero comic books. In his article, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," Robin Wood asserts the horror film represents one of "the most popular and, at the same time, the most disreputable" forms of mass entertainment.⁶⁸ Like horror films, membership in comic fandom "is restricted to aficionados and complemented by total rejection" from the majority of society. While one might expect that a number of recent box-office successes would garner comic books a certain amount of wider acceptance (*Spiderman, X-Men*), it seems the film-text is somehow taken more seriously, while the comic book itself is still "dismissed with contempt...or simply ignored" by mainstream critics.⁶⁹ The subject of the horror film and the superhero comic alike is the relationship between "normal" and "monstrous" (or 'heroic' and 'villainous'), and its appeal lies in its ability to fulfil "our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere."⁷⁰

Barbara Creed argues that horror films are an expression of our desire to "eject the abject," and that the function of the monstrous is "to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability."⁷¹ Similarly, Wood suggests that "the Other" is that which the dominant ideology "cannot recognise or accept

⁶⁸ I know many people who will more readily admit to reading pornography than to reading comics (is it any mistake we hid comics under the bed as children, that they are packaged in nondescript brown paper bags at the time of purchase?).

⁶⁹ Wood, p. 202.

⁷⁰ Wood, p. 205.

⁷¹ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Imaginary Monstrous Feminine" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996), p. 40

but must deal with...in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself.”⁷² He suggests that the figure of the Other is not just positioned external to the culture, but functions as a kind of vessel containing that which is denied in the self so that it can be reformed or ritually destroyed. He argues that the basic horror film formula (which I argue can be extended to other genres) consists of the Monster threatening the Norm, that is, the generally accepted social and cultural order; after a conflict, the ‘happy ending’ generally signifies the return of repression – in other words, the affirmation of the dominant cultural status quo. He describes this sort of film as reactionary, in that it affirms the value of traditional social institutions and sites of authority in the face of their (real or perceived) disintegration. The exteriority, inhumanity, and extremity of the threat – the Monster as ‘pure evil’ – makes it easier to disavow, and implies that negotiation or redemption is impossible; the repression or destruction of that threat is the only possible option. This is a narrative strategy that allows for continued collective denial of shared social fears and anxieties.

Progressive horror films seek to problematise our assumptions about what we value as a society; they make visible the forms of oppression and privilege rendered invisible or ‘natural’ by ideology, and collapse the boundaries between self/other, norm/monster. According to Wood, a film like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* magnifies the human exploitation at the core of the capitalist system, and critiques the destructive, repressive attitudes about sexuality and gender, and the dysfunction at the heart of the hetero-normative nuclear family. The norm is not merely threatened, it is completely

⁷² Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” in *Movies and Methods Vol. II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). pp. 195-220.

destroyed; the threat comes not from some force or being external to the culture, it is intrinsic to our culture. We are the Monster. Frustrating the viewers' desires for a happy ending, and revealing the impotence of traditional sites of authority allows the progressive horror film to show that, "annihilation is inevitable, humanity is now completely powerless, there is nothing anyone can do to arrest the process." Put another way, Wood posits "they are progressive in so far as their negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes...the recognition of that ideology's disintegration, its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart."⁷³ Wood notes the inherent nihilism here, observing that our contemporary ideology "can encompass despair, but not the imagining of constructive radical alternatives."⁷⁴

In other words, while audiences are allowed to indulge their fantasies about the destruction of oppressive social systems, creators do not deliver more equitable or just alternatives. A "progressive" horror film reveals that the dominant ideology is unsustainable, and allows audiences some measure of validation, but often denies the opportunity for positive change. A "reactionary" horror film calms anxieties, and makes reassurances about the integrity and dependability of traditional sites of authority. By foregrounding either broken systems, or a successful defence of the status quo, the implicit message of most North American popular culture is either that the existing social order is desirable, or that social revolution is impossible.

All of this applies to superhero comics; consider the superhero as part of a reactionary narrative, and the villain as a projection social anxiety. Traditionally, the superhero can certainly be seen as affirming that the forces of law and order are always

⁷³ Wood, p. 215

⁷⁴ Wood, p. 211

good and unproblematic, and erasing the reality of the violence with which they contain undesirable elements of society. But therein lies the crux of the contradiction: if the authorities and institutions were able to maintain order, there would be no need for superheroes. Over the course of the genre's history, this tension between the inability of traditional sites of authority to maintain control and the requisite necessity of the superhero to re-establish order eventually resulted in a fracturing of these long-held assumptions. Authors had to start thinking differently about the nature of superheroes, and the kinds of questions possible to pose in this genre, and responded with post-modern popular narratives.

In typical accounts of the history of comics, Allan Moore (*The Watchmen*, 1987) and Frank Miller (*The Dark Knight Returns*, 1986) are credited with challenging the foundational assumptions about the superhero. Moore asked the question, "Who watches the Watchmen?" – that is, who provides oversight on the powerful beings capable of rending the fabric of the universe, to ensure they really are operating in everyone's best interests? His heroes exist in a world largely indifferent to, or afraid of, their existence; they turn to drugs and alcohol, become performers in the adult entertainment industry. Some grow old and die, and others, suffering god-complexes induced by their abilities, perform actions detrimental to the society they are sworn to protect – they decide to 'destroy the village in order to save it.' Rather than preserving the dominant social order, they become the threat poised to raze it to the ground.

Miller explores the relationship between the superhero and the vigilante, pushing Batman's obsession with finding his parents' killers to the brink of psychosis and beyond. Hero and villain begin as diametric opposites, but through the course of the narrative, the

gap between the two narrows until the reader is invited to ask if there is any difference between them at all. Both authors seek to problematise the assumptions made by the genre, and to make visible the previously hidden ideologies inherent in the genre. While Miller in particular was criticised for his deliberate rejection of the Comics Code and the amount of violence in his story, Geoff Kloch notes that *The Dark Knight*,

is not so much more violent as it is **more graphic and more realistic about the violence that has always inhabited superhero narratives**... Miller's portrayal leaves readers with the impression that all of Batman's fights must have been of this kind, but that they have been reading a watered-down version of the way things 'really happened.'⁷⁵ [emphasis mine]

The ways in which these authors re-imagined the superhero had a profound impact on the genre, and on the industry as a whole. Coogan credits them with starting a "superhero renaissance" that continues today on the silver screen.⁷⁶

What the typical history of comics leaves out is, a full seven years before these books were published, the Canadian artistic team of Mark Shainblum and Gabriel Morissette were also contemplating the ways the conventions of the genre needed to be altered in order to create a Canadian national superhero in their series *Northguard*. If Bell is correct that a national superhero is the embodiment of national spirit and identity, I suggest he is also a monolithic figure who requires an equally monolithic evil in order to exist, and it is a centralised, monolithic, and universal culture that he defends from this evil – a modernist culture. Without a centralised and universal national identity to preserve, the construct of the superhero collapses. To so singularise Canadian diversity behind such an icon would seem to go against the grain of the official policy of

⁷⁵ Geoff Kloch, *How To Read Superhero Comicbooks and Why* (New York and London: Continuum Press, 2002), p. 30-31

⁷⁶ Coogan, p. 1.

multiculturalism. In fact, any attempt to discuss or pin down a shared, universal notion of 'Canadian identity' or 'Canadian values' seems impossible. The diversity made possible by multiculturalism apparently ruptures the monolithic unity needed to support a superhero.

However, Canadian comic artists continually take up the challenge of reconciling the modernist construct of the superhero with our complex national identity, within the context of a postmodern, postcolonial culture, with interesting results. The task for them has been to see how a mainstream genre can be appropriated by an alternative agenda, but also to discover the role of nationalism in contemporary Canadian society, and how, or even *if*, the monolithic, modernist construct of the national superhero can be adapted, fractured, faceted, and rearticulated within a diverse post-modern society. I believe this task has been most successfully accomplished in Mark Shainblum and Gabrielle Morissette's eight-issue mini-series, *Northguard*. To put this series properly in context, it is important to first look at the ways in which "Canadian" identity has been constructed in popular culture, and to look at how the expression of that identity has changed in response to changing social, political, and historical contexts.

CONSTRUCTING 'CANADA'

Canada as a landmass is huge, and spans several distinct geographical regions, each having its own character, and a range of cultures, colours, and social classes. As noted by John Ralston Saul, “the essential characteristic of the Canadian public mythology is its complexity... that makes it a revolutionary reversal of the standard nation-state myth.”⁷⁷ While this diversity is also present in the United States, the difference is that our diversity is constitutionally protected; but, more importantly, multiculturalism is popularly propagated as a central aspect of our national identity – ‘The Canadian Mosaic’ vs. ‘The U.S. Melting Pot.’ Though this dichotomy is simplistic and contestable, I would argue that it is still firmly entrenched in popular social consciousness. Many younger Canadians probably would not recognise the phrase “The Peaceable Kingdom” as referring to their home country.⁷⁸ They would certainly, however, be familiar with the beer commercials that proclaim, “I believe in Peacekeeping, NOT Policing; diversity, NOT assimilation.”⁷⁹ They would also probably

⁷⁷ John Ralston Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Toronto: Viking, 1997. p. 9

⁷⁸ See Ryan Edwardson, *Kicking Uncle Sam out of the Peaceable Kingdom: English Canadian “New Nationalism” and Americanisation in The Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 37, #4 (2003) p. 131-151.

⁷⁹ From Molson-Canadian Brewing Company’s “I Am Canadian” campaign, one which came under a lot of criticism for its supposed ‘anti-American’ sentiments. The full monologue is:

“Hey.....! I’m not a lumberjack, or a fur trader, and I don’t live in an igloo or eat blubber, or own a dogsled. And I don’t know Jimmy, Sally or Suzy from Canada, although I’m certain they’re really, really nice. I have a Prime Minister, not a President. I speak English and French, NOT American! And I pronounce it ‘about’, NOT ‘a boot’. I can proudly sew my country’s flag on my backpack. I believe in peace keeping, NOT policing; diversity, NOT assimilation; and that the beaver is a truly proud and noble animal. I know that a toque is a hat, a chesterfield is a couch, and it is pronounced ‘zed’, not ‘zee’, ‘zed’! Canada is the second largest landmass in the world, the first nation of hockey, and the best part of North America! My name is Joe, and I... am... Canadian!”

know that in a national poll in 2004, we acknowledged the ‘father’ of peacekeeping – Lester B. Pearson – as one of the top ten greatest Canadian public figures.⁸⁰

So, at least on the surface, it appears that diversity, multiplicity, celebration of difference, and maintenance peace and order are the unifying factors of Canadian identity. We are taught to take pride in this identity as Canadians, which is presumably founded upon these values. However, these are abstract concepts to rally behind as a nation, not concrete symbols that can be held up to represent national identity. This is hardly surprising considering that, while many may be willing to agree that there is a distinct Canadian identity, we are hard pressed to define exactly what it is, beyond the ubiquitous “*Not American.*”

This definition-through-negation actually collapses our myth of celebration of diversity, and operates to disguise the fact that our assumed multiplicity is really just another duality: Canadian identity is often constructed in opposition to popular notions of American identity. Our national myth of origin grounds the country in peace, order, and good government; Canada achieved independence from Britain by an act of legislation, not an act of war.⁸¹ However, this obscures what some see as colonial acts of war mounted against the aboriginal population since the time of contact. Even as the government takes tentative steps towards negotiating land claims, the exploitation of natural resources on those lands still continues. A nationalist ideology, however, operates to naturalise a supposed tolerance of difference even as minorities are further marginalised; the dominant culture of white Anglophones can assume multiculturalism

⁸⁰ “CBC’s Top Ten Canadians Poll of 2004,” <http://www.cbc.ca/greatest/> (accessed December 15, 2007)

⁸¹ The Canada Act, 1982

and a lack of prejudice or racism largely because of their racially privileged position in society.

Notions of cultural dominance and social power relationships are tricky things to discuss in the Canadian context. While individual white, male, English privilege is a fact in our society, this position of dominance seems somewhat compromised at the national level by American cultural imperialism. Our diversity and our underdog status force us as a nation to keep asking ourselves: What is “Canadian?” In his introduction to Canuck Comics, Mark Shainblum wrote,

Canadians have an inferiority complex born of living next door to the most powerful nation on earth... [this] makes everything we have accomplished look small, makes it difficult for our own cultural identity to assert itself over the bedlam emanating from Hollywood and New York, and makes us wonder if, in the long run, there is any such thing as being a ‘Canadian’.⁸²

Is this inferiority complex, like the official and popular adoption of ‘multiculturalism,’ another mechanism which allows the erasure of prejudice and racism? What makes us so different from Americans? Some tentative answers to these questions show up in our superheroes, as we move from the moral certainty of World War II, to the cultural and economic optimism of the 1970s, through to the collapse of these ideals in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

⁸² Shainblum, Mark. “Introduction” in Canuck Comics. John Bell, ed. Montréal: Published and distributed to the comic book trade by Matrix Books: Downsview, Ontario. Distributed to the book trade by Eden Press, 1986, p. 1

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE GOLDEN AGE, 1941-46⁸³

Canada declared war against Germany on September 15th, 1939; British gold shipments to Canada were curtailed in 1940, and the trade deficit with the U.S. began to grow. In order to combat rising debt Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King introduced the War Exchange Conservation Act, which restricted the importation of non-essential goods, including fiction periodicals and comics.⁸⁴ John Bell notes that without these restrictions, “[p]rinting costs, market size [and] distribution obstacles...[would have] militated against the possibility of a Canadian firm wrestling any appreciable portion of the market from American publishers.”⁸⁵ The demand for comics did not decrease with the supply, and Canadian comic publishers formed across the nation to fill the void. The so-called “Golden Age” peaked with a total of 5 publishers and 20 original

⁸³ Unless otherwise noted, the information in this section is summarised from the chapter called “A History: English Canadian Comic Books” in *Canuck Comics* (Montreal: Matrix, 1986, p.19-44), and the exhibition programme *Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-book Art* (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1992), written by John Bell. Specific quotations from these texts will be cited as “*Canuck Comics*” and “*Guardians*” respectively. Much of the text of the original publication, with a few revisions to bring it more up-to-date, can be seen at <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/superheroes/index-e.html>. For a similar historical (though stylistic, not social) background on related developments in American comic books, see Robert C. Harvey’s “Legions in Long Underwear”, chapter two of *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) p. 16-49. For an examination of the social, political, and economic issues played out in American “Golden Age” comics, see Bradford W. Wright, “Superheroes for the Common Man: The Birth of the Comic Book Industry, 1933-41” p.1-29, and “Race, Politics, and Propaganda: Comic books Go to War, 1939-1945” p. 30-55, chapters one and two of *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁸⁴ Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p. 23

⁸⁵ Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p. 23

titles,⁸⁶ in addition, Anglo-American published comics featuring U.S.-based Fawcett Publishing's heroes and scripts, redrawn with original Canadian art.⁸⁷ But by 1946, with the end of WWII and the return of American comics, the majority of Canadian publishing houses folded; the few that remained cancelled most of their original titles, and existed only as reprint houses. May 1947 saw the last story featuring a Canadian superhero.⁸⁸

The trade deficit with the States continued to increase, and in 1947 Mackenzie King reintroduced the bans enacted in 1941; however, the regulations now permitted Canadian publishers to purchase the rights to reprint American comics. Bell states that "American hegemony was a *fait accompli*" - it proved to be "much simpler to purchase U.S four-colour mats...than to establish the infrastructure needed for a distinct national industry".⁸⁹ By the end of 1948 a new firm, Superior Publishing, was the leading reprint house, and the only company still secure enough to produce its own original titles. The majority of the artwork, however, was created by Jerry Iger's comic studio in New York; as John Bell notes, even Canadian comics had become a branch plant industry. When the bans on US imports were finally lifted in 1951, American firms opted to ship directly to Canada. No longer afforded the protection of legislation requiring Canadian firms to handle distribution within Canada, publishers were again forced out of business.

⁸⁶ These five publishers were Maple Leaf Publishing (Vancouver. Best known for *Better Comics*, which consisted of entirely original material, and was published in a recognisably modern comic book format, though without a glossy cover); Anglo-American Publishing (Toronto. Perhaps unfairly best known for reprints of comic strips previously published in newspapers, both Canadian and American. Founder/Writer Ted McCall also created the first Canadian adventure strip, *Men of the Mounted*, which ran in the Toronto Telegram); Hillborough Studios; and Commercial Signs of Canada (these two merged in 1942, and became Bell Features. Best known for *Triumph Comics*).

⁸⁷ Fawcett Publications was one of the leading American publishers of the 1940's; in 1943 alone they sold nearly forty-seven million comic books (Bongco, p. 97).

⁸⁸ Bell, *Guardians*, p. 17

⁸⁹ Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p. 30

In this period, censorship became a problem for comic books – and for their half-cousins, the pulp fiction novels. In 1955, Frederic Wertham published a book entitled Seduction of the Innocent that purported to establish significant links between the rise of juvenile delinquency and the increasing popularity of crime comics among youth.⁹⁰ As a form of children's entertainment, artists, writers, and publishers were thought to be obliged to have morally upstanding content, in order to avoid contributing to delinquency and the subsequent destruction of the moral fabric of society. American parents concerned about the impact of comics on impressionable young minds began anti-comic lobby groups to try to curtail the 'crisis' – and the waves of this tempest crashed north, to Canada.⁹¹ This gave rise to a number of prosecutions of artists, publishers, and shop owners for obscenity.

It was mainly crime comics that were coming under fire, both for their level of violence and their depictions of corrupt police officers – a move perceived as a direct attack on a traditional site of authority. Superhero comics were, to an extent, exempt from this demonisation by virtue of their patriotic determination to protect the nation's honour and their affirmation of the propriety of law and order. However, many of the publishers – also coming under fire for pulp fiction depictions of “reefer madness” and “forbidden lesbian love” – were often publishing all three. The comic book industry responded by drafting up the Comics Code as a means of self-regulating violent and ‘morally questionable’ content, the presence of their ‘Seal of Approval’ thus reassuring parents of

⁹⁰ Frederic Wertham, Seduction of the Innocent (London: Museum Press, 1955)

⁹¹ Some things never change - the next generations would have their violence blamed on television, rock'n'roll, and violent movies or video games.

the quality of their publications.⁹² Superior Comics, though flagrant in its abuse of the Code, managed to remain active until 1956. Then, in spite of a successful appeal of a crime-comics conviction in 1954, it was forced to close due to pressure from the lobby groups concerned about the impact of comics on impressionable young minds.⁹³

THE POPULARITY OF SUPERHEROES DURING WWII

A number of conditions contributed to the popularity of superheroes during WWII; the most obvious is the novelty and sheer audacity of such a premise. Not since the titanic clashes of Greek and Roman gods, the exploits of Beowulf, or the adventures of King Arthur had such epic beings waged battles on behalf of humanity. However, instead of belonging to a distant past, these new heroes were emphatically situated in the here-and-now. The characters' hairstyles, fashions, and slang, the presence of technology in a contemporary urban landscape, and the familiar Axis villains – their real-life counterparts introduced on newsreels and in radio reports – all act to locate these heroes in a recognisable and eternal “now.” This can be made clear by examining a typical example of comic book cover art.

⁹² For the text of the American Comic Code, see Roger Sabin, Appendix One: “Comics Code of the Magazine Association of America, Inc” p. 251-253 in *Adult Comics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). For an examination of the Canadian response to pulp fiction novels and comic books, see Mary Louise Adams, “Youth, Corruptibility, and the English-Canadian Post-war Campaigns against Indecency, 1948-55” (*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1995, pp. 89-117). For developments in England, see James B. Twitchell, “Disorderly Conduct Illustrated: The Rise and Fall and Rise of the Comics” in *Preposterous Violence: Fables of Aggression in Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Martin Baker *A Haunt of Fears: the Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

⁹³ Later critical examinations of Wertham’s book have revealed questionable research methodology, reasoning, and purposeful misreading of the material. Even so, prosecutions continue to the present day; in response to this threat to free speech, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) was founded in the United States in 1986 [<http://www.cbldf.org/>] and the Comic Legends Legal Defense Fund CLLDF) was founded in Canada in 1987 [<http://users.uniserve.com/~lswong/CLLDF.html>].

The cover for issue 9 of *Triumph Comics* (May 1942) (fig. 1) features a serene Nelvana of the Northern Lights simultaneously drop-kicking a small-moustached figure (sending his radio flying), and unmasking an impostor-Nelvana who has been acting to infiltrate, confuse, and sabotage Allied troops. The composition is active, dynamic, full of speed lines; the villains have their hands thrown up in exaggerated poses of surprise and distress, while the heroine maintains a mask of cool and authoritative composure. This story, called "The Dictator Strikes," opens with a view inside the "secret hide-out of the cruel dictator" nestled "high in the Bavarian Alps," and features vicious caricatures of inept German troops with heavily parodied accents (Fig. 2). Nelvana evades their traps by tapping into the immense, supernatural powers of her father "Koliak" - the Inuit god of the Northern Lights. Given the semi-divine nature of the heroine, the unquestionably patriotic nature of her mission, and the obvious evil of her opponent, this is clearly what Thomas Inge would refer to as "a world in which both might and right are on the side of morality."⁹⁴ After achieving a temporary victory over enemy forces, the story closes with Nelvana musing that "If every boy and girl...makes a gigantic effort to buy War Savings Stamps, the Tyranny now on this Earth will vanish into its own nothingness" (Fig. 3).⁹⁵ Though the inside cover assures us that this story is "purely fictional" and that all similarities to real events or people is utterly coincidental, and *even though* one never

⁹⁴ Inge, p. xiv

⁹⁵ Page 13, Issue 9 of *Triumph Comics* May, 1942. This overt marketing of War Stamps raises a number of issues that are beyond the scope of this paper, but are important to mention at least in passing. While Bell mentions this product placement with a nudge and a wink that largely implies that we have come a long way in terms of sophistication, he glosses over the ideological implications of its inclusion. It is clear that, at least in this case, comics were intended to transmit shared values, but I think that to insist these comics are 'merely' propaganda aimed at children misses the point, particularly when one looks at the complex interconnections of 'education' and 'propaganda' playing out in the contemporaneous productions of the National Film Board. At the very least, it indicates that comic books have operated as a tool for marketing and promotions for some time, and perhaps reveals a different set of attitudes about "marketing targeting children."

sees the entire face of the “cruel dictator,” his identity would have been obvious to anyone living in the 1940s – as it still is today.

Joining Nelvana between the pages of *Triumph Comics* are adventures featuring Tang the fearless Pony-Express rider, who braves ‘roving packs of fierce Comanches,’ and Ace Barton - RAF Pilot extraordinaire, who dog-fights his way into an Allied victory over German troops. Interspersed with these stories are portraits of “real life” Canadian heroes, such as Lt. Gen. A.G.L. McNaughton, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Forces in the European theatre (Fig. 4). Just like Nelvana and Ace, these men were intended to be seen as individuals who triumphed in the face of adversity to gain a heroic victory. This victory resonated in the hearts and imaginations of children across the nation who, while too young to participate themselves, had witnessed the departure of family members – to the front or to the factories – to “do their part” for the war effort. Family members who, in appallingly high numbers, never returned home from overseas. Bongco notes that the very existence of superheroes “expresses a desire for a fiercer and purer authority that would arise to punish evil.”⁹⁶ In this historical context, superheroes affirm that “law and order were always good and unproblematic,”⁹⁷ and that the loss of life is necessary to maintain peace and order. They can also be understood as a manifestation of society’s anxiety in the face of a war of incomprehensible proportions - anxieties that were largely unspoken and unacknowledged, especially to and by children.

However, while these comics are significant for the way they present Canada’s wartime identity, they are also significant for what they make absent – Jewish Canadians,

⁹⁶ Bongco, p. 103

⁹⁷ Bongco, p. 92-3

Japanese Canadians, and aboriginal First Nations.⁹⁸ One aspect of these texts that is not problematised by John Bell is the way in which they appropriate some portions of First Nations cultures while simultaneously marginalising those cultures as undesirable, or erasing them altogether in an attempt to ‘indigenise’ the colonial presence. In Alan Filewod’s article “National Theatre and Imagined Authenticities,” he draws on Benedict Anderson’s notions of ‘imagined communities’ to work towards a theory of colonial national identity. Filewod points out that, in spite of the Massey Commission’s assertion that we are a “young” nation, Canada is no younger than nations like Italy or Germany. The main difference for Canada is that we “could not legitimize the national state by a mythic invocation of racial unity.”⁹⁹ He notes,

The deep paradox of colonial nationalism is that while nations posit themselves as immemorial principles, colonial nations begin with historically identifiable events that are usually incompatible with transhistorical mythmaking. The exception to this may be the United States, in which the myth of personal liberty has in effect provided a metaphysical prehistory to the revolution. More typical is the Canadian example, in which nationhood was a legislative act.¹⁰⁰

In order to construct a national myth, then, the aboriginality of the First Nations people has to be co-opted, and masked by conventions of representation that privilege the colonising presence.

We all know the stories: innocent and peaceful settlers who, in their move ‘out west,’ get savagely attacked by fierce bands of roving warriors for no apparent reason;

⁹⁸ While Canada certainly contains many more ethnic groups, I feel that these three are the most significant to examine in the context of World War II, given our immigration policies for Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, our internment camps for Japanese Canadian citizens, and our exploitation of First Nations as ‘expendable’ military troops less likely to receive commendations than their fellow White soldiers. This is not to say that injustice and inequity were limited to these groups, but that they are the most logical examples to examine.

⁹⁹ Filewod, p. 2

¹⁰⁰ Alan Filewod, “National Theatre and Imagined Authenticities” in *Textual Studies in Canada* (Spring 2002, #15, pp. 1-10 p. 7

there are rarely any references to land seizures, forced relocation, residential schools, broken treaties, or the very real attacks on First Nations cultures and peoples. These stories rely on popular Western stereotypes of “Indians”— feathered head-dresses, tunics made from furs and skins, braided hair, and of course the ubiquitous tepee. In the absence of other kinds of narratives, these conventions and modes of representation operate to locate aboriginal cultures in the natural past, as opposed to the modern, and civilised or urban present. Further, they repress the diversity present in First Nations cultures and universalise aboriginal identity behind a single, homogenised mask, turning actual lived multiplicities into a kind of generic type which is compatible with white North American expectations and agendas – that is, at its most basic, the naturalisation of the extinction of “the Indian.”¹⁰¹ This constructed “inevitability” serves to allay or pacify any lingering colonial guilt.

As Marcia Crosby discusses in “Construction of the Imaginary Indian,” there are for the most part only two kinds of Indians in mainstream North American pop culture: the warrior, and the wise shaman, medicine man, or ‘guide’ – in other words, the ‘bad’ Indian and the ‘good’ Indian.¹⁰² The warrior poses an unreasonable threat to western culture, and this threat is negotiated through the narrative; sometimes this is achieved through a story of redemption in which the ‘primitive hostile’ is educated, domesticated, or otherwise recuperated by an assimilationist colonial agenda. Most often, however, this threat is defused by simply killing him off after proving he cannot be civilised, and therefore cannot co-exist with the white man. Since he cannot adapt, it is only ‘natural’ that his culture be replaced by the more robust and vital European culture. This is the

¹⁰¹ See also Robert J. Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North*.

¹⁰² Marcia Crosby “Construction of the Imaginary Indian.” In *The Vancouver Anthology*, ed. Stan Douglas (Vancouver: Ion Books, 1991).

type of character Tang the Pony Express Rider faces when he is attacked by the “bloodthirsty Comanche,” who communicate quite clearly, in their broken pidgin, that they want nothing more than to scalp him (Fig. 5).

By contrast, the medicine man or guide often appears ‘simple’ at first, though he possesses ‘natural wisdom’ that he shares with the (White) main character, often losing his life in the process. Commonly, he shows himself unable to transition to a ‘modern’ culture, and retreats back into the wilderness. This is the type encountered by Captain Canuck in the character Utak, who first saves Canuck from a polar bear attack (though admittedly with a White Man’s rifle), and then leads him to the enemy’s hidden Arctic base. Shaman from *Alpha Flight* is a similar character, for though he dwells in a modern city, he still possesses the wisdom of his ancient ancestors; his super powers (later passed to his daughter in *Omega Flight*) depend on an inherited medicine bag that allows him to contact the inhabitants of the spirit realm. This last example, at least, acknowledges First Nations’ ideas of knowledge being perpetuated and learning being accomplished through family relationships. This is more respect than is accorded to the character of Nelvana herself.

Bell relates that Nelvana’s creator Adrian Dingle credited Group of Seven member Franz Johnston with giving him the inspiration for the character of Nelvana. As the story goes, Johnston came back from a trip to the Arctic (c. 1939) with stories of a “powerful Inuit mythological figure - an old woman called Nelvana” who was the child of the Northern Lights.¹⁰³ Dingle says, “I changed her a bit. Did what I could with long

¹⁰³ The relationship between Dingle (essentially a commercial artist), the Group of Seven, and the official notions of landscape and national identity current in this period – not to mention contemporary accounts of Canadian art history – is potentially a rich area of future inquiry.

hair and mini skirts. And tried to make her attractive.”¹⁰⁴ While in the 1940s comic book industry, this is considered an apparently harmless bit of creative license, it amounts to a kind of cultural appropriation that renders First Nations invisible in the graphic narrative. The simple act of transforming an Inuit crone goddess into a young, nubile, white heroine simultaneously discredits the value First Nations accord to their elders, affirms the North American cult of able-bodied youth and beauty, and reinforces the association of age with incapacity and ugliness. Further, it aligns colonial forces with the land, creating a mythic invocation of an aboriginal (literally, “from the beginning”) geographical unity in lieu of a shared racial identity. This symbolic colonisation of aboriginal stories functions to erase First Nations’ ownership of the land, which has very real, legal implications, as well as influencing Canadian myths of nationalism. As Benjamin Woo observes in Red and White Tights: Representations of National Identity in Canadian Comic Books, “Canadians have traditionally imagined theirs as a northern nation. That is, a nation that has nordicity as an essential, defining quality. The wilderness, winter, and the north are taken to be key elements in any formulation of a unique Canadian national identity.”¹⁰⁵ He goes on to note that, “[R]epresenting the north is not a neutral or apolitical act. The north presents us with a bundle of highly ideological signs that are more than just picturesque scenery.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Bell, *Guardians*, p. 5. Interestingly, I have not been able to uncover any more information about the figures of Koliak and Nelvana in Inuit culture. “Koliak” may be a bastardisation of “kodiak” from “kadiak,” the Inuit word for island, but I cannot find a correlative example for Nelvana. Increasingly, I wonder if the character has been fabricated – if this is so, the implication is that Inuit culture is insufficient, and needs intervention from colonial forces which then attribute their creations to Aboriginal sources to provide legitimation.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin Woo, Red and White Tights: Representations of National Identity in Canadian Comic Books, unpublished thesis, 2006. Available online at <http://ir.lib.sfu.ca/retrieve/4251/etd2680.pdf> (accessed December 14, 2007)., p. 73

¹⁰⁶ Woo, p. 77

This equation of Canadian national identity with “The North” while simultaneously erasing the actual inhabitants of the northern climes is ubiquitous in Canadian popular culture more broadly, not just in superhero comics. Woo observes,

In need of symbols to represent and bind together the Canadian community in the figure of a national superhero, artists come upon a cluster of signs, such as those representing the north. The north is exoticised as Other in order to serve as a symbolic opposite of the Canadian nation-state, but these images become so thoroughly incorporated into our identity that they also serve to exoticise the Self and make a bland Canadian identity feel vibrant and special...we might call this cultural logic ‘Borealism.’¹⁰⁷

Even our national anthem invokes “The True North” – as if a pure essence, emanating from “our Native land” itself, transforms us into a nation; indeed, at one time land ownership was a requirement for participating in the privilege of voting. The legal and symbolic role of land in determining citizenship cannot be underestimated.¹⁰⁸ This of course begs the question, “Strong and Free” for whom?¹⁰⁹ As Woo notes,

[I]ronically and tragically, as Canadians continue to celebrate the North as an integral part of our national identity, we just as often ignore the actual north and the people who live there, here serious economic and environmental problems threaten the livelihoods, life-worlds, and, perhaps, the very lives of the people whose culture the rest of the nation has so often plundered for these vitally important symbols.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Woo, p. 80

¹⁰⁸ Notions of Northern purity are by no means unique to Canada; see also Simon Schama’s book *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 1995).

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the lyrics were meant to be “Our home, *and* Native land” referring to two distinct ideas, much like the phrase “truth, justice, *and* the American Way” refers to three.

¹¹⁰ Woo, p. 88

These social, economic, and environmental issues are only compounded by challenges to Canadian arctic sovereignty in recent years by Russia, Denmark, and the United States.¹¹¹

THE “SILVER AGE”: 1967-1985

In order to follow the trail of the Canadian national superhero, my chronology has to skip ahead a few decades; the comics produced in Canada from 1957-1966 were predominantly “give away” retail promotional comics, and educational tracts. The next ten years saw an increase in publishing now referred to as Canada’s “Silver Age” of comics; yet despite the marked increase in titles, there were few recognisably national superheroes.¹¹² The period of 1967-74 saw many independently published underground ‘comix’ which, Bell notes, “explored the major preoccupations of the counterculture, namely, drugs, sex, rock, and radical politics...they openly defied not only the strictures of the comics code, but also most other standards of straight society.”¹¹³ These comix also tended to explore and negotiate the political and social concerns of the counter-culture – often with a biting satirical edge.

In the written mainstream and academic histories of comics, however, they are often de-politicised, and are written off as being vulgar, self-indulgent, or simply ineffectual at ‘actually accomplishing something.’ When comix are allowed to retain their political significance, they are generally watered down, or portrayed unsympathetically,

¹¹¹ See Matthew Carnaghan and Allison Goody’s “Canadian Arctic Sovereignty” (Library of Parliament, Political and Social Affairs Division: January 2006). Available online at: <http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/PRBpubs/prb0561-e.htm>

¹¹² see Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p. 39-44; *Guardians* p. 20-26

¹¹³ Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p. 37. Here, I do not think that Bell is attempting to equate the entire *avant guard* with homosexuality, but rather uses the term “straight” to refer to the dominant, non-counterculture, moral standards of the time. That said, some of these comix almost certainly provided a voice to many marginalised social groups, including ethnic, sexual, and political “minorities”.

revealing the ideological stamp of the ‘moral majority’ – which I would argue is neither moral, nor the majority. For example Roger Sabin, in his book Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels, starts his history of the underground by stating that the alternative comix of the late 1960s were “as politically radical as they were artistically innovative.” He goes on to say that, as a product of the hippie movement, comix were “engaged, to a greater or lesser degree, with protest against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights struggle, Anarchism, Socialism, Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation.” Later, however, he reduces ‘Hippie culture’ to the sexual antics of Fritz the Cat, and the “grotesque, racist, and misogynistic” creations of Robert Crumb.¹¹⁴ He notes, “[w]here the [Comics] Code had stipulated ‘no violence’, ‘no sex’, ‘no drugs’, and ‘no social relevance,’ the underground comix would indulge themselves to the maximum in every category.”¹¹⁵ Oddly enough, radicalism and anarchism are never mentioned in his account again. There is no acknowledgement that the “indulgence” he describes is part of a radical shift both in how artists approached comics, and in society more broadly.

Sabin’s book is ostensibly a survey history of adult comics, but a number of biases are evident in his work. He falls prey to a connoisseurship-based criticism that fails to adequately examine the social, political, and economic context of the works in question. An obvious privilege is given to the so-called ‘alternative’ works published by Marvel, DC/Vertigo Comics, and Image Comics.¹¹⁶ Adult comics from Canada and the

¹¹⁴ Worthy of note also are the complete absence of Canadian artists. Rand Holmes is internationally acknowledged as one of the main players in the Underground Comix movement, and yet he tends to be absent from most (American) historical accounts of the period.

¹¹⁵ all quotes in paragraph from Sabin, Comics, Comix, p. 92.

¹¹⁶ In this case, “alternative” applies more to the aesthetics and the genres of the comics, rather than their politics. In comics as in art history, the avant-garde is often co-opted and assimilated into the mainstream. One works that would be considered to fall under this heading would be Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, a comic book about Batman which allows a depth of psychology that borders on chilling psychosis for a character often exploited for his Camp. In general, the mainstream alternative can be broadly

rest of Europe are completely absent. Finally, he credits Americans with all of the innovations in the industry, and reduces the relationship between British or Canadian and American artists to one of ‘Monkey See, Monkey Do,’ with Britain and Canada always lagging behind. This is a dramatic oversimplification of, and insult to, the international network of avant-garde artists, musicians, squatters, and activists organising and agitating for social change across the globe.

Bringing this back into a Canadian context, we can examine the *Fuddle Duddle* comix of 1971-72 – an independently produced publication in the same tradition as *MAD Magazine*. This zine was home to the first Canadian superhero since the end of WWII, Stanley Bernache’s *Captain Canada*. In chapter five of John Bell’s 1992 catalogue, entitled, “You’ve Got to be Kidding!: Two Decades of Satirical Visions,” Bell discusses Bernache’s character “Captain Canuck” and his sidekick “Beaver Boy;” he recounts that Captain Canada first appeared as a bumbling buffoon who turned superheroic conventions upside-down – accidentally aiding the anarchists he was trying to defeat (Fig. 6 & 7), and then as what Bell characterises as a “right wing Neanderthal.”¹¹⁷ What he neglects to mention is that this Captain is not just satire, but a scathing and deliberately political critique of an uncompromising right-wing threatened by the radical anarchist politics of the artistic, literary, and intellectual avant-guard of the 1970s (Fig. 8 & 9).

In Bernache’s first story, “The Cap” and “Beav” defeat the villain Media Master, who is trying to take over the world through television broadcasting; the critique here has

described as having an aesthetic style in the ‘gothic’ or ‘film-noir’ tradition of movies like *Blade Runner*, with story lines that either reject the traditional superhero altogether, or reinvents that construction for a more post-modern sensibility.

¹¹⁷ Bell, *Guardians*, p. 39

two parts. First, it undoubtedly refers to a sort of American cultural colonialism aided by the ubiquity and dominance of American programming in Canada. Second, it perhaps critiques the CBC, whose mandate (as is that of the CRTC) is ostensibly to allow a platform for Canadian voices, instead of an effort towards the pan-Canadian resistance of Americanization, programming choices tend to affirm the primary dominance of English-speaking Canada, and the secondary dominance of the Québécoise. In a multicultural country like Canada, rather than giving voice to our multiplicities, this tends to homogenise Canadian identity into the duality of French and English. That this Captain Canuck is a buffoon perhaps speaks to Canadian politicians' unwillingness or inability to assert Canada's autonomy within North America.

Bernache's subversive intent becomes even clearer in Cap's second adventure when Cap, now an overtly authoritarian and oppressive figure, becomes intent on destroying the Ottawa counterculture. A group of anarchists nearly trick him into blowing up the House of Commons, and he responds by viciously beating the on-looking crowd of anarchists and hippies having a peaceful protest on the Parliament lawns. The story closes with Prime Minister Trudeau rescuing Cap from arrest (by equally authoritarian cops) and praising him as "an involved Canadian." Bell discusses this work purely in terms of how it was "aimed at an adult (if sometimes immature) audience,"¹¹⁸ and Bernache's virtuosity as an artist. Any discussion of whether Bernache was an anarchist, or how he positioned himself in relation to the counterculture movement, *or* how his politics may have influenced his choice of subject matter, was beyond the scope of the exhibition mounted by Canada's official national cultural institution. However, these issues are very

¹¹⁸ *Invaders*, p. 107

important given that the comic was published just two years after Trudeau's invocation of the War Measures Protection act to deal with the October Crisis.

I see these stories as, in part, a reaction to the post-Expo '67 'new nationalism,' sparked first by encroaching economic and cultural Americanization, then by the appearance of books like George Grant's *Lament for a Nation*, and later by Margaret Atwood's book *Survival*.¹¹⁹ Berneche subverts the mass popularisation of Canadiana by using the figure of a national superhero to poke holes in the myth of the "Peaceable Kingdom" – the (English) Canada that sought sovereignty from Britain through legislation, not civil war, while maintaining a kind of colonial hold over aboriginals, French Canadians, and other minorities.¹²⁰ But superheroes had more than one role to play in this era, and an examination of the nationalism these other heroes embody reveals that the dominant culture in Canada was highly invested in its national myths.

In 1972, the National Gallery mounted the first touring exhibition of Canadian comic art, called "Comic Art Traditions in Canada, 1941-5."¹²¹ This was perhaps inspired in part by Michael Hirsch and Patrick Loubert's 1971 book *The Great Canadian Comic Books*, which reprinted many pages and covers from Bell Publishing's wartime comics.¹²² 1975 saw the appearance of *The Northern Light* in James Waley's *ORB*

¹¹⁹ George Grant, *Lament for a Nation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965); Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972).

¹²⁰ See Ryan Edwardson, *Kicking Uncle Sam out of the Peaceable Kingdom: English Canadian "new nationalism" and Americanisation* in *The Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 37, #4 (2003) p. 131-151.

¹²¹ There seems to be some dispute around this point. John Bell records this exhibition as being put on by the National Gallery (see: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/comics/027002-8500-e.html>; accessed February 5, 2009). Other sources, however, attribute this exhibition jointly to the National Archives and the now defunct Canadian Canadian Museum of Caricature (Personal correspondence with Mark Shainblum, December 19, 2007).

¹²² Michael Hirsch and Patrick Loubert, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (Toronto: P. Martin Associates, 1971).

magazine (Fig. 10),¹²³ and the release of Richard Comely's self-published *Captain Canuck* (Fig. 11). This last hero used only necessary force to subdue his enemies; he preferred to outwit his opponents, and avoided violence whenever possible. Fan letters published in the second issue of *Captain Canuck* show the enthusiasm with which a "modern superhero immediately identifiable as Canadian" was received; praise is lavished on the "innovative design,"¹²⁴ the plausibility of the premise, and the inclusion of recognisable Canadian locations. The popularity of this hero ties into the same nationalism Berneche had lampooned; these divergent reactions from artists and fans point to the contested nature of Canadian national identity. Ryan Edwardson suggests that *Captain Canuck*, in a future where Canada has become a major superpower based on the wealth of our natural resources, responds to the need for a Canadian "sense of place in an increasingly tense Cold War world."¹²⁵ I say it should prompt us to ask, again, "Whose Canada are we talking about, here?"

Because the reaction was not all positive; letters are included from readers who criticise Comely's lack of female characters, his superficial and sometimes demeaning treatment of northern aboriginals, and errors in continuity. Comely's main weakness was identified by a fourteen-year old, who wrote in to criticise the writer/author for heavy-handedness in using a radical communist – who looked remarkably like Lenin – as the arch-villain the Captain must defeat. Clearly, in the three decades since *Nelvana*, readers had come to expect a more sophisticated treatment of issues surrounding ethnicity, gender, and politics; the perceived tone of American McCarthyism was not appreciated

¹²³ I have been unable to access any issues of *ORB*; the National Library reports its collection as incomplete and non-circulating. It has been suggested to me that I "make some friends in the recycling industry" if I want to find copies.

¹²⁴ In the first issues, partly to combat his own inexperience as an artist, Comely utilised photographs for the backgrounds of some of his panels.

¹²⁵ Edwardson, p. 145

by fans. After just fourteen issues, the publication folded for financial reasons. Well into the 1970s, distribution was still a paramount issue; creators relied on fan-press ads and speciality dealers for sales, rather than news stands, and did not (with the exception of *ORB*) have the benefit of national distribution. A complete restructuring of the industry in the early 1980s ultimately allowed for direct sale to comic shops from a distribution network that was independent of the U.S. controlled news stands.¹²⁶

Canadian superheroes had a wider North American appeal: American-owned Marvel Comics had its own title featuring Canuck heroes. *Alpha Flight* (Fig. 12) – Canada’s ‘first line’ of defence – is widely regarded by collectors as the most successful national superhero title, though John Bell describes it as “an American comic with token Canadian heroes.”¹²⁷ While the creator, John Byrne, was a Canadian, he was working for Marvel when he developed this team of characters. They made their first appearance in a story arc called “Chaos in Canada” (*X-Men* #120; April 1979), where it is revealed that Wolverine (previously assumed to be American) is really a Canadian secret agent gone AWOL; they have to track him down to convince him to return to his job with the Canadian government.¹²⁸ There were several subsequent meetings, some of which saw the U.S. and the Canadian teams banding together to accomplish their missions.

Wolverine was a very popular character, and there was enough interest in the “Canadian

¹²⁶ Paul Audley, in his book *Canada’s Cultural Industries: Broadcasting, Publishing, Records and Film* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co. in association with the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy, 1983), notes that in this period, the largest 8 or 9 U.S. magazine distributors accounted for 90% of news stand sales, and that these firms are all owned by U.S. publishing companies (p. 73). He also notes that publishers tend to use the same distributors for both the American and Canadian markets, in effect, treating all of North America as a single domestic market (p.72). Though these statistics do not directly relate to the comic book industry, they offer a potentially useful context when determining why American publishers are hesitant to pick up Canadian titles for distribution. It does not make good “dollars and sense” to distribute a title that will be potential competition for a title you already own.

¹²⁷ Aside from the leader, Guardian/Weapon Alpha (who subsequently became known as Vindicator) Alpha Flight had seven members: Aurora, Northstar, Sasquatch, Puck, Marrina, Shaman, and Snowbird.

¹²⁸ “Alpha Flight” in *Toonopedia*, available online at: <http://www.toonopedia.com/alphafit.htm> (accessed December 12, 2007)

Connection” that the team spun off into its own series in August, 1983. It ran for 150 issues (with a three-year hiatus between issues 130 and 131), becoming the longest-running comic featuring Canadian heroes. The team still makes appearances in the “Marvel Universe” today, performing missions despite having been “disbanded by the Canadian government for financial reasons” – apparently health and social services are not the only victims of federal tax cuts.¹²⁹ Most recently, surviving members of the team appeared in a new mini-series called *Omega Flight* (April 4, 2007) (Fig 13), but original plans to incorporate the team back into the larger continuity have been cancelled.¹³⁰

Bell’s dismissal of *Alpha Flight*, despite its success, prompts me to ask the question: what *is* a Canadian Superhero? The characters were Canadian, the creator was Canadian, and some adventures even took place in Canadian locations – all events nearly unheard of in an American title. Further, instead of selecting one figure to be symbolic of Canada’s national identity, Byrne uses a team that reflects the cultural and regional differences of the nation; Sasquatch comes from British Columbia, Shaman comes from Calgary, Puck hails from Saskatoon, Marrina from Newfoundland, Snowbird from Yellowknife, and Aurora and Northstar also have ties to the north. The leader Guardian, tellingly, comes from Ottawa. They are also the first team to embrace an openly gay member, and Northstar is the one of the first gay characters in the Marvel Universe. Why does Bell refer to this title as an American comic with “token” Canadian heroes?

¹²⁹ <http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/guardian.htm> (accessed December 12, 2006; since revised)

¹³⁰ In an interview, *Omega Flight* editor Andy Schmidt indicated that Marvel felt there were too many spin-off books coming out of the Civil War story arc in the Marvel Universe. He stated, “While we’ve got plenty of ideas and we’re confident that OMEGA FLIGHT will be well received, we’re also aware that a lot of people have been spending a lot of money on our books lately. We’re trying not to ask too much of our readers and their wallets” (online at http://www.alphaflight.net/interviews/schmidt_interview1.php, accessed November 8, 2009). Despite huge fan support (issues #1 and 2 sold out and went to a second printing) the title was cancelled at the end of the miniseries. This prompted a massive “Fight for the Flight” campaign that saw fans writing letters, making phone calls, and putting up posters in local comic shops, in a vain effort to save the title from cancellation. (<http://save.alphaflight.net/>)

I wonder if the answer does not have to do with the nature of ‘Canadian-ness’, but rather with the context of Bell’s writing. The exhibition featured works and documents from the collections of the National Library and Archive, which would not have included issues of a comic book printed in the United States. Further, when creating a catalogue for an exhibition, it is essential to provide a framework for the works on display. Notoriously tight-fisted Marvel owns the rights to all characters, plots, and artwork created by its artists; my unverified speculation is that the company had no interest in participating in a Canadian exhibition that would not net them significant profits. It is possible that the exhibitors were denied authorisation to use copyrighted work (either outright, or through prohibitive pricing of rights), and an explanation had to be found to justify the absence of a well-known title still in publication at the time of the exhibition. The gallery system, then, not only shapes popular conceptions of “Fine Art,” it also shapes popular conceptions of popular culture.¹³¹ Though these comics, initially printed on cheap paper and sold to children for a dime in the 1940s, were viciously attacked as the most reprehensible form of pulp fiction in the 1950s, they are appropriated and elevated to the status of official icons of Canadian national identity in the 1990s.¹³²

Shortly after the first issue of *Alpha Flight*, the artistic team of Mark Shainblum and Gabriel Morissette created *Northguard* (1984) (fig. 14 & 15), a comic featuring a male anglophone/female francophone team whose adventures took place in a recognisably Canadian urban landscape, and used Canadian public figures. The artists

¹³¹ A move furthered by Canada Post’s 1995 release of a series of stamps commemorating these “great moments” of Canadian comic industry.

¹³² This, however, is done without a direct acknowledgement (in the exhibition, or in the catalogue) of the racist and sexist content of these comics; if mentioned at all, it is with a shrug and a “product of their times” pronouncement. A true exploration of the meaning, impact, and relevance of these comics cannot be written without “owning” this aspect of the documents, and the popular and official attitudes, actions and politics they reflect.

took photographs of their home city Montreal, and major cities like Toronto and Ottawa, which they used as the basis for the backgrounds of their panels. Originally planned as an on-going series, it became a mini-series spanning a total of eight issues. The final instalment ends with the hero rejecting a job offer as a special agent for CSIS, after being suspicious of its agenda and deciding that the personal cost of being a superhero is too high. Collectors hailed this departure from the superheroic convention as a particularly Canadian rejection of the norms and traditions established by the American artists and writers that dominated the industry.¹³³ Though I will analyse these characters in greater detail in a later chapter, here it is important to observe that, while U.S. superheroes “bought into” and “underwrote” the culture of fear, aggression, and consumption popularised by the American mass media, this post-modern Canadian hero adopted a stance of passive resistance by refusing to participate in governmental machinations.

WHAT ABOUT NOW? SUPERHEROES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Outside of the occasional editorial cartoon lampooning a politician, *Northguard* was the last Canadian national superhero until 2003. Once again Mark Shainblum, this time teamed with artist Sandy Carruthers, co-created the first Canadian superhero webcomic: *Canadiana*.¹³⁴ Notable not just for being one of the few female national heroes, she is also fairly unique in her adoption of a costume dictated by the practical considerations of fighting crime, rather than one pandering to the sexual fantasies of fanboys.

¹³³ Private correspondence with Don McCaskill, February 2004.

¹³⁴ Available online at: <http://www.sandycarruthers.com/canadiana1.html> (last update February 26, 2007; accessed December 12, 2007)

The first page of *Canadiana* opens at Vimy Ridge, a touchstone of Canadian military success and sacrifice; our first introduction to the heroine as the “New Spirit of Canada” is narrated by one of the allegorical statues associated with that monument [Figs. 16a, 16b]. A World War I memorial might seem a strange place to meet the national superhero of a country that prides itself on its record of peacekeeping and its preference for diplomacy over war, but as a viewer, this choice reminds me of a number of things. It reminds me that it was during WWI that Canada began to develop a distinct national identity, in spite of our colonial ties to England. It also calls to mind that other icon of Canadian identity associated with the Great War, the poem “In Flanders Fields” authored by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae – memorialised on our \$10 bill, along with our peacekeepers, since 2001.¹³⁵ Using a war memorial instead of some kind of active military complex, highlights the great sacrifices made in the past, and the desire that “Never Again” would so many die in armed combat. It suggests that force is only something to be used with just cause.

I am also reminded that both the First and Second World Wars were formative moments for the way other countries perceive Canada, and the growth of our international reputation; to this day throughout the north of France, cities liberated from the Nazis by the Canadian Forces have streets named “Rue de la Canadienne” in their honour. Finally, it reminds me that the Canadian national superhero was itself born during the WWII. Still, this reference to Canadian military history makes me uneasy,

¹³⁵ See http://www.bankofcanada.ca/en/banknotes/general/character/2001-04_10b.html (accessed December 14, 2007). Of course, the notion of “Canadian soldier as peacekeeper” is a highly problematic one, especially since our shift to a combat mission in Afghanistan. I would argue that part of the public discomfort with the mission in Afghanistan is that having combat forces in a foreign nation runs counter to our national myth of the Peaceable Kingdom, as evidenced by the current Liberal Party position that deployment after 2009 is acceptable, but troops must be in a non-combat role. [CITATION] the issue is largely one of semantics, as soldiers on peacekeeping missions in Bosnia (largely supported by the Canadian public) occasionally saw combat after being ambushed while on patrol.

particularly since the comic debuted in late 2003. While Prime Minister Chrétien committed troops to the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, they were largely in supporting roles providing humanitarian aid, rather than directly involved in combat roles. By February of 2003, Canadian Forces represented a sizable portion of the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force;¹³⁶ by July, we had taken command of UN peacekeeping in the area.¹³⁷ In retrospect, *Canadiana*'s references to 'the last good war' reads as a kind of wishful thinking, a desire to assert our identities as peacekeepers in spite of a rapidly expanding mandate in Afghanistan that resulted in an unpopular and hotly contested combat mission.

Canadiana touches on some other less volatile, though no less contested issues around national identity. Later in the story, after falling through a trans-dimensional portal, she meets up with Group of Seven associate Tom Thomson, who functions as her guide on a kind of spiritual quest [Fig. 17]. Thomson ends up at first at the business end of *Canadiana*'s right hook [Fig. 18], and later, locked in a passionate kiss [Fig. 19 A & B]. This self-reflexive engagement with Canada's art history perhaps indicates our national love/hate relationship with a group that has become synonymous with Canadian art. Credited with both the inspiration for *Nelvana*, and the establishment of landscape as a 'national genre' (much to the chagrin of abstract and expressionist painters), there is no way to avoid the Group of Seven; they come up over and over again in my research on Canadian comics.

¹³⁶ "Canada sending 1,000 soldiers to Afghanistan," CTV News, February 13, 2003. Available online at: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1045079373440_67 (accessed December 14, 2007).

¹³⁷ "Canada takes charge of Afghanistan peacekeeping," CTV news, July 17, 2003. Available online at: http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/1058438133705_3 (accessed December 14, 2007).

The relationships between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, the Group of Seven, and the official notions of landscape and national identity current in their period could fill a thesis on its own; suffice it to say that a national identity built on contested land is tenuous indeed, and necessarily raises the spectre of colonialism. But beyond this, a fan writing into an issue of *Northguard* observed,

I saw a film about the Group of Seven wherein one of the painters said that the old ways of painting had to be discarded if the Canadian landscape were to be properly captured on canvas [...] Looking at your first issue I can see the same holds true for the Canadian comic book scene, and if such a group existed in the comics field, [Mark] and Gabriel would be members.¹³⁸

Clearly, the role of the Group of Seven in our national mythology extends well past ‘high’ artistic production. Further, this fan states that “the old ways” of doing comics have to be thrown out if a Canadian comics scene is to thrive; states that the old conventions must be altered to make room for a Canadian national superhero.

¹³⁸ Letter from Walt Dickenson, *Northguard* Issue #2, page 10

RE-PRESENTING CANADA

In what ways are notions of ‘Canada’ and ‘Canadian’ constituted and constructed in the graphic narratives of national superhero comic books? Aside from differences resulting from the economic structure of the comic industry, Canadian comics insist on their difference in other ways; they look to realism in style and narrative, alternative publishing, and the inclusion of visual, linguistic, and ideological performances of difference to assert their national and artistic individuality. This idea of Canadian identity as difference, and how Canadian difference should look, was one that was widely discussed by both artists and fans; this is clearly expressed in a fan letter published in *Northguard*:

We are all accustomed to the Marvel and DC universes and, of course, this is a major factor in their appeal. But, that’s where an alternative superhero has to step into the breach to be different. His creators have to avoid having a hero who lives outside the laws of nature as *we* know them. They have to pull together a story that comes close to reality – i.e., the socio-political way of life on our plane of existence.

Costumed people of the good and evil persuasions battling each other in cosmic power struggles is fine for the Marvel/DC boys, but **our alternative creator** must pull, pull and keep pulling his readership towards *his/our* universe.¹³⁹ [Italics original, bold emphasis mine]

The reference to “our alternative creator” clearly indicates the notion that Canadian comic artists were forging an identity outside of, perhaps even running counter to, the

¹³⁹ Letter from David Darrigo, *Northguard* Issue #3 p. 37

American mainstream. This emphasis on, and subsequent praise for, “realism” in the narrative is recurrent; appreciation for Shainblum and Morissette’s realism in the 1980s was preceded by praise for Richard Comely’s realistic premise in *Captain Canuck* the mid 1970s. This suggests that such realism, in opposition to the fantastic and convoluted plot lines of American comic books, and perhaps even to the foundational premises of the superhero genre itself, was seen as central to the ‘Canadian-ness’ of superheroes and Canadian comic book production.¹⁴⁰ Here, I feel it is important to point out that realism refers not just to the visual style, but also to the (relative) ‘believability’ of the narrative, or at least its congruence with shared fantasies of ‘true’ national identity.

‘Realism,’ like other social constructs, is historically and culturally specific. As Dan Brown notes, *Captain Canuck* was

[V]ery much of its time. The series was set in the futuristic world of the 1990s, a time when Canada had fulfilled its destiny by becoming the most important nation on the planet. In the late 1970s, such a future seemed plausible to this reader. It would be impossible to publish a comic with the same premise today – the idea of Canada turning into a superpower is so preposterous, it would get laughed out of stores.¹⁴¹

This, of course, completely elides any discussion of problematic notions associated with the very idea of a “superpower country,” and whether being a superpower is something Canada should aspire to in the first place.

Canadian identity is, then, not a static and unchanging concept; notions of national identity shape, and are shaped by, other political, social, and economic factors. Having endured the threats to Canadian sovereignty posed by the Cuban Missile Crisis,

¹⁴⁰ It seems that just as Canada is best known for documentary film, we are also known for our realism in comic books, and a tendency towards historical events and persons (particularly autobiography) as subjects.

¹⁴¹ Dan Brown, “The Greatest Canadian Cliffhanger Ever”, CBC News Viewpoint. Oct. 6, 2004. Available online at: http://www.cbc.ca/news/viewpoint/vp_browndan/20041006.html (accessed February 7, 2009).

and the threats posed to Canadian unity by the FLQ crisis, Captain Canuck perhaps responds to the new nationalism fueled by Expo '67, and a decade of building national artistic and social institutions. The vast majority of the cultural institutions that we now take for granted as equating to 'Canadian' were founded as recently as 1971; here, 'cultural institutions' refers to both brick-and-mortar buildings like national museums, and arts and science centres, but also abstract concepts like Multiculturalism and Medicare, and legislation like the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Canadian comic book artists, after establishing a 'realistic' style and storyline as a context, mainly construct 'Canada' and 'Canadian' in the graphic narrative in three ways: by the use of formal/visual cues, through linguistic cues in the dialogue and expository text, and finally at the level of ideology – that is, through the expression of specific social values identified as 'Canadian', which are (problematically) presumed to be universally shared by the (presumably white, male and Anglophone) reader-subjects. To explore these ideas in greater detail, it is worth making reference to specific examples from *Northguard*, *Captain Canuck*, and *Canadiana*.

Several formal visual cues identify these heroes as Canadian. It seems to be *de rigueur* for all national superheroes to be clad in the colours or flag of their countries, or to have those symbols on their costumes. Richard Comely's original *Captain Canuck* has a red and white outfit, patterned after the Canadian flag, with a maple leaf on his forehead and at his belt buckle. The cover of the first issue shows him with his feet apart, his hands planted firmly on hips, standing squarely in front of the rising sun and an unfurled flag [fig. 11]. Sandy Caruthers's *Canadiana* wears a long sleeved, white zippered jacket with a

red maple leaf, loose black pants, and a white mask [fig. 18].¹⁴² Shainblum and Morissette's Northguard is also dressed in the colours of the flag, with maple leaf details on his forehead, the top edge of his boots, and blazoned on his chest [Fig. 15]. His counterpart Fleur de Lys [Fig. 16] dresses herself in the blue and white of the Quebecois flag. These symbols and colours visually and symbolically unite the character with the nation he or she has chosen to defend.

For Captain Canuck in particular, the use of the national flag is significant. The now-familiar single red maple leaf on a white and red ground was relatively young at the time of Cap's creation. Commissioned amid controversy in 1965 by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson for the nation's centennial in 1967, this new flag represented the first time Canada had its own national symbol. While the Maple leaf had been used to identify Canadian Forces in WW I, prior to that, soldiers marched under the British ensign or the St. George's cross. The flag, then, is symbolic both of Canada as a nation, and of its independence from British rule. Similarly, Fleur de Lys's use of the flag of Québec articulates a French identity distinct from Canada's largely Anglophone society.

There are other visual cues to national identity, which revolve around prominent and recognisable landmarks, institutions, and public figures. Earlier, I mentioned Canadiana's association with Vimy Ridge and Tom Thomson. In the first series of Captain Canuck, the hero flies over "the magnificent Rockies" [Fig. 23], and also makes a *rendez-vous* in Ottawa (identified by the Parliament clock tower) with his employers at

¹⁴² In keeping with the alternative agenda, this is a deliberate rejection of the dominant costume conventions for female comic book characters; typically, women's scanty and form-fitting costumes are stretched over impossible curves.

CISO.¹⁴³ Northguard and Fleur de Lys, like their creators, are residents of Montreal; parts of their adventure take place near the Concordia University campus, and several of the panels were drawn from photos taken by the artists. Before becoming Northguard, Phillip Wise watches a broadcast of *The National* on television, hosted, of course, by Knowlton Nash [Fig. 24].¹⁴⁴ These conventional cultural symbols would be familiar to most Canadians, and operate to construct a sense of shared identity among readers.

“Canadian-ness” is also performed at the level of the narrative. Along with the visual cues, there are verbal references to Canadian locations, persons, and concerns, in both the dialogue and the expository text. Captain Canuck asks his Inuit guide Utak if he speaks English or French; it is telling that Inuktitut and Aleut are not options.¹⁴⁵ Issue #1 of *Captain Canuck: Unholy War* [fig. 25a] opens in Surrey, British Columbia with the hero, in his ‘day job’ as an RCMP officer, sitting in the cruiser with his partner, making jokes about Saskatchewan drivers [Fig. 25b].¹⁴⁶ Northguard’s first heroic act is to rescue René Lévesque (premier of Québec, and passionate proponent of French sovereignty) from an assassination attempt during a *Partie Québécois* rally at the Forum – an attempt falsely attributed to the fictional ‘Anglo Liberation Front’ [Fig. 26a, b, c], itself an allusion to the *Front de libération du Québec*. This insistence on the Canadian specificity of location is itself a subversion of the largely anonymous cities that are home to American heroes. With the exception of Spiderman, who is explicitly linked to New York, most other heroes hail from a universalised and non-specific ‘Metropolis, USA.’ Mainstream American cultural production as a whole has naturalised the modern urban

¹⁴³ CISO stands for the Canadian International Security Organisation, a take-off on the real-life CSIS: the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

¹⁴⁴ *Northguard*, Issue #1, first printing September 1984; second printing January, 1987.

¹⁴⁵ *Captain Canuck*, Issue #1, July 1975.

¹⁴⁶ *Captain Canuck: Unholy War*, Issue #1, October 2004

city as American; in order for difference to exist, it must be explicitly specified and insisted upon.

Canadian-ness is also constructed at the level of ideology; according to Althusser, ideology creates an imaginary unity or coherence of identity, it operates to make constructed relations appear natural, and it works to reconcile contradictions to the established order.¹⁴⁷ Thus there are specific traits which make the Canadian superhero different from his or her American counterpart. The Canadian national superhero comic negotiates culturally specific anxieties and concerns. These texts address and almost magically resolve these concerns, and function to both hide and reveal contradictions to national ideology in a self-reflexive fashion that sometimes questions these received truths, and sometimes operates to perpetuate them. *Northguard*, particularly, examines fears about the (cultural, if not literal) collapse of our border with the US, the threats that poses to our economic security, and also concerns about the stability of Canadian unity. The narrative operates to defuse resistance and opposition to the dominant anglophone ideology through a sort of surrogate domestication and assimilation of the female francophone character into a hetero-normative pair bond (and thus by extension makes suggestions about the nature of Francophone and Anglophone relations). This is accomplished by the trivialisation of internal, national issues, and the exoticisation and vilification of external forces threatening both the hero, and the nation. Here it will be useful to turn to a more specific and in-depth analysis of the series.

It must be remembered that *Northguard* was published prior to Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*; the anti-hero had not yet become an industry staple. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* had not yet hit the stands, meaning that no one had yet questioned superheroic

¹⁴⁷ Story, p. 94-96

infallibility and immortality. Superman was still alive and well,¹⁴⁸ Captain America had not been assassinated on the courthouse steps,¹⁴⁹ and Robin was still uttering improbable epithets as comedic counterpoints to Batman's self-absorbed seriousness ("Holy priceless collection of Etruscan snoods, Batman!").¹⁵⁰ The hallowed conventions were all still in place. Might was always on the side of right, and in the battle against pathological criminality, the good guys were still winning. Violence and death were non-problematic, particularly if perpetuated against the 'bad guys.' All that would change when Canadian alternative comic book creators Shainblum and Morissette decided to question not only the received conventions of the national superhero genre, but also the national mythology of their homeland.

¹⁴⁸ See, *Superman* #75, 1993

¹⁴⁹ See, *Captain America* vol. 5, #25, April 2007

¹⁵⁰ See, "A Death in the Family," *Batman* #426-429, 1988-89

NORTHGUARD: A POSTMODERN SUPERHERO

Northguard tells the story of Phillip Wise, a young comic book fan who gets pulled into a conflict between a research-and-development technologies company called P.A.C.T. (Progressive Allied Canadian Technologies) and a conservative, religious terrorist organisation called Manifest Destiny. Along the way he runs afoul of Russian and American Cold War spy networks that he – and, by extension, Canada – is totally unequipped to deal with. He also grapples with the complexities of notions of heroism, responsibility, French sovereignty, service to the nation, and his own Jewish identity and cultural past. As a hero he is flawed and fallible; his country is on the brink of falling apart, and he feels powerless to stop it. He falls in love with his French team-mate Manon (the Fleur de Lys), but in a subversion of readers' expectations and narrative norms, she rejects Phillip's awkward advances and stays with her boyfriend. This places *Northguard* in sharp contrast to all prior incarnations of Canadian national superheroes.

The first issue of *Northguard*, entitled "And Stand On Guard...", opens with a quote from Margaret Atwood's *Survival*: "Canadian history defeats attempts to construct traditional or society-changing heroes" (Fig. 27). Shainblum uses this quote from a text which is itself concerned with notions of Canadian identity, in conjunction with the last line of the national anthem, to establish the narrative as Canadian. Given the nature of Atwood's book, this quote resonates with both the Québécois struggle for cultural recognition, and the larger Canadian struggle for cultural distinction from both the US

and Britain.¹⁵¹ However, it also signals the creators' deliberate rejection of the (American) comic industry's super-heroic conventions. It insists on Canadian difference in the face of American cultural imperialism and hegemony; in fact, it insists on the irrelevance of traditional notions of '(super)hero' to Canadian history and society. And Phillip Wise, a socially awkward, twenty-something comic book fan, is anything but a traditional hero.

Before becoming Northguard, Phillip finds himself frustrated with Canada, a nation that he feels should be the one of the greatest in the world. When he arrives back at home to think over PACT's employment offer, he angrily rips the Canadian flag off his bedroom wall, and yells "MEAN SOMETHING!" at the crumpled silk in his fist, before tossing it aside in frustration. Comic book heroes – Captain Canuck, Alpha Flight, and Firestorm – are the inspiration which drives him to become a hero himself, collapsing the boundary between his fantasy and lived possibility [Fig. 28a&b].¹⁵² This is a postmodern, self-reflexive engagement with the history of comics, particularly Canadian comics, and also with the process of constructing the subject through identification with the character. Phillip identifies with Guardian (*Alpha Flight*) and Captain Canuck, and the reader – presumably also a comic fan – is intended to identify with Phillip.

Likewise, Phillip's eventual employer Ron Cape, head of the P.A.C.T Corporation, is anything but a stereotypical CEO. He makes it clear that he is not a "free market messiah" who makes "deadly toys for the US military"; instead, he tries to look

¹⁵¹ The irony of Margaret Atwood's "Survival" being, of course, that she is talking about the continued existence of Canadian culture in the face of American cultural imperialism, when the real survival story is that of First Nations cultures in the face of European imperialism.

¹⁵² Firestorm is a DC hero that first appeared in 1978. Martin Stein, a Nobel physicist, and Ronald Raymond, a high school student, were caught in a nuclear accident that allowed them to fuse into a single entity: Firestorm. Though not a Canadian superhero, this choice is a clear allusion to Phillip's relationship with his boss Ron Cape.

after the real needs of society.¹⁵³ In *Northguard*'s Canada, it seems that even corporations have social consciences of a sort. While Cape uses P.A.C.T.'s security teams to monitor the overseas activities of multinational corporations, covertly observing and exposing illegal and unethical practices, he uses these same teams to unlawfully snatch Phillip from his home, essentially kidnapping him to bring him in to headquarters to brief him on the situation. This vigilantism would suggest a loss of faith in the ability of the traditional sites of authority to maintain law and order, a loss generally implied by the very existence of the superhero genre. It also indicates that this is a society where people with power and money use their advantage, particularly technology, to aid the disadvantaged. However, Cape does so in corrupt ways that overstep the bounds of ethics and morality, and even results in the loss of life; the only thing that separates him from the villain is the guilt he feels for his actions. This problematises the binary relationships between good and evil so common in the superhero genre, and hints at the problematisation of "heroism" to come in the narrative. This skewed humanitarian motivation is what prompts Cape to design the UniBand.

The UniBand, the brainwave-powered technology which allows Phillip to perform his seemingly superheroic feats, is described by Cape as "the first and last weapon PACT ever created." The scientists run him through a battery of tests and training in order to develop the mental and emotional mastery Phillip has to acquire to properly control the UniBand. Interestingly, he performs much better than the agent originally selected to wield the weapon; they credit his ability to suspend his disbelief – cultivated through years of reading comics – as the factor most significant to his superior mastery. That which would mark him as marginal in the 'real world' operates to elevate his status

¹⁵³ *Northguard*, Issue #1, pp. 6-7

within the world of the comic. For readers who identify with Philip in part because of a shared love of comics, this – like the reliance on shared cultural symbols – becomes a way of suturing themselves into the narrative.

When Phillip starts his training in the use of the weapon, the scientists are careful to explain to him,

This simulation is a test of both selectivity and selection. You must choose the correct targets to use the UniPulse against, and you must adjust power levels according to target tolerance. In all circumstances, you must refrain from fatally injuring a human being. **All instances.**¹⁵⁴ [emphasis original]

At this point in the narrative, a desire to use only necessary force has already been established; Cape explains to Phillip during their first meeting that his preferred weapon is blackmail and the threat of embarrassment. The decision to use weapons is made only when it is discovered that an American organisation called “Man Des” (short for “Manifest Destiny”) plans to interfere in Canada’s internal affairs “on a massive scale;” the location of this strike will be Montreal, but the nature of their plan is unknown.¹⁵⁵ Cape feels that the threat to the nation is severe enough to justify the use of force, and the persons behind that threat motivated enough to be undeterred by anything less than a full show of force. Interestingly, this action by PACT is not an act of aggression, or even a legally justifiable invasion, but a defence of the nation from outside attack. For the Canadian hero and his employer, like for Captain Canuck before them, violence is only mobilised in the event of a direct external threat, and only as a last resort.

¹⁵⁴ *Northguard*, Issue #2, p. 16

¹⁵⁵ *Northguard*, Issue #1, p. 8

MANIFEST DESTINY

So where does *Northguard* situate evil? In stark contrast to what is constructed as the Canadian use of “only necessary force,” is the American group Manifest Destiny: an extremist, racist, cult-like, intolerant, and militant right-wing religious group, posing as a multi-national corporation. How much more threatening a villain could be constructed in opposition to a nation threatened by a branch plant economy, that prides itself on its moderation, its toleration, and its peacefulness? Man Des views Canada as a “blasphemy against [God’s] sacred doctrine of Manifest Destiny;” they hope to exploit the divide between French and English, and take over the nation as a headquarters for creating a New America founded on imperialist, racist, and extremist Christian principles.¹⁵⁶ This is clearly indicated in the attitude of the Man Des thug sent to abduct and torture Leila, a black scientist working for PACT,¹⁵⁷ and reinforced by the montage of images that accompanies Reverend’s prayer at the start of the third issue [Fig. 29].¹⁵⁸ In a sense, the extreme nature of the Reverend’s racism acts to trivialise institutional prejudice that stops short of racialised violence; in the face of this enormous threat, Phillip can be “forgiven” for forgetting about Manon’s dreams of French sovereignty.

The leader of Man Des, known simply as the Reverend, finishes a group meeting with the cry, “Praise God! Praise Man Des! Praise America!” This is shouted in unison by the group, and accompanied by arm movements reminiscent of the ‘Zeig Heil’ Nazi salute [Fig. 30].¹⁵⁹ The monstrous is, then, constructed within a contemporaneous Canadian social reality, but external to the nation; it is generated by fears regarding

¹⁵⁶ *Northguard* #3, p. 2

¹⁵⁷ *Northguard* #1, p. 22

¹⁵⁸ *Northguard* #3, p. 1

¹⁵⁹ *Northguard* #1, p. 13

Christian extremism, and right-wing racism and intolerance in the United States. Evil is presented not as an alien force, but as something originating from within known (but foreign) social structures. To further explore ideas explained earlier in “Genre,” the projection of racist tendencies onto the Other-as-Villain functions as a means of disavowing or erasing that behaviour in the self.

In Issue #2, in a dream sequence revealing Phillip’s Jewish identity, the Man Des leader is visually conflated with Hitler even more explicitly.¹⁶⁰ Through this comparison to Hitler, his extremism is vilified and becomes an evil that cannot be negotiated with or understood – it can only be annihilated. However, while Nazi soldiers are often invoked in popular culture as villains, sometimes in trivialising or superficial ways (as in the television show *Hogan’s Heroes*), there are a greater set of resonances and layers of meaning at play in this sequence of images. Description and analysis are required to fully unpack these elliptical trails of meaning at the levels of individual, cultural, and national identities; the significance of World War II in Canadian memory, and the history of comic book narratives.

In the first issue, Leila is abducted and tortured for information about the UniBand (a sequence which I will return to later on), and Phillip arrives too late to protect her from harm. The alley in which he finds her figures prominently in his nightmare that night. In Phillip’s dream it is 1944, and he walks the deserted streets of Nagyvarad, Transylvania, looking for his grandparents; these pages contain no panels, only overlapping images that invoke the disordered subjectivity of dreaming [Fig. 31a-e]. He enters a door marked with the hand-painted word “JUDE” and a Star of David. The dreamscape morphs to the alley where he earlier found Leila. She is bound and gagged

¹⁶⁰ *Northguard* #2, pp. 4-8

and slumps against the wall; and as earlier, he is attacked from behind. In the bottom left, figures resembling concentration camp detainees huddle together in front of large furnaces. Bottom right, a menacing figure stands silhouetted atop what looks to be a mound of corpses; behind him are tall, concentration camp watch towers. The looming figure asks Phillip, "Looking for something, Jew-boy?" The dreamscape has once again transformed, becoming the death camp where his grandparents were killed.

In the following two-page spread, the figure atop the corpses is revealed to be that of Hitler. He tells Phillip his family and his past "[h]ave gone and outlived their usefulness, in more ways than one."¹⁶¹ Phillip swings the bag with the UniBand at Hitler knocking a solid blow on his jaw, and then takes off down the barbwire-fence-lined path of the camp. Phillip hides behind a Volkswagen van; strange skeletal figures are packed inside, or are reflected in the windows like ghosts. "DIE JUDEN" (the Jews) has been scrawled on a nearby wall. Narrative thought bubbles scream the words "FEAR," "LOATHING," "HATE." Reaching into his bag, he finds not the UniBand, but a Jewish *tefillah*. He struggles to remember how it is wrapped, puts his left hand to his forehead, and prays: "God. Help Me." He transforms into Northguard, this time with a Star of David incorporated in the Maple Leaf of his costume, and the *tefillah* becomes the UniBand. He lashes back and blasts a hole through Hitler's chest, squeezing his eyes shut to hold back tears, and abruptly finds himself awake and back in his bed.

The *tefillah* have great significance to Orthodox Jews, and wearing them is considered among the most important *mitzvot* or precepts of the Torah. The black leather boxes – worn on the head and the upper left arm – contain scriptural excerpts that remind the faithful of the unity of God, His promise of reward for the faithful and

¹⁶¹ Northguard #2, p. 6-7

retribution for the disobedient, the Exodus and delivery from Egypt, and the duty to pass these teachings on to the children. Further, they are a reminder that the hand, the heart, and the mind must act as one in the service of God. Alexander Cowen notes:

Placed on the arm opposite the heart, and on the head, the Tefillin signify the submission of one's mind, heart and actions to the Almighty, as well as the rule of intellect over emotion. A fundamental principle of Chabad Chassidic philosophy is that the intellect must control the emotions. [...] often the emotions control the mind, and the intellect is utilized merely to provide justification, rationalization, and excuses for this "instinct-emotion centered" existence. *The Mitzvah of Tefillin and its practice facilitates the attainment by the individual of unity of mind and heart, intellect and emotion.*¹⁶² [emphasis mine]

While this unity of mind and heart, intellect and emotion is central to Judaic spiritual practice, it is also central to Phillip's struggle with learning to use the UniBand, and his struggle with the power and authority typically granted to superheroes.¹⁶³ He has rapidly moved from the safe normalcy of his life to a position of, to paraphrase *Spiderman* creator Stan Lee, great power and great responsibility. However, he is the reversal of the typical superhero: instead of being a hero who masquerades as a regular guy, he's a regular guy trying to pass as a superhero. His appeal to God for help perhaps indicates a lack of belief in his own ability to live up to his new responsibilities, and as such is a subversion of the confidence and bravado typically associated with more conventionally 'macho' superheroes.

On another level, this sequence negotiates issues of personal identity. Phillip fights a dream figure, not a real person. In a sense, this implies that the real evil comes

¹⁶² Alexander Cowen, "Tefillin and Its Significance." Available online at: http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/81814/jewish/Tefillin-and-Its-Significance.htm (accessed February 9, 2008)

¹⁶³ See also Rabbi Shimon D. Eider, *Halachos of Tefillin* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 2001)

from the inner demons we carry with us, the products of past trauma, both individual and collective – traumas incurred as a result of difference. In grappling with this trauma, Phillip seems to draw strength from his heritage; the merging of the maple leaf and the Star on his costume suggest that it is through coming to grips with his Jewish identity and difference, and being able to integrate his Jewish-ness and his Canadian-ness, that he can defeat the ghosts of the past and gain the confidence to face the villains of the present. His identity as a Jew is not in conflict with his identity as a Canadian, nor is it an impediment to his ability to act on behalf of his nation; he is not forced to sublimate his Jewish-ness to his Canadian-ness in order to be a hero. In fact, embracing his entire identity as a whole makes him stronger as a hero. This implies that not only can cultural differences be accommodated in the fabric of the nation, through integration rather than through assimilation, but that this difficult but worthwhile integration makes our nation stronger. It is not the Other that is threatening per se, just the sort of Other that must dominate rather than integrate; Phillip's difference does not pose a threat, unlike the difference exhibited by Man Des.

This overt use of a Jewish character speaks to Shainblum's own cultural identity, his awareness of the occlusion of Jews and Jewish characters in the history of comics,¹⁶⁴ and his interest in "deliberately trying to create a typically Canadian, multicultural cast." He states,

[T]o be honest I was pretty conscious as I was writing Northguard that even though most of the major superhero characters of the 40's and 60's were created by Jews (Wonder Woman and Plastic Man being the only obvious

¹⁶⁴ More recently, authors have addressed this absence in the discourse. See Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore: Leviathan Press, 2003). See also Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007).

exceptions I can think of), none of them felt comfortable enough to actually make their characters openly Jewish...I figured by 1984, it was time to be a little more honest.¹⁶⁵

Not only did these early American writers possibly feel uncomfortable making their characters Jewish, they often changed their own names as Jewish identities were 'undesirable' after the war. In fact, so many of them worked in the comic industry because they were excluded from more 'legitimate' forms of commercial illustration and publishing.¹⁶⁶ In Up, Up, and Oy Vey: How Jewish History, Culture and Values Shaped the Comicbook Superhero, Simcha Weinstein argues that, "Jewish comic book creators explored the ambiguities of assimilation, the pain of discrimination, and the particularly Jewish theme of the misunderstood outcast, the rootless wanderer."¹⁶⁷ In many ways, *Northguard* can be seen as operating simultaneously in these traditions of Jewish identity and values, as well as the conventions established by Canadian graphic narratives.

That *Northguard* is a Jewish Canadian superhero is ironic in no small way. While Canada has officially adopted a formal policy of multiculturalism, at least since 1971, restrictionist immigration policies during World War II left the borders closed to thousands of Jews fleeing the Nazi occupation of Europe.¹⁶⁸ In None is Too Many, authors Irving Abella and Harold Troper note that,

[F]rom 1933 to 1945, while the United States accepted more than 200,000 Jewish refugees; Palestine, 125,000;

¹⁶⁵ Personal correspondence with Mark Shainblum, December 19, 2007.

¹⁶⁶ See Arie Kaplan, "How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry, Part I: The Golden Age (1933-55)" in *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Fall 2003, Vol. 23, No. 1. This article traces the history of Jewish contributions to the American comic book industry; as of the time of this writing, a similar examination of Jewish contributions to the Canadian industry remains unwritten.

¹⁶⁷ Weinstein, p. 18

¹⁶⁸ The Immigration Act, passed in 1910, allowed the government to regulate immigrants based ethnic origin or "race." While specific groups are not targeted by name, Section 38 gave officials the power to restrict any immigrant of a "race" that was considered "unsuited to Canada's climate." Though by 1967 most discriminatory legislation had been removed from the books, this statute remained until 1978. (see Immigration Act S.C. 1910 c. 27, s.38)

embattled Britain, 70,000; Argentina, 50,000; penurious Brazil, 27,000; distant China, 25,000; tiny Bolivia and Chile, 14,000 each, Canada found room for fewer than 5,000.¹⁶⁹

At the time, Canada was, geographically, the second largest nation in the world – second only to the USSR, where the majority of Jewish persecution outside of Germany itself was occurring. Canadian officials refused these war refugees entry based on their status as ‘undesirables,’ and their presumed inability to assimilate – this in spite of the fact that Jews have been present in Canada since well before confederation, and the fact that 17,000 Jews enrolled in the army and fought for Allied interests in the European theatre.¹⁷⁰ It was not until the high numbers of war casualties produced a shortage of workers after the war that immigration policies were loosened to allow entry to Jews – along with a whole host of Nazi war criminals and collaborators. Later, indictments and war crimes trials were grossly mishandled, prompting the Canadian satire news show *This Hour has 22 Minutes* to crack, “Nazi War Criminals: Your Decades are Numbered!” In light of these considerations, the difficulty with which Phillip reconciles his Jewish and Canadian identities becomes significantly easier to understand.

The text of the comic refers more specifically to ‘un-Canadian’ issues of racism and the use of unnecessary and socially unacceptable violence, and links them to “the villain.” In Issue #1, The Reverend sends a henchman to intimidate Leila, a black scientist working for PACT, in order to get intelligence about the UniBand shortly after Phillip decides to join PACT. We know the ‘thug’ is a bad guy because he is racist; he

¹⁶⁹ Irving Abella and Harold Troper, None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948 (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys Limited, 1982), p. x

¹⁷⁰ See “Jews” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, available online at <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC822663> (accessed February 8, 2008).

provokes Philip into a fight saying, “You a friend to niggers, boy?”¹⁷¹ But further, we know he is evil because he hits women; evil is situated in the patriarchal desire to dominate and subdue women – with violence, if necessary. Here, Philip’s violent response to the attacker would normally be non-problematic, because he is coming to the defence of the defenceless. However, after establishing unease about violence and killing as a heroic convention, the writers subvert their own rules. After the confrontation with the ManDes thug (later mirrored in his dream-confrontation with Hitler), Philip thinks, “He’s alive. Right now I don’t know how that makes me feel;” the implication here is that Phillip’s ambiguous feelings stem from an uncertainty about the superhero’s use of acceptable violence.¹⁷² In spite of the near-biblical heroic prohibition on lethal force in the superhero genre, Phillip’s confusion prompts us to wonder, are there situations in which it is morally acceptable to kill?¹⁷³ Against the backdrop of the moral debates around the 1976 decision to abolish the death penalty in Canada, this question would be familiar, and resonate with viewers.¹⁷⁴

This is a contrast to the stance of Captain Canuck who, echoing Nelvana’s call from thirty years earlier, refers to “Canada’s great responsibility in the efforts to maintain world peace,” and takes extreme measures to ensure there are no fatalities.¹⁷⁵ The Captain’s insistence on non-fatal forces carries with it the implication that the might of Canada is sufficient to quell the bad guys without having to kill, reminding me of our long international reputation as peacekeepers. Northguard’s self-reflexive engagement

¹⁷¹ *Northguard*, Issue #1, p. 22

¹⁷² *Northguard*, Issue #1, p. 24

¹⁷³ For a further examination of the relationships between gods and superheroes, see Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007)

¹⁷⁴ Indeed, it resonates even today, given the media attention surrounding TASER use by the RCMP in Canada, the use of torture in American facilities used to detain terror suspects, and the public reception of Canada’s combat role in Afghanistan.

¹⁷⁵ *Captain Canuck*, Issue #1, July 1975.

with, and subversion of, the different conventions (the American genre, the Canadian genre, and the writer's own set of rules) both works to question the Captain's unthinking reliance on non-fatal force, but also acknowledges the human desire for revenge, and our human capacity for committing violence without regret.

In a letter published in the comics, one fan criticizes the team for their choice of villain, saying, "The hired thug is a sociopath, okay. Does he *have* to be a bigot?"¹⁷⁶

Another fan sends a list of the problematic clichés in the plot:

- (1) The Evil United States...threatening good ol' Canada once again
- (2) The evil (American) multinational...as a slimy megabeast thirsting for total power
- (3) The religious person as evil fanatic¹⁷⁷

On the surface, this is a valid analysis, not far from my own initial interpretation.

However, by way of reply, Shainblum states:

I in no way meant to imply that the United States as a whole is threatening Canada in this series...ManDes is [threatening], and while it may represent certain less savoury aspects of modern American culture (as I interpret them, of course), in the final analysis it is an un-American as it is un-Canadian...[and] No, not the religious person as evil fanatic. The evil fanatic as evil fanatic. A truly religious person, by my definition, *cannot* be evil.

What really makes ManDes 'evil' is not their religion; Phillip's own invocation of God in his dream would tend to support this. It is not their beliefs, or their country of origin, but rather the act of taking a singular and extreme point of view, and imposing it upon the whole – that is, the colonialist eradication of the Other.

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Ty Templeton, *Northguard* Issue #1, p. 10

¹⁷⁷ Letter from T.M. Maple, *Northguard* Issue #1, p. 37

FEDERALISM, SEPARATISM, AND ASSIMILATION

Even though the author is not deliberately constructing the United States as the villain, but rather, intolerant extremists of any type, the fact remains that this intolerance is located in America – not within Canadian borders. The very name ‘Manifest Destiny’ invokes American colonialism and imperialism, and Canadian fears of being assimilated by southern neighbours – a fear present for more than four hundred years.¹⁷⁸ The text expresses anxieties about the threat of assimilation enacted through force of arms by a group interested in wiping out all differences of colour, creed, or opinion; this is perhaps an expression of Canadian anxieties about losing our economic independence through American-owned multinational take-overs, and losing our cultural difference under the avalanche of mass-produced and mass-distributed American cultural commodities.

Northguard as a text, however, acts to situate this colonialism and the drive to assimilate as a threat from outside Canada; here, nationalist ideology operates to hide the social and legal assimilation of First Nations, Francophones, and immigrants of all ethnicities within our own borders. In a sense, this allows whatever actions taken by Canadian individuals and institutions to be less terrible than the ‘real danger’ coming from without. This also speaks to more conventionally relied upon (though highly generalised) conceptions of ‘American-ness’ centred around expansionist economic and cultural imperialism. As *This Hour*’s Rick Mercer once observed, “If the United States

¹⁷⁸ See David Orchard, Fight for Canada: Four Centuries of Resistance to American Expansionism (Stoddart, 1993; 2nd ed. Robert Davies, 1999). Also available in French as: Hors des griffes de l'aigle: Quatre siècles de résistance canadienne à l'expansionnisme américain (Robert Davies, 1998).

were a 35-year-old man, I think he'd be in a mental institution. Violent tendencies... delusions of grandeur... medicate heavily.”¹⁷⁹

Man Des tries to exploit the tensions between French and English through an assassination attempt on Renée Lévesque during a speech at a *Partie Quebecois* rally; graffiti at the scene falsely claims the attack as the work of “Anglo Liberation” forces (a potentially painful irony for those who lived through the FLQ crisis). Philip, as *Northguard*, angrily destroys the evidence, saying,

Someone is trying to reopen old wounds. **Someone from 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 into hate and paranoia!¹⁸⁰ [emphasis mine]

This dialogue speaks to decades (if not centuries) of French-Canadian resistance under Federalist authorities (like the 1980 referendum on Quebec sovereignty), and the dramatic and sometimes violent protests that occurred in the years following the so-called ‘Quiet Revolution’ (like the FLQ bombings). But it also carries with it the sense that, much like an older sibling regards a younger, while French and English may have differences with each other, external interference is disliked even more.

Further, the assassination or murder of public figures is not something that generally occurs in Canadian society; it happens to presidents, and sometimes to Canadians (especially journalists) on foreign soil, but not in Canada – with one particularly notable exception. Early in the 1980s, the word ‘assassination’ would certainly have conjured images of John F. Kennedy and John Lennon, and then-recent attempts on the lives of Ronald Regan and Pope John Paul II. But for many Canadians, it would also call to mind the name Pierre Laporte, the Quebec Vice-Premier and Minister

¹⁷⁹ Comedy sketch from “This Hour has 22 Minutes.”

¹⁸⁰ *Northguard*, Issue #1, p.28

of Labour kidnapped and murdered by members of Front de Libération du Québec in the October Crisis of 1970. In his introduction to the second printing of the comic, Shainblum notes that the plot line, which was originally inspired by the cultural tensions left in the wake of the FLQ crisis, took on a whole new layer of meaning a few months after publication, in light of Denis Lortie's attack on the National Assembly.¹⁸¹ However, the real issue expressed here is not a literal fear for the safety of our public figures, but symbolic fears around the stability of Canadian unity, and the threat of external forces pulling it all down. These issues around the stability of Canadian unity tie also into issues surrounding assimilation and diversity, some of which are played out in relations between genders within the text.

GENDER/ROLES

One of the most contentious areas of comics studies is the analysis of gender, sexuality, and the associated stereotypes. In comics, feminists find ample fodder for critiques of the patriarchal objectification of women's bodies as things-to-be-looked-at, and the sexualisation of violence against women. Strong women tend to provoke anxiety in the real world, because they challenge the assumed dominance and power of men, and the same seems to be true of their superheroic counterparts. While an analysis of the causes of this anxiety deserves a full study in its own right, it will suffice to examine some of the general symptoms. A disproportionate number of female superheroes have rape or sexual trauma as part of their origin story, and their deaths often include actual,

¹⁸¹ Denis Lortie arrived at the National Assembly at around 9:45 a.m. on May 8, 1984. Witnesses say he shouted, "Where are the MNAs, I want to kill them." In his efforts to destroy the Parti Québécois, Denis Lortie killed three government employees, none of whom were politicians. The news broadcast that night on The National was hosted by Knowlton Nash.

http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-70-1308-7634-20/that_was_then/disasters_tragedies/lortie_gunman

symbolic, or implied rape. Female characters often exist only to symbolise thwarted love interests for heroes more concerned with preserving their secret identities than forming emotional bonds with the women who love them. As in popular cinema, women are often trivialised, marginalised, or exist solely to forward the narrative of the male protagonist (or satisfy the libido of the male viewer).¹⁸² They are reduced to a narrative device, existing only to be rescued by men, or are even killed off merely to provide depth and drama to the male hero's story – this is what Gail Simone refers to as the “Women in Refrigerators Syndrome,” so-named after a plot twist in *Green Lantern* #54.¹⁸³ This both naturalises and reinforces the patriarchal equation of masculinity with heroic agency. The lack of strong, rounded, believable female characters is not purely sexist, but also indicative of a broader kind of discrimination that operates on the combined axes of race, gender, class, and ablism. While many fans (including men) protest for more inclusivity in their comics, it seems that resistance to diversity is partially entrenched at the editorial level.

Part of the problem is the received wisdom which asserts that “girls don't read comics” – at least, not superhero comics.¹⁸⁴ Feminist, graphic novelist, and comics scholar Trina Robbins notes,

Up until Manga arrived on our shores, American comic editors and publishers suffered from a kind of collective amnesia [about girls' comics in the 1940s and 50s] and

¹⁸² See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford and New York: University of Oxford Press, 2000), pp. 34-47

¹⁸³ Gail Simone, “Women in Refrigerators,” available online at: <http://www.unheardtaunts.com/wir/> (accessed December 1, 2007). In *Green Lantern* #54 (Ron Marz, 1994) the title character's long-term girlfriend is killed off, apparently only to justify a heroic battle with the villain, Major Force. See also “Project Girl Wonder,” available online at: <http://girl-wonder.org/robin/projectgirlwonder.html/> (accessed December 1, 2007)

¹⁸⁴ The corollary to this rule is, of course, “Black books don't sell.” See “The Panel” discussion, “Why don't 'Black Books' sell?” in the Comics Bulliten, available online at <http://www.comicsbulletin.com/panel/1063121223602.htm> (accessed January 27, 2009)

used to say, well, girls don't read comics. I mean, I have some unbelievable quotes from them. They actually said, "Girls' brains are wired in a different way, so they just don't get comics." Somehow, it never, ever, occurred to them that girls weren't reading comics because girls are not interested in overly muscled guys with square jaws punching each other out.¹⁸⁵

Eww, boy eooties! I mean, all that testosterone sure does sound "boring." She goes on to note that women did read comics, titles like *Betty and Veronica*, *Millie the Model*, and *Night Nurse* that, presumably, were about things that did interest girls. This quote also indicates assumptions made by editors and marketing departments (and apparently some feminist commentators) who have decided that girls read Japanese manga, especially *shoujo* manga, which are known for their sentimental plotlines of boy-on-boy romance and betrayal, their melodrama, and their relentlessly aesthetic artwork.

Here I am forced to observe the essentialism at work in these arguments, by feminists and editors alike; are girls (even the ones who read comics in the 1950s) really only interested in shopping, dating boys, glamour modelling, and traditionally gendered occupations? Further, do these arguments even hold, if manga is understood as a style, not as a genre? Further still, I have to ask: just what precisely does that argument make me? As a woman who reads and enjoys superhero comics, a genre hailed as "one of the last bastions of unapologetic masculinity in American entertainment,"¹⁸⁶ do I have to turn in my feminist membership card? Or worse, trade it (and my comics) for a membership in Club Femme? And seriously, since when were all superhero comics about nothing more than "overly muscled guys with square jaws punching each other out?" And even if they

¹⁸⁵ Mr. Media Interview with Trina Robbins, available online at <http://odeo.com/audio/13170193/view> (accessed on December 17, 2007)

¹⁸⁶ Rational MadMan, "Its [sic] Official. Gail Simone Hates Men," November 20, 2007. Available online at: <http://rationalmadman.blogspot.com/2007/11/its-official-gail-simone-hates-men-and.html> (accessed December 16, 2007)

were, is it really so surprising that women might find something appealing in finely muscled and scantily clad male bodies grappling with each other on the page? Might it be that we have just gotten sick of having to go out of our way to ignore badly written (and even more terribly drawn) female characters? Is it possible we have just seen one too many women in a Thong of Righteous Crime-fighting, while the majority of their male counterparts at least get to cover their legs?

Make no mistake: comics and comic fandom are not always safe places to be female. If a heroine escapes being raped (as a kind of trivialising shorthand for “depth of character”) or murdered (as punishment for being powerful while female), she will likely endure jokes about the most common female super power being the size of their breasts.¹⁸⁷ This extends beyond the panels on the page to include the misogynistic heckling of female writers and artists in online forums, and the defence of exploitative, offensive or patronising representations of women on the grounds that “it’s just comics,” with the implication that the (usually female) critics have somehow misplaced their senses of humour. There are a number of common, nearly rote responses to feminist criticisms of comics – so many, in fact, that Karen Healey of “Girls Read Comics” created a ‘bingo card’ designed to illustrate their ubiquity and highlight their absurdity [fig. 32].¹⁸⁸ The most common (and short-sighted) response to feminist criticisms of comic books is, “If you don’t like them, don’t read them” – which might almost seem reasonable, on the surface; the next most common are accusations of censorship. But as Karen Healey explains, this argument is made when fans of any gender find themselves unwilling or unable,

¹⁸⁷ <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MostCommonSuperPower>

¹⁸⁸ Available online at: <http://girl-wonder.org/girlsreadcomics/?p=66> (accessed December 16, 2007)
Related version available here: <http://viv.id.au/blog/?p=431>

to see why feminist comics fans spend time and energy discussing and deploring sexism in superhero comics when there's just so darn much of it...[they suggest you] give up comics altogether, or find alternatives to the superhero books that infuriate you so. But that's not good enough. Most feminist fans hate sexism, but *love* superheroes. I know that there's something about costumed people beating the crap out of bad guys, invading alien armies and each other that makes *my* heart happy. If there are explosions, so much the better! [...] Personally, I'm not interested in censoring things. I want people to stop depicting women so poorly in comic books, but I want them to stop because they realise it's fucking dumb, not because there's someone with a rubber stamp hovering suspiciously above each page. If criticism contributes to people realising that depicting women so poorly is fucking dumb – and I have an inbox says it does – then that is awesome.

Hail sister, hail. There is not a finite possible amount of feminist criticism, therefore it need not be reserved for “more important” causes than the representation of women in comics.

Sexism continues in the scholarship; Wolfgang Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger speculate on the absence of overt sexuality in traditional superhero narratives. Though they comment in passing on Superman's untapped potential for adolescent sexual wish-fulfilment, they make an explicit joke about Supergirl's “super-powers of vaginal muscle contraction.”¹⁸⁹ There are tellingly no jokes about Superman being ‘faster than a speeding bullet,’ or nudge-wink discussions about just what else he could ‘leap in a single bound.’ Bradford Wright, while willing to confront the racist subtext of the ‘jungle queen’ genre of comics, seems largely unwilling to confront the sexist overtones. John Bell sees no reason to qualify Adrian Dingle's comments that he, “[d]id what I could with long hair and mini skirts,” to take a crone goddess and try “to make her attractive,” as if youth and

¹⁸⁹ Wolfgang Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger, *Comics: Anatomy of a Mass Medium*. (London: Studio Vista Publishers, 1972), p. 122

beauty are the two most important qualities of a super-heroine.¹⁹⁰ This last example is perhaps more likely a case of unwitting male entitlement, rather than sexism, but the lack of intention or awareness is itself cause for discussion. While there is some resistance to ‘politicising’ comic book texts, refusing to take the social and political issues they present into account is itself a political decision.

Lillian S. Robinson is one author who does engage with the gender politics of comics, in her book Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes.¹⁹¹ She too notes an unwillingness to examine the political implications of comics, and suggests that this is partly due to the stigma that is still attached to criticism of mass culture, and is “exacerbated...by the sin of looking critically and, even worse, looking ideologically, at material originally addressed to children.”¹⁹² She observes that even feminist comics scholarship – such that exists – tends primarily toward “describing, detailing, and cherishing their subject, rather than analysing it.”¹⁹³ Robinson suggests there is a preference for accepting the existence of the female superhero as a heroic icon, rather than seeking “an understanding of how the representation of such an icon derives from and serves – as well as challenges – the dominant social forces.”¹⁹⁴ Borrowing her notion that “feminism is not exclusively – not even primarily – a matter of role models and symbolic butt-kicking, but is rather a worldview directed at understanding and remaking society,” I too will make further demands on the stories comics tell us about female superheroes.¹⁹⁵ I want to use Robinson’s assertion that “the female superhero originates

¹⁹⁰ Bell, *Guardians*, p. 5

¹⁹¹ Lillian S. Robinson, Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes (NY and London: Routledge, 2004)

¹⁹² Robinson, p. 3

¹⁹³ See Trina Robbins

¹⁹⁴ Robinson, p. 6

¹⁹⁵ Robinson, p. 7

in an act of criticism – a challenge to the masculinist world of superhero adventures” as a foundation for a feminist analysis of gender in *Northguard*.¹⁹⁶

Manon Deschamps is a character designed to critique the prevailing norms of how women are portrayed in comic books. She is a highly trained gymnast and competitive martial artist; she has trained for 9 years, and is a three-time champion. When Phillip first meets her, it is because he has gone to get tae kwon-do lessons, and she is in the studio training.¹⁹⁷ We see her training or practising throughout the narrative, and this situates her as an active agent, an able female clearly willing to defend herself and others [Fig. 33 a&b]. While she is slender, her body is more accurately described as athletic, not impossibly buxom, and this is readily explained by her active lifestyle, rather than superheroic powers of gravitational defiance. She is a strong woman: she lays Phillip out flat in a matter of moments,¹⁹⁸ and he later ruefully acknowledges that she is “intelligent, beautiful, and tougher than God,”¹⁹⁹ and could probably “break every bone in my body with her pinky.”²⁰⁰ This harkens back to Phillip’s invocation of God during the dream sequence, and his anxieties around his own abilities. The female character is a source of dramatic motivation for the hero, but it is because her confidence and competence inspires him to be stronger, not because her weakness or untimely death compels him to seek vengeance. Instead of emasculating him with her superior abilities (making her a

¹⁹⁶ While Robinson is speaking specifically about Dr. William Moulton Marston’s deliberate construction of Wonder Woman as a “feminist” icon intended to subvert the violent patriarchy of boy’s adventure comics, her arguments can be applied to other super-heroines as well. I put “feminist” in quotations because, while Marston himself certainly regarded himself as a feminist, today we would have difficulty identifying some of his ideas as feminist.

¹⁹⁷ *Northguard*, issue 3, p. 9

¹⁹⁸ *Northguard*, issue 3, p. 18

¹⁹⁹ *Northguard*, issue 4, p. 5

²⁰⁰ *Northguard*, issue 5, p. 9

“bad woman” which would typically result in punishment, containment, or rehabilitation), she acts as an inspiration to Phillip to try harder and do better.

Through their conversation, it becomes apparent that she is his superior in every way – more physically capable, more mentally focused, more emotionally mature – and, in sharp contrast to Phillip’s stuttering French, fluent in both French and English. This last point is one I find interesting; while there is a lot of talk in multicultural societies about ‘accommodating difference,’ with the assumption that it is the dominant society that changes to incorporate minorities, most often it is the Other that must accommodate the dominant society, by hiding or abandoning cultural practices and dress, by negotiating unfamiliar cultural “norms,” or by learning a new language. Her difference, rather than marginalising her, becomes the source of her strength as a hero.

In fact, her heroic identity emerges in part as a challenge to Phillip’s assumptions about Canada. A newscast discussing the likely defeat of the *Partie Québécois* in the upcoming provincial elections angers Manon, and prompts her to mention that her family were “dyed in the wool Péquistes,” for whom “the question of independence was never so much ‘if’ as a ‘when.’”²⁰¹ When Phillip tells her that a dream only dies if you let it, she retorts with a criticism of the “three foot maple leaf” he wears on his chest. Ideologically, the implication is that that his costume naturalises a federalist Canada, and denies the possibility or legitimacy of French Canadian independence and sovereignty. Days later, she arrives for a training session at P.A.C.T. in her costume as the *Fleur de Lys*, which she made herself from “one flag and one Danskin”²⁰² – a brand of bodysuits and tights associated with dancers and athletes [Fig. 34].

²⁰¹ *Northguard*, issue 4, p. 5

²⁰² *Northguard*, issue 5, p. 13

Her costume, while it may look nearly identical to those worn by other superheroes, is literally built from the flag of her country, and an athletic garment designed to accommodate rigorous physical movement. The implications of this are two fold. First, she conceives of herself as a French national superhero, not simply as a sidekick, or a token effort at inclusivity. She chooses her costume as a deliberate challenge to Phillip's choice of the Canadian flag for his costume. Second, though her costume is form-fitting, I would argue that this is due to both functionality and familiarity, rather than the usual excuse to exhibit scantily clad women. It covers her whole body: no flesh is exposed to tantalise a male viewer, and the cut of the bottom of the suit is full coverage.

Here is an attempt to create a female hero with real agency; a woman not dependent upon the male hero for her salvation – who is in fact capable of actively coming to *his* rescue. The narrative also allows room for Francophone separatist concerns; even if the text functions ideologically to allow these to be swept aside by a larger threat to the unified nation, it never explicitly shuts down the possibility of French sovereignty. Though never explicitly stated, there is room for a reader to speculate that, while she and Phillip are joining forces for now, once the exterior threat has been vanquished she will go on to fight for the cause of French sovereignty.

Still, for all of Manon's superior abilities, and fashion-functional thinking, her character unites sexual difference with cultural difference. She is doubly Other, in a sense, doubly colonised, and the ideological implications are complicated, and will take me some time to unpack. A useful text worth considering in this endeavour is Matthew J.

Smith's article, "The Tyranny of the Melting Pot Metaphor: Wonder Woman as the Americanized Immigrant."²⁰³

Smith explores the ways in which different artists and writers have conceptualised the character of Princess Diana (aka Wonder Woman) in comic books, and shows how these stories work ideologically to either assimilate or accommodate Wonder Woman's sexual and cultural difference. Smith explores the metaphor of the 'Melting Pot' – in order for an outsider to fit in with American culture, s/he must first shed all cultural habits and physical or emotional ties with their homeland, and enter into the homogenising milieu of American culture. Once in the melting pot, the cultural individuality and "unique flavours" of immigrants melt away and are replaced by the dominant American culture, "characterised by the supremacy of the American English, unquestioning loyalty to Old Glory, and reverence for artefacts like mom, apple pie, and baseball."²⁰⁴ Ideologically, this operates not only to perpetuate the expectation by the dominant culture that immigrants leave their cultures behind, but also to represent this assimilation as desirable and 'natural' – after all, if a semi-divine Amazon Princess is willing to reject Paradise Island for the shores of America, who of us common folk are in a position to argue otherwise? Smith suggests this representation may in part be influenced by the strictures of the Comics Code, which rejected (among other things) representations which questioned or showed corruption in traditional sites of authority; heroes, if they were to exist, had to defend the law and order of the status quo.

²⁰³ Matthew J. Smith, "The Tyranny of the Melting Pot Metaphor: Wonder Woman as the Americanized Immigrant" (*Comics and Ideology*, McAllister, Sewell Jr., and Gordon, eds. NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001).

²⁰⁴ Smith, p. 131

However, during the late 1980s, creators “rebooting” the character showed a Diana who had to learn English after she arrived, who maintained relationships with family and friends on Paradise Island, and who retained the religious worship of the gods of her homeland. She invites a UN delegation back to her homeland; the artist made a deliberate choice to include Amazons that were people of colour – a subtle but damning critique of the implicit racism present in earlier issues. Instead of forgoing her culture in order to become American, she shares her culture with the world while maintaining her status as an ‘American Hero;’ her cultural difference has been accommodated. These writers also challenge the traditional notions of femininity and hetero-normativity associated with Wonder Woman’s origin story. In this version she leaves Paradise Island not to follow her ‘true love’ (a male army pilot who crash landed on her Island and is sworn to return to the defence of his homeland), but as a gesture of sisterhood to a female pilot killed while helping the Amazons fight for their lives and their homes. Her journey to America is meant to honour the sacrifice of a fallen sister-at-arms, not to perpetuate patriarchal notions of women’s motivations, and the primacy of the heterosexual union in women’s lives. Smith suggests that in this rendering, the melting pot is replaced by the “salad bowl” where individuals retain their unique character. This representation did not persist, however, and future writers once again recuperated Wonder Woman back into the American colonialist agenda. Smith suggests that the persistence of this character as a model of assimilation is perhaps tied to her gender, noting that colonialist efforts often focus on control of the female body as a means of colonising the next generation – in this case discursively, if not territorially.

The analysis and methodology of this article has many parallels with those of *Northguard*. While Fleur de Lys is Canadian-born and not an immigrant, she is Québécoise, giving her a similar outsider status in relation to the dominant, white, male Anglophone 'majority.' I see a similar pattern of recuperation and homogenisation at work in both of the narratives, as they negotiate the anxieties provoked by Fleur de Lys' and Wonder Woman's sexual and cultural differences, and reconfigure and reproduce the behaviour 'appropriate' to their female French/Amazon identities in the normative Canadian/American societies. However, for all their critiques of the genre and their movements towards progressive representations, Shainblum and Morissette still cannot completely escape our social and cultural ideology; their text both resists and affirms dominant norms.

As a secondary character, as a woman, and as a Francophone, she is symbolically subordinate to the male Anglophone hero. Although she voices separatist concerns and criticises Phillip's costume as a federalist symbol, the threat that her difference of opinion provides is contained by introducing an outside threat, which renders her separatist interests irrelevant. She is assimilated into the 'federalist' cause because diversity must unify in the face of danger; united we stand, divided we fall. Although she is not alone in her cultural difference (there is a character of Indian descent, and one who is black), presenting the illusion of internal Canadian diversity, the text reads as a French/English polarity and not a true diversity at all. This polarity is both created and maintained through the foregrounding of a French/English heroic partnership. In reality, however, the diversity has been unified into a singularity that is naturalised as 'white', 'male' and

'English-speaking'; Canadian diversity and multiplicity are collapsed into a binary Us/Good versus Them/Evil dichotomy.

Ideologically speaking, the text not only universalises 'white', 'male,' and 'English,' it also privileges Anglophones over Francophones. It does this visually, through the use of a 'federalist' symbol antithetical to French separatists, but also through the conflation of English/Male and French/Female. Though Philip expresses sympathy for Manon's lost dreams of sovereignty, the text makes it clear that at present these are only dreams. By conflating 'French' with 'female', and putting Fleur de Lys into a role subordinate to the anglophone hero, the threat of French separatism and the distinctness of French culture are, in a sense, defused through assimilation into a kind of naturalised, hetero-normative pair bond with English/Federalist culture.

As a cultural text, the comic *Northguard* simultaneously acknowledges, questions, subverts, and reinforces the dominant patriarchal and federalist ideologies. It is neither wholly progressive nor wholly reactionary, but instead contains a series of gestures that can be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the relative subject-position of the reader, and historical context of the act of reading. While on one hand the text can be interpreted as illustrating French subordination to the English power structure, on the other hand it is clear that she and Phillip have to rely on coming together as a cohesive team. When Phillip is attacked by the American spies seeking to get their hands on the UniBand, it is her personal physical prowess (and her car) that assures their escape, as much as Phillip's technologically enhanced body. When Phillip uses a shield generated by the UniBand to deflect the villains' bullets, it is Manon who sends them

flying down the stairs.²⁰⁵ In a later confrontation with the Russian spies, it is Manon who conceives of, and primarily executes, their daring escape on her motorcycle. She offers to help him with his training. The narrative of *Northguard* is a case study in power differentials, the struggle within Canada between the dominant norms and the others those norms repress.

²⁰⁵ *Northguard*, Issue 3, p. 24

WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT CANADIAN SUPERHEROES?

In the catalogue accompanying the 1992 exhibition mounted by the National Gallery called *Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-book Art*, John Bell traces the successive incarnations of national superheroes. He draws primarily from his own collection, which focuses on heroes created and printed by Bell Publishing. He insists that our national superheroes were mostly the victims of American control of the industry with a superior product, and unfortunate economic conditions. But in spite of Bell's assertion that Canadians love and need a national superhero, few attempts since the 1940s have been very successful. We do not seem to *buy* – financially or intellectually – the idea of an all-powerful individual wrapped in the 'Good Ol' Red and White' who fights for 'Peace, Order and Good Government'. The very idea seems a touch ridiculous. As Jeet Heer noted, "Creating a Canadian superhero is rather like growing bananas in Nunavut. With enough ingenuity and willpower you can do it, but is it worth doing?"²⁰⁶

In an essay that pre-dates the exhibition catalogue, Bell himself notes that "[a]lthough the challenge to create a viable national superhero for news stand distribution remains...many Canadian comics publishers would likely perceive such a project as an exercise in parochialism."²⁰⁷ This suggests that Canadians tend to regard the superhero genre as a typically American form, a conclusion supported by the number of Canadian

²⁰⁶ Jeet Heer, "POW! BLAM! ZOWIE! eh?" *Literary Review of Canada* Vol. 15, #5, June 2007, pp. 23-24. Online at <http://lrc.reviewcanada.ca/index.php?page=pow-blam-zowie-eh> (accessed January 20, 2009)

²⁰⁷ Bell, *Canuck Comics*, p.44

artists who move to the States to get recognition; for example, Alberta-born Todd McFarlane (*Spawn*) decided to base his company (Image Comics) in California.

While comics are a commercial medium dependant on the preferences of the consumer, the increasing status of the comic book artist in the last two decades has allowed an unprecedented freedom of style, subject matter, and genre. A shift from newsstand distribution to speciality-shop direct sales, combined with the increasing popularity of computer technology as a means of production, and the Internet as a method of distribution, has led to an industry where the success of creators is no longer dependant on an American distribution system – or adherence to American genres. There has also been a growing awareness on the part of artists and society of the negative impact of racial and gendered stereotyping, a growing opposition to cultural and economic imperialism, and an increasing level of critical thought regarding the mass-media and the often-negative social constructions that they perpetuate. This is not to suggest that we are ‘more sophisticated’ than previous generations, but simply that our perspectives, targets of awareness, and values have shifted in the transition from a modern society to a post-modern society.

A national superhero is, by definition, “the embodiment of national spirit and identity.”²⁰⁸ But he is also a monolithic figure who requires an equally monolithic evil just in order to exist, and it is a centralised and universal culture that he defends from this evil. To so singularise Canadian diversity behind such an icon would seem to go against the grain – assuming we could take ourselves seriously enough to even make the attempt. While the ‘American Dream’ celebrates the power of the individual to shape their own destiny, it could be argued that Canadians put more faith in the efficacy of the collective

²⁰⁸ Bell, *Guardians*, p. 50

to achieve social harmony. In a time where many are suspicious of hidden government agendas, and political rhetoric that includes statements like 'You're with us, or with the Terrorists,' the universal culture and unthinking patriotism required to support a national superhero may seem dangerous and threatening. Rather than seeing the absence of a Canadian national superhero as yet another way we have "fallen behind the Americans," perhaps we should see this absence as one aspect of a true national character.

CONCLUSION

In my introduction, I state that the goals of this thesis are manifold; first, to critique some of the problematic methodologies prevalent in the comics discourse (canon building, reluctance to discuss the political implications of comics as cultural texts, resistance to interdisciplinarity, Amero-centrism); second, to politicise the discourse around the history of Canadian comics; and third, to show what a deliberately political, interdisciplinary analysis of Canadian superheroes can bring to the discourse. In my examination of *Northguard*, I combined social/cultural/political analysis, critical theory, and formal analysis in an attempt to draw equally on my background as an art historian, a popular culture critic, a Canadian, and a feminist reader and fan of superhero comic books.

While I am critical of the need or desire for a canon in comics scholarship, the persistence of hierarchy cannot be ignored; as long as there are proponents defending the canon, it is imperative that scholars continue to examine works that challenge their assumptions – particularly when those assumptions operate to render the production of an entire nation invisible. Rather than asserting that (some) comics are important because they are “literary,” exceptional, and also belong in the canon of “high art,” I argue that it is precisely because of their status as mass-produced entertainment that they represent a useful area of analysis and critique. Popular culture matters because these are the stories we tell each other about what it is to be ourselves. Nuanced critical discourse around these stories is essential to the creation of a culture of inclusivity that resists homogenising narratives. Further, an analysis of the culturally and historically specific

ways that these stories respond to changes in their social, political and economic landscapes can only increase our understanding of the strategies of resistance and affirmation adopted by producers and consumers of cultural products. As Martin J. Powers notes, in his article "Art and History: Exploring the Counterchange Condition,"

the historical and conceptual parameters of the phenomenon in question cannot be formed adequately within the limits of just one cultural tradition...they must be developed dialectically in comparison with related phenomena in other cultures, where such can be found.²⁰⁹

To expand on this idea and reformulate it to apply to comics scholarship, then, is to say that it is insufficient to simply celebrate Canadian achievements in the comic industry; a complete analysis must also examine stylistic, ideological, and narratological similarities and differences in texts created in other cultural contexts.

In my examination of the discourse around comic books, I suggested that there are four main types of scholarship: historical surveys examining the chronology of developments within comicbooks; monograph publications examining particular artists or characters; works primarily focused on the formal analysis of the artwork; and works seeking to explore the social/historical meanings of comics. Breaking the dominant modes of analysis into separate and disparate camps may be a false construct, but is still a useful exercise. While existing analyses tends to remain closest to one of these four sets of concerns, it is not uncommon to see a scholar combine social and literary frameworks, or to use a joint literary-artistic lens. It is very rare to find a scholar concerned with ideological underpinnings, the themes and issues raised by the narrative, how these both form and are informed by popular culture, *and* how these combine with the formal

²⁰⁹ Martin J. Powers, "Art and History: Exploring the Counterchange Condition" in *The Art Bulletin*, V. 77, No. 3 (September 1995), pp. 382-7

properties of the visual image. This is partly due to the ways in which educational institutions segregate disciplines into separate faculties, and partly because these individual faculties will tend to privilege particular forms of analysis. It also relates to the tensions between publishing for scholarly audiences, and publishing for 'general interest.' However, delineating these groups along differences in methodological approaches in a sense reflects the ways in which comics scholars think about themselves. Most (informal) criticisms I have read of recent works published on comics is that they are "too literary," "too scholarly," or "not scholarly enough," or that they "didn't pay enough attention to the images themselves." These contradictions suggest that people are heavily invested in their notions of what comic books are/should be, and what a meaningful discourse around these texts should accomplish.

A number of interests are at play in this arena. Academics recognise a largely untapped field which allows for rapid development of a career and body of work as an 'expert' in a particular area. Some fans and artists (some of whom are also academics) are interested in gaining 'mainstream' respect for a medium long neglected by a dominant culture primarily concerned with 'high art.' Other fans and artists are desperately concerned with keeping the academics out of the field altogether (especially the feminists!), as they are only going to ruin the escapist fun. Each of these sets of interests (which are by no means mutually exclusive) shape the kinds of analysis that are possible, and the kinds of analysis deemed acceptable in particular contexts. So where do I fit in this, and what kind of contribution do I want to make to the discourse?

As a child I read comics for their funny, romantic, or fantastic stories; they provided a wonderful escape from the perceived hardships of childhood. Later, in high

school, I came back to 'higher-brow' graphic novels, and developed an admiration for the literary and philosophical sophistication achieved by artists and storytellers. Now, as an academically-trained art historian, I come back to these works with highly developed visual literacy, and an appreciation for the political implications of myth-making and the impact popular culture has on social structures and interactions. At first, this may sound like a teleological arc which creates a hierarchy that privileges the academy, but that is not my intention; as I have shown, there are limitations to a purely academic approach to comics studies. I want to give voice to my inner fan's appreciation for, and attachment to, the artistic and narrative skill demonstrated by professionals in the comic book industry. But I also have other concerns with these texts, informed by my social-historian's interest in how these texts functioned in particular communities, and my art-historian's interest in how the distinct formal, visual properties of individual work to produce meaning. Most important, I feel that an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of comics as cultural texts is required, if the fullest possible understanding of them is to be reached.

Although superhero comics books are considered an American genre, Canadian comic artists continually take up the challenge of reconciling the modernist construct of the superhero with our seemingly post-modern national identity. Insisting on the irrelevance of traditional notions of '(super)hero' to Canadian society, artists reject the received 'American' conventions of the national superhero genre, and try to define their Canadian difference through antithesis. They looked to realism in style and narrative, alternative publishing, and the inclusion of visual, linguistic, and ideological performances of difference to assert their national and artistic individuality. In terms of nationalist ideology, however, this definition-through-negation collapses our apparent

diversity into a binary, while naturalising our tolerance of difference, in order to disguise the fact that our assumed multiplicity is really an Us/Them duality.

Where comic books situate the villain, or the 'un-Canadian', is in racist, colonialist attitudes, unnecessary violence, and exploitation of weakness. This reveals anxieties about our economic security, the stability of Canadian unity, and the difficulties of preserving our cultural distinction from the US in a cultural marketplace saturated with American commodities. This, however, acts to situate colonialism and the drive to assimilate as a threat from outside Canada, hiding the social and legal assimilation of 'minorities' within our own borders. Further, by subordinating the French heroine to the English hero, the threat of French separatism is diffused, and French difference is assimilated through the introduction of an outside threat. However, French concerns and values are at least acknowledged. These characters simultaneously affirm and resist different aspects of social and national ideology, and retain a kind of ambiguity which makes them difficult to pin down to just one meaning. Perhaps without a centralised and monolithic culture, the construct of the Canadian superhero does not have to collapse, but be adapted, fractured, faceted, and rearticulated to make meaning within a diverse post-modern society.

I wanted to touch on many areas and issues that proved to be beyond the scope of this thesis; I see these issues as valuable avenues of inquiry for future research and analysis. While I touch on how nearly all Canadian superheroes are complicit in, and perpetuate, a colonialist outlook that privileges the figure of the (hyper)able-bodied, white, male, Anglo-Saxon, I did not have the time and space to dedicate to examining

artists and characters that challenge that hegemony. For example, I critique the negative stereotypes of First Nations peoples present in some superhero comics, without examining the counter-narrative offered by Jay Odjick's series *The Raven*, or the ways in which artist Michael Nichol Yahgulanaas challenges and subverts both the formal visual properties of the medium, and the privileging of the colonialist perspective. Further, I have uncritically accepted the construct of "Canada" as a nation, without examining the challenge posed to this construct by the work of artists like Gord Hill and others. Finally, though one of the images I included in this analysis was created by Peter Hsu, there was no room to discuss the relative absence of Asian artists in the industry and the histories written about the industry, and the dearth of Asian heroes – or indeed, the absence of non-white artists and heroes more broadly, something that is particularly jarring in a nation that prides itself on its multiculturalism.

Similarly, though I offer a critique of the heteronormativity of the Canadian national superhero and examine the ways in which sexual and cultural difference are conflated, I was primarily interested in how constructions of nationality inflect the figure of the superhero; as a result, I was unable to search for Queer heroes, or to hypothesise how their presence in the cultural landscape might challenge the assumptions made by the superhero genre, the normativity of the gender binary in popular culture, and the heterocentric resistance to discussing the homoeroticism of superheroic narratives. Does the Camp of the superhero lend itself to genderqueer insurrections against the gender binary imposed by straight society? Might the transformations often at the heart of superhero narratives have anything in common with the processes of transition for transgender individuals?

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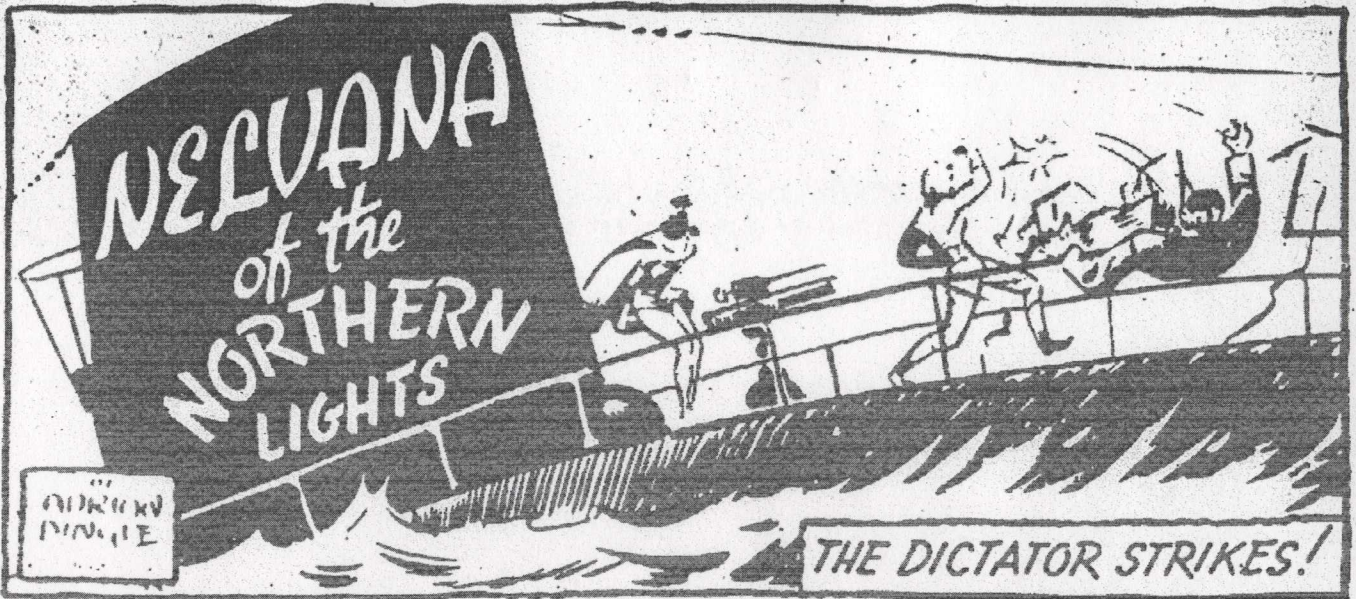
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Triumph Comics

COMICS • 64 PAGES OF EXCITEMENT



FIG 1

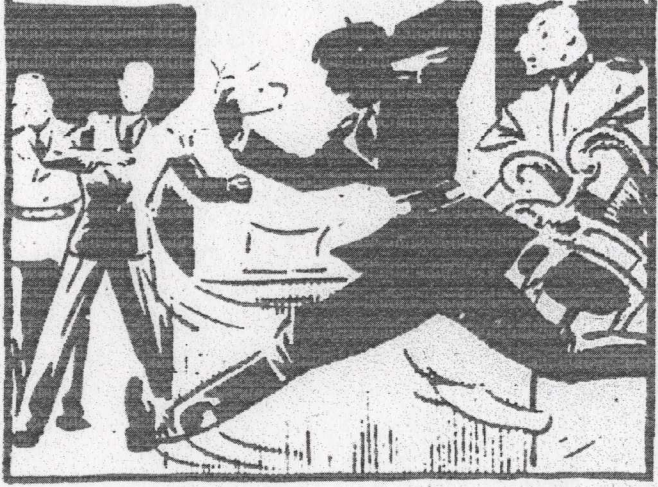


THE DICTATOR STRIKES!

HIGH IN THE BAVARIAN ALPS NESTLES THE SECRET HIDE-OUT OF THE CRUEL DICTATOR!



IF WE COULD LOOK THROUGH THE LONG PLATE-GLASS WINDOW AT THIS MOMENT, WE MIGHT FIND "NUMBER 1" IN ONE OF HIS BAD MOODS.

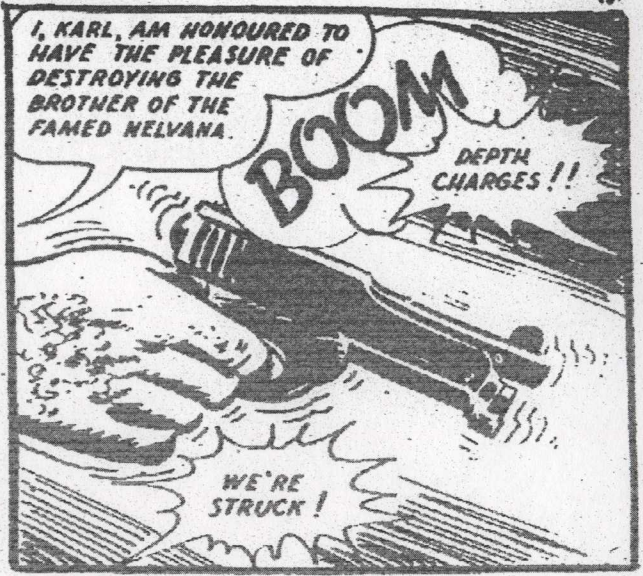
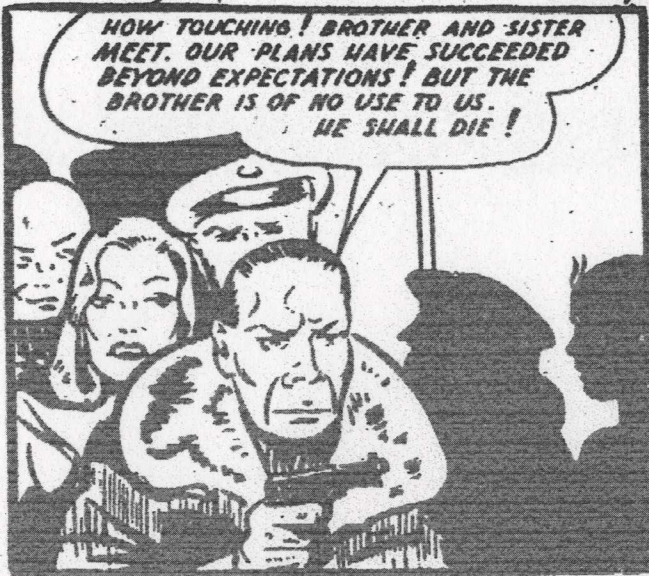


DIS ARCTIC GIRL HASS RUINED MY EVERY MOOF TO PROGRESS WITH OUR GLORIOUS NEW ORDER IN THE WEST.



FIRST I SEND TOROFF! THEN MY TRUSTED AIR MARSHAL KERLICH! AND DEPUTY KEITZ! ZEY ALL FAIL ME!







Lt. Gen. A. G. L. McNaughton
COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE CANADIAN FORCES



SPOTTED EAGLE ALWAYS SAID - "PILE 'EM UP IF YOU CAN" HERE GOES!

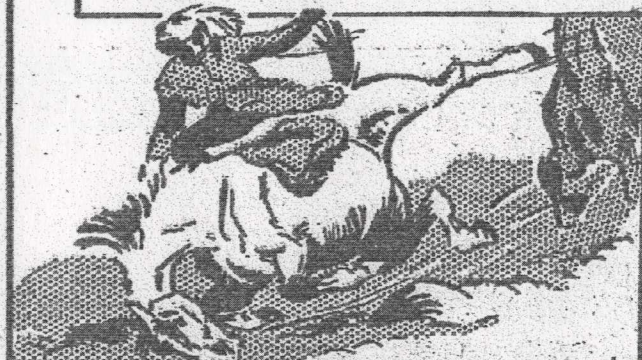


IN HOT PURSUIT, THE BLOODTHIRSTY COMANCHES, RACING AT BREAK-NECK SPEED, GAINED SLIGHTLY ON THE FLEEING LAD.



BANG

TAKING CAREFUL AIM BUDDY BRINGS HIS SIGHTS DOWN ON THE CHIEF WHO IS LEADING.



SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD, THE LEADER'S PONY WENT DOWN WITH A CRASH.



BUNCHED CLOSE BEHIND HIM, THE WARRIORS PILE UP IN A TANGLE OF KICKING HOOFES AND BROKEN SPEARS.

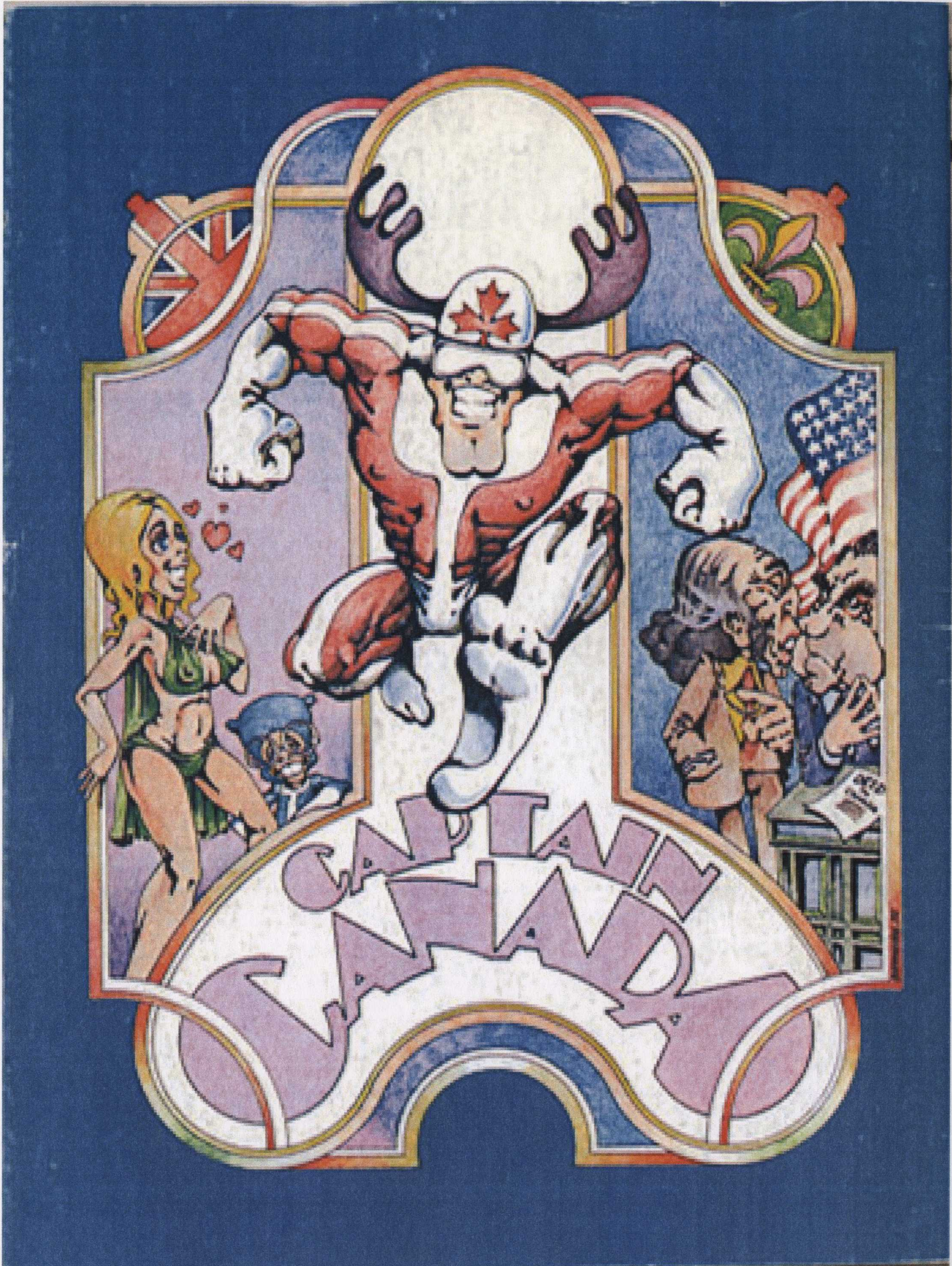


Fig 6

volume 1 number 5 50 cents

fuddle buddle

THE HANSARD OF THE COMMON PEOPLE

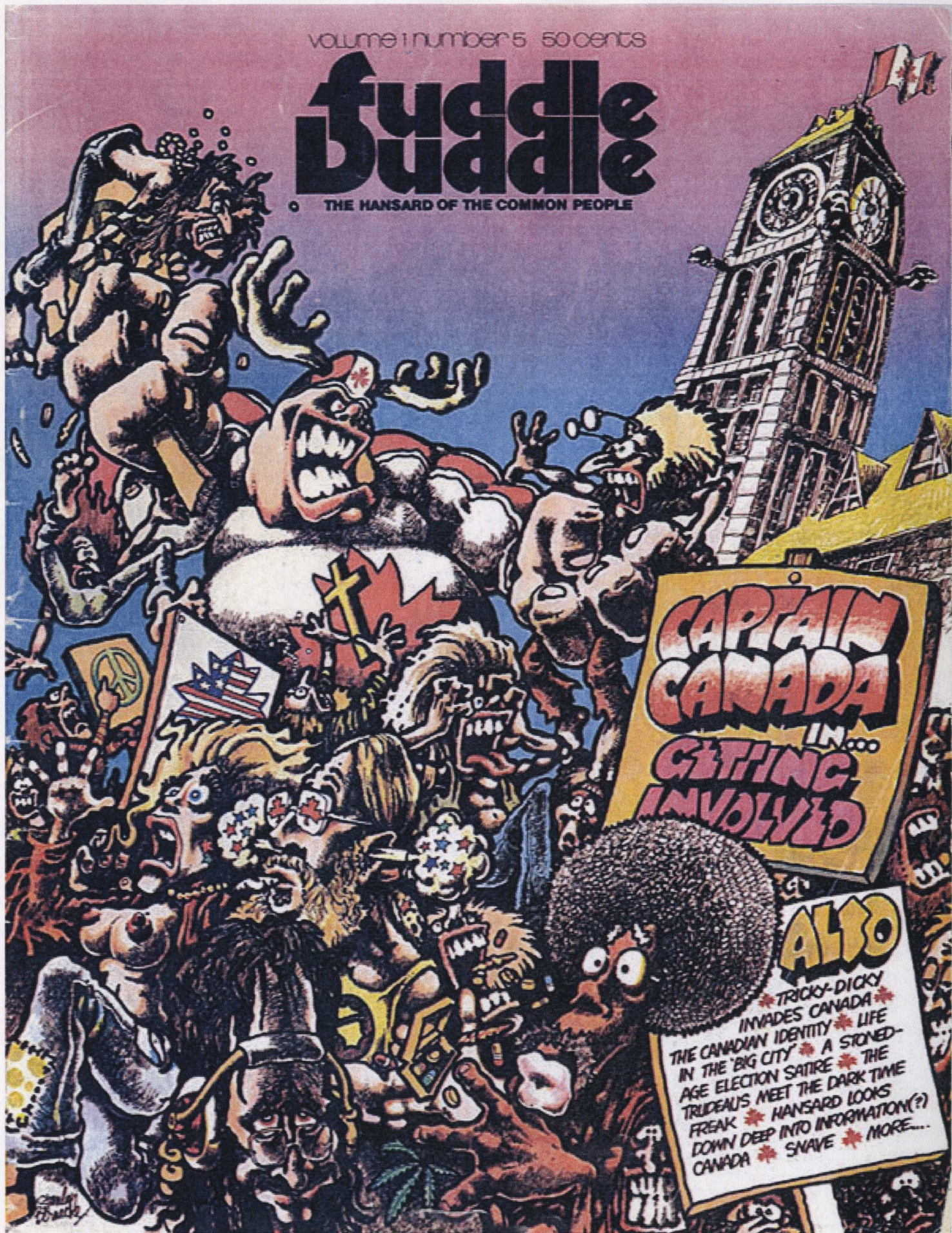


Fig 8



WOW! YOU CAN FEEL THE ELECTRIC ENERGY IN THE AIR!

AND YOU CAN SEE IT IN THE STREET! LOOKS LIKE A PROTEST...

RIGHT ON!
OFF A FIG FOR ME!!

DEMOCRACY SUCKS!



STOP THE CAR!

WITH A MOUTHFUL OF MASH MASHING CAP PLUNGES INTO THE 'UNTIL-NOW-PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION!

NOBODY OPPOSES DEMOCRACY AND GETS AWAY WITH IT!! DAMN COMMIES!

BLINCHA FEVERED DROP-OUT FREAKS!

SMASH

WHAP



POLICE!! CUTTA THE TRUCK AND HELP ROUND 'EM UP!

COMMIE

WHAK

WHEW! HEY... WHERE ARE THE COMRADES? WHY AM I...? WHERE ARE WE...?

WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A LACK OF COMMUNICATION... SHUT UP FREAK!

IS THIS UH... A MOVIE?

TV?



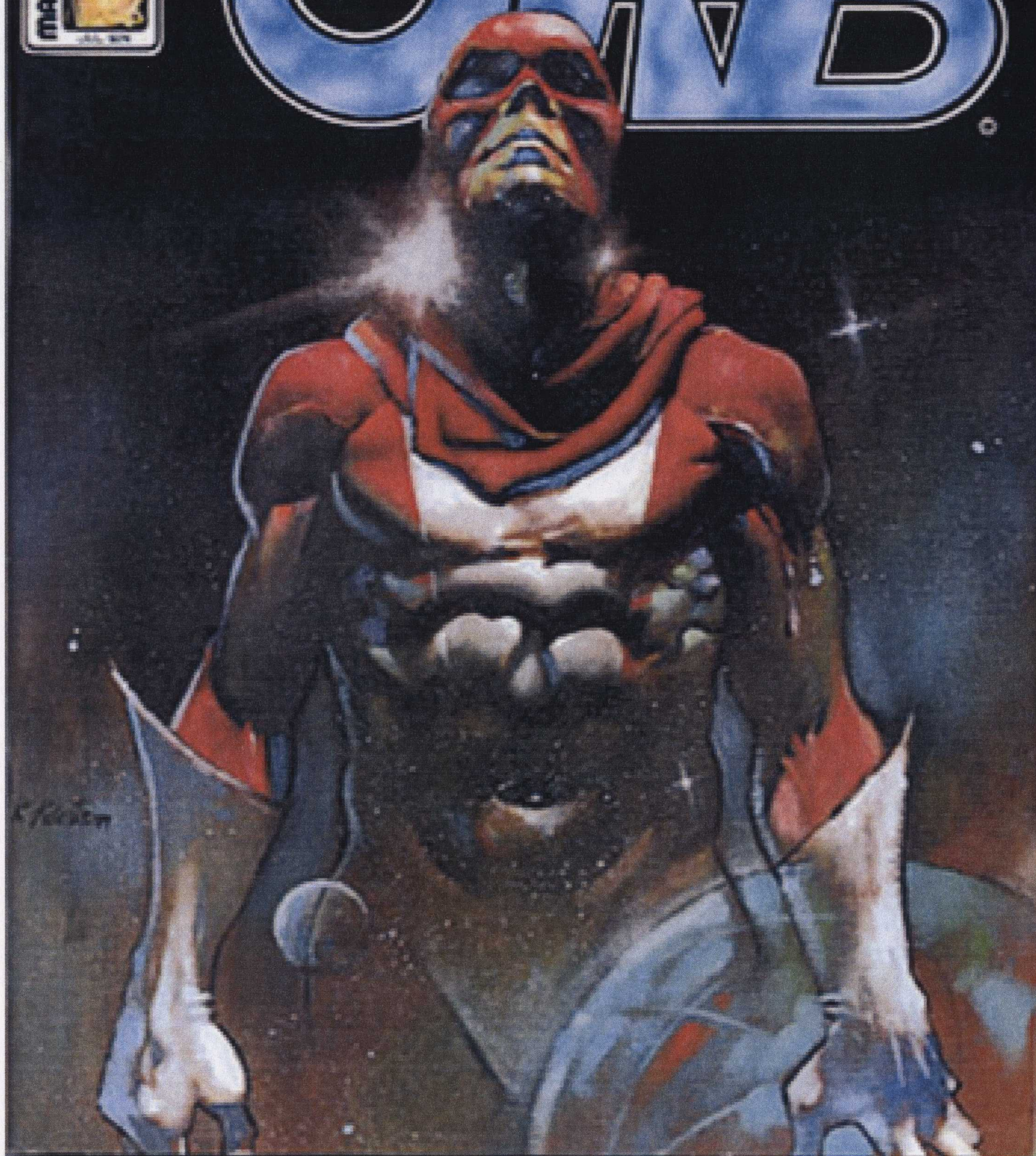
MAGIC MUSKIE™ RELEASED THE SMELL FROM THE BOTTLE OF THE TRULY CANADIAN PERFUM. ITS ORIGIN TO BE TOLD BY U.S.



HORROR·ADVENTURE·SCI-FI·FANTASY



OTRAB



COMELY
COMIX

FIRST
FANTASTIC
ISSUE!

JULY-75
No. 1

CAPTAIN CANUCK



PLUS
THE OPENING
SAGA OF
JONN
AND...
MUCH, MUCH,
MORE!

COLLECTOR'S
EDITION

Fig 12



FIG 13



OMEGA FLIGHT

[HTTP://SAVE.ALPHAFLIGHT.NET](http://save.alphaflight.net)

CANADA'S LAST LINE OF DEFENCE

NEW • TRIUMPH

featuring

NORTHGUARD



MATRIX
GRAPHIC
SERIES

No. 1
\$2.00 CDN
\$1.75 USA

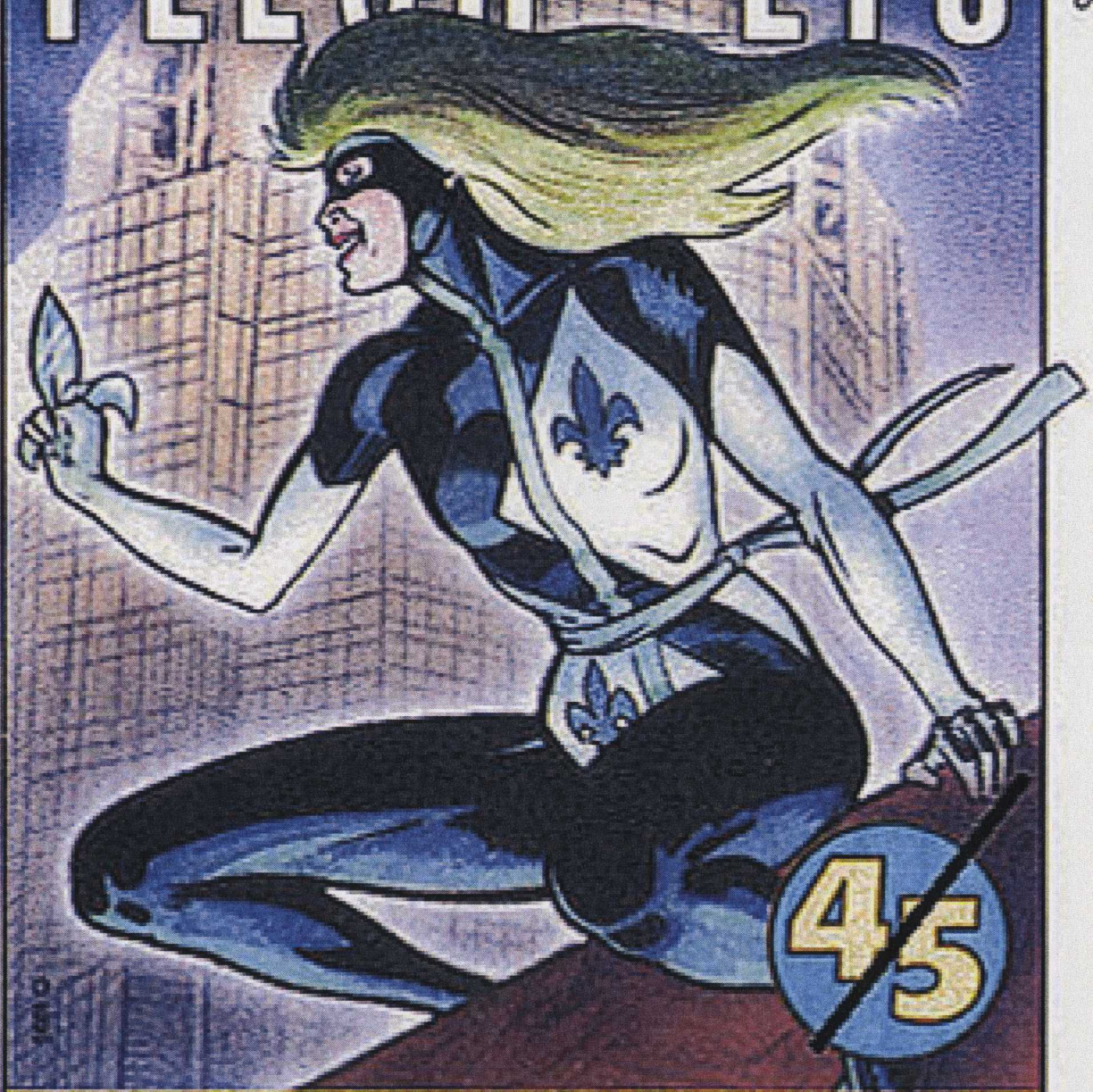


SECOND PRINTING

FIG 15

FLEUR DE LYS

SUPERHÉROS



SUPERHEROES

C A N A D A

45

FIG 16

GIVENCHY-EN-BOHELLE, FRANCE,
NEAR WWY RIDGE.

I STAND WATCH. I GUARD THE MEMORY OF THE
ELEVEN THOUSAND. WELL, ELEVEN THOUSAND,
TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTY-FIVE, IF YOU
MUST BE PRECISE.

THEY DIED, YOU SEE. IN PAIN. ALONE. UNKNOWN.
WITHOUT EVEN A NAME OR A GRAVESTONE TO
GIVE THEM COMFORT.

BRAVE MEN FROM CANADA. NOW FODDER
RAW MATERIAL FOR THE MURDER FACTORY
THEY CALLED A "GREAT WAR."

I NEVER UNDERSTOOD WHAT WAS SUPPOSED
TO BE SO GREAT ABOUT IT, MYSELF.

THEY CALL ME THE SPIRIT OF CANADA, BUT
I'M NOT EVEN TRULY A WOMAN,
MUCH LESS A SPIRIT

I DO NOT LAUGH. I DO NOT
BREATHE. MY FEET ARE
ETERNALLY PLANTED IN
ALIEN SOIL.

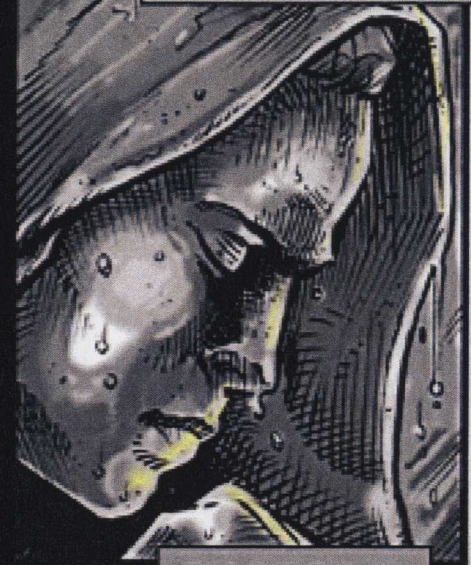


HOW BORINGLY,
TYPICALLY
CANADIAN.



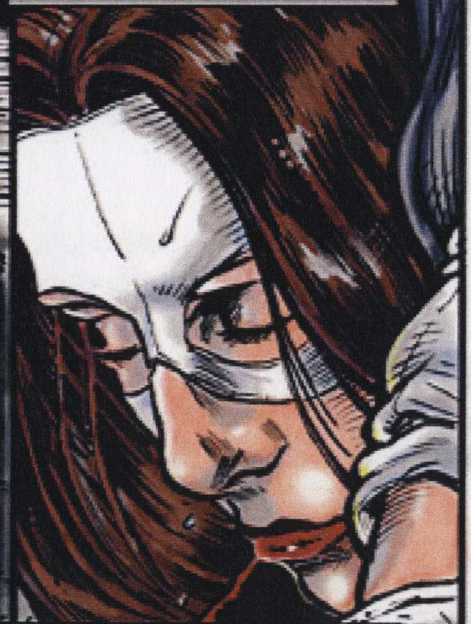
I AM NOT A SPIRIT. NOT IN
ANY SENSE THAT MATTERS
AT THIS POINT..

MY TEARS ARE CAST IN
CONCRETE. ALL I CAN DO
IS MOURN.



THIS ONE, THOUGH,
SHE'S DIFFERENT.

SHE MOURNS, YES, BUT THERE
IS ALSO LIFE IN HER. VIBRANCY.
LOVE. HOPE. LUST. RAGE.



SPIRIT YOU COULD FEEL A MILE AWAY.

A female superhero with long brown hair, wearing a white mask with a black eye cutout, a white and red jacket with a red maple leaf on the chest, and dark pants. She is flying over a city with a large white building complex in the foreground. The background shows a cityscape with green trees and a blue sky with light clouds.

WELCOME, MY
SISTER.

IT'S TIME CANADA HAD A
SPIRIT LIKE YOU.

AND THIS IS
ONLY THE
BEGINNING.

CHECK BACK HERE FOR
FUTURE WEBISODES OF
CANADIANA: THE NEW
SPIRIT OF CANADA!



ANOTHER SPACE...



ANOTHER TIME...



OH... THAT WAS... REALLY... UH...



HRRRURRK!

I REALLY WISH YOU WOULDN'T DO THAT.

UHN.. WHO IN THE HELL - ?



I'M TOM THOMSON.

THIS IS MY WORLD.

NEXT: THE MIND OF AN ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN



THE SHAME IS HIS, YOU KNOW.

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?

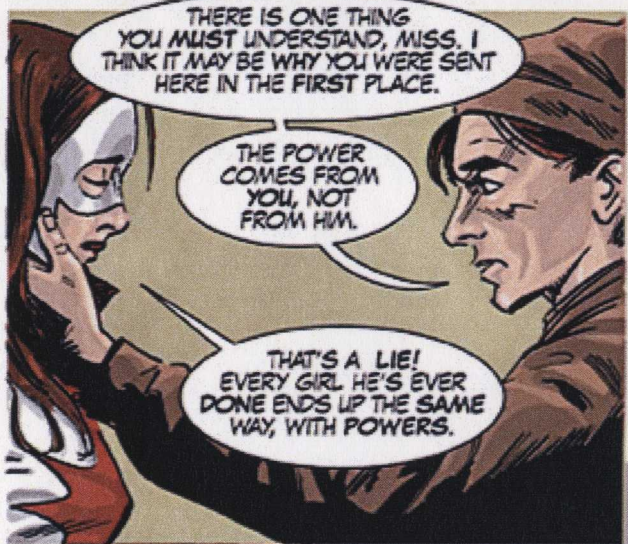


THE SHAME IS HERE.



IT'S A GIFT.

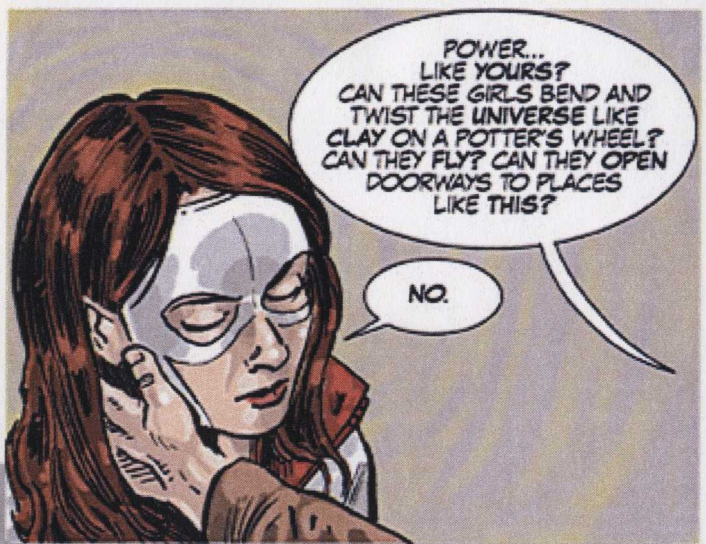
IT'S A DISEASE.



THERE IS ONE THING YOU MUST UNDERSTAND, MISS. I THINK IT MAY BE WHY YOU WERE SENT HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

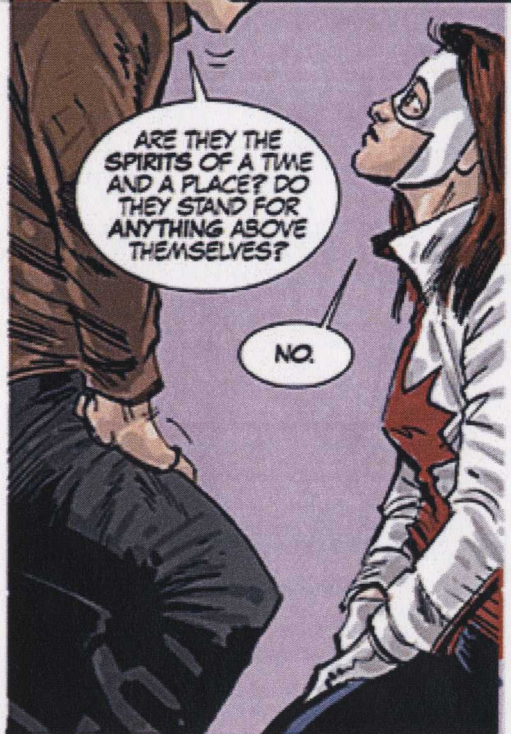
THE POWER COMES FROM YOU, NOT FROM HIM.

THAT'S A LIE! EVERY GIRL HE'S EVER DONE ENDS UP THE SAME WAY, WITH POWERS.



POWER... LIKE YOURS? CAN THESE GIRLS BEND AND TWIST THE UNIVERSE LIKE CLAY ON A POTTER'S WHEEL? CAN THEY FLY? CAN THEY OPEN DOORWAYS TO PLACES LIKE THIS?

NO.



ARE THEY THE SPIRITS OF A TIME AND A PLACE? DO THEY STAND FOR ANYTHING ABOVE THEMSELVES?

NO.



THERE IS NO FATE, MISS, YET YOU WERE FATED TO BE WHO YOU ARE. ROBERTSON-DARK ANGEL THAT HE WAS-KNEW IT.

YOU DIDN'T GET YOUR POWERS FROM HIM. HE WAS TRYING TO TAKE YOUR POWERS FROM YOU.

NEXT: A SMALL REQUEST.



OKAY, I'VE HAD MY SAY, MISS. THAT'S ALL.

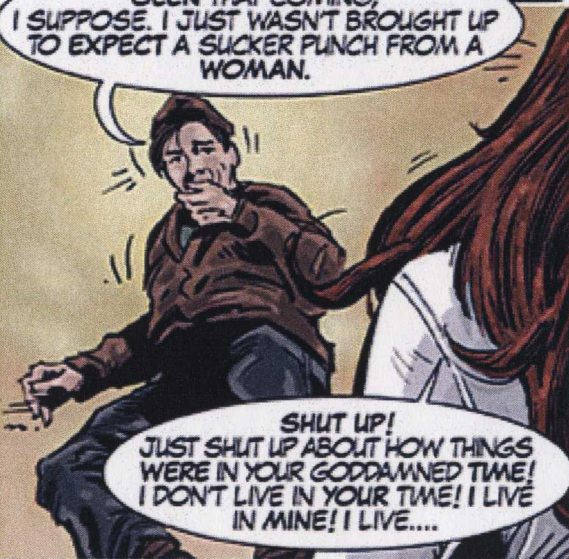


I'M SORRY THAT...

YOU SON OF A...



SHOULD'VE SEEN THAT COMING, I SUPPOSE. I JUST WASN'T BROUGHT UP TO EXPECT A SUCKER PUNCH FROM A WOMAN.



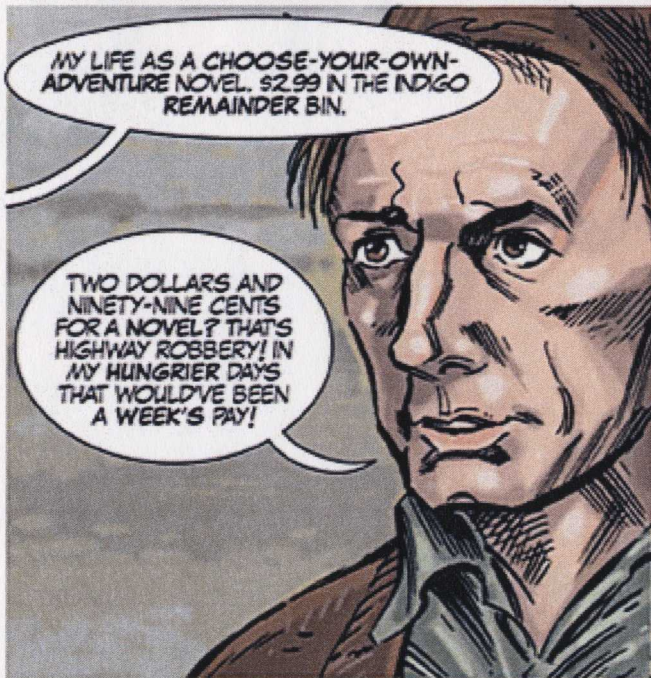
SHUT UP! JUST SHUT UP ABOUT HOW THINGS WERE IN YOUR GODDAMNED TIME! I DON'T LIVE IN YOUR TIME! I LIVE IN MINE! I LIVE....



I... LIVE....

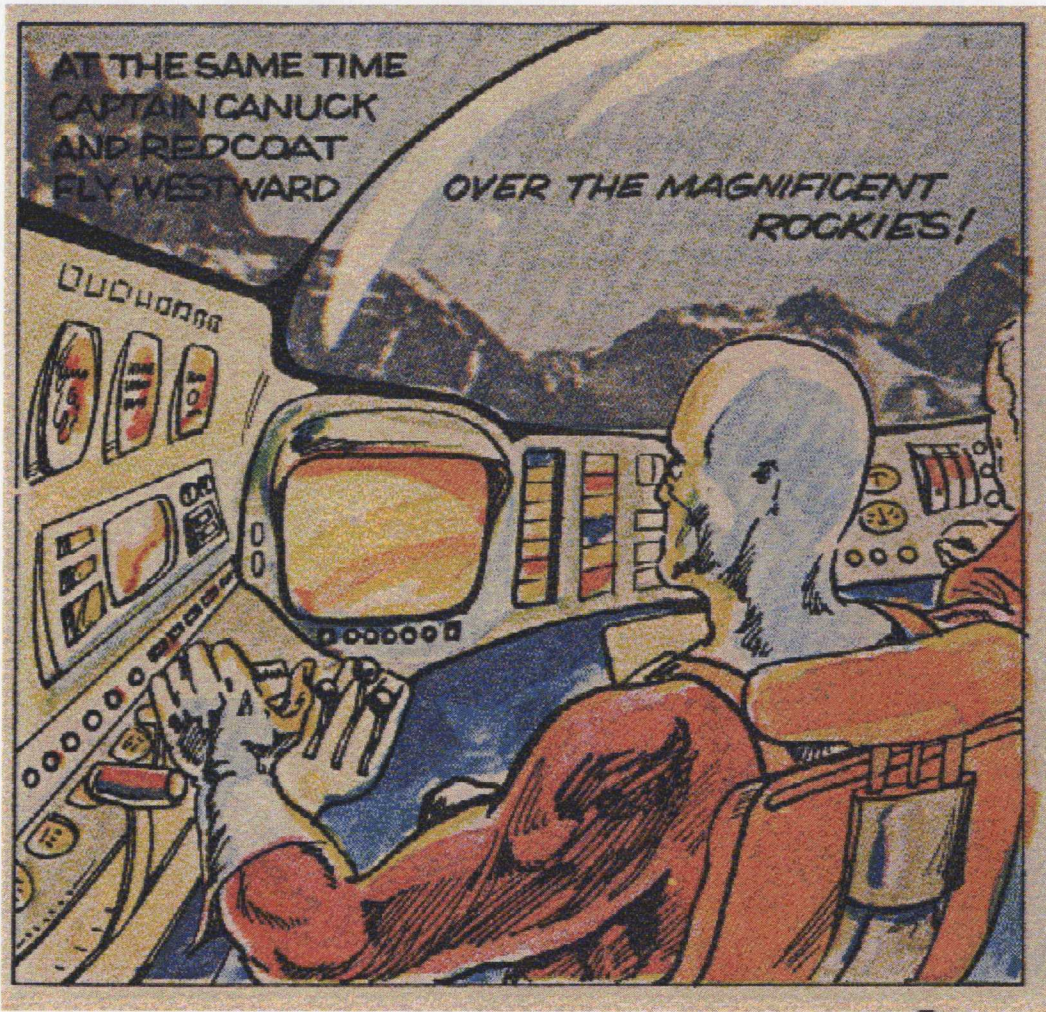


NEXT: TRUTH, CONSEQUENCES, AND ALL THAT JAZZ.





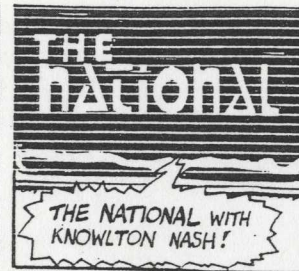
NEXT: KEEP ON ROCKIN' IN THE REAL WORLD...



"Canadian history: defeats attempts to construct traditional society-saving or society-changing heroes." Margaret Atwood Survival



HIS NAME IS
PHILLIP WISE.



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 FROM CALGARY.

I DON'T NEED THIS. NOT NOW.


THIS DAY HAS BEEN AN UNEASY ONE FOR PHILLIP WISE.

HIS FAMILY HAS LEFT ON AN EXTENDED VACATION, HIS FRIENDS ARE UNAVAILABLE, AND HE IS ALONE IN A BIG HOUSE. THE DAY, SOMEHOW, IRRATIONALLY, SEEMS READY TO POUNCE.

HE SEEKS SOLACE IN MUSIC. CHRIS DE BURGH'S SPANISH TRAIN.

3

TIME

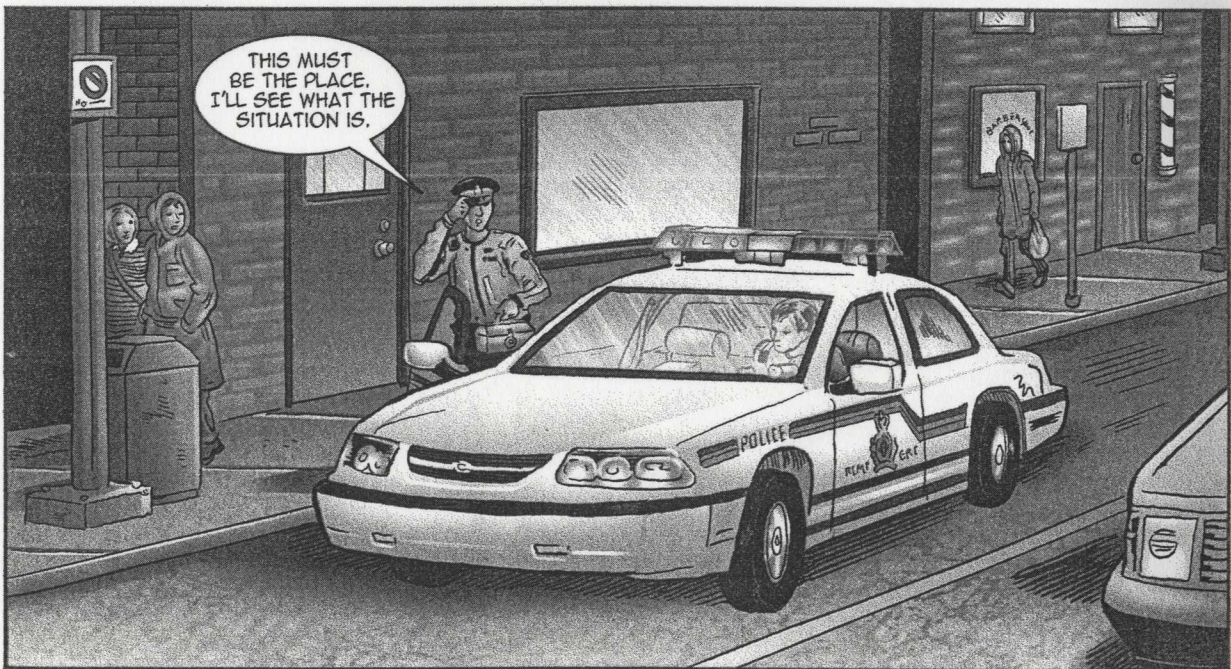


WHO IS
**CAPTAIN
CANUCK?**

As his popularity rises, so do his acts of heroism.

But what is the true agenda of this mystery man?

By Jeffrey Gatzburger



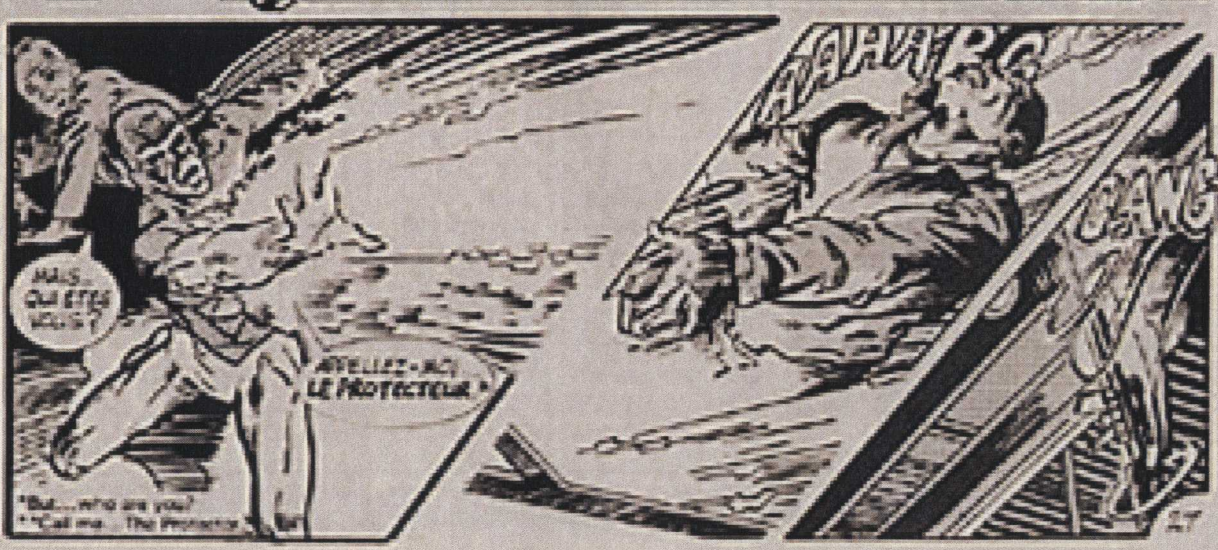
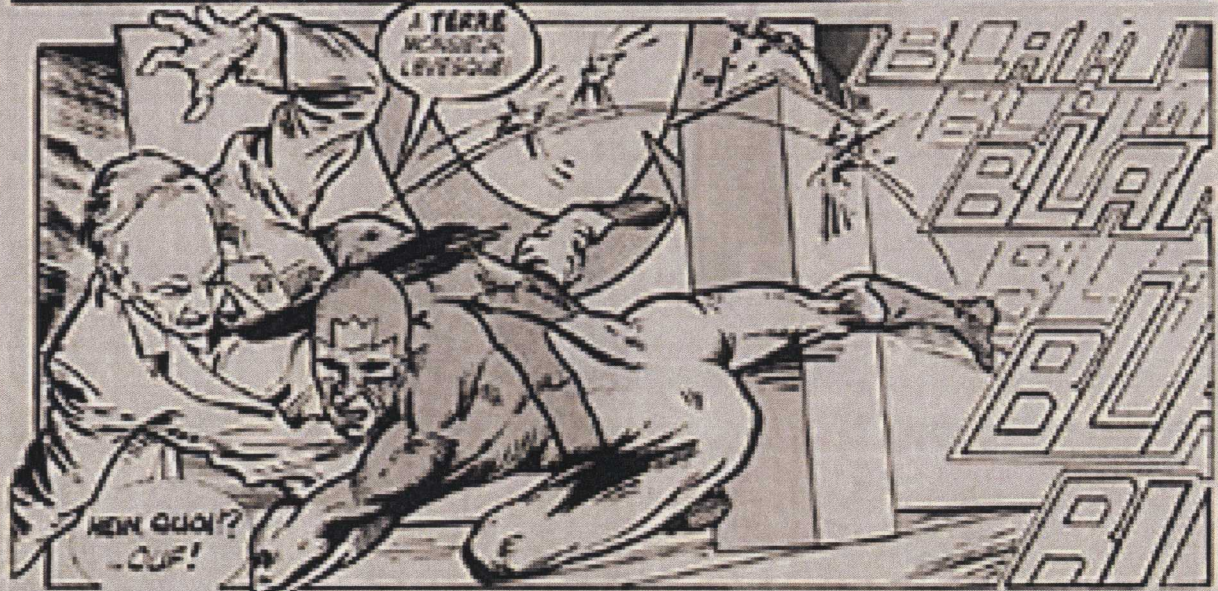
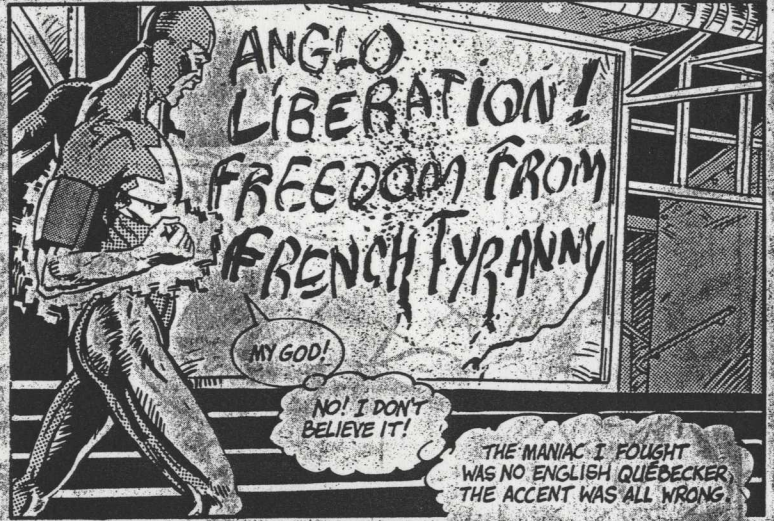


FIG 26R





"AND STAND ON GUARD..."

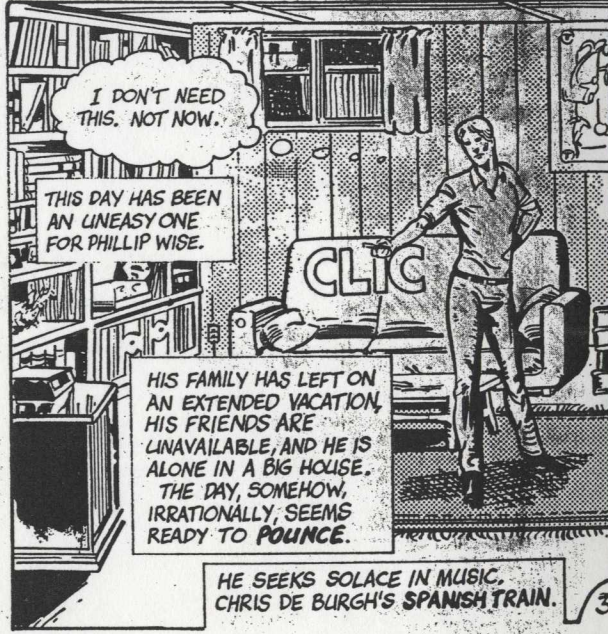
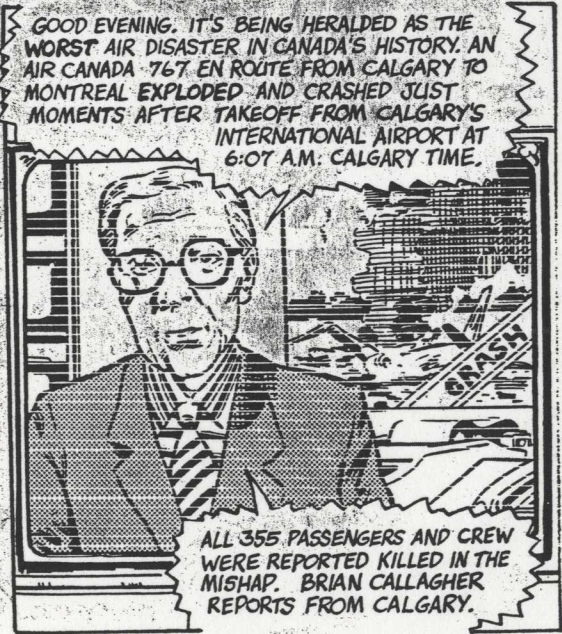
Writer/Co-creator
Mark Shainblum

Artist/Co-creator
Gabriel Morrissette

Letterer
Ian Carr

Plotting & Design Assist
Geof Isherwood

"Canadian history defeats attempts to construct traditional society-saving or society-changing heroes." Margaret Atwood Survival



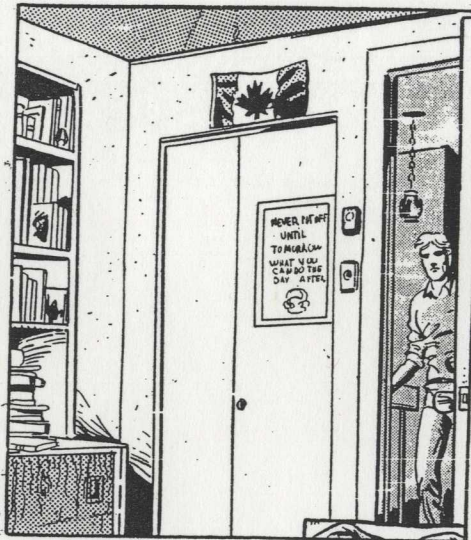
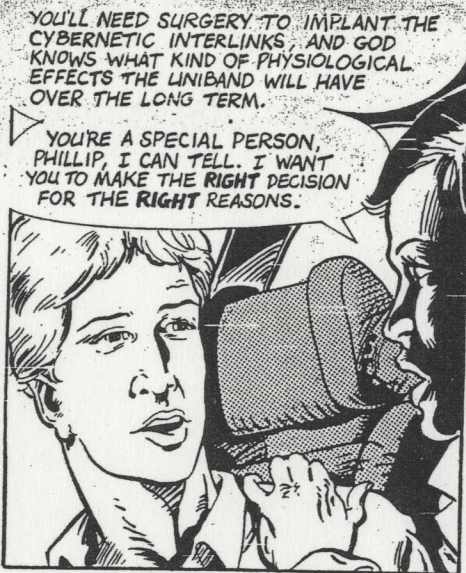


FIG 28A



I'LL DO IT!

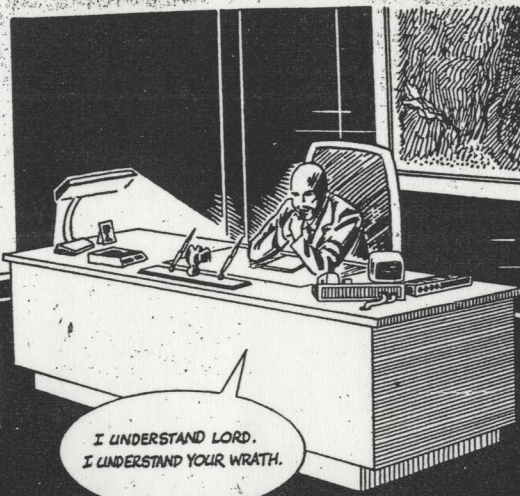


PROLOGUE ONE

THERE IS A SIGN ON THE DOOR OF THIS OFFICE, A SIGN WHICH IDENTIFIES THIS MAN AS THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE ULTRA CORPORATION.

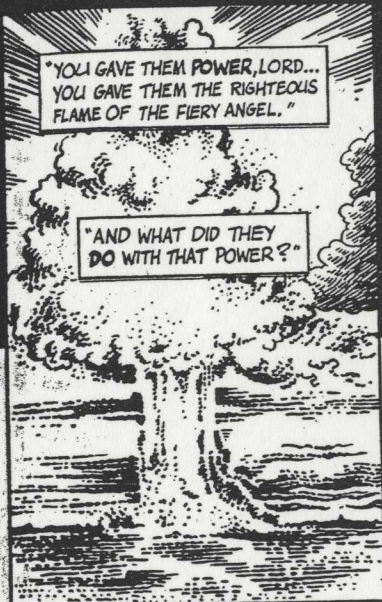
ULTRA HAS ESTABLISHED A RATHER LOW-KEY REPUTATION FOR ITSELF AS A RELIABLE AND EFFICIENT SUPPLIER OF BUSINESS-APPLICATIONS SOFTWARE.

IT, LIKE THE NAME ON THE DOOR, IS A SHAM.



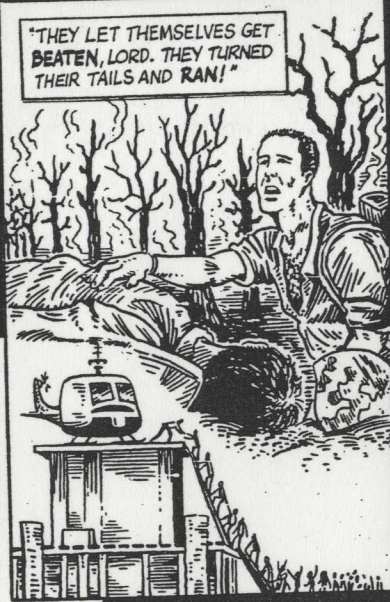
I UNDERSTAND LORD. I UNDERSTAND YOUR WRATH.

YOU CHOSE THEM. YOU CHOSE THEM ABOVE ALL OTHER PEOPLES.



"YOU GAVE THEM POWER, LORD... YOU GAVE THEM THE RIGHTEOUS FLAME OF THE FIERY ANGEL."

"AND WHAT DID THEY DO WITH THAT POWER?"



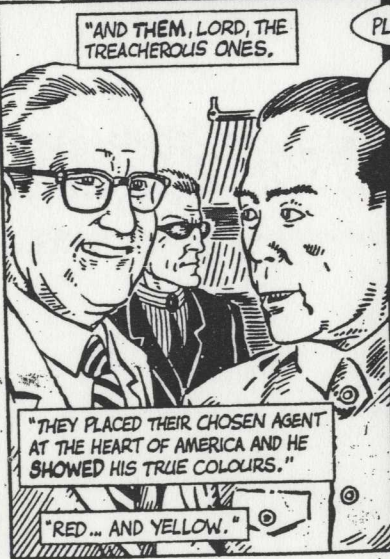
"THEY LET THEMSELVES GET BEATEN, LORD. THEY TURNED THEIR TAILS AND RAN!"



"AND AGAIN LORD. AGAIN YOUR CHOSEN PEOPLE WERE HUMILIATED BY INFIDELS AND NO PUNISHMENT WAS METED OUT."



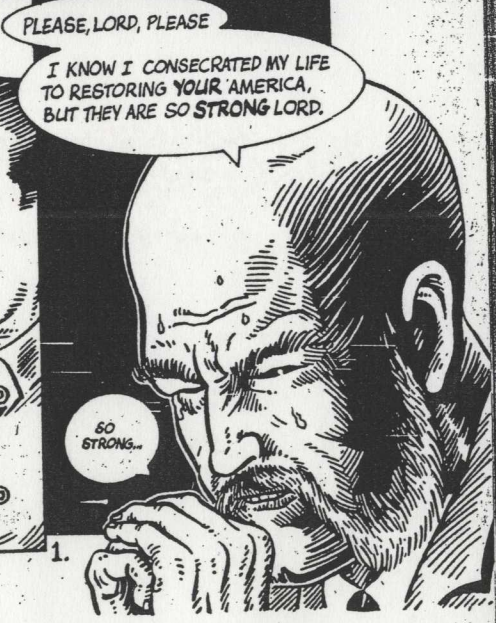
"THEY GAVE THE HEATHEN A VOICE, AND THEY HEDED HIS WORD."



"AND THEM, LORD, THE TREACHEROUS ONES."

"THEY PLACED THEIR CHOSEN AGENT AT THE HEART OF AMERICA AND HE SHOWED HIS TRUE COLOURS."

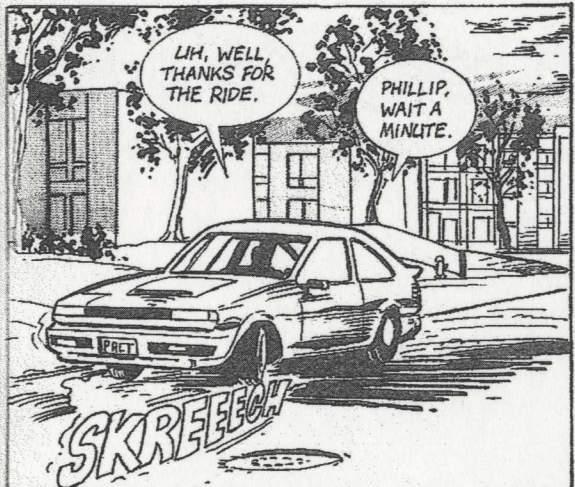
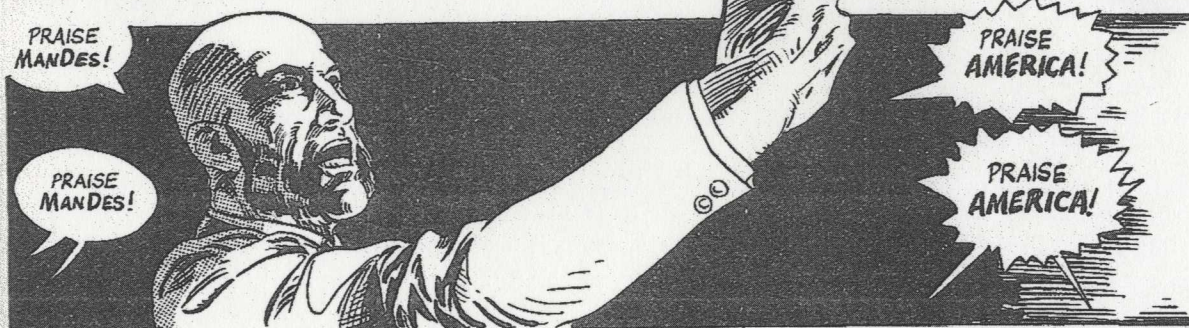
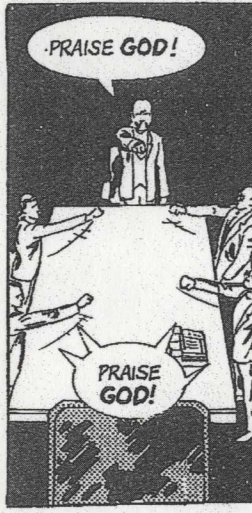
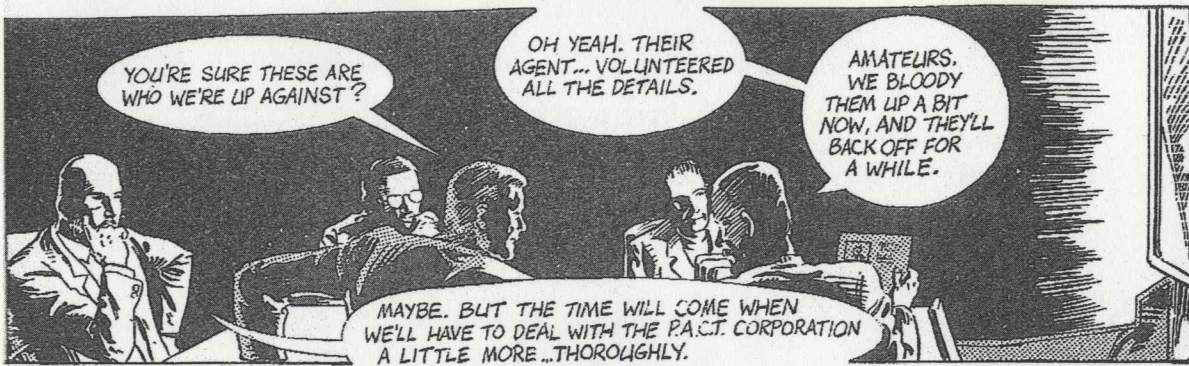
"RED... AND YELLOW."

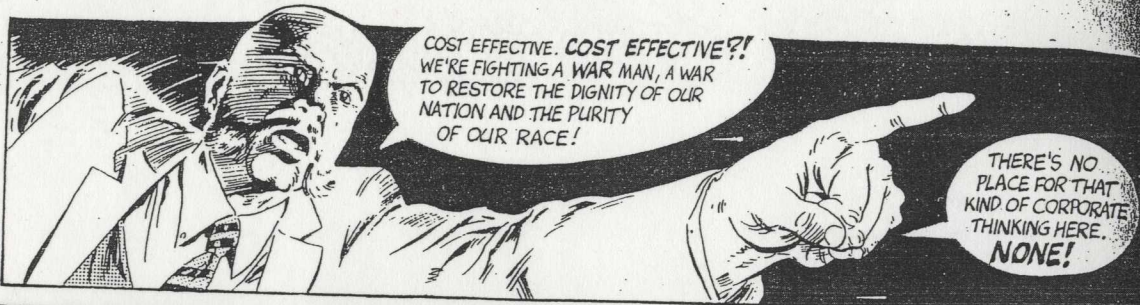


PLEASE, LORD, PLEASE

I KNOW I CONSECRATED MY LIFE TO RESTORING YOUR AMERICA, BUT THEY ARE SO STRONG LORD.

SO STRONG...





DON'T BE SILLY. SHE HASN'T BEEN BORN YET.

SURE SHE WAS. SHE WAS BORN BY 1944.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S 1944?

HAVE YOU FOUND ANYTHING YET, PHIL?

MAYBE YOU SHOULD WAIT. IT MAY NOT BE SAFE.

SHE MAY BE HURT RON. HOW FAR AM I?

NOTHING RON. NOT YET.

ABOUT THE REST OF THE WAY.

GOD.

OH MY...

AAAAAAR!

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING...

JEW-BOY?

WHAT LYSIS

YOUR ?

4

5



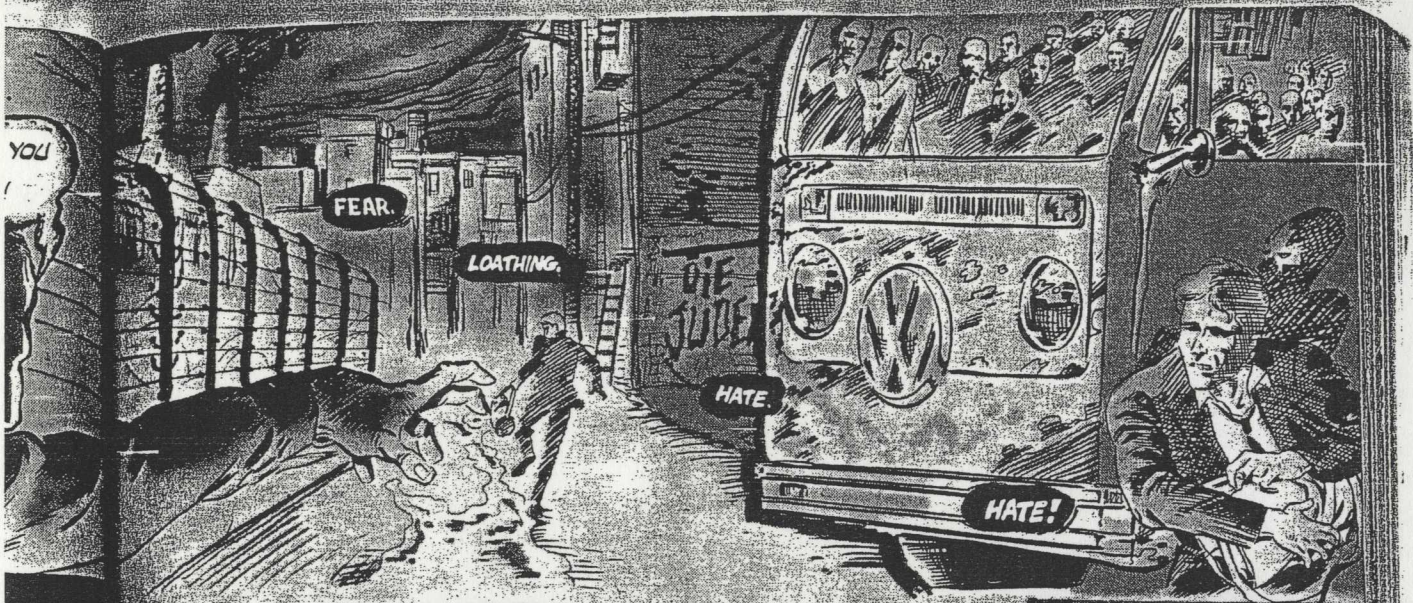
YOUR GRANDPARENTS? YOUR
AUNTS AND UNCLAS? YOUR PAST?
TOO BAD. THEY'VE GONE AND
OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS.

THAT WILL COST YOU
JEW-BOY! I'LL
SKIN YOU ALIVE!

IN MORE WAYS
THAN ONE.

GOD.

FIG 31 C



YOU

FEAR.

LOATHING.

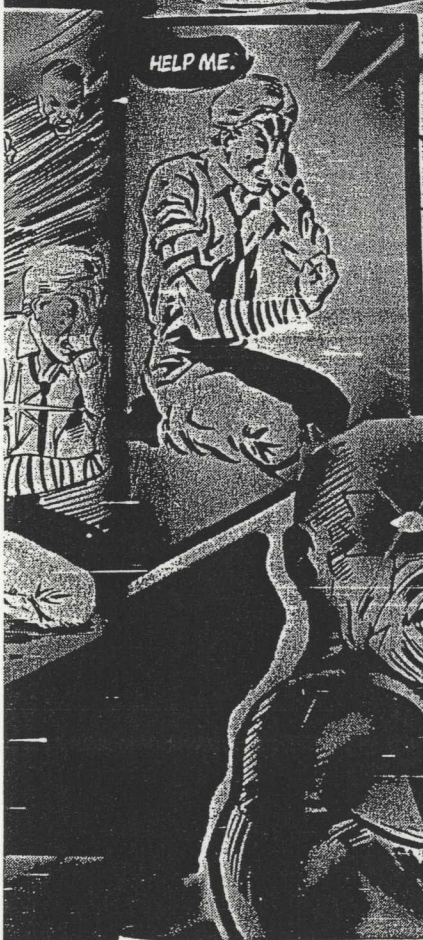
HATE.

HATE!

IT HAS BEEN SEVEN YEARS SINCE YOU LAST WOUND THE TEPHILLIN. YOU HAVE NOT DONE IT SINCE BAR-MITZVAH. YOU CANNOT REMEMBER HOW.

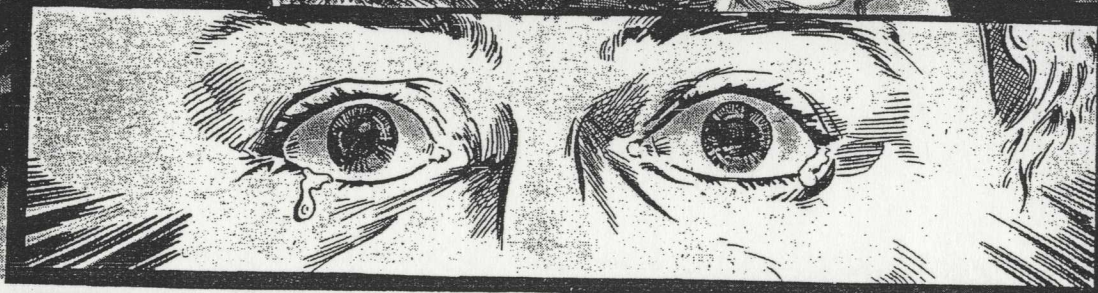
ALMOST. ALMOST...

TEPHILLIN. PHYLACTERY. LOATHING AND HATE.



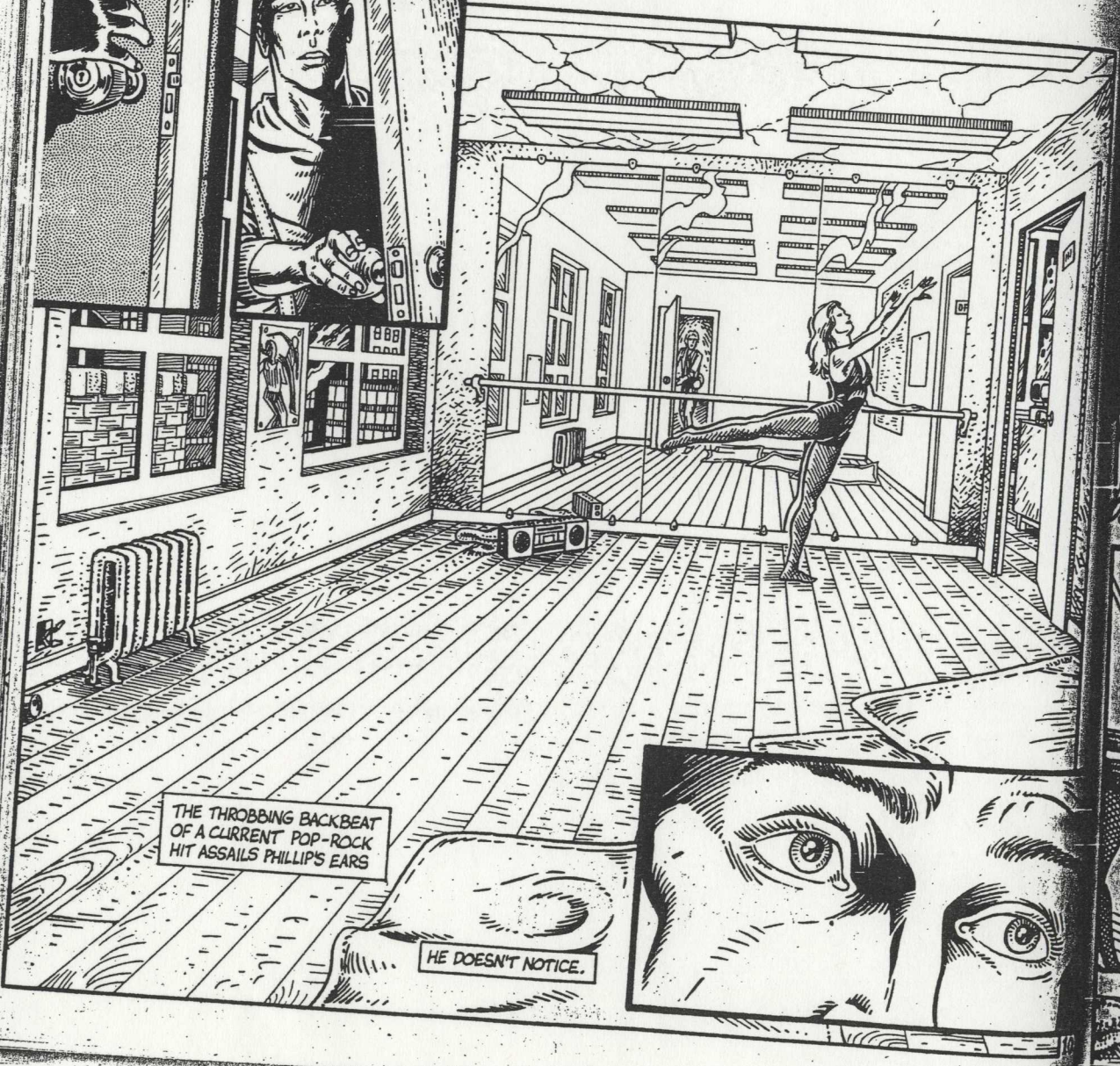
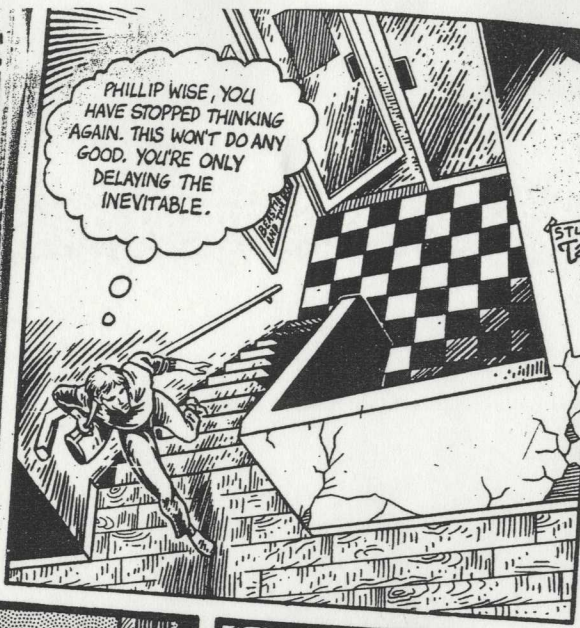
HELP ME.

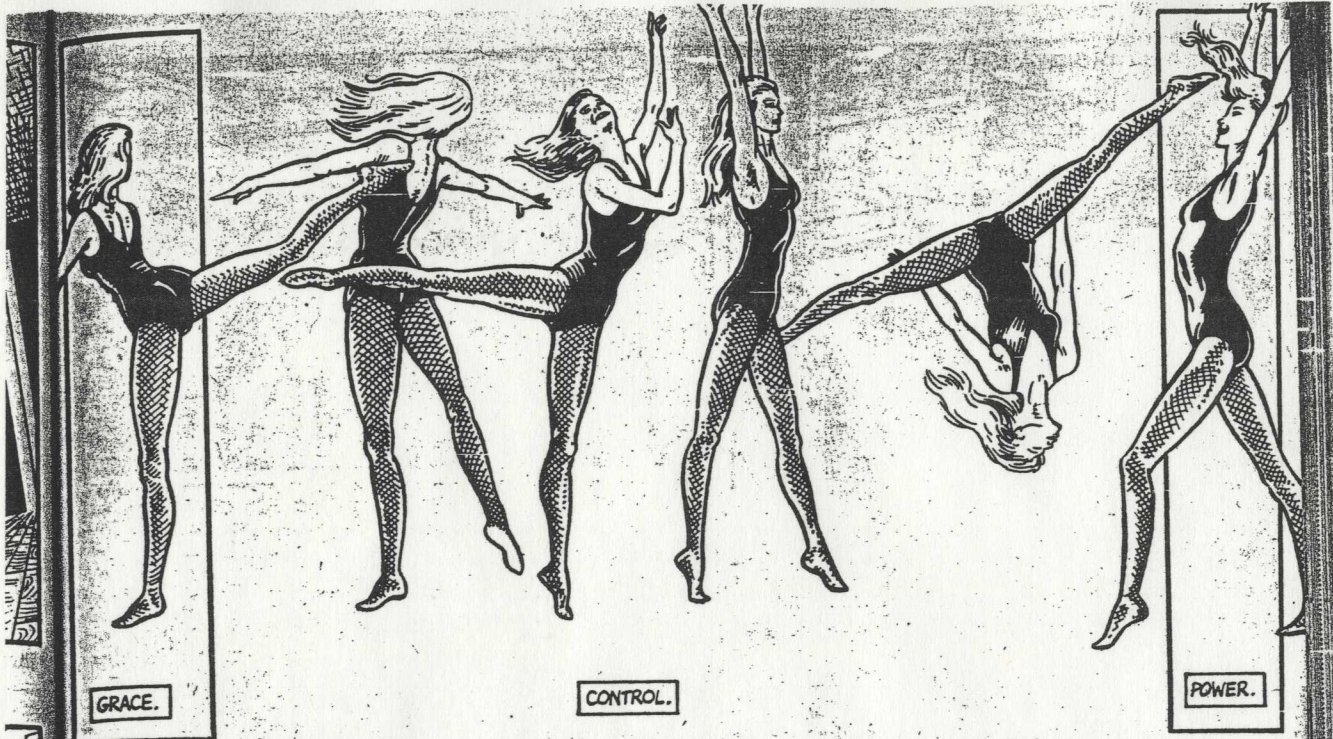
MY TURN BASTARD!



BINGO

<u>Just read manga like the rest of the girls.</u>	<u>You're only jealous because you don't look like that.</u>	<u>So you want comics full of ugly fat chicks?</u>	<u>If you don't like them, don't read them.</u>	<u>That's censorship!</u>
<u>But doing martial arts in high heels is perfectly reasonable!</u>	<u>But super-strong women don't need bras!</u>	<u>But she's from an alien culture with no nudity taboo!</u>	<u>But girls often wear skirts. Why wouldn't they go flying in them?</u>	<u>But that costume suits her personality!</u>
<u>No one wants realism in comics!</u>	<u>But rape happens in real life too!</u>	<u>But men are drawn unrealistically too!</u>	<u>Men can't help themselves! Why are you punishing us for our biology?</u>	<u>Women just don't get comics.</u>
<u>If you don't like it, shut up and write your own.</u>	<u>Why are you complaining about comics when women in Muslim countries are oppressed?</u>	<u>This is just fanboy entitlement... from women!</u>	<u>There aren't many women working in mainstream comics because they're just not good enough.</u>	<u>...I mean, because they're just not interested.</u>
<u>Sexism is a convention of the genre!</u>	<u>Are you calling me a misogynist!?</u>	<u>My girlfriend never complains about this stuff.</u>	<u>But male characters die too!</u>	<u>Comics are never going to change. You're wasting your time.</u>





GRACE.

CONTROL.

POWER.



EST-CE QUE JE PEUX VOUS AIDER?



YOO HOO?

OH--UH--OUI. JE --LIM-- JE SUIS INTER-ESSER AU... DANS LES COURS DE...



MASTER KIM ISN'T HERE RIGHT NOW, BUT I CAN GIVE YOU SOME PAMPHLETS.

OH --UH --OKAY.

