

Negotiating the Nation Through Superheroes: Making the Canadian Shield Visible

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ABSTRACT

This case study focuses on Canadian students' responses to our invitation to imagine their own nationalist superheroes whose costumes and powers represent a nation. We provide a close reading of 34 student artifacts to show how they draw on discourses that position Canada as a benevolent, multicultural country—a rhetorical formation we call the Canadian Shield. We also reveal how some artifacts negotiate tropes of the Shield, adapting or revising them in distinctive ways. We conclude, however, that when invited to create Canadian superheroes, many of the student creations reaffirm dominant visions of the country, and such habits of thought, we venture, are best considered as ideological bottlenecks.

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INTRODUCTION

As practitioners of the scholarship of teaching and learning interested in film and media studies, we have long been intrigued by media historian Aniko Bodroghkozy's (2002) theory that Canadians read American television shows *as if* they are Americans and with a simultaneous awareness that the American *there* is not the Canadian *here*. Hence her characterization of a double consciousness at play in Canadian spectating habits. As it turns out, this doubleness is also operative when Canadians view American Hollywood films.¹ English-speaking Canadian students often engage with American Hollywood film products *as if* they are American; that is, as if there is no difference between “us” and “them” (Easton & Hewson 2013, 2018). However, playing at “being American” does *not* mean that Canadian students are unaware of the border that divides Canadians from Americans. We discovered that many students were far from playful or ambivalent about being Canadian. Particularly when confronted with troubling subjects in American films, such as black slavery and white racism, they distanced themselves from these “American” issues by earnestly invoking a Canadian identity and relying on uncritical beliefs about Canada and its mythologies. However, reliance on and reiterations of narratives of Canada's better nature do not stop racism at the border; rather, they become barriers to the critical reflection required to acknowledge and address its operations in Canada. Initially, we wondered if students' familiarity with the tropes of American Hollywood films and television series produced these nationalist mythic responses. Would a similar dynamic occur were we to shift the medium from film or television to a medium that shares similarities with, while offering important differences from, American films? If so, would this different medium allow us to understand more fully how American cultural products elicit assumptions about Canada and thereby illuminate better the barriers to student learning about how race and social differences are constructed in Canada?

To explore these questions, we decided to focus on popular American comic books in Canada, specifically those that feature superheroes. Although reading comic books themselves is a niche practice—comic books no longer dominate young people's reading material as they did in the medium's heyday of the 1940s and 1950s—superheroes, by contrast, are now ubiquitous in (North) American popular culture, with wide recognition even when the source material is less well known. Moreover, superhero comics offer a sub-genre featuring what cultural geographer Jason Dittmer (2013) calls “nationalist superheroes,” characters whose

¹ By Hollywood films, we mean films produced by the major motion picture studios such as Disney (PIXAR, Marvel, 20th Century Fox), Paramount, and Sony, which are headquartered in Los Angeles, USA. American independent films are not included in this term although it's important to note that some independent films such as Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* might receive Hollywood attention through Oscar nominations or by their attachment to Hollywood “stars.”

powers and identity are tied directly to the nation-state. Because nationalist superheroes such as *Captain America*, *Captain Britain*, and, of course, *Captain Canuck* appeal to a particular embodiment of the nation, its aspirations, and citizens' patriotic feelings, these figures are ideal vehicles through which we could explore how underlying ideological beliefs about "Canada" shape our students' imaginations. We could then assess to what extent, if any, students deploy common-sense tropes and images to represent their sense of the nation.

Our SoTL work is inspired by those projects that call for a focus on and/or uncover the affective and ideological dimensions of learning (e.g., Fielding, 1999; Diaz et al, 2008; Chng & Looker, 2013; Hassel & Launius, 2017; Kreber, 2017; Miller-Young & Boman, 2017; Easton et al., 2019). In this case study, we analyze Canadian students' responses to our invitation to imagine their own nationalist superhero, after having spent a semester exploring how ideologies—those "common-sense" beliefs, assumptions, and practices—can invisibly shape the representations of gender, race, class, and Indigeneity in (North) American popular culture. We provide a close reading of 34 student artifacts comprised of three parts: a visual representation of the student-creator's hero, a character profile, and a student-creator rationale, which outlines the reasons for the creative choices the student made in designing the character. We show how the artifacts draw on discourses that position Canada as benevolent and seamlessly multicultural—a rhetorical formation we call the Canadian Shield (and will henceforth refer to as the Shield). We also reveal how some artifacts negotiate these tropes of the Shield, adapting or revising them in distinctive ways. We conclude, however, that when invited to create Canadian superheroes, many of the student creations re-affirm dominant visions of the country, and such habits of thought, we venture, are best considered as ideological bottlenecks that impede students' learning.

OF COMICS, (NATIONALIST) SUPERHEROES, AND CANADIAN SHIELDS

Similar to Hollywood films, mainstream comic books are produced largely by American companies with American talent.² Parallels between Hollywood film distribution and mainstream comics also exist. Indeed, just as Hollywood considers North American box office receipts, the comics market is also conceived as a continental marketplace. Crucially, American comics anticipate a homogenized (albeit vaguely multicultural) English-speaking readership where national differences between Canada and the USA are ignored, elided, and/or erased.³ While

² Canadians working in mainstream comics have tended to follow a well-established pattern of earlier cartoonists who lived in Canada but published in the United States (Grove, 2019) or who simply relocated to the USA.

³ The smattering of Canadian superheroes that do exist have often been created by American comic publishers for a North American audience. For example, Marvel's Wolverine,

Disney and Hanna-Barbera comics exemplify this homogenization, these same elisions and erasures offer Canadian readers a similar kind of meaning-making playground as Hollywood-produced films and offer opportunities where readers can, if they so wish, choose to play at being American.

Given these considerations, *Archie*, with its seemingly eternal generic suburban setting in Riverdale, would also provide a productive example of how Canadian students might practice Manning's (1993) "reversible resistance," which he contends Canadians use to "reconstitute and re-contextualize American cultural products [in this case, comics] in ways representative of what consciously, albeit ambiguously, distinguishes Canada from its powerful neighbor" (p. 8). But given our interests in Canadian identity, Archie's homogenous Riverdale is a bit too deeply camouflaged. Yes, Riverdale could easily be taken for a Canadian suburb⁴ and would seem to welcome a characteristic Canadian ambivalence, which Hutcheon (1988) links to a "postmodern paradox: the refusal to pick sides, the desire to be on both sides of any border" (p.162). Indeed, Bodroghkozy (2002) suggests, in terms of television viewing, Canadians are a nation of "in-betweeners" (p. 584). Despite such ambivalences, though, observers agree that Anglophone Canadian identity often rests on some form of anti-Americanism (e.g., Redden, 2002; Easton & Hewson, 2013; Bryant, 2017). Therefore, we needed a genre that might overtly signify "America," elicit responses that would mobilize students' notions about "Canada," and in so doing, uncover components of the Shield and its operations.

The nationalist superhero genre answers these requirements. Mainstream superheroes themselves offer American ideals, which Canadian readers must negotiate, or, as Bodroghkozy (2002) argues, use "to assert an ambivalent but ultimately affirming sense of national self [by tactically deploying] tools appropriated from the Other" (pp. 584–85). The American superhero typically finds his home in American cities—New York City, Gotham, Star City—and portrays American understandings of justice, moral character, and social good. In fact, critics have drawn attention to how American superheroes promote hegemonic beliefs and assumptions about gender, race, class, and sexuality (Roblou, 2012; Ghee, 2013; Easton, 2017). These assumptions are often evident in the superhero comic's generic core (Coogan, 2008)—the hero's mission, powers, and identity (MPI). Given that nationalist superheroes represent and defend their respective countries "through [their] name, uniform, and mission" (Dittmer, 2013, p. 47), the MPI model offers a convenient rubric to assess how an American nationalist superhero such as *Captain America* has been modified in Canadian nationalist superheroes such as *Captain Canuck*. Most importantly, nationalist superheroes

Canadian superteam Alpha Flight, and, as we argue elsewhere, Superman were designed with these (North) American readers in mind.

⁴ We note in passing that Fox's successful TV show *Riverdale* is, in fact, largely shot in Vancouver, where Archie's suburban street is located.

have been used to arouse patriotic feelings about the nation and its ideals during moments of national crisis. *Captain America*, for instance, was just one of several nationalist superheroes who sought to arouse patriotism among young readers during the Second World War. Similarly *Captain Canuck's* appearance has been linked to surging Canadian nationalism in the 1970s (Edwardson, 2003).

Manning (1993) and Bodroghkozy (2002) also argue Canadians use American cultural products to affirm Canadian identity. Following Ozguc (2011), we contend this Canadian identity is characterized as “being tolerant, peaceful, generous, a good international citizen and (non-American)” (p. 39). Ozguc also underscores that official multiculturalism “signified a new representation of Canada, which was completely different from the past. The new Canadian identity was ‘just, kinder, better, inclusive’ rather than assimilationist” (p. 42). Indeed, as Mackey (1999) posits, “Canadian identity proposes a form of ‘civic nationalism’ [which] has been perceived as liberal, moral, rational, inclusive, universal, peaceful, and sensitive to individual identities“ (p. 155). These features of Canadian identity find their expressions in tropes of long cold winters, hockey, and our presumably pristine environment, all connected to Canada’s geographic location north of the 49th parallel. According to Arnold (2010), “northernness” operates as a resource in the Canadian collective imagination. It also provides Canadians with a “visual identity” (p. 17). Taken together these values, beliefs, and tropes create a discursive shield that can be deployed to construct a positive vision of Canada. The Shield serves multiple purposes for its users: it is a resource whereby the “truths” of “Canada” (in opposition to those of America) can be affirmed and protected; and it emerges as a defense against the possibility that Canada and Canadians might be complicit in the historical, social, and political forces that shaped those “American” truths.⁵ Given the nationalist superhero’s connection to the nation, the figure provides a vehicle through which we can see how students use the discourses of the Shield to represent their visions of Canada.

IMAGINING THE CANADIAN HEROIC: CREATE A CANADIAN NATIONALIST SUPERHERO

To this end a nationalist superhero unit was created for the final segment of a General Education composition course. Drawing on cultural studies’ contentions that images are constructed to secure meanings ascribed to them by dominant groups, students in the course were encouraged to read and write critically about representations of social differences, including those of gender, race, and

⁵ Bryant (2017) identifies this as part of “Canadian exceptionalism”—a concatenation of beliefs brought by the Loyalists to Canada when they fled the American Revolution—among them, that settlers were “chosen” to inhabit “vacant” land, thereby erasing any Indigenous presence, and that Canada is morally superior to the United States.

Indigenous-settler relations. Before the nationalist superhero unit was taken up, students had already written about the photo of Thomas Moore Keeswick, a Cree youth boy whose “before and after” residential school photos illustrate the settler-colonial agenda of Indigenous assimilation; investigated the racialized representations in Jordan Peele’s film *Get Out*; and explored representations of masculinity in Gillette’s “The Best Men Can Be” advertisements. Students then read the origin stories of *Captain America* and *Captain Canuck*, examining how each character embodied the concept of hegemonic masculinity as well as how each was connected to larger discourses of whiteness in (North) America and to specific conceptions of the nation. Students also reviewed a sample adventure of a Canadian hero featured in the Canadian Whites (Bell, 2006), *Nelvana of the Northern Lights*, who was presented to students as the world’s first superheroine and an Indigenous woman, as imagined by a non-Indigenous male creator.⁶

Drawing on cultural studies and feminist media pedagogies, which advocate providing students with the opportunity to intervene in meaning-making processes, the final assignment asked the students to undertake two tasks:

- 1) Create your own nationalist superhero with a character profile that explains the hero’s abilities and origin story.
- 2) Write a 250-word rationale explaining how your character embodies your values and beliefs about Canada or your chosen country.

By asking students to imagine their own national superhero, we speculated some of them would enact those dominant beliefs about Canada and its values, making the Shield visible. We examined each hero’s mission, powers, and identity (MPI), paying special attention to how their identities were visually and narratively represented. To be clear, we did not explicitly ask the student-creators to take up the position of a subordinate or marginalized subject or to be critical interveners in dominant discourses. Rather, we deliberately left the task open-ended, such that the students could make a range of choices about how their nationalist superhero could represent *their* vision of Canada and defend its values. In order to better understand the student-creators’ choices, we also asked them each to write a 250-word rationale about their decisions and intentions.

Fourteen students in the section (n=22) chose to participate in the study.⁷ Ten participants submitted a complete portfolio including one visual representation of

⁶ Dittmer and Larsen (2010) argue *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* is an alternative nationalist superhero. While this perspective was discussed in class, the instructor elected to ask students to focus on *Captain America* and *Captain Canuck*.

⁷ This project was approved November 26, 2016, by Mount Royal University’s Human Research Ethics Board, File no. 100868.

their imaginary Canadian nationalist superhero; one character profile, which outlined the hero's mission, powers, and identity (MPI) in an origin story; and one rationale outlining their particular creative decisions (n=30). Two assignments were incomplete: one lacked a visual representation and the other did not provide a character biography. Although incomplete, the other portfolio components met the assignment requirements; therefore, we decided to include them in the data sample (n=34). One participant took up the invitation to choose a country other than Canada and created the Filipino nationalist superhero *Super Juan*, who uses his superpower of hypnosis to turn "bad people ... into good Filipino citizens" (M08). While *Super Juan* offers an interesting example of a nationalist superhero, we chose to exclude him from the sample since his costume, MPI, and student rationale were only loosely connected to our focus on how beliefs about Canada and its values contribute to imagining a "Canadian" nationalist superhero. Finally, the assignment required students to submit a variety of writings with different purposes and visual representations; we refer to these different kinds of expression individually and collectively as "artifacts," a term Manarin (2018) coins to denote anything "a student writes or draws or performs" (p. 102). Artifacts represent, Manarin states, the students' thinking at particular moment in time, but they are nevertheless "shaped by a series of choices the student makes" (p.102). Thus, the term seems particularly appropriate to this project, which highlights how authors make choices about how their creations will represent Canada. We provide a close reading of these artifacts to tease out where we see elements of the Shield at play and to interpret their possible meanings.⁸

ENCODING THE CANADIAN SHIELD

We begin by noting that all the artifacts presented a "Canadian" nationalist superhero, and in accordance with nationalist superhero costume conventions, half the students (n=6) incorporated Canada's flag—the maple leaf—in their hero's garb. Analyzing the characters' MPI, different elements of the Shield come into view. Just fewer than half the characters' missions (n=5) entailed variations on defending Canada's multicultural values and/or its commitment to diversity. Three of eight heroes' powers employed signifiers of the North while a quarter of the heroes' identities (n=4) were connected to Canadian winter. In a nod to the "two solitudes" trope of Canadian identity, twenty-five percent (n=4) incorporated Francophone elements into their heroes' identities. As a collection, then, sixty-six percent of these nationalist heroes (n=8) integrate elements of the Shield into their design, either through their costume or in their MPI sketches. Significantly, five superheroes were racially *unmarked* (implicitly white) characters while the other seven were *explicitly* given racialized or Indigenized identities. Viewing this data

⁸ See Manarin (2018) for more about close reading as a method drawn from literary studies.

set as a Canadian superhero team, we see an assembly of visibly diverse heroes. Markedly different from Marvel's 1980s *Alpha Flight*, whose composition of English, French, and white ethnicities manifests an early phase of Canadian multiculturalism, this 21st century assembly, with its focus on racialized and Indigenous identities alongside white Canadian identities, "updates" Canadian multiculturalism.⁹

We now turn to analyze specific artifacts, starting with those referencing tropes of northerness. According to Rabinovitch (2011), "The North remains a codeword for both the vast Canadian frontier and an idealized Canadian personality" (p. 19). The hero *The Canadian Shield* shows how these tropes work. *The Canadian Shield* articulates his heroic mission in terms of the national anthem's pledge "to protect the true north, strong and free" (B012). His powers combine signifiers of Canadian winters, sports, and rugged landscape. Able to "withstand extreme temperatures" (B012), this superhero is equipped with a hockey stick that shoots ice while the geographical formation, the Canadian Shield, gives him his strength. Proudly Canadian, his costume is intended "to portray values and beliefs shared by the entire nation" (B012). The maple leaf occupies the top part of the uniform while the lower part is comprised of a multitude of flags, indicating that Canada is "home to many people from around the globe" (B012). Here we see multiculturalism expressed ambiguously: while *The Canadian Shield's* outfit may signify how "Canada" is home to all, it can also represent a more problematic version of multiculturalism, a hegemonic one. The Canadian flag and its values atop a range of nations' flags are, after all, on a white, straight, male body.

The belief in two founding (European) cultures remains an important element in constructions of Canadian identity. *Johnny Hockey* figures forth Canada's biculturalism as well as its multiculturalism. Aka Matthew Bergeron, whose civilian name "sounds Canadian and identifies with French origins" (R02), *Johnny Hockey* is on a humanitarian mission to "rid the world of cruelty" and "bring diverse people together" (R02). Similar to *The Canadian Shield*, *Johnny Hockey's* powers are rooted in symbols of the Canadian North and presented in terms of ice hockey: "a supersonic slapshot" to his face took him out of the game. When he awoke in hospital, Matthew found himself gifted with superpowers, including the ability to "shoot shards of ice" out of the staff of his hockey stick and create ice slides to thwart his enemies (R02).

With *Captain Yeehaw*, we see a characteristically Canadian deployment of parody, a "form of authorized transgression that is paradoxically both an inscribing

⁹ Will Kymlicka (2015) discerns three phases in the narrative of Canadian multiculturalism. Initially, official multicultural policies encouraged the self-organization, representation, and participation of ethnic groups defined by their country of origin. A second phase saw ethnicity augmented by a focus on processes of racialization and racial discrimination. A new phase has emerged as religious minorities seek recognition as a distinct multicultural voice (p. 17).

form and a subverting of what it inscribes” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 163). From the “Yeehaw” holler associated with the Calgary Stampede to the jangling spurs that warn his opponents their time is up, this figure filters the nationalist superhero through the regional lens of Southern Alberta. Placed in a broader context, *Captain Yeehaw* shows how Canadian “national identity has sprung from regionalist impulses” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 3). Refracted through a regional Albertan lens, the nationalist hero becomes the (settler) cowboy who brings the rural into the metropolitan, much as the annual Calgary Stampede does for Calgarians. As with “Matthew Bergeron” above, the bicultural elements of Canadian identity are signified by *Captain Yeehaw*’s civilian name, Marc Gatineau. Tropes of northernness are present—*Yeehaw* is an excellent hockey player—as is reversible resistance: the American superhero’s cape becomes the Canadian lumberjack’s plaid shirt. An indirect comparison is evident between *Yeehaw*’s Canadian “fuel of choice, a double double”¹⁰ (H011) and (American) Popeye’s muscle-inducing spinach. Although an extension of the nationalist superhero parody, *Yeehaw*’s predilections to put “maple syrup on everything” and “to apologize even when it’s not his fault” also invoke other Canadian stereotypes. In this regionalized and parodic iteration, the Shield comes into full view but with characteristic Canadian self-reflexivity: *Captain Yeehaw* asserts the verities of Canadian identity even as he lampoons them.

The following two creations, *Captain Pleased* (L010) and *Super Frozegirl* (A014), offer racialized superhero/ines whose representations respectively affirm and adapt elements of the Shield. For example, *Captain Pleased* hails from Kanpur, India, the city chosen to contrast “Canada’s cleanliness” as Kanpur is “the most polluted city in the world” (L010). Referencing images of Canada’s pristine environment, the hero’s codename indicates the pleasure Canadians take in living in “a safe and healthy environment” (L010). Possessing the power to breathe through smoke and gas fumes, *Captain Pleased* is created to contrast an issue the student feels faces many outside Canada—the lack of access to clean air. Interestingly, *Captain Pleased* is “injury proof,” a superpower designed “to contest expensive, privatized, American health care” (L010). By associating *Captain Pleased* with free health care, the student-creator harnesses “a potent political symbol that distinguishes Canada from the United States” (Redden, 2002, p.103), thereby affirming the anti-Americanism and the belief in Canadian moral superiority that comprise the Shield.

As aforesaid, official multiculturalism is a substantial component of Canadian identity and thus serves as a key element in the Shield’s construction. *Captain Pleased*, an Indo-Canadian, illustrates how a national superhero captures three of

¹⁰ A “double double” is a unique Tim Hortons franchise term that refers to a coffee with two sugars and two creams.

four central tenets of official multiculturalism (Wright, 2012).¹¹ For example, *Pleased's* costume captures what Wright (2012) identifies as “the willingness to recognize diverse cultures and their importance to the country” (p. 104). The maple leaf on his chest as a symbol of national pride and the turban representing his South Asian roots, *Pleased* signifies Canada’s “acceptance of individuals from around the world” (L010).¹² Likewise, *Captain Pleased's* belt buckle is an equals sign, which symbolizes liberal multiculturalism’s “equal opportunities for everyone no matter where you are from or what gender you are” (L010). As Dittmer’s nationalist superhero embodies the nation, so *Captain Pleased* embodies the tenets of Canadian multiculturalism, emphasizing how they have become “part of the sticky stuff of Canadian identity” (Stein, 2006, as cited in Wright, 2012, p. 105). Representing a vision of an accepting, tolerant Canada where racial difference is incorporated as part of a multicultural “Canadian” identity, *Captain Pleased* reveals the Shield in action, recapitulating its most optimistic, even utopian elements.

While *Captain Pleased* could be said to perform an optimistic vision of Canadian multiculturalism, *Super Frozegirl* seems less confident that its “sticky stuff” is strong enough. “Into equality,” *Super Frozegirl* is, we learn, friendly to everyone except those who are “bad and racist,” (A014), acknowledging, at least inadvertently, the experiences of racism that racialized groups and Indigenous people report happening to them (Statistics Canada, 2018). In fact, a “recipient of negative comments and bullying” herself in a pre-multicultural Canada, she, as *Super Frozegirl*, takes up a mission “to defend other immigrants” or “people who do not feel like they belong” (A014). In yet another reference to the Canadian north, she freezes racists, and once they defrost, she employs the pedagogical possibilities ascribed to the nationalist superhero (Easton, 2017). Canada’s story of multiculturalism imperfectly realized, *Super Frozegirl*, as educator, adapts the narrative. It becomes her mission to teach the nation what, in her view, it requires if it is to be fully, fairly multicultural. With instructions in the stereotypical Canadian attributes of politeness and kindness, *Super Frozegirl* hopes her lesson—“an acceptance [by all its citizens] of diversity”—will be learned (A014).

We refer now to three artifacts that attempt to account for and remedy the absence of the Indigenous presence in many narratives—both formal and informal—about Canada. With the figure of *Man Bear*, whose civilian name is Tim Hudson—a blend of the iconic coffee chain and the fur trade to which his costume alludes—that presence is realized in the unnamed First Nation he inhabits in the

¹¹ Wright (2012) identifies the following four pillars of Canadian multiculturalism: 1) three founding peoples—Canada’s two solitudes—the English and the French plus First Nations; 2) a willingness to recognize cultures and peoples beyond the founding peoples as integral to the nation; 3) a strong liberalism (or neoliberalism) as hegemonic national ideology; 4) tolerance of diversity, including the exceptionalism of Quebec and recognition of Indigenous Peoples as “citizens plus” (p. 104).

¹² This data set was collected before Quebec’s Bill 21 became an issue.

mountains of northwestern British Columbia. Further, he derives his superhero identity and powers from the bear— “a spirit animal” representing “strength, confidence, and the ability to withstand adversity” (P04). As an Indigenous superhero, *Man Bear*’s mission is to fight for freedom and against prejudice—the former a conventional Canadian value, and the latter, according to the student and similar to *Super Frozegirl*’s creator, “something [Canada] needs to work on” (P04).

The hero *Kistahkisiw* (B013) takes this engagement with Indigenous peoples further. Not only does the codename derive from a Cree word meaning “the tree stands solid,” his racial identity is hybridized: *Kistahkisiw* is the son of a Pakistani-Métis-Indigenous couple. From one perspective, *Kistahkisiw* epitomizes Wright’s (2012) four pillars of Canadian multiculturalism, embodied, as they are, in a single heroic figure. From another, we can see the hero resisting the hegemonic authority of the nationalist superhero’s alignment with the dominant beliefs about Canada. For this student, *Kistahkisiw* plays a central role in revising Canada’s story. Resisting stereotypes and attending to some of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), *Kistahkisiw*’s origin story “could right some wrongs of representation, show [the effects of] intergenerational trauma, and [display First Nations’] values” (B013). Indeed, *Kistahkisiw* is intended to offset the predominance of “settler superheroes,” those from English and French Canada, who, the student writes, “are not the original inhabitants of the land” (B013). The critical perspectives this artifact offers are further evident in the character’s MPI. *Kistahkisiw*’s mission, in fact, is to call into question the association between Canada and eco-friendliness: “We are often seen as a leading country in environmental action, but that is not always true.” The storylines in *Kistahkisiw*’s comic book could represent Indigenous perspectives to demonstrate, for example, “why a pipeline is good and bad from the point of view of the First Nations,” thus helping all Canadians recognize “where we truly stand on climate issues” (B013). And given his powers—the ability to make trees grow fast with a swipe of his hand—*Kistahkisiw* aids in Canada greening itself.

Swan River, according to her creator, is positioned as a corrective to both the misrepresentation and lack of representation of Indigenous female figures in television, film, and comics (M06). By design, this student engages the resistant potential of the assignment and implodes stereotypes of female superheroes. *Swan River* rejects “emphasized femininity”; she is strong and muscular *and* sophisticated and elegant. She is *not* a role model for all women; she is created specifically “to appeal to young Indigenous women” (M06). Her powers derive from her connection to Mother Earth, passed down to her from her grandmother, and are never used to harm. Rather, “she is able to help people understand what they refuse to acknowledge or are misinformed about” (M06).

Unlike the single costume associated with the nationalist superhero as an expression of a single unified nation, *Swan River* and her alter ego work with two costumes. When she is the superhero, her top, like other superheroes, is emblazoned

with a flag, but hers is the Métis flag—dark blue beading in the shape of the infinity symbol, thus signifying the legitimacy of nations who have fought and are still fighting for recognition, having been subsumed or erased under imposition of the Canadian. When she is Theresa Slingagun (the name, the student indicates, an Anglicized version of her Métis name, given to her in residential school), she wears a red dress. Why? To represent “each and every [Indigenous woman] who has gone missing or been murdered” (M06). As with the creator of *Kistahkisiw*, we see this student’s creation as an attempt to re-imagine Canada as accounting for its Indigenous origins and structures of settler violence. Where *Kistahkisiw* replaces the typical superhero origin story with an accounting of Indigenous history, *Swan River* rejects trauma for the powerful resources of “education and conversation” necessary for “building a better world” (M06). Both figures direct us to Homi Bhabha’s contention that “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (as cited in Johnston & Richardson, 2012, p. 122). We argue both *Kistahkisiw* and *Swan River* articulate a counter-hegemonic agency, challenging both fixed narratives of the nation as well as fixed concepts of national identities.

GOING BEYOND THE SHIELD: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

If the foregoing analyses reveal that most artifacts accept the Shield’s central tenets, when examined in terms of representations of gender and race, some artifacts reveal more complexity. Certainly, half the heroes are male, and these figures visibly embody hegemonic masculinity, most obviously in the heroes’ exaggerated musculature, wide body stances, and evident readiness for battle. None of the male heroes are explicitly identified as gay, bisexual, or sexually fluid. As Dittmer (2013) cogently observes, since nationalist superheroes’ bodies are “constitutive of the larger (racialized) body politic with which they are aligned,” racialized identities are “generally deemed tacit and unworthy of attention unless African American, aboriginal, or gay” (p. 47). In contrast, the female superheroes feature a more critical edge, often deliberately so. For instance, to contest “the dominance of masculine superheroes” (M07), a female *Captain Canada* attempts to redress the gender imbalance in the comic kingdom to remind Canadians that “even in a country as progressive as ours, people still fall prey to gender stereotypes” (M07). After all, as M07 writes, “I bet the majority of people would assume that the gender of [my *Captain Canada*] is male.” Gender stereotypes are difficult to overturn, but this student is determined to try: giving a female superhero the name “Captain” redistributes power, assigns authority, and allows her to be a leading role model for young girls (M07). Similarly, student P05 provides us with an unnamed superheroine, who, though visually modelled on *Captain Canuck*, has as her mission “women’s empowerment” (P05). She is Canada’s version, we are told, of *Superwoman*. In contrast to the *Captain Canada* figure, who displays the

letters CC on her decidedly unenhanced chest, this character has been deliberately drawn with “emphasized femininity” in mind: she has “typical lady superhero features” (P05), including “long hair, a big bust and slim body” (P05). Significantly, though, this representation is positioned as a resistance to gender stereotypes. The heroine has “abs which might not be easily seen by people,” this attribute, according to the student, breaking the stigma that women cannot be as strong as men (P05).

Artifact S01’s superhero, *Tonia*, not only resists gender and racial constraints, she (trans-identified; preferred pronoun “she”; with colourless skin) resists earthly ones. Literally out of this world, *Tonia* is an alien who nevertheless grounds her powers—she communicates through sonic peace waves—in the myth of Canada as peacekeeper. Our final example of how new and challenging identities and nations might be imagined resides in the superhero *Omnia*. Derived from the Latin meaning “everything,” they are gender ambiguous, “a hero anyone could be,” and a hero “for the people not for the media” (P03). There is no mask-wearing for *Omnia*: they proudly show off “exactly who they are” (P03). Their costume, inspired by the flag colours of Canada, Mexico, and the United States, is created to represent a “unified North America.” Colonial borders erased, *Omnia* is hemispheric.

CONCLUSIONS

We want to be cautious about overloading our students’ work with theorizing, since their work, like all artifacts, is overdetermined in its production. And, to be sure, our close reading of their work is open to other interpretations. Moreover, the assignment asked students to produce a *creative* response to the nationalist superheroes considered in class and provide a *short* explanation for their choices. As Manarin (2018) cautions, artifacts such as these are “*oblique* measurements of student learning” (p. 104), so we must be careful about inferring too much about what is learned. The small sample also limits our ability to generalize. Nevertheless, the data do yield insights we consider worthy of further investigation. If we place the artifacts on a spectrum, the superhero *The Canadian Shield*, on one end, features the strongest endorsement of conventional Canadian values while *Omnia*, on the other, resists such conventions altogether. In between, we see examples of student artifacts adapting and revising ideas about Canada as well as a range of attitudes about Canadian multiculturalism. *The Canadian Shield*’s form of multiculturalism has been criticized from the left for “for failing to address white supremacy and the pivotal problem of racism” (Wright, 2016, p. 167); other figures address white supremacy and racism by incorporating those identities erased or rendered invisible by the official discourse while *Omnia* gestures towards a post-multicultural world. Our research suggests that assignments such as this highlight nationalist ideologies and students’ investments in them. While some students demonstrate a commitment to and a defense of an inclusive Canada through their superheroes,

others get stuck and default to a comforting reiteration of the Shield's tropes. Having identified this reliance on the Shield as an ideological bottleneck, we now have to think carefully about what other interventions we might make to help funnel students through what we deem a significant block.

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