

GRAPHIC



Edited by
Frederick Luis Aldama

INDIGENEITY

Comics in the Americas and Australasia

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Contents

ix **Nourishing Minds and Bodies with Indigenous Comics: A Foreword**
Lee Francis IV

xi **Graphic Indigeneity: Terra America and Terra Australasia**
Frederick Luis Aldama

Part I: Mainstreamed Indigeneities

5 **“We the North”: Interrogating Indigenous Appropriation as
Canadian Identity in Mainstream American Comics**
Brenna Clarke Gray

27 **Jack Jackson, Native Representation, and Underground Comix**
Chad A. Barbour

53 **“Goin’ Native!”: Depictions of the First Peoples from “Down Under”**
Jack Ford and Philip Cass

75 **Representations of Indigenous Australians in Marvel Comics**
Dennin Ellis

100 **The Wisdom of the Phantom: The Secret Life of Australia’s
Indigenous Superhero**
Kevin Patrick

Part II: Decolonial Imaginaries *Terra South*

127 **Outsmarting the Lords of Death: An Amerindian Cognitive Script
in Comics**
Arij Ouweneel

- 144 **Memory in Pieces: Chola Power's Origin Story and the Quest for Memory in Peru**
Javier García Liendo
- 168 **Visualizing an Alternate Mesoamerican Archive: Daniel Parada's Comic Series *Zotz* in Historical Perspective**
Jessica Rutherford
- 181 **Critical Impulses in Daniel Parada's *Zotz*: A Case Study in Indigenous Comics**
Jorge Santos
- 197 **The Battle for Recollection: Maya *Historietas* as Art for Remembering War**
Brian Montes
- 210 ***Turey El Taíno* and *La Borinqueña*: Puerto Rican Nationalist and Ethnic Resistance in Puerto Rican Comics Dealing with Taíno Cultural Heritage**
Enrique García

Part III: Decolonial Imaginaries *Terra North*

- 237 **Securing Stones in the Sky: Word-Drawn Recreations of Oral Trickster Tales**
Jordan Clapper
- 254 **Super Indians and the Indigenous Comics Renaissance**
James J. Donahue
- 273 **Seeing Histories, Building Futurities: Multimodal Decolonization and Conciliation in Indigenous Comics from Canada**
Mike Borkent
- 299 **Deep Time and Vast Place: Visualizing Land/Water Relations across Time and Space in *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection***
Jeremy M. Carnes
- 316 **Deer Woman Re-Generations: Re-Activating First Beings and Re-Arming Sisterhoods of Survivance in *Deer Woman: An Anthology***
Joshua T. Anderson

- 340 **Indigeneity, Intermediality, and the Haunted Present of *Will I See?***
Candida Rifkind and Jessica Fontaine
- 361 **Afterlives: A Coda**
Susan Bernardin
- 365 **List of Contributors**
- 371 **Index**

Graphic Indigeneity: Terra America and Terra Australasia

Frederick Luis Aldama

I learned to read with a Superman comic book. Simple enough, I suppose. I cannot recall which particular Superman comic book I read, nor can I remember which villain he fought in that issue. I cannot remember the plot, nor the means by which I obtained the comic book. What I can remember is this: I was 3 years old, a Spokane Indian boy living with his family on the Spokane Indian Reservation in eastern Washington state.

—Sherman Alexie , *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1998

For as much as Alexie is today *persona non grata*, he speaks a truth here. That many of us raised in the ethnoracial and socioeconomic margins found our way to our ABCs along with a reprieve from poverty in and through our encounters with comics. It also speaks to how, in spite of the history of mainstream comic books focusing on creating superheroes that *don't* look like us or come from our communities, we have long cocreated them on our own.

Times are changing. While there continue to be egregious misrepresentations of people of color in mainstream comics, there are some who are getting it right. And, we're seeing, too, how creators of color are not sitting around waiting for a sea change. They are clearing important spaces of self-representation—and from everywhere around the world.

This brings me to the pulse that beats at the center of *Graphic Indigeneity*: to throw scholarly light on how mainstream comics have clumsily (mostly) distilled and reconstructed Indigenous identities and experiences of *terra America* and *Australasia*; and to spotlight how Indigenous comic book creators are themselves clearing new visual-verbal narrative spaces for articulating more complex histories, cultures, experiences, and identities. To this end I bring together scholarship that explores both the (mis)representation of Indigenous subjects and experiences as well as scholarship that analyzes and brings to

the fore the extraordinary work of Indigenous comic book creators. As Lee Francis IV so beautifully and forcefully identifies above, the volume seeks to center-stage Indigenous creators and their work as important, powerful transformative forces within the shaping of the visual-verbal narrative arts writ large.

Of course, the scholarship that makes up this volume doesn't exist in a vacuum. Important scholarly inroads have been made on Indigenous comics, image-text, and mixed-media creations generally by scholars such as Chad A. Barbour, Susan Bernardin, Jorge L. Catalá Carrasco, Sarah Henzi, Sheri Huhndorf, Elizabeth LaPensée, Claudia Matos Pereira, Nickie D. Phillips, Dean Rader, Deanna Reder, Candida Rifkind, Michael Sheyahshe, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Lindsay Claire Smith, Miriam Brown Spiers, and Staci Strobl, among others. *Graphic Indigeneity* seeks to build on and solidify these important incursions that shed light on the ways in which indigeneity is *geometrized* in the comic book narrative arts of *terra America* and *Australasia*. By this I mean the way comic book creators (mainstream and Indigenous) use the shaping devices of comics (layout, balloon placement, ink lines, perspective, character posture and facial expression, among others) to distill Indigenous subjectivities and experiences (past, present, and future) then reconstruct this in word-drawn narratives. Artful drawing and word craft skills along with a responsibility to subject matter leads to the geometrizing of narratives that adds kinetic energy to the word-drawn narrative; that directs our eyes, our minds, and our hearts in the filling in of motion and emotion; that breathes life into Indigenous identities and experiences. When not done well, it can and does lead to the reproducing of denigrative stereotypes: sidekick buffoons, thieves, threatening hordes, hypersexualized seducer, frozen-in-time mystics, noble savages, alcoholics, and preternatural race-betrayers, and criminals. When not done well, they destructively delimit what has happened, what is happening, and what might happen in the future for Indigenous subjects.

The volume's wide-armed embrace of comics by and about indigeneities of *terra America* and *Australasia* is ambitious. It is also a first step to understand deeply how the histories of colonial and imperial domination across the globe connect the violent wounds that continue to haunt the existence of Indigenous peoples across hemispheres and continents. We feel very present yesteryear's coloniality of power as it swept across the Americas and Australasia—the globe. We see today the scars of this in our communities that continue to suffer external and internal forms of racism, sexism, and classism.

Wounds connect us, but so, too, do resistance movements create a global web that connects Indigenous and first nation peoples across the planet. Resistance to histories (past and present) of expropriation, oppression, exploitation, and genocide also connects Indigenous communities. I think readily of the resistance movements of the Indigenous Māori and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, who share deep decolonial re-occupations and revolts with those in

the Northern Americas: the Māori resistance movement against the Treaty of Waitangi in Aotearoa, New Zealand, shares a like impulse with the Indigenous resistance movement of Columbus Day and, as well, with resistance movements to the US annexation of the Hawaiian Islands, the occupation of Alcatraz, the Trail of Broken Treaties, the occupation of the BIA in Washington, DC, the revolution at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and many others. (See Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior's *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee.*)

From these violent wounds we have survived. We are mestizos. We are Mexipinos. We are Asiatic and Indigenous admixtures. We are Canadian métis. We are Taíno, African, Latinx métissage. And from these wondrous new spaces we have been able (against the odds) to create dynamic, syncretistic cultural phenomena, comics included. As Rudy P. Guevara sums up the colonial and capitalist global practices in the trans-Pacific, they have created “a long historical web of interconnectedness that underpins the mestizaje that began in the sixteenth century” (*Becoming Mexipino* 327). From the trans-Pacific to and from the Canadian arctic to the Southern Cone, nations that make up Americas north and south can, as Earl E. Fitz states, “claim a Native American history and cultural heritage, and in many, if not all, of these modern nation-states this heritage lives on, becoming finally, the common denominator of our multiple American identities” (15). In *Comparative Indigenities of the Américas* Arturo Aldama and his coeditors identify how a “shared history of colonization, genocide, displacement and Eurocentric racism and sexism” (1) connects Indigenous peoples globally, and thus necessitates a hemispheric approach to the study of cultural phenomena by and about Indigenous subjects. It's from our shared open wounds (Gloria Anzaldúa's *heridas abiertas*) that Rachel Adams asks that we consider how “transnational cultural networks” (5) from New York to Quebec to Mexico City interconnect Indigenous spaces, creating a vital Indigenous transnational imaginary.

This volume likewise seeks to articulate a transnational framework. In this regard, it seeks to build on scholarship of those like Rachel Adams just mentioned along with Shari Huhndorf, James H. Cox, Daniel Heath Justice, and Chadwick Allen. And, like these scholars the scholars that make up this volume are respectful of the situated histories and politics that have shaped different Indigenous subjectivities and experiences. In *Continental Divides* Rachel Adams sums this up nicely when she writes how a transnational framework “does not seek to ignore borders or to bypass the nation altogether, but to situate these terms within a broader global fabric” (18). For Adams, the identifying of these transnational cultural networks are not just reactions “to the fractious power of the nation-state” (35). They are the “resumption of alliances and networks of filiation that were severed by the conquest and its aftermath” (35). In *Mapping the Americas* Shari Huhndorf's analysis of post-1980s Native art and literature puts

front and center how national and Indigenous nationalist political structures along with global capitalist structures of power have shaped in contradictory ways the Native cultural phenomena such as fiction, performance, photography, and film. Likewise, in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature Online*, editors James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice discuss the transnational move in Indigenous literary criticism as one that seeks to identify and build on “coalitions among Indigenous and allied scholars across institutional, tribal national, and settler-colonial borders” (1). We see this transnational scholarship in action in Cox’s *The Red Land to the South*. Cox analyzes early and mid-twentieth-century Native American (northern) authors such as Todd Downing, Lynn Riggs, and D’Arcy McNickle and how Mexico’s precolonial indigeneity became inspiration for these authors to once affirm local, tribal national spaces and to create a revolutionary “indigenous American transnational” imaginary (19).

In putting coalition building and networks of coalition Indigenous imaginaries front and center, these scholars destabilize the concept of “transnational” that has historically privileged the colonizer and settler-invaders. As such, the concept of transnational has been deployed as a tool of, in the words of Chadwick Allen, “scholarly deracination of the Indigenous” and the “engulfment of the Indigenous within and beneath systems of meaning-making dominated by the desires, obsessions, and contingencies of non-Indigenous settlers, their non-Indigenous nation-states, their non-Indigenous institutions, their non-Indigenous critical methodologies and discourses” (“A Transnational Native American Studies? Why Not Studies That Are Trans-Indigenous?”). In a like spirit, Danika Medak-Saltzman warns of the scholarly deployments of Indigeneity in ethnic studies. This can erase important specificities of historical, political, and cultural contexts. If we do not become conscious of such moves in our scholarship, we simply perpetuate the colonial and imperial logics of power that continue to haunt critical ethnic studies fields (paraphrase 29).

It’s this kind of critical self-conscious about one’s position as a scholar of Indigenous cultural phenomenon that at the heart of scholars like Cox, Huhndorf, and Allen among others. For instance, Alice Te Punga Somerville declares that while she is doing comparative work on Indigenous texts from a number of contexts, she does so as a Māori scholar inhabiting Māori lands—a situatedness that, she identifies, “both guides and underpins my comparisons” (25). And we see in Chadwick Allen’s book, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, a careful and critical articulation of a trans-Indigenous approach to Indigenous cultural phenomena by those of the US America, Canadian First Nations, Indigenous Hawai’i, New Zealand Māori, and Aboriginal Australia. For Allen, cultural creators and intellectuals who “self-identify as Indigenous and/or who are claimed by Indigenous communities” are situated within specifics of time and places of “survivance” as well as across

trans-Indigenous layers of “diversity and complexity,” made up of “seeming paradoxes of simultaneity, contradiction, coexistence” (xxxii).

In addition to Native authors of literature mentioned above, the transnational model has also been used in approaching cultural phenomenon such as art and film as specific instantiations of Indigeneity *and* as cross-coalitional. Such an approach can lead to the articulation of “create a cross-genre discourse of resistance,” as Dean Rader states in *Engaged Resistance* (2). Such an approach allows Chris Teuton to articulate and analyze the transcultural connections that inform Mesoamerican writing, Navajo sand painting, and Iroquois wampum belts.

* * *

Cultural phenomena by and about Indigenous identities, histories, and experiences circulate far and wide. However, not all such phenomena are made equal. Not all such phenomena serve to enrich an understanding of the complexity of Indigenous subjectivities. This is the case with films, animations, TV shows—and comic books. In an interview with Elizabeth LaPensée, Michael Sheyahshe decries, “Whether it’s the whooping, attacking horde of Indians in the early ‘cowboy’ movies, the notion of Native American as a crack-shot and/or expert tracker in comics, or the continued (mis)representation in video games (some mentioned above), pop culture media serves to mirror the emotional consensus of how mainstream America sees us.” In *Indian Stereotypes in TV Science Fiction*, Sierra S. Adare critically dismantles a whole range of these destructive stereotypes in sci-fi shows where we see constantly reproduction of “Indian” stereotypes (7). Other scholars have turned their sights to mainstream comic books and comic strips to critically sleuth out and dismantle the “Indian” stereotypes. For instance, in Michelle Bauldic’s analysis of the Canadian comic strip, “Ookpik” (1964–1966), that was meant to be a symbol to unite the Canadian nation, she reveals how Ookpik becomes a stand-in for First Nations peoples portrayed as idiots disconnected from land, history, and culture. For Bauldic, Ookpik represents an “imaginary space that is the frontier, empty, white, blank and belongs to Canada; and the ideological North that is an empty page used to project Canadianness against the urban Canada” (143). In *Native Americans in Comic Books*, Michael A. Sheyahshe carefully retraces mainstream superhero comic book archaeologies built out of the pernicious stereotyping of Indigenous peoples. He also identifies the tradition in comics of the “Mohican syndrome” whereby white saviors play “Indian” (Plastic Man, Captain Marvel, Superman, Batman, and the Phantom) to fight for justice and restore the white American way of life (10). In *From Daniel Boone to Captain America*, Chad A. Barbour analyzes how white heroes and superheroes slum it in “Indianness” with little connection to the “genuine history, ongoing traditions, and particular peoples” (5–6). In these scholarly archival reconstructions

Contributors

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Jeremy M. Carnes is finishing his PhD in English Literature and Cultural Theory at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His dissertation explores how comics can help us theorize historicization and temporality differently to more radically dismantle Euro-American power structures surrounding history itself. He has written on indigeneity in Marvel's *The New Mutants* and Tim Truman's *Scout*.

Philip Cass, born in Papua, New Guinea, works as senior lecturer in the communication studies program at Unitec in Auckland, New Zealand, and as an associate editor of *Pacific Journalism Review*. He has published on a wide range of Pacific issues, including climate change-induced migration and Islam in the Pacific. His work with Jack Ford has focused on depictions of Australians and New Zealanders at war and representations of Asia and the Pacific in *Commando* comics.

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Jonathan (Jack) Ford is a member of Australia's Professional Historians Association, with a PhD in history (University of Queensland). Within Brisbane City Council's Heritage Unit (2001–2014), he gained heritage protection for 337 local sites. Jack is the author/contributor to ten books, fifteen commissioned reports, one heritage trail, thirteen journals, and eight conference papers. As a military historian, he, with Phil Cass, have examined how their shared ANZAC legend was appropriated for comics.

Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna) is the Head Indigenerd and CEO of Native Realities, the only Native and Indigenous pop culture company in the United States with the hope to change the perceptions of Native and Indigenous people through dynamic and imaginative pop culture representations. He is the author of poetry, short stories, and comics. His first solo comic book, *Sixkiller*, debuted June 2018. He is an advocate for Native youth, with a focus on community literacy and entrepreneurship. He lives in Albuquerque with his family (and dog).

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Jessica Rutherford is an assistant professor of Spanish in the Modern Languages department at Central Connecticut State University. She received her PhD from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese from The Ohio State University in 2017, specializing in Latin America from the colonial period to the present. Her current research works to decenter historiographical discourse via the study of Latin/x American popular culture to include marginalized perspectives and experiences in the historical archive.

Jorge Santos is Ecuadorian-Salvadorian Latinx and the first in his family to earn a PhD. He is assistant professor of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States at the College of the Holy Cross. His work has appeared in *MELUS*, *College Literature*, and *Image/Text*. He has contributed work to multiple collections on graphic narrative scholarship. His book, *Graphic Memories of the Civil Rights Movement*, was published in 2019.