RED AND WHITE TIGHTS: REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADIAN COMIC BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

Though produced in the shadow of the American comic-book industry, Canadian comics both explicitly and implicitly engage themes of national identity. This thesis extends historical fan scholarship into an examination of some of these nationalist themes in the context of Canadian art and culture.

Canadian adventure comics developed in the 1940s to fill a wartime vacuum; generic conventions of American superhero comics were reworked for the new context, incorporating elements of the 'Northwoods' genre of Mountie film and pulp literature. This is accompanied by the exoticization of the wilderness and its incorporation into national identity as a marker of exotic difference.

Keywords: comic books; nationalist; superhero; Canadian identity

Subject terms: Comic books, strips, etc., Canadian -- History; Comic books, strips, etc. -- Social aspects; Comic books, strips, etc. -- History and criticism

DEDICATION

For Canadian cartoonists.

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CANADA'S FIGHTING-MAD SUPERHEROES:
An Introduction

> I started reading Canadian literature when I was young, though I didn't know it was that; in fact I wasn't aware that I lived in a country with any distinct existence of its own. At school we were being taught to sing "Rule, Britannia" and to draw the Union Jack; after hours we read stacks of Captain Marvel, Plastic Man and Batman comic books, an activity delightfully enhanced by the disapproval of our elders.
>
> Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Atwood 1972:29)

One of the most prized objects in my meagre collection of monthly comic book pamphlets is a copy of *Uncanny X-Men* 121 (Claremont and Byrne 1979). It is not in particularly good shape – fine condition would probably be a tad generous – and, as far as I know, is not worth very much money on the speculators' market. However, the economies of the market are not always the dominant values when it comes to the collector's evaluation of his or her collection. I am not much of a fan of the X-Men, but this particular comic book has a great deal of sentimental value for me because issue 121 of *The Uncanny X-Men* is the first appearance of the Canadian superhero team with the rather awkward and uninspiring name, Alpha Flight.

Alpha Flight, created by the superstar artist – and Canadian expatriate – John Byrne for the American publisher Marvel Comics, was a team of super-powered agents working for a rather shady Canadian government with orders to retrieve the beloved and curmudgeonly X-Man known as Wolverine, himself an

AWOL Canadian agent/experimental subject. I acquired this issue at a small comic book convention in a generic hotel ballroom somewhere in suburban California, the type that is less a gathering of a community so much as a funnybook flea market. I was in high school at the time, perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old; like Byrne, I was an expat. Though the text always labels them 'heroes,' Alpha Flight spends this issue fighting the stars of the series. That is, they are the 'bad guys.' Yet, there was something satisfying about seeing the superior tactics and teamwork of the Canadians overwhelm the X-Men. Although they played a little dirty, needed the X-Woman Storm to save Calgary from the fury of a magically-powered blizzard they created, and eventually allowed Wolverine to slip through their grasp, I insisted on identifying with and cheering for Alpha Flight in my own against-the-grain reading of the story. After all, the fantasy world of superhero comic books is a very American world, full of star-spangled super-soldiers and paeans to the American way, so it was no surprise that my geeky little heart swelled with pride to see Vindicator, Snowbird, Shaman, Sasquatch, Aurora, and Northstar go toe-to-toe with the most popular superheroes in American comics and give as good as they got.

Alpha Flight has since been spun off into a succession of comic book series, and as far as I can discern, Canadian creators have had little, if anything, to do with their production since John Byrne's departure after *Alpha Flight* 28 (Misiroglu and Roach 2004:11). In the meantime, I grew up, moved back to Canada, and clambered my way into university. Somewhere between there and graduate school, I decided to investigate the representations of Canadian

national identity in Canadian comic books. As the product of the New York-based Marvel Comics Group, Alpha Flight falls outside the bounds of this investigation, but looking back at *Uncanny X-Men* 121 I realize that many of the tensions that have guided the analysis undertaken in this thesis are also present in there.

The battle between the X-Men and Alpha Flight is fundamentally a clash between different visions of the hero. On the one hand, the X-Men are a collection of 'gifted youngsters' born with special abilities that have made them outsiders and outlaws. These "children of the atom" are "feared and hated by the world they have sworn to protect" (Claremont and Byrne 1979:1). Insofar as they are portrayed as rebels, they are prototypically American and, insofar as they accept this marginal status in service of the responsibilities that come with their great power, they are archetypically superheroic. Their mission is inspired by the dream of a single man, Prof. Charles Xavier (the source of the 'X' in 'X-Men'), that one day his students will not be judged by the colour of the laser beams that shoot out of their eyes but by the content of their character. Thankfully, Xavier is also independently wealthy enough to support his own superhero team (complete with a supersonic stealth airplane and an unending supply of expertly-tailored spandex costumes). Even the Canadian Wolverine has absorbed this American stance, paraphrasing Patrick Henry at one point in the conflict with Alpha Flight and swearing that he will "stay free – or die!" (1979:19).

The members of Alpha Flight, on the other hand, are described as "the culmination of a decade of intensive research and development" by the Canadian government, rather than simply a group of concerned citizens gifted with mutant

powers (1979:7). They are agents of the law and order, following orders from Ottawa. The team's leader, James MacDonald Hudson (a.k.a. Weapon Alpha a.k.a. Guardian a.k.a. Vindicator), stole the super-powered armour he designed for his employers, "who wanted to use the suit for evil goals," and "sought refuge with the Canadian government," for whom he developed the top-secret Department H and recruited the rest of Alpha Flight (Misiroglu and Roach 2004:10). Alpha Flight's conflict with the X-Men would seem to suggest some allegory about Canadian communitarianism versus American individualism, but I find a more compelling question to be whether the members of Alpha Flight – or the protagonists of any Canadian comic book, for that matter – are Canadian in any significant way. Or, are they only so many "tin-pot Yukon Avengers," to borrow a turn of phrase from Wolverine (Claremont and Byrne 1979:19)? That is to say, given the American roots of the superhero comic book, what is so Canadian about Canadian comics?

The figure of the 'national superhero' is the entry point I have chosen for this question. This may seem a curious locus for the vexing questions of Canadian identity, but, as Ryan Edwardson notes in an article on the legacy of the Canadian superhero character Captain Canuck, "in mass culture one can find mass national identity" (2003:186). The national superhero, who justifies his or her war on crime through the iconography of patriotism, is by necessity a *nationalist* superhero. As such, national superheroes embody particular definitions of nationhood and national subjectivity that are circulating more or less widely at the time of their creation. Does the decidedly – aggressively, even –

populist, low, and mass character of such definitions hinder my attempts to speak to the larger question of Canadian nationalism? I would like to argue for the appropriateness of the national superhero as a point of analysis for two reasons: (1) the role of the superhero genre in popular culture, and (2) the insight we can gain by looking at changes to the genre that occur as it was imported to Canada and localized.

First, while the superhero may seem a marginal and unimportant genre primarily associated with a marginal and unimportant medium, it has played a more central role in popular culture than one might first assume. Of the 86 comic book and strip adaptations to film and television profiled by Roy Kinnard (1991), 14 were straightforward superhero characters and an additional 9 could potentially be considered superheroes.[1] David Hughes's (2003) study of comic book movies, though only addressing 20 films released between 1978 and 2003, includes 10 that are clearly superhero movies.[2] Recently, superhero films have been in fashion in Hollywood, with a new crop being released each year. Comic books have long served as – and still remain – a rich fund of colourful (and marketable) characters for film and television producers, and the most colourful of these have been superheroes. As Kline (1993) has observed, the superhero comic book provided a thread connecting the adventure genres of children's

[1] The 9 'maybes': newspaper strip characters Mandrake the Magician and the Phantom; characters from other genres who have been incorporated into superhero continuities such as Blackhawk, Howard the Duck, Swamp Thing, and Vigilante; the quasi-superheroic Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles; and science fiction characters such as Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon who could be included within the genre by means of the similar DC Comics character Adam Strange who is part of a superhero genre universe.

[2] Several of those 10 have had (often, multiple) sequels that are not discussed separately by Hughes. Again, there is an additional group of potentially superheroic films on the list, including *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Judge Dredd*, *The Phantom*, and *Men in Black*.

literature to television. From their earliest days, comic books "clearly demonstrated the viability of a children's market by turning out a product that children could buy with their own hard-to-come-by pennies" (1993:103). By giving children an opportunity to exercise their own taste judgements and reworking some of the themes of children's adventure literature in a new medium and context, the comics consolidated a child audience/market for their most popular genre that endured even as another medium usurped their dominant position in children's media culture. McLuhan also understood comics as a key transition between print and televisual cultures, albeit in more abstract terms than Kline:

> The print is clue to the comic cartoon, just as the cartoon is clue to understanding the TV image ... Comics (as already explained in the chapter on The Print), being low in definition, are a highly participational form of expression, perfectly adapted to the mosaic form of the newspaper. They provide, also, a sense of continuity from one day to the next. The individual news item is very low in information, and requires completion or fill-in by the reader, exactly as does the TV image, or the wirephoto. That is the reason why TV hit the comic-book world so hard. It was a real rival, rather than a complement. (1994:165)

The superhero genre, whether starring characters licensed from the comics or original heroes, has remained a staple of kids' TV. The animated series 'Captain Planet and the Planeteers' (1990) harnessed the conflict narratives of the superhero genre for pro-social educational goals by using it to demonstrate the struggle between environmentalism and the sources of pollution that threaten the world. 'Rescue Heroes' (1999), ostensibly an attempt to introduce a non-violent action genre to the field of boys' culture, still draws heavily upon the superhero tradition, transforming its paramedics, fire fighters, and assorted rescue personnel into *de facto* superheroes. Recent series 'The Powerpuff Girls' (1998)

and 'Atomic Betty' (2004a) have attempted to craft superhero narratives that comfortably straddle the traditional divide between boys' and girls' media cultures. Superheroes also made their presence known in the realm of video games early in the 1980s: "Atari produced a Spider-Man version, and linked with DC to have five *Atari Force* comic books ... which were given away with the games" (Rhode 1999:159). Given the genre's longevity and ubiquity in children's culture, the number of people who had their first exposure to questions of justice, death, and the darker side of human nature through the Manichean moral universe of the superhero genre is inestimable. For this reason alone, we would do well to consider the superhero as a vitally important area of popular culture to understand, both within and outside of comics scholarship.

Second, it is my hope that by looking for expressions of Canadian national identity in a mass medium as heavily influenced by American media as the comic book, it will be possible to further illuminate those qualities that define 'Canadian-ness.' Beyond some icons and points of pride – the flag, hockey, socialized medicine, and so on – discussions of who we are as a nation routinely descend into tired comparisons with the United States and laments that all we do is compare ourselves with the United States. Because Canada is a multicultural nation, traditional ethnic nationalisms are not an appropriate basis of civic identity, yet generations of nation-builders have remained unable to mobilize a compelling vision of a nationalism that can embrace all of Canada's diversity. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe it is an impossible goal. Yet we still live within the borders and under the authority of a nation-state called Canada, and

our sense of being Canadian – of what constitutes 'Canadian values' – is routinely appealed to by politicians, activists, journalists, and marketers. There is by no means a single Canadian identity, but a number of representations of identity continually compete for dominance. I would like to suggest that, by paying attention to the parallax that occurs when artistic traditions such as the national superhero are altered as they cross the 49th parallel, we can begin to identify themes and patterns that reveal some of the assumptions that lie beneath normalized definitions of truth, justice, and the Canadian way.

To that end, this thesis is a survey of some key texts on the national superhero tradition and some key ideas about Canadian national identity. As such, it is perhaps best understood as a kind of meta-theoretical analysis. I have attempted to reorganize existing historical research on this corner of Canadian popular culture around the issue of nationalism and bring this body of work into contact with other studies of Canadian culture and theories on the construction of national identity:

Chapter 1 reviews the existing literature on Canadian comic books. The tradition of fan scholarship in comic books offers an invaluable archive of characters and creators, but tends to assume the Canadian-ness of its objects that I want to interrogate. However, I believe that this literature can be usefully drawn upon to begin examining what they might these comics say about the culture in which they were created. To this end, I also review studies of some other national comic book traditions and the different foundational arguments they use to draw the connection between comic book texts and the issues and

problems of national identity in their particular contexts. Attempts to argue this connection have not always been successful, but they do provide lessons in how we might go about doing so in the Canadian case. Moving forward from this point will allow us to begin to add a more theoretically-informed analysis of nationalism and national identity to the already existing fan scholarship.

Chapter 2 focusses on the emergence of the Canadian comic book industry and the figure of the Canadian nationalist superhero during the brief 'Golden Age' of World War II. Though the nationalist superhero was only one of many traditions represented in these comics, it is the one that most clearly articulates themes of nationalism and national belonging, especially given that these characters' adventures were created in the midst of, owed their existence to, and chiefly concerned the war effort. This is also the generic tradition that, until very recently, the bulk of subsequent indigenous comic book production has followed. I argue that, though the genre was imported from American comic books, the superhero in Canadian comics has incorporated elements of the 'Northwoods' or Mountie genre, itself a subgenre of the Western. In doing so, the Canadian superhero comic book has developed a number of thematic emphases that are distinct from its American contemporaries. As a part of this analysis, I briefly construct a new genre studies framework for studying the superhero, drawing heavily on Rick Altman's (2000) concept of syntactical and semantic approaches to genre. This framework rejects the dominant perspective on superhero comics as a form of mythology in favour of one that foregrounds its status as a genre of popular, commercial media.

In chapter 3, the influence of the Northwoods genre on the Canadian superhero leads me to an examination of the ways in which images of the north are deployed in Canadian comics. The Mountie as represented in popular fiction entails a particular relationship with the Canadian wilderness, and Canadian superhero comic books also often portray a relationship as a result of their generic links with the Mountie tradition. Synthesizing arguments made by Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Ian McKay, I will propose that Canadian culture has tended to use imagery of the north in a way that simultaneously exoticizes the Other and assimilates it into the Self.

In choosing the analytic and thematic foci of this thesis, it has of course been necessary to exclude certain aspects of the question. As such, there are a number of things this study is not:

It is not a history of Canadian comic books. Other scholars have begun the task of cataloguing the history of the comic book in Canada and are continuing that work as of this writing, and this thesis is not intended as a contribution to that project. Rather, this is an attempt, on the one hand, to situate the comic book within the context of Canadian arts and culture and, on the other, to understand the ways in which Canadian culture has influenced the development of this imported art form through the incorporation of 'Canadian themes' that have reworked key elements of the American comic book tradition for a new context. While it does describe particular *moments* in the history of Canadian comic books, its focus on the national superhero leaves a great deal of Canadian comics outside the scope of analysis. It is not comprehensive history,

but a probe into some points of contact between the comics medium and ideas of national identity.

This text is not an appreciation of Canadian comic books. Though I am a long-time reader of comics and a sometime cartoonist myself, I have for the most part attempted to bracket questions of aesthetics and canonization. I remain concerned with these issues as a reader, but making judgments about the quality of Canadian comics and separating the wheat from the chaff falls outside the scope of this study. After all, most indigenous comic book production in Canada has been amateur or semi-professional at best, and critiquing the production values of art created at the unprofitable margins of an international cultural industry seems unproductive at best. Furthermore, aesthetic quality is neither a necessary nor sufficient guarantee of a work's significance in terms of the categories this thesis is interested in; I want to look at the ways in which these characters embody different nationalist themes, not how well drawn they are.

This text is also not intended to be a definitive statement on either Canadian comic books or Canadian identity. It is not proposing a unified theory of comics and nationalism. Indeed, many of the nationalist assumptions embedded in the texts under consideration hardly seem tenable in an increasingly 'post-national' age of globalized cultural flows; however, these assumptions still may serve as keys to unlock the nationalisms that these comics embody. But while this work is an exploration of these issues, it is an exploration within certain proscribed limits. The most important of these limits is that it deals almost exclusively with English-Canadian comic books and English-Canadian identity.

Québècois comics, while an important part of the Canadian comics scene, are also inheritors of a distinct tradition of cartooning, the European *bande dessinée*, that deserves separate treatment, and Quebec nationalism is a subject that this Anglophone scholar feels unable to address credibly, especially within the confines of this very short study. Rather, this thesis will primarily focus on Canadian comics as an exemplary case of the localization of an American mass cultural form in the cultural milieu of English Canada. However, despite bracketing this important segment of Canadian society, I will persist in using the term 'Canadian' to describe the cultural and social phenomena that I am investigating, partially as a convenience but also, significantly, because this is how the nationalist superhero tradition in English Canada has been portrayed. Despite producing comics in English for an English-speaking audience and dealing heavily in themes that suffuse the canon of English-Canadian culture, these artists and their works rarely include the prefix, instead thinking of themselves as telling adjectivelessly Canadian stories to unhyphenated-Canadians. This ideologically-informed practice of re-inscribing the specificity of English-Canadian culture as simply Canadian culture is itself part of the picture of Canada that these comic books create for their readers.

Significantly but unfortunately, it is also not, in the main, a close reading of the primary texts under discussion. This is a result of the fact that very few Canadian comic books are available through public archives. The National Archives in Ottawa does have a selection of Bell Features comics from the World War II period, and a few issues of Maple Leaf comic books from the same period

are available through the Vancouver City Archives. However, I felt that this sample was not sufficient to sustain a close analysis for the purposes of this study, for it would bias the analysis towards a smaller subset of Canadian comic books. Furthermore, locating a wider selection of comic books in private collections seemed to be a task outside the practical limitations on this thesis. Thus, I have been forced to rely on secondary sources to carry out my analysis and construct the arguments that follow. A broader and more systematic analysis of the primary texts in this area is an important avenue of future research for comics scholarship and the study of Canadian culture more generally. It is also my hope that the technical problem will be addressed in the future, either by the creation of larger public collections of Canadian comic books or through the dissemination of reprint editions of the comics.

In the meantime, the research undertaken by fans of Canadian comic books will have to suffice as the raw material for the sort of cultural analysis I am attempting. And it is to a review of this existing literature that I now turn.

NATIONALISM, COMICS, AND NATIONALIST COMICS

In undertaking this study, I have made the fairly large assumption that these comic books have something important to say about Canadians' sense of national identity. In turn, this claim is founded upon the larger assumption that popular culture matters. This chapter is intended to justify those assumptions. Or, more specifically, it is intended to explore some of the ways of justifying these assumptions. I will begin with a review of the existing literature on Canadian comic books, paying attention to the gaps left by its authors. I will then examine three studies of nationalist comic books from other countries and traditions, looking at how their approaches to this question may be instructive for the Canadian case and point to a way forward beyond the limitations of the existing body of work on Canadian comic books. Thus, this chapter is partly a literature review, partly a road map for the rest of this thesis, and partly a sort of modest manifesto for the future development of Canadian comics scholarship.

A Proud Part of Our Heritage

As of this writing, the study of Canadian comics seems somewhat rudderless. There still exists a relative dearth of sources exploring this corner of Canadian art and culture, as the literature on Canadian comics comprises three main texts: Hirsch and Loubert's retrospective of the comic books published by Bell Features during the World War II period, *The Great Canadian Comic Books* (1971); the essay anthology and price guide edited by John Bell, *Canuck Comics*

(1986a); and the catalogue for an exhibition at the National Archives of Canada entitled *Guardians of the North: The National Superhero in Canadian Comic-Book Art*, also edited by Bell (1992).[3] Despite having been professionally published, and, in the case of the catalogue, being endorsed by a major institution, these books all belong to the tradition of fan scholarship. This implies some very specific advantages and limitations to the knowledge they produce, as will become clear as I examine them in greater detail.

Hirsh and Loubert's book seems to be the first work to have examined the history of Canadian comic books. It is primarily a nostalgic retrospective, comprising excerpts from World War II era Canadian comics and prefaced by an "historical perspective" by Alan Walker (Hirsh and Loubert 1971:5-21). Thus, the book is almost entirely composed of fragments of old comics intended to showcase the various characters. The text portions reflect this, providing brief summaries of notable characters with little in the way of analysis. The most striking thing about the book, however, is its flagrant bias for only one of the several Canadian publishers of this period, Bell Features. This bias is justified in the text by the claim that Cy Bell of Bell Features "invented Canadian comic books" and "published the first one", which is not true (see Bell 1986b:23), and by the claim that "it is certain that he published ... the best", which is both dubious in its subjectivity and never aesthetically justified (Hirsh and Loubert 1971:7). However, as Walker suggests, the Bell characters are also the focus of Hirsh and

[3] The on-line version of this catalogue, hosted by the National Library and Archives of Canada, has more detailed information on the Canadian underground and the contemporary alternative scene, but presents more or less the same fundamental viewpoint on Canadian comics as the print version.

Loubert's book for the practical reason that those are the characters to which they own the rights (1971:21). In this light, it is probably best to consider *The Great Canadian Comic Books* as a *repackaging* of particular Canadian comic books, rather than a study of them in any meaningful sense.

John Bell's first offering, the edited collection and price guide *Canuck Comics: A Guide to Comic Books Published in Canada,* is certainly more thorough, balanced, and accurate as a history than Hirsh and Loubert's text. It includes a general outline of the history of English-Canadian comics, a spotlight essay on Anglo-American Publishing, two essays on Quebec *bandes dessinées* — one in English and one in French — and a separate price guide for the comics of each of the two solitudes. However, it still seems somewhat superficial, almost an outline of the history, focussing on when various companies were founded, who some of the key creators were, and descriptions of some popular characters. *Canuck Comics* represents a better retrospective, a better appreciation of Canadian comic books, but never gets much beyond that level of study.

The short *Guardians of the North* is still marked by Bell's general approach, so it is even-handed but primarily historical in orientation. It updates *Canuck Comics* to cover the intervening six years, which means a great deal

more material on the 'silver age'[4] of Canadian comics. Bell also brings to this text some loosely defined critical concepts; for example, he suggests that the initially Canadian-created but American-published *Alpha Flight* was "an object lesson in how not to create a uniquely Canadian national superhero" and that Marc Shainblum's *Northguard* represented "the most mature vision to date of a Canadian superhero", tinged with "authenticity and realism" (Bell 1992:33). This rhetoric is not only teleological, in that it presupposes some finished form that the Canadian superhero genre should inevitably take, but vague, in that this presupposed final form is never itself described or argued for. Hence, this patina of critical analysis does not really manage to change the primary function of Bell's catalogue.

Thus, as I suggested earlier, it might be best to think of these books as growing out of the tradition of fan scholarship. Fan scholarship's main interests are in amassing descriptive knowledge, primarily about characters, continuity, and creators, with a secondary interest in evaluative criticism. Thus, fan scholarship has always been an excellent source of basic historical information about media products, especially in cases where academics are relatively late in taking an interest. Fan scholarship is also very appealing in its insistence on keeping the fan culture involved in the project of research and scholarship.

[4] Bell borrows the notion of 'ages' of comic books from American comics fandom. For Bell, the initial period of production during World War II is our 'Golden Age,' and the scattershot rise of independent superhero comics beginning in the mid-1970s is our 'Silver Age.' Despite the currency and popular usage of such terminology that ensures its continued deployment, even within this study, the very idea of such 'ages' is a highly problematic analytical concept, given the totalizing nature of the rhetoric. I would prefer to rely on the notion of a comics scene or community, along with the corollaries of inter-scene movements and intra-scene trends, and will return to this language when the fan-derived 'ages' do not apply.

Comics already has a large advantage in these terms, as comics fans generally have a well developed interest in the history of the medium and books about comics are widely read within the subculture. However, this kind of scholarship has a rather damning limitation in that it generally fails to ask the questions of primary interest to an academic comics scholar: why does this matter? What does this mean? For the fan scholar, the significance can be assumed: it is interesting because it is interesting to me, and it is interesting to me because I like it. My hope is that, by subjecting issues raised by Canadian comics to critical and theoretical scrutiny, this thesis will begin to fill a gap in the study of Canadian comics. Our understanding of the comics must become less self-referential, incorporating what we have learned from studies of other artforms into more complex theoretical frameworks.

International Examples

Thankfully, there are studies of other 'national universes'[5] of comics that attempt to grapple with these issues in ways that prove instructive for us and for the scholarship of Canadian comics. I have chosen three such studies to examine in some detail: Matthew Screech's *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes Dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity* (2005); *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (1994) by Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas; and

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[5] I use this term as more or less analogous to the concept of a 'national cinema' in film scholarship. However, it is also intended to evoke the idea of a cluster of intertextually-related comic books with some degree of continuity between them, in the way fan parlance talks about the 'DC universe' or 'Marvel universe' of superhero comics characters. While the sense of continuity in a national universe is obviously not as prominent as in the case of these superhero comic books, I think it is important to acknowledge the systems of influence and canon-building that operate within a national tradition of artistic production like the Canadian comics scene.

Anne Rubenstein's *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (1998). These studies explain why and how comics have come play a significant role in the formation and representation of national identities in each of their contexts, despite being predicated on very different foundational arguments.

France and Belgium: *Bandes Dessinées* as Public Art

Screech's book looks at the impact of *bandes dessinées* on Franco-Belgian, by which he means 'French *and* Belgian' rather than 'French-speaking Belgian,' identity. It is organized primarily around appreciations of specific artists or series, covering early Belgian BD artists, like Hergé and Andre Franquin, and French comics from *Astérix le Gaulois* through the *nouveau realisme* of Jean Giraud and Jacques Tardi. The entire project is, at a fundamental level, founded on the proposition that comic books are widely read and well regarded in France and Belgium, so therefore they are an integral and important component of the cultures of these two nations. As Screech is quick to point out, "the French and Belgians believe their comics to be a genuine art form: they even go so far as to call *bandes dessinées* 'the ninth art' ... [which] places *bandes dessinées* on a level with the seven liberal arts" of elite culture (2005:1). Further, Screech asserts that "the ninth art draws heavily, though not exclusively, upon the rich cultural and historical legacy of France and Belgium: folktales, novels, paintings, plays, poems, songs, historical events, and so forth," which are reworked from "the past into the present, giving Franco-Belgian culture a powerful new voice in the age of mass communication" (2005:4). Again and again Screech makes an argument

that a certain *bande dessinée* is popular in France and Belgium, which therefore proves that it is culturally significant. For example, Screech tells his reader that the popularity of the Belgian cartoonist Andre Franquin in France "[proves] that Franquin had built strong cultural links between France and Belgium; as such, his strips inevitably assert a sense of Franco-Belgian cultural togetherness" (2005:74). I refer to this as the argument from public art. The ideal type of this argument would be based upon a conception of public art similar to Gilbert Seldes's use of the term for those art forms, whether 'high' or 'low', that "provide models for behavior" and have a discernible "public effect" (1956:2-3). Any cultural or artistic form that could produce a noticeable effect on the public consciousness and national culture would, without a doubt, be worthy of study. Unfortunately, this argument, as articulated by Screech, is relatively ineffectual, if not a little ridiculous at times.

To a large degree, this is because Screech's study takes place at the wrong level of analysis given the arguments that he eventually wants to make. He studies individual artists or series and analyses them with little reference to French or Belgian culture outside of the comic at hand. Despite an insistence that these comics are constantly reworking French and Belgian traditions in new ways, one sees (with the possible exception of the chapter on *Astérix*, and even this section is not without its problems, as I will explain below) very few connections made to the cultural context, beyond vague historical allusions to *bandes dessinées* being different from American comics because of developing at a time of "loss of empire, wartime occupation, [and] reduced global influence

and dominance by Anglophone [i.e., foreign] popular culture" (Screech 2005:17). Screech wants to look at *bandes dessinées* and Franco-Belgian identity, but never really gets beyond the former to actually examine the latter, which precludes any meaningful discussion of the relationship between the two.

For example, Screech's chapter on Hergé and *Les Aventures de Tintin* is unmoored from its cultural context, floating freely from one analytical framework to the next. Screech writes about the characterization of Tintin himself as a "positive role model whom young Christian boys were supposed to emulate" (2005:18), Hergé's attempts to maintain an illusion that Tintin was a real person (2005:19), Hergé's efforts to thoroughly "research the history, the culture and the customs of every country Tintin visited" and portray them accurately in his famed 'clear line' style (2005:25), and the lack of geographical specificity used in portraying Moulinsart/Marlinspike, the chateau that served as home base for many of Tintin's adventures (2005:32). However, the reader never gets a very strong sense of what makes this product distinctly or significantly Franco-Belgian, other than the fact that it is popular in France and Belgium. If that is the criterion, does Tintin's popularity in translation all over the world suggest that Hergé unwittingly created something that was an important and integral part of the national identities and cultures of disparate groups around the globe? If that were the case, then what would be the justification for discussing the comics in reference to France and Belgium? We must distinguish between the broad appeal of a good story and the specific ways in which a story or set of images is rooted in and speaks to nationalist themes. In many cases, the former is

sufficient; however, if one wishes to undertake a nationalist reading of a comic book, then the latter is required in order to suggest why a reader would be interpellated as a nationalist subject and how this text would be understood in relation to other forms of nationalism and nationalist art. In many ways, this seems similar to the problems presented by Bell's *Guardians of the North*, suggesting in its rhetoric an attempt at a critical reading of the texts, but never actually presenting such a reading.

This lack of specificity about the contours of the identity that these comics supposedly influence so powerfully is, perhaps, a result of a more general failure on Screech's part to appropriately justify his combination of French and Belgian culture into a single identity. The fact that a shared language creates a convenient market for each other's comic books does not quite seem enough to justify this assumption. Screech suggests that Belgian artists' important early role in the development of *bandes dessinées* may have been the result of a "more relaxed attitude taken by Belgian authorities" toward comics. He also suggests that the hybridity of the comics form is appropriate to Belgium as a hybrid nation that "turned French-speaking Catholics and Flemish-speaking Protestants into a single, coherent country" (2005:7). However, this glimmer of culturally grounded analysis, itself tenuous and underdeveloped, is extinguished by the constant conflation of French and Belgian identity. This conflation becomes particularly difficult to swallow after the second chapter, when Screech more or less leaves Belgium behind for France. Screech himself points out that "since the 1960s and

Pilote, the centre of *bande dessinée* activity has moved to France, although Belgium is still an important player" (2005:204).

The chapter on *Astérix* in particular highlights some of the problems created by Screech's insistence that French and Belgian national identities are one and the same. Screech himself admits that, "for many people in the mid-1960s, Astérix, like de Gaulle, was perceived to assert French national identity" (2005:82). Although "Astérix's initial popularity could well have stemmed from the fact that ... he gave France a positive self-image" and although "Astérix can embody what is best about France very easily", Screech refuses to see the character as a symbol of a specifically French nationalism (2005:86). When Astérix visits ancient Belgium and meets his Gaulish counterparts there, "the parodies of Belgian culture are affectionate" and traditional racist jokes at their expense are only told by Roman characters (2005:85). Thus we see not only a portrayal of acknowledged difference and conflict between the cultures, but also a profoundly ideological process of exorcising that conflict from French identity and placing it on the heads of the villainous Roman characters rather than the heroic French/Gauls. This is not only a nationalist theme, but also one that seems disproportionately more important for French readers than for Belgian ones. Screech feels that "the Gaulish setting frustrates attempts to reduce Astérix to a flattering portrait of 'la belle France'" since "occupied Gaul is a remote, non-contentious historical period, which few people know very much about, even in France and Belgium" (2005:87). However, the grounding of the often-problematic politics of nationalism in a non-contentious and, thus, seemingly innocuous

historical setting is part of the ideological work performed by *Astérix le Gaulois*, a point that Screech misses because he has rather clumsily defined the parameters of the national universe he is studying.

The Middle East: An Oppositional Pop Culture

Douglas and Malti-Douglas's *Arab Comic Strips* also looks at a national universe that extends beyond the borders of a single nation-state; however, in looking at Arab comics they are examining an artistic tradition within an existing, if not uncomplicated, sense of ethnic and religiously-based nationalism that extends throughout the modern nation-states of the Middle East. While Douglas and Malti-Douglas do stress the popularity and ubiquity of comics in the Arab world, where "Western comic strips are part—indeed, for economic reasons one of the largest parts—of the invasion of Western mass media", this is not the basis of their study *per se* (1994:3). Rather, comics have become an important component of culture and identity as Arab intellectuals and artists have sought to respond to the influx of Western comics by creating an indigenous corpus of comic strips that now forms a significant part of mediatized children's culture in the Middle East:

> The response of Arab artists and writers to this challenge has been to create their own mass culture in which comic strips (much cheaper to produce, for example, than animated cartoons) play a leading role ... [Production] is now largely indigenous and original. It forms part of an emerging regional mass culture whose forms may appear Western but whose content has long ceased to be so. (1994:3)

As a result, "Arab comic strips are a flourishing genre with an enormous readership and a political and ideological range extending from leftist and other

secular modernist to Islamic religious perspectives" (1994:1). Further, because "many of the most successful [comics] are government publications, directly paid for and run by the ministries of culture or the official parties or youth groups", comics in the Arab world are often articulated into official culture (1994:5). Thus, Arab comic strips are cultural objects produced at the confluence of

> three major social forces: (1) state propaganda combined with state-supported ideologies, generally secularist Arab nationalism with more or less attention to Islam as identity and as private morality; (2) the encroachment of world-capitalist mass media, of which Disney is the clearest example; and (3) the Islamic revivalist movement, which serves as opposition to the first two. (1994:7)

It is the role of comic strips as a way of mediating between these three forces and communicating the tension between them to children that makes them a significant object of study for Douglas and Malti-Douglas.

In understanding mass media as a product of these various forces, these comic books can be seen as the result of a dialogic relationship between local, regional, and global cultures. The Arab comic strip itself, in even its most common or generic form, is a hybrid of local culture with global cultural forms. Characters like Dalla and Finjân, an anthropomorphic coffee pot and cup, combine the symbology of "authentic Arabian culture" with a Western, Disney-inspired mode of cartooning and caricature (1994:152). There is also the genre of Beur comic strips, produced by people of Arab ethnicity living in France. Beur comics draw from "at least three distinct traditions":

> Its attachment to the French comic-strip tradition is the most obvious: in visual imagery, in tone, and to a considerable degree in subject matter. But as a French strip production centering on North Africans (in Algeria as well as France), it links itself to the Algerian

> Francophone strip. Behind this and despite the linguistic gap, Arab Muslim comic-strip and other cultural elements nourish Beur comic-strip production. (1994:199)

And though Beur cartoonists may create comics in a style "which is superficially modern, secular, and French in its brutal frankness" (1994:201), their work is still very much marked by this dialogue between here and there, modernity and tradition, and the capitalist West and Arab Islamic culture.

Because Douglas and Malti-Douglas's study is undertaken at the level of social forces and cultural discourses, it is more adequately able to address the question of national identity than Screech's study. Douglas and Malti-Douglas suggest that comics actually do matter, as they are part of a growing oppositional, post-colonial cultural movement in the Arab world. They are also able to recognize and analyze the ideological work that is part of the strips. For example, an historical epic starring a female warrior fighting Christian armies during the Crusades could be interpreted as "the elimination of much traditional misogyny" that is often associated with fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic law, but is recognized as participating in "a more traditional ideological function: the smoothing of potential contradictions between a *turâth* [Islamic tradition] held dear and a social project [the project of modernization in Tunisia, in this case] that includes some most untraditional values" (1994:149). Douglas and Malti-Douglas's perspective, being broader in scope than Screech's, allow them to recognize that cultural forms grapple with contradictions within nationalist discourses, rather than simply suggesting that popular things must be integral to the national identity in simple and completely unproblematic ways.

Mexico: The Comics Mediator

Anne Rubenstein's approach focusses even more heavily on such contradictions within a national identity by looking at comics primarily as a site of political struggle. Her history of Mexican comic books, or *historietas*, is really about the *Comisíon Calificadora de Publicaciones y Revistas Ilustradas*, the organization in the Mexican government responsible for monitoring and, occasionally, censoring Mexican comics. Her argument is that the Commission, in its calculated inefficacy, played a very important role in mediating between competing definitions of the national identity:

> ...[The] story shows the commission performing an important job for the Mexican state by giving it the appearance of control over popular culture industries. This illusion strengthens the allegiance of the most socially conservative citizens to the state, without threatening the connection between the government and the highly integrated systems of media that characterize contemporary Mexico. The commission also protects local mass media by deflecting anger from pop stars and magazines to the government, where it can—if necessary—be further diffused by co-opting particularly irate citizens through government efforts at censorship—however futile. (Rubenstein 1998:2-3)

This is a very different approach to justifying the importance of comics scholarship, as it is more concerned with the discourses and political context that surround comic books than the content of the books themselves. However, this is not to say that content has been ignored; in Rubenstein's view, comics are both containers of discourse and, through the various struggles and moral panics over the *historietas*, shapers of discourse.

The Mexican situation resembles a kind of cold war between the producers of comic books and conservative social groups, with the commission

providing the vital mediator to prevent the conflict from escalating. In this way, the struggles over mass media, addressing as they did the issues of "postrevolutionary transformations of the household and workplace, masculinity and femininity, and religion", allowed a "means for the participants to negotiate the terms of their entry into that ill-defined condition, modernity" (1998:5). Rubenstein argues that the postrevolutionary national culture of Mexico had two mutually constitutive aspects: "One was the set of ideas, arguments, attitudes, and metaphors related to modernity, progress, industrialization, and urbanity. The other was a discourse of tradition, conservatism, rural life, and Catholicism" (1998:42). These two discourses often clashed within the pages of comic books. For example, the plot of the popular serial 'El Viejo Nida' was organized around contradictions created by the demands of "four sets of ideas" in the new, modern Mexico: "gender, kinship, location, and social class"(1998:56). Versions of national identity that were associated with rhetoric of tradition and modernity were set against one another in these melodramas. Other "stories that valorized either *chicas modernas* ['modern girls'] or traditional women, but displayed both" were using "both stereotypes as they participated in the development of both lines of the cultural argument" (1998:45). This argument was politically useful "precisely because it was unlikely to close" (1998:76). In this way the "state kept the peace by keeping all of Mexico's cultures in constant conflict with each other and, simultaneously, acting as the mediator among them" (1998:6). And if the clash ever threatened to spill out into the realm of political action that might threaten the state, the commission was available to contain it. The continuing,

simmering moral panic over comic books in Mexico was one way in which dissent over the project of modernization after the revolution was expressed, but it was also seen as a way to keep this dissent under control and re-legitimize the state as the privileged mediator in the conflict.

Bringing It All Back Home

In what ways can we apply the lessons of these studies of other national comics universes to the study of Canadian comics? This is not an entirely straightforward procedure. The arguments presented by Screech, Douglas and Malti-Douglas, and Rubenstein apply only tenuously but remain provocative and suggestive of ways to interpret comic books from a nationalist perspective.

Despite the success of Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* and perhaps some lingering nostalgia for 'Doug Wright's Family,' it would be difficult to convince anyone that comics are a public art in Canada, even in the vaguely defined way Screech makes the argument. Indeed, comics are not nearly as popular in Canada as in *any* of the other regions on which I have commented here. One can imagine that if Canadian comics ceased to exist, comics readers the world over would be mourning the loss of many successful and influential cartoonists before the average Canadian noticed anything had disappeared.

While the National Archives did sponsor the exhibition that produced *Guardians of the North* and Canada Post issued a set of stamps featuring Canadian super-heroes, institutional support of the level described in the Arab world is lacking. The Canada Council for the Arts has provided funds to support

artists as they work on graphic novels. However, a stipend to cover the artist's living expenses while working does not represent the same level of government support as we see in Douglas and Malti-Douglas's study, where official and semi-official state institutions intervened heavily in both the production and distribution phases. Canadians have learned to live with imported mass media in various ways that have seemed to obviate the political will that would be needed to justify a new intervention in national culture of the type, scope, and ambition that the provisioning of comics by Arab governments represents.

In contrast to the slow-burning moral panics over *historietas* in Mexico that provided a site for continuing, political struggle, Canadians, though heavily involved in the movement against crime comics in the 1950s, have paid relatively little heed to comic books since then. Though the occasional comic book is still seized by Canada Customs as obscene, there is nothing like the long, continuing struggle over the issues of decency and morality that has been playing out in Mexico, and certainly the government has not capitalized upon what public outcry there has been in the way the Mexican state did through the Commission.

However, other lessons from these studies help point the way for Canadian comics studies beyond fan scholarship. Remembering that comics are produced in the context of a dialogic relationship between the local, regional, and international mass cultures is strikingly important in the Canadian case. As a nation of strong regionalisms, understanding Canadian identity and culture as a product of the tension between those regions and ever-changing, ever-emerging attempts to create a larger, more broadly encompassing national identity is a key

insight. We can also apply this insight to specific cultural products. Take, for example, *True Loves* by Jason Turner and Manien Bothma (2006). The comic is set in Vancouver and is replete with references to local landmarks, hangouts, and transit routes. The original series of minicomics was produced in Vancouver and Toronto as the creators moved back and forth between the two cities and their respective cartooning communities; it has since been collected in a single volume by a small press publisher based in Vancouver. Furthermore, as a romance comic, it is clearly indebted to the traditions and conventions of classic romance comics published in the United States – though it builds upon and reinvents them for a new historical and social context, most notably in its grounding of the romance in a world of urban, pot-smoking, Gen X hipsters who work in vintage clothing shops and upscale organic grocery stores – and the New Reliable Press edition carries a blurb on its cover from California-based cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud, who first encountered Turner's work on the internet. The comic book's form and content is a result of the dialogue between these three different levels of culture.

In order to avoid the pitfalls that were part of Screech's look at French and Belgian comics we must keep the context of this dialogue in mind, but we would also do well to maintain an insistent focus on the specificity of the Canadian cultural context. This implies an attempt at a holistic understanding of national culture that does not isolate comics from other areas of cultural production. An exemplary case in this regard is R. Bruce Elder's study of Canadian film, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (1989). Elder's study

recognizes that in order to say something meaningful about one art in Canada – the cinema, in this case – we must keep in mind that it is articulated with other aspects of Canadian culture, such as philosophy, literature, and fine art. Though in many ways our assertions and even our vocabulary for discussing Canadian identity and culture must remain tentative and provisional as the conversation continues to unfold, if we fail to maintain a 'long view' of Canadian culture we are likely to repeat Screech's mistakes.

Finally, it is important to recognize that comics, like all arts and mass media, are containers of discourses, but also have the potential to contribute to discourses in significant ways. Rubenstein demonstrated how Mexican comics played an important role in helping to mediate between competing definitions of what it meant to be Mexican. Canadian comics may yet play a similar role. How do we envision the Canadian hero? The confident Captain Canuck, or the unlikely but courageous hero Northguard? Archetypes and conventions from other sources – domestic and foreign, traditional and modern – have found their way onto the pages of Canadian comic books but have been configured in new ways by Canadian creators. Further, what shape will the Canadian comics community take in the future? Will Canadian comics serve solely as an adjunct or branch plant to the American industry, a separate but similarly entertainment-oriented industry, an oppositional culture, or an art form of personal expression for its own sake? These are issues to which comics scholarship will have to pay careful attention for some time to come, as Canadian comics themselves continue to wrestle with them.

It is my hope that lessons drawn from Screech, Douglas and Malti-Douglas, and Rubenstein will prove instructive as Canadian comics scholarship attempts to develop a critical vocabulary and a set of analytical models for understanding Canadian comics. Canadian comics scholarship needs to retain the love, affection, and energy inherent in fan scholarship and the tradition that has descended from it, but supplement that enthusiasm with more sophisticated critical frameworks. We must remain sensitive to how these comic books are constructed as part of the larger conversation of Canadian culture, but also how they develop in dialogue with cultural traditions at a number of different levels and how, in turn, they make a contribution to these traditions. In doing so, we may yet find a way to answer the question of why Canadian comic books matter.

FROM RED SERGE TO SPANDEX:
The Canadian Superhero

Canadian cultural nationalists who revel in finding the 'Canadian connection' in any work of significance have always had plenty of fodder for their Canuck-spotting efforts in comics. Early newspaper cartoonists such as Winsor McCay of 'Little Nemo' and Hal Foster of 'Tarzan' and 'Prince Valiant' were born in Canada. In 1934, Canadian Jake Geller went to New York to publish *Comic Cuts*, a short-lived weekly comic magazine reprinting British strips that he had licensed (Bell 2004:3). When superhero comics, the medium's most famous and enduring genre, emerged with *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, expatriate Torontonian Joe Schuster was there, co-creating Superman and drawing his early adventures. Over the years, many more Canadians have made the pilgrimage to the Big Two publishers in New York City.[6] However, the 'Canadian comic book' – that is, comic books created by Canadian cartoonists and published in Canada for a primarily Canadian audience – was relatively late in coming. Indeed, it was more or less an accident of wartime fiscal policy. However, once indigenous comic book production began, it quickly established a tradition of nationalist superheroes. Even after the end of this early period, superheroes – and, especially, nationalist superheroes – remained a prominent constituent of the

[6] Often quite literally, as their physical presence was required in New York. More recently, especially with an increasing amount of work on comics being done and transmitted digitally, writers and artists have had more freedom to reside outside of the New York area and still participate in the mainstream comic book industry.

Canadian comics scene. In this chapter, I will outline the distinguishing characteristics of the superhero genre from a genre studies perspective. I will also address another significant genre of adventure fiction within Canadian popular culture, the 'Northwoods' Mountie genre. Elements of the Mountie's portrayal created a model for Canadian heroism that, I argue, has bled into portrayals of Canadian superheroes.

At the end of 1940, the Mackenzie King government introduced the War Exchange Conservation Act, which "was primarily designed to conserve American dollars by restricting the importation of non-essential goods" from the United States (Bell 1986b:23). Numbered among these non-essential goods were fiction periodicals, "a category encompassing pulps and some other newsstand magazines, including comic books" (Bell 2004:4). However, American publishers had already cultivated an audience for comic books in Canada as a subset of their own national market. Thus, the government's effort to ration US dollars for the furtherance of the war effort temporarily created a vacuum, a space in which Canadian publishers and cartoonists could create an indigenous comic book industry.

March 1941 saw the debut of the first fruits of this nascent industry, Maple Leaf Publishing's *Better Comics* and Anglo-American Publishing's *Robin Hood and Company*. Though they were published in the same month, Canadian comics historian John Bell gives the distinction of first Canadian comic book to *Better* because, unlike its Anglo-American counterpart, it "consisted entirely of original material and was published in a regular comic book format" (2004:5).

These two publishers were soon joined by Hillborough Studio and Commercial Signs of Canada, which would eventually merge into Bell Features, and later Educational Projects (2004:5, 10). The comic books produced in this era were colloquially known as 'whites' because of the black and white interior art contained between the colour covers (Bell 1986b:26).[7]

Better #1 also introduced the first Canadian superhero character, the Iron Man,[8] created by former Disney artist Vernon Miller (Bell 2004:5). Thus, the superhero genre was part of Canadian comic books from the very beginning for, unlike the early pioneers of the American comics industry, the creators of Canada's first comic books benefited from already having the American comic books they replaced as a template to follow. Though the American comics industry "has long incorporated a wide range of different genres including, but not limited to, science fiction, horror, Western, gangster, jungle, romance, and funny animals," it is the superhero that is "the genre most commonly aligned with comic books, and most crucial to an understanding of the entire medium ... No other genre has been as closely associated with the medium as the superhero has been, with well over a thousand different costumed characters appearing within the industry's first fifty years" (Brown 2001:145). It should come as no surprise then that, while there was a great deal of generic diversity in the comic books of this period, the superhero became a major figure in Canadian comics very quickly. The Iron Man was soon joined by other notable costumed crime-fighters: Anglo-American's Freelance and Commander Steel (Bell 2004:6), Hillborough's

[7] As opposed to American comics, which were famously 'all in colour for a dime.'
[8] No relation to the later, more famous Marvel Comics character of the same name.

Nelvana of the Northern Lights (2004:8), Bell Features' Johnny Canuck and the Penguin (2004:10), and Educational Projects' Canada Jack (2004:13) were among the most prominent of the many superheroes of this period. In subsequent generations of Canadian comic book production, the superhero genre would become nearly as entrenched as it is in the American industry. However, Mary Jane Miller's comparison of *Street Legal* and *L.A. Law* suggests that genres may undergo a process of "inflection," whereby cultural differences that affect "processes of production and the aesthetic of the programs" lead to "the grafting of new ideas, dramatic conventions, and technical advances onto old conventions," as they are indigenized in new cultural contexts (1993:104). In the process of importing the American superhero to Canada, the genre was subtly inflected by the Canadian cartoonists who re-imagined it for a newly constituted national audience.

Amazing Fantasies: The Superhero Genre

But who is the superhero that these Canadian cartoonists imported? In one sense, comic-book superheroes are the children of Superman. Though he or she has obvious precursors in popular fiction, the configuration of themes and conventions that mark a character as a superhero in the comic book tradition was first articulated by this 'amazing stranger from the planet Krypton.' Many have commented on Superman's defining role in the genre. The genre's "narrative formula" was established with "the emergence of Superman in 1938 as a culmination of heroic juvenile literature, pulp adventure serials, and the comic book medium's search for a defining story form" (Brown 2001:149). Stephen

Kline writes that Superman was the "most important and influential new character" for the comic books' "epic stories"; Superman's creators brought together "the idea of an unending and dogged fight against crime and chaos" from detective fiction and "an imaginary universe where they could explore mysterious forces beyond worldly powers" from science fiction narratives (1993:101). Umberto Eco also believed Superman to be "the forerunner of the group" and "representative of all his similars," suggesting that his readers could easily apply his observations about Superman "to a whole series of superheroes, from Batman and Robin to Green Arrow, the Manhunter from Mars, Green Lantern, and Aquaman up to the more recent Fantastic Four, Daredevil, and Spider Man [sic]" (2004:162). Indeed, Richard Reynolds (1992) takes this descent at face value and distills his entire definition of the genre from the first Superman story in *Action*, identifying seven important conventions:

> 1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
> 2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
> 3. The hero's devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
> 4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
> 5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.
> 6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
> 7. The stories are mythical and use science and magic indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder. (1992:16)

These are similar to Mike Benton's "four main conventions," as cited by Brown:

> (1) The hero must wear some form of distinguishable costume that sets him or her apart from ordinary people; (2) the protagonist must possess some form of superpower, be it of alien origin (e.g., Superman, the Martian Manhunter), granted by the gods (e.g., Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel), induced by science (e.g., Captain America, the Hulk, or developed through years of self-improvement (e.g., Batman, the Green Arrow); (3) the character hides behind the guise of a dual or secret identity; and (4) the superhero must be motivated by an altruistic, unwavering moral desire to fight against evil. (2001:148)

To these "surface conventions" of the genre, Brown adds a few additional "generic elements":

> the malleability of time (characters routinely travel to the future or past or exist in separate eras simultaneously), space (trips to the far end of the cosmos are as common as going to the corner store), and even reality (dream realms and different dimensions often merge with the characters' version of reality). (2001:146)

However, we should be cautious about adopting these definitions of the genre fully and completely, as they are limited by their reliance on classical mythology as a template and interpretive schema for the superhero.

Brown cites Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell to establish the mythological extraction of superhero stories, suggesting that the superhero's "narrative formula" is in actuality "a modernized version of the classical hero myth" (2001:146). He goes on to describe that formula in outline:

> [The] hero, who seems to be an ordinary man but is actually the progeny of exceptional parents, must heed the call of adventure and set out on a quest to vanquish a seemingly all-powerful evil force, thus protecting the community. Characteristically, the hero acquires magical powers as a type of gift from the gods, as well as an assortment of reliable helpers, and eventually he returns to his people with certain boons and greater wisdom; he marries the

> princess and becomes the true king and leader he was born to be. (2001:146)

Campbell calls this journey outline, "whether presented in the vast, almost oceanic images of the Orient, in the vigorous narratives of the Greeks, or in the majestic legends of the Bible," the monomyth (1972:35). This is the single narrative structure that supposedly supports everything from the myths and folktales of traditional societies to the mass entertainments of our own day. According to Reynolds, mythic heroes like "Samson, Hercules, and so on" constituted the "material already to hand" from which Siegel and Shuster created Superman (1992:53). B.J. Oropeza goes further and invokes the theological as a key framework for interpreting the superhero genre, suggesting that superhero comics are "a pop-cultural implementation of religious premises" that "point to something greater than themselves" (2005:4). There are pastoral and evangelistic motives at play here; Oropeza sees this line of inquiry as "[instructing] the inquirer on how the biblical message and its theological/philosophical outgrowth has been revised or retold through the superhero genre" (2005:4). Umberto Eco also understands the superhero as broadly mythological, but he specifically means by this that the superhero "must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature" (2004:149). That is, for Eco, the mythic hero is static and unchanging because his or her story is "the story of something which [has] already happened," and it is only a matter of retelling and embellishing the same tale again and again (2004:148). But Eco also insists that the superhero is not exclusively mythic

because superhero comics are "marketed in the sphere of a 'romantic' production for a public that consumes 'romances'" (2004:149). Thus they belong to the "'civilization' of the modern novel," a sphere where "the reader's main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of *what will happen* and, therefore, to the plot invention which now holds our attention" (2004:148, Eco's emphasis). Superhero stories are told in the indefinite present: no matter how many adventures Superman and Batman have had, they are still roughly the same age. The settings of their adventures are always contemporary, giving superhero continuity a strangely ahistorical character in which narrative time bears no predictable relationship to real historical time. Following Eco, Brown makes the same distinction between "the adventures of comic book heroes and those of their classical ancestors" on the basis of a marketing necessity:

> Because the superhero must return every month for a new story, the hero's quest is never completely resolved via marriage and/or his reintegration into the community. Rather, the comic book adventure is a modification of the original heroic myth due to the cyclical nature of mass entertainments. (2001:146-7)

For Campbell, the "nuclear unit of the monomyth" was the three-stage rite of passage: "*separation—initiation—return*" (1972:30). But superhero comic books are periodicals, so the completion of the rite must be indefinitely delayed. Rather than a heroic journey with a beginning, middle, and end, we have a structure of iterative conflicts that can potentially be extended indefinitely, and certainly for as long as the audience is willing to make it lucrative for the publishers. This is but one example of how the practical concerns of publishing popular fiction in the

contemporary marketplace intrude upon attempts to identify superhero comics with these mythological 'forebears.'

Many superheroes do indeed have resonances with mythic subjects and themes: Thor and Hercules are direct superhero adaptations of myths; Wonder Woman has a quasi-mythological pastiche of Greek and Roman themes as her background. Others draw heavily on religious imagery and symbolism: Superman's origin recalls Moses in the reeds and elements of his character evoke, if not Christ, then some sort of Messianic figure; Marvel characters Daredevil and Nightcrawler both rely on the contradictory imagery of a demon who fights for good. Some, such as Jack Kirby's Fourth World characters, encompass both classical mythology and contemporary religiosity. But conceptualizing the superhero as a 'modern mythology,' as the subtitle of Reynolds's study would have it, tends to overemphasize the mythological at the expense of the modern. That is, in searching for that which is cognate with classical mythology, we may lose sight of what is unique to the genre and what it owes to its immediate antecedents and contemporaries in popular fiction.

These analyses must be understood as not simply mythological but mythopoetic; this approach is a rhetorical strategy for justifying superhero comics and their study by rooting the genre's characters and conventions deep in the heart of our culture. This same logic also undergirds approaches to comics *as* literature and *as* art, rather than more broadly 'literary' and 'artistic'. It is also at work in Scott McCloud's (1999) revisionist history of comics that subsumes

Egyptian painting and the Bayeux Tapestry under comics' banner.[9] It allows comic books – often but not always, specifically superhero comic books – to ride the coattails of more accepted cultural forms into mainstream culture's good graces. While matching up superheroes to similar figures from folk traditions may be an interesting and useful strategy for reading those individual characters, it does little to advance our understanding of the genre as a whole. Furthermore, if we are not careful in our application of the monomyth concept, we may also implicate an idea of myth that implies universal and timeless truth. As Campbell writes, "in myth the problems and solutions shown are directly valid for all mankind" (1972:19). Myths are a way of answering the fundamental human questions, "What is the core of us? What is the basic character of our being?" (1972:385) Similarly, Oropeza argues that "superhero legends venture to tap into universal mythic elements"; therefore, the genre's tendency to resurrect characters who have been 'killed off' speaks to "humanity's latent desire for life everlasting," which is "a benefit of unfettered communion with the giver of life in the new paradise" (2005:4, 10). Yet we also need recognize that these iterative resurrections are a narrative expression of the requirements of character marketing. Notwithstanding enduring aesthetic quality or textual richness, we need to remember that myths and stories are the products of people embedded within specific cultural contexts and social structures at specific moments in history. Inasmuch as all human beings need to secure the material bases of life and deal with the challenges of living in a community, there are universal human

[9] For an excellent analysis of McCloud's use of this rhetorical strategy, see Horrocks, Dylan. n.d. "Inventing Comics: Scott Mccloud's Definition of Comics." Retrieved 5 May 2006 from http://www.hicksville.co.nz/Inventing%20Comics.htm.

experiences to which myths may correspond, but we must pay attention to the specificities of the cultural systems in which the myths are created and the differences between these systems. If we neglect the fact that the significance and meaning of cultural artefacts are contingent upon the societies that create them, we risk falling victim to a form of commodity fetishism that alienates the story from its telling. Yet, in the absence, as of this writing, of a genre studies perspective on the superhero, we must attempt to salvage what is useful from the existing treatments of superhero comics while constructing a more sensitive framework that takes into account, not only their mythic echoes but also their existence as a genre of a commercially-oriented mass medium that is thoroughly entrenched in the world of multinational entertainment conglomerates.

It is thus incumbent upon us to analyze the superhero genre as a genre. The first consequence of this change in perspective is that, *pace* Reynolds, we must be cautious in using Superman alone – indeed, only one Superman story – as the template for our definition of the genre. Nearly 70 years and countless comic books now lie between his debut and the present day. The superhero genre's fortunes have risen and fallen a number of times. The audience's demographics have changed dramatically, as have its tastes. At the very least, the popularity of 'grim and gritty' anti-heroes[10] in the superhero comic books of the late 1980s and 1990s suggest that it is not so easy to predict what kind of character will be embraced as a superhero. By the mythologically derived definitions we have in place right now, we would have to consider many of the

[10] This trend encompassed characters like Venom and the Punisher, who originally debuted as supervillains but were later repurposed as vigilante heroes, a host of brooding, violent vigilantes in trench coats, and the so-called 'Bad Girl' craze of occult-themed cheesecake.

most popular characters of that era villains, yet their readers understood them to be superheroes. Superman's children have grown up, and our definition of the genre must evolve with them. Before we can do this, however, we require a more robust understanding of genre itself.

In his essay 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,' Rick Altman (2000) makes an important distinction between genre's vocabulary and its grammar. A semantic definition of a genre is one that "depends on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like," thus "stressing the semantic elements which make up the genre," whereas a syntactic definition of a genre focusses on "certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable placeholders" (2000:183). As Altman summarizes the difference: "The semantic approach thus stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged" (2000:183). Because of their narrow focus on the heroic monomyth, the definitions I have examined thus far are primarily on the semantic side of the dichotomy that Altman has set up. This creates a significant gap in their analyses of the genre. Without a complementary treatment of the genre's syntax, our definition is unbalanced. Altman argues that the two approaches must be combined. The resulting "semantic/syntactic approach to genre study" will allow us to "avail ourselves of a possible way to deal critically with differing levels of genericity" because "not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent" (2000:184). This approach allows us to properly situate previously problematic texts, such as the 'everyday heroes' subgenre of comics

about the lives of ordinary people in a superhero universe (c.f., Misiroglu and Roach 2004:200-01), which are syntactically related to their own individual genres (police procedural, detective, journalism thriller, and so on) but have borrowed semantic conventions from the superhero genre, or the television series 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (1997), which draws heavily on structural elements of the superhero genre but uses the semantics of horror. As we can see, the "dual approach" that Altman suggests does indeed allow for "a far more accurate description of the numerous inter-generic connections" than do "single-minded approaches" (2000:184). The 'everyday heroes' books may be better understood, not as a subgenre of superheroes *per se*, but a way of making generic experimentation more palatable to the hardcore superhero fans that the comic book industry relies on to make ends meet; though 'Buffy' *feels* like a superhero story, its feminist subtext is much more credible in a semantic context where the convention of skimpy skin-tight costumes for woman heroes is absent.

In an attempt to rebalance our definition of the superhero genre, I would like to explore three syntactic relationships that I believe to be thematically important to the genre: the relationship between the superhero's dual identities; the relationship between the superhero and the city; and the relationship between the superhero and authority.

Under the Hood: Revisiting the Alter Ego

In a famous sketch from 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' (Davies 1969), a crowd of bystanders in Superman costumes stand helpless and agape at a broken-down bicycle. Only one of them is capable of saving the day, but he must

find a way to change into his costume without revealing to the world that Mr. F.G. Superman and the heroic Bicycle Repair Man are, in fact, one and the same. Even those of us who have never been active consumers of the superhero genre recognize the convention that the Pythons are satirizing in the scene. The dual or secret identity is one of the most prominent aspects of a superhero character, as Reynolds and Benton both attest. While readers thrill to the exploits of the costumed, heroic identity, it is the balancing influence of the ordinary and mundane alter ego that makes one care about a character and keep reading its comic book from month to month. Furthermore, the conflicts that are created by the vicissitudes of the hero's double life are often more important and enduring than the tussles with the criminals and supervillains *du jour* that provide the action sequences of the average superhero comic book.

The dynamic tension between these two sides of the hero is responsible for the element of wish fulfilment and escapism often ascribed to superhero comics, wherein it is suggested that the reader identifies with the mild-mannered civilian identity but wishes to identify with the powerful, unfettered hero identity. For example, like many others before and after him, McLuhan noted that Superman's civilian identity Clark Kent is "a nobody … a third-rate reporter whose incompetence wins him the pity and contempt of the virile Lois Lane." Thus, "his hidden superself is an adolescent dream of imaginary triumphs" (2004:105). This is even more true of Marvel's flagship character, Spider-Man, whose alter-ego, Bradford Wright suggests, provided "an instant point of identification" for his readers because his secret identity Peter Parker was an

adolescent with typical adolescent problems in addition to his superheroic responsibilities (2001:210). The "young, flawed, and brooding antihero" character that Spider-Man represented "became the most widely imitated archetype in the superhero genre since the appearance of Superman" (2001:212). The constant between these two models is the juxtaposition of a weak, frustrated secret identity with a powerful, liberated heroic one.

It is through the dual identity convention that the melodramatic and soap-operatic are incorporated into the genre. After all, very few superheroes are able to effortlessly manage both of their identities. 'Superheroes with ordinary problems' was Marvel Comics' great innovation. Spider-Man's series "became one of the first superhero soap operas, inviting readers to return each month to check in on the latest trials and tribulations of the hero and his supporting cast" (2001:212). Peter Parker famously learned that with great power comes great responsibility. However, for most superheroes, there is an inevitable conflict between personal – often, romantic and sexual – desires and those heroic responsibilities. The Superman/Lois Lane/Clark Kent love triangle is an excellent example of this, though only one of many that could be cited. The superhero's interpersonal relationships suffer as a result of his or her double life. Often, the hero realizes that, should a supervillain discover the secret identity, his or her loved ones could easily become a target. This provides both the need for secrecy and an impetus for the hero to remain distant from other people. Reynolds believes that such diegetic justifications for maintaining the secret identity convention are transparent, "only secondary to the structural need for characters

to have secret identities," which is that the logic of myth requires the hero to observe a taboo in order to

> [pay] for his great powers ... in a manner which is analogous to the process by which warriors in many traditional societies 'pay' for their strength in battle by abstaining from sex, eating special foods, and other taboos designed to isolate and protect the 'masculine' in their characters. (1992:14-15)

Eco agrees that "Superman's double identity has a function," but he understands it to be a narrative one, "since it permits the suspense characteristic of a detective story and great variation in the mode of narrating our hero's adventures, his ambiguities, his histrionics" (2004:147). I prefer Eco's explanation, as it foregrounds the exigencies of maintaining narrative interest from month to month. But the convention of the dual identity is, significantly, also a way of posing the issue of managing the public and private selves and suggesting that, even for those gifted with powers beyond mortal ken, this is a challenge.

However, not every superhero has a secret identity. Some characters simply *are* their heroic identities (the Silver Surfer and the android Avengers member Vision fit this category); others just cannot be bothered to maintain the deception (the third Flash, Wally West, publicly revealed his secret identity). For the semantic approach to the genre this presents a problem. Though the lack of a secret identity may not completely preclude a character from being considered a superhero, it is certainly a significant deviation from the generic Ur-text. But when we consider the dual identity convention as a syntactic relationship rather than simply one more item on a genre's checklist, we can see that a distinction is

still made between their private lives, included in the story as character development subplots, and the actions they take in the public sphere as costumed crime-fighters. Furthermore, we can see that this syntactic configuration can potentially carry a great deal of meaning for audiences in contemporary society, where the management of private and public selves is a significant feature of daily life. As Freud writes, "it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct, how much it presupposes precisely the non-satisfaction (by suppression, repression or some other means?) of powerful instincts" (1975:34). The convention of the superhero's dual identity speaks powerfully to the civilizing process and the self-denial it requires of us all.

Your Friendly Neighbourhood Superhero

The relationship that the superhero has with the city is also significant. Most superheroes have a particular city under their charge. Though Superman is capable of "good on a cosmic level," he restricts much of his action to "the level of the small community where he lives (Smallville as a youth, Metropolis as an adult)" (Eco 2004:163). Most major DC Comics characters are similarly rooted in their own fictional metropolises: Batman in Gotham City, the Flash in Keystone City, Green Lantern in Coast City, and so on. The bulk of Marvel Comics characters are based, like their publisher, in New York. Thus, the majority of action in superhero narratives takes place in the city. The city is the superhero's natural habitat. He is at home on a warehouse rooftop, ready to pounce on an unsuspecting thug; she is at home soaring among the crystal spires of the urban

landscape. Though Reynolds did not include this element in his definition of the genre, he does recognize its importance: "The locus of superhero comics was then, as it largely remains, New York ... This is the New York (or Gotham City, or Metropolis) that dominates the superhero story and has become its almost inevitable milieu" (1992:18-19). Partially, this is because early comic book creators 'wrote what they knew' and situated their stories in familiar locales.

However, Reynolds also argues that this is because New York (and its various comic-book doppelgangers) "is a city which signifies all cities, and, more specifically, all modern cities, since the city itself is one of the signs of modernity" (1992:19). If the relationship to the city is indeed a cipher for the superhero's relationship to modernity, then it is a profoundly ambivalent one. Just as the hero's relationship to technology is ambivalent – for the fantastic pseudo-scientific technology that is responsible for explaining his or her powers is also responsible for the powers of the supervillains that threaten him or her every week – the modern city is both the locus of progress and the site of the gravest social ills. The New York natives that wrote superhero comic books were "thoroughly familiar with stories of grafting politicians and organized criminals who ran urban neighborhoods as private fiefdoms" (2001:24). The average citizen in a comic-book city was, thus, as likely to suffer at the hands of a heartless businessman or organized crime as to be threatened by the more colourful psychotics of his or her local superhero's rogues gallery.

This Looks Like a Job for Legitimate Civil Authority

Perhaps it is because their urban environments were so dangerous that early superheroes were committed reformers. Wright notes that many early comic books "implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, underscored key New Deal assumptions," often using "the forces of corporate greed" as the antagonists of their stories (2001:22). In these New Deal era comics, "superheroes repeatedly sounded the warning that business dealings free of public scrutiny and government regulation inevitably led to corruption and crime" (2001:23). Superhero stories also frequently used corrupt local politicians and political bosses as enemies, "pointing out the failings of local government and the dangers of provincial demagogues," though they rarely were as critical of the federal government, portraying it "as the common man's chief benefactor" (2001:24-25). With this crusading background, it is no wonder the definitions I have cited above quite explicitly pose the issue of a superhero's commitment to justice versus the law of the land. When they are in conflict, where do the superhero's loyalties lie? And to whom is he or she accountable? The superhero is an imaginary agent capable of combating complex, seemingly intractable problems that vex modern societies, but the solution represented by the superhero is almost always at some point reduced to the level of physical violence. Many critiques of the superhero genre have focussed on the way that such fantasies, in McLuhan's words (referring specifically to Superman), "reflect the strong-arm totalitarian methods of the immature and barbaric mind" (2004:105). The superhero "is ruthlessly efficient in carrying on a one-man crusade against crooks and anti-social forces," but his or her devotion to justice

is a devotion to justice "as an affair of personal strength alone"; this may be taken as a sign "that today the dreams of youths and adults alike seem to embody a mounting impatience with the laborious processes of civilized life and a restless eagerness to embrace violent solutions" (2004:105). This critique is largely rooted in the way that many superhero comics settled into more pro-*status quo* roles in the post-war era. This is especially true of Superman, who, "having launched his career as a crusading champion of social justice and a militant antifascist," became the "conservative elder statesman among comic book heroes" in the late 1940s and 1950s (Wright 2001:60).

The conflict between justice and the law is a significant syntactic relationship in superhero comics because the basic premise of the superhero inevitably represents a challenge to the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, and, thus, in the Weberian sense, the very foundation of the state's authority as the only political actor "considered to be capable of 'legitimizing,' by virtue of mandate or permission, the exercise of physical coercion" (Weber 1968:904). Nearly all superheroes work outside of the law: some enjoy the tacit support of authority and the approval of the public, such as Superman or the Marvel super-teams the Fantastic Four and the Avengers; others, such as Batman and Spider-Man, have on-again-off-again relationships with the police and the public; and some characters are openly despised and hunted by the government and populace alike, such as the Incredible Hulk and the X-Men. These characters must navigate their relationship to the law and law enforcement on a regular basis as they seek to do what they consider to be right. Those

characters that do represent governmental authority will eventually face a moral dilemma in the conflict between their own ethical judgement and the orders they receive from an institution that does not always live up to the ideals it espouses.

The ability of the superhero to readily typify an entire set of political relationships to government and authority figures has led to a number of comic books that have used superhero characters to construct political allegories. Ironically, Superman has often been used in these allegories to represent the more fascistic side of the superhero fantasy. For example, he plays a prominent role in *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller 1986) and *Kingdom Come* (Waid and Ross 1996). In the former, he is too willing to abdicate his own moral judgment and collude with a corrupt government, and in the latter, he is too willing to override legitimate government sovereignty in favour of his own sense of ethics.[11] In *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986), the villain is a former superhero who realizes that he must use his abilities to overstep the political process entirely (and sacrifice the lives of millions of New Yorkers) in order to save the world from war and intolerance. The ending of the comic book suggests that he may have been right.

These three relationships are most certainly only the beginning of a more thorough analysis of superhero comic books from a syntactically-oriented genre studies approach. However, when we combine them with the existing semantic

[11] Interestingly enough, Batman represents a preferred 'third way,' a liberal/libertarian individualist who is committed to making society better for others, in both of these stories.

definitions of the genre, the value of dialecticizing the two approaches, as Altman suggested, becomes evident.

A superhero story is one that has a figure we recognize as a superhero for its protagonist. He or she wears a recognizable costume and has a colourful codename or *nom de guerre*; this costumed persona usually hides a secret identity. The superhero has exceptional abilities of some type and feels a responsibility to use them to oppose other individuals with similarly exceptional abilities, usually through violent combat. These characters and conventions are used to tell stories about problems and conflicts that arise as we attempt to manage the relationship of the individual to the society. The iterative nature of superhero comic books allows for these themes to be embodied again and again in an unending series of always-contemporary morality plays. The adventures of comic-book superheroes are not simply myths containing timeless universal truths but, rather, texts that continually negotiate and rework specific themes in the context of the everyday lives of their audiences.

In its early years, the superhero comic book fed off of the climate of confrontation, anticipating the outbreak of war and America's involvement in it. As Wright notes, many of the creators of this period were "Jewish and liberal," and "they expressed their politics in their work" (Wright 2001:35). In contrast to isolationist politics, early superhero adventures took Nazis and Fascists as ready-made. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, comic book publishers were "saturating newsstands with patriotic superheroes costumed in the

American flag and bearing names like 'Uncle Sam,' 'Minute-Man,' 'The Star-Spangled Kid,' and even 'Miss America'" (2001:42). Thus, "by the time the United States joined World War II in 1941, the superhero genre was clearly defined and firmly ensconced in the collective consciousness of North American popular culture" (Brown 2001:149). Of course, the superhero comic books that had been published in Canada since March of the same year were even more fully engaged in the imaginary war effort of the comic-book adventurers.

Notwithstanding the periodization of this era in the history of comic books as the Golden Age, it certainly was *a* golden age for the superhero genre in terms of the popularity and relevance of its patriotic power-fantasies. However, the end of World War II more or less meant the end of the Canadian comic book industry *qua* industry. The import restrictions were lifted, and American comic books, in full colour and starring many beloved characters from before the war, returned to Canadian newsstands. Anticipating the end of the wartime protectionism that had separated them from American competition, some publishers "revamped their titles in the face of such a formidable threat while others ... accepted the inevitability of their demise" (Bell 1986b:27). Educational Projects and fifth Golden Age publisher Feature Publications belonged to the latter category; Maple Leaf, Bell, Anglo-American, and "newcomer" Rucker Publications attempted, with varying degrees of success, to put up a fight by adopting US-style production values (1986b:27). Maple Leaf's new colour comics were produced "exclusively for the Canadian market" and proved too expensive to be feasible in the long term; the company closed its doors "by the summer of

1946" (1986b:27). Anglo-American and Rucker distributed their comics in the United States, and Bell exported to both the US and the United Kingdom, but these enterprises were not ultimately sustainable; Bell and Anglo-American only managed to stay afloat by cancelling their own original titles and instead reprinting American comic books for the Canadian market (1986b:27).

When a similar import restriction was instituted in 1947, comic book publishers again benefited, but this did not result in "resurrecting the indigenous titles that had flourished during the war years," as "it was much simpler – and cheaper – to acquire reprint rights than it was to establish the infrastructure needed for a distinct national industry" (Bell 2004:18-19). Rather, Canadian comics became little more than an extension of the American industry. This lasted until 1951 when, once again, American comics were able to cross the border; by the end of the year only one Canadian company, Superior Publishers, survived (2004:23). Though Superior was an aggressive publisher that produced and distributed its own titles in the United States in addition to reprinting American comics, these original titles were written and drawn by the New York-based Iger Studios (2004:20). Therefore, if we consider 'Canadian comics' to be comics produced by Canadians with a Canadian audience in mind, then, despite this decade of production, "Canada's Golden Age of Comics was clearly over" in 1946 (Bell 1986b:27).[12]

However, Canadians still read these reprints and imports. And every once in a while a new national superhero would appear thanks to a passionate reader

[12] Superior would remain in business until 1956 (Bell 2004:24).

who wondered why Canadians could not save the day, too. These were products of dedicated amateurs working outside of the industrial scene of American comic books but with a sensibility and devotion to genre fiction that appealed to readers of mainstream comics. The first of these was Richard Comely's Captain Canuck in 1975. He was followed by other 'postlapsarian' Canadian superheroes such as Shainblum's Northguard and Waley and Craig's The Northern Light. Though Canadian cartoonists have become better known recently for slice-of-life comics inspired by the American underground movement of the 1960s and growing out of another tradition of comic book production in the 1960s and '70s, the national superhero has proven itself to be a remarkably hardy artistic and generic tradition. And, if anything, the superheroes that have come afterwards have been more self-consciously nationalistic than their World War II predecessors, for whom fighting Nazis was often a sufficient demonstration of patriotic intent.

Take Off, Eh? The Superhero goes North

As we have seen already, the superhero genre is a highly syncretic one, and in crossing the 49th parallel and coming to Canada the superhero comic drew another genre of adventure fiction into its orbit: the Mountie story. The first home-grown adventure strip in a Canadian newspaper, writer Ted McCall's 'Men of the Mounted,' made the transition to comic book pages as 'Kip Keene of the Mounted' (MacMillan 1986:98), but do we find evidence of the Mountie figure in Canadian superhero comic books? Numerous Canadian comic book characters have had a career in the Mounted Police as part of their origin stories, and even those that have not themselves been Mounties have been created in the shadow

of that archetype of decorous heroism. This is not to argue that the Mountie is a proto- or crypto-superhero. Rather, because the 'Northwoods' genre has long been the dominant popular representation of idealized Canadian heroism it has provided superhero comics with a ready-to-hand vision of what it means to be a hero in Canada.

Men of the Mounted

The North-West Mounted Police was created in 1873 and deployed to keep the peace in what is now Saskatchewan and Alberta, "dispensing justice British-style" (Francis 1997:30). In the "classic version" of the history of what became the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Mounties brought the prairies under the dominion of the peaceable kingdom by "pursuing a strategy of calm negotiation, in which force was always seen as a last resort" (Dawson 1998:6-7). In this narrative, the Mounties are fundamental to the birth of the nation. Of course, this is a selective and subjective interpretation of the RCMP's history and its role in Canada's, but it has become a powerful myth in our culture:

> [It] gained its dominant position because it was supported and enhanced by popular writers during the first half of the Force's existence. It was buoyed by government publications and firsthand accounts by former Mounties, all of which acted as resources for those wishing to learn (and write) about the Force. (1998:19)

As a tamer and civilizer of the wilderness, the Mountie is analogous to the cowboy, the US Marshall, or the Texas Ranger in American historical mythology. Despite many Canadians' desire to imagine that our westward expansion was somehow less imperialistic than our southern neighbours', the Mountie is our own agent of manifest destiny.

As a genre, the Northwoods story hinges on two key semantic aspects: its protagonists, the Mounties, and its setting, the Canadian wilderness. I will briefly examine the historiography of the former here in order to describe its influence on Canadian superhero comic books; the latter will be addressed in the following chapter.

The Mountie, as 'he' appeared in popular culture, was rarely an accurate representation of the RCMP,[13] as attested to by the palpable frustration in the pages of RCMP member T.A. Culham's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Literature* (1947). The 'Mountie' is a narrativized and aestheticized cluster of normative depictions of the ideal Canadian, and has been more highly constrained by gender and race than his real-life counterparts. Reality's RCMP has had to change along with the political and social changes of the latter half of the 20th century; fiction's Mountie has continued to represent the moral order of Canada's primal scene, a political fantasy set in the great woods that denies the challenges associated with managing and accommodating difference in a modern, multicultural, and liberal democratic society. Michael Dawson writes that the Mountie "was a symbol of divinely ordained hierarchies, against which ethnic minorities, subordinate classes, and feminists could struggle but never prevail," and, thus, was "an expression of Canadian antimodernism" (1998:43). The process of transforming the historical Mounted Police officer into the imaginary Mountie, and thus preserving the fantasy of an unproblematic

[13] In order to preserve this distinction, I will reserve 'Mountie' to refer to fictional depictions of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and its members. 'RCMP', 'RCMP member', and similar formulations will be used to refer to the actual police force, whether historically or in a contemporary context.

Anglo-Saxon, patriarchal, and heteronormative social order, began with the rise of dime novels and pulp fiction at the end of the nineteenth century, in which the Mountie became a "stock figure" (Francis 1997:31). According to Dawson, the Mountie was a "politically useful" symbol at that cultural moment because the "popular novelists," like many in their readerships, "were lamenting the passing of Victorian manliness and traditional hierarchies in the face of modernity" (1998:33). The fictional Mounties came to represent an ideal of masculinity and patriarchal authority that was believed to be slipping away:

> The Mountie addressed threats to Victorian hierarchies and sought ... to combat threats to Anglo-Saxon middle-class hegemony, threats including immigrants and French Canadians, while encouraging the reader to defer to a social order that encouraged female passivity and rigid class distinctions. (1998:34)

The first Mountie movie was made in 1909, the Kalem Company's *The Cattle Thieves* (Berton 1975:112). Eventually, "Hollywood produced 'Northwoods' movies by the hundreds" (Berland 1999:214). Canadians rarely had a significant influence on the production of these films, most of which were filmed in Hollywood and its environs, but the films still "*connoted* Canada with pine trees, dishevelled French Canadian villains, Mounties, snow, and uninhabited virgin forests" (1999:215). The Mounties' "endlessly recycled iconographic signification" in these many films "both references and counteracts the uncivilizing, lawless powers of northern winter hinted at so decorously in the inevitable snowy backdrop" (1999:211). The genre has been enduring and pervasive:

> From the 1890s until the 1950s, books and films – as well as TV programs and comic books – depicted Canada's federal police force as a daring group of individuals who brought British justice

> and fair play to the less civilized peoples of the world: Native peoples, Eastern European immigrants, and French-Canadians. In coming to the aid of damsels in distress, these square-jawed Victorian gentlemen also rekindled the spirit of Medieval chivalry. (Dawson 1998:53)

In Canadian pulp magazines – magazines that owed their existence to the same legislation that made the Canadian comic book industry possible – the Mountie story also informed a national tradition of true crime literature (Strange and Loo 2004). All of these stories, both indigenous and imported, provided a generic framework for representing the idealized Canadian hero.

The Mountie, as portrayed in Hollywood melodrama and pulp magazines, "was almost invariably brave, noble, honourable, courteous, kind, and trustworthy – all the standard Boy Scout qualities, to go with the hat" (Berton 1975:111). While they were impressive physical specimens, "police power came from the lawmen's wits and not their brawn" (Strange and Loo 2004:30). As representatives of British civilization, Mounties were required to be more than simply agents of law and order. They had to be proper Victorian gentlemen. "Refinement was a common trait" in these representations of the RCMP, and "many of the fictional heroes displayed a 'high quality of breeding and conduct' by demonstrating their musical skills as well as their interest in art and dancing, even on patrol" (Dawson 1998:37). The Mounties were "patriotic, vigorous he-men who didn't smoke, drink or otherwise engage in behaviours that would interfere in the discharge of their duties or the care of their trusty steeds" (Strange and Loo 2004:31). The particular masculine ideal that the Mounties represented was characterized by "sexual self-restraint, chivalry, and

gentlemanly behaviour" (Dawson 1998:37), not rough-and-tumble machismo. However, the practical requirements of enforcing the law in the wilderness meant that Mounties, despite their genteel air, were capable of facing the hardships of the environment. This double nature is an important thematic tension in the genre's portrayal of the hero:

> The Mountie, in overcoming the trials and tribulations of the environment, showed he was ready for anything; yet he retained his refined and gentlemanly qualities too. The Mountie's adversaries could not match his dual nature: they either lacked his hardiness in the face of nature's challenges, or his upstanding Victorian demeanour. (1998:39)

Though they were rugged individuals, they were not individualists. Rather, they "upheld" the values of "cooperation and uncompromising fairness" in their pursuit of 'their man' "because chasing criminals across vast uninhabited territories was a collective effort" (Strange and Loo 2004:32).

Through all of these representations, a common portrayal of the Mountie emerges. He is strong, smart, and dogged in his pursuit of criminals. He is courteous, kind, and possessed of all the social graces one expects from an upright member of the community. The common features of the "Mountie fraternity" were expressed in several ways by the pulps and stories that used them as protagonists:

> through descriptions of appearance and deportment; through displays of courage and determination that brought them acceptance as men, not boys (and never women); and through their chivalrous service to helpless female characters. (Dawson 1998:41-42)

For generations of Canadians, the Mountie has served as a symbol of the nation itself. Furthermore, this romantic image of horsemen in scarlet tunics peacefully taming – indeed, gentrifying – the wilderness has captured the imagination of people all over the world.

North-Westerns

Yet, despite the popular appeal of the Mountie, the characterization of the force on screen often rang hollow for Pierre Berton:

> In the majority of the movies the Mountie was little more than an American sheriff in a scarlet tunic ... By switching the sheriff over to a Mountie, Hollywood still retained the essential ingredients of the classic western: blazing guns and thundering hooves. (1975:121)

Quoting Alan G. Barbour's *Days of Thrill and Adventure*,[14] Berton notes that Hollywood producers used Mountie movies as a strategy "to add variety to their production schedules and still maintain relatively low production costs," simply "by converting the hero from a fighting cowboy to a gallant Mountie. Aside from the change of costume and change of location ... the films remained western in flavour" (qtd. Berton 1975:121). However, though not every movie Mountie conformed to the generic pattern of genteel heroism, the Mountie story is not simply the result of film executives cutting corners to provide a false sense of diversity. As a genre that has its thematic core in the relationship between civilization and the wilderness (and which had dealt with these concerns in print before the inception of the Hollywood film industry) the Northwoods fiction tradition is a Western in a much more profound way than Berton lets on. It is

[14] Berton mistakenly refers to the author as Alan *J.* Barbour.

essentially a subgenre of the Western, re-expressing the grammar of that genre in the Canadian vocabulary of Mounted Police officers and French-Canadian heavies in the great woods of the north.

As John Rennie Short succinctly puts it, the Western is about "the battle between good and evil in the frontier zone between wilderness and civilization" (1991:178). In Jim Kitses' study of the Western, *Horizons West*, he posits a "structuralist grid focused around the frontier's dialectic play of forces embodied in the master binary opposition of the wilderness and civilisation" that defines the basic syntax of the genre (2004:13). The grid organizes various concepts under the rubric of the oppositions between individual/community, nature/culture, and west/east. For the most part, positive values accrue to the side associated with the wilderness. The individual, nature, and the west are associated with freedom, honour, integrity, purity, equality, and tradition; the community, culture, and the east are associated with restriction, institutions, compromise, corruption, class, and change (2004:12). However, this is not a complete valorization of the wilderness over civilization. There has been a long tradition in Western culture of fearing the wilderness and fearing "the effects of the wilderness on the individuals exposed to its influence," for it has served as "a symbolic representation of the id" and, therefore, "contact with the wilderness was contact with the wild unconscious" (Short 1991:9). Thus, the wilderness also places self-interest, solipsism, brutalization, and savagery against the social responsibility, democracy, refinement, and humanity of civilization (Kitses 2004:12). Early Westerns were "morality plays in which right and good triumphed over wrong and

bad," but with the "mature western" came an appreciation of "the tension between the celebration and the criticism of the coming of civilization" (Short 1991:180, 185). A quintessential example of this tension is John Wayne's character Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (Ford 1956), who is "less a hero, more a struggling soul touched as much by savagery as by domesticity" (Short 1991:191). Edwards is a rugged individualist who must use the anti-social skills he has learned on the frontier to restore the community broken by violence. In the end, however, he cannot remain in the community and must return to the space outside of civilization.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the Hollywood Western eventually turned its attention to Canada, or at least the Canada-like "mythical region, never geographically defined, which it invented and called the Northwoods" (Berton 1975:25). Where there is wilderness, there is fertile ground for the themes and concerns of the Western – even in the 'final frontier' of outer space, as the Joss Whedon television series 'Firefly' (2002) demonstrates. As Berton writes, "it was always the woods and never the plains that formed the setting for Hollywood's Mountie movies" because the exoticism of the setting relied on that fact that the "woods were wild" while "the plains had been tamed by the plough"; "the plains were American; it was the woods and forests that related to Canada" (1975:25). But while Canadian culture has also been defined by its encounter with the wild and untamed landscape, the emphasis has fallen on Kitses's grid in different ways.

For Canadians, building a society in the wilderness was not a matter of a frontier simply marching across the continent. The "immensity and diversity of the country" has meant that we instead dwell in a land of "empty spaces" (Elder 1989:9). Rather than a clear border between wilderness and civilization, Canada had pockets of people, garrisons of civilization surrounded by untamed wildness. For early settlers, "the only hope of surviving [rested] with human institutions" (1989:31), and the RCMP was such an institution. In referencing the historic role of RCMP in the nation-building process, the Mountie represented a response to the wildness and madness that overcome people who have been outside of civilization for too long. While the ideology that this conception of the Mountie embodies may be overly optimistic about the unproblematic triumph of civilization, it also treats the wilderness with appropriate gravity. The 'savage mind' should not be taken so lightly, and the anti-social violence of the frontier cannot be put towards pro-social aims as easily as the Westerns would have us believe. Unlike the Western gunfighter, the Mountie does not attempt to balance savagery and civilization; he opposes the wilderness in the name of Victorian gentility.

Superheroes That Always Get Their Man

Wright suggests that while the cowboy heroes of popular Westerns, as "a classic American hero type," provided a template for the American superhero, "the explicit problems and solutions expressed in the Western myth" were no longer relevant to the modernized and urbanized society that the superhero comic book addressed (2001:10). However, in Canada the influence of the

Mountie genre has kept elements of the Western alive within the superhero tradition. The fact that Americans and American film companies contributed so much to the Northwoods' generic corpus has not kept the Mountie from remaining a similarly 'classic' hero type in Canadian popular culture, even if today these portrayals of square-jawed Mounties fighting crime on the frontier are more likely to be consumed ironically than patriotically.

In many ways, the Mountie and the superhero are well matched. Both use all their abilities in the furtherance of justice, going above and beyond what an ordinary person would or could do to apprehend evildoers. For the Mountie, like the superhero, there is often a conflict between personal loyalties and public duties. Berton calls this "theme of Love versus Duty, or Friendship versus Honour"; the movie Mountie was constantly being tasked with bringing in "his sweetheart, his brother, his best friend, or somebody else close to him, usually his sweetheart's father or brother or best friend" (1975:117). For Mounties, when these conflicts arose, "in most cases, duty won out" (1975:117). Both wear distinctive clothing that identifies them and their mission. Indeed, Const. Benton Fraser, the hero of the popular television series *Due South* (1994), is a perfect example of the affinities between the Mountie and the superhero. When his father is murdered, the young Mountie goes in search of his killer. Using his exceptional tracking abilities, he continues to fight crime in Chicago with the help of his faithful wolf Diefenbaker and his American partner (sidekick?) Ray Vecchio. However, he has an uneasy relationship with the Chicago Police Department because of his outsider status. Also, unlike most Mounties, he can

talk to the ghost of his father. Intriguingly, a British fan site for superheroes from various countries, internationalhero.co.uk (n.d.), also made the same connection, including Fraser on its page of Canadian superhero profiles.

It may be overreaching to suggest that because of these influences the Canadian superhero deserves to be treated as a distinct subgenre of the superhero. However, it is clear that they have led Canadian creators to place differential emphases on specific themes within the generic frame provided by the American superhero comics they were emulating. Many Canadian superheroes have been agents of the government or quasi-governmental organizations. In the World War II era, chief among these was the military. According to Hirsch and Loubert, Johnny Canuck creator Leo Bachle "admits that he 'leaned on' Captain America" when working on the character (1971:24). However, Canuck cut a much less bombastic figure than his American model, wearing more or less ordinary clothes that did not distinguish him from his compatriots. Yet, while he was a "Captain in the Allied air forces," Canuck tended to "[operate] like a freelance agent" behind enemy lines (Bell 2001). The same tension between a Canadian tendency to associate characters with the government and the liberal individualist conventions of the superhero genre were still evident 30 years later. Richard Comely's original Captain Canuck was an RCMP officer and an agent of the Canadian International Security Organization (CISO). As Eva Mackey reminds us, Mounties are "symbols and representatives of the kind and benevolent *state*" (1999:5, original emphasis). That is, uniformed Mounties represent the actions of a state institution, rather than the efforts of

individuals. But Captain Canuck is also singled out for individual attention as a "a symbol of CISO power and authority and a showpiece for Canada" (Bell 2001). Though he is an RCMP officer and a CISO agent, once he is given his powers, Tom Evans is recreated as a superhero with a distinct identity that distinguishes him from his less-super peers. Thus, in addition to the conflict between private and public selves implied by the superhero secret identity, Canuck also exhibits a conflict between costume and uniform; does he act for justice because of orders from the authorities? Or are his adventures his own?

As mentioned above, the superhero has traditionally been an urban genre, taking place on dangerous and crime-ridden streets that would not be out of place in a classic *film noir*. The archetypal superhero has a particular city under his or her care. The Marvel character Daredevil is even more specific, protecting a particular neighbourhood, Hell's Kitchen in New York. But the Mountie tradition stands in complete opposition to this. Berton notes a lack of urban scenes in the movies he examined: "*There were no cities shown.* In fact, there weren't even many small towns. Well over 90 per cent of the pictures made about this country were set either out of doors or entirely inside log cabins or saloons" (Berton 1975:44). A shift of venue from the urban to the wilderness also occurred in the Canadian pulps:

> Unlike the majority of British and American police procedurals, which led readers through the seamy streets of London, Glasgow, New York or Los Angeles, Canadian true crime stories had cops trailing suspects through the country's wilderness precincts, introducing their audiences to places like Herschel Island, Fort Nelson, Aklavik and Norway House, places of adventure and danger in the True North. (Strange and Loo 2004:35)

Creators working within the constraints of the Mountie genre imagined that criminals and evildoers were in the woods and wild places of the country, not in our peaceable cities and towns. Danger comes from outside the walls of the garrison, and it is up to our heroes to 'maintain the right' out there. While most superheroes are very protective of their own cities, the national superhero necessarily implies a larger territory. In the case of Canada, this larger territory includes a great deal of uninhabited or sparsely populated space. However, it is not just that many Canadian superheroes had adventures in the wilderness, but that these characters, like the Mounties before them, have had a specific relationship with the north of the country.

The superhero genre has been with us now for 68 years. In this chapter I have attempted to briefly provide an analysis of the genre and some of its salient semantic and syntactic features. Its synthesis of a number of adventure genres provided its readers thrilling, escapist fantasies while maintaining, through a secondary but insistent focus on its heroes' everyday problems, a foothold in a stylized version of the real world. When Canadian comic books were first produced during the World War II period, their creators and publishers benefited from this basic generic framework that American comics had already established and successfully marketed to Canadian children. Furthermore, American superhero comic books remained the dominant comic books in the Anglophone world and, thus, the dominant models of the superhero genre, even as subsequent Canadian creators attempted to revive the national superhero

tradition after the end of the Golden Age of the Canadian whites. However, in their attempt to create superhero characters that embraced a Canadian national(ist) identity, Canadian creators had another generic tradition on which to draw, the Northwoods genre of dime novels, film, and radio. This genre's portrayal of chivalrous, refined, and well-mannered Canadian heroes shared a great deal of affinity with certain aspects of the superhero genre and the place of the Mountie within Canada's founding myths of northern and western expansion (and the continued exploitation of the Mountie's symbolic currency in national and patriotic contexts) made it an ideal fund of symbols and tropes that address national identity. Drawing on the Mountie hero in this way represents an inflection of the superhero genre, and, specifically, an inflection that biases the genre towards representing a nationalist hero figure and addressing its audience as subjects defined by their Canadian identity. In the next chapter, I will examine the second key syntactic element of the Northwoods genre – the Mountie's relationship with the natural environment – and the prevalence of images of the north in Canadian superhero comics.

THE TRUE NORTH SUPER-STRONG AND FREE: 'Borealism' and Identity in Canadian Comic Books

The continued influence of the Western by way of the Northwoods genre has altered the superhero's generic profile in significant ways. This has been the primary means by which the superhero genre has been localized for the Canadian context. Beyond the assimilation of the heroic Mountie into the representation of Canadian superheroes, the Northwoods' influence has entailed a specific relationship to the wilderness of the Canadian north. As Pierre Berton comments, "If one were restricted to a single word to describe Hollywood's image of Canada that word would be 'primitive'" (1975:75). Defined by his opposition to this primitive wilderness, the Mountie comes himself to reference and to represent it. This Janus-like relationship to the wilderness has carried over to many Canadian superheroes. However, this dimension has a special resonance with Canadian arts and culture over and above the other syntactic structures discussed previously. This is because 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. Despite our actual, decidedly more ambivalent, relationship to the northern reaches of our geography, images of the north dominate much of Canadian art, and comic books are no exception.

Standing on Guard: The Superheroes of the North

As I suggested in the last chapter, though the superhero genre has traditionally been an urban one, Canadian superheroes – especially the nationalist ones – tend to be associated with images of the north and the wilderness. Even if they are not from the north and continue to operate in urban settings at least part of the time, they are coded as northern as part of the process of rendering them specifically Canadian heroes. Even the briefest survey of the superheroes of Canadian comics turns up a surfeit of characters that serve as apt examples of the northern imagery I am discussing.

'Brok Windsor' was a "Borroughsian fantasy strip" that ran in *Better Comics*, set in a "land beyond the mists" somewhere in the Canadian North (Bell 1986b:24). The familiar trope of the savage tropical land hidden in the Antarctic, which had already graced the pages of Canadian comics in Anglo-American's series *Freelance*, was here refashioned for a Canadian context, ending up as an antitype of the Greek myth of the arctic utopia Hyperborean. But, though he seems to belong to the north, Brok's first name echoes British general Isaac Brock, famous in Canada as a hero of the War of 1812, and he shares his last name with the British royal family.

In the 1970s, Captain Canuck attempted to embody Canadian nationalism in a way that few other characters had, being the first national superhero to wear a costume based on the new Canadian flag. Furthermore, he gained his powers due to an encounter with alien beings while on a camping expedition (Bell 1992:11). This new, flag-garbed identity is thus born in the Canadian hinterland;

Tom Evans went out into the woods, and Captain Canuck returned. Furthermore, in many ways the Captain's power comes from the land, as the future 1990s milieu of the series posits a world where "Canada has become a superpower because of its natural resources" (Bell 1992:26); the hewers of wood and drawers of water take their place at the head of the global political order as the land itself has become the source of the nation's power and prowess. As a crime-fighter who, like a good Northwoods genre Mountie, "shunned violence as much as possible," Captain Canuck was "the appropriate superhero for a middle power that was somewhat distrustful of heroism and very much aware of the limits of power" (1992:25-6). However, as much as the Captain may himself attempt to avoid violence, the northern power that he represents is also one of domination. John Bell notes that "Canuck seemed more aware of the duality of Canada" than his superheroic predecessors "and worked in tandem with a Quebecois super-agent – Kébec, the first of several French-Canadian associate heroes who have appeared in English- Canadian comics" (1992:25). The Captain was also joined by Redcoat, another costumed agent who, due to the obvious allusion in his codename, represented Canada's British heritage. But Bell's choice of the phrase "in tandem" to describe their working relationship belies the fact that Canuck is clearly portrayed as the other agents' superior. The narrative portrays Canada's two 'founding nations' as both subordinated – almost infantilized – to a new, pan-Canadian identity that is rooted in a particular way of regarding the north and wrapped in the maple leaf flag.

Jim Waley and Jim Craig's character, the Northern Light, was an agent of a security agency called Alert and operated out of "a secret fortress in Northern Canada" (1992:20-1). While this secret headquarters may be derivative from Superman's Fortress of Solitude, I would hasten to note Superman's own tenuous Canadian pedigree, via Toronto-born co-creator Joe Shuster. These hidden fortresses may be a modern, sci-fi rendition of the Hyperborean theme. They also represent a kind of garrison in the wilderness to which our heroes retreat; Superman's was, for a time, protected by the fact that only he could lift the gigantic front-door key (Boring 1987).

Mark Shainblum's Northguard was a young comic book fan recruited to defend Canada against a plot from the south hatched by the mysterious American organization called ManDes (i.e., Manifest Destiny) (Bell 1992:33, 35). Like Captain Canuck, Northguard also worked alongside a French-Canadian sidekick, the Québècoise martial arts expert codenamed Fleur de Lys (1992:35). However, the hierarchy is somewhat less clear here, especially as Northguard was himself an Anglophone Jew from Montréal, rather than the more normatively Anglo-Celtic Captain.

Even John Byrne's Alpha Flight series for Marvel included several allusions to the North, in the codenames of the twins Aurora and Northstar, and in the character Snowbird, who bears a striking resemblance to the World War II character Nelvana, whom I will discuss in greater detail below. To the extent that the Canadian wilderness is symbolically aligned with the North, I might suggest that the strongman character Sasquatch belongs to this tradition as well. The

northern imagery resurfaces even when packaged for an American audience, which is not privy to the lion's share of Canadian art but which is familiar with these themes through mass-mediated representations of Canada, such as Northwoods movies.

Such northern imagery seems to be a dominant theme, though obviously not the only significant one, in Canadian comics. However, representing 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, and the north is dealt with in some very specific ways in the comics I have just briefly described. But what is the pattern that seems to be emerging from these narratives?

Nordicity and National Identity

My argument is that these representations of the north and their startling ubiquity in Canadian comics are evidence of a particular cultural logic that is deeply embedded in Canadian art and culture. Understanding the logic behind this specific sense of nordicity will require a theoretical analysis of how national identity is constructed and represented. I will then place my analysis of this logic in the larger context of thinking about the north. Finally, I will return to one more example drawn from Canadian superhero comic books to show how this analysis plays out.

The Logic of Borealism

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that "nationness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts" (1991:4). That is, nationalism and

national identity are products and effects of discourse. But what does it mean to say that a place or a people constitute a nation? Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community". The word "imagined" is used because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991:6). Consequently, creating and maintaining this image of communion is essential in order for nationalism, and perhaps a national culture, to persist. While much of the way we understand and interpret national identities is shaped by more immediate experience – whether lived or received – the fund of signs provided by the mass media has an important and privileged role in articulating what it means to be a part of an imagined community that is larger than one's own experience. These signs form the vocabulary of nationalism.

However, we also realise that concepts and ideas are defined through systems of difference. In imagining our national community, we create an Us or a Self, which requires a Them or an Other to make sense, just as the concept of 'light' requires a concept of 'darkness' to make sense. After all, as Anderson notes, "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (1991:7). Edward Said suggests that, for the West, it has traditionally been the Orient that played the role of the Other:

> Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them'). This vision in a sense created and then served the two worlds thus conceived. (1978:43-4)

On a globe, designating one place *the* East and another *the* West makes no real sense. It is primarily our way of thinking about the world that so divides it. For Europeans, the Orient has represented "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable memories" (1978:1). The Orient, as a concept created by the West, is subordinated to Western needs and ways of thinking: "A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (1978:44). Indeed, Orientalism generally "responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object" (1978:22). Because the true purpose of Orientalism was to provide a counterpoint to Europe, to define by opposition, the truth about the area and its people was relatively inconsequential. So, by a strange process in which "European culture gained in strength and identity" by alienating its imagined counterpart, the Other is also a "surrogate and even underground self" (1978:3).

Historian Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk* (1994) provides a useful study of how similar processes might operate *within* a culture or nation. McKay argues that the image of communion that holds together the identity of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia is based primarily on the concept of the Folk, a discourse that emerges as part of German nationalist movements in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Folk were believed to be "those who preserved an older way of life within an urban and literate society," "were closer to nature," and were "the epitome of simple truth, work, and virtue, the antithesis of all that were

overcivilized, tired, conventional, and insincere" (1994:12). Nova Scotia, as a Folk society, was "essentially innocent of the complications and anxieties of twentieth-century modernity," as the province's "true essence ... resided in the primitive, the rustic, the unspoiled, the picturesque, the quaint, the unchanging" (1994:30). An association with the Folk helps to justify modern society because it is imagined to be the heir of this older, traditional society, its unproblematic mechanical solidarity, and its values. So, "paradoxically, the Folk [are] more 'us' than we ourselves, more *essentially* Nova Scotian (or Canadian)" (1994:29). Thus, the Other not only helps us to define the Self, the Other is turned into the *exemplar* of the Self.

If we attempt to synthesize these three perspectives – Anderson, Said, and McKay – I believe we begin to get a picture of the logic responsible for the prevalence of northern imagery we have seen. 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 exoticized 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 exoticize the Self and make a bland Canadian identity feel vibrant and special. The appeal to nordicity as a way of exoticizing Canadian identity has an historical precedence, as we will see below. If there is need for a short-hand, with apologies to Said, we might call this cultural logic 'Borealism.'

Ideas of North

Insofar as Canadians invest in the idea of a national identity defined by nordicity, the cultural logic of Borealism colours much of the discourse about our relationship to the north. On October 6, 2003, Adrienne Clarkson, the Governor General of Canada at the time, gave a speech at a state dinner held in Helsinki, Finland. The state visit was part of a circumpolar goodwill tour, designed to "[bolster] economic and cultural contacts between countries that border the Arctic" (CBC News Online 2003). The speech made many allusions to the affinity that Canada and Finland have, based on a "natural northern relationship," which is "a relationship not just between countries, but also internally, to our land, our environment, our native people, to our North"; Her Excellency further claimed that peoples of Canada and Finland are "equally chosen by the North" (Clarkson 2003). If we can see around the vague, quasi-mystical language used here, we can find a particular (and familiar) way of thinking about Canada and its northernness. Clarkson's speech betrays an attitude towards our latitude that sees nordicity as a calling, a process of election that engenders a special character in we northerners, a category which is assumed to include all Canadians, no matter how close we live to the 49th parallel.

This "cult of the North," as Francis terms it, is hardly new. It has a long history, at times intertwined with "an Aryan nation theme" that argued that "the struggle to survive in a northern climate created a set of national characteristics ... which set us apart as a separate people" (1997:154). Francis is here specifically referring to a movement that began in 1868 known as 'Canada First'

(1997:153). For a number of years, Canadian immigration policy even endorsed this "environmental racism" to exclude Black and Asian immigrants "on the grounds that they were unsuited to the climate" (Mackey 1999:33). Though the blatantly racist language of the Firsters, who suggested that the Canadian climate "weeded out the weak and the lazy and discouraged members of the 'southern races' from settling here", has faded in the era of officially endorsed multiculturalism, many of the essential ideas about the north and its role in shaping Canadian identity espoused by the movement are still with us (Francis 1997:154).

Of course, Canadians did not invent this discursive framework whole cloth. The people who settled what became Canada brought it with them from Europe, for, as Peter Davidson has argued, a particular idea of north has been part of the Western tradition since at least the Hellenic age. Davidson writes that, by the Classical period,

> Already, the north is reported to be a place of extremes and ambiguities: on the one hand, it is a place of darkness and dearth, the seat of evil; on the other, it is a place of austere felicity where virtuous peoples live and are happy. These two opposing ideas of the north repeat and contradict each other right up to the time of the nineteenth-century Arctic explorers. (2005a:13)

Indeed, this opposition continues to be prevalent in thinking about the north today. These two poles represent two very different understandings of the relationship between human society and the wilderness of the north, which John Rennie Short classifies as, on the one hand, a 'classical' orientation and, on the other, a 'romantic' one:

> The classical perspective sees most significance in human action and human society. The creation of livable places and usable spaces is a mark of civilization. Human use confers meaning on space. Outside of society, wilderness is something to be feared, an area of waste and desolation. ... For the romantics, in contrast, untouched spaces have the greatest significance; they have a purity which human contact tends to sully and degrade. Wilderness for the romantics is a place to be revered, a place of deep spiritual significance and a symbol of an earthly paradise. (Short 1991:6)

He goes on to argue that "the classical position predominated" in the Western world "until the last 200 years when the romantic conception began to gain more ground" (1991:6). The ambivalence towards the north in Canadian culture could be seen, not only as the result of Canada being a nation with a vast, untamed, and dangerous landscape, but one that was colonized by Europeans in the midst of the increasing conflict between the two ideas of north Short describes. Margaret Atwood suggests that, for some immigrants from England, the experience of nature in Canada would have been profoundly disillusioning: they arrived with "their heads filled with diluted Burke and Wordsworth, encountering lots and lots of Nature," but quickly discovered that the "Great Good Place" promised by Wordsworth and the Romantics' notions of a sublime encounter with Nature was not quite all it was cracked up to be; for these recent arrivals, "complaining about the bogs and mosquitoes must have been like criticizing the authority of the Bible" (1972:50). Yet, despite the hardships of living in the Canadian climate, the essentially romantic theme of "moral recuperation" has remained prominent in the representations of Canada: "The bracing air of Canada, the absence of any cities, the stark simplicity of life in the raw, the cleansing effect of the eternal snows – all these elements were seen by

Hollywood as an antidote to the corruption of an urban society" (Berton 1975:55). Thus, Canada is described as "'the land God gave to Cain' – a place perennially accursed, a place of exile" – but is also "a powerfully defined *locus classicus* for the vision of the north as a place of spiritual cleansing and healing, a powerful antidote to the greed and decadence of modernity, and the location of a dignified and integrated life in which man takes his rightful place in the world of nature" (Davidson 2005b:187, 191). Borealism provides a way of resolving the contradiction between the classic and romantic by setting up a dialectic that synthesizes the two in order to produce the Canadian nordicity that is invoked – by the Canada Firsters, by Adrienne Clarkson, and by national superheroes like Captain Canuck, the Northern Light, and Northguard – as a key component of our identity. Within this perspective, the hostile and wild northern climate seems a ready-made foil to the peaceable kingdom of Canadian society 'south of 60' – indeed, each can only be constructed in opposition to the other – but, at the same time, it is our encounter with this fearsome climate that has produced us as we are, a unique and essentially northern people, and made it possible for us to live as we do. Even if we, as individual Canadians, have never been to the north.

Nelvana of the Northern Lights

I would like to here address Adrian Dingle's Nelvana of the Northern Lights, our first explicitly nationalist superhero, as a somewhat extended example of the peculiar relationship to the north that Borealism constructs. Co-created with Franz Johnston of the Group of Seven – a collective of painters inspired by a romantic vision of the wild Canadian landscape – the character was based on "a

powerful Inuit mythological figure – an old woman called Nelvana" (Bell 1992:5). However, Dingle's Nelvana was not a faithful adaptation of Inuit myth by a long shot. As he put it, "I changed her a bit. Did what I could with long hair and mini skirts. And tried to make her attractive" (qtd. Bell 1992:5)(qtd. 1992:5). The fundamental change he did not mention was the transformation of a character from Inuit mythology into a white woman. Furthermore, Nelvana eventually moved south, to Nortonville, Ontario, and adopted the identity of "Alana North, secret agent" (1992:7). John Bell identifies Nelvana as fitting into a pre-existing model of the "white queen [or] goddess":

> Typically, these figures had names that ended with the letter 'a,' were beautiful and immortal, and ruled over 'primitive' peoples (often lost races). Prior to Nelvana's appearance, the character Sheena, the first of many white jungle queens in U.S. comics, had made her debut in *Jumbo Comics*. (1992:7)(1992:7)

We must also take note of the "powerful racist and imperialist – as well as sexual and sadomasochistic – overtones" of the Jungle Queen genre's formula of "white lords, kings, queens, and princesses [who] ruled over jungles populated by childlike, superstitious, and mischievous brown people in need of paternalistic guidance" (Wright 2001:73). However, Nelvana is also part of a more specifically Canadian tradition of Borealist representation.

Lianne Pupchek suggests that "Canadian identity has relied on an extended program of identifications in which indigenous peoples are important elements", and Nelvana seems to be an archetypal case of this program (2001:193). This particular regime of representation may have reached its apex in Canada with Expo '67. Drawing on McKay's work, Pupchek argues that the

construction of the Inuit as a quintessentially Canadian Folk allowed Inuit art to be appropriated as a Canadian national artistic style. Samples of Inuit art were presented to visiting dignitaries, and the Expo adopted Inuit symbols, such as Ookpik the Owl and the Katimavik pavilion, as symbols of Canada in this moment of nationalistic fervour (2001:204). As a more recent example, the logo of the 2010 Olympics to be held in Vancouver, BC, is a stylized inukshuk, another Inuit image. However, as Eva Mackey notes, this treatment of Native peoples is not reserved for the Inuit alone, for "only Aboriginal people, not the later settlers, are perceived to be actually linked to the land and ... the land is a primary symbol of the nation" (1999:78). During the interwar period, "the collecting and salvaging of Native artefacts and the romanticising of 'Indians' reached a peak. In combination with tourism, the collection and romanticisation of Native people's artefacts and culture were also now integrated into more official forms of national identity" (1999:36-37). Because "Aboriginal people also represent Canada's heritage and past," "images of Aboriginal people have been mobilized to help differentiate Canada from the United States because through them British Canada can construct itself as gentle, tolerant, just and impartial" (1999:38-39). Within this framework, it makes perfect sense that a sculpture in the Haida artistic style and depicting a subject from Haida mythology graces the Canadian embassy in Washington, DC, adding prestige to the state that outlawed potlatching.

Like the rural Nova Scotian Folk discussed above, the cultures of the Inuit and other First Peoples have been usurped by the rest of Canadian society and

come to be viewed as simultaneously representing both Other and Self in these nationalist pageants and sites of nationalist commemoration. Atwood also notes that aboriginal cultures have been extensively appropriated as symbols by Canadian writers, who saw them as "a potential source of magic, of knowledge about the natural-supernatural world which the white man renounced when he became 'civilized'; these writers have cast the Inuit and First Peoples "as our true 'ancestors,'" providing the vital link to the past that only the Folk can deliver (1972:103). It should come as no surprise, then, to see Canadian creators transforming an Inuit mythological figure into a hero intended to represent the Canadian nation-state, her physical appearance altered to make her palatable to white Canadians and then transplanted into a (relatively) southern context. A figure first created to appeal to our sense of the exotic is thus absorbed into the Self to the point of fighting to defend the same government that routinely repressed Inuit culture. Nelvana has since lent her name to a successful animation company and appeared on a Canadian stamp; though still relatively obscure, she has clearly been absorbed into the fund of signifiers used to represent Canadian national identity.

As Davidson writes, "'True north' goes beyond the idea of the prodigious or malign north and suggests that ... there exists somewhere the place that is the absolute of the north, the north in essence, northness in concentration and purity" (2005b:11). But this 'true north' belongs to the Imaginary. The mythical north is produced and sustained by a group of discourses that operate according to the

simultaneously alienating and absorbing logic I have here called Borealism. This is the second key inflection of the superhero genre in Canada. Though only constituting a relatively small generic corpus, the Canadian nationalist superhero is a powerful symbol of identity for those who read Canadian comic books. Furthermore, as an exemplary case of Borealist ways of producing and organizing knowledge about the world, the Canadian superhero speaks to the not always so innocent way Canadians navigate difference in search of a common national identity. Ironically 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, where 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.

These images of the north and of the wilderness still thrive within our cultural imagination despite the fact that Canada is an increasingly urban society. One can imagine two possible trajectories based on this demographic trend. On the one hand, Canadians' fetishization of the north may only intensify as fewer and fewer Canadians ever actually experience the encounter with the wilderness that is so often celebrated in our arts and letters. As Mackey writes:

> Wilderness – unpeopled and savage – can also work as an 'other' to 'civilisation,' a comparison within Canada which reinforces the settlers' sense of the difficult struggle to civilise the wilderness and the success they have had in controlling it. If the wilderness park works as a leisure site – a controlled 'precinct' which acts as an 'other space' to modern cosmopolitan lives – the north can be seen

> as that kind of 'other' to the majority of Canadians who live in 'the long thin strip of civilisation'. (1999:45)

On the other hand, the cultural significance of the north and Canada's wild places may be transferred to our new urban environments. Short (1991) suggests that a great deal of slippage already exists between the ideas of the wilderness and the city, as evidenced by common phrases like the 'urban wasteland' or 'urban jungle'. For artists and writers, this shift to the city may also be marked by a profound reorientation towards the internal lives and problems of protagonists, as Atwood points out:

> A preoccupation with one's survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. (1972:33)

In the work of later Canadian cartoonists, the city comes to predominate as well. In the two revivals of the Captain Canuck character, *Captain Canuck: Reborn* (1993) and *Captain Canuck: Unholy War* (2004b), urban and (especially in the latter) suburban landscapes predominate. And in the comics produced by Canada's alternative cartoonists, the complete transformation described by Atwood is achieved: the settings are now almost entirely urban and their artist/protagonists' greatest obstacles are their own angst and neuroses.

CONCLUSION?

I began this thesis with an epigraph drawn from Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, in whose footsteps, in many ways, this thematic exploration of the Canadian national superhero has followed. Like Atwood, I too began reading superhero comic books imported from the United States before I had much of a sense of what a country was, let alone what it might mean to be a citizen of one rather than another. But later on in life, my understanding of nationality was formed by the experience of living outside of Canada for a time, and I eventually picked up a comic book made by Canadians for Canadian readers. And while, as Freud (1975:51) has suggested, the differences that engender narcissism may indeed be minor, there are indeed differences and they can contribute to individuals' experiences of the world in robust ways. It has been my project in this thesis to examine some of these differences as they have shown themselves on the pages of Canadian comic books.

Early on, I posed the question, what's so Canadian about Canadian comic books? I hope that I have managed to supply some answers, if tentative ones. In producing comic books in Canada, creators have incorporated themes and narrative elements from Canadian literature, art, film, and culture more generally. I have attempted to show how Canadian traditions like the Northwoods have made their mark on Canadian comics, though often in roundabout ways, as part of the process by which these creators have attempted to produce Canadian

comic books that were distinct from the ones that were imported from across the border. I have also attempted to account for some of the patterns evident in these comics through the development of a number of theoretical models, which I hope will prove valuable outside of the context of this study alone: the semantic/syntactic perspective on the superhero genre, which pushes the analysis of the genre out of the narrow focus on mythological types, and the cultural logic of Borealism, which addresses how the kinds of processes Said described in his *Orientalism* might work within a society to help construct the identity of the Self by the incorporation of the Other's exoticism.

Yet, the Canadian-ness of our comic books remains very much under negotiation. In 2005, two sets of awards to honour the work and achievements of Canadian cartoonists and their comic book industry were established. These two awards represent two very different ideas about what Canadians should value in comics.

One the one hand are the Shuster Awards, named in honour of Superman co-creator Joe Shuster, who was born in Toronto and lived there until the age of 10 before moving to Cleveland, OH, where he would meet his collaborator, writer Jerry Siegel (Salem 2005). Following Shuster's own example, it seems, the Shuster Awards focus primarily on Canadian creators working within the American industry – indeed, primarily within superhero comics published by the 'big two' corporate publishers. An article in the Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix* covering the 2005 Shuster nominations from a local-boy-makes-good angle manages to celebrate the contributions of Canadian artists to comic books without referring to

a single comic book published in Canada (Anonymous 2005). The winners of the Shuster awards were determined on the basis of fan votes (CBC Arts 2005).

On the other hand are the Doug Wright Awards, named for the newspaper and magazine cartoonist who drew the strips 'Little Nipper' and 'Doug Wright's Family' (Hutsul 2005). The cartoonists nominated for the Doug Wright Awards, many of whom are published by Canadian presses, tend to be from the 'graphic novelist' end of the scene and work in alternative, or even experimental, genres. In addition to cartoonist Chester Brown, the jury comprised writer and journalist Robert Fulford and directors Don McKellar and Jerry Ciccoritti, further attesting to the awards' orientation towards the Canadian arts community rather than the comic book industry (CBC Arts 2005).

However, the dichotomy between the two was not absolute. Dave Sim and Gerhard, the self-publishers of independent comics juggernaut *Cerebus*, were honoured at the Shusters. The work that garnered a Wright nomination for Darwyn Cooke was a nostalgia-tinged treatment of DC Comics' Silver Age superheroes, while two Wright nominees for the emerging talent award, Bryan Lee O'Malley and Rebecca Dart, are published by small presses in the United States (2005).[15]

These awards attest to the fact that the 'national universe' of Canadian comic books is still related to international cultural and economic structures in complicated ways. The market for Canadian comic books is an adjunct of the

[15] Portland, Oregon's Oni Press and the Gainesville, Florida-based Alternative Comics, respectively.

American market and part of the same distribution system. Thus, publishing Canadian comic books for a Canadian audience remains a financially risky proposition due the vexing issue of economies of scale, and, thus, most of the creative labour done by Canadian comic book artists and writers is absorbed into the industrialized model of the Big Two. At the same time, there is a great deal of liveliness within the Canadian domestic scene, and, with the growing recognition of the comic book's legitimacy, there has never been a better time to be a cartoonist with serious artistic intent. Cartoonist collectives and community-oriented events are helping to maintain a vibrant atmosphere for creators, even if few ever transcend the zine and minicomic formats. For cartoonists operating at this grassroots level of almost artisanal or craft-based cultural production, the internet has proven itself to be a valuable mode of distribution and a primary means by which networks of affinity and influence are being established within Canada and with artists from all over the world. At the same time, Canada is the home of one of the world's top alternative comic book publishers, Montreal's Drawn and Quarterly, which releases the work of many fine Canadian and international cartoonists. Though the nature of Canadian comic books is still being defined and redefined in its continual dialogue with American media, as I have attempted to demonstrate in this thesis, you needn't dress in red and white tights to wear your flag on your sleeve.

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