Drawing Identities: An Ethnography of Indigenous Comic Book Creators

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Abstract

This research examines the experiences of Indigenous comic creators when making comic books, and I aim to investigate the individual and communal motivations for creating comics. Representations of Indigenous characters and storylines have primarily been told through a white lens in mainstream comics. Within the past five years, this trend has shifted with increased academic and public attention on Indigenous comic books and the rise of comic conventions like Indigenous Pop X. I argue that these comics are acts of decolonization and self-determination where creators use comics as educational tools and as a form of cultural preservation by documenting Indigenous histories, languages, and perspectives. The data was captured through participant observation at Indigenous Pop X and semi-structured interviews with six self-identified Indigenous comic book creators. These experiences were categorized with thematic and narrative analysis, and analyzed through the frameworks of postmodernism, decolonizing theories, and Tribal Critical Race theory.

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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my family; in particular, it is for Pa and Sandy.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis explores Indigenous creators' experiences when making comics by examining their intentions for creating a story, the process itself, and how their work reaches the public. Through the process of making Indigenous comics, I argue that creators are using their agency to enact a form of sovereignty while educating the public through an Indigenous lens. The stories told by creators in comics are used to preserve creation stories, languages, and present other aspects of Indigenous epistemologies. These comics also serve as alternatives to mainstream comic book depictions of Indigenous characters and storylines.

The most effective lens to explore these ideas is through an anthropological lens as it captures experiences of comic creators as told from their perspectives. This is done by looking at how their identity as an Indigenous creator is reflected in their work and how it has impacted their work in the comic book industry. This research aligns with anthropology's focus on identity as it explores how creators use text and images to make Indigenous characters. In addition, it also looks at comics as a form of knowledge production that is publicly shared. There is a misconception that Indigenous comics and events like Indigenous Pop X (IPX) are erroneously believed to be only for Indigenous people. This is something which IPX Denver Director Kristina Maldonado-Bad Hand (Sicangu Lakota and Cherokee) notes when describing the event, "we invite everybody and then it's open and inclusive" (Nick 2019). With these comics and comic conventions

open to the public, it is important to see how these comics and events are received and interpreted by non-Indigenous audiences as well as Indigenous audiences.

It is also important to note who I am and where I come from. I am a white, cisgender, able-bodied, woman from a middle-class family. With this privilege I actively work towards a collaborative allyship with mis-/under-represented groups, specifically Indigenous peoples, in my personal and professional life, and in my academic work, to redress this historically unequal power dynamic between researchers and Indigenous people. To me, allyship refers to using one's place of privilege to speak up against injustice, discrimination, and the systems that perpetuate them. When conducting research, it involves being transparent about the progress and providing participants with access to the findings. It involves knowing the distinction between speaking up for people and speaking for them. Allyship involves using the resources available to self-educate oneself on topics rather than relying on and expecting marginalized groups to relive their trauma. It involves knowing that allyship is a lifelong commitment and that mistakes will be made. When mistakes are made it is vital to understand the origin of the pain, acknowledge it, apologize, and to change behaviors going forward. It means understanding that as a person with privilege, I will never understand; but this is not an excuse to not stand in solidarity. While all of these are important, especially in the current moment with the Black Lives Matter movement, they are just performative acts unless they are enacted.

Below are some of the ways in which I enact allyship with Indigenous people that impact my research (in no particular order). First, I work towards allyship by referring to people (including participants) by their preferred pronouns and how they choose to self-

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identify. Whenever possible or known, I refer to people by their tribal affiliation as a means of recognizing their unique personal and tribal history. Second, I work towards allyship by showing up. This is done virtually and in-person but is much more than just retweeting images of poverty porn. It involves putting in work and going to events, not just when it is convenient for me; but rather, when it is hard. When it is hard, I am able to make a relationship with the people I am supporting a priority. It is something that is especially difficult to work towards during this time of COVID-19 but it is a more important time than ever with communities at risk.

Third, I work towards allyship by using my privilege to highlight the existing voices of Indigenous people who are speaking for themselves, share and promote these voices with those in my circle who are unfamiliar with them, and most of all, to be quiet and listen. It is not my place to speak for those who already have a voice but to instead engage in active listening to hear what is being said even though I will never truly understand the experiences or feelings that are expressed (Smith, Puckett, and Simon 2016, 16). Fourth, I work towards allyship by learning, recognizing, and acknowledging whose lands I am currently on as a means to "combat the continued erasure of Indigenous Peoples" (Smith et al. 2016, 15). Finally, I work towards allyship by recognizing that when I make a mistake or I am called out by someone or a group who are hurt by my words or actions, that it is my job to apologize (Phillips 2019). And to apologize without justification or clarification of my intended actions, but instead to acknowledge people's feelings and to come up with corrective actions to do better in the future. This is something that is scary for many now with cancel culture (Romano 2019), but I work towards following Dr. Adrienne Keene's (Cherokee) lead and facing it head-on (Keene

2020). It is also a vital action because I have this privilege in part based on centuries of colonizers refusing to acknowledge, let alone apologize for, their continued acts of suppression and oppression against Indigenous people.

While far from achieving goals of allyship, these actions are a start and provide insight into what is important to me. These actions are reflected in my choices of theories as they focus on self-reflexivity and privileging voices who have been overlooked; all things ingrained in me from childhood. Beyond allyship, another area that is important to me and made me who I am today is a love and aappreciation for pop culture. From a young age, I learned that how you make connections with others is through discussing your opinions about what movies you watch or what books you read. This can be seen in my interviews where I often defer to talking about films because that is a passion of mine and the main way I create a bond with others. In my interviews, one can see that I defer to talking about movies because I am more familiar with it than with comics.

When rewatching cartoons and movies that I have fond memories of growing up now with a critical eye, I cannot help but notice that the vast majority of them have at least one aspect that is problematic. One of my family's favorite movies growing up was *Cat Ballou*, a movie that as a child seemed to be about female empowerment but with each revisit, I cannot help but notice the what once seemed as innocuous jokes actually had insidious undertones that made light of alcoholism, rape, and used negative stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous people. Ever since this realization, I knew that I wanted to explore how people and groups are represented in pop culture as this is many people's first experiences with people outside their community, and as such, these representations are important.

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At this point, you might be asking yourself, then why comics? Fair question. It was the one area of pop culture that I was the most unfamiliar with as I had only ever read one comic series before. I originally intended to explore Indigenous representation in animated sitcoms but comics were suggested as an alternative. Something which intrigued me because this was the opportune moment to learn about a new medium. The timing was also perfect with the increasing amount of public and academic attention to comic books with comic book movies, and at the time what was then Indigenous Comic Con was only 2 months away. An event that became the deciding factor to pursue this research once I attended it and the rest is history. Before these ideas can be explored, it is necessary to provide context and definitions for key terms like Indigenous, Indigenous epistemologies, comics, and comics creator.

For this research, it is important to be precise with defining the terms 'Indigenous' and 'Indigenous people'. In this research, the term is used to "signify original peoples who are too often living in occupation throughout the world...including the United States and Canada," and to not feed into "the erroneous depiction of indigenous peoples and traditions as a singular cultural entity" (Schade Eckert 2017, 148). They are the people who are Indigenous to the area and lived on the land prior to colonization (Foxtree 2014, 8). It is not an essentializing term but rather a universal term that recognizes the "many diverse communities, language groups and nations, each with their own identity within a single grouping" who all have similar experiences of land dispossession, genocide, language extinction, invalidation of epistemologies, abuse of women, and more detrimental effects under colonization (Smith 2012, 38). The term 'Indigenous' provides space for inclusion and "lends to connections among peoples across a global range of

settler-colonial contexts" (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 30). When used as "a plural ("Indigenous peoples")" it emphasizes shared traumas and experiences by providing "a network of connections and mutual encouragement, information, possible practices, and inspiration" (Conkey 2005, 16). Throughout this thesis the default terminology will be 'Indigenous,' 'Indigenous people,' or 'Indigenous peoples,' however, whenever known, the primary terms will be tribal affiliations.

Similarly, it is necessary to discuss how the term 'Indigenous epistemologies' is used in this research. It refers to "what knowledge is and the nature of it" from an Indigenous lens (Held 2019, 1). Indigenous epistemologies are "culturally specific knowledge" ways that are "unique to a certain population," which are "alive," and as such are adaptive (Simonds and Christopher 2013, 2185). These ways of knowing are based on "the relationships between people, lands, and the stories that are rooted in relation to both" (Hinzo 2019, 794). Within this dialogical relationship, Indigenous people and the land are "carriers and sustainers of knowledge production" (Sium and Ritske 2013, II). The term is preferred over 'Indigenous epistemology' as the plural recognizes "the characteristics that Indigenous cultures of the world share" (Cajete 2005, 71). As with the term 'Indigenous', it is used to acknowledge the similar ways of knowing across groups while simultaneously recognizing that these are not universal and that differences exist within this space (Held 2019, 6).

It is also important to define other pertinent terms and how they are used in this research. Within this research, participants and the makers of comic books are referred to as 'Indigenous creators,' 'comic creators,' or 'creators'. The term 'creator' is used as it is how participants refer to themselves (Deforest 2019; LaPensée 2019; Odjick 2019; Terry

2019) and it is a common term within the comic industry (Davies 2019; Eisner 2000, 123; Lewis 2010; Meskin 2007; Zarate 2019). The term allows space for the multiple roles that people can and do have during the comic book making process—such as writer, artist, penciler, inker, letterer, etc.—as well as recognizing their role as the creators of these stories.

A history of comics is examined more in Chapter Two, but first, it is necessary to define how the terms 'comic,' 'comics,' and 'comic books' are used in this research. The criteria to define comic books includes: 1) the final product must first be or have the potential to be multi-issued; 2) have stories involving the same characters to varying degrees that are included throughout the issues; 3) they are accessible for the public to consume either in hardcopy or digitally; 4) and no more than 24 pages. This definition was chosen as it reflects the works created by participants and aligns with the definition of comics that participants gave with one participant noting that "a comic book is essentially sheets of paper that are stapled together and folded it in half to form a book […] told in 24 pages" (Deforest 2019). More broadly, they are "pictorial narratives or expositions in which words usually contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice versa" (Harvey 2009, 26). Both images and text need to be represented at some point within its entirety to be considered part of the medium, though these do not need to be an equal distribution. In tandem with McCloud's definition, the beginning of comics starts with Rodolphe Töpffer in the 1830s who employed "the first interdependent combination of words and pictures seen in Europe," placed the text and images within a border, and created comics during a time when mass production and consumption was available (McCloud 1994, 17; Heer and Worcester 2009, XIV). The term 'visual narratives' is also

used to describe stories that are told with visuals and text, but unlike comics, these narratives can expand into other mediums such as television, film, and games.

As a medium, comics are a unique as they present stories through "a montage of both word and image," that requires the reader to not only read both at the same time but create the connection between the two (Eisner 2000, 8). This style of reading creates a bond between the reader and creator as the reader literally fills in the gaps of the story left by the creators; something which creates individualized experiences of stories. The medium is also unique due to the community that is built based on these relationships and seen at comic conventions where creators and readers come together. Within the past four years, a new community has emerged with conventions dedicated to Indigenous comics, their creators, and their fans. This thesis looks at the experiences of six self-identifying Indigenous comic book creators and explores how they create their stories, the comics themselves, and the process of publishing their work. At the heart of these experiences is the creator's interpretation of what storytelling means to them, with their comics serving as the physical embodiment of these ideas.

This thesis explores the history of these terms in Chapter Two, and I provide background information on settler-colonialism, pop culture, comics, and storytelling. All three areas work together to paint a picture of how stereotypes are created and maintained due to settler-colonialism; something that is transferred into and perpetuated in pop culture, specifically in comics. With the foundation of these topics in place, they are further built upon within my analysis in Chapter Six. In Chapter Three, I provide the theoretical frameworks that guided this research, their histories, and their application in this research. Within the theory chapter, I discuss that this research uses aspects and

tenets of postmodernism, decolonizing theories, and Tribal Critical Race theory, but does not classify itself as existing solely within these frameworks. Together, these theories are used to unpack how participants use comics to unsettle and challenge power dynamics within the comic industry while promoting different forms of Indigenous storytelling.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the research design, the ethnographic methods used, and how the data was analyzed. These methods were chosen to promote participant perspectives and through using narrative and thematic analysis on the semi-structured interviews, I uncovered the themes of access, artistic freedom, collaboration, education, multimodality, representation, and stories evolve as we evolve. In Chapter Five, I provide an overview and explanation for my use of presenting the interviews through a life history approach. Within the chapter, each creator has their work placed within their own subsection that includes their life history, long excerpts from their interview, and images of their work. Throughout each creator's section, I limit my voice to providing transitions and highlighting takeaways from the quotes with the analysis in the following chapter. In Chapter Six, I analyze the interviews both individually and comparatively as a group. In addition, I explore how the themes arise in interviews and tie to larger ideas of self-determination and decolonization. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I provide the conclusion, final thoughts, and potential areas for future research. These ideas focus on how Indigenous comics are cultural products that preserve language, stories, and work as extensions of visual and rhetorical sovereignty.

Chapter Two: Background

Overview

  This chapter will provide background information on settler-colonialism in North America, representation in pop culture, a history of comics and Indigenous comics, and storytelling. At the heart of this thesis is understanding why Indigenous comic creators tell the stories they do in the medium that they do. But before this can be answered, an understanding of the individual histories of all the topics must be done to place them within the context of Indigenous comics. First, is an examination of the power dynamics within North American settler-colonialism. Second, considers the history of pop culture and its weaponization of representation and how movements like Indigenerds have combated these stereotypes. Third, is an exploration of the history of comics, the scholarly study of comics, and how comics are used as a form of Indigenous Cinematic universes (Ramirez 2015, 22). It is within this period Indigenous comics were born and popularized. storytelling. Finally, the chapter ends by looking at previous academic studies of both storytelling or narratology and Indigenous storytelling.

Settler-Colonialism

  A thesis on Indigenous comic book creators cannot begin without first acknowledging and addressing settler-colonialists. By placing it first, the intention is not to give priority to settler-colonialists but rather to look at how the history of colonization impacts contemporary lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. It is in this environment

that Indigenous comic book creators are producing their comics as counternarratives to combat the voices of the colonizers, reorient, and privilege Indigenous voices; "Indigenous comic artists around the world are making space for readers to imagine a better world" (Forbes 2020).

Settler-colonialism refers to the form of colonization where "the settlers came not to exploit the indigenous population for economic gain, but rather to remove them from colonial spaces" (Hixson 2013, 4). Before the land can be illegally and unjustly occupied by settler-colonialists, they must "do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there" (Arvin et al. 2013, 12) as they "must be destroyed, removed, and made into ghosts" (Adas 2001, 1697). It is an invasive and continuous structure based on the extraction of the land, its resources, and eliminating Indigenous peoples (Adas 2001; Byrd 2014; Hixson 2013, 4; McClintock 1992, 88; Mohanty 2003; Tuck and Yang 2012; Turner Strong and Van Winkle 1993; Yellow Bird 2004; Waziyatawin, and Yellow Bird 2005; Wolfe 1992, 2; Wolfe 2006). Those that remain are essentialized into an amalgamized pan-Indigenous group facing assimilation, cultural genocide, and who are viewed as constantly being on the brink of extinction and are physically removed from the land and forced onto reservations as they are viewed as incapable of cultivating it to its full potential (Haynes Writer 2008, 6). Through pushing aside anything and anyone Indigenous to the land, European settlers attempt to create their own nationalist identity through appropriating Indigenous identities as the "original" inhabitants of the land (Ames 1992, 79; Deloria 1999; Green 1988; Yanagisako 2005, 79).

This involved primarily groups of Europeans who came to North America "to make a place their home" by removing "the Indigenous peoples that live[d] there" (Tuck

and Yang 2012, 6). While this structure has been enacted globally, the focus in this research is on settler-colonialism within North America, specifically Canada and the United States of America. This is because the creators interviewed and consulted in this research are from and currently reside in these two countries. Though Canada and the U.S. have different settler-colonial histories and contemporary experiences, they share similar, overarching experiences. Because of this, when settler-colonialism is discussed it will refer to both Canada and the U.S.

The structure was created, maintained, and is perpetuated from a multifaceted approach from political legislation to military domination and to one of the most insidious forms, education (Asad 1973, 16; Alexander and Mohanty 2010; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002; Biermann 2011; Castile 1996; Chambers and Watkins 2012; Champagne 2007; Darroch and Giles 2014; Hill 2000; Smith 2012; Waziyatawin, and Yellow Bird 2005; Wolfe 1999). Since its inception in the 1800s, American anthropology "was shaped by the settler-colonial project" that began as a "project of "knowing the Native American "other" and the project of defining the nation-state," both projects that built on one another (Yanagisako 2005, 79, 81). And it is not just that anthropologists past and present have "draw[n] upon Indigenous peoples" for their own professional gain, but that Indigenous people have been used as "objects for observation...objects for experimentation, [and] for manipulation" with little regard for the communities' well-being (Deloria 1969, 81).

When Indigenous people are looked at as "data" they are quantified and calculated, something which only "non-Indian scholars can interpret" (Green 1988, 37), causing anthropologists to be the keepers of Indigenous cultural knowledge and the

academy serves as the "location for the production of knowledge" (Alexander et al. 2010, 26; Smith Tuhiwai 2012). This type of salvage ethnography was part of "paternalistic encroaches [to] claim that Indians are too witless to chronicle their own histories or to manage their own affairs, and they assume that it is in the Indians' best interest to publish sensitive details of tribal life" (Mihesuah 1993, 132). It is through capturing and maintaining the "knowledge of subject races" that "makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge" (Said 1979, 395). This power stems from "the state's ability to 'produce' an 'other', different from the national 'us', on the basis of othering"; which is "validated" and reinforced by the academy (Lopez Caballero 2009, 172). The knowledge of the "Other," the colonized is exploited to keep them under the colonizer's dominion, and this knowledge is spread to the mass of the colonizers through stereotypes (Yanagisako 2005, 82-83).

False images of stereotypes represent "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known […] that needs no proof, can never really be proved" (Bhabha 1994, 94). Faux anthropological ownership of knowledge led and leads to the incorrect assumption that it correlates to ownership of peoples, people's cultures, and land. Anthropology and other disciplines as branches of imperialism "perpetuate[s] through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West" (Smith Tuhiwai 2012, 31). Simply put, "Western academic discourses are embedded in a context of colonialism and oppression," something which many in the academy actively work against, but still exists to varying degrees to this day (Darroch and Giles 2014, 26).

Pop Culture

These efforts led to not only misrepresentations of Indigenous people within the academy but infiltrates into other areas such as pop culture. Popular culture or pop culture as it is referred to throughout this thesis, refers specifically to products that are a) widely liked by large groups of people—in this case within North America; b) widely shared or accessible due to mass-production and; c) used as a connective piece of hegemony for people to bond over (Fabian 1978; Storey 2015). Some such products include the different mediums of television, film, the internet, radio, print media, and within the category of print media are comics. While it can be viewed as innocuous or "harmless fun" (Witkin 2003, 1), the messages transmitted more often than not "reinforces dominant culture[al] stereotypes of Indians" (Cox 1997, 64). Something which has brought about a surge of scholarly research into different medium's representation of Indigenous people.

Studies exploring Indigenous characters and references on television (Cox 1997; Tahmahkera 2014; Tan, Fujioka, and Lucht 1997; White 2012), in movies (Green 1988; Griffiths 2001; Keith 2013; Kilpatrick 1999; Lewis 2006, 73-74; Meek 2006; Peterson 2011; Raheja 2011), in print media (Bataille 2001; Mendoza and Reese 2001; Sheyahshe 2008), and overarching studies across all media (Bell 2011, 85; Bird 1999; Merskin 1998; Native Appropriations n.d.; Tahmahkera 2016). These characters were based on stereotypical imagery made by primarily white creators without Indigenous involvement or consultation that portrayed Indigenous people "as time[less], silent, savage Plains warriors" (Meek 2006, 94). Other common stereotypes show Indigenous people as placed within a historic romanticized past, hypersexualize

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women, create an image of Indigenous people and nature being one, and as noble savages (Haynes Writer 2008, 8; Hill Sr. 2000; Sheyashe 2008). Mainstream comics frequently build on these stereotypes and present them since it is "a visual form [that] rel[ies] upon certain features such as condensation, repetition, dramatization, exaggeration, and [the] caricature" (Dodds 2012, 118).

Due to the accessibility of social media and other online platforms, shifts have occurred so that increasing numbers of Indigenous and independent creators are telling their own stories. These stories are "acts of self-decolonization and activism" for the creators by "replacing stereotypes with more positive yet complex constructions of Indigenous identity" (Hill 2016, 52). Pop culture is no longer a hegemonic tool but can and has been utilized to "enable indigenous producers to create critical expressive and performative texts" and "can become an instrument of sovereignty" (Tahmahkera 2016, 9). The images and stories that are seen in comics and pop culture become acts of self-determination where Indigenous people have the agency to decide what representations are shown or not shown.

An audience for these stories and humanized representations exist and can be seen in online social movements such as #oscarssowhite, #representationmatters, #notyourmascot, and #ownvoice where people are looking to see themselves in the stories they see and read (Deforest 2019). Some of the people leading this movement are part of the Indigenerd community. Known by many variations—Native nerds, IndigeNerd, IndigiNerd, indigi-nerd—the preferred term throughout this thesis is Indigenerds as it is the preferred term of Native Realities—the only Indigenous owned and run publisher in North America and leader in printing Indigenous comics. The word

comes from the combination of the words "'Indigenous' and 'nerd'" and encompasses people who self-identify as nerds, geeks, and all-around lovers of pop culture who work to stop the creation of negative stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous people, and instead work to incorporate Indigenous elements into pop culture. It is not coincidental that "the rise of the Indigenerd coincides with concerted efforts by marginalized communities to assert themselves in establishing authentic representations within global pop culture" (Francis 2018).

These efforts I classify as enactments of sovereignty by Indigenerds, both comic creators and readers, who object to Western representations of Indigenous people and instead promote works that "give voice to contemporary Native people" (Rickard 2011, 467). When looking at Indigenous comics and its intersection with sovereignty, I focus on both rhetorical sovereignty and visual sovereignty as comics use both text and visuals in tandem to tell stories or counternarratives. It is necessary to breakdown these terms as they are broad, and their meanings vary based on the context in which they are used. Though sovereignty is typically looked at and defined through a legal and political lens, that is not the case for this research (King 2011, 77). Throughout this thesis, sovereignty "denotes the right of a people to conduct its own affairs, in its own place, in its own way" (Lyons 2000, 450). It is part of an ongoing process that promotes renewal, resistance, and works to deconstruct the colonizing gaze and the representations that gaze creates (Bell 2011, 101; Rickard 2011, 467, 471).

This is performed in many forms like artistic sovereignty (Ohnesorge 20008), cultural sovereignty (Singer 2011), economic sovereignty (Cattelino 2008), intellectual sovereignty (Warrior 1995), political (Simpson 2014), rhetorical

(Lyons 2000), and visual (Raheja 2007). With the focus on rhetorical and visual

sovereignty, it is important to dissect what these mean and how they are used. Rhetorical

sovereignty is centered on "Native peoples wishes [for] control over language and

rhetoric—and therefore control over the representation and the image derived from them"

(King 2011, 78). It is focused on Indigenous people using language to create self-

representations in text rather than relying on Indigenous representation as seen through

a white lens "in law, in education and academia, in popular culture, and museums" (King

2011, 78). Similarly, visual sovereignty seeks to promote "self-representation by

Indigenous media producers" while the images work to disempower dominant and

stereotypical imagery (Peterson 2011; 31, Raheja 2007, 160). While visual sovereignty

generally refers to film, photography, and art, I argue that when combined with rhetorical

sovereignty, it can and should be extended to refer to Indigenous comics as both the

words and images are used together to create counternarratives.

History of Comics

For the scope of this research, an examination of the history of US mainstream

comics provides context for industry trends and the rise of Indigenous comics. While not

the first comic book superhero The Phantom holds that position Superman's debut in

1938 marks the beginning of the Golden Age of Comics from 1938 to 1950. It is during

these years that the birth of the comic book industry occurred along with the mass

production and publication of superhero comic books (Ramirez 2015, 20-21). These

comics became what is known as mainstream comics, meaning stories involving white

characters, primarily triumphant superheroes, written by white creators primarily for

white audiences. These stories were written without necessarily considering non-white

audiences; they were written with the intention that the creators, characters, and readers are unmarked racially and gendered. All parties involved were assumed to be white (Dyson 1999, 220).

This trend largely continued through the Silver Age of Comics from 1956 to 1970 (Ramirez 2015, 21). However, a shift occurred where the comics became self-reflexive and responded to socio-political issues of the day as can be seen through Captain America's grappling with a loss of "faith in his identity and country" in the *Secret Empire* series (Roeder 2013, vii). A change in readership occurred as well, and readers no longer passively reading comic books; they began to form and attend comic conventions (or cons). Comics began to take on social value and to be collected by collectors—a shift that altered the publishing process itself from the number of books that were published to how they were published (Rendace, 2000, 50). The years from 1970 to 1985 brought about the Bronze Age of Comics where superhero storylines took on even darker plots, mainstream comics began to regularly produce non-superhero comics, and so too did the alternative comic also known as comix market began (Ramirez 2015, 21; Rendace 2000, 51). Alternative comics or as they came to be known, comix, targeted an adult readership, involved gritter stories that included sex, violence, and more closely aligned with lived experiences of readers (Hatfield 2005, XI; Rendace, 2000, 51). Most importantly these underground works were largely self-published and included creators from a wider range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, something distinctly missing within mainstream comics.

It is from this underground movement and the Dark Age of Comics—from the late 1980s to the early 1990s—that graphic novels were born, and the art form began to

be taken seriously as a form of literature (Ramirez 2015, 21-22). These works consisted of a series of typically adult-themed stories intended to be read in one sitting. All of these lead up to the current period, the Modern Age, which saw the rise of the anti-hero, the popularization of comic cons, and a reinvigorated readership due to the Marvel and Cinematic universes (Ramirez 2015, 22). It is within this period Indigenous comics were born and popularized.

Comics Terminology

Terminology regarding comic books is vast and is used interchangeably by scholars and the public alike (Alvitre 2019; Carleton 2014, 151; Cohn 2012; Eisner 2000; Labio 2011; McCloud 1994; Romero-Jódar 2013). This is due to ongoing debates as to what exactly the medium is and when it began. Graphic novels, newspaper cartoons, sequential art, graphic narratives, visual narratives, and single-panel comics are just a few examples of the visual and textual forms merging to tell a story. While overlapping in many areas, comic books alone will be at the center of this research and will be referred to throughout this thesis as either comics or comic books.

Scott McCloud and Will Eisner are two comic creators and the most often cited comic theorists when it comes to defining comics. Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1994, 20). While Eisner's definition is broader, as simply it defines comics as "sequential art" and refers to comics as "the art of graphic story-telling" (2000, 16). Both definitions work to define the process in which comics are read, their visual and textual components, and highlight the reader's role in interpreting the images and text.

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Reading comics is an active process that challenges the readers to combine the words and images within a panel as well as the gaps between panels—also known at the gutter—to create the story (Folk 2017, 12; Kukkonen 2013, 3). It is through the processing of gutter where readers connect the panels together by filling in the narrative of what occurred in the space between them (Eisner 2000, 8-13; Lent 2000, 203; McCloud 1993, 91). Comics are unique in that stories are broken up into small panels or blocked segments in which the texts and images are situated within. Words and text may be confined within the border or boundary of the panel themselves or might surpass them, all of which enhances and changes the readers' experience of the story. Panels dictate the speed and tempo at which people read, and without a proper understanding of the flow of panels, the reader will miss out on large pieces of the story by reading them out of order (Figure 1.1, McCloud 2006, 9-53).
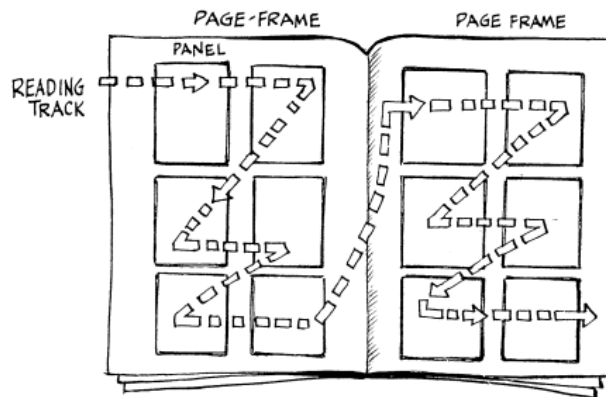
Figure 1.1: Page 41 from Will Eisner's Comics & Sequential Art

This process is one of meaning-making in which the individual images, texts, and panels collectively come together in the mind of the reader and create a complete story (Langston 2018, 122; Hatfield 2005, 33). This process can be seen in Figure 1.2 where

the panels present different actions, but through reading them separately and together, the

reader infers that within the gutter, a murder occurred.

Figure 1.2: Page 66 from Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art

Indigenous Comics

Alter/native or Indigenous comics as they are referred to here are comics

primarily made by, about, and for primarily an Indigenous audience. Many times, but not

always, the main characters and storylines presented in the comics are to counteract the

misrepresentation of Indigenous people in pop culture (Bladlow 2019 35-39; King 2009,

222). One such example is the *Super Indian* series by Arigon Starr (Kickapoo) where the

lead character is an Indigenous superhero and not a mainstream superhero in redface;

something which Batman, Superman, and Captain America have all done. Not all

elements of what defines an Indigenous comic need to be present to be classified as

Indigenous comics, but at least one must be present. For example, the

series *Scout* follows Apache Emanuel Santa in a dystopian future is written by non-

Indigenous creator Timothy Truman but is considered by many to be an Indigenous

comic for its humanistic, non-stereotyped depictions of Indigenous people. In fact,

Truman is a frequent exhibitor and speaker at Indigenous Comic Con and Indigenous Pop X. This definition is also based on panel conversations and informal discussions with creators at IPX.

These works join the tradition of Indigenous storytelling, specifically literature, where "works [are] produced by persons of Native identity and/or culture for primary dissemination to other persons of Native identity and/or culture" (Forbes 1987, 19). While this is meant to help guide what is and isn't Indigenous literature, it is important to not essentialize the topic and note that it is not a rigid definition. For too long, anthropologists and outsiders have tried to claim authority over and dictate who is and who is not Indigenous; something which has extended into other areas such as determining what literature is. This research seeks to not be a part of that trend and as such, the definition of Indigenous literature is not fixed.

Many Indigenous creators write stories about non-Indigenous characters for non-Indigenous audiences; ultimately it is up to the creator to determine what they want their stories to be designated as and what genre they want to place them under. Similarly, Indigenous literature and comics do not cover just one homogenous genre. Indigenous comics specifically can be seen across any and all types of genres from manga (Brown Spiers 2014), apocalypse (Lester Robertson 2018), science-fiction (Baudemann 2017), Indigenous futurism (Lidchi and Newman Fricke 2019; Tiger 2019), and noir (Parker Royal, 2010).

Some of the earliest and prominent Indigenous comic books were the anthologies *Trickster: Native American Tales* (2010) and *Graphic Classics Volume 24: Native American Classics* (2013). All of the components to be considered Indigenous

comics are found in the anthology series *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume* 1 (2015), Volume 2 (2017), and the soon to be released *Volume 3* (2020), *Deer Woman: An Anthology* (2017), *Native Realities: Anthology One* (2017), and *Sovereign Traces: Not (Just) (An)Other* (2018). The *Moonshot* series involves the collaboration between Indigenous authors and illustrators to present stories that range in topics. *Deer Woman* was edited by participants Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish) and Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva, Scottish, and Gaelic) and focuses on stories of Indigenous women, assault, and strength through sisterhood. The book *Sovereign Traces* used pieces of contemporary Indigenous literature and had artists create imagery to accompany and interpret the text.

It is not coincidental that the majority of these works appeared within the past 5 years. Since 2015, increased visibility has been directed toward Indigenous comics internationally, academically, and publicly. This is largely due to the efforts of Dr. Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna) who opened Native Realities publishing house in 2015 which "strive[s] to give you the most original and authentic representations of Native and Indigenous peoples through stories and texts that educate and entertain" (Native Realities 2020). It is unique as it is "the country's first publishing house devoted exclusively to Native American comics and graphic novels" (Sanchez 2018). In 2017, Dr. Francis IV brought his publishing house to the public through the opening of Red Planet Books & Comics, a brick and mortar store in Albuquerque, New Mexico that sells Indigenous art, comics, and books. It is unique and is "the only Native American comic shop in the world" (Red Planet Books and Comics, 2020).

He did not stop there; Dr. Francis IV launched the first-ever Indigenous Comic Con or ICON in 2016 also in Albuquerque. It is a site of community building where comic creators, readers, and the general public to interact with each other and support creators by purchasing their works. In its first year alone, Albuquerque ICON saw over 1,200 people visit in a 3-day period (Indigenous Comic Con 2018). After 2 years, the Albuquerque convention changed its name to IndigiPop X and expanded to include more conventions worldwide. IndigiPop X came to Denver, Colorado in July of 2019 and to Melbourne, Australia in November 2019 under the name of Indigenous Comic Con. With each con put on and comics published by Native Realities has not only brought awareness to the public about Indigenous comics but to those within the academy.

Scholarly Study of Indigenous Comics

Scholars began to take notice of this trend in Indigenous comics, and 2019 alone, there were 9 separate articles and dissertations that explored disparate themes in Indigenous comic books (Anderson 2019; Bladow 2019; Callison, Daigneautl, Mazowita, and Rifkind 2019; Donelle Marshall 2019; Lidchi and Newman Fricke 2019; Matuk, Camillia, Talia Hurwich, Amy Spiegel, and Judy Diamond 2019; Morris 2019; Tiger 2019). Scholarly analyses on Indigenous comics fall in line with larger studies of comics in the early 2000s that dissected stereotypes and the educational benefits of comics, beginning with major studies by Cornel Pewewardy, 2002, Michael Sheyashe 2008, and C. Richard King 2009. Since then, studies have become more specialized but larger trends of studying stereotypes still persist. The following sections will discuss these trends: Indigenous comics and stereotypes, Indigenous comics as a form of education, and Indigenous comics as a form of storytelling.

As previously noted, the representation of Indigenous people has long been the focus of academic study, specifically stereotypic portrayals in a variety of mediums from museums to literature to film (Aldama 2020; Barbour 2015; Devoss and Russell Lebeau 2010; Hill Sr. 2000, 43; King 2009; Pewewardy 2002; Sheyahshe 2008). Michael Sheyahshe's (Caddo) 2008 book *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* is regarded as the first major work to compile these representations over time and counters these stereotypes in mainstream comics by highlighting the works of Indigenous creators in the same breath as those of mainstream creators and publishing powerhouses Marvel and DC. Since then scholars have turned their attention and platform to discuss the positive representations being created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous creators (Anderson 2019; Callison, Daigneautl, Mazowita, and Rifkind 2019; Henzi 2016; McLaughlin 2016; Mehta and Mukherji 2015; Morris 2019; Sanchez 2018; Seibel 2018).

Scholarly study of Indigenous comics builds on previous notions of comics being a previously underutilized educational tool (Grice 2017). Whether teaching students to learn through the creation of comics (Begoray and Brown 2018; Jyoti 2017; Montgomery, Manuelito, Nass, Chock, and Buchwald 2012) or through engaging with comics (Garrison, Carmichael, and Manck 2018; Legatt 2016; Matuk, Hurwich, Spiegel, and Diamond 2019; Schade Eckart 2017), comics are accessible to a variety of readers and necessitate a level of engagement that is different from prose and film. Larger educational themes in Indigenous comics are using comics as a form of linguistic and cultural reclamation, addressing health education, and using the comics as a form of culturally responsive education. They cover a range of educational topics and provide readers the opportunity to see themselves in the characters and learn through them on

how to tackle their problems through culturally specific means. Pressing physical and mental health issues such as tobacco use and suicide are taught and discussed in Indigenous comics for Indigenous communities (Legatt 2016; Matuk, Hurwich, Spiegel, and Diamond 2019).

By far, one of the most popular areas of scholarly study of Indigenous comics looks at Indigenous comics as a new form for continuing Indigenous storytelling techniques (Ahtone 2018; Bernardin 2017; Buhle 2007; Bladow 2019; Chavarria 2009; Forbes 2020; Langston 2018; Legatt 2016; Morris 2019; Schade Eckart 2017; Tiger 2019). Scholars compare comics and graphic novels to Indigenous modes of storytelling whether it be birchbark scrolls, ledger books, winter counts, rock art, oral stories, or other forms that involve the blend of visual and textual elements (Ahtone 2018; Bladow 2019, 37). Parallels are drawn between these forms of narrative expression and comics, specifically the interactive nature of comics and oral storytelling. Within both comics and oral storytelling, the process of the story comes to life between the collaboration between readers or the audience and the creator (Langston 2018). It is here that the meaning-making is done—whether that is in the gutter between panels or the pauses of storytellers, it is a joint effort by all parties (Bladow 2019, 36).

Storytelling

"Human beings are natural storytellers" (Bernard 2018, 46).

Similar to comics themselves, stories and storytellers have a history of debated origins within academia. Academic studies that have focused on "the study of narrative as a genre" or narratology as it is known, look at what components are needed to be classified as a story (Fludernik 2009, 8). Some such components are conflicts,

protagonists and antagonists, and most importantly sequences that contain a beginning, middle, and end (Brunner 1990; Denzin 2001; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 152; Labov and Waletzky 1997; McCance, McKenna, and Boore 2001, 352; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph, Smith 1992, 42; Polkinghorne 1988; Reissman 1993; Scholes 1981; Tilley 1995). Stories can communicate social norms, share myths, serve as a form of escapism and can be told in multiple mediums (Bruner 2010, 45; Jabar 2019). Broken out and studied by genres or categories such as the Hero's Journey, stories are seen as educational tools but are themselves rarely viewed forms of data within the academy. Rather, stories are seen as a way "we create meaning in our lives as well as ways we enlist each other's help in building our lives and communities" (Clandinin 2006, 44).

For this research, the terms stories and narratives are used interchangeably and focus primarily on the ever-evolving nature of stories, their relationships to people, and their receptions. This can be summarized as stories evolving as we evolve, with "each telling of a narrative…only facets of a narrator's or listener/reader's selfhood" emerges as "narratives are apprehended by partial selves" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 21-22). Partial selves represent each individual reading, viewing, or experience with a narrative as distinct; experiences that build on each other throughout our lives and reshape our perception of the story with each revisit. Each encounter with a narrative provides the reader with the opportunity to create new meaning-making experiences with characters and the story so that they are no longer foreign but instead personal stories (Munro Hendry 2010, 79).

Indigenous Storytelling

Indigenous storytelling, on the other hand, focuses on only storytelling as a method, theory, and as a form of cultural preservation and continuation (Forbes 2020). Storytelling is "at [its] base…what American Indian authors and poets are doing— storytelling" (Weaver 2001, 3). I would add comic book creators to that list as well. Before delving deeper into narratives or stories themselves, it is necessary to step back and look at the areas in which these stories are shared. Geary Hobson notes that

> "literature, in all its forms, oral as well as written, is our most durable way
> of carrying on this continuance [of Indigenous peoples]. By making
> literature, like the singers and storytellers of earlier times, we serve the
> people as well as ourselves in an abiding sense of remembrance" (1981,
> 11).

I propose that as new forms of communication arise in popularity, like online platforms and comic books, they should also be considered an addition to the canon of Indigenous literature. Comic creators describe themselves and their work as such, and this medium is simply a new format in which stories can continue (Aldama 2020; Bernardin 2017; Chavarria 2009; Forbes 2020; Langston 2018).

These works of literature have reparative benefits and that characteristics of it are used as a form of survivance and/or as a form of communitism. While similar, survivance stems from Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa) and in this thesis refers to the "combination of survival and endurance" (LaPensée 2014, 264) and works as "renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" (Vizenor 2008, 1). And the term communitism allows for people "to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities that have pained individuals in them" (Weaver 1997, 52). Creating and sharing stories with

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the purpose of reaffirming cultural identity and addressing historical traumas allows for healing and self-determination to begin (Emberley 2014). This is done through the communal activity of storytelling and is at the heart of comic book creation. It involves the collaboration between authors, letterers, illustrators, editors, and publishers to work together to create a comic book (Ray Murray 2013, 336-339). The intersection of this joint effort aligns with Indigenous epistemologies of the valuation of the community over that of the individual and the importance of stories (Brayboy 2005, 438).

A fundamental aspect of Indigenous communities is the importance of land, something which can be seen in Indigenous storytelling traditions. Stories are "connected to our homelands and is crucial to the cultural and political resurgence of Indigenous nations" (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, T'lakwadzi 2009, 1). Stories, land, and people are interconnected with stories embedded in the land (Basso 1996). When sharing stories about specific places, storytellers and their audiences "are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on" (Silko 1997, 27). Telling, listening, and sharing stories allow for the continuation of cultures but are political actions. The ability to have passed down stories "despite traumatic events" and intentional efforts of erasure; stories become signifiers of self-determination (Forbes 2020). They are acts of defiance in the face of the settler-colonial machine. They "affirm [and …] proclaim that Indigenous people still exist, that the colonial project has been ultimately unsuccessful in erasing Indigenous experience" (Sium and Ritskes 2013, IV). Despite the best efforts of colonialism, these stories are as valid as Western notions of education and storytelling.

Most importantly for this research are the intersections between Indigenous comic books and Indigenous storytelling. Neither are static or one dimensional, both "are

negotiable and ever being transformed, stories are carried by their tellers and communities'" (Sium and Ritskes 2013, V). Both involve active participation from all those involved when hearing, reading, or experiencing the stories (Sium and Ritskes 2013, V). The following chapter will build off of these ideas of storytelling and look into who is telling these stories or metanarratives when discussing postmodernism, look at how Indigenous and other minoritized perspectives are being held up in the academy and pop culture through multivocality, and concluded by exploring the importance of Indigenous storytelling through Tribal Critical Race theory.

Chapter Three: Theory

Postmodernism

Gaining popularity during the late 1970s and 1980s, postmodernism came to prominence during what became known as a 'moment of crisis' in anthropology as "the discipline went through a deep revision of its tenets and its representation practices" (Vargas-Cetina 2018, 2). As colonies around the world enacted social movements to gain traction toward their independence, colonial governments were forced to understand what this meant for them (Marcus and Fischer 1986, 9). For anthropologists, this involved an "inward spiral of self-criticism" that reassessed what their work would look like in the future (Trilling 1996, 360). Due its questioning of universal concepts, postmodernism makes space for relativism while also creating what some view as vagueness, contradictions, and ultimately renders it meaningless (Comsky 2012; Habermas 1987). Within this research, when using the term 'postmodernism' I am referring to the concepts of self-reflexivity, partial truths, the critique of metanarratives, the study of narratives, and the promotion of multivocality.

Research within anthropology turned inwards and looked at who was being researched, as well as how they were represented and by whom. This involved shifting the focus onto the anthropologist themselves, looking at their subjectivity, how this affects the research they conduct, and their analysis of it. It is only when exploring one's role in perpetuating systems of injustice, such as anthropology, that "a change in power

relations between an imperial West and its anthropological other [that]…could lead to a way of our crisis of representation" (Fabian 2006, 144). Through the recognition of one's subjectivity, one is able to shift power dynamics within research in a more equitable way; something that has guided this research and my role as a researcher.

Another postmodern concept that guided this research is that of partial truths. It challenges notions of research being seen as neutral, complete, and final, and instead promotes the idea that an ethnographer's research is subjective and is a small part of a much larger, ongoing story (Clifford 1986). Research can be compared to a kaleidoscope, where what the viewer sees changes based on their perspective. Research design and analysis are performed through the researcher's lens which is "inherently partial—committed and incomplete" as it captures what they might find important and not important based on what they leave out; something which might drastically differ from participants involved (Clifford 1986, 7). Research can be compared to a kaleidoscope, where what the viewer sees changes based on their perspective. This can be combated with the inclusion of participants in the research design as well as multiple perspectives looking at the same research; this includes the changing perspective of the research themselves over time. Partial truths are centered on relativism where it acknowledges groups and individuals will have different understandings of events and that all of these are valid with none holding more validity over others.

For this research, the idea of partial truths extends to comics and storytelling as each reading is unique and can never be the full picture for either the creator or for the reader. Creators change a reader's experience with a story, and readers do not know the creator's intentions when reading the story. This extends to the role of the researcher as

well, where what is written within this thesis is a snapshot of stories as told through my vantage point. Through a postmodernist lens, however, no perspective outweighs the other and none are invalid, rather it is all culturally relative (Darnell 2000, 309).

Postmodernism works to challenge metanarratives and dominant narratives of anthropology, the Indigenous literary canon, and the canon of comics. Postmodernism works to challenge "privileges of gender, ethnicity, and knowing" (Matthew and Hoey 2006, 536) and how "western values [are used as] an instrument of universalism" (Trilling 1996, 359). These narratives that dominate society—the scholars, experts, etc.— wash over history with a homogenizing perspective and seeks to erase and/or invalidate all other experiences. Instead within postmodernism and this research, the focus turns to individual experiences (the comic creator's experience), individual narratives (the comic itself), and through the layering of these voices, a multivocal narrative is created (Lyotard 1984, XXIV). It is no longer up to one person or group of people to decide what is or isn't considered canon, but instead, it is an individualized process. Through a postmodernist lens, this research seeks to use a multivocal approach for creators to make their own representations and speak to what being an Indigenous comic book creator means to them individually rather than as a universalizing experience (Dyke, Lund, Suthers, Teploys 2013, 639).

Postmodernism also works to challenge metanarratives or the dominant narratives that reaffirm existing power dynamics within the academy and for this research, the comic book industry. It works to challenge "privileges of gender, ethnicity, and knowing" (Matthew and Hoey 2006, 536) and how "western values [are used as] an instrument of universalism" (Trilling 1996, 359). These narratives that dominate society—the scholars,

experts, etc.—wash over history with a homogenizing perspective and seeks to erase and/or invalidate all other experiences. Instead within postmodernism and this research, the focus turns to individual experiences (the comic creator's experience), individual narratives (the comic itself), and through the layering of these voices, a multivocal narrative is created (Lyotard 1984, XXIV). It is no longer up to one person or group of people to decide what is or isn't considered canon, but instead, it is an individualized process. Through a postmodernist lens, this research seeks to use a multivocal approach for creators to make their own representations and speak to what being an Indigenous comic book creator means to them individually rather than as a universalizing experience (Dyke, Lund, Suthers, Teploys 2013, 639).

Decolonizing Theories

"Stories are decolonization theory in is most natural form" (Sium & Ritskes 2013, II).

Within this research, decolonizing theories shaped every aspect of it from the research design to how questions were asked to how the data was analyzed. Specifically exploring the idea of power dynamics within the creation process and the comics themselves. While not easily defined, nor should it be, the term decolonizing theories in this research refers to the continuous act of unsettling colonial doxa and orthodoxies and instead prioritizing Indigenous epistemologies, while understanding the multiple and overlapping ways in which this occurs (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002; Battell Lowman and Mayblin 2011; Memmi 1991; Mohanty 2003; Ozkazanc-Pan 2012; Said 1979; Smith, Puckett, and Simon 2016; Smith Tuhiwai 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012; Wolfe 1999; Wolfe 2006; Yellow Bird 2004). The term 'decolonizing' is used to reflect that the act of removing colonial authority is a continuous act (Darroch and Giles 2014;

Smith, Puckett, and Simon 2016; Smith Tuhiwai 2012; Yellow Bird 2004), and the term 'theories' is used to acknowledge and include the various epistemologies that focus on decolonization (Alfaisal 2011; Arvin, Tuck, Morrill 2013; Mihesuah 2000, 1249).

Decolonization, like allyship, is an on-going process that may and most likely will never be fully achieved (Smith, Puckett, and Simon 2016). Involving daily practices of those in power recognizing their privilege, whose land there are on, challenging Eurocentric narratives, and practicing self-reflexivity (Bhambra 2014, 115; Morton Ninomiya, Hurley, & Penashue 2020, 220; Powys Whyte 2018; Smith, Puckett, and Simon 2016). While these practices are a start, they are not enough and larger actions of collaboration within research and policies, the promotion of Indigenous self-determination, and the repatriating of land, ancestors, and other objects illegally procured need to be enacted to truly perform decolonial work (Morton Ninomiya, Hurley, and Penashue 2020; Tuck and Yang 2012, 21). When it is used as a metaphor or the buzzword of the moment "it re-centers whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 3). These types of actions are trendy, but it shifts focus on the settler as a means to remove their guilt and complicity in the system by acknowledging and talking about their privilege but with no actionable ideas that work towards the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Decolonizing theories removes the focus from the settler/colonized binary and from defining one person based on their relation to the other, and instead seeks to define and promote Indigenous peoples and epistemologies on their own merit (Alfaisal 2011; Hannibal Paci 2001, 356; Indian Country Today, 2009; McClintock 1992; Smith Tuhiwai 2012).

Decolonizing theories stems from postcolonialism, but they differ in a few key areas. While this research only focuses on the former, it is important to note these differences and why the choice of terminology was made. On face value alone, post-colonialism signifies a time after colonialism's demise where the colonists and the colonial system is removed from power and from the lands they took over (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 87; Frainais-Maitre 2011; McClintock 1992; Mignolo 2000; Shohat 1992). In addition, there are geographical and temporal differences between the two with postcolonialism referring "mainly to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" varying levels of removal of European powers in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (Bhambra 2014, 115-116). Whereas decolonialism refers to the ongoing occupation of settlers in the Americas and the active resistance of Indigenous peoples from the fifteenth century to today (Bhambra 2014, 115-116). Since this research occurs in settler-colonial countries in North America and as such cannot be postcolonial, the preferred term throughout this research is decolonizing.

It must be said that neither postcolonialism nor decolonizing theories are without critique. They are themselves instruments of colonialism and often used as a means to alleviate white- and/or settler-guilt to offset the current realities of white Americans who are benefiting from the settler-colonial regime (Bhambra 2014, 120; Indian Country Today 2009; Tuck and Yang 2012). Some also charge that "postcolonial authors [seek] to replace one universal [with] another" by prioritizing Indigenous perspectives, "despite their questioning of essentialism, rigid binaries and theoretical closures"; something which I view as erroneous as Indigenous epistemologies are neither universal nor seeking to claim absolute authority over knowledge production and reception (Frangie 2011, 50).

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In addition, within postcolonial theories, there is an absence of promoting feminist theories and the "double colonization" experienced by Indigenous women and other gendered individuals based on their political status and their gender (Alfaisal 2011 37; Tyagi 2014, 45).

Despite these criticisms, I use decolonizing theories in this research for a few reasons. First, since it is an on-going process it needs to be made into daily practice; something that is enacted with intentionality and not performativity. With this research spanning the course of a year from conceptualization to analysis to writing; it was important for me to return to the project with a framework that grew as the research grew but remained firmly grounded in its tenets. Second, due to its self-reflexivity decolonizing theories acknowledges its shortcomings and works to remedy it by leaving behind concepts that are no longer appropriate and creates new concepts to fill in the gap (Battell Lowman and Mayblin 2011, 6). It also forces me to reconsider my role as a white anthropologist, whose research is centered on Indigenous peoples, to look at how the power dynamics at play affects my research; while also keeping in mind the contentious historical and contemporary relationship between Indigenous peoples and anthropologists affects the final outcome as well. Finally, it was chosen as it places a priority on Indigenous perspectives over the dominating voices of white settlers; something that is fundamental to this research.

Foundational to colonial and settler-colonial societies is the idea of the oppressed and the oppressors. They go by many names Oriental and Occident, Global South and Global North, the West and the Rest, colonized and colonizer, etc. No matter the name the power dynamics are the same (Frainais-Maitre 2011; Memmi 1991; McClintock

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1992; McEwan 2001; Ozkazanc-Pan 2012; Said 1979). Those in charge create a system built on unequal, exploitative power dynamics, and continues them through maintaining the status quo. Within this research, the ideas of power dynamics extended to the research questions themselves which sought to uncover the power dynamics between creator to creator, creator to the public, and creator to publishers during the comic book making process to see who within these relationships held power to dictate what stories were told. Decolonizing what is thought of as the comic book making process and thinking of it through an Indigenous lens, is an example that shows that comics are used as a means to reshape power dynamics within literature (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002, 3-11). The visual analysis of the comics or pieces of works by the creators was done with the intention to decolonize what is considered "valid data" or "data," and purposefully they did not include a judgment of the comics on their aesthetic value as either "good" or "bad" (Ashcroft 2015, 412-413).

Hegemonic notions of what is and is not considered valid sources of knowledge and data have long been held by colonizers through the intentional discrediting of other ways of knowing "because it jeopardizes the West's central and dominant position" (Frainais-Maitre 2011, 13). If Indigenous knowledge ways are viewed as valid, then it follows that Indigenous peoples are capable of maintaining sovereignty over themselves; something that is diametrically opposed to colonial rule.

In order to delegitimize Indigenous epistemologies, they "are dismembered and then reconfigured to fit into a European paradigmatic mold," something which cannot be done and provides settlers with the "authority" to consider Indigenous epistemologies inferior to their own (Biermann 2011, 392). This is the case for "the settler-colonial

academy" who feigns to "claim authority over indigenous discourse" as part of the continued "usurpation of indigenous space" (Wolfe 1999, 3). The authority over knowledge converts to power through utilizing the knowledge to create false constructions of them as "Othered" individuals (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2001, 8-9). This is where decolonizing theories and methodologies come in as they "question the implied assumptions of the dominant discourses" and call for marginalized perspectives to be heard (Bhambra 2014, 117).

These "Othered" images become stereotypes where "The West interprets, depicts and speaks for the Orient" (Frainais-Maitre 2011, 13). Depictions more often than not are negative showing "Indigenous lives and communities as desperate, bleak, and sick" (Morton Ninomiya, Hurley, & Penashue 2020, 221). Presenting only negative depictions of Indigenous peoples creates negative stereotypes of them as one-dimensional caricatures, rather than as fully realized human beings. The images serve as "instruments of oppression" through suppressing Indigenous self-representation (Tyagi 2014, 47). Generally, decolonizing theories work "to remove western negative stereotypes about people and places" and "challenges us to rethink" categories such as "Othered" and colonized (McEwan 2001, 96). Instead of continuing work on analyzing negative stereotypes, this research decolonizes stereotypes by instead looking at the representation of realized Indigenous characters within Indigenous made comics.

This research works to decolonize stereotypes and representations through shifting the balance by creators speaking for themselves about their experiences and work to combat stereotypes. Discussions on and about stereotypes and Indigenous representations stem from people and places of power, but within a decolonizing

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framework, this requires the unsettling of this power dynamic. This involves work from both sides, but the burden lies on those who benefit from this system. They have a responsibility to make space for Indigenous voices and demand that others in similar situations do the same. Indigenous voices have created and are creating counternarratives to offset the power dynamic by creating stories as a form of resistance.

Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit)

Before delving into the tenets of Tribal Critical Race Theory, it is necessary to first discuss where it came from. Developed in the mid-1970s in Critical Legal Studies (CLS), Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines "the relationship between race, racism, and power" (Haynes Writer 2008, 2) as a means for "the subordination of people of color" through white supremacy (Villenas and Deyhle 1999, 414). This supremacy stems from and is maintained through the legal system, the educational system, and through governmental legislation (Delgado 1990; Parker and Stovall 2004). CRT seeks to challenge systematic racism through questioning who profits from racist systems, the hegemonic master narrative, and what is considered "valid" sources of knowledge; all which contribute to the perpetuation of white supremacy that is endemic to North America (Castagno and Lee 2007, 4; Delgado 1990; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Haynes Writer 2008; Locklear 2017; Merriweather, Guy, and Manglitz 2006; Parker and Stovall 2004; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Villenas and Deyhle 1999).

Through a CRT lens, the relationship between racism and power dynamics are examined to show "its historical dimensions, social construction, and political/social ramifications" in school and governmental policy (Parker and Stovall 2004, 175). With those in positions of power, who are predominantly white, centering dominant discourse

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around their lived experiences while simultaneously discrediting and sidelining all other experiences to the periphery, ultimately resulting in racialized oppression (Brayboy 2005, 435; Villenas and Deyhle 1999). CRT utilizes these stories known as counterstories—or as they are referred to throughout his research, counternarratives—as "tool[s] for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32). Counternarratives shift the balance of power away from hegemonic stories while legitimizing and highlighting oral histories, family stories, and community stories. These stories look to "subvert and recreate possibilities and spaces for resistance" and are at the heart of this research as they present people's lived experiences as presented by themselves (Sium and Ritskes 2013, III).

Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy (Lumbee) builds off of the tenets of CRT in conceptualizing Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) which focuses on the unique political, legal, and now racialized status of Indigenous people within the United States (Brayboy 2005 430-433; Yosso and Solórzano 2005, 120). TribalCrit is centered around nine tenets, with a focus on the five tenets that specifically guide this research. The first tenet, "colonization is endemic to society" is something discussed in-depth in the Background section and refers to the domination of Euro-American epistemologies through orthodoxies and the dismissing of Indigenous epistemologies and sovereignty in North America (Brayboy 2005, 429). It is through this domination that racism and colonization become doxa and the only "valid" ways of being. I argue that these ideas have permeated into and dominated the comic book industry and can be seen in the prevalence of prioritizing white characters and storylines over others. It also occurs with the exploitation of underrepresented people, specifically Indigenous people, through the

use of negative stereotypical characteristics, without the worry of loss of readership or financial repercussion (Sheyahshe 2008).

His second tenet where "the notion that colonization is" not only "endemic in society" but "is rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain" is also used in this research (Brayboy 2005, 431). While this tenet refers to larger issues of sovereignty and the removal of Indigenous people from the land, it applies to this research by looking at ideas of ownership of stories and how material gains occur within the comic book industry based on who is profiting from Indigenous representation. If major publishing houses dictate who has the financial resources to create stories, they are perpetuating the hegemonic discourse of domination through who owns the rights to stories, who they support and hire, and more importantly who they do not (Byrd 2014; Hunn, Guy, and Manglitz 2006, 244). In addition, a literary Manifest Destiny occurs where through years of intentional discrediting of Indigenous storytelling as "valid"; Indigenous people are dispossessed from their ability to speak for and about themselves within pop culture—specifically in comics—and major publishers step in and take "moral authority" to speak for and about Indigenous people with stereotyped imagery, characters, and storylines (Brayboy 2005, 432).

This speaks to the way his fourth tenet guides this work, which reiterates the centuries-old demands that Indigenous people speak for themselves through the continuous demanding, "obtain[ing] and forg[ing] tribal autonomy, self-determination, self-identification, and ultimately tribal sovereignty" (Brayboy 2005, 433). Similar to the second tenet, this refers to larger issues of land, resources, and complete autonomous control of tribal membership, enrollment, and federal tribal recognition. Within this

research, this refers to self-representation within Indigenous creators' work. It also means that publishers need to do "a reconceptualization of parameters for engaging with Indigenous" people from hiring creators to proper compensation and crediting for consultants (Brayboy 2005, 434).

His fifth tenet discusses "the concept of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens" (Brayboy 2005, 429). Instead of using a Euro-American lens to view the world, this tenet seeks to challenge it and promote the use of Indigenous perspectives, epistemologies, and ontologies as equally valid. It also notes that "culture is simultaneously fluid or dynamic, and fixed and stable," so too I would argue are comics (Brayboy 2005, 434). This tenet guided the conceptualization of research questions, the analysis of data, and served as a reminder for the self-reflexivity needed to conduct this research as a non-Indigenous woman. Within the study of comics, this tenet validates the emerging use of visual narratives as a form of education, of Indigenous storytelling, and its place within Indigenous literature as these areas are everchanging (Brayboy 2005, 434).

The final tenet used within this research is the eighth tenet which "honors stories and oral knowledge as real and legitimate forms of data and ways of being" (Brayboy 2005, 439). For this research, that means comics and the stories within them are just as legitimate sources of data as are the interviews with the creators themselves. They serve as a guiding compass for individuals and communities as they "are the guardians of cumulative knowledge" (Brayboy 2005, 440). Not only are stories a source of strength for individuals and communities; they "expose how white privilege operates to reinforce and support unequal societal relations" (Hunn, Guy, and Manglitz 2006, 244) and

provides insight "for others and invite[s] the reader into a new and unfamiliar world" (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 41). Through sharing stories, connections are made internally between storytellers and the audience, within communities, and externally with those ill-informed to Indigenous experiences. This tenet reiterates the main focus of this research which is exploring storytelling and its importance within Indigenous comics.

Chapter Four: Research Design

Research Scope

The research questions that guided this thesis were created with the intention that they would change over the course of this research. This was done to allow for the creators to guide and dictate where the research went based on their expertise, what they find important in their field, and most importantly what they wanted to share or not. While the questions fluctuated slightly, the foundation of exploring Indigenous comic book creators' experiences during the stages of making a comic book: story creation, storytelling, and story production remained the same. Through these stages, I was able to determine what brought about the creation of these stories, why they were told, and why creators chose to tell them in the medium they did.

Research Questions

- Story Creation

    o What pressures do Indigenous creators experience when creating comics?

- Storytelling

    o Do Indigenous creators consider telling their story in a medium other than comics? If so, what were the mediums and why were they considered?

- Story Production

    o Why do Indigenous creators choose to publish their work in the manner that they do?

The first question seeks to look at how other factors impact a creator when making a comic. By the term "pressure," I am referring to a multitude of areas such as internal, external, financial, co-collaboration, and publishing. Internal pressure refers to the anxiety a creator places on themselves when creating a comic; something that can refer to not wanting to alter their story or to not wanting to let their community down. External pressure refers to a burden the creator feels is placed on them by individuals, their community, or mainstream comic book publishers to create stories and make them in a way that each party feels is in a tribally appropriate manner. Financial pressure refers to the lack of finances affecting the comic creation process or a creator receiving finances from a publisher and feeling pressure to make the story they want while potentially sacrificing their artistic integrity. Co-collaboration pressure refers to a creator feeling that their work is forced to be altered through their collaboration with others with either a positive or negative affect. Finally, publishing pressure refers to when a creator has their work altered by a publisher in order for it to be seen as Indigenous through the publishers' lens, whether that means removing characters or adding Indigenous stereotypes. It was asked to see how these areas impacted the creation of Indigenous comic books, how creators adapted their books as a result of these pressures, and ultimately, what the creator felt about these experiences.

The second question explores why creators choose to tell their visual narratives in comics versus children's books, games, or other visual and textual mediums. Since the majority of creators within this research have experience creating stories in other mediums, it was important to understand why comics were chosen as the preferred mode of communication. This question was asked to unpack individual creators' perspectives

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on comics, stories, and how they impact the other. These creator perspectives highlight what makes a story best suited for a comic compared to other mediums and vice versa. It also sheds insight on the creator's intentions for their story when creating a comic versus when they tell their visual narratives in other mediums.

The third and final question looks at how the comic is published and how, if at all, this affects the story itself. While often seen as the final stage in the comic book making process, the printing and distribution of the comic can affect how the story is made. This question was asked to determine if the method of publishing ultimately affected the creator's story and how they publish future comics. The types of publishing vary from self-publishing, working with a small publisher, and working with a large publisher. Self-publishing consists of a creator making, producing, and distributing their own comic but may receive financial assistance from online crowdfunding platforms. Working with a small publisher refers to a creator collaborating with a publishing house that has the resources to hire co-collaborators, distribute, and promote the comic. Also, within this relationship, the creator's artistic freedom and story may or may not be affected as a result. Working with a large publisher refers to nationally and internationally known publishers such as Marvel, DC, or Scholastic. Similar to small publishers who provide creators with resources to support their work, large publishers have more access to ensure that the comics are widely available to the public. These questions were explored through participant observation and semi-structured interviews.

Research Methods

My research methods consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with self-identifying Indigenous comic book creators. Together, these methods

allotted for the voices and perspectives of the participants involved to take the lead while still allowing space for my analysis of the data. Each method builds on each other to create research that is qualitative in nature, focused on narratives, and analyzed through an interpretivist lens. These methods aided in my understanding of comic books as a means of storytelling, counter-storytelling, and their place within the Indigenous literary canon.

Participant observation took place at Denver's Indigenous Pop X from July 26th through July 28th, 2019 at the McNichols building. During the weekend, I volunteered every day at the event, first and foremost to give back to the Indigenerd community, and to those who participated in my research. It also provided me the opportunity to reconnect with creators that I had met at Albuquerque's Indigenous Comic Con in November 2018 and make connections with potential research participants. While the focus of this research is not on comic cons, the purpose of conducting participant observation was to capture the environment and community that supports, promotes, and produces Indigenous comics.

The main source of my data came from semi-structured interviews with Indigenous comic book creators. For the convenience of the creators, interviews were conducted via email, over the phone, and in person. Semi-structured interviews were chosen due to their flexibility in the field, the ability to cover a wide range of topics, and to allow for the most efficient use of the interviewee's time (Bernard 2018, 164-165). They also allowed for the main research questions to be asked of all participants while providing space for new leads or directions to arise (Bernard 2018, 165). As a non-Indigenous non-comic book creator, it was vital to rely on the perspectives of the

participants to direct areas of conversations to ensure that their lived experiences were

captured. In addition to the interviews conducted for this research, previously published

interviews about and with the creators were also referred to in order to provide additional

perspectives on their lives and their works.

Participant Observation

This research followed H. Russell Bernard's definition of participant observation:

"[it] gives you an intuitive understanding of what's going on in a culture and […] lets you

make strong statements about cultural facts that you've collected" (Bernard 2018, 283).

Participant observation was the first method used for capturing data and took place at

Indigenous Pop X (IPX) in Denver from July 26th through July 28th, 2019. I

acknowledge that the observation period was short, but it aligned with the compressed

timeline of the research project as a whole with the data being captured, analyzed, and

written in under six months. This method was selected as it allowed me to be fully

immersed in the Indigenerd community. IPX is presented by and made

for Indigenerds and their supporters, because of this the discussions at panels and events

are reflections of how the community wants to present and represent themselves.

Observing and participating in these activities granted me the opportunity to understand

what topics and comics are important to the community and to hear their stories.

With the event only lasting three days, IPX was chosen due to 1) its importance in

the Indigenous comic book community; 2) it was the first Indigenous comic con in

Denver; and 3) it is a place of convergence for creators, publishers, and fans. It allowed

me to build rapport with creators and reconnect with creators I had previously met at

Albuquerque's 2018 Indigenous Comic Con (ICON). It was also an important initiation

for me into the world of comics as it was an area that I was largely unfamiliar with prior to this research. Participant observation took form through mapping out the convention center space, attending panels, and taking field notes.

Semi-Structured Interviews

This method involved the use of an interview guide and open-ended questions that ensured a variety of topics were covered throughout the interview (Bernard 2018, 163). Semi-structured interviews were chosen for several reasons to be the main source of data. First, they allow for the perspective of the participant to be prioritized through open-ended questions while still maintaining a cohesive structure throughout all interviews. Second, they allow for the most effective use of the participant's time. This was vital to my research as all participants graciously and generously shared their time to participate, and the majority of them are independent creators whose time is their money. As the semi-structured interviews were the one opportunity I had to interview them, and it allowed for the most efficient use of their time (Bernard 2018, 164-165). Finally, it allows for flexibility in the mode in which the interviews took place whether it was in-person, over the phone, or through email.

The selection of participants, how interviews were conducted, and analyzed were done intentionally as a means to work towards decolonization. Participants were specifically chosen as they work in a variety of different styles and genres; something which reinforces how varied Indigenous comics are. They also use their comics and visual narratives to combat negative stereotypes of Indigenous people and culture, to educate the public on Indigenous histories, and to preserve tribal stories and languages. Throughout all six interviews, I used the research questions as my foundations

but provided participants space to dictate the direction that the research ultimately took (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 136). This was done as a way to decolonize this research by having participants determine what this research explored. All six interviews were recorded, transcribed, and transcriptions were shared with participants for their review and final say on edits. This was done as a way to decolonize and offset the power dynamics inherent in research where participants not only share their thoughts but to have their approval of how their interviews were used and presented. This was essential because as noted in my positionality statement, I believe in collaboration, adjusting power dynamics, and multivocality; something which I wanted to be reflected in my research methods.

The average length of the interviews was 49-minutes; a length that was intentional as it was long enough to cover all the topics and explore new ones, while still being respectful of their time. My interview guides (Appendix A) focused on the three main stages of comic book making (story creation, storytelling, and story production), and was altered slightly to cater to specific questions for certain creators. For example, Dale Ray Deforest (Navajo and Anglo) has two different versions of his Hero Twins comics, one that is self-published and one that is published through a small publishing house. I asked him, "What do you think and see as the differences between the Kickstarter version and the Native Realities version?". This question was asked to capture changes in the publication process; something that would not apply to any other creator.

Chapter Five: Life Histories

Overview

To fully understand the individual and collective experiences of Indigenous comic book creators, the following sections take a deep dive into the histories of the creators themselves and object biographies of their works. The intention of this approach is to provide the proper amount of attention and time that is needed to present their perspectives and incorporate the visual analysis of some of their works. Life histories provide detailed accounts of personal narratives that when taken as a whole, build together through multivocality to provide insight into regional, professional, and cultural experiences (Agar 1980; Blackman 1991, 58; Darnell 2000; Zeitlyn 2008). As a genre, it allows for participants to speak for themselves that moves anthropological research towards a more dialogical relationship with participants (Darnell 2000). However, the anthropologist's imprint is still felt "once [they] begin to rearrange or delete material found in the original transcription in order to clarify meaning for an external reading audience" (Zeitlyn 2008, 166). Since the objective is to place the creator's voices front and center, each section intentionally contains large, unedited excerpts from the interviews. It was also part of my decolonizing framework and worked to readdress pervious power dynamics of anthropologists speaking for Indigenous people. These singular narratives are representative of and exemplify varying aspects of Indigenous comic book culture.

Within these life histories, the focus will be on the comic books themselves, specifically their object biographies. The comic is connected to the creators but have their own history as they "change through their existence" and "have the capability of accumulating histories so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected" (Gosden and Marshall, 1999, 170). A creator's original relationship with a comic changes over time, and an object biography of the comic itself can be tracked by examining how the language used to describe it also changes over time and how. This everchanging relationship will be examined by delving into the journey of the comics themselves from their inception (story creation) to their manifestation (storytelling) to their reception (story production). Life histories rely on the relationships between people, specifically between collaborators, publishers, and the public (Friedman, Neary, Defeyter, Malcolm 2011, 80; Gosden and Marshall 1999, 169). The creation of each book is a mirco-experience within the comic industry, and together they build into the larger Indigenous comic book culture that is embodied at Indigenous comic con (Agar 1980, 224).

The data for these histories were gathered from the semi-structured interviews with the creators, external interviews of the creators, and visual analysis of the comics themselves. I analyzed the data set using thematic and narrative analysis and looked to see if what creators said about their experiences were reflected in their works and was mirrored in other experiences. The thematic analysis looked at "identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes" (Guest, Macqueen, and Namey 2012, 10), while the narrative analysis focused "on the stories themselves […] and on how themes are combined and ordered in predictable ways"

(Bernard 2018, 447). These analyses were done by using the interview transcripts, highlighting important words and phrases which became initial themes (Bernard 2018, 459). Once completed for each creator, the themes were pile-sorted to create the final themes.

The following sections will look at comic creators Dale Ray Deforest, Keith Jim, Weshoyot Alvitre, Elizabeth LaPensée, Jay Odjick, and Jim Terry. Each section is dedicated to one creator and their journey in the three identified stages in comic book making: story creation, storytelling, and story production. Story creation comprises the inception of the comic book idea, storytelling involves the physical creation of the comic book, and story production consists of the producing and sharing of comic book with the public. As themes arise, they are highlighted, defined, and briefly discussed; however, the large analysis is presented in the final analysis section. It is there that the themes of access, artistic freedom, collaboration, education, multimodality, representation, and stories evolve as we evolve, are compared and contrasted per creator and across the creator data set.

Dale Ray Deforest

Dale Ray Deforest (Navajo and Anglo) is a comic book author, artist, letterer, and graphic designer. He has written and illustrated the comics *REZ-LUV* and *Hero Twins*, done the artwork and lettering for *Native Entrepreneurs*, and *Making the Monster*, and has also illustrated the children's book *The Powwow Mystery Series 1: The Powwow Thief* and books *Rise of the Dog Soldiers*, *Race to the Sun*, and *Height of the Story: A Mutants & Masterminds*. He was the first creator I had the opportunity to talk at what was then Indigenous Comic Con in Albuquerque in 2018 about this thesis, and during our

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brief conversation there he had nothing but words of encouragement, guidance, and even recommended other creators to talk to. Our phone interview took place a little over a year after our first meeting. We spoke immediately about the medium of comics, and what better place to begin a thesis on comics than a discussion on what comics are?

MK: What do you consider, I guess the distinction between comics and graphic novels?

DRD: Well, the literal definition would be graphic novels have more chapters. You know there's more of it. Whereas a comic book is essentially you know sheets of paper that are stapled together and [you] fold it in half to form a book. Whereas graphic novels you have more chapters, you can have anywhere from 32 pages to 160 pages, and they're bound, and they're just a lot easier to have because you know, you can tell more of a story in a graphic novel whereas in a comic book you're essentially forced to tell your story in chapters. While typically most comic book stories are told in 24 pages and 32 pages is kind of like the plus version of it. It's like you have a story that might fit in 24 pages but then you push it to 28, but 28 is just really awkward because of the page signatures. And 32 just kind of evens out...it's tough to explain (Deforest 2019).

While his definition aligns with many, it was important to understand he considers a comic to be. For this thesis, it important to not just understand a creator's intention when making a story, but to also understand how they brought their comic into fruition. We spoke about his process of creating a comic book from story creation to story production.

Through understanding his process, it illuminated for me what aspect of the story he was most excited about and wanted to present to the public.

MK: When you make a comic like the *Hero Twins* or just any other ideas that you've got in the works. How do you like formulate it first? Do you draw like your images first? Do you have a script? Do you try to do the panels and everything at the same time?

DRD: I gotta have a story first and once I have my story where I want to be, I'll try to break it down into script form. And that's probably one of the hardest things that I do, is converting a short story into a script because then you have to provide descriptions for each panel. You have to describe the surroundings; you have to describe the action and then you have to think about the dialogue.

People have their way of writing stories, telling their stories, and then there's this standardized version of scripts. You have to pull dialogue or add more dialogue, and you have to essentially flesh everything out on this skeletal structure that is the script. And that's how I work. I write my story, put it into script form, and then once I have a script because the script again it helps me with structure because I can be a fluid artist all I want but then I don't think I'd ever get anything done. But having a script that provides the essential foundation of where to begin and how it ends it really helps me see the scope of work that's ahead of me. And I feel really accomplished when I get it done. It's a huge, huge accomplishment when you get to that point of finishing a comic book.

MK: Especially when you're doing it all yourself because you're doing your own lettering too, right?

DRD: Oh yeah. That goes into me being a graphic designer. I've been a graphic designer since the year 2000 professionally, so I've been in this business for a long time. So, the Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, all that good stuff; it kind of goes hand-in-hand with producing comic books for me (Deforest 2019).

The skillset that Dale has as a graphic designer is all self-taught as he "went to school for photography and just kinda fell into graphic design" (Sheyashe 2019). He does not have an educational background in illustration and his career as a designer "evolve[d] on its own naturally" (Sheyahshe 2019). While he has and does do standalone illustrations, they are images without a story. It is when "the illustrations became a vehicle for a story, that's when it became meaningful" (Denison 2018). His illustrations in comics work to tell a story in tandem with the text, and Dale strives to make sure that the story that is told is a transformative one. We spoke about what this means and how this is embodied in ideas of good storytelling.

MK: What does good storytelling mean to you?

DRD: Good storytelling is something that makes you forget about everything else apart from what you're hearing or what you're reading. You know if you're able to engage one hundred percent and essentially be transported somewhere else then that's good storytelling. If you can take your reader or your viewer or someone who's listening to you, to a completely different place and forget that they're even human; then boom,

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you know that's a good story. I've heard some remarkable stories that have

taken me all over the place and that's something I aspire to be part of, to

try that someday, to hopefully take someone somewhere else just by my

words alone (Deforest 2019).

He is able to achieve such a goal in his comics, but it is not just with his words alone. As

comics are a textual/visual medium, his artwork creates the images that his words

describe. He notes that his "artwork can be used to not only express but captivate and

manipulate thought and action" (Gomez 2020). He does this through his style of

"employ[ing] high-contrast and thick lines to convey bold imagery matched with bright

and vivid colors" (Gomez 2020). Something which can be seen in all his works. Dale

strives to create images, stories, and comics that were not available to him growing up;

stories that included Indigenous. Growing up many people in his community could not

see these stories as some did not physically have access to comics.

> I grew up in the Four Corners area, Shiprock and Farmington, and while I
> was growing up out there, people didn't have a whole lot of money, so it
> didn't make sense for people to spend their money on artwork or comic
> books when they could spend their money on food and car payments
> (Martinez 2017).

But the lack of financial resources was not and is not the only reason that people

in his community did not see themselves in comics. They did not see themselves

because they were not being represented and when they were, more often than not

it was through the use of stereotypical imagery. This is a motivating factor for

why Dale tells the stories that he does.

> When I was growing up I didn't see myself in anything that I was really
>
> into because I was really into Saturday morning cartoons. I was really into

comic books, I was really into music, and I didn't see myself in any of

that. The only way I could see myself in it was to do it myself. And when

you do something yourself, when you're a marginalized group of people

within a marginalized group of people, no one's going to help you with

that pop culture element.

I still want to see myself more in what I do even though we're making it

happen with like Indigenous Comic Con and all that. We're making it

happen literally, but I still want to see more of it. I want to see my friends

succeed. I really want to see more of what they enjoy, what they want to

do. And it's happening, it's starting to gain traction. You know people are

starting to pay attention and a lot of us are doing it on our own terms and

that makes me happy (Deforest 2019).

He and others like "Lee Francis, Elizabeth Lapensée and others associated with

Indigenous Pop X and Native Realities are actively changing that narrative" to ensure

that future generations like his son do not feel unseen (Sheyahshe 2019). It is not just the

lack of Indigenous characters in comics and pop culture that led him to feel unseen, but

the shortage of bi-racial representations as well.

My mother married a white guy from Salt Lake City and that's where we

came from. We sort of migrated out to the fringes of the Navajo

reservation which is where I grew up. And so, I sort of grew up on both

sides of that fence. And in doing so you know I have my traditional

background and I also have my non-Native background. And I like to keep

a healthy balance between the two. And for some reason people some

people don't understand that; I was talking to a friend of mine and he kept

assuming that I identify with my Native side more than my white side and

I had to correct him several times. I'm like, "No, I don't identify with

either side more than the other. I like to identify with both at the same time

because that's really who I am." And I try to reflect that through all of my

work and everything I do from making artwork to having a conversation

(Deforest 2019).

His comics work to fill this void by "having characters that reflect this reality"

(Sheyahshe 2019). Through his comics and graphic design, he has been able to

remedy this representational omission and become an independent artist.

DRD: One of my biggest dreams was to like actually sustain myself and

my family with just the work I do from home. You know the comic books

and the freelance illustration, all the stuff I wanted to do that full-time and

well recently I made that jump. I now work exclusively from home. I don't

really have a boss apart from like someone who might hire me to do

artwork you know. I'm making my own hours and I'm spending a lot more

time with my family which is exactly what I wanted (Deforest 2019).

Being a freelance artist has given Dale the autonomy to work on his own

schedule, on the stories he wants to, and with who he wants. Most recently he

collaborated with the publishing house Houghton Mifflin Harcourt "to produce

some illustrated covers" (Gomez 2020). While he is "still relatively new to the

book publishing scene" he has been able to learn by "look[ing] at other artists and

follow their process" (Gomez 2020). He also has been hired by publishing house

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Reycraft Books to illustrate *The Powwow Mystery Series 1: The Powwow Thief*

(Figure 5.1), a story that teaches children about problem solving and working

together. While he was not able to talk about it in detail then and it is not

explicitly educational, we spoke about the use of visual narratives as an

educational tool.
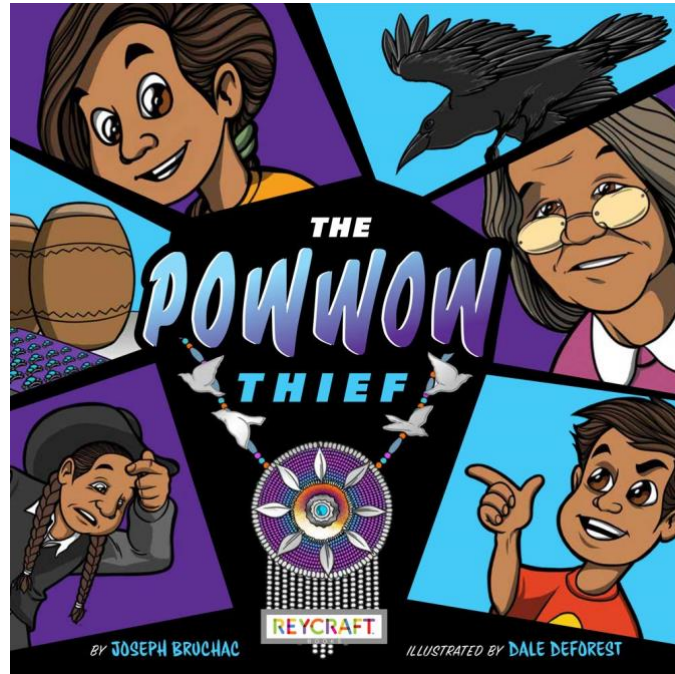
Figure 5.1: The front cover of Dale Deforest's illustration on The Powwow Mystery Series 1: The Powwow Thief

MK: So then, do you see comic books, like this children's book, as a form

of education? Whether it be for like perpetuating different stories or myths

or histories or language revitalization? Do you see the parallels for that?

DRD: I see the potential of it. This particular series I'm working on right

now doesn't really, it's more of a bedtime story as opposed to something

that's educational. And I'm happy to do so but with this story that was

given to me was...I can't tell you all about it until after it's published.

MK: Oh, that's ok, you don't have to.

DRD: It has a lot to do with just inspiring kids to stay curious, to get out
and explore, and just have fun and be safe. And if you're a parent you
understand the magnitude of that, of that application because you know I
have a kid and I want him to explore, I want him to be curious, I want him
to be safe; all while doing so you know and these books to kind of
promote the importance of curiosity and play, all with a Native twist
(Deforest 2019).

His relationship with these publishers has been fruitful and one with little interference of
his creative vision. He spoke about his experiences working with publishers and if they
or other external influences have tried to alter his work. The latter of which can be seen in
questioning the motivations behind his creation of the *Hero Twins* comic, both his self-
published version and the Native Realities version.

DRD: And so, with publishing, if it has any effect on my storytelling it
really depends on the publisher you know. And with community versus
publishing, there's been kind of a disconnect there because I was talking to
another friend of mine about this and he was I guess lamenting about how
some people from his community on the reservation were pressuring him
to say, "You know you shouldn't write stuff like that because it's taboo on
the reservation." It's like, "Well, no." My stories are not taboo on the
reservation because they are my stories. I'm not telling your stories and I'm
not telling those traditional...I'm not telling those sacred stories that were
passed on from oral traditions. I'm not telling those stories. I'm telling my

stories based on what I knew, what I grew up with. And sometimes

publishers don't really understand that that cultural disconnect (Deforest

2019).

A main point of contention and misunderstanding stems from people not

understanding that *Hero Twins* is inspired by and not based on the Diné Bahane'

or the Navajo creation story. Dale's comic is set in a contemporary setting and

"follows two warriors of the same name throughout their journey to rid the Spirit

World of evil spirits" (Deforest 2016). He notes that his "story is relative to" the

Diné Bahane' and that it is not "a retelling"; in a similar vein to "how some

people would quote, sort of fictionalize good versus evil based on Bible stories;

I'm doing the same thing" (Martinez 2017). He spoke about how he negotiates

this misunderstanding and works to have others understand his perspective.

> DRD: Well, sometimes for publishers will understand that I'm not trying
>
> to write a story that's already written or I'm not trying to write a story
>
> that's been told orally or passed on orally. You know I have my story that
>
> really is just; I try to make my stories just as much mine as possible
>
> because it's based in Navajo tradition but that's as far as it goes. You know
>
> I have my characters that are inspired from the Navajo creation story, but
>
> they're not directly lifted from that because if you read my story, the
>
> Changing Woman, which is very important in Navajo tradition, well I
>
> gave her a name. I gave her a name and I made her human and those are
>
> things that are very...a Navajo medicine man will tell you; you're not
>
> supposed to do that. When I ask him why; he doesn't have an answer I said

well then good because I'm not trying to write that story. I'm not trying to write those oral traditions. I'm not trying to lift them from... I'm not trying to copy them if you will and tell them to a bunch of people who don't know or don't understand that tradition. I'm writing my story that's about a Navajo a woman who's not really human you know what I mean.

It's just all from my inspiration. It's all from my imagination and has almost nothing to do with Navajo tradition whatsoever. I shouldn't say whatsoever, I should more say just it has almost nothing to do with it apart from the names and parts of the descriptions because the hero twins themselves you know, there's a huge difference between my *Hero Twins* and the heroes. It's a new creation story because the hero twins in the creation story will go on and tell you about how they were created by a certain figure that has something to do with Spider-Woman and all that good stuff and that's great. I want to leave that where it's at. My *Hero Twins*, completely different. They originate from a story that I told, that I wrote down, that I'm having fun with you know. And it's just... that's the whole reason why I'm into this because I just want to have fun.

MK: Yeah, I mean you wouldn't, just like consider how much work it takes, you wouldn't want to do it if it's not fun you know. Or if it's not something that you care about.

DRD: Yeah. The thing is, it's also helping people. Cause the whole reason why Lee Francis had approached me after the first Indigenous Comic Con, was that he saw that there was potential in my work in terms of education.

And he saw that kids were interested in my book; kids were carrying it

around. He saw that. One of the reasons that he started Native Realities

[and] Indigenous Comic Con was that it was a way to reconnect; it was a

way to connect the things you're a fan of to the thing...a sense of where

you need to be as a human being. I don't know if that works or not, but

that's how I took it. And we're working towards getting *Hero Twins*

published as a graphic novel if I can finish some of these other parts. And

we're working on getting them into libraries. We want to make it to where

you don't have to pay for books, they're just available to you whenever

you want to read them (Deforest 2019).

While the comic is just a story that Dale wanted to tell, it also has the potential to engage

and intrigue people to learn more about the Diné Bahane' and other creation stories. The

Hero Twins version published through Native Realities his is a reboot of his original

comic which he successfully published through Kickstarter in 2016. Though both comics

focus on the twins, they tell very different stories; something which can be seen based on

their covers alone (Figure 5.2, Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2: The front cover of Dale Ray Deforest's Kickstarter Hero Twins
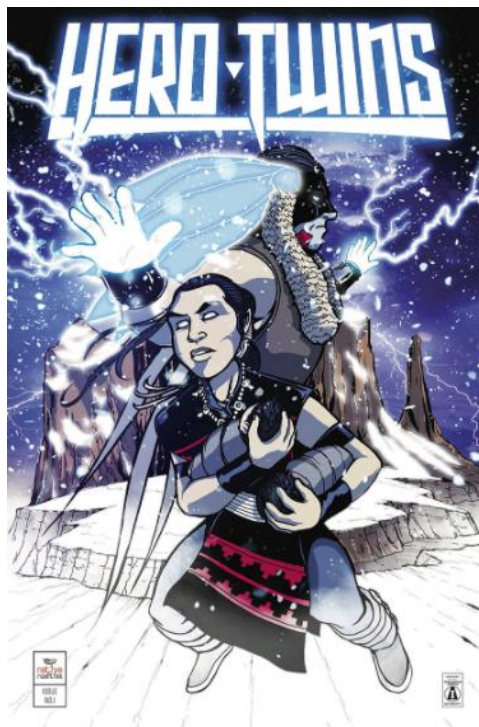
Figure 5.3: The front cover of Dale Ray Deforest's Native Realities Hero Twins

We spoke about the cause of these differences and whether it was his decision to make a new story or whether it made by the publisher.

MK: Do you feel just like publishing through the Kickstarter like doing it yourself and then doing it with Native Realities changed the story that you told, or did you want to tell a different story to begin with?

DRD: I did want to tell a different story but keep the same elements relative if you will. The Kickstarter version for me was, it was supposed to be like a one-shot deal you know because I didn't know if I was going to be able to do it again. I didn't know how successful the first Indigenous Comic Con was going to be. And honestly, my freelance career was kind of dependent upon that decision. When the Kickstarter got funded, I was able to buy all the parts from my printer and I was able to buy paper and start producing because when I launched the Kickstarter, the comic was essentially done. I was working full-time at a newspaper and in all my free time I was producing this book, I was making artwork for it, and I was coloring it. I was doing everything for the insides, and when all the insides were done that's why I launched my Kickstarter. And I think that's what helped make it really successful was because people were able to see this thing fully fleshed out and ready to go. And where the *REZ-LUV* Kickstarter failed was cause I didn't have anything really to show. But anyway, once the Kickstarter *Hero Twins* had gone through and I set it up for sale at the first Indigenous Comic Con, it caught a lot of eyes. People were like, "Wow this is really cool. I like this a lot. I think it's really cool

you're turning the hero twins from the Navajo creation story into a couple

of superheroes." I'm like, "Yeah makes sense doesn't it." I mean it's there

in the name, hero twins. So, I ran with it and Lee Francis who is the CEO

of Native Realities, it caught his eye and he thought, "We could do more

with this. I would like to publish your book now." And I thought, "Well

yeah of course. Let's do this." So, we drew up some contracts and pushed

it through. And the reason why it's [the cover] like, you said fire and ice

earlier; there's a reason behind that. The Native Realities version is like a

prequel of the Kickstarter version. It's meant to go back to the beginning

and to retell the same story in the Kickstarter version in five different

parts. So, where you have the warm cover on one, you the cool cover on

the other. And that's intentional because it's starting over (Deforest 2019).

Hero Twins is not the only comic that Dale has sought to reboot. In 2010 Dale self-

published three books in his *REZ-LUV* series originally, and in 2019 he unsuccessfully

launched a Kickstarter to raise funds to reboot the series (Martinez 2017). He shared his

ideas as to why he believes this happened and what he wants out of remaking the series.

DRD: I've been trying to...I don't know if you saw. I tried, I launched a

Kickstarter for another project I was working on and I wanted to hire

Shaun Beyale for and that was for *REZ-LUV*. I don't know if you

remember seeing copies of *REZ-LUV* on my table at Indigenous Comic

Con.

MK: I do, I have a copy in my closet right now, I just finished reading.

DRD: Oh cool. Well, that story was gonna be rebooted and if you like I could send you the new script that was [for] this Kickstarter [that] failed, it wasn't funded. I wasn't even close to my goal, and so there's a lot of reasons for it and I can go on about that all day but that's probably the next project that means a lot more to me than you know the *Hero Twins* is great; I'm still having fun with that and I'm looking forward to doing more of it but *REZ-LUV* is kind of like my it's...I'm trying to make some sort of comparison but you know some people will say, "It's my baby you know it's my baby," but like it is an important part of my comic book career and it's my personal pet project that I really wanted to develop and possibly shop around as a mini-series or even an animated series you know. I thought it had a ton of potential but again I just couldn't get that Kickstarter project off the ground.

MK: Yeah.

DRD: You know I'm not going to ask Shaun to work for me with the hopes that it will be funded. That's just not fair. So, if and when I do, relaunch the Kickstarter then hopefully like I said I'll have more of my ducks in a row. I'll send you that script here when I get a chance because I'm at my desk but I'm not at home you know.

MK: Yeah.

DRD: But it's a lot different. It's a lot more exciting, it's a lot less slice-of-lifeish you know. Cause have I recommended *Love and Rockets*.

MK: I don't think so. No, what's that?

DRD: *Love and Rockets* is a series by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez and

it's kind of like all about the lives of these people and how everything

intertwines and it's a really spooky and dramatic storytelling if you will. It

kind of goes into how dirty, ugly but beautiful humanity can be. The

original *REZ-LUV* that you have is kind of like my version of that.

MK: OK.

DRD: And I did those *REZ-LUV* stories when I was in my 20s and my

early 30s. I felt like I had some personal stories to tell. But again, times

change, you get older, you start seeing what works and what doesn't. And

I felt like that version of *REZ-LUV* just didn't work for me because I'm not

that kind of person that would write that kind of story anymore. And being

that I've been in this business for a while I know what people might

respond to and so I wrote I think, a much more exciting story and I'm

looking forward to getting back on that wagon again. It's just I have a lot

of work to do with some other projects first (Deforest 2019).

If given the opportunity, he wants to change the story to reflect where how he has

changed. One of the big changes in his life between his 20s and now is that he became a

father; something that has impacted the stories he wants to produce.

DRD: But when he came into the picture a lot of things changed;

especially with my storytelling like I was telling you earlier about how

REZ-LUV's story is different now. And when I wrote *REZ-LUV* and when

I produced that book, I self-published it. And when I finally got it out, it

was great because you know it was a part of me and had a lot to do with

me and where I came from and all that. But now, not so much. I don't

know if you've interviewed any Native American parents who are comic

book makers, but I'll tell you that having kids will have a huge effect on

your storytelling and your work in general (Deforest 2019).

Throughout this research, I interviewed other Indigenous creators who are also parents

who felt similarly, but they are not alone in this sentiment. It was something that I heard

from creators who are not parents as well. Once a story is told and a comic is made, it is

not complete as new readers will be introduced to it and creators revisit it. In the future, it

will be interesting to see if, when, and how Dale revisits his works.

Keith Jim

Known for comic series *The Heroes*, Keith Jim (Navajo) is a self-published artist

based in Moab, Utah. The series is currently his only comic book credit

and has two issues, but there are hopes and intentions in the future to create "perhaps as

many as 10 issues" (Easterling 2018). What he doesn't have in a large quantity of comic

book credits, he has in quality in his series, which follows the twins Monster Slayer

or Naayee Neizghani and Born for Water or Tobajischini on their adventure to

discover their powers and fight monsters.

When creating the series, Keith's goal was to "keep it close to the original story"

as the wins "are part of our creation story. Where we came from" (Jim 2019). Beyond the

story holding cultural significance as part of the Diné Bahane', or Navajo

creation story, there is a personal connection with the hero twins since he "grew up with

this story" (Karima 2018). He remembers that his grandfather Kee Tso Jim Sr. "told me

this story every night, and I loved it so much that I think it's something we should keep

and keep passing it down" (Gonzales 2018). Keith talked about how he "was raised traditional[ly]" and about how his Nali or "grandfather would tell me various stories" (Jim 2019). As a child Keith would listen to his grandfather tell stories that he knew were important and being increasingly forgotten, he would draw pictures of "what [he] imagined" (Karima 2018). He built on these ideas and spoke about the importance of making *The Heroes* for him.

> KJ: It is one of our traditional stories that is being forgotten. You know I ran into quite a few people at shows and were Navajo, and I'll meet another Navajo who doesn't know the story. Which kind of surprises me just a little bit just because...I don't know maybe just the way me and this other individual were raised.
>
> I was raised traditional. My grandfather would tell me various stories. I wish I could turn them all into comic books, but it would probably take a while, but that one [the hero twins] was one of my favorites. I mean there's some places around our reservation apparently that they, the hero twins were, and you know it's cool to see for example the Shiprock. It was cool to see you know that the story was there; they have a couple places; I think and one of the valley parts of Colorado. So, you know that's what caught me. And like I said other people don't know this story and I don't mind sharing it with them, this is your culture, this is part of our creation story and you know it's important to know most of this stuff. So, I'll talk to them, and you know get them interested and they'll end up buying it because I tell them that it's not altered in any way; it's the way my

grandfather told me. That's how, that's how I did it. Some people would

say they know a little bit of it, I guess just enough to know who they are.

And you know it'll capture their attention too. Also, non-Natives that I've

met say they know somewhat of the story and they you know they know

it; the non-Natives know it and our own tribes don't know it. So that's kind

of like how I also wanted to do it and why I want to do it. I got invited to a

couple schools here where I recently moved to the town of Farmington.

So, I did a story-time kind of thing over there. So, and there were a few

Native kids in there but it's also a learning kind of thing I guess (Jim

2019).

By sharing *The Heroes* (Figure 5.4) with the public, he is providing non-Indigenous

people an insight into Navajo culture that challenges stereotypical portrayals seen in pop

culture. He says that the comic is used "to let non-Native people see it […] and let them

see what our culture holds" (Easterling 2018). While multiple literary versions of hero

twin stories exist, Keith sought out to transfer the story his Nali told him into a comic

without edits to characters or the story itself. One of the reasons being that the comic is

educational and therefore needs to present the story accurately. The goal "is to actually

get it out there and let the younger generation get a hold of this story" (Gonzales 2018)

and "to ensure the creation stories continue for future generations of Navajos – and

anyone else who is interested in such things" (McMurdo 2018). Though Keith and others

worked together to make the comic, he is quick to point out that the story is not his. On

the inside cover of *The Heroes* #1 he writes (Figure 5.5):

"This story and its characters don't belong to us the creators of this comic book. They belong to the Navajo Diné people. We are simply retelling this story. Stories like this I think we should hold on to and pass down for its part of our culture" (Jim et al. 2018).
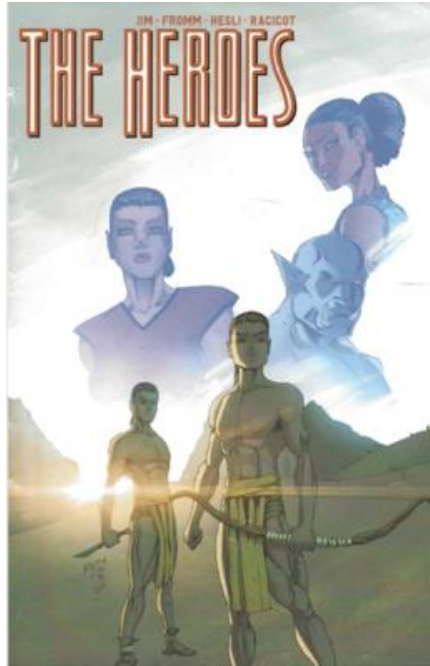
Figure 5.4: The front cover of Keith Jim's The Heroes #1
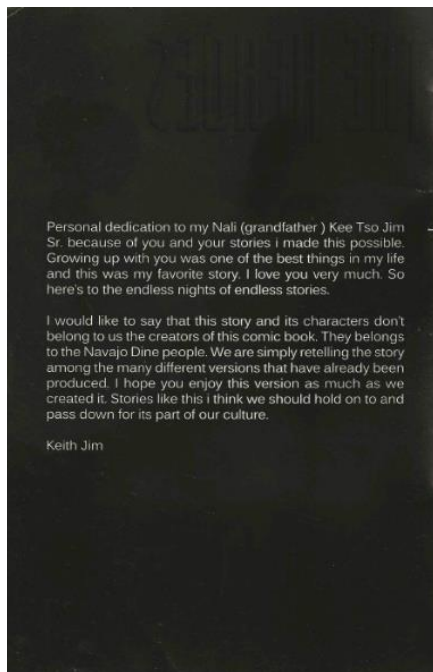
Figure 5.5: The inside cover of Keith Jim's The Heroes #1

As a story that belongs to the Navajo community, it is important to Keith that it is told in the same manner that it was told to him for proper stewardship. Passing down a story with such tribal significance is not a task that he takes lightly.

> MK: I was wondering...so like when you're creating a story like this, when you're doing a traditional story. Do you feel or do you experience any pressure I guess to live up to telling it in the way that it's meant to be told like for the community or for yourself?
>
> KJ: I do actually. You know that's what kind of struck me when I first started it, I wanted it to be just right, to be perfect to where people will know how the story goes. There is, I do feel some pressure on it sometimes. It's just I grew up with this story so maybe that's why (Jim 2019).

The closeness he feels to the story makes its transference into a comic a daunting task, but one that he is able to overcome by seeing firsthand the knowledge transmission.

> MK: How do you like circumvent that? How do you like work through or past that pressure?
>
> KJ: I run into people that don't know the story [and] when I tell them the purpose of the story or creation story, that's how it makes me feel better. You know that I'm actually doing something right, and now that they know (Jim 2019).

With each person who he encounters or encounters his comic, awareness of the creation story grows, and hopefully so too does their curiosity to explore their

origin stories. In order to preserve the story for future generations, it must be told, shared, and made accessible, something which the comic makes possible. Because of its importance, Keith did not want to potentially jeopardize the integrity of the story in order for it to be made into a comic, a choice that led to his decision to self-publish it.

> MK: Why did you choose to self-publish?
>
> KJ: Well, there's maybe a couple reasons. You know one of them being that self-publish[ing] goes on your own standards. It's like you're your own boss; that's a great part of it. And then the other would be...yeah it's hard to get attention from the other big publishing companies. And then if you do get into those, that's where they might try to alter your story. So, that is why I decided to do my own thing.
>
> MK: But you didn't have any experience with someone trying to alter or change your stuff? Or like you just had an idea that you did not want even [to] go down that route.
>
> KJ: No, I didn't have anybody try to do that, but you know I went to a few cons myself and I kinda met some of the other independent artists and they would say the same thing. So that kind of just got my attention. And as far as the stories I'm working on, I don't want it to be altered in any way (Jim 2019).

For Keith, a story of such importance is not worth gambling by placing it in the hands of small or large publishers. In order to preserve the story and its verity, the authority over the comic needs to be his. It is not just the publishing of *The Heroes* #1, but this

involves all of the future comics which perhaps maybe as many as 10 issues in the future (Easterling 2018). While publishing houses have more financial resources to create stories, to reach audiences, and more access to distribution processes; to Keith, it is not worth losing stewardship of the story. Without the resources of publishing houses, Keith has had success self-publishing and 2 months after its release in October 2018 he sold more than 250 hardcopies of The Heroes #1 have been sold throughout the Southwest (Easterling 2018). The success of the comic would not be possible without the collaboration with Michael Fromm who helped put the story Keith knew so well into a script. Their relationship began when they "became acquainted through a Facebook group that connects artists and writers" (Easterling 2018). The fact that Michael is not Navajo or Indigenous did not deter their collaboration as Jim "was comfortable with him [and] really liked his stuff after he sent [him] some samples" (Easterling 2018). Keith detailed their collaboration process when physically making the comic book.

> KJ: Well, for me first I started the story. I typed it all out from beginning
> to the end. It took me a couple of days, but I wrote it all down first. And
> then I kind of went back and spoke with my grandfather for a little bit and
> see if I missed anything or just kind of revise it. So, then I went back and
> fixed that whole story again, just some parts and then that's when I met
> Michael. I sent him like Part 1, maybe 10 pages or something. So, when I
> gave it to him, he read everything, and he liked it. And then he's the one
> that actually turned it into a script, a comic book script.
> Yeah, so then he'll send that to me, I'll look it over and then if I have
> some changes, I'll add it, and then he'll fix that. When we agree on it.

That's when the script is done. And then I start, I start drawing again.

Sometimes when I draw though, when I start drawing the pages something

else will come up and we'll have to change or just so the art can fit in a

certain way.

And then sometimes I'll send him to some previews and stuff like that, the

pages. He'll give me a few ideas and you know that's basically how it goes

to the last page and then that's done. Then I ink it myself, I finish all that. I

send it to my colorist; he colors it all and you know, again we go through,

we'll change a few things that need to be colored or changed to a different

color. After that's done, I send that to my letterer and he also does the

cover designs for it as well. And the same process where you look through

it, find some mistakes because the last, the first one kind of had some

mistakes in it and it was a good thing we only printed out one like a

preview. We look it over and then find mistakes and we just fix it

then (Jim 2019).

After all of those steps, the comic is done. While it is a tedious process going back and

forth it is a rewarding one as Keith "is about to get the third issue going" (Jim

2019). When he's not working on that series, he uses his art to bring awareness

to issues impacting Indian country that are often overlooked by dominant discourse such

as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit (MMIWG2S) and

#NoDAPL. Keith "tr[ies] to reach out to them and help spread the situation" through his

artwork (Karima 2018). His work on MMIWG2 involves raising awareness on a topic

that "a lot of people don't know" (Jim 2019). He is collaborating with a friend to create a

comic that will incorporate "all the statistics [...] all the information" on the topic in the

hopes of educating the public about it (Jim 2019). At the heart of his art and comics is the

goal to present stories that are "as tribal as possible" and "keep the traditional stories

alive and going" (Karima 2018). While he made the comic, and "the characters

in [his] art aren't from [his] imagination but within our cultural stories, that they have

been around for years and years" (Karima 2018). His work is a vehicle for continuing

Navajo stories and inspiring others to explore their heritage.

Weshoyot Alvitre

Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva, Scottish, and Gaelic) is a comic book illustrator,

penciler, inker, and editor based in southern California. Her illustrations can be seen in

such works as "They Come for Water" in *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics

Collection Volume 3*, *Sixkiller*, *Ghost River: The Fall and Rise of the Conestoga*, *Tales of

the Mighty Codetalkers Vol. 1*, *Graphic Classics: Native American Classics*, *Little Nemo:

Dream Another Dream*, and *Umbrella Academy*. While primarily an illustrator for comic

books, she has also illustrated the game *When Rivers Were Trails*, the children's book *At

the Mountain's Base*, did coloring for *Scout: Marauder* and *Tribal Force*, and is a co-

editor of *Deer Woman: An Anthology* with Dr. Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe, Métis,

and Irish). We spoke over the phone and immediately talked about having little ones

running around in the background and why she chooses to tell her stories in comics over

other mediums. Working in comics was not the original medium in which Weshoyot

envisioned telling visual narratives.

> I studied to be in animation before I actually got into comics. I went to a
>
> summer school program at CalArts Animation or at CalArts Center Arts

program […] for high school students […] and I was in it for animation

and basically, I loved it. That's what I really wanted to do, and it's tied in

very closely with comic book and sequential art storytelling. But when we

finished up the summer school, all of our instructors were basically like,

"Look, Pixar just opened […] and this is where the direction of like any

animated is job going." And basically, Disney had just closed their hand-

drawn animation department as well […] but also because of the advent of

the 3D technology that was moving in. So, then I'm looking at art schools

that I wanted to go to, CalArts was like my number one and their tuition is

just ridiculous. Nothing I could afford even with scholarships (Alvitre

2019).

The potential financial burden of the program was too much to bear as she "was

ineligible for any Native scholarships as they all asked for certificates of federal

recognition," something the Tongva currently do not have (Lindstrom 2019). However,

she went on to pay for school through art and merit-based scholarships and "graduated

with a B.A. in Illustration/Fine Art" all while she continued to explore storytelling in

other areas and worked "in comics all throughout college" (Lindstrom 2019). Comics

became a tangential avenue to animation that allowed her to work in a visual medium

while still telling her stories.

And so, I took a look at a couple of areas that I was interested in. So, I just

continued with storytelling and drawing; and comics and animation are so

close. A lot of the storyboarding and stuff that you do for animation,

which is what I really love, is kind of like comic books sequential art. The

way that they're different I think is because comic book pages, like

composition and layout that you really have to think about, where you

don't have to think about that as much when you're working with a

traditional film aspect ratio in animation storyboarding cause that sort of

already given to you and you just work within the parameters. The comic

book art took a little bit more learning on my end I think, until I finally felt

comfortable doing like page layouts and stuff. That's what got me into it

was, "How can I survive doing this?" and most of the ways that I would be

able to get jobs. But I always knew that what I wanted to do was telling

stories through visual narrative media. So, I guess I just gradually, as I

continued, I saw comics as more of an avenue to do what it is that I

wanted to do. So, when I was doing that, I didn't feel comfortable doing

any sort of like Indigenous books at all. I was trying to get jobs with

Marvel, and you know the top, big companies (Alvitre 2019).

Her initial aversion working on comics that dealt explicitly with Indigenous characters

and stories is based on past experiences of being "expected" to present Indigenous

comics "due to [her] name and nationality" (Lindstrom 2019). These experiences

continued and "in college I had people expecting romanticized Native work from me, or

westerns even in comics, and I really got uneasy whenever that came up" (Lindstrom

2019). External pressures and expectations to present exoticized, "Othered" depictions of

Indigenous people feed into existing power dynamics of mis-/under-representation,

something which Weshoyot did not want to contribute to. It is little surprise that her

experiences of being tokenized led her to avoid making Indigenous comics.

Her views shifted once she began to collaborate and talk to fellow Indigenous comic creators, specifically Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo) and Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna); "many years later after I started working in comics, and was not only introduced to more working Native artists within comics, but also this voice of the Indigenous perspective [that [I] began working on Native projects]" (Pratt 2018). Meeting and talking to Michael and Lee about Indigenous comics led her to "feel comfortable even discussing that side of my heritage through the comics medium" (Lindstrom 2019). She continues this sentiment through her choices of what she works on and who she selects to collaborate with as she "work[s] primarily within Native-owned publications and educational avenues, to further support a self-funded narrative on past, present and future native issues" (Alvitre, n.d.). She found an "unspoken understanding in freedom in putting out material" that is found "with smaller Native owned publications" that is unrivaled at major publishing houses (Lindstrom 2019). The choices of who she chooses to work with are done to support and promote the Indigenous comic community while avoiding the exploitative nature of major publishing houses.

While changes in the industry are occurring as "major publishers are putting call outs for Native American and Indigenous centric media" and "are now giving us space to tell our stories," this is often at the cost (or lack thereof) of Indigenous creators as they are hired as temporary consultants without long-term contracts (Lindstrom 2019). Recent calls for Indigenous centered stories from major publishers come after demands from Weshoyot and others for non-stereotyped stories and instead to have tribally specific stories that represent Indigenous peoples as fully realized human beings in a culturally accurate manner, that are done by or in collaboration with the specific Indigenous group

the comic is about (Alvitre 2020). This change in the industry for performative inclusion is recent and when she started her career, major publishers like DC or Marvel did not seek out to include Indigenous perspectives or creators, something which was difficult as she initially sought to work for those companies. Getting her start in the industry centered on her access to these publishers to create her own stories, something which was dependent on her ability to attend San Diego Comic-Con.

> WA: When I first started in comics, basically the only way to get a job was either to know somebody that was already working as, generally a writer or editor and you could sort of slip your portfolio through like all these imaginary levels of security to get to the higher-ups in order to get work. Most of the people that got work they would go to San Diego Comic-Con; you go to the portfolio review section which was upstairs, and you had to wait in line with each publisher for a long time, there's a long, long lines so basically like your entire time at the convention was spent upstairs. And then you kind of had to navigate the schedules with different editors from different publishing houses who were gonna be there to get in and get any feedback, and what they would do is basically post like a sample script on the Internet. And you didn't have access to all the scripts that you have now, I mean now that you can literally download pages if you want to be an inker and ink over any number of professional artwork and do samples that way. Back then it was like very, very difficult and especially with DC and Marvel. A lot of the time they weren't even at the portfolio review section because it was so in demand; they would

basically have like a seminar, an hour long seminar and you had to go to

that but you had to wait in line in order to get in because it was a limited

number of seats, and listening to their panel lecture and then at the end

they would say, "You're allowed to submit your portfolio," so you had to

submit like a photocopy portfolio sample to them. And then basically I

guess they'd have editors on that panel, and they would go through the

hundreds of different portfolio samples that were left at the end of the

session. And then later during that day they would write on a whiteboard

like maybe five names of people that they were actually interested in

talking to. It was just like this whole process. And San Diego Comic-Con

came once a year, so that was like your only chance to meet with any of

these people to get into the system. And if you blew it then you had to

wait another year (Alvitre 2019).

Her experiences accounts for those who are lucky enough to have the financial resources

for tickets, lodging, and transportation to travel to the Con, not to mention the physical

ability to attend it. These are just the entry level barriers which determined and continue

to determine who can meet with publishers and therefore create comics. This agonizing

process put in place by major publishers is something that she believes can be avoided

today. Instead of waiting in lines, "it's as easy you know as sending out a tweet now to an

editor or a writer in order to communicate" (Alvitre 2019). While it is easier, "there's

way more competition I think" since anyone can reach out to publishers (Alvitre 2019).

We spoke further about the accessibility of social media and crowdfunding sites to create

one's own comic.

MK: Do you find the same thing I guess with publishing it, whether it be

like self-publishing or digitally or whatever the case may be? Do you think

it's easier now or more accessible?

WA: I think its way more accessible. I mean with crowdfunding

campaigns like Kickstarter or Indiegogo; the access to reaching larger

target audiences and also obtaining financial backing for your projects is

way easier than it ever was. Basically like when I first started, if you're an

independent publisher you are in the small little section at San Diego

Comic-Con and like everybody is basically photocopying their stuff at

Kinko's and hoping that maybe a major publisher would walk by and like

their stuff enough to maybe like you know offer them some sort of gig or

something to get actually published in a legit publication (Alvitre 2019).

Online crowdfunding websites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo create the opportunity

to remove control from major publisher's hands and place it in the hands of the creators

themselves and the communities that support them. By removing some of their power and

shifting it to the creators, it makes space for different kinds of stories and more stories to

be shared. We spoke about how it is not enough to look at who is creating stories but to

look at who has access to read the comics. While digital comics are more accessible to a

larger audience, this is not her preferred mode of production.

MK: Do you do any like digital publication yourself of your comics or do

you prefer to have like the actual hard copies?

WA: I prefer hard copies. I don't do like webcomics or anything like that.

I've had my work published as PDFs where you can download digital

85

copies through Native Realities where they choose to put up digital copies

of work, but I really...I don't like how easy it is to take in the digital

medium, I guess. I'm very much traditional print media. You know a very

well-published book that has paper, like the physicalness of having a book

in your hand, is something that I am much more interested in than having

it more widely available digitally (Alvitre 2019).

The comic available for digital download she is referring to is *Sixkiller* #1, a comic she

where she worked with frequent collaborator Dr. Lee Francis IV who wrote the story

while she illustrated it. She also worked with him on *Deer Woman: An Anthology* and

Ghost River: The Fall and Rise of the Conestoga. While currently a single story, in the

future it might evolve to become "a six and eight issue story arc" (Dueben 2018).

Published in 2008 through Dr. Francis' own publishing house Native Realities, the comic

follows the journey of Alice Sixkiller as she deals with schizophrenia, seeks revenge, and

to uncover her sister's murder. It is described as "Alice In Wonderland meets Kill Bill set

in Cherokee Country" (Red Planet Books & Comics, n.d.). Since neither Dr. Francis nor

Weshoyot are Cherokee, it was important for both to represent Cherokee cultural in a

culturally appropriate manner.

> In regards to this story taking place in Cherokee country: It is something I
> considered before taking the book on. I never want to step on toes or into
> tribal customs or stories that are not my own. With that being said, I also
> feel the need to help bring a modern story like this to fruition, to give
> representation where there is none. I feel that both Lee and myself really
> put time and energy into doing justice to the people we are creating within
> the story. And I hope that this book gives a representation of modern
> Native voices where there is currently such a lack of it in the comics
> medium. I can only try the very best I can. And if I miss something, I hope
> that a future dialogue can be brought up to discuss better ways to create or
> represent (Pratt 2018).

Weshoyot's self-reflexivity of both her work and position as a Tongva woman

representing Cherokee culture highlight sensitivity to Indigenous representation. She

knows that enough negative and harmful representations of Indigenous people in pop

culture already exist and she does not want to contribute to it. The style of *Sixkiller*

diverges from Weshoyot's other pieces as characters are shadowed with cross hatching

and the use of dark blues, grays, and purples. The cover embodies all of these

characteristics with a close-up shot of Alice staring at the reader with a hat covering her

right eye. Her hat and coat in those shades contrasted with the warm yellow background

and the border of a necklace with her red and blue animal figurines. These artistic choices

were intentional choices as the story and images pay homage to *Alice In Wonderland*.

> I have always wanted to try with the art style in this book. I have always
> been a huge fan of the original illustrations to *Alice in Wonderland*. I had
> always wished there were more drawn, as they both complement the
> writing style of book but also make it weirder and more iconic than
> anything ever could have. There have been many artist renditions of the
> book over the years, but the odd proportions, fantastical imaginings and
> whimsy of those original illustrations really have held ground over time. I
> told Lee from the beginning that I wanted to try to pay homage to the
> original *Alice* illustrations. I had been working in a lot of Victorian
> reproduction work for some commercial art I was doing years prior to the
> book. I felt like I had enough under my belt to attempt it and create a style
> I had not yet played with before. The timeline for this book also allowed
> me that artistic freedom. I don't think I could have tried this on a monthly
> book. It's rather time-consuming (Pratt 2018).

While it was time-consuming the artistic style carries connects to the melancholy of the

story. Weshoyot was given space to create and play with the style based off of trust

between her and Dr. Francis (Figure 5.6, Figure 5.7).

> I was working on *Sixkiller* on and off for over a year, I think. Lee allowed
> me the time not only to play with the style but get it down before I started
> on final pages. I had worked with Lee on various things before, so I
> trusted him as a writer (Pratt 2018).

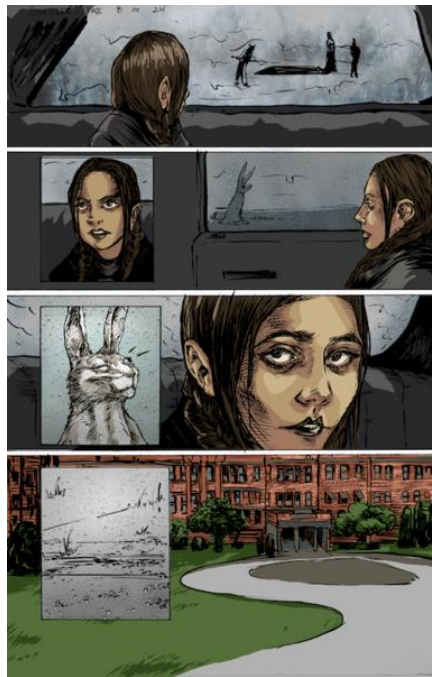*Figure 5.6: The front cover of Lee Francis 4's and Weshoyot Alvitre's Sixkiller #1*

Figure 5.7: Page 9 from Lee Francis 4's and Weshoyot Alvitre's Sixkiller #1

Her working relationship with Dr. Francis is built on trust and the artistic freedom to

explore different storytelling styles and she says that "he is flexible with my art style,"

especially within this comic (Dueben 2018). The way in which *Sixkiller* is drawn "couldn't realistically [be done] on [as] a monthly book" (Dueben, 2018). Through her collaborations with people like Dr. Francis and her social media presence, Weshoyot actively works to promote and support fellow creators whose work provides more Indigenous representation in comics and pop culture.

> WA: I think anything by Native Realities is a really good start. I always
> send people over to his website because he [Lee], I mean he publishes a
> lot but then he also just knows a lot of writers and artists in publishing and
> carries a lot of their books and stuff on his website.
> I always recommend Debbie Reese's recent blog because she covers so
> many books in like children's lit, in regards to whether or not they're good
> representations of Native culture. And oftentimes to if one maybe she
> recommended in the past is sort of outgrown that recommendation, she'll
> also go back, and you know retouch certain things which I find very
> commendable. And she's also very active on Twitter too. So, reading what
> she has to say on books I think is an incredible source of information.
> And from there I mean those both those areas would kind of branch out I
> think into a lot of the Native writers and artists that are currently working
> in the field and also a lot of the larger publishers giving coverage to that.
> And then there's a lot of attention from major publishers realizing that they
> have huge gaps in their you know their library catalogues of lacking
> Indigenous representation. And the majority of the major publishers are

trying to fix that very quickly because it's kind of embarrassing I think on

their end to not have that area fleshed out.

I mean I think I've been doing Native based storytelling maybe since 2015,

so it's been about five years and just in those five years I've seen it go from

pretty much independent publishing on a very much like small scale.

And I think in that, a lot of that stuff is supported more acknowledgement

for Native issues currently and also tying them into the climate crisis and

everything going on around the world. The Internet and social media kind

of have like taken away a lot of the walls that used to be up where Natives

were seen as these liberal kind of like tree hugging hippie types that you

know we're fighting oil pipelines lots of other stuff. But now people are

realizing like this is like a global issue with corporate control over you

know just basic necessities to keep us alive for the next so many

generations. So, I think there's a lot more support. Over the last couple of

years than I've ever seen in my life and in that it's branching out to major

publishing houses realizing that people are interested and hungry for these

types of things. And then they're also supporting Native artists and writers

you know to provide an authentic, instead of like a white written or white

illustrated book that people are asking for (Alvitre 2019).

She not only has provided more representation of Indigenous creators though her own

personal work but pushes the industry to produce more "Native voices in general, but

[that] oral histories [be] put into book form for current and future generations to access"

(Forbes 2020). And it is not enough to have inclusive representation of Indigenous people

in comics but that creators are paid fairly (Forbes 2020). Since Weshoyot is selective

about who she chooses to collaborate with, her collaborations with Dr. Francis and others

have yielded positive results with little to no outside interference.

> MK: I guess with publishing itself, have you had people or editors alter
>
> your work in a way that you feel has affected the story or the story you
>
> intended to tell.
>
> WA: Not really. I haven't really run into that too much; I was very careful
>
> of the projects that I chose. I think for a long time I didn't want to do any
>
> like Indigenous themed projects and then once I met Lee Francis and
>
> Native Realities and saw that there was a Native publishing house, I felt
>
> more comfortable knowing that he wasn't going to be pushing into
>
> editorial decisions and allow a lot of freedom to what I would do. And
>
> that's just sort of like grown from there. Like even working with a major
>
> publishing house like Kokila, they were so open to trusting me; which I
>
> thought was crazy because I'm not primarily a children's book illustrator.
>
> But they just had full faith in what I was doing, so I was like, "Okay well
>
> thank you" because I've heard horror stories you know editors coming in
>
> and changing things, and artist being incredibly unhappy with the final
>
> product because it wasn't the vision that they had or it was pulled back in a
>
> lot of ways. And I've been very lucky in the projects that I've been
>
> involved with, but that hasn't been an issue (Alvitre 2019).

Careful choices in collaboration have led to protection of her stories and preservation of

her artistic integrity. Due to their frequent collaborations, it is not surprising that her

stories at Native Realities have not been affected by editorial changes as there is a mutual

understanding of each other's processes. Her experience with Kokila on the other hand

was one of firsts; her first time working with them and her first time working on a

children's book. And while her "background is in comics," she notes that she and "many

writers" have chosen to work in children's books and "work more geared to children and

young adults" in order to reach a larger audience; something that "seems to be especially

prevalent with Native American writers" (Rogers 2019). Kokila, a branch of Penguin

Random house and Penguin Young Readers, works to center "stories from the margins

and mak[e] space for storytellers to explore the full range of their experiences" (Kokila.,

n.d.). While this is a similar sentiment of major comic publishers, Kokila actively works

to create spaces for Indigenous stories and perspectives without interference, something

which has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated by creators like Weshoyot.

> It is a beautiful thing to see so much more space being given by major
> publishers, like Kokila, to under-represented minority writers within the
> Native community. I am grateful to have had such a warm reception with
> my first book and look forward to many more in the future (Rogers 2019).

The book she is referring to is *At the Mountain's Base* which tells the story of a family

that is physically separated while a young woman serves in the military, they remain

connected through traditions of song, cooking, and weaving. Made with Traci Sorrel

(Cherokee), the story focuses on fictional Cherokee family and Cherokee weaving, but

parallels can also be seen with Tongva weaving practices.

> My own tribe, the Tongva, were basket weavers. And there are so many
> steps to learn about the process, many which include songs, stories, ad
> protocol methods to gathering and preparing supplies. Weaving has
> similar attributes, and while I don't know the songs or stories associated
> with each step of finger weaving, for example, I can appreciate and try to
> show that it's more than something people just sit down and do. There is a

whole lineage of ancestors behind it who have passed the knowledge on generation to generation, and it has outlived books or tutorials on the subject matter. It becomes ingrained in the makeup of who we are as Native people if we simply take the time to tap into it, and it heals a lot of emotional weight we carry by learning the arts and incorporating them into our daily lives (Rogers 2019).

Weaving is connective and as seen in the book, it is passed down through intergenerational learning, but it is also a reparative practice as it combats colonialism while it connects a person to their language, ancestors, and culture. Throughout the book, pages are tied together visually with pieces of yarn stretching from one page to another and serving as the borders for images (Figure 5.8).
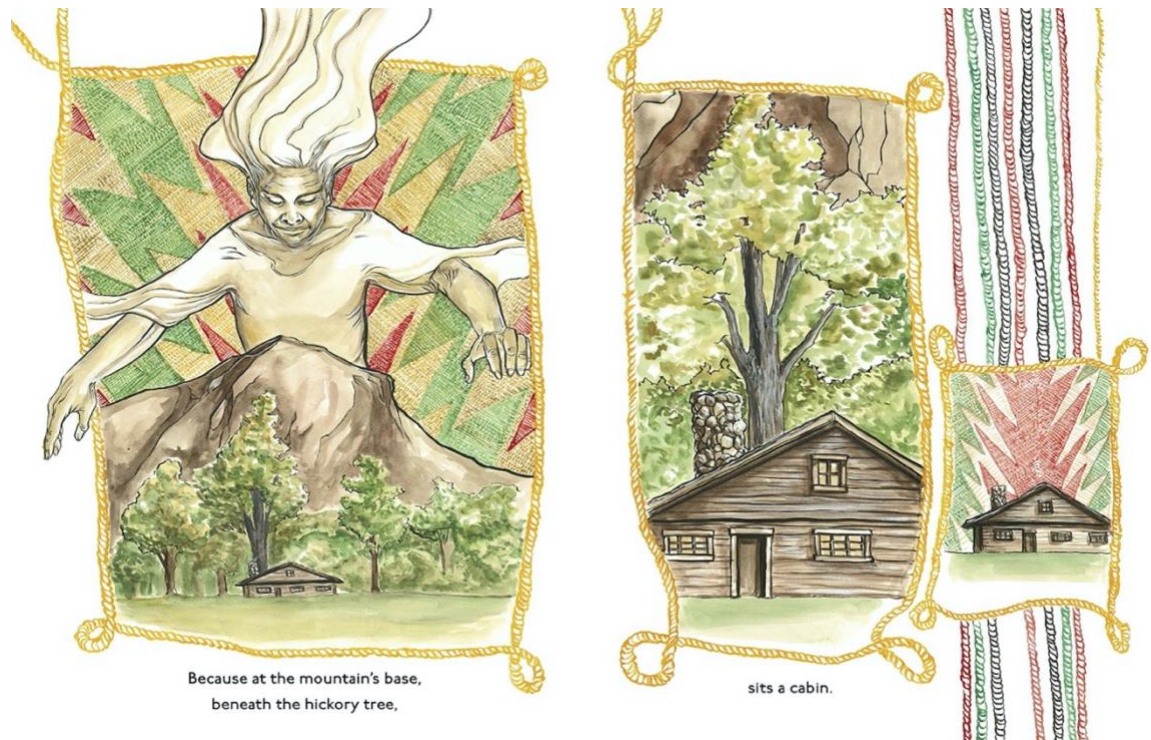

Figure 5.8: Pages 19-20 from Traci Sorell's and Weshoyot Alvitre's At the Mountains Base

Something that was important to Weshoyot was to depict "spinning yarn, weaving, etc. and [to] show our traditional arts" (Rogers 2019). Books like *At the Mountain's Base* are forms of culturally responsive education and work towards providing Indigenous

representation, stories, and to inspire people to look into their family history. It aims to remedy and inspire those who grew up detached from their culture—whether due to personal or systematic reasons—to learn about their creation story and to pass that knowledge down to future generations.

> I would love to see more of the unique traditional stories brought to the world of children's books. So many people grow up not knowing their creation stories so I feel that this [*At the Mountain's Base*] would not only benefit the current and future generations, but really fill a void that some of the older generations who are trying to reclaim their culture (Lindstrom 2019).

Creating stories like these are a form of resistance by providing examples of culturally responsive education and work to make space for more stories like it to be made. Weshoyot knows that all too "often we are trying to educate children as well as adults by offering unique perspectives to the publishing world" since for too long Indigenous histories have been overlooked, especially in education (Rogers 2019). The use of visual narratives like these in education increased in the early 2000s, something that can also be seen within comics as stories are created specifically to teach the public about Indigenous histories. Weshoyot and I spoke further about the utilization of comics in education and her involvement in those projects.

> MK: So how do you feel about whether it's children's books or comics or sequential art as a form of education whether that be sharing histories or language revitalization, do you see that as an effective format for that?
>
> WA: Oh yeah. I think, I mean honestly and especially with the work that I'm doing with my own tribe and I was invited to go speak at the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian on my personal project a

graphic novel I just finished, and also *When Rivers Were Trails*, which is

the game that Beth (Elizabeth LaPensée) also worked on.

Those three projects were all very much tied into education. *Ghost River* is

all [about] accessing historical ephemera and documents of the Paxton

massacre and the Pamphlet war in Pennsylvania in the 1700s. So, we are

working alongside the Library Company of Philadelphia, which is an

academic library, and then putting out a graphic novel based on all these

historical things to educate. And a lot of these projects to have like

educational things written and lesson plans and stuff for educators to use

in the classroom. So, we've had people from like elementary to middle

school write things as well as like upper level and university classes

they're utilizing the work that we're doing.

So, I think there's this huge, amazing opportunity right now. Especially in

the major publishing houses where they're using graphic novels and comic

book art in educational material to help kids, I think maybe grasp things

that may have otherwise been kind of boring to read about in like a history

book. But to see it being used to make higher education too which is really

eye-opening on how far-reaching it is (Alvitre 2019).

Her work in culturally responsive education and visual narratives goes beyond comics

and children's books and extends into video games as these are all mediums that work

together to provide more perspectives on overlooked histories. Histories such as "the

massacres of Native peoples" that have very real implications for the present yet are

"always sort of ignored and tiptoed around" in dominant educational systems

(Sheyahshe 2008). Part of the increasing incorporation of these narratives in higher education is due to a change in terminology when referring to these works by those in the academy, publishers, and the creators themselves.

> MK: You said sequential art and then comics, how do you define...do you define them separately? Or do you use comics and sequential art or graphic novels interchangeably?
>
> WA: I would probably use them interchangeably. I think I try to use sequential art more than I do a comic book art as a term because I feel like sequential art not only sort of heightens it but it also kind of covers graphic novels and comic books in the same swoop. I know that like major publishers they kind of prefer to use 'graphic novel' because it has sort of a stigma that somehow a graphic novel is more not worthy, but like...
>
> MK: Like it seems prestigious?
>
> WA: It has more...yeah, it's more like respectable in the academic community and even in the major publishing community than if you were to use the terminology like comic books. Which is weird to me, this [is] all sort of a new thing because before you didn't really have major publishers interested in comics or graphic novels (Alvitre 2019).

Sequential art is also inclusive of Weshoyot's non-comic book-related work such as her children's book and video games, as both are forms of visual narratives. It is an umbrella term, but one that places the value it deserves on her work as children's books, video games, and comic books are often viewed as juvenile and therefore not worthy of praise within higher education. None of these works would exist were it not for her ability to

collaborate with others by providing mise-en-scène to their words. Weshoyot discussed her process of creating a comic when collaborating with others.

MK: And then how does like that process work I guess between you and another person? Like I know I spoke to Beth in terms of like when...she shared with me you hear the stuff that you guys are working on in *They Come for Water*, in terms of what comes first for your process or when working with others?

WA: Normally what I request, if I worked with somebody before, then I just ask for the finished script or like a script that's near finished so then I can take a read and kind of visualize it in my head as I do a couple of read-throughs. So yeah I usually rely on the writer to provide me a script that I can read through first and then if I have any issues with the script or if there's anything that's problematic, I'll kind of highlight those areas and we'll have a discussion back and forth and figure that out. And then I go and thumbnail all the pages, which are just like page layouts compositionally, [it] kind of shows maybe where the characters will be. It sets up the stage for introducing environments, more locations or story points and then we kind of go back and forth. I'll send notes to the writer, if they approve them then I'll go and do pencils on a page. I usually scan or photograph those and then I'll send those over to the writer. And once those are approved then I have like more artistic freedom to just go and do inks and then completed colors and then I'll generally send both of those steps to them as well. So, if there's any editing that needs to be done, it's

done in process as opposed after everything is complete and then you

realize, "Oh this isn't working," or "This needs to be a different color" or

something like that (Alvitre 2019).

Another frequent collaborator of Weshoyot's is Elizabeth LaPensée, who she co-

edited Deer Woman: An Anthology, illustrated the video game *When Rivers Were Trails*,

and illustrated the comic They Come for Water. Their working relationship began after

an introduction with Dr. Francis.

> I was working with Lee and had met Elizabeth LaPensée through him. He
> put a call out looking for a co-editor for an unnamed book, and because
> the assembly, [the] creation of a book from an editorial standpoint really
> interested me, I threw my hat in the ring. Lee then let me know what the
> project was, and the fact Elizabeth was heading it, it just felt like a dream
> project (Dueben 2018).

That anthology became *Deer Woman*, a compilation of stories she and Elizabeth co-

edited that brought "together more than a dozen Native and Indigenous women artists and

illustrators to present stories of resistance, survival, empowerment, and hope"

(Kickstarter 2017). Originally a result of a Kickstarter campaign, the comic was

published and is available through Native Realities. While she has different meanings for

different tribes, within the anthology, the stories use *Deer Woman* "as a muse to allow

women to talk" about healing from a multitude of traumas (Chong Bras 2017). Weshoyot

notes that the book becomes a platform that shows "the strength and tenacity of

Indigenous women" not only as people but as "storytellers and artists" (Dueben 2018).

As her first project as a co-editor, it provided Weshoyot with the opportunity to

experience the operations behind the scenes. During this project she got "to give input

into the layout, and also into the pieces [that] made [it into] the anthology" (Dueben 2018).

Since this project, they worked together on *When Rivers Were Trails*, as she describes it as "a Native centric Oregon Trail" (Lindstrom 2019). The game is free to download and aims to challenge hegemonic notions of westward expansion by centering the game from an Indigenous perspective. The central figure of the game is "a Native character who is forced to move westward" and as they move from place to place, they see different tribal experiences with colonists and the government (Lindstrom 2019). Comics and games like these work to present forms of culturally responsive education and to provide a positive representation of Indigenous people and history. Weshoyot notes that "I have such a respect for Beth, and the projects she's materialized in the gaming world [and] it was really one of the most amazing things I have been part of" (Lindstrom 2019). Their working relationship remains strong due to their respect of each other's work and in April 2020 their most recent collaboration "They Come for Water" in *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 3*; a project that is discussed further in Elizabeth's section.

Though she primarily has collaborated with others to create comics, Weshoyot recently created her own comic. She spoke about the creation process and how that differs than when she works with others.

MK: when you've done like your own stories, have you done that and like how is that process different?

WA: I think that process is a little bit different because when I'm writing I'll generally write my scripts in a sketchbook, and I don't sit down in front

of the computer and then just write for the most part. Occasionally I will

do that but more often than not I'll do them in a sketchbook, so as I'm

writing the story certain images will come to me and I'll throw those down

either as sketches or as full-page thumbnails. So, I'm kind of doing like the

first couple of steps together. And then after I've done all that I'll read back

through with the images that I've created and if there's any edits that I feel

need to be made I'll go and make those (Alvitre 2019).

With the project not being contingent on other people or their schedules, the process

becomes fluid. The writing process does not dictate the drawing as in her work with

collaborators, but she is able to let her sketches guide the script. It is not just the process

that changes but also the types of stories that she is creating when it is a solo project.

WA: If it's my own personal work, I generally am working with either

stories having to do with tribal things connected to my own tribe, or me

trying to work out themes within feminine viewpoints because I feel those

are underrepresented in the industry (Alvitre 2019).

These are stories that are close to her heart and to her community that all too often are not

presented in mainstream comics. Her own works, whether in comics or social media also

are used to address "political and environmental issues that Indigenous people are facing

internationally" (Lindstrom 2019). While she has been able to incorporate Tongva

elements into her projects such as *At the Mountain's Base*, her own stories are fully

Tongva or have the ability to be if she so wishes. In the early years of her career when

Weshoyot began to feel comfortable making Indigenous comics, she spoke about her

visions for the future and how she wanted to contribute to the field.

100

Moving forward, in comics, I really want to lend my art to telling stories which I feel are important in current representation as native peoples. I also want to provide my own personal perspective on historically based material. I didn't have any Native artists, writers, or examples to look up to growing up. Most books about Natives, were not written or illustrated by Native people. So, I am doing my small part to try to change that so my children have a different experience with representation when they grow. I find that doing the work I do is very healing for me in many ways. Eventually I would like to do a graphic novel based on my tribe, the Tongva of Los Angeles basin, and to bring light to some of their stories, and people, specifically Toypurina, which is not well known to current people (Sheyashe 2008).

11 years after this interview in October 2019 with community support through Kickstarter, Weshoyot made this dream into a reality with the soon to be released comic *TOYPURINA: OUR LADY OF SORROWS*.

Elizabeth LaPensée

Elizabeth LaPensée (Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish) is a woman of many professions. She is a "designer, writer, artist, and researcher of games and comics. Assistant Professor of Media & Information and Writing, Rhetoric & American Cultures at Michigan State University" (LaPensée 2019). She is also known for writing and creating the video games *When Rivers Were Trails*, *Thunderbird Strike*, *Honour Water*, and *The Gift of Food*, and writing for *Dialect*, *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine*, *Coyote Quest*, *Max's Adventures*, *Techno Medicine Wheel*, *Venture Arctic*. Elizabeth is known primarily as a writer, artist, and editor who has created or contributed to the comics: *The West Was Lost*, *Fala*, The Nature of Snakes, "Our Words" in INC's Universe #0, Copper Heart in *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 1*, "The Observing" in *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 1*, "Arming Sisters" in *Deer Woman: A Vignette*, "They Who Walk As Lightning" in *MOONSHOT:*

The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 2, "The Strange People" in *Sovereign Traces Volume 1: Not (Just) An(Other)*, "Of Ash and Snow" in *Sovereign Traces Volume 2: Relational Constellation*, and "They Come for Water" in *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 3*. We connected on the last day of Indigenous Pop X in Denver and later corresponded online about her experiences.

One of Elizabeth's most recent comics is a collaboration with Weshoyot Alvitre (Tongva, Scottish, and Gaelic) called "They Come for Water," a story written by Elizabeth that looks at themes of capitalistic greed, access (or lack thereof) to resources, and Indigenous survivance through utilizing cultural knowledge ways. In the comic, the planet's water is toxified turning people into cannibals that eat anything and anyone they see insight. Anishinaabeg and others who have been denied water are not infected and work together to protect their community. Together Elizabeth and Weshoyot have created a powerful story that showcases the strength of Indigenous women and the need for collaborative efforts for survival, something which I believe holds parallels to the comic industry. While she can and has self-published and produced visual narratives, her works would not be possible were it not for her collaborating with others.

> Collaborations where I get to write and hand off the tough work of illustrating panels is awesome for obvious reasons. I'm kidding, but also not. It's no surprise to me that the comics I write for other people to illustrate end up much longer than the ones I know I have to illustrate myself. I enjoy all ways of working and tend to run to comics as a break from working on games and stop motion animations which have such long development cycles and require intensive work on my part (Dueben 2017).

These partnerships allow others to build on her vision in a way that she could not anticipate. When she is not creating her own stories, Elizabeth actively works for the inclusion of Indigenous creators in pop culture, specifically in comics, "when possible, I

hope to support Indigenous creatives in comics" (LaPensée 2019). It is critical that there

are not just a few Indigenous comic creators known in the industry but that there is a

community that supports each other. Supporting creators and providing space for them in

the industry means incorporating creators beyond a "consultant role" and to instead

"involve Indigenous community members as artists and as designers, [and] hopefully as

programmers" (Hearne and LaPensée 2017, 34). All these efforts are done with the hopes

to create industry changes because she says, "the more we are communicating with one

another, the more that's echoing to other industries that this is important" (Deerchild

2018). An important way she supports communities and creators is through her role as an

editor, where she uses her platform to highlight Indigenous voices by curating their

stories.

> I edit collections mainly to provide space for more voices, especially as
> we're at a critical point in establishing Indigenous comics. It's vital to me
> that strong Indigenous writers get an opportunity to work in comics if
> that's something they're interested in, just as it's important to ensure that
> new writers and illustrators have the same kind of chance I had, only I
> prefer to give them a more guaranteed scenario where they continue to
> own their Intellectual Property (IP), rather than in a contest situation
> where they have to sell away their dream for a few bucks, which is
> ultimately what happened to me for several years. Sovereignty is essential
> (Dueben 2017).

Elizabeth is referring to her first foray into comics in 2008 where she entered the

Aboriginal Peoples Television Network's Comic Creation Nation Contest and won, and

which resulted in the creation of her digital comics *Fala* (Figure 5.9) and *The West Was*

Lost (Figure 5.10) (LaPensée 2019). The contest was ultimately "voted on by the public

through social media," a compliment to her storytelling and a sign of affirmation that the

public wanted to hear more from her and support her (Dueben 2017). Unfortunately, the

opportunity was too good to be true.
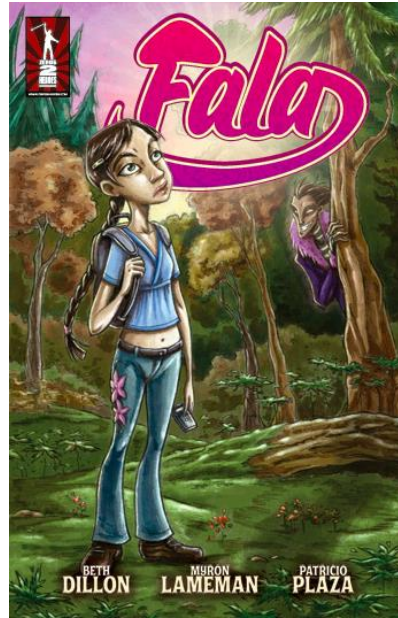
Figure 5.9: The front cover from Elizabeth LaPensée's, Myron Lameman's, and Frank Fau's The West Was Lost
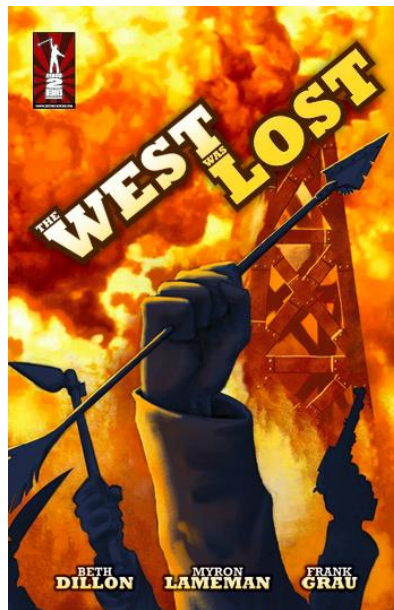
Figure 5.10: The front cover from Elizabeth LaPensée's Myron Lameman's, and Patricio Plaza's Fala

Both of the digital comics that were created through the Comic Creation

Nation Contest were brought out by the publisher for $10 Canadian each.

Yikes. I signed contracts when I was first starting out and was told by

people that I should be happy that anyone cared about any of my "ideas"

at all. Unfortunately, the company used those Intellectual Properties to

fund their in-house teams but weren't able to move forward with them

when the company's goals changed. Having said that, because of the

changes, they didn't fully develop the IPs into anything concrete, so they

were contractually returned to me after the ten years stipulated in the

paperwork. Ten years has been a long while to wait for getting the rights

to those stories back. This experience has been a big part of why I've been

working on short eight-page comics rather than characters and storylines

that are more developed, because I've been afraid of dedicating myself to

something that will just be taken away again. With the IPs back, one has

the opportunity to be developed into a graphic novel thanks to the support

of an acquisitions editor who was interested in the IP and has been

incredibly helpful in walking me through the process of collaborating with

a publisher. Although the experience started out rough, I'm glad I had to

wait, because I can now approach the characters and stories with many

years of both life and industry experience (LaPensée 2019).

After such a distressing situation, it rightfully took time for her to be able to trust

publishers with her work. It is through her collaborations with people like Dr. Lee Francis

IV (Laguna Pueblo) that she has been able to work past it.

I've had to work my way up slowly over the years, with gratitude to Lee

Francis IV and Native Realities Press for the space he has given to

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Indigenous comic creators, as well as AH Comics Inc. for *MOONSHOT:*

The Indigenous Comics Collection which included me as a writer

(LaPensée 2019).

Both Native Realities and AH (Alternate History) Comics provide Elizabeth with the

artistic freedom to create stories how she wanted to. These partnerships align with

Elizabeth's goal for Indigenous creators to have sovereignty within pop culture.

> It's about developing our own voices through hands-on work and making connections with self-determined distribution. I'm stoked about the opportunities that are opening up for Indigenous voices thanks to Indigenous-owned and -operated pathways such as the comic publisher Native Realities Press, the record label RevolutionsPerMinute, and more (Martinson 2017).

Her decisions of which publishers she chooses to collaborate with are extensions of her

desire for creating space for Indigenous creators. Through her work with different

publishers, she had the opportunity to take on different roles with the intention of

promoting other Indigenous creators.

> Since my work is primarily in games, comics have built up secondarily,
>
> and I have been more interested in building capacity and providing
>
> opportunities for Indigenous writers and illustrators in comics or who are
>
> interested in trying out comics. Because of that, I've focused more on
>
> grant or crowd funding and editing collections with a myriad of voices.
>
> Most recently, I have been given the opportunity to write a graphic novel
>
> from a large publisher, and I'm excited about how the work will unfold.
>
> Lee Francis IV wanted to offer me a similar opportunity after "Deer
>
> Woman: A Vignette," but it was very important to me that Indigenous

women in comics have the opportunities that they deserve, so I declined

working on a comic series or graphic novel and chose instead to focus on

editing a collection and bringing in Weshoyot Alvitre as a co-editor, since

she has an incredible amount of experience in comics. When possible, I

hope to support Indigenous creatives in comics, because I love what

everyone does (LaPensée 2019).

This support is embodied at places like Indigenous Comic Con or Indigenous Pop X

where she says that "at an event that is Indigenous created, you really are in a space you

can talk about all of the dreams that could come about, [and] work that can unfold

between everyone there" (Deerchild 2018). These collaborations also extend to other

areas of pop culture like gaming where her projects work to not only provide space for

Indigenous creators but ensure access to the stories themselves. She uses games as an

educational tool, one that is widely accessible.

> I have approached the expression of Indigenous teachings through games
> in a different way in a sense that I'm going for mobile games and web
> games. I think that's what's most accessible (Hearne and LaPensée 2017,
> 32).

If her games, comics, and other works are not accessible, they cannot reach an audience,

and if they do not reach people, they cannot become educational tools. She says that for

her, "digital media [is] about access and the frequency with which it can be shared"

(Hearne and LaPensée 2017, 29). Her work in video games stems from her love of

"playing games and want[ing] to see gameplay that [she] can identify with". (Lone Fight

2019).

> I first started off critiquing these representations but recognized that if I
> was ever going to get to play a game that I wanted to play, I'd have to do it

myself. I'm interested mostly in how Indigenous ways of knowing can be transferred into unique mechanics. That is, I want to go further than simply representing Indigenous culture through a game character, I want to see Indigenous cultures infused in the gameplay itself (Martinson 2017).

Her stories work to push beyond having tokenized Indigenous characters but instead seek to tell stories that are about and for Indigenous people. Stereotyped depictions in video games extend into comics as well, something that she also grew up with.

Much like video games, we're often shaped into stereotypes. Halfbreed heroes who slay Indians until they too discover their Indian roots and all is forgiven, the busty hot Native chick who means business in tight skinned leather, you name it. As more of us grow up playing games and reading comics, the more we'll get involved in making our own representations, and I'm looking forward to it (Sheyahshe 2008).

These self-representations not only combat negative Indigenous representations but provide tribally and culturally specific alternatives. This can be seen in the comic *Moonshot* series as it "provides an opportunity to speak out against and offer alternatives to comics and fiction that misrepresent Indigenous stories" (Morris 2016). As well as with her game *Thunderbird Strike*.

I've been troubled by J. K. Rowling's appropriation and simplification of animikii (thunderbird) into a "wizarding house" in her ongoing Harry Potter series. Now we have people who are unaware, claiming that they are in the "thunderbird house," without understanding what they are saying or what the stories and truths entail. My hope is to share a perspective on thunderbirds that is true to my family and communities (Morris 2016).

While she uses multiple mediums to share stories that challenge Indigenous representation, she believes that some stories are best suited for some mediums over others. One medium is not better than the other, but they work to tell different stories.

I definitely feel each story is supposed to come into form in its own way. I love comics, games, and animations equally while recognizing that they

each evoke different ways of interacting. I also often appreciate interweaving them. For example, a game that uses comics as cut-scenes instead of animations cuts down on costs while also appealing to comic readers. This overlapping is at the heart of the fun in transmedia (Martinson 2017).

It is not just the style of the medium that dictates whether a story would be better told in comics versus games, but the story itself.

> Sometimes it makes sense to have crossovers from comics to games, such as shared themes in "They Who Walk As Lightning" and *Thunderbird Strike*. In other instances, comics are a safer space for particular stories, such as *Deer Woman*. Personally, I would not design a game where players can be *Deer Woman*, but I do encourage her being represented through comics (LaPensée 2019).

Though they are both visual narratives, for Elizabeth the stories cannot be told in all formats. Due to the medium itself, comics provide storytelling opportunities that games cannot.

> Comics are brilliant because of the movement and expression that can be conveyed. I can share a moment or an experience in a way that echoes what I see when I write. Words, particularly English, just can't fully portray the textures and feeling that I have when I'm writing, while comics can, and nicely enough in a process that moves faster than games (Dueben 2017).

While she works in multiple mediums, Elizabeth is ultimately a storyteller whose work is rooted in Indigenous storytelling techniques where she notes that "there is a reciprocal relationship between the storyteller and the listeners at all times" (Ray Corriera 2014). This relationship changes over time "as you grow you are given access by storytellers to more layers — 'add-on content' if you will — as you go along" (Ray Corriera 2014). She

notes that life experiences influence one's relationship and understanding of a story as well.

> As we grow as human beings and as we experience our own life lessons, our eyes are closed but our ears are open to more teachings that reveal themselves. The storyteller is always telling the same story, we're just able to access more teachings from it (Ray Corriera 2014).

As Elizabeth works to retell and revisit her stories *Fala* and *The West Was Lost*, it will be interesting to see how her understanding of these stories have changed and how differently, if at all, the comics look.

Jay Odjick

Jay Odjick (Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg) based in Quebec, Canada is an artist, writer, television producer, teacher, a freelance writer for *The Ottawa Citizen*, and a speaker. He has illustrated the children's books *Blackflies*, *Emma's Gift*, and *Bear for Breakfast*. Within comics, he has created the webcomic *POWER HOUR*, "First Hunt" for *MOONSHOT: The Indigenous Comics Collection Volume 1*, and what he is most known for, *Kagagi: The Raven*. The *Kagagi* series is a superhero comic centered around Algonquin mythology with the main character and hero Matt who fights a Windigo (Jung 2015). It is much more than this though as Matt grapples with balancing his friends, family, and school just like any other 16-year old does. While the main character is Indigenous, something that impacts "who he is," Jay wrote the story so that "you should be able to come into this world without a lot of knowledge of Native culture or what indigenous experiences are like" (Ad Astra Comix 2015). We spoke over the phone about the evolution of the series from a self-published comic called *The Raven* to its adaptation into an animated series called *Kagagi: The Raven*.

JO: I had done my own black and white self-published mini-series called *The Raven*, and then I started going to comic conventions to promote it and try to hustle it. But rather than get a table and in artist alley at the cons like a lot of people do, I got a publisher's booth. So that kind of put me right in the mix with all the publishers, and I was going to all the afterpart[ies] because you get invited to all that stuff if you're a publisher. So, I made a deal to bring the property over to, I guess at the time was Canada's biggest comic book publisher in terms of titles, like the amount that they were putting out. A company called Arcana located out of British Columbia. So, we brought the book over there and I rebooted it. Then we did a full complete story graphic novel called *Kagagi: The Raven*. And then I think for me, my thinking was we were just in the beginning days of seeing all the superhero stuff in the media. I guess at the time I don't remember what was going on but this was before *The Avenger*s and a Marvel movie coming out every three weeks so I was kind of looking at it going like this is where it's headed [and] we're starting to see a lot of superhero stuff. So eventually it's a no brainer, somebody's going to want to do an Indigenous superhero on TV or in movies. And according to every Indigenous TV and movie producer who I could find, I was way off course cause there was no interest in it. So, the guy who owns the publishing house Arcana had been in film production.

So, we started a production company and we pitched it to a network in Canada and we got the show picked up ourselves. So, we produced an

animated series based on the graphic novel. It also airs in the United States

and in Australia. So that kind of took me away from comics pretty heavily

because it wasn't just a deal where, "OK you sold your rights and now you

know we'll cut you a producers' check and invite you to the premiere, or

maybe not."

It was more like...I was you know, I owned a production company, I was

the show's executive producer, and I was the showrunner. So, I was

heavily involved in it and it took three or four years from the time I got

greenlit to actually getting it on TV; so, I wasn't doing any comics work in

that time beyond like some small things here and there (Odjick 2019).

It was during the transition from being a self-published comic into the graphic novel with

Arcana (Figure 5.11) that Jay "decided to tweak the character a bit, both in terms of the

character's personality and look" with his artistic style also shifting to what he calls "a

more cartoony style" (Figure 5.12) (Indian Country Today 2015).

Figure 5.11: Page 4 from Jay Odjick's and Fernando Granea's KAGAGI: The Raven

Figure 5.12: Page from Jay Odjick's KAGAGI: The Raven, Vol. 1, #3

While others were not aware of the potential in superhero movies and television shows, Jay saw a void that needed to be filled. Up until that point in the early 2000s he says, "as far as I'm aware the only Native superhero book that had been done before *Kagagi: The Raven* was *Tribal Force*" (Odjick 2019). In the years since there has been an increase in the number of Indigenous superheroes, but Jay has focused his attention on other areas.

> JO: I did a couple of short stories for anthologies and just two small things like that. And then, are you familiar with Robert Munsch?
>
> MK: Yeah. Why is that ringing a bell with me? Is that the...
>
> JO: So, it's weird because in Canada he's like a national institution. And if you look into it, he's an older guy and he's written like countless kids' books but there was one he has called *Love You Forever* which has the fourth highest-selling kids book in the history of planet Earth behind like *Charlotte's Web* and *The Outsiders* and something.
>
> MK: Oh wow.
>
> JO: So, coming out of the *Kagagi: The Raven* TV show, I was kind of like, "OK well, I don't know what I'm going to do next." And I ended up by making a deal with Scholastic to draw a book by Robert. We did that. It was called *Blackflies*. It was cool because it was set in a First Nation and it had a cast of all Indigenous kids. So that was pretty cool. And that went on to become a national bestseller. I think we hit number two in Canada throughout the summer and then following that we did another one this past year called *Bear for Breakfast* that I also had Scholastic published in Algonquin and that had never been done before in terms of a publisher of

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that size or scale doing a book in an Indigenous language. And we actually

got the Algonquin version up to number three on the bestseller charts in

this country. We just found out the other day, it was the number six

highest-selling kids book of the year of this year. But there was only one

other book that came out in this calendar year that sold more, the rest were

all classics and stuff.

So that'll be coming out in the States I believe in April, in Algonquin as

well. So that's going to be cool. So, all of that stuff kind of took me away

from comics (Odjick 2019).

Jay has fought for the incorporation and use of Algonquin within children's books but has

also made sure that it was an integral part of *Kagagi: The Raven* graphic novel and

television show. The show was "produced in both English and Algonquin, and scripts in

both languages are available on his website" (Kappler 2018). While it makes more work

for Odjick, it is part of his mission for language preservation, "I can't speak for other First

Nations communities, but I know from my own, we're losing our language speakers at an

incredibly rapid rate" (Kappler 2018).

Something that his comics and other visual narratives work to combat, and with

Bear for Breakfast, people are "able to walk into literally any bookstore in this country

and see a book on the shelf in Algonquin" Odjick says and can be seen in Figure 5.15

(Kappler 2018).

So Donovan walked down the street looking for a bear.

His feet went *thump, thump, thump, thump, thump* and he yelled, "Bear, bear, bear, bear, bear!"

Behind him he heard something going *trip, trip, trip, trip, trip* and saying in a very high voice, "Kid, kid, kid, kid, kid!"

He turned around and saw an ant.

Donovan yelled, "Go away, ant!"

The ant said, *"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"* and ran away.

Mi tash Donovan mikanàng ki màdjikishing andawàbamàdj makwan. Inwewezideshin *thump, thump, thump, thump, thump* ashidj nòndàgoze, "Makwa, makwa, makwa, makwa, makwa." Ishkwayàng onòndàn kego inwene *trip, trip, trip, trip, trip,* wisakwene, "Kid, kid, kid, kid, kid." Ki kwekigàbawe owàbamàn enigònsan. "Màdjàn, enigòns!" iji nòndàgoze Donovan. Enigòns ikido, *"Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"* ki màdjibatò.
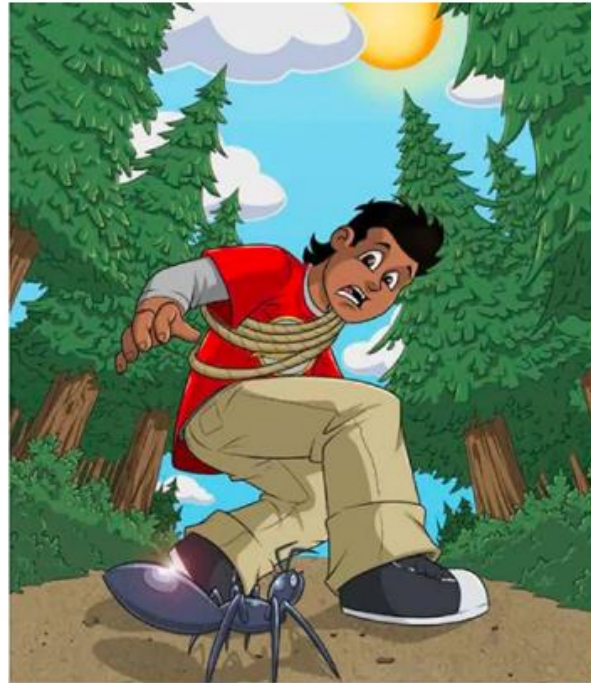
Figure 5.13: Pages 5-6 from Robert Munsch's and Jay Odjick's Bear for Breakfast

Not only that, but "it's important to show our kids that there is a market for stuff like this" (CBC 2017). An Indigenous child can "pick up a children's book and see someone who looks like them" which he says is "important for kids to see themselves reflected in their content" (Kappler 2018). That is something impactful for children and adults alike as they have rarely been shown in pop culture. What makes the publication of *Bear for Breakfast* in Algonquin so monumental is that it was done through Scholastic, "the world's largest publisher and distributor of children's books" (Scholastic n.d.).

> JO: So, we literally changed the publishing industry with that in terms of changing the way this gigantic the corporation does business and creating opportunities for other Indigenous creators and showing that a market exists for Indigenous content (Odjick 2019).

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As such it sets trends in the industry as Jay notes "if you're a smaller publisher looking to boost your sales, you might be going, hey, we could do this too. Let's do it in Cree, let's do it in Mohawk" (Kappler 2018). While there are efforts in the world of children's books to produce these works, Jay spoke about why he feels the comic industry is not using comics to their full potential as an educational tool.

> MK: Do you see comics as a possibility to do a similar type of education whether it's like culturally responsive or language revitalization? Do you find that children's books are more effective for that?
>
> JO: In terms of is it more effective? I would say absolutely. If you look at like for example with *Bear for Breakfast*, you can walk into any Wal-Mart any Chapters Bookstore, Indigo bookstore in the country and find it and it's on the shelves and it's in Algonquin. You cannot replicate that with a comic book. The comic book industry is so beholden to an archaic vulture system of old Diamond distribution monopoly and we shipped directly to these stores, the comic shops. And you can't find comics like when I was a kid and you went to a corner store and there was a spinner rack. Those days are gone right. So, unless we're talking about some like digital revolution that hasn't yet or something; the business of comics, the distribution and the availability of comics as well as the price, are what holds that back from it even being remotely competitive.
>
> With *Bear*, not only do we have a book that's available at any storefront, we're coming out with an audiobook. It should be out I think in January or February that will have the pronunciation of all the Algonquin so you can

learn it that way. Where are you going to be able to do that in comics, you know? Unless you're selling it from your own website. But again, this is something that we're shipping to every major store that will be available literally pretty much everywhere. And with *Bear*, the cover price in Canada is $7.99. So, you're looking at it going, "OK what's the cost of a graphic novel compared to that?" It's just night and day (Odjick 2019).

While both are based around visual narratives, the publishing and distribution process for children's books and comics vary greatly. It is these differences that limit comic books ability to be a source of learning along with a misunderstanding of who their readership is. When asked about how could comics become a more effective educational tool, Jay broke down the publishing process further.

JO: Well, what I think is there's two things. One is that there is a market to reach kids through graphic novels but it's not the industry system that's been built. If you look at it, they stopped doing it maybe a year or two ago but up until then the New York Times actually maintained a top 10 bestseller list of graphic novels. And for people who have never seen this before, it always blows their minds because you go there and look and on average something like seven out of the top ten best sellers in any given month are Scholastic books and it's not Marvel and DC because they're actually reaching kids. Whereas if you're a kid and you want to read like...there's so...how do you even know where to get in on the ground floor if you're like twelve years old at this point. You're like I want to read Spider-Man and you go into a comic shop and they're like, "Hey there's 50

Spider-Man comics on the shelf and then the graphic novels, there's like

60 years of backstory." Like how do you even know where to begin? So,

they've kind of found a way to create these entry-level things where there

are constantly new things being developed and the industry is not

beholden to characters that were created 80 years ago. So, you know these

books when I looked at sales numbers I was blown away. So, you know

I'm going to be doing a graphic novel through Scholastic because I think

you can actually reach more kids than if you were to do it through a bigger

publisher. Not a bigger publisher but an American mainstream comic book

publisher that people identify as the big two, which isn't necessarily true.

The other thing is that "kids are reading comics." A lot of kids from what I

saw anyway are reading manga. They're reading Japanese comics but that

doesn't necessarily mean that they're interested in you know American

style comics. So, I don't know, it's a weird thing (Odjick 2019).

For Jay, part of the disconnect and reason why comic book publishers do not push for the inclusion of Indigenous languages is that publishers do not want to make space for Indigenous creators and their fanbase.

JO: What I always say is, if you look at, I don't know about the States, but

I know here, like we don't get invited to comic conventions. Indigenous

creators don't get invited the comic conventions. And what I always tell

people is that it's not that they don't want me there. They don't care about

me. It's that they don't want who I would bring. Because if you have me

there as a guest, you're going to get other Indigenous people, and there's a

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group of people who are involved in that industry who are still the old

boys club, who want to keep their geekship for themselves. And once you

start bringing in a diverse crowd of creators you start bringing in a more

diverse crowd of guests. And that's not what they want (Odjick 2019).

For Jay, mainstream publishers are threatened and their position in the industry is

threatened with the inclusion of more diverse groups. In order for them to

maintain those power dynamics, mainstream publishers work to limit the

perspectives of outsiders and are very particular with the creators they choose to

work with but also the characters they create.

> JO: Yeah. And the other thing is you know Image comics certainly
>
> provides an opportunity. But at DC and Marvel you're only ever going to
>
> get so far because when you look at it you know, I don't mean to go off on
>
> another rant here but like look at what they've done where in the past I
>
> think five years both companies have created a new Native hero, right. So,
>
> one of them is called Equinox and I think that's at DC and then I think
>
> Marvel created a new Inuit, Inuk superhero female character and they're
>
> big thing was "we hired consultants. So, we didn't hire a Native person to
>
> create this, but we had consultants." And I'm like well what the heck, if
>
> you're going to do Batman, you're not going to hire a Scottish consultant,
>
> you get a white guy to do it.
>
> MK: Yeah.
>
> JO: So why can't you just hire Native people to do this stuff? Number one.
>
> Number two the problem is we all know that they're not A-list characters.

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They're not going to be treated on the same level as Captain America, Iron Man, Batman, or Wonder Woman. They're a tier or several underneath those characters. They're just, they're tokens.

What does it accomplish? And unless you treat that character like they are important, then nobody will perceive them as being important. And I mean we're both living in the same world. We have the same access to the Internet. We probably have the same access to TV channels and movie theaters. We're not seeing Equinox in the Avengers movie or whatever. She ain't there, and it's possible we're gonna get to that point at some point but it almost is begrudging on their part. It's not like they're chomping at the bit to try to represent people who are underrepresented. It's like Marvel's like, "Yeah well you know we don't think of female superhero movie would work" and then DC is like, "Here's Wonder Woman that made a billion dollars" and then all of a sudden there's a Black Widow movie. You have to kind of drag them kicking and screaming into the modern era and they're only halfway drug at this point. (laughs)

MK: Yeah, that's one of those things too I know you're talking about artists and the creators and stuff start stepping up, but I think it's also... I think readers and people can step up too. I'm very much for you go to the movie theater to support people that you want to see more of, you know.

JO: Well the only reason I did *Blackflies* and I said this at the time. I said, "Look I don't need the money I don't care. There's three things I want to do. Number one I want to try to create opportunities for other Indigenous

creators cause I think this is going to sell really well. Number two I want to provide Native kids with positive representations of themselves instead of just being tokens or bad guys or whatever. And number three I want to show the market exists between *Blackflies* and *Bear for Breakfast*." I believe that if we put out those kinds of books like you're talking about, that had like Native superheroes or Native comic book characters of any sort, people would buy them. Non-Native people would buy them. I don't think people are as racist or prejudiced as they used to be. I think people are open to reading about different experiences but it comes back again to how do we reach those people number one, and number two how do we create characters that actually show those different experiences because when you look at for example what DC and Marvel are doing they're kind of going...OK well, I get into this a lot this idea of why can't Batman/why can't Superman be black. The problem with that is if you create for example Batman but now, he's African American we go okay, but Bruce Wayne is old Gotham money, right?

MK: Yes.

JO: That has to change because based on what state he's in, his family may not have even been allowed to own property legally. So, can you retain that same dynamic? How did the police view black Batman? How does the mainstream media view black Superman? I think they're terrified of him.

MK: Yes. That's so funny that you brought that up. Kristina [Maldonado Bad Hand] was doing a talk about that. We were talking pretty much that

being a form of like erasure you know in terms of it's also racist, or you're

making it seem like you're always in positions of power or...

JO: Yeah. So, what they're doing is they're stripping away the life

experiences of these people of color and effectively doing the thing people

do and when they say, "I don't see color".

MK: Yeah. (laughs)

JO: That's effectively what they're doing. So, I'm not on board with it. The

problem is there are people within the industry who are super on board

with it. And I've argued about it publicly with them. You know where it's

like, look you can't do it the way you're doing it. Things have to change

because by virtue of Spider-Man being black he has a different

relationship with the media, with people, with the police, with authority

than Peter Parker does. And the comic companies who are doing those

superhero stories are not interested in those things at all.

So, like it's a weird deal because like growing up in comics I always

thought like those are the kind of stories that I'd like to do and then you

realize that's not what those companies do though. They have no interest

in that stuff. You know they need to change their thinking; they need to

change their methodology because it's come to a point where we're almost

looking at things going...I mean Hollywood's in the same boat right where

it's just like remakes and reboots and revamps and re-whatevers. And

there's very little going on that's actually unique and fresh unless you look

at like indie films I think (Odjick 2019).

It is not just enough to have inclusion by making well-known characters Indigenous as this is harmful, but instead, create and promote Indigenous characters. These characters, Jay believes, have a wide appeal as they are at the end of the day, stories about people. All are welcomed and encouraged to read these stories, for Jay, the problem rests with publishers who do not work to include Indigenous perspectives to tell the stories they want to. Publishers' lack of wanting to hire Indigenous creators, even as consultants, can be seen in the lack of representation in pop culture, something that Jay felt as a child as he did not see characters that looked like him.

> I didn't come across too many comics that featured many native characters as a kid – I think my first real exposure to any were in some Westerns – and then at some point, Apache Chief from *Super Friends* (not comics, but still). I never really felt like I saw anyone in comics who looked or acted like any native people and, as a kid, I found it weird even if I didn't understand why. I also didn't understand why there were so few native characters on TV or in comics. Only later did I kind of begin to theorize as to why that was and want to create a superhero character who did look and act like the Native people I knew (Ad Astra Comix 2015).

The impact of publishers dictating who is represented and what stories are told had an impact on Jay's childhood as the characters he saw in pop culture were stereotypical images and visual cues, something which he avoids in work.

> In terms of visuals, I decided to steer clear of the stereotypes or tropes we tend to see associated with native super-people. I didn't – and still don't – believe a super person in buckskin will resonate with younger readers or maybe even readers my age (Ad Astra Comix 2015).

For Jay, there is a crisis of representation for Indigenous comics and it is not limited to the characters themselves. It resides in what publishers perceive are Indigenous stories and what they want Indigenous comics to look like, rather than letting Indigenerds

determine that for themselves. While their intentions are to promote Indigenous

perspectives, this can backfire and ultimately stifle Indigenous perspectives.

JO: In terms of what I'd like to see from comics. I think the biggest thing

we need especially as it relates to Indigenous people. There have been a

few Indigenous comics collections over the past couple of years, like

anthologies. And we need to see those being edited and owned and run by

a Native people with all of the creators being Indigenous. I think this is a

huge one. Are you familiar with *Moonshot*?

MK: I am yeah.

JO: Ok. So, what happened with *Moonshot* was you were asking about

like editorial interference or whatnot. So, in the first volume or *Moonshot*

my brother and I did a story in the first one that we wrote, and I drew, and

then for the second one we quit. And we quit because a) I had a problem

with the fact that there was no Native editorial representative. And a lot of

the creators who they were using were not Native. So, when it came time

for volume two, the editors of this book showed me a piece of art and it

was supposedly Windigo. and they said, "Hey do you have any stories

about Windigo?" And I said, "Why?" I literally just finished a TV show

that deals with Windigo I worked on for four years. And they said,

"Because we got this guy and he draws a really cool Windigo, check it

out." And I said, "Is he Native?" And they said, "No." And I was like, "OK

well at that point we kinda got a bit of a problem, like this is not cool." But

I thought about it and we came up with a story that was basically a sci-fi

thing, and it was an allegory about mining and energy companies kind of, I don't know, taking too much from the planet, right.

And using the Windigo mythology as an allegory for that greed and consumption and too much-unchecked hunger or greed leads to ruin, loss of humanity. So, the story I was kind of like Windigo in space, if you think of like the movie *Alien*, the original *Alien* movie kind of like that with a Windigo. Now we sent it off to the editors who are both Caucasian and one of them says, "Okay well what if we don't really like this. What if it's more psychological harm and Windigo is all in their mind?" And I said, "Think about what you are telling me. What you are saying is the equivalent of saying, "OK I think this is cool but what if Jesus Christ was only in your head" because you are literally telling somebody, not for me, but there are people who I've met who this is still a part of the core belief system like this is crazy the fact we're having this conversation is crazy." And at that point we quit because I said, "It's not cool that you don't have Native editorial and you need to have all Native people if you're going to call this an Indigenous comics collection because it's not; it's a marketing slogan. So, talk to me when you get your stuff together."

And then for the third one they came back to me say and they said, "Alright we hired Michael Sheyashe and Beth LaPensée and they're going to be editing it and you don't have to deal with me." I said, "If that last part is true and I don't have to deal with you at all, I'm in." Cause I can [deal] with Michael and Beth, cool.

And so, I did a story for the third volume and if we're being honest,

literally two days ago I emailed them and I said, "Hey uh, any word on

when that's coming out? It's been awhile and I haven't heard anything on

when I'm going to get paid?" And the guy who owns the company said,

"Oh you should've been paid six months ago." And then I got the money

transferred it to my bank account that day. So, they were six months late in

paying me. So that's *Moonshot* in a nutshell.

And we need, we need better. And I'll be honest with you when I was

voicing these things about anthologies needing Native editorial and you

know the amount of people who reach out to me privately who are

unwilling to say anything publicly I was shocked by. And I understand

that for them, they need the work, or they think it's good exposure or for

whatever private reason they have, that's fine. No one has to say anything.

I'll be the guy tilting at windmills, but it needs to be said. At the end of the

day we shouldn't have companies that aren't Native, hiring non-Indigenous

people. And really there is no excuse for saying, "Hey we forgot to pay

you for half a year." That's just insanity. But I wanted to explain why I see

it the way I see it. If there was one thing, I think we need, it's better than

that. And until somebody steps up and does it, I don't know if it can

happen (Odjick 2019).

While the anthology publishers are producing series and anthologies dedicated to

Indigenous comics, Indigenous representation ends on the page. To Jay, publishers are

not seeking to highlight or support these voices behind the scenes in editorial roles or

positions of power. Jay spoke about potential ways to shift this power dynamic while ultimately making his stories available.

JO: Until there [is] actually a publishing company I think who was Native-owned, that had the kind of reach; because like I said I think that's my problem with comics a lot of the time is the ability to reach people. Like that's the great problem and I think one way around that [i]s you see stuff that's like Kickstarter, crowdfunded, Indiegogo, whatever; that could reach a lot of people but you need a certain cache in terms of a fan base or existing fan base. I think in order to be able to pull that off you know what I mean and then afterwards I think a lot of people are like, "Oh I never heard of that and it's too late, you know it's over." So, I don't know. I think for Indigenous comics to really take another step and become an effective learning and teaching tool and things of that nature; we need a better distribution system; we need a better way to reach the people. Especially as it relates to [those] on reserve because there's just no way to get the books there and like I said, it's possible that like maybe digitally there's better avenues but I don't know.

MK: Yeah and that's one of the things too where I guess is if people even like to have their work digitally...cause I know there are some people, which is fair it's your work and your creation, but don't prefer that. And then it's hard like you're saying too, reach and availability.

JO: Mhmm. Well, there's no comic shops on a lot of reserves. So how do we...especially like in Canada in remote northern communities. How do

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you, reach people there? It's a tough gig. All of their stuff in some of these communities that are more northern than where I'm at, all their food and stuff has to be flown in. So, I went to speak kids there in a community called Wemindji that's about eight hours North from Ottawa, Ontario and it's up by James Bay. So, you go up there and there's like one store that sells clothing and food like an old school general store. And they had turkeys there for like $100 bucks. I think a carton of milk is around $12, a loaf of bread is like $8 bucks because they gotta get it all flown in there. So how do you reach kids in a place like that where there's not only no distribution system in existence, but the economy is skewed radically from the rest of the country.

MK: I hear you. Yeah, I have no clue.

JO: No, me neither. Those are things that we would need...one of the things I enjoy about working in kids books and working with Scholastic is it puts me in touch with so many educators and then I can say, "Look how do we reach your students? How do we reach your kids?" And it's a much better way because the comic book industry in terms of DC/Marvel, at a certain point effectively just said, "Screw it, we're making books for 40-year-olds. We're not kids' books." You know so the industry in terms of retail followed suit. So now we're stuck in this situation where like I said the industry is not for kids, so it's hard to figure out how to...you kind of have to blaze your own trail and figure out your own way of getting it

done. I hope this all makes sense. I know I'm throwing a ton stuff at you

(Odjick 2019).

As a child Jay experienced the lack of access to comics where the issue was not

due to the lack of physical access to books but rather a financial one.

> I got into comics while we were still living in the states. We lived in an
> Italian neighborhood in Rochester, New York that had a comic shop down
> the street from where we lived. We didn't have a lot of money, but this
> was one of those shops where they took the books that didn't sell and
> ripped the covers off and sold 'em for a dime or whatever, so we were way
> into that (Sheyahshe 2009).

Since his childhood, access to comics and publishers remains an issue but once he

has worked with publishers, he had very few instances of a publisher tried to alter

his artistic vision or changes to his story.

> JO: With *Kagagi* and Arcana there was very little in the way of "you
>
> should change," or "you should change that". I was allowed to do things
>
> the way I wanted but like I said for *Moonshot* it was completely the
>
> opposite. And one of the things that I think in the second, I don't
>
> remember if it was the first or the second one, but there was kind of some
>
> guidelines that we were expected to follow. And one of them was no
>
> contemporary Native issues.
>
> MK: Really?
>
> JO: Yeah. So, there's always kind of been that in terms of those kinds of
>
> things. But like I said with *Kagagi* there was nothing at all. I was free to
>
> just go do whatever I wanted. But the only times that anyone said anything
>
> to me in terms of my editor was just keeping it a little more kid-friendly

cause I...there was a lot stuff we were doing that might have been a little too violent for kids. So just in terms of sometimes the violence is making it more kid friendly. That was the only thing we got at *Kagagi*. But like I said from *Moonshot* there was definitely some things that you know, "We don't want to be political" things of that nature.

MK: Mmk (laughs) That's interesting.

JO: I did a story in Volume 3 and I just wrote it; I didn't draw it. So, I did a story about a doctor who purports to invent a cure using like nanotechnology that they claim can go through a person's DNA and kind of clean it up and remove any trauma that is not accrue from your own lifetime. So, you can be free of generational trauma and this "miracle cure" offered on a trial basis to a First Nation. The chief has to decide whether or not this is something he wants to endorse for his people because the morality of that and the humanity.

And then everything else is just the way of getting it to people, right. Like the distribution system was getting it to people. So, I thought that was a really interesting thing and because we didn't have non-Native editorial, there was no interference whatsoever on Volume 3. Michael and Beth were just like, "Yeah cool just we'll edit it in terms of like you know some of the dialogue is a bit too long or whatever we don't think it would also fit onto a page" cause as you can tell I have a problem with talking too much. So, you know when they had to trim some of the fat off the dialogue but other than that there was none at all. So, I don't think I would have been

able to do that story for example in one of the other two books. Although,

I can't speak for sure of number two because again I quit that one, so I

don't know. I'm dubious as to whether or not it would have been

something that they would have allowed. I'm not sure.

MK: Yeah.

JO: Well actually I only really only mean one person. I mean the guy who

owns the company whose name is Andy at AH Comics. I think he's

really...it's really about him and what he wanted to see out of these things.

I remember specifically at one point being told nothing political and I was

like, "Ok well, you know good luck".

MK: Yeah. I mean it, it affects everyone in every way. I dunno, it just

seems really weird and unattainable request.

JO: Well I think, I think it's fine if you're doing something for children you

know what I mean. But if you're going to a group of adult people saying

we want to create a book for other adults, I don't know what you know.

MK: I agree. I think there's a difference between like having some politics

in there but also like propaganda cause I think those things can be

separate, they don't have to be the same. I don't think it would have been

different I guess if he said, "Don't make it propaganda". I don't know that

just seems strange.

JO: Well I'll be perfectly honest with you. Okay. The majority of Native

writers I know are socially active and politically aware. So, I can't fathom

going like trying to find 20 people who would be willing to work under

that circumstance. That would be very tough (Odjick 2019).

Attempts to censor his work has led him to explore other mediums as a means to

communicate his message with the public while educating them on Indigenous

experiences.

JO: Well, can I tell you one different avenue, in terms of introducing non-

Native people to Native realities using comics. So, I had done some work

for the *Ottawa Citizen* which is like the largest paper in the nation's

capital. So, think of it as the *Washington Post* only more snow. And I had

done some pieces for them and then I said, "Look let's try something

different. Would you give me, and I know this is a big ask, would you give

me an entire page of the paper?" Cause the stuff I had done was really well

received and I thought they might actually let me do it. And they were

like, "Sure what do you want to do?" And I said, "Let's do a full page of

comics in the paper. So, we'll do contemporary Native issues into only

instead of an article, they'll be done in comics form" So we did that and I

think their distribution was in the Ottawa area was probably like from

what I remember, I dunno like 600,000 copies. So that's a way of reaching

a wide array of people, albeit not children, right.

MK: Yeah.

JO: So, I mean if you just think outside the box there are ways to do it. I

think one of the catches with that, one of my caveats with that would be

you'd need a certain amount of cache in order to be able to pull it off.

Cause I'm stubborn. And once you give me an inch I start asking for stuff.

You know again with *Bear for Breakfast* I was like, "Can we put it out in

an Indigenous language?" and Scholastic was like, "Yeah sure. That

sounds awesome." Like "OK thank you." So, I'm trying to raise the bar,

but I can only do it so much myself. And then at some point it has to

become a thing that you know other people do as well it can't be one

person.

MK: I do. It's hard when people don't want to speak up cause some people

get scared.

JO: Yeah. Exactly.

MK: Which I understand makes sense. But you know *voices* are more

powerful you know, protests don't really work when you demand like *I*

want this, it's more powerful when it's a we.

JO: Exactly. Yeah, yeah. So, I mean the newspaper thing was one way of

introducing people to comics and through; my theory on it was, what we

did the first one that I did was on the issue on, I don't know if you're

familiar but there are still I think around 150 Native communities in

Canada that don't have clean drinking water. So, we did a comic about

that, explaining the situation and that for example in some communities

the issue of the water is not bacterial but it's actually radiation in the water.

Stuff a lot of Canadians don't know about. And I thought they might be

more receptive to hearing this, to taking in this information visually rather

than just reading about it and you can have more of an impact by actually

showing the effects of it. Cause that's the one way I comics works better than prose.

MK: Yeah but I think it gives people especially just seeing a face, you know you connect with like a person's s tory more if you can just see them and make some eye contact even if it's not reciprocated.

JO: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. So that's one way I'm sure there are like, if we sat around and we got the right people in the room you know, we kick around ideas I'm sure we'd come up with some of cool stuff. It's just to try to figure those ways out. It always ends up becoming kind of a bit of a catch-22 situation because like I said what we need is we need success on the outside. I don't know if that makes sense, how would I explain it? We need success in the mainstream in order to be able to pull stuff like that off. So, for me as creators we need to at some point...it's important that we make stuff for our own people, but we need to make stuff that's financially successful *outside* of just the Native demographic in order to be able to do mainstream things. And it's tough to find out that balance I think a lot of the time.

MK: Yeah. I think that makes sense in terms of...cause once you've got that mainstream support it's easier, you'll have people backing you.

JO: Yeah and it just gives you a bigger reach. You know what I mean. Cause there are smaller Native kids book publishers in this country for sure, for sure, for sure, for sure. But they're not getting into every Wal-Mart, they're not getting into every Chapters. The fact there's a lot of

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Native people who live off reserve in cities like Winnipeg and Toronto

and Edmonton and Vancouver or whatever. And we want to reach those

kids. So, in order to do that, I need to be able to pull off enough sales

numbers that I can walk into a Scholastic and say, "Hey I have an idea"

and they go, "What would you like to try?" Whereas if I'm just sending

like, no offense to anybody, but if I'm selling 500 books to reserves,

nobody cares. So, it's tough to find that balance between providing content

for your own people but at the same time doing it in a way where we're

doing on the biggest stage we possibly can (Odjick 2019).

Jay is working to change publisher's dictation of stories by encouraging

Indigenous creators to join together to form a unified front in order to shift the

power dynamics. If creators want to be in charge of how they and other

Indigenous people are represented, for Jay they need to speak up. To take a break

from the stresses of working with publishers, Jay began working on a project that

is putting him back in touch with his comic roots, his own self-published graphic

novel.

JO: I've just been kicking around my own little crazy story with like no

editorial process in mind. It's weird, like working in TV where you have

like a network to appease, and you have advertisers and there's 50 million

things; and I think coming out of that I kind of wanted to get back to doing

something that I thought was cool so I started work on a graphic novel

called *The Outsider*.

With *The Outsider*, it was all supposed to be me. So, if I created

something that nobody liked then I wouldn't hurt anybody. It was just

getting back to like no pressure, no stress. If you screw this up, you're out

your time, but you're not really hurting anyone else's way of life if that

makes sense. *The Outsiders* is really just me getting back to the simplicity

of like underground punk rock DIY, you know just get on stage and jam as

opposed to this gigantic machine, you know?

And in my head, I was like, "I want to do the whole thing myself. Like I'm

going to draw it and I want to pencil it, make it, write it, and letter it, and

color it." And then after like three years of it not being out, I'm like, "OK

well I better hire some people and get it done."

There's like four pages that need to be colored and it'll be finished. I need

to letter it, but that's where that's at. And then I'm going to be writing a

graphic novel through Scholastic that will be coming out next year as well.

So, I'm kind of still in comics but there are people who are like, "Oh you

know I heard he doesn't want to draw comics" and I'm like, "That's not

really true, it's just that it's such a time-intensive thing that it's not as

attractive to me at this point". Like I'd rather write than draw because a) I

think I'm a better writer, b) I think I enjoy writing more for sure, and c)

drawing comics is just so, so long that you know. It's something that it's

cool when you're 20 and you can draw all night, but now that I'm getting

older, it's like now I kind of like sleep once in a while. (laughs) (Odjick

2019).

Making the comic himself, he maintains sovereignty over what is told and how it is told. While that is his goal and can be done, due to the time-consuming nature of comics, in order to tell his story, he will turn to others to collaborate with. In order to tell a story with multiple parties involved, it is necessary to ensure that everyone has the same understanding and intentions with storytelling. He more spoke about his role as a writer and what is elements are needed to tell a good story.

> MK: So then, I get sometimes you just want to do art for art's sake and other times you want to tell a story. What do you think makes a good story? Like what elements do you think are pivotal or essential?
>
> JO: I think more than anything at all, the whole point of storytelling is for me to be able to hear *your* thoughts and to be able to feel like you're...how would I say? It's not perception but it's your experiences through the human experience. So, for me to be able to come away from something saying, "This really resonated with me, I felt something, I understand maybe what this person thought" is the point. I mean it's like a spell.
>
> MK: Mhmm. It's like connecting to people.
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> JO: It's like literally a magic spell. You cast it and you change the way people think, you changed the way people feel and then maybe they come away saying like, "Holy cow, I'll never look at this the same way again". Or maybe "That's just followed me around for three weeks after I read it or watched it or whatever" but it has to be rooted in what will resonate with human beings. The things that we have that are universal. When I'm

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speaking, one of the things that I like to talk about is, if you look at the difference between Native people are non-Native people; we've been taught for so long to look at all the ways we are different and it's time we start looking at what we have in common cause and people can come together without needing government because that's where I think we really need to get to. And I think art is the same way; it's about universality, it's about commonalities, and finding things that where you say, "Oh man, I never thought about what it would like to be a kid growing up in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, but I read this book and holy cow" you know. It's those commonalities that really make things resonate with us. So, to me that's the number one thing you need for a story is, you need that human element.

Well what's important is always theme to me, theme is what's important. Plot comes in, plot should serve theme. So, if you are creating a thing, you want to talk about something that you think more people should be aware of or you think, "Hey this is something I care about and isn't it messed up or whatever" and you're telling your story, your plot should service that. Your plot should be what pushes people into getting your feelings or thoughts on that theme or whatever it is that you're trying to say. And then your character should also be designed to help facilitate that. I'll give you a really, really bad example ok because it's one that I think is really clear to me is there's a Jim Carrey movie called *Liar Liar*, right?

MK: Oh yeah, come on.

JO: Ok but if you look at it, it's about a guy who's full of shit who needs to improve himself. So, your character arc is super clear. We start the movie; he is a liar. He needs to become a better person and stop lying. Character arc is crystal clear. Once you take that into account you go, "Well okay well what's his profession. He's a lawyer, he lies for a living and that permeates his entire existence". So even though it's a simple, stupid little movie. It's a great example of looking at story and saying, "OK here's a great example of not only the problem, this is what a story needs to do. The story needs to show you a character and say here's the problem and here's how we could fix it. Over the course of our story, we'll fix this guy who's a liar". And then we go on that journey by the end he comes out, hopefully better. That doesn't mean you can do stuff like *Breaking Bad* where it's the opposite arc, but the idea is to show your readers or your viewers, "Hey look here's the situation and over the course things, come with me on this journey and I'll show you how we can fix it. Just trust me". And hopefully by the end you get there and it feels organic and it doesn't feel forced, it's not like all of a sudden in act three something magical happened that he just became a better person poof overnight. Hopefully it's a gradual journey but that's a crystal-clear version of a character arc showing like how do we get him from here to where he needs to be, to be a better person (Odjick 2019).

For Jay, stories and their reach have the ability serve as entryways into new experiences while showing the commonalities among people. The stories may be different, but their arcs are the same.

Jim Terry

Jim Terry (Ho-Chunk) is an artist known for his artwork on *Sundowners*, *The Crow: Skinning the Wolves*, *Crow: Hack/Slash*, and *Alice Cooper Vs. Chaos*. He has also written his own series *Edgebright & Leofwyn*. Jim is known for his dark horror comics. This was my first interview and my only in-person interview as I was back in his home base of Chicago at the time. He spoke about how he got his start in comics after making his own comic series.

MK: In terms of self-publishing and publishing and people's experiences. How did you even start doing?

JT: That was a big pain. Because this was before there were all these companies now that specialize in small runs. Back then you had to do at least 200 issues. And you had to go to a printer that never had done comics before. So, I had to tell them how to format them and all that. So, it was expensive. And there's a couple of stores in Chicago that will sell stuff on consignment. So, I found all those and left them copies. And then I would take those to the shows with me and sell them at the shows. So, even with all the man-hours involved, subtracting all the man-hours of work. I'm just drawing it, which is you know between four and six hours a day for a 22-page book. So, you multiply that, and then you spend all the money. Which was, oh jeez I think it was about $2 a book and I was selling them

for $3. And so that's about $400, $500 five you're putting out of pocket.

And you carry them to the show. And then you desperately to try to sell

them one at a time for $3 apiece. It can be a soul-crushing affair (Terry

2019).

All of this work was done just to make and sell his own comic, just a small step to get

started in the industry. He had to not only sacrifice time and money to get the comic

made, he had to teach others the process just to have it printed. What kept him motivated

was the end product, making his own comic.

I had never had my own book before. So, the idea of even doing one...and

then once I had done one, I realized I could do it. So, then I just kept doing

it. I think that if I didn't have the desire to hold a finished book in my hand

so badly. It would have been too daunting (Terry 2019).

The toll that it takes to create a comic, let alone to self-publish a comic can

be excruciating with little reward depending on a creator's motivation to create a comic.

JT: I always say to people if you don't absolutely love it, find something

else to do. Because it is not rewarding in any way other than gratifying the

love you have for it. It's not financially rewarding. It is not. You're not

going to get famous doing it. No, you're not. You know you're not going to

win the adoration of strangers you know (Terry 2019).

All this work is done for the love of the medium. While it was excruciating to create his

comic, his hard work paid off as it became an entry way for him into the industry.

JT: I had done an entire crime series of like six issues of this crime book.

And I threw it on James O'Barr's table when he was at a show. Just a

Xerox and I didn't hear, I just thought it was lost in the mass and maybe

three or four years later. I got an email from him saying he had looked at

what I'd done and liked it.

And so, he and I started talking and we had a lot in common as far as

mutual likes. We like the same old comics; we like the same old movies.

We became friends. And then when he got the opportunity to do

more *Crow* stories, he asked if I wanted to do one. And at that time, the

whole time I'd been doing my own comics. So, I had done probably I think

eleven or twelve self-published comics by then. And he said, "I think

you're at the point where you can do this professionally. Do you want to

do it?" And I said, "Yeah". And I've been working ever since (Terry

2019).

His collaboration with O'Barr became more than just his beginning in the industry but a

full circle moment as he read O'Barr's work and *Crow* series when he was younger.

> O'Barr's *The Crow* was a turning point for me – his book brought me to
> indie comics and blew the doors off what I thought a comic could
> be. Years later, I'd become friends with James and eventually work on *The
> Crow: Skinning the Wolves* (Figure 5.16). It was my first published work
> and still among the best things I've done (Parkin 2019).
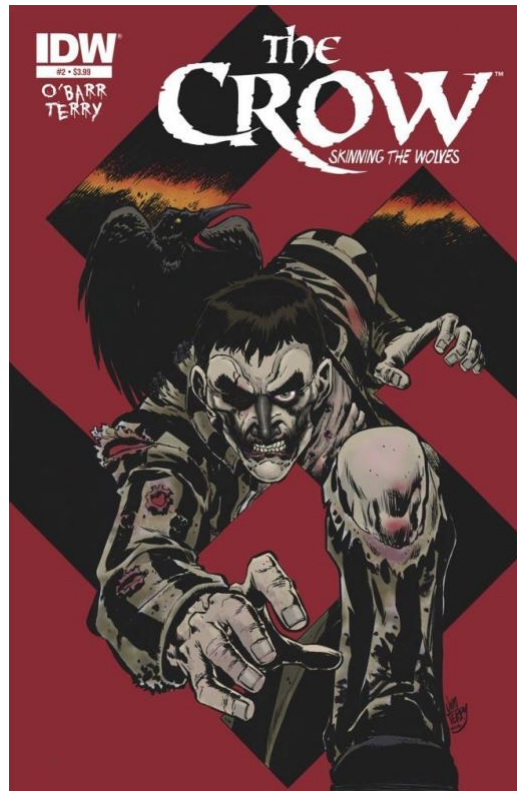
Figure 5.14: The front cover of James O'Barr's and Jim Terry's The Crow: Skinning The Wolves #2

Their collaboration taught him a lot about the co-collaboration process with Jim

learning from O'Barr's work style. He has also gone on to collaborate with major

publishers and has continued to self-publish his own stories. He spoke about the

differences between the two; their pros and their cons.

> JT: Yeah, I've worked with a couple of different ones. I've worked with
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> IDW, Dark Horse, Dynamite, Heavy Metal. I think that's it as far as bigger
>
> ones. I've worked with one in Britain, but I think they might be semi-self-
>
> published.
>
> MK: What do you feel the different is beyond the labor intensiveness, but
>
> creative freedom between self-publishing and working with another
>
> author, artist, illustrator, anyone else?

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JT: I mean when I self-publish everything is me. So, it's 1,000% freedom. Whenever I do something for a publisher I have to work with other people. Which it can have its rewards and it can have its detriments you know. I just always look at that stuff as work. You know I do the best job that I can and hopefully I bring something new to that table. And I am always out to impress with my work, but I don't take it as personally as I do work that I do on my own. So, I don't bother with reviews.

MK: (laughs) You don't?

JT: I just say, "Oh yeah, this is out." and I just leave it alone.

MK: And you just don't check? Ok.

JT: Yeah. I mean I'll find out if I get hired again. It means it was OK.

MK: (laughs) What like asking for forgiveness not for permission?

JT: Not quite. (laughs) It's like a guy told me once cause I've read the reviews when my first book came out and I was crushed. Because people were so petty that they didn't want to give the book a chance just because they'd never heard of me before. That was the level of expertise and critique that came. "I don't know who this guy is. I don't want to read this." That's it. I was like, "Well this is hopeless." And then there were good reviews as well. There are some that were really well-written and really, really moving actually. But my buddy said to me, "You know if you believe the good ones you gotta believe the bad ones." And so ever since that I've kind of taken it all and say, "Hey if you like this stuff you will come back. If you don't, thanks for reading it" (Terry 2019).

In order to not let external forces influence or alter his work, Jim avoids social media commentary as it, like publishers, can dictate what stories are made.

> JT: I have a successful writer friend who is obsessed with his social media, and what everybody has to say about his reviews, and what everybody wants from him. And his stories go in every direction cause he's trying to please everybody you know. And also, social media is affecting what stories are being told. That's why I don't bother with them. I dump my stuff and I split. Say, "Here I did this." and leave.
>
> MK: You feed it to the masses and run.
>
> JT: I feed it and then I just take off. You know because I don't need to know what everybody thinks about it. They can have that; they can have the work and think what they want and do with it what they want. It's for them.
>
> MK: Don't you ever feel like you want to give them context? Or like you're meaning or story behind it? Or does that not...you don't think it's as important?
>
> JT: I mean most of the context that I think is important is limited to what might be happening in the world, you know what the climate might be politically or whatnot. Those are the only context that would have any bearing on; otherwise my stuff is pretty straightforward. You know they don't need to have insight into what, into me. But for the most part I try not to let that stuff affect me too much because I've seen it pollute other people's writing (Terry 2019).

While many creators use social media as an extension of themselves and a space to promote their, for Jim it is primarily for the latter. When possible, he also tries to avoid digital methods and prefers to draw with ink; something which he believes enhances the art of a comic.

JT: You see paintings to me, not to everybody, but to me the beauty is getting close to one and seeing the brushstrokes. Seeing the life of it. You know a photograph is beautiful because of the composition and the lighting and the subject matter and what you, how you choose to frame that. That's what makes that beautiful. What makes painting beautiful is all that and the human element of the brushstrokes. I mean have you ever seen a Norman Rockwell painting? You've seen one printed a hundred times probably, but have you ever seen one up close? It's amazing.

MK: I don't know if I have seen one up close, but I will say the one thing I was thinking about up close that's beautiful is The Picture of Dorian Gray.

JT: Well, yeah. Yeah. Ivan Albright, he's amazing. You've been to the Art Institute; you've seen his stuff over there?

MK: Yeah.

JT: I used to roll my eyes at Jackson Pollock, right. "OK. Yeah. Great. Okay. Amazing." And then I saw one in real life. It was at a gallery and I just happened to walk past and said, "Oh I want to look at here and see what they got." And I walked in there and they actually had a Pollock. And I looked at it. And when you are, when I was facing it head on, I stared at it until I felt like I was travelling through it. I felt I was moving

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through the painting when I was looking at. It was a strange optical

sensation that happened. Which had never happened when I had just been

seeing one and reproduced in print. But seeing it with the actual levels of

texture, it felt like it was moving. It was amazing and made me change

when I thought about all of this.

MK: Well then what makes the comic medium I guess, like what's the

difference with the art there for you?

JT: All that stuff that I was just talking about the things that you can do,

that you can't do anywhere else. Like having somebody floating on top of

a word, you know. Or shifting gravity of perspective in a way that you

know would be intrusive in a film.

MK: Well what do you think about the actual technique itself. Like what

do you think about people who are just doing non-computer...people who

are...

JT: Traditional? That's how I prefer to work. I draw on the iPad. I did the

entire *Crow* book, this recent one *Crow: Hack/Slash* I did all four issues in

the iPad because I was penciling, inking, and coloring it in 30 days.

There's no humanly way possible I could have done all that tradition. So, I

had to adapt, and I had to do it and it looks a little sloppier than my

traditional brushwork. But you know most people can't tell. But me, I don't

know people make fun of me here sometimes.

MK: Really?

JT: My peers do. Yeah. Because I'm prone to saying you know real

dramatic things you know comics are a sacred duty. You know things like

that.

MK: (laughs) I don't think for people, especially who deal with

superheroes and things, I don't think that's that dramatic.

JT: Um, no. People who do it day in and day out don't see it as a sacred

duty anymore. Not generally. Most of us think of it as a grind and why do

we decide this is what we want to do with our lives, you know

(laughs) (Terry 2019).

The power of the images can tell a story all their own and transport the viewer. For Jim,

even the final image may be the same, the impact of these images can change based on

the method that is used. Depending on the schedule of the comic, these artistic choices

may be outside of the creator's control. What a creator can control is how the artistic

style the use to present their story, something that is important to Jim as he sees

creating comics is preserving a specific form of storytelling for future

generations. Something that is changing with the advent of newer technologies and

techniques to create comics.

JT: I mean like I said before there is this ridiculous photo-realistic trend

going on where the comics are trying to look like movies, right. Have you

seen that?

MK: I have but I'm wondering why you don't like it so much?

JT: Because I'll go to a movie, right?

MK: Can we talk about, this thing when people said about like

photographs and paintings like, "Why do we have two, let's just have one."

Why does it have to be...?

JT: Yeah. Why try and making a comic into a movie? Let it be a

comic. Why try making...Why would you take a photograph...I've never

been a fan of people who did photo-realistic painting. Especially when

they work right off a photo cause it's a photo already (Terry 2019).

Creators have blended techniques of film storytelling into comics for years, but this was

increased due to the rise of comic book movies in the early 2000s with the Marvel

cinematic universe. It is something that Jim is not a fan of as the two are entirely different

mediums and as such, so too are their ways of storytelling.

> Comics force you to connect dots, to read, to imagine more than a film
> does. Many folks don't even understand what panel order to read, and it
> seems like a waste of time to them, while it's in almost everyone's
> wheelhouse to sit back and be spoon-fed all sensory data by a film. They
> are entirely separate medias, though they bear so many similarities. That's
> why I cringe at "big budget comics" that try to look like blockbuster films
> and use gimmicks such as a rack focus or blur effect. If you want to see a
> movie, go see one! Stop trying to make one in your comic. There are
> things you can do that movies cannot! Okay, off my soapbox now
> (Kubinski 2013).

His distaste for art that is easy to replicate or does not have "the human element" he

enjoys stems from Jim's love of art and preference for it over text in comics.

JT: I mean I still read comics. I still read them. But mostly I'm attracted to

art now. More than anything because the trend right now is that writers are

the superstars, and the artists are the footnotes. And me being an artist, I

love art just for art's sake on occasion.

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And you know for throughout the 2000s there's so many books where it's just pets talking to each other. Dialogue...it was TV writers. Television writers who are writing comics; what they wanted to be doing is writing TV. So, it's a lot of dialogue a lot of...

MK: Oh, are you talking about during the writer's strike? Or just generally?

JT: No, I'm just talking in general in the 2000's.

MK: Oh, that's interesting.

JT: There were a lot of them. A lot of the hot writers in the 2000s were guys who had done TV. And then they discovered they could be megastars of comics. And so, you have you know a *Daredevil* issue where it's eight pages of them having a courtroom discussion. It's boring. It's just talking heads and they would just Xerox their heads so they wouldn't even redraw them. They wouldn't change the facial expression; they might do a little different crease here and there but mostly it was just...OK this is like a storyboard. This is just a storyboard with dialogue done.

It's not comics. And when I read that Will Eisner where he was incorporating the onomatopoeias into the art. And when a guy was cold, his air was...his dialogue balloon would be dripping icicles. You can't do that in any other media. You can't do that in a movie. You can't do that in…you can but it'd be weird. You can't do that in prose. You can describe how cold the guy is.

Now in a movie you can have music and you could have him shivering.

But only in a comic can you represent it in such a way, and he took

advantage of every one of those little storytelling devices and that's

thrilling (Terry 2019).

As a unique medium, comics to Jim should use their own storytelling devices and not rely

on the technique of other mediums. Something that an inspiration of his Will Eisner did

and whose techniques he employs in his own work. When he first started reading comics,

he was not consciously aware of Eisner's techniques, but over the years as his love for

comics shifted, he took notice of them.

JT: You have to love the medium. Otherwise, try and write a screenplay.

You know or learn math. (laughs) Because this is a...even Jack Kirby said

comics will break your heart.

MK: Well, why do you love it so much?

JT: I think, I think it's changed over the years; the reasons I love it. When I

first loved it was because a cousin of mine had given me a box

of Amazing Spider-Man that he was too old for. And so, I read 'em and for

the first time I was able to read continuing adventures cause there was a

whole run. So, I read each month right after another. And I got to see this

character and live with this character. And I loved Peter Parker you know

he was a little nerd, and no luck with the girls, he was always broke. I was

like yeah (laughs) this kind of, my kind of hero. And one thing that

Spider-Man did and I'm going to get nerdy here.

One of the things that Spider-Man did was, he refused to give up every time anything awful was happening. Somehow, he found a way to persevere, and to a nerdy kind of loserish kid like I thought I was, that meant a lot.

And then as I got older you know comics became something that was just a part of me to a degree. Part of my identity. I went to the store every week, and then they got...you know *Sin City* came out and that was exciting; *Hellboy* and I started getting into the horror comics more. And there's a point in the mid-2000s where I was burned out on comics and I didn't read superhero comics anymore. You know they just didn't speak to me anymore. And I wasn't really getting hooked by anything that was going on. And I picked up a book by Will Eisner called *New York* (*The Big City*), and it was a collection of I think 4 novellas that he did. And it was all just about life. It was all just little O. Henry type short stories of life with ironic little twists at the end. Just nothing I'd ever seen in a comic before. And it was so moving to me parts of it, that I was crying when I was reading the book because the stories...I never knew that comics could do exactly that. I knew they could be inspiring and fun and thrilling, but never quite as profound as I found that book. And after that I saw that Will Eisner worked with a brush. So, I bought a brush and I started learning how to use a brush when I inked. And I don't know that book kind of, you know, I mean Spider-Man those superhero X-Men. Those books in the beginning, you know outsiders, outcasts, losers, whatever. I related to that

and then as I was an older man, I found a different thing in comics to

relate to and to aspire to. So, you know it's changed.

These comics changes his perception of storytelling and the ability that a

great artist can have to direct reader through a story.

JT: Even the breakdown of the page, how you read it, and how it's

composed is dictated so that if a skillful storyteller can sort of slow you

down as you're reading it. So, you know more dialogue here so you're

paying attention to what's going on. And then, OK this is all action you

know so there are beats and each page has to end with something you can

turn a page on (Terry 2019).

Action that keeps the reader engaged within comics is based on the relationship between

words and images but to Jim, this does not have to be the case as he believes images can

do this on its own.

MK: Well, what do you think the relationship should be between text and

art. Should it be equal or...?

JT: Well so they're supposed to complement each other right. And it really

is a symbiotic relationship in comics. The texts and the art, it should be.

You know what I mean, you should be able to…I mean the masters can

tell an entire story without a single word. Will Eisner did it a number

of times in that book I told you about.

JT: Yeah. So, a master you can tell a story without a single word of

dialogue. The dialogue is there to help us along, right or to deepen the

story. You know because otherwise just great prose, right?

MK: I mean I agree but I'm also partial to silent films. So, I agree

with you, but I'm not supposed to be this biased. (both laugh)

JT: You can agree with everything I say I'm perfectly OK with that.

(laughs)

MK: I'm sure you are. I need to be a contrarian. But no, I agree. I think

that you can definitely tell more just visually.

JT: Well it's a visual medium.

MK: I think words can help supplement it.

JT: Well I've worked with people that write more dialogue, or I should say

I know people who write exorbitant dialogue in their books because it

takes longer to get through a book that way and they think that people feel

they've gotten their money's worth that way. So, a utilitarian use of

verbiage is not something I'm interested in. I mean writing it so that

people read it longer. Why? I'm little more I'm more of a…what's the word

I'm looking for? Maybe purist is not the word I'm looking for. There's this

artist whose name is Alex Toth and he became, he's sort of artists, artists.

Nobody likes him except other artists because he began to pare down his

work until it was just a few basic lines. And you always knew exactly

what it was, and it was perfectly composed. And beautifully centered, you

know I mean everything especially his use blacks. I mean it all looked

great. But it was so clean. And he was still like, "I'm using too many

lines." He was all about economy. And I am like that in storytelling. I'm

not like that at all in my art cause you know I like rendering the hell out

everything. But economy in storytelling I think is important. You know

unless the intent is to misdirect the reader in some way you know with

some boggy story and then bam something else is going on (Terry 2019).

Jim employs the idea of economy in storytelling as an artistic choice and

something he strives for in his work. Both an economic use of words and

powerful visual are important to Jim when it comes to a good comic, and he spoke

further about what storytelling and visual storytelling means to him.

MK: What does visual storytelling mean to you?

JT: I don't know. I mean I guess you could look at it as a delivery device

for information and ideas. I mean that's really what it is. It's...what do they

call corn? There's a word that people use.

MK: Maize?

JT: Yeah, but it's like corn itself doesn't have necessarily any vitamins or

nutrients. It's just a...

MK: It's just there?

JT: Yeah but it's used as a ...I'm not coming up with the right word. It's

used as a delivery device for other things. So, like you make it into a

tortilla, you make it into bread, you make it into whatever. And it's...and

so that's kind of what visual storytelling would be to me. I mean you could

say it's a delivery device for ideas and thoughts and information. So

historical you know, philosophical, inspirational hopefully.

MK: What do your stories tell?

JT: I try to tell an entertaining story first, but I also like to throw in my own little philosophy's in there. In a manner where you could take them or leave them. You know what I mean, I like to put them out there so that they're there. But they're not what drive the story. It's not so that I can hammer this philosophy into you. It's these things happen because this is my personal philosophy, and this is what happens (Terry 2019).

This insight is something that for Jim, can provide the reader with insight into his perspectives, but it is not needed to enjoy the story. While he primarily tells stories with his images, Jim is also a writer, a role that has evolved throughout his career.

MK: Do you like writing?

JT: Yeah.

MK: Why don't you do it more then?

JT: It's a status thing right now. I'm known more as an artist. You know if I were to start, the only way I'd, the only way people start writing is to either already just come in as writers. But once you're an artist you have to write your own stuff for a while and then people will take you seriously as a writer. And plus, I like drawing too much.

MK: You don't have to pick one over the other, I was just curious.

JT: I used to. All my 20s were spent being a writer. I barely drew.

MK: Was that the time that you were falling out with comics?

JT: Yeah. I think so. But I tried writing screenplays for a while. And I got to the point where one was almost, was getting ready to be produced and

they were casting. I mean it was, it got pretty deep in there. And they kept

asking me to rewrite it. And they asked me to rewrite it four or five times.

To the point where it wasn't even the story I started out with. And at that

point I realized that there's too many cooks in the kitchen for

that particular medium for me. So, I said, "Well how am I going to tell this

story how I want to. I mean I can draw. I should just draw it." And so, I

began adapting it into a graphic novel and that was the six-issue crime

story that I gave to O'Barr.

MK: What is it called?

JT: It's called *Lie Down Low*. It's only been self-published, it's never...I've

never brought it to anybody. It's aged poorly.

MK: Has it?

JT: Yeah, I think so. I don't know. I mean my art is not what it is now.

MK: Oh, ok. I was worried you were talking about the story. I was like,

"Oh god what happened?"

JT: Oh well the story, I probably wouldn't be as proud of it now as I was.

I'm such a different person now. You know. It's like people who, you

know once they hit 40, *Taxi Driver* should not be your

favorite movie anymore. You know what I mean? It's a great movie but is

it my favorite? It might have been when I was an angry 20-year-old. But

you know now that I'm you know quite an old man. It doesn't quite touch

me the same way. (laughs)

MK: Yeah. I had our time when I was describing to people how much I liked *A Clockwork Orange* when I was like 18 and they were very confused.

JT: Yeah. It's like *Taxi Driver*, *Fight Club*. It's not, you're not allowed to have those be your favorite movies after your 40. It's not allowed (Terry 2019).

While he wrote the story, his relationship to the stories have changed over time while the story itself remains constant. He spoke further about how his experiences with stories have shifted over time and how that impacts his understanding of them.

JT: I mean I still enjoy those movies. *Fight Club* maybe I enjoy not as much but...

MK: You know it's 20 years old this year.

JT: Oh God. Yeah, I'm old.

MK: I'm sorry. Not to age you, just in terms of like '99 it was a great year for film.

JT: Yeah it was. But I would re-watch *Eyes Wide Shut* which also came out in '99 way sooner than I'd re-watch *Fight Club*.

MK: That's a little...I mean *Fight Club*, you should re-watch both and you should listen to Filmspotting's reviews on them. Do you ever listen to them? It's really good [and] they just today released their review or discussion of it.

JT: I've watched that movie several times over the years and each time I felt differently. It's an amazing movie. It's an enigma of a movie. It's unreal. I've never had such different reactions watching a movie upon repeat viewings. It's an enigma. It's really an amazing movie.

MK: I agree. I need to...I haven't re-watched it in a couple years.

JT: It's time for a re-watch. The first time I saw it. I wanted the thrills. That I was expecting you know I wanted...

MK: I don't think they knew how to market it.

JT: It was this, it was very sensationalized and I was into, at that time I was into a really hard-hitting avante film. And I was like, "Oh Kubrick is doing like a you know sort of a scandalous movie I got to see this." And I was disappointed cause I was like, "That wasn't...I don't even know if I understood that." When I saw it again after I got married and I was a jealous person when I was newly married. I was insecure you know I got married way too young. And I watched it and I was like, "How can she be so manipulative to him. This is awful. And yeah, I don't blame him for wandering around angrily. I relate to that." And then I got older and also like a lot of things have changed in my life. And I was like, "This guy is such an asshole. He is such an asshole. Of course, she is going to mess with him because he's asking for it. Look it, right there he's dancing in front of the girl right in front of him. What's his problem?" I've never switched allegiances or felt so powerfully different each time. And the last time I watched it you know I'd gone out through a divorce and everything

and I was like, "You know this really is a love song to fidelity. That's what

this whole movie is about."

MK: That's where you're at now with it?

JT: Yeah. It's you know stay the course. You know all of the grass is

greener, I mean that's what the whole movie is about. If you wandered too

far off the path you're going to get, scary shit's going to happen to

you (laughs) (Terry 2019).

It is not surprising that he was drawn to the storytelling in *Eyes Wide Shut* as he Kubrick,

like Eisner, is an inspiration to him, "I would look at work by guys like Kubrick for

visual aesthetic […] film is very connected to my work; be it visual or the thematic

influences" (Kubinski 2013). Similar to Kubrick, Jim's work and relationship with it has

changed over time and it will be interesting to see how continues in the future.

Conclusion

All of the life histories above present individualized and personal experiences,

though there are many overlapping trends between creators. Every participant involved

has attended, participated, and showcased their work at Indigenous Comic Con or

Indigenous Pop X. Through their own comics, each creator presents different ways to

make Indigenous comics, challenging ideas of what an Indigenous comic is and what

stories that an Indigenous creator "can" tell based. I argue that these constraints are

imposed on creators by outsiders, much in the same way that occurred when outsiders

placed definitions on what Indigenous literature is and is not (Forbes 1987). These

constraints continue ideas of who can speak for who and how; something which these

creators challenge through their comics. Together, I argue that the creators in this

research present multivocality in Indigenous comics and highlight that there is not a single definition of what an Indigenous comic is or type of story that can they tell. These ideas are discussed further in the following chapter where an analysis is giving of the life histories of creators which are broken up by the stages of comic book making and themes.

Chapter Six: Analysis

Introduction

Within this chapter, I provide the analysis of the life history of creators by placing it within the framework of the three stages of comic book making: story creation, storytelling, and story production. This format was chosen as the stages of comic book making are part of the foundation of this research, but it also allows for individual experiences to be examined while simultaneously presenting group experiences. Throughout the analysis, I explore how making Indigenous comics can serve as a form of rhetorical and visual sovereignty and works to decolonize mainstream comics. Once the individual and group analysis is complete, I provide a breakdown of experiences through examining the themes of this research.

Story Creation

What pressures do Indigenous creators experience when creating comics?

When creating comics, Dale experienced what I argue is both financial and external pressures. His utilization of Kickstarter to fund *Hero Twins* and attempted campaign to fund *REZ-LUV* are means of subverting the power dynamics of the publishing industry and instead turning to the readers themselves to support work they want to see. As seen with Dale's experiences, this is a risk as the project does not come

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into fruition and comics can be delayed due to lack of finances. However, when the project is funded, they are autonomous projects done without the influence and input of publishers.

His other pressure when creating comics is external pressure from Navajo community members and their reaction to his *Hero Twins* series. Reaction to his series brings about debate about who owns stories. While for him, the story is his own and is "based in Navajo tradition but that's as far as it goes," he notes that others believe that he "shouldn't write stuff like that because it's taboo on the reservation" (Deforest 2019). I believe this comes from a misunderstanding that stems from the story being inspired by rather than based on the Diné Bahane', yet even then, that is based solely on the external pressure Dale has experienced. The topic of who stories belong to—individuals or communities—is much larger than this thesis and deserves academic attention in the future. What I can say is that while Dale has experienced external pressure to reshape his story or to not tell it at all, his refusal to do so is a form of sovereignty. He continues to tell a story as a form of artistic expression while also inspiring readers to research and learn about the hero twins themselves.

Keith's pressures consisted primarily of internal and external pressures he placed on himself and were placed on him. Both items which I believe stem from his desire to make *The Heroes* an educational tool. As the creator of the comic, he is serving as the steward for the story and as such, he needs to ensure that the story is told in an accurate manner which means that it is told in the same way it was told to him and his grandfather before him. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy's eighth tenet notes that "stories remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities"

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(Brayboy 2005, 439), something which I argue encapsulates *The Heroes* series. Keith notes that his intention for the series is "to actually get it out there and let the younger generation get a hold of this story" because it is being forgotten and "it's something we should keep and keep passing it down" (Gonzales 2018). One way to combat the story's erasure is to continue sharing it orally and in other mediums like Keith's comic.

The comic and its story not only act as an act of resistance against settler-colonialism's aim of erasing Indigenous people, but it also works to connect or reconnect Navajos to the land. Keith situates the series in the Southwest with intentionally recognizable landscapes to connect people to the story and the story to the land. He notes that "there's some places around our reservation apparently that the hero twins were, and it's cool to see that the story was there" (Jim 2019). Navajos reading the series are able to see familiar places and create connections with the story, the land, and their tribal identity. This form of education extends to non-Indigenous people, but the educational takeaway is different. For Keith, he uses the series as an entryway "to let non-Native people see […] see what our culture holds" (Easterling 2018). It is a similar goal that the exhibits at the National Museum of the American Indian where "Native visitors may recognize storytelling traditions" and "non-Native visitors are invited to learn about them" (King 2011, 92). His comic serves multiple educational purposes for different audiences by presenting non-Indigenous with representations of Navajo people that are told from a Navajo perspective as well as sharing the hero twin stories with Navajo people who may be unfamiliar with it.

Weshoyot similarly experienced both internal and external pressure making her comics, but they come from a different source. I believe a source of both internal and

external pressure when creating comics for Weshoyot comes from her using the comics she is involved with to present Indigenous representations. This began as an external pressure of others expecting her to create and work on Indigenous comics regardless of this is what she wanted to do or not.

> "I had people expecting romanticized Native work from me, and I really got uneasy whenever that came up. My goal as a comic artist was to be as good as the leading males in the industry and be diverse in the types of books I was suited to illustrate" (Lindstrom 2019).

Weshoyot fought back against these pressures and expectations early in her career through refusing to participate in Indigenous comics at all. By refusing to work on comics that perpetuate negative Indigenous stereotypes, I believe that Weshoyot denied comic book publishers the opportunity to use her and her work as a means to validate this type of imagery. If she as an Indigenous creator used negative stereotypical imagery, it creates the facade to the public and publishers that she approves of them, a move which would aide in the perpetuation of their usage. Instead, she denied people this opportunity and later in her career when she made Indigenous comics, she used them as a means of self-representation. This is an enactment of TribalCrit's fourth tenet where rhetorical and visual sovereignty are manifested through self-representation while also making space for more imagery to combat harmful stereotypes.

While this was part of her experience in comics, her actions work to decolonize what is expected of Indigenous creators and can hopefully alleviate similar pressures that other Indigenous comic creators experience. When she began to work on Indigenous comics, she still continued to feel internal pressure

when creating comics, specifically when she began to work on Indigenous comics like *Sixkiller* that focused on a tribe other than her own. She worked through this pressure through self-reflexivity as she notes that "if I miss something, I hope that a future dialogue can be brought up to discuss better ways to create or represent" (Pratt 2018).

She continues to create comics and use them as a way to begin a dialogue with a primarily Indigenous audience as a means of representation and healing. Her work on visual narratives such as *Ghost River: The Fall and Rise of the Conestoga*, *When Rivers Were Trails*, and *TOYPURINA: OUR LADY OF SORROWS*, work to shed light on Indigenous historical events that are rarely discussed. It is an enactment of TribalCrit's fifth tenet that seeks to prioritize knowledge and experience through an Indigenous lens. I argue that the stories she helped curate for *Deer Woman: An Anthology* are used as reparative acts. They are told to educate those unaware of violence against Indigenous women about these realities while also using the stories as an act of empowerment and form of healing for individual and collective trauma (Kickstarter 2017).

Elizabeth worked with Weshoyot to create the anthology with the intention of presenting and sharing female Indigenous voices. During the process of creating comics, Elizabeth has experienced financial and publishing pressure along the way. When she started in comics, Elizabeth faced publishing pressure by having "limited access to big publishers," something that she still experiences and "for the first time ever this year" she is now working "with a big publisher" (LaPensée 2019). The lack of access to publishers I argue is an intentional act on

behalf of publishers in order to maintain and perpetuate control of the industry. It is done to maintain power dynamics where mainstream publishers hold the resources and provide them to creators who will maintain the status quo.

Having limited access to publishers is a common experience among creators, not just those like Elizabeth whose work aims to disrupt this system. She, like many creators, still face financial pressure when self-publishing or working with a small to produce her comics. Similar to Dale, Elizabeth has taken control over this area by turning to crowdfunding websites rather than publishers. Elizabeth's focus now when creating comics has shifted to an editorial one where she works to ensure that other creators do not experience some of the pressures she and others have experienced. She is working towards multivocality in the industry by "building capacity and providing opportunities for Indigenous writers and illustrators in comics" (LaPensée 2019). With the inclusion of more voices, there is a greater potential to challenge settler-colonial perspectives.

Similar to Elizabeth, Jay also works to change power dynamics and increase Indigenous self-representation within comics so that future Indigenous creators are empowered to speak out and create the stories they want without fear of repercussion. While this has not been an issue for Jay, he has experienced external pressure from publishers to illustrate Windigo for a story, despite the fact that he had already "worked on" a story about one "for four years" (Odjick 2019). Instead of working on a story that did not take into account or prioritize Indigenous perspectives, he used his autonomy and refused. Not all of his experiences and pressures were acts of refusal. Due to Jay's internal pressure to

create Indigenous representation both visually and linguistically, he created *The Raven* to fill in this gap.

The pressures Jim has experienced have overlap with the other creators within this research but vary in one distinct area. While the majority of creators in this research actively work on and create comics that include Indigenous characters, Jim's work primarily does not though many of his social media posts include imagery that promotes Indigenous activism. His comics work to present a different aspect of Indigenous comics by showing that creators can and do make comics that do not solely involve Indigenous stories, and creators should not be expected to make these stories based on their identity. I argue, that Jim's work contributes to this area and works to challenge expectations placed upon Indigenous creators.

When making comics, Jim experienced publishing pressure due to the lack of access to publishers when beginning his career. This was worked through by asserting his autonomy by presenting his work to creators and publishers at comic cons, but even then, he was at the mercy of those who he shared his work with to reach out to him about potential projects. In order to provide more equitable access to publishers and remove this pressure, I along with the creators in this research argue that an industry overhaul must occur. While all pressures are different, they all impact the story itself and how it is made.

Storytelling

Do Indigenous creators consider telling their story in a medium other than comics? If so, what were the mediums and why were they considered?

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Once a creator decides to bring their story into fruition, it must be decided what form their visual narrative takes. With Dale's experience of working in children's books, illustrations, and comics, he has options when deciding how he wants to tell his story. Like Jim, what is important for Dale's stories, regardless of the medium they are told in is artistic freedom. He seeks to have control over what story he is telling and how. I believe that his work in all of these mediums works towards filling the representation gap of Indigenous people within pop culture and to reach as wide an audience and possible. He makes stories in comics because of his appreciation for the medium and because he has the skillset for it. Comics are his primary medium to share his stories, and I believe for Dale, there are not stories that would be better suited for comics over other mediums.

For Keith, no other mediums were mentioned or considered to tell his story. This is not surprising considering that he has only worked on his series, but it will be interesting to see in the future with more experience if he expands into other mediums and what stories he tells. In contrast, Weshoyot has experience telling stories in games, children's books, and comics, and it was when she decided to pursue a degree in higher education that she answered this question. While she originally wanted to tell visual narratives in animation, training, and education in animated was far too costly with too few prospects, so she turned to comics. It was the next logical step for her as "comic book pages [look] like animation storyboard" and they present stories in similar manners (Alvitre 2019).

The stories that she tells in any visual medium do not vary, something which changes with her collaborations with Elizabeth, as Weshoyot brings the stories to life through her artwork in a medium that Elizabeth has selected. This is of particular

importance to Elizabeth as she believes some stories are appropriate to share in comics while others are not. Stories that involve readers to have agency of how the story progresses are best for games as the reader is truly a co-creator of the story. This style of storytelling works for Elizabeth's and Weshoyot's game *When Rivers Were Trails* where players have multiple options and create the direction for the story. But for Elizabeth when she makes stories where the creator is guiding the reader, these stories are best told in comics. She spoke about Deer Woman as an example of a story that would not be suited for games and as such, she would not make the story that way.

> EL: comics are a safer space for particular stories, such as Deer Woman.
> Personally, I would not design a game where players can be Deer Woman,
> but I do encourage her being represented through comics, including in
> the *Deer Woman: An Anthology* comic collection (LaPensée 2019).

This is done as a way to treat the story with care while still sharing it with others. Similar to Elizabeth, Jay finds that some stories are best told in one medium over another. It is not the story itself that dictates the medium in which stories are told but rather who his intended audience is. When he wants his work to be accessible and to reach a broad audience, he shuns comics and defers to telling stories in children's books. This is due to what Jay calls "the distribution and the availability of comics as well as the price, are what holds that back from it even being remotely competitive" (Odjick 2019). Because of this, comics are not Jay's first choice when trying to use visual narratives as an educational tool, and instead, he turns to larger publishers who have the capacity to ensure that his story reaches as many people as possible.

Jim found that telling stories in other mediums such as film, involve too many perspectives that comprise the story. When he began to tell a story as a screenplay, he was asked "to rewrite it four or five times," the story was no longer what he sought out to write "and at that point I realized that there's too many cooks in the kitchen for that particular medium for me" (Terry 2019). For him, the only way to preserve his artistic freedom and the integrity of the story was for him to "adapt it into a graphic novel" by himself (Terry 2019). Since then, Jim continues to tell stories exclusively in comics where he controls who he does or does not collaborate with and on what. A creator's choice of medium to tell stories I argue is a personal one, due largely what a creator's intention is for their story.

As a medium, comics provide a unique medium that others do not. Unlike television and film, comics do not require multiple people such as a cast and crew to bring the story to fruition; it can be completed by just one person. Unlike children's books, independent comic book creators have the opportunity to create and share work at comic conventions, something that is not widely accessible and available in children's books. In addition, while children's books cater to children, comics can be written for any and all ages, genres, and audiences. While all tell stories through a combination of visuals and text elements, it is only through comics that a creator can make a story by themselves while still reaching the public.

Story Production

Why do Indigenous creators choose to publish their work in the manner that they do?

The way in which a creator publishes their work impacts how the story is made and who it reaches. Creators may change the manner in which they have published their

work base on positive or negative experiences, access to publishers, and finances. The last area Dale has experienced with his *Hero Twin* comics. He initially self-published the series with financial support through Kickstarter, and once this was secured, he was able to remake the series with Native Realities. Throughout both modes of publishing, he was able to maintain control over his work, how it was told, and the final product—a concern that causes many to turn to self-publishing rather than collaborating with publishers.

That is the case for Keith who opted to self-publish his work as an intentional act of sovereignty to present the story in the way that he believes it needs to be told. As he does not want to risk the story being altered, he purposefully chooses this method of publishing and has not attempted any others. His fear of having his work edited is real, but luckily has not been the case for Keith and Weshoyot though unlike Keith, she has worked with publishers to make her comics. Part of the reason that this is the case is Weshoyot being selective about who she chooses to collaborate and publish with. She works with individuals and organizations that actively work to promote and prioritize Indigenous perspectives and ensure she will have artistic freedom over how she tells stories.

She is not alone in being selective about who she chooses to publish with as Elizabeth also chooses to only work with publishers who have the same mission of creating space for Indigenous creators both as creators and as editors themselves. When creators do this, they are challenging existing power dynamics that do not privilege Indigenous voices and are building a community that supports current and future creators. Jay works to build this community by also being intentional with his choice of publishers, but by also speaking to publishers about the unfair treatment of creators. While he still

works with small and large publishers, Jay still works on his own books to self-publish as passion projects. He is not alone with this as Jim also works with large publishers on projects for his career and works independently on comics that are personal to him. During the comic book making process, creators generally have agency over how they publish this work, this is not the case when they do not have access to work with publishers on their work.

Themes

Within each creator's section, the themes of access, artistic freedom, collaboration, education, multimodality, representation, and stories evolve as we evolve arise to varying degrees with as few as four themes present with some creators and all themes present with others. While all distinct, the themes in this research are dependent on each other. When one theme is discussed, it dictates how frequently and what other themes arise tangentially with it. An example of this can be seen in the theme of artistic freedom; when it arises it, is more likely to be associated with, but not necessarily always, with the themes of access and multimodality. For example, if a creator seeks to maintain artistic freedom over their comic, they may choose to self-publish in order to maintain control of it, but in order to do so, they first need to have access to the resources of time, finances and an audience to support the project via crowdfunding websites. Once all the resources are acquired, the creator must be multimodal (or have the skillset) in order to bring the comic book to fruition. Within this section, an analysis of the themes will be done by 1) defining each theme; 2) discussing examples from individual creators; and 3) examining communal experiences between creators. The communal experiences are not meant to be representative of all Indigenous creator's experiences, but rather,

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showcase the similarities between these specific creators. Themes are discussed in alphabetical order and not in order of importance.

Access

Access refers to a creator's ability to obtain multiple resources throughout the comic bookmaking process. This refers to financial resources needed to purchase materials and/or the ability to hire collaborators in order to assist in creating comics, the ability to reach publishers and audiences and to connect with the public for support via social media and crowdfunding websites. When asked about the pressures she experienced during the creation of her comics, Elizabeth noted one main source being financial pressure and "just having the money to do it at all" (LaPensée 2019). She is not alone in this as Keith spoke about the issue of obtaining the finances to attend comic cons in order to reach an audience and distribute the comics once they are finished.

> MK: What show is your next show?
>
> KJ: Well, we're trying to get into Santa Fe; not Santa Fe, Albuquerque, New Mexico. They have one in January. We went last year; it was awesome but we're trying to get it again this year if we can. We got lucky actually, a table opened up at the last minute. We're trying to get the application going but we kind of don't have the funds to send it with it. So apparently, they do that. Yeah, others they, you fill an application and if you get accepted then you pay them, but this was different (Jim 2019).

If a creator does not attend comic cons, they cannot sell their comic, yet how can one pay for transportation, lodging, and fees to attend without first having revenue from their comics? Creators are in a bind dictated by their access to financial resources; something

which extends to the ability to collaborate with fellow creators. Dale spoke about his desire to hire artist Shaun Beyale (Navajo), but due to the lack of funding for his Kickstarter, this collaboration is currently on hold.

> DRD: I tried, I launched a Kickstarter for another project I was working on and I wanted to hire Shaun Beyale for and that was for *REZ*LUV*. Well, that story was gonna be rebooted and […] the Kickstarter failed, it wasn't funded. I thought it had a ton of potential but again I just couldn't get that Kickstarter project off the ground. And I'm going to try it again here soon, once I get more of my ducks in a row and my friend Shaun, Shaun Beyale, he's currently living in Arizona. So, it's kind of a lot harder for me to communicate with him, but he's been on board since day one. And I'm going to try it again here soon, once I get more of my ducks in a row. I have a hard time asking someone, "Hey can you do this work for me on spec" and so because I don't have any money for this project. But I have, I have the story and I have the motivation. I just don't have the money. You know I'm not going to ask Shaun to work for me with the hopes that it will be funded. That's just not fair (Deforest 2019).

While it did not work out in this situation, these sites work to shift power dynamics from having publishers dictate the stories that are made to instead placing it into the hands of the audience and creators themselves. In addition, crowdfunding websites and social media platforms can also serve as a place for Indigenerds to make connections and build a community. It is because of online platforms that Dale and Shaun are still able to collaborate. It was also online that

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Keith met his collaborator for *The Heroes* comic, it was in "a Facebook group that connects artists and writers" (Easterling 2018). Creators use these spaces to collaborate on projects, but they also use them to support and promote the work of their peers. Something that works with Elizabeth's goals as she notes

> I have been more interested in building capacity and providing opportunities for Indigenous writers and illustrators in comics, [and] because of that, I've focused more on grant or crowdfunding and editing collections with a myriad of voices (LaPensée 2019).

Online crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo provide creators with access to financial capital to create or produce their works, yet in order for their campaigns to be successful, creators need to have a pre-existing fanbase and the ability to reach new audiences in order to promote and finance their work. These platforms can serve as an alternative to working with or for publishing houses but are still contingent on the support of others according to Jay.

> JO: Kickstarter, crowdfund[ing], Indiegogo…that could reach a lot of people, but you need a certain cache in terms of a[n] existing fan base I think in order to be able to pull that off (Odjick 2019).

Without some online presence, the ability to reach an audience and fund a campaign becomes impossible. Crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo provide "the access to reaching larger target audiences and also obtaining financial backing for your projects" something that "is way easier than it ever was" (Alvitre 2019). However, as Weshoyot notes the potential ease of access leads to more competition as more creators use them and social media platforms to reach out to publishers.

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WA: When I first started in comics, basically the only way to get a job in

comics was either to know somebody that was already working and you

could sort of slip your portfolio through all these imaginary levels of

security to get to the higher-ups in order to get work. And it's as easy as

sending out a tweet now to an editor or a writer in order to communicate.

It's way more instant now, there's way more competition I think, although

it's also much easier to discuss something with an editor or writer if you

reach out on Twitter or social media or even by email (Alvitre 2019).

It is through these "imaginary levels of security" that the power structures and power

dynamics are maintained with the same groups of people remaining in positions of

power. When starting out in the industry, it is not atypical to have a lack of access to

publishers. It is something that Jim also experienced.

JT: I had done [my own] entire crime series of like six issues of this crime

book. And I threw it on James O'Barr's table when he was at a show…and

I didn't hear back. I just thought it was lost in the mass, and maybe three

or four years later, I got an email from him saying he had looked at what

I'd done and liked it. And then when he got the opportunity to do more

Crow stories, he asked if I wanted to do one. And he was like, "I think

you're at the point where you can do this professionally. Do you want to

do it?" And I said, "Yeah." And I've been working ever since (Terry

2019).

While access to publishers can be limited as seen in situations similar to Jim's, they can be the start of new collaborations. As is the case with Jay, his access to publishers was the result of a happy accident that became the start of his comic book career.

> JO: I started out in comics and…I had done my own black and white self-published mini-series called *The Raven*, and then I started going to comic conventions to promote it and try to hustle it. But rather than get a table and in artist alley at the cons like a lot of people do, I got a publisher's booth. So that kind of put me in the mix with all the publishers, and I was going to all the afterpart[ies] and stuff because you get invited to all that if you're a publisher. So, I made a deal to bring the property over to Arcana (Odjick 2019).

Once the hurdle of getting access to publishers is dealt with, creators then grapple with how to ensure that the public has access to their product. For Dale, this was able to happen "once the Kickstarter *Hero Twins* had gone through and [he] set it up for sale at the first Indigenous Comic Con, it caught a lot of eyes" (Deforest 2019). For Jay, the comic industry's insufficient distribution system is a reason why instead chooses to create stories in other mediums.

> JO: If you look at like for example with *Bear for Breakfast*, you can walk into any Wal-Mart any Chapters Bookstore, Indigo bookstore in the country and find it and it's on the shelves and it's in Algonquin. You cannot replicate that with a comic book. The comic book industry is so beholden to an archaic vulture system of old Diamond distribution monopoly and we shipped directly to these stores, the comic shops. And

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you can't find comics like when I was a kid and you went to a corner store

and there was like you know a spinner rack. Those days are gone right. So,

unless we're talking about some like digital revolution that hasn't yet or

something; the business of comics, the distribution and the availability of

comics as well as the price, are what holds that back from it even being

remotely competitive (Odjick 2019).

Building on this, Jay talks about access to resources on reserves, a concern that is

specific to Indigenous communities.

JO: I think for Indigenous comics to really become an effective learning

and teaching tool; we need a better distribution system; we need a better

way to reach the people. Especially on [the] reserve because there's just no

way to get the books there (Odjick 2019).

Depending on a person's location, more often than not, comics are less accessible

than other visual narratives such as children's books or other mediums like

games. If they cannot be easily accessed by the public, they are not a viable

storytelling or educational tool. To circumvent this, a creator can choose to have

their work freely available to download or read, something which Elizabeth and

Weshoyot used for their game *When Rivers Were Trails*. However, in order to

support the project, a creator must have access to financial resources either

through grants, crowdfunding, or personal means to not only support themselves

during the project but for its distribution.

One of the most important resources that is often overlooked in scholarly research

on comics is the time to physically make and sell the comic. Creating comics is a time-

consuming process, and as such, finances are required to support one during this time but also for the acquiring of supplies, printing material, and the distribution of the comics. All items that Jim had to contend with when he made his first self-published comic.

JT: That was a big pain. Because this was before there were all these companies now that specialize in small runs. Back then you had to do at least like 200 issues. And you had to go to a printer that never had done comics before. So, I had to tell them how to format them and all that. So, it was expensive. And there's a couple of stores in Chicago that will sell stuff on consignment. So, I found all those and left them copies. And then I would take those to the shows with me and sell them at the shows. So, even with all the man-hours involved, subtracting all the man-hours of work. I'm just drawing it, which is you know between four and six hours a day for a 22-page book. So, you multiply that, and then you spend all the money. Which was, oh jeez I think it was about $2 a book and I was selling them for $3. And so that's about $400, $500 five you're putting out of pocket. And you carry them to the show. And then you desperately try to sell them one at a time for $3 apiece. It can be a soul-crushing affair (Terry 2019).

While anyone can tell a story, only those who have access to resources can create a comic in a timely manner and a comic that reaches a wide audience. For creators, the comic industry and its publishers are a microcosm of larger societal issues of power with the haves and the have nots. It perpetuates systems of oppression that pushes Indigenous narratives to the side while continually promoting dominant narratives of white

characters that promote nationalism—i.e. mainstream comics. Indigenous creators are using their agency to demand proper compensation for their work, for the inclusion of more creators in mainstream comics, and for the incorporation of Indigenous languages, characters, and storylines within mainstream comics. They are also working to decolonize the system by creating their own support networks from Indigenous Comic Con, Indigenous Pop X, Indigenous comic anthologies, and Indigenous publishing houses. Though the movement is relatively new, taking prominence within the last 15 years, the increasing number of Indigenous comic events, anthologies, and studies on the topic indicates that it is here to stay.

Artistic Freedom

Artistic freedom refers to a creator's level of control over their comic from story inception to its publication. It is a creator's ability to maintain control over their work can be seen as creators enacting rhetorical and visual sovereignty. These actions are "creative act[s] of self-representations that has the potential to both undermine stereotypes of indigenous peoples" (Raheja 2007, 1161). For some creators like Keith, having artistic freedom and control over how the story was transferred into a comic was vital; something that came up when he spoke of his decision to self-publish *The Heroes*.

> KJ: Well, there's maybe a couple reasons. You know one of them being that self-publish[ing] goes on your own standards. And then the other would be it's hard to get attention from the other big publishing companies. And then if you do, that's where they might try to alter your story. So, that is why I decided to do my own thing.

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MK: But you didn't have any experience with someone trying to alter or

change your stuff? Or like you just had an idea that you did not want

even [to] go down that route.

KJ: No, I didn't have anybody try to do that, but I went to a few cons

myself and I kinda met some of the other independent artists and they

would say the same thing. So that kind of just got my attention. And as far

as the stories I'm working on, I don't want it to be altered in any way (Jim

2019).

His decision to self-publish was to maintain that control and as a means to protect the

story. By doing this, Keith enacted TribalCrit's eighth tenet by preserving the story so it

can be passed down to future generations. The idea of protecting the story was important

to him as the comic is a retelling of the hero twins story and for him, needs to remain

historically accurate. When telling people at cons what makes his comic special, he refers

to the fact that "it's not altered in any way; it's the way my grandfather told me. That's

how I did it" (Jim 2019). While some creators choose to self-publish their comic to keep

creative control of a project, others have had successful relationships collaborating with

publishers where their artistic freedom has not been compromised. One of those creators

being Weshoyot.

MK: Have you had people or editors alter your work in a way that you feel

has affected the story or the story you intended to tell?

WA: Not really. I haven't really run into that too much; I was very careful

of the projects that I chose. I think for a long time I didn't want to do any

like Indigenous themed projects and then once I met Lee Francis and

Native Realities and saw that there was a Native publishing house, I felt

more comfortable knowing that he wasn't going to be pushing into

editorial decisions and allow[ed] a lot of freedom to what I would do.

Even working with a major publishing house like Kokila, they were so

open to trusting me; which I thought was crazy because I'm not primarily a

children's book illustrator. But they just had full faith in what I was doing

(Alvitre 2019).

Her decision to be selective about who she works with has benefited her artistic

vision as she has not had to succumb to the demands of editors, something which

she is grateful for. As she notes that "I've heard horror stories [with] editors

coming in and changing things, and the artist being incredibly unhappy with the

final product because it wasn't the vision that they had" (Alvitre 2019). Similar to

Weshoyot, Jay has also had positive experiences with publishers that have not

altered his story.

JO: With *Kagagi* and Arcana there was very little in the way of "you

should change," or "you should change that". I was allowed to do things

the way I wanted. I was free to just go do whatever I wanted (Odjick

2019).

He had creative freedom over the comic, graphic novel, and the animated show;

something that did not happen with his partnership with another publisher.

JO: For *Moonshot* it was completely the opposite. And one of the things

that I think in the second, I don't remember if it was the first or the second

one, but there was kind of some guidelines that we were expected to

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follow. And one of them was no contemporary Native issues (Odjick

2019).

An editorial choice that Jay did not agree with and ultimately chose his right to maintain

control over the story and left the project. Like Jay, Elizabeth has experienced both

positive and negative interactions with publishers regarding creative control of a project.

Her first comic book project saw her sovereignty infringed on as her Intellectual

Properties were taken from her.

> I signed contracts when I was first starting out and was told by people that
>
> I should be happy that anyone cared about any of my "ideas" at all.
>
> Unfortunately, the company used those Intellectual Properties to fund their
>
> in-house teams but weren't able to move forward with them when the
>
> company's goals changed. Having said that, because of the changes, they
>
> didn't fully develop the IPs into anything concrete, so they were
>
> contractually returned to me after the ten years stipulated in the
>
> paperwork. Ten years has been a long while to wait for getting the rights
>
> to those stories back.
>
> This experience has been a big part of why I've been working on short
>
> eight-page comics rather than characters and storylines that are more
>
> developed, because I've been afraid of dedicating myself to something
>
> that will just be taken away again. (LaPensée 2019).

A situation that has led her to ensure that it does not happen to others and now she

works to "ensure that new writers and illustrators have the same kind of chance I

had [but] where they continue to own their Intellectual Property" (IP) (Dueben

2017). Since then, she has been able to maintain artistic freedom not only of stories she creates but those she curates for anthologies. Something that she credits "Lee Francis IV and Native Realities Press for [making] the space he has given to Indigenous comic creators" (LaPensée 2019).

For creators, to maintain their artistic freedom is for them to have sovereignty over their work. When editors or publishers either stifle their original vision or change their stories, creators are no longer speaking for themselves. These are relationships that are based in unequal power dynamics that parallels the early ethnographies of Lewis Henry Morgan and Alfred Louis Kroeber. Creators who self-publish in order to have creative control of their work are enacting a form of ethnographic refusal where they are denying publishers to be the ultimate authority on their story and instead are reaffirming their own sovereignty as storytellers (Simpson 2014, 95-114).

Collaboration

Collaboration refers to the relationships that are forged between creator and creator, creator and the public, and creator and publisher; relationships that dictate how comics are made. As seen with Dale earlier in the Access theme, some collaborations fail to materialize due to a lack of financial resources. This attempted collaboration is an outlier and the collaborations discussed within this section are ones that have occurred. Jim collaborated with other creators to transfer their vision from a screenplay into a graphic novel, a relationship he viewed as less than reciprocal as they did not appreciate the art of visual narratives.

> JT: I was making money adapting screenplays for graphic novels. It was
>
> [for] people who had written screenplays, who didn't think they had a

snowball's chance in hell of getting it to a producer. And they thought,

"Oh comics are hot, comic movies are hot. I'll change my screenplay into a

graphic novel and then that way I'll have something to show producers.

And then the movie will get made." So it's like a roundabout backdoor to

getting into exactly what the story was intended for in the first place. But

as a detour through this other completely different medium. As a means

to get to the medium they really want (Terry 2019).

These collaborations were short-lived and worked to bring other people's stories to

fruition, not his own. With his work on *The Crow: Hack/Slash* series he collaborates with

James O'Barr to draw the series. This is common within the comic book making process,

especially within mainstream comics, as it would be too time-consuming for one person

to do it all. The production of *Kagagi* the graphic novel and animated series also required

Jay to work with a team. When he was "working in TV" he needed to work with the

network, "appease advertisers," and managed the production from animators to voice

actors (Odjick 2019). His collaborations extend outside of the show and to his work with

Scholastic and the *Ottawa Citizen*, both collaborations that have allowed him to share

Indigenous experiences with the public. Within comics, he is looking to collaborate with

someone in the future to help him bring his project *The Outsider* to life.

JO: I started work on a graphic novel called *The Outsider* and in my head,

I was like, "I want to do the whole thing myself. And then after like three

years of it not being out, I'm like, "OK well I better hire some people and

get it done." (Odjick 2019).

When collaborators are hired as a result of crowdfunding efforts, this is a type of

collaboration between the creator and the public. While the public may not collaborate in

the writing or drawing of the comic, they are performing a financial collaboration through

their contribution. A creator's work process will change due to collaborations as seen

with Weshoyot but also the stories that they tell.

> WA: If it's my own personal work, I generally am working with either
>
> stories having to do with tribal things connected to my own tribe, or me
>
> trying to work out themes within feminine viewpoints because I feel those
>
> are underrepresented in the industry. If I'm working with something that's
>
> written by somebody else, I think my goals are a little bit different. I'm
>
> trying to kind of do the best I can to bring to fruition the vision of the
>
> writer (Alvitre 2019).

While she is working to bring other's stories to life, without being aware of it she may

also be enhancing their work. Elizabeth notes that the collaboration process enhances her

work as collaborators build off of her story.

> Collaborations where I get to write and hand off the tough work of
> illustrating panels is awesome. It's no surprise to me that the comics I
> write for other people to illustrate end up much longer than the ones I
> know I have to illustrate myself (Dueben 2017).

Similar to Artistic Freedom, Collaboration serves as a form of self-determination where

creators decide who they want to work with and how. It is not only the standard mode of

operating within comics but also for the creators involved in this research; collaboration

ensures multivocality within a project. A writer and an artist might have the same idea for

a story, but due to their lived experiences, they will highlight different dimensions of it;

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thus, ensuring that multiple perspectives are seen in the final product. Collaboration is physicalized through social media platforms where in-person events like Indigenous Pop X and online communities support Indigenous comics. When Indigenous creators, Indigenerds, and the public work together to create and show the demand for Indigenous comics, they are challenging mainstream comic industry standards.

Education

Education refers to the use of comics as an educational tool and a means of cultural preservation. This is an intentional decision by the creator as a way to reach younger generations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, and share stories that creators feel need to be passed down. For Keith and his comic, *The Heroes*, that was the goal; "to ensure the creation stories continue for future generations of Navajos – and anyone else who is interested in such things" (McMurdo 2018). Weshoyot also ensures that her work in comics and games works to educate the public on often overlooked people and moments.

> MK: So how do you feel about whether it's children's books or comics or
> sequential art as a form of education, do you see that as effective?
> WA: Oh yeah. I think, I mean honestly and especially with the work that
> I'm doing with my own tribe, and also *When Rivers Were Trails*, which is
> the game that Beth (Elizabeth LaPensée) also worked on.
> Those projects were all very much tied into education. *Ghost River* is all
> [about] accessing historical ephemera and documents of the Paxton
> massacre and the Pamphlet war in Pennsylvania in the 1700s. And a lot of
> these projects to have like educational things written and lesson plans and

stuff for educators to use in the classroom. Especially in the major

publishing houses where they're using graphic novels and comic book art

in educational material to help kids, I think maybe grasp things that may

have otherwise been kind of boring to read about in like a history book

(Alvitre 2019).

Due to their visual/textual elements, her narratives engage both readers and non-readers

alike. While Dale did not originally set out to create an educational comic, but it was

through his collaboration with Dr. Lee Francis IV that this shift occurred.

DRD: The whole reason why Lee Francis had approached me after the

first Indigenous Comic Con, was that he saw that there was potential in

my work in terms of education. And he saw that kids were interested in

my book; kids were carrying it around.

One of the reasons that he started Native Realities [and] Indigenous Comic

Con was that it was a way to reconnect; it was a way to connect the things

you're a fan of to the thing...a sense of where you need to be as a human

being. And we're working towards getting *Hero Twins* published as a

graphic novel if I can finish some of these other parts. And we're working

on getting them into libraries. We want to make it to where you don't have

to pay for books, they're just available to you whenever you want to read

them (Deforest 2019).

Similar to Dr. Francis and Dale, Jay also sees the potential in children reading his work

and using visual narratives as a form of culturally responsive education, but comics are

not his preferred medium to do that. Instead, Jay turns to children's books and newspapers to reach a wider audience.

> JO: I had done some work for the *Ottawa* Citizen and then I said, "Look let's try something different. Would you give me, and I know this is a big ask, would you give me an entire page of the paper?" and they were like, "Sure what do you want to do?" And I said, "Let's do a full page of comics in the paper. So we'll do contemporary Native issues into only instead of an article, they'll be done in comics form " So we did that and I think their distribution was in the Ottawa area was probably like from what I remember, I dunno like 600,000 copies. So that's a way of reaching a wide array of people (Odjick 2019).

> JO: One of the things I enjoy about working in kids books and working with Scholastic is it puts me in touch with so many educators and then I can say, "How do we reach your students? How do we reach your kids?" And it's a much better way (Odjick 2019).

He believes his work in both children's books and newspapers reaches a wider audience of readers and can be accessed more easily than comic books. However, that does not mean Jay does not use his comics as an educational tool as he incorporates Algonquin language and mythology within *Kagagi*. He did this he says because "we're losing our language speakers at an incredibly rapid rate" (Kappler 2018).

Using comics as an educational tool is one way in which creators and their readership are decolonizing education. They provide educators and the public alike with options in terms of educational tools to use. Many creators use their comics as an entry

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point into tribal histories and languages, and it is up to the readership to continue their self-education from there. The metanarratives of history books and other textbooks are challenged as they are no longer the only "valid" form of data; comics are just as valid. Similar to the theme of Artistic Freedom, creators can enact a form of ethnographic refusal when using their comics as an educational tool by having the authority to decide what stories they choose to tell or not.

Multimodality

Multimodal or multimodality refers to the multiple roles creators take on during the comic book making process, and the outside professions that expand a creators work in visual narratives and support their ability to create comics. All of the creators have taken on more than one role when creating a comic; though some like Jim, Keith, and Weshoyot primarily work primarily as artists. When projects are self-published, creators are more like to take on numerous, if not all of the roles needed to complete a project. When creating his Kickstarter version of Hero Twins, Dale did the project all by himself.

> DRD: I write my story, put it into script form, and then once I have a
> script because the script again it helps me with structure because I can be a
> fluid artist and I feel really accomplished when I get it done. It's a huge,
> huge accomplishment when you get to that point of finishing a comic
> book.
> MK: Especially when you're doing it all yourself because you're doing
> your own lettering too, right?
> DRD: Oh yeah. That goes into me being a graphic designer; it kind of
> goes hand-in-hand with producing comic books for me (Deforest 2019).

Five out of the six creators said that they have a profession outside of making comics, all of these jobs involve storytelling from games to children's books to education. A trend that has not gone unnoticed by the creator of Indigenous Pop X.

> Especially Native folks, a lot of us have these multiple roles that we have to occupy all at once, simultaneously because there's the work and responsibilities that we have for our home communities (Francis 2019).

The creators in this research all have a skillset that extends beyond one profession, even within the comic industry itself. The ability to work in multiple roles and mediums speaks to a creator's adaptability and skillset, but also to their desire to tell stories in specific mediums. These different mediums will dictate what story is told and what skillsets is used. More largely, it speaks to the need of creators to work in multiple professions as comics do not properly compensate creators for their work.

Representation

Representation refers to the desire to have more Indigenous representation on the page and behind the scenes. When creators use visual and rhetorical sovereignty, they are in control of how they are represented with images and text to the public, something which is epitomized within comics. By making Indigenous comics, creators are speaking for and representing themselves, rather than having others do that for them. Within pop culture and comics, Indigenous characters, storytelling, and imagery have all been presented through a stereotypical lens. These images are what the creators saw as they grew up and often times became an impetus to create their own stories as is the case with Jay.

> JO: I didn't come across too many comics that featured many native characters as a kid. I never really felt like I saw anyone in comics who looked or acted like any native people and, as a kid, I found it weird even

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if I didn't understand why. I also didn't understand why there were
so few native characters on TV or in comics (Ad Astra Comix 2015).

With his comics, he works to not only present Indigenous characters but actively tries to

avoid "the stereotypes or tropes we tend to see associated with native super-people" (Ad

Astra Comix 2015). Something that Dale also experienced as a child.

> When I was growing up, I didn't see myself in anything that I was really
>
> into because I was really into Saturday morning cartoons. I was really into
>
> comic books, I was really into music, and I didn't see myself in any of
>
> that. The only way I could see myself in it was to do it myself.
>
> I still want to see myself more in what I do even though we're making it
>
> happen with like Indigenous Comic Con and all that. We're making it
>
> happen literally (Deforest 2019).

Changes in representation are happening as a direct result of Indigenous creators

making space for themselves individually and as a community. Elizabeth talks

about these systematic changes through collaborative efforts.

> Self-determination is key. We need more people who are currently in other
> areas such as film and music to check out games and jump into it right
> now. I know many talented Indigenous creatives who may be interested in
> contributing to these areas if they had workshops and funding
> opportunities geared towards that (Martinson 2017).

This funding is more likely than not, not going to come from mainstream comics as there

is little incentive for them to support Indigenous creators beyond marketing. While there

are many Indigenous comic writers, artists, inkers, pencilers, letterers, etc., there are far

fewer Indigenous people behind the scenes in positions of power. Something which was

felt by Jay when working on *Moonshot*.

JO: At that point we quit because I said, "It's not cool that you don't have

Native editorial and you need to have all Native people if you're going to

call this an Indigenous comics collection because it's not; it's a marketing

slogan" (Odjick 2019).

A way to fix this he sees is by not just having Indigenous-owned publishing houses but

one that has "the kind of reach" that can meet a wide audience (Odjick 2019). He has

taken work outside of Indigenous comics to show children that there are not just

Indigenous characters but there are also Indigenous creators behind the scenes.

JO: Well the only reason I did *Blackflies* and I said this at the time. I said,

"Look I don't need the money. I want to number one; I want to try to

create opportunities for other Indigenous creators cause I think this is

going to sell really well. Number two I want to provide Native kids with

positive representations of themselves instead of just being tokens or bad

guys or whatever" (Odjick 2019).

He wants to make sure that there are Indigenous creators hired to make comics

but that they are more than a consultant, a concern both he and Elizabeth share. Through

Indigenous comics, creators are making representations that speak for themselves and

address issues of under-/misrepresentation. This is vital as much of the imagery

surrounding Indigenous people in pop culture shows them in binaries of poverty or

wealthy from casinos, savage or wise medicine men. More often than not they are

portrayed as historicized or extinct. As such, it is important that comics are available to

counter these untrue ideas by having contemporary stories of Indigenous people set on

reservations, cities, and in suburbia; something that can be seen in Dale's and Jay's work.

But it is equally as important to have the games and comics that Elizabeth and Weshoyot make which depict historical events through a specifically Indigenous lens. Foundational to images in comics are that they "tell a story along a continuum of condensation and abstraction," something which is foundational in comics as (Ochs and Capps 1996, 21). Comics are based around the use of "recognizable symbols" to tell a story and in order to comprehend an image, "a commonality of experience" is needed (Eisner 2000, 8, 13). Indigenous comics seek to challenge what symbols are used in order for a character to be read as "Indigenous" as dictated by the dominant discourse (mainstream comics) and are instead replacing them with imagery from an Indigenous lived experience.

Stories Evolve as We Evolve

Stories evolve as we evolve refers to creators who make a comic, revisit it at a later date, and rewrite the story to reflect personal changes in their lives or address larger societal changes. It fits into TribalCrit's fifth and eighth tenets where "stories are the guardians of cumulative knowledges" and these stories are not static but rather "change, adapt and move forward with change" (Brayboy 2005, 434, 440). While stories serve as anchors for passing down Indigenous epistemologies, they can and do change over time, but this does not make it any less important. Stories and their meanings vary over time of and so too does a creator's relationship to a story. For Elizabeth, this can be seen in her revisiting of the comics *Fala* and *The West Was Lost*.

> Both of the digital comics that were created through the Comic Creation
> Nation Contest were brought out by the publisher. I signed contracts when
> I was first starting out. Unfortunately, the company used those Intellectual
> Properties to fund their in-house teams but weren't able to move forward

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with them when the company's goals changed. Having said that, because

of the changes, they didn't fully develop the IPs into anything concrete, so

they were contractually returned to me after the ten years stipulated in the

paperwork.

Ten years has been a long while to wait for getting the rights to those

stories back. With the IPs back, one has the opportunity to be developed

into a graphic novel thanks to the support of an acquisitions editor who

was interested in the IP and has been incredibly helpful in walking me

through the process of collaborating with a publisher. Although the

experience started out rough, I'm glad I had to wait, because I can now

approach the characters and stories with many years of both life and

industry experience (LaPensée 2019).

The life and industry experience will undoubtedly affect not only how she changes the

stories, but how they will be published. While 10 years is a long time to not have access

to her stories, the time has given her a new perspective. Elizabeth summarizes that

experience and this theme succinctly.

> As you grow you are given access by storytellers to more layers — 'add-
> on content' if you will — as you go along […] and as we experience our
> own life lessons, our eyes are closed but our ears are open to more
> teachings that reveal themselves. The storyteller is always telling the same
> story, we're just able to access more teachings from it
> (Ray Corriera 2014).

Jim had a similar experience with the movies *Taxi Driver* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, he also

experienced this with his own comic. When talking about his self-published comic, his

feelings towards it have shifted as the years have passed, not because of the integrity of the story but his shift in perspective.

> JT: It's called *Lie Down Low*. It's only been self-published; I've never brought it to anybody. It's aged poorly.
>
> MK: Has it?
>
> JT: Yeah, I think so. I don't know. I mean my art is not what it is now. Well the story, I probably wouldn't be as proud of it now as I was. I'm such a different person now. You know. It's like people who, you know once they hit 40 *Taxi Driver* should not be your favorite movie anymore. You know what I mean? It's a great movie but is it my favorite? It might have been when I was an angry 20-year-old. But you know now that I'm you know quite an old man. It doesn't quite touch me the same way (Terry 2019).

Dale experienced a similar shift in perspective due to him becoming a father; something that altered his storytelling style and relationship with his comic *REZ-LUV*.

> DRD: But when he [his son] came into the picture a lot of things changed; especially with my storytelling like I was telling you earlier about how *REZ-LUV*'s story is different now. And when I wrote *REZ-LUV* and when I produced that book, I self-published it. And when I finally got it out, it was great because you know it was a part of me and had a lot to do with me and where I came from and all that. But now, not so much. I'll tell you that having kids will have a huge effect on your storytelling and your work in general (Deforest 2019).

Though it is not the story he would tell today, his original *REZ-LUV* series serves as a time capsule of what he believed storytelling was at that time. His view on this has changed over time even though the comic itself has stayed the same. The physical comic itself is a fixed product, once it is published it cannot be changed, but a reader's reception of it can. This can be seen with narrative accrual where each time a story or comic is revisited, they "have the potential to generate a *multiplicity* of partial selves" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 22). The story will always be illusive to both the creator and the reader as each engagement with a story is "situated in time and engages only facets of a narrator's or listener/reader's selfhood" and with each subsequent revisit these impressions build onto one another creating a larger, new story (Ochs and Capps 1996, 22).

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This research contributes to the field of anthropology as the methods and analysis used can be transferred to other areas such as museology and museum studies due to the parallels between comics and museums. Both use the combination of visual and textual elements to tell stories that the viewer must interact with and interpret. Within museums, this can be seen with the objects themselves serving as the visual element and the object labels as the textual element. When taken together and seen through a comic book lens, labels and objects can be viewed as a panel, with labels serving as the text boxes or speech balloons and objects are the characters. Continuing to use comic terminology to describe exhibits, the mounting and placement of the objects serves as the border, a case of objects serves as a page of panels, and the exhibit as a whole is the book itself. Individual objects and panels can tell a standalone story, but their larger meaning comes from their placement and relationship to other objects and panels as they are meant to be read and experienced in their entirety.

By looking at museums through a comic book lens, I argue that it provides anthropologists with new insight into how viewers interact with objects, the exhibit, and how they create meaning between the two. In comics, the text does not describe the visuals or vice versa as it would be redundant for text to say for example, "it is a sunny day" in a panel where the sun is shining. Instead, the text and visuals work together as storytelling elements for the reader to connect and create a larger narrative. Curators and

anthropologists can learn from this and work to create labels that move beyond describing the history of the object and the object itself—which the visitor can see—and instead present connections by exploring how the object was used, how others feel about it, and if there are similar objects to it that people use today. A similar sentiment can be noted for the mounting of objects as the placement of objects can be used as part of the story itself, though this is often overlooked and underutilized for a variety of reasons like financial constraints and ensuring the safety of the object. If anthropologists and curators look at mounts as a method to set the stage for the story as comic creators use borders to enhance their story, more effort would be made to reimagine how objects are presented and more would be done to utilize them as an integral part of the object's story. Steps like these would work to engage the visitor to think critically about every aspect of the exhibit and the intention behind them.

With this understanding, anthropologists and curators can reconceptualize how objects, labels, and the exhibit space are used together to tell stories and become more effective communicators with the public. This research also contributes to the field of anthropology and museum studies by encouraging curators to consider presenting not just the objects themselves but to include object histories and the cultural production of objects from the creator's experience. Following this research's framework of prioritizing the creator's perspectives, it can present a more complex picture of the object beyond its function or aesthetic value and forces the viewer to connect with it and its creator on a personal level. This can be seen when a reader looks at *Kagagi: The Raven* for example. While on its surface it appears to be just another superhero story, which in the age of the Marvel cinematic universe is not uncommon, but when looked at through

Jay's perspective, it is much more than that. It is a comic that is about a superhero, but one seen through an Indigenous lens that seeks to (re)connects readers to Algonquin stories and languages. In its current state, this research contributes to the field of anthropology, but this can be pushed further with future research.

I urge anthropologists in the future to expand on this research by exploring the areas above but also to incorporate more perspectives that work together to have a fuller picture of Indigenous comic books. While it was a shortened time period, I was able to include multiple perspectives by including multiple interviews creators gave, their work, and giving creators the ability to provide notes on their life histories. In the future, this should be expanded to include perspectives of the attendees of Indigenous Pop X to unpack their motivations for attending the convention and their understanding of Indigenous comics. I believe that including the perspective of the comic book reader would provide an insight into the effectiveness of Indigenous comics as an educational tool. In addition, adding the perspectives of publishers was something that this research sought to include, but due to the compressed time period, this could not be done. Incorporating publisher experiences would provide insights into their motivations for creating Indigenous comics, what is needed for them to consider a comic to be an Indigenous comic, and how, if at all, these overlap with the creators themselves. The inclusion of more partial truths would provide more multivocality to the research as a whole and would illuminate how each party affects the comic book making process.

Also due to the compressed time period of the research, I could not include a visual analysis and object history of the comics themselves, something which I originally intended to do and believe would enhance this research. The visual analysis would

involve examining the semiotics of comics, the stories themselves, and how the final comic relates to its creation process. It recognizes the visual choices made by the creator and unpacks the formal elements of size, color, and lines to see how they contribute to tell the story. The specific techniques used for a visual analysis would involve looking at a piece that the creator felt was representative of their work, a piece of the creator's choosing, or a piece they are most well-known for. Once selected, a piece would be analyzed with a visual data guide that would capture quantitative data like the numbers of pages, panels, and characters in a story. But the meanings of stories cannot be quantified just by these numbers alone, I would also rely heavily on my interpretation and understanding of the stories. I would explore how the use of color, shapes, lines, and characters work together to build a story and how effective they are (Connors 2011; Kukkonen 2013). For color, I would look at what colors are used, if they adhere to color theories, and how they create the mood (Kukkonen 2013). For shapes I would look at the shape of the character, panel, and page and where they direct the reader's eye. For lines, I would look at the type of line that was used, where it was used, and how it was used to move the story along. And for characters, I would look at how the characters were presented, their size, and the number of their appearances.

The visual analysis would provide another perspective, that of the story itself, in this research and would be added to the object biography of the comics. Object biographies track the everchanging relationship a creator has with a comic as, over time, the comic has "the capability of accumulating histories" and the "significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected" (Gosden and Marshall 1999, 170). These histories can be seen with each stage of comic book making

from their inception (story creation) to their manifestation (storytelling) to their reception (story production). They would be placed within the life histories of creators and would add another perspective and insight into a creator's experiences.

While adding object biographies and visual analyses to each creator's analysis are areas that in the future, I would build onto this research, I urge future researchers to expand further and explore imagery within Indigenous comics. This could be done by looking at the images of the comics themselves and examining how successful the writing and visuals work together to effectively tell a story. This future research of imagery in Indigenous comics could also build onto studies of Indigenous stereotypes through a decolonizing lens. In order to truly use decolonizing methods for this research in the future, it would involve it to be even more collaborative by involving participants in the process to formulate research questions. By doing this, participants would be given more agency over the entire research process from start to finish—an act that would truly provide a shift in power dynamics.

Comics are more than just a book with pictures and words. They are a medium that connects with readers of all ages and literacy levels due to their textual and visual elements. It is one of the few mediums that creators and readers can connect, interact, and create a community with one another both online and in-person at comic cons. The readers of these works dictate the direction of where the industry is going, and with the increasing numbers of comic book readers identifying as Indigenerds, they are shifting power dynamics by changing the stories that are told. The experiences of creators within this research are a mirco-experience within the comic industry, and when taken together, they create a larger Indigenous comic book culture that is embodied at Indigenous Pop X

(Agar 1980, 224). However, they are not intended to encompass all experiences of Indigenous creators as each are unique and Indigenerd culture is heterogeneous. That said, an overarching trend within this research is that the comics are created to serve as counternarratives by providing narratives that are told through an Indigenous lens, stories that present fully realized (and sometimes flawed) Indigenous characters, and most importantly preserve tribal stories and Indigenous languages.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interviewee Name:
Date of Interview:
Location of Interview:
Date of Data Entry:
Occupation:
Tribal Affiliation(s):

Question 1: Did you consider telling this story in other formats, if so, what formats were considered and why?

Question 2: What does storytelling mean to you?

Question 3: How did these pressures affect your comic book creation process?
    a. Financial
    b. Publication
    c. Co-collaboration
    d. Internal (personal)
    e. External (communal)
    f. Other:

Question 4: What do you think about comics as a form of education (language revitalization, myth continuation, history)?

Question 5: What is your creative process when you create comics yourself? (panels, idea, words, pictures?)

Question 6: What do you think about comics as a form of culturally responsive education for language revitalization, history, sharing myths, etc.?

Question 7: How have you previously published work before? (Please select all that apply)
    a. Self-published
    b. Small independent publishing firm
    c. Large/Major publishing firm
    d. Digitally
    e. Other:

Question 8: Why did you choose to publish your work this way?