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# Images of the North: “Borealism” and Identity in Canadian Comic Books

What are the words and images that signify “Canada”? There are many symbols that spring to mind. We may supply the maple leaf flag, the beaver, or the red serge of an RCMP uniform to answer the question, but sooner or later we will inevitably come to ice, snow, and the vast, white-mantled winter landscape. Canada cannot escape the label of the “true North, strong and free”. But as much as the North is celebrated in fiction, it is marginalized in fact. While the geographic isolation, low population density, and general lack of economic development have left the North on the outside looking in, images of the North are continually appropriated to represent the nation-state as a whole. Borrowed representations of the North as essentially Canadian – and vice versa – help to define the popular definitions of identity that Canadians live with every day. One of the sites where this discourse is contained is in the pages of Canadian comic books. Here, many of the complex ways in which Canadian identity is represented as a Northern identity are embodied, especially in the portrayals of the protagonists of these superheroic adventure stories, who represent an ideal Canadian figure as an essentially Northern figure.

But before we can analyze specific instances of the construction of nationalism, we must have a more general understanding of how this process occurs, especially some of the ways in which this occurs within the Canadian context. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that “nation-

ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts" (p. 4). That is, nationalism and national identity are products and effects of discourse. This is the most basic assumption that underlies our analysis of Canadian comic books. Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community" (p. 6). 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" (p. 6). This implies that there must be some way of creating and maintaining that image of communion in order for nationalism to persist. For this reason, it is not surprising that the rise of modern nationalism is roughly concurrent with the development of mass media: print, and later radio and television, allowing for the transmission of the nationalist discourse. While much of the way we understand and interpret nationalist identity is shaped by more immediate experience – whether lived or received – the fund of signs provided by the mass media is essential to articulating what it means to be a part of of an imagined community that is larger than one's immediate 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. Anderson notes that "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind"; there are always boundaries or borders, "beyond which lie other nations" (p. 7). Edward Said (1978) 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 (p. 43 – 44).

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, and these produced geographic categories have come to be associated with values and arranged in a hierarchy. For Europeans, the Orient has represented “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable memories” (p. 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” (p. 44). Indeed, Orientalism generally “responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object” (p. 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”, the Other is also a “surrogate and even underground self” (p. 3).

Ian McKay's exploration of the construction of Nova Scotian identity shows a way in which the Orientalist process described by Said has been subtly, but significantly, inflected in the Canadian context. McKay's analysis draws on the concept of the Folk as a construction upon which the imagined community of Nova Scotia is founded, but which originates 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" (McKay 1994:12). The Nova Scotian Folk are “apparently peasants, telling old tales, singing old songs, making old crafts in traditional ways, living lives of quiet stolidity in centuries-old villages" (p. 26). 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" (p. 30). The association with the Folk helps to justify our current, modern, post-industrial society because it is imagined to be descended from the older, traditional society, which still exists in isolated pockets, and founded on the same values. So, "paradoxically, the Folk [are] more 'us' than we ourselves, more *essentially* Nova Scotian (or Canadian)" (p. 29). Thus, the Other not only helps us to define the Self, the Other is the *exemplar* of the Self.

If we attempt to synthesize these three perspectives – Anderson's imagined communities, Said's Orientalism, and McKay's Folk society – we begin to get an understanding of a discursive phenomenon that, I believe, recurs again and again in Canadian media. In need of images to supply the creation of a Canadian national identity, we come upon a cluster of signs, such as those surrounding the North. We exoticize the North as Other in order to define ourselves. But we also appropriate the images of the North as part of our identity in order to exoticize ourselves and make a bland Canadian identity vibrant and special. If there is need for a short-hand, with apologies to Said, we might even call this recurring

phenomenon “Borealism”.

While I primarily wish to address Borealist representations of the North in Canadian comic books, it is also essential to have some understanding of the discursive framework into which the Canadian comics industry emerged in the 1940s. Given the lateness of its emergence both in terms of mass media generally and comic books specifically, there were already a number of ideologies at play that shaped and influenced the kinds of representations that were possible.

On October 6, 2003, Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, the Governor General of Canada, gave a speech at a state dinner held in Helsinki, Finland. The state visit was part of her circumpolar goodwill tour, designed to “[bolster] economic and cultural contacts between countries that border the Arctic” (CBC 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“ (Clarkson 2003). Her Excellency further claimed that Canada and Finland are “ equally chosen by the North“ (2003). If we can see around the vague, quasi-mystical language used here, we can find a particular way of thinking about the North, one which, with all due respect, is hardly original to Her Excellency. But it is a way of thinking that we cannot avoid if we are to address the topic at hand.

This “cult of the North,” as Daniel Francis (1997) terms it, has a long history, the associations of which 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" must give us pause (p. 154). Francis is here specifically referring to a movement began in 1868 known as "Canada First" (p. 153). 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, many of the essential ideas about the North and its role in shaping Canadian identity espoused by the movement are still with us, as evidenced by the Governor General's speech (p. 154).

It also seems difficult to even consider discussing representations of either the Canadian North or the Canadian hero without discussing the figure of the Mountie. The Mountie is one of the most enduring symbols of Canada, right alongside hockey and maple syrup. 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" (p. 30). In his role as tamer and civilizer of the wilderness, the Mountie is analogous to the cowboy, the US Marshall, or the Texas Ranger in American historical mythology. The Mountie is our own agent of manifest destiny, a destiny that conceptually links Western expansion with the North, in the same way that they are linked in the name of the police force.

The process of transforming the historical Mounted Police officer into the Mountie 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" (p. 31). The first film about the Mounties was made in 1909 (p. 31). By the 1920s, "Hollywood produced 'Northwoods' movies by the hundreds" (Berland 1993:214). Canadians

rarely had much to do with the productions of these films, most of which were filmed in Hollywood, but the films still "*connoted* Canada with pine trees, dishevelled French Canadian villains, Mounties, snow, and uninhabited virgin forests" (p. 215). In a classic Borealist paradox, the Mountie's "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" (p. 211). That is, the Mountie is civilization's foot soldier against the vast, wild North/West, but through his opposition to the wilderness, he also comes himself to symbolize it.

On February 11, 1933 the Toronto *Telegram* published the debut of "Men of the Mounted," a comic strip written by Ted McCall and illustrated by Harry Hall (MacMillan 1986:93). This was Canada's first indigenous adventure comic strip, soon followed by another McCall-written strip, "Robin Hood and Company" (Bell 1986:21-22). But a real possibility for Canadian comic books did not come for seven years, not until American comic books were no longer allowed to be imported into Canada in order to conserve foreign currency during war time; only in 1940 could Canadian cartoonists and magazine publishers now "seriously contemplate the creation of a Canadian comic book industry" (p. 23). So, while the strip did little to actually blaze the trail for the comic books of the World War II period, "Men of the Mounted" has its true significance in that it establishes an obvious link between the Mountie fiction of the Northern Westerns and this new medium in the very earliest stages of Canadian comics.

In what ways does the transplantation of this discourse from dime novels

and nickelodeon serial films into the comic books affect the reception of the nationalist ideas contained within? We must realise that the comics have their own set of particular signifying practices that influence the reading experience for the audience. It is rather appropriate that Marcel Danesi uses Superman, a comic book character who has some Canadian pedigree, as an example to outline the basics of semiotic theory. He suggests that children might interpret Superman comics denotatively – as a literal, “face value linkage between a sign and its referent” – whereas, adults would not because “they would know that Superman represents an imaginary figure, not a real one” (Danesi 2002:36). Besides not giving enough credit to young comic book readers, I believe Danesi is overlooking a crucial aspect of comic book semiotics. Because of the nature of the abstracted cartoon artwork in comics, the comic book signifier only has a tenuously indexical relation to reality. Indeed, we might suggest that comic books – or at least, drawn, fictional comic books – are relatively non-referential. That is, there is no real thing in the world that they refer to, and, therefore, it is difficult for even young readers to assume the comic book is a denotative sign. Furthermore, because of the kind of artwork used in most comic books, the comic book signifier sidesteps what Sturken and Cartwright (2001) call “the myth of photographic truth” (p. 16). Relying thusly entirely on iconic signification for the telling of the story but with little or no relation to reality, comic books allow for significant levels of symbolic investment in the characters. I believe that the heroes of comic book adventure stories are empty signifiers awaiting a symbolic signified. This is why Superman so easily comes to “[represent] 'truth', 'justice', 'the American way', and all the virtues that modern-day

people aspire to have, but often fail to manifest" (Danesi 2002:35). It is for these reasons that I find the analysis of some of the main characters from Canadian comic books to be such an intriguing lens for examining Borealist discursive practices.

In March 1941, the first two Canadian comic books appeared on the newsstand: Anglo-American Publishing's *Robin Hood and Company,* reprinting the newspaper strip of the same name, and Maple Leaf Publishing's *Better Comics* #1, which featured original material and is, thus, the "first true Canadian comic book" (Bell 1992:23). It was also *Better* that brought us the first Canadian superhero, Vernon Miller's Iron Man. He was the "lone survivor of a South Seas civilization," who would "return to the surface world to combat Nazis, pirates and other villains" (Bell 1992:4). Iron Man was followed by Anglo-American's Freelance, a second Canadian superhero who was not at all Canadian – he was raised by "a lost tribe in a tropical valley in Antarctica" (p. 4). Indeed, Anglo-American's line of characters, in general, lacked a strong Canadian identity:

> Unlike most Canadian companies of the 1941-1956 Golden Age period, Anglo-American avoided serialized stories, nor was their product particularly Canadian. While undeniably patriotic, in so far as they supported the war effort, the firm's comics were decidedly unnationalistic (Bell 1986:25).

It was not until August 1941, with the release of *Triumph-Adventure-Comics* #1 that Canada was presented with its first markedly Canadian – and also first female – superhero, Adrian Dingle's Nelvana of the Northern Lights (Bell 1992:5).

Co-created with Franz Johnston of the Group of Seven, the character was based on "a powerful Inuit mythological figure – and old woman called Nelvana" (p.

5). However, Dingle's Nelvana was not Inuit. As Dingle 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). The 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” (p. 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* (p. 7)

However, Nelvana also is part of a more specifically Canadian tradition of Borealist representation.

Lianne S. Pupchek suggests that “Canadian identity has relied on an extended program of identifications in which indigenous peoples are important elements” (2001). Margaret Atwood claims that “Indians and Eskimos are seen as our true 'ancestors'” (qtd. Pupchek 2001). Connecting white, colonial Canadian society to First Nations and aboriginal civilizations gives our current society a justification, creating an organic link to the land that we have come to inhabit. This is a furtherance of the kind of portrayals of Native Americans represented by James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder*, in which the “'white' woodsman Natty Bumpo and the noble Delaware chieftain Chingachgook” are both coded as “'Americans', fighting for survival – against the French, their 'native' allies [who are not similarly coded] ... and the treasonous agents of George III” (Anderson

1991:202). With Nelvana, a superhero who draws her power from the arctic North and the mythology of the Inuit people in order to defend the Canadian nation-state, aboriginal people are not resignified as Canadians, but, rather, supplanted entirely by Europeans. This writing out of the Inuit from the story smacks of Borealism, as the exotic Other culture is once again taken up as a signifier of Canadian-ness.

Years after Nelvana had come and gone, this regime of representation reached its apotheosis in Expo '67. Drawing on McKay's work, Pupchek argues that the construction of the Inuit as a quintessentially Canadian Folk allowed Inuit art to become representative of a national artistic style, samples of which were presented to foreign dignitaries, and for the Expo to adopt Inuit symbols, such as Ookpik the Owl and the Katimavik pavilion (2001). Like the rural Nova Scotian Folk before them, the Inuit and their symbols came to be viewed as simultaneously representing both Other and Self. Nelvana is but one example of the many ways in which the people of the North are marginalized from the national narrative while the trappings of their culture and the images of the landscape are made central to a portrayal of Canadian identity.

Nelvana's contemporaries, to greater and lesser degrees, also took part in this discourse. “Brok Windsor” was a “Borroughsian fantasy strip” that ran in *Better*, set in a “land beyond the mists” in the Canadian North (Bell 1986:24). The familiar trope of the tropical lost land hidden in the antarctic, which had already graced the pages of Canadian comics in *Freelance*, was here refashioned for a Canadian context. But, though he seems to belongs to the North, Brok's first name echoes British general Isaac Brock, who is regarded as a “saviour of Canada” for

his death in the War of 1812 (Francis 1997:59), and he shares his last name with the British royal family. McCall's “Men of the Mounted” made a comeback in the pages of Anglo-American's comics as “Kip Keene of the Mounted,” bringing with it all the baggage of Mountie fiction (MacMillan 1986:98). Other characters, such as Johnny Canuck, represented Canada, but did so primarily in foreign settings as part of the war effort – indeed, only one Johnny Canuck story was set in Canada (Bell 1992:11). Little did Johnny and the other war-oriented characters realise that, in their struggles against oppression, they were also, in a sense, fighting for their own eventual demise.

The end of World War II, and its controls on the importation of American comics, was cataclysmic for the Canadian comic book industry, which had been flourishing in an entirely artificial market due to the special circumstances of the wartime economy. “Where there had once been five major publishers regularly issuing more than 20 titles,” by the end of 1946 there were ”only reprint houses” (Bell 1986:27). This vacuum continued for a significant period of time, leaving the comics with few representations of Canadian identity, if any. By the 1950s and '60s, “comics had become an American art form” (p. 35).

Things changed rather dramatically when a “Silver Age” was “ushered in” by the release of *Captain Canuck* in 1975 (Bell 1986:39). Though in many ways a flawed work hampered by poor production values, *Captain Canuck* 1 “represented the first appearance on the newsstands of a Canadian superhero since the demise of Johnny Canuck, Sergeant Canuck, and Canada Jack in 1945” (p. 39). The Captain 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 Canadian flag. Furthermore, as a character who “shunned violence as much as possible,” he was “the appropriate superhero for a middle power that was somewhat distrustful of heroism and very much aware of the limits of power” (Bell 1992:25-26). Indeed, the Captain was something of a middle power himself, merely “twice as strong” and “twice as fast” as an ordinary human (Comely 1975:11). An RCMP officer before being recruited to the Canadian International Security Organization, Tom Evans – Captain Canuck's secret identity – already had this link to the North (p. 11). However, I think it is even more significant that he gains his powers due to an exposure to alien rays while on a camping expedition (p. 11). Tom Evans went out into the bush, and Captain Canuck returned.

This new, flag-garbed identity is born in the hinterland. In this respect, the ideology that Captain Canuck represents is absolutely in line with Canada First's cult of the North – if, perhaps, a fainter echo. Even the future 1990s milieu of Comely's series, in which “Canada has become a superpower because of its natural resources,” bears traces of this discourse, as the land has become the source of the nation's power and prowess (Bell 1992:26). And as much as the Captain may himself attempt to avoid violence, the Northern power that he represents is inescapably one of domination, if not the outright racism associated with Canada First. Bell notes that “Canuck seemed more aware of the duality of Canada and worked in tandem with a Quebecois superagent – Kébec, the first of several French-Canadian associate heroes who have appeared in English-Canadian comics” (p. 25). The Captain was also joined by Redcoat, another CISO

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 our protagonist is clearly portrayed as superior to his comrades. When flying to meet a group of neo-Nazis in combat, Captain Canuck gets his own jet plane, while Redcoat and Kébec fly one together (Comely 1979:8). And, of course, it is theirs that gets shot down (p. 13). Though the two agents together prove tough enough to hold their position against the Nazis, it is only when Captain Canuck rides into battle – mounted, conveniently enough, on an Albertan stallion – that the tide of the battle turns in favour of the forces of freedom and democracy (p. 16). The two solitudes are both subordinated to a new, pan-Canadian identity that is rooted in a discourse of the North. This, however, obfuscates the fact that Captain Canuck is a white character with a British surname. Though *Captain Canuck*, with its optimistic representation of an ideal Canadian hero, presents a vision that may seem inclusive and uniting on first glance, like Nelvana it simultaneously plays into dominant, colonialist discourses by appropriating the mystique of the North to prop up a normative Canadian, who is a white, Anglo-Celtic agent of the government.

Of all the Silver Age characters who appeared after Captain Canuck, none were quite as enduring as the Captain himself. Jim Waley and Jim Craig's character the Northern Light, who was an agent of a security agency called Alert and operated out of “a secret fortress in Northern Canada”, only appeared in five comic books before disappearing, the last being in the pages of an American series (Bell 1992:20-21,24). Mark Shainblum's character Northguard, also known

as Le Protecteur in his hometown of Montréal, was a young comic book fan recruited by PACT (Progressive Allies Canadian Technologies) to defend Canada against a mysterious American organization called ManDes (i.e., Manifest Destiny) (p. 33,35). Northguard also worked alongside a Quebecoise martial arts expert codenamed Fleur de Lys to defend Canada from an American takeover (p. 35). However, by 1989, Northguard's creators had given up the character (p. 36). Captain Canuck, on the other hand, managed to make a comeback in a second series and a newspaper comic strip in the mid-1990s, and there was even some groundwork done to develop a third series at the end of that decade (Bell 2001).

So, why are these representations so persistent? Unlike the American producers of pulp fiction and Mountie movies, there has never been a significant, lasting financial incentive to publish Canadian comic books – as evidenced by the post-war meltdown of the industry – yet Canadian superheroes keep coming back in one form or another. As I have attempted to show, the terms of the discussion were set well before “Men of the Mounted” was even a gleam in Ted McCall's eye. While they have done their part to propagate the ideas to their young readers, the representations of the North depicted through Canadian comics are effects of a larger cultural discourse. When the creators of Canadian comics sat down to envision what a Canadian hero might be like, there were already a number of images and types in play. With the ideologies of Canada First and the iconic figure of the Mountie already in place, Borealism had achieved a hegemonically dominant position in our ways of thinking about Canadian identity that was then re-expressed in the comic books.

It is clear that these kinds of nationalist discourses play a significant role in the formation and maintenance of Canadian identity. But what do they do to the people of the North? In one respect, it is rather difficult to talk about how these stories treat the people of the North, as they've been entirely removed from the narrative – and, by extension, from the national metanarrative. In this way, the representations in the media allow the rest of Canada to imagine the North as belonging to us without these images ever bringing to mind the problems that face the region. If one's mental associations with the North do not go beyond Kip Keene of the Mounted or Nelvana of the Northern Lights, will one ever begin to think through the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing the North of this country? I would tend to think not. Yet, the North is no longer merely being spoken for by mainstream Canadian media from the South, it is beginning to speak back to the rest of Canada. I am not quite sure what to make of it, but I find it intriguing that one of the programmes produced by the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation is a superhero show called “Super Shamou” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001:331). Perhaps this suggests that the discourse of the North is reversible and can be reappropriated as a form of cultural resistance, with Inuit audiences beginning to write themselves back into the story of the North.

Though only in a small cluster of discourses and representations, the national superhero, as a sign embodying Borealist ways of producing and organizing knowledge about the world, is a powerful way of constructing identity, whether put in the service of dominant, white Canada or of resisting subcultural and national groups. The heroic figure speaks to power and strength, creating a

link to the land and creating an exoticism that can then be absorbed as part of one's own identity. But we must always remember that this way of constructing nationalism is at the expense of someone else who has been left out of the story.

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