Native Noir: Genre and the Politics of Indigenous Representation in Recent American Comics

By Derek Parker Royal  

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The past several years have seen a significant number of studies on the cultural intersections of comics and American ethnicity. These critical analyses usually approach the medium as a unique expression of a particular ethnoracial community, or highlight the ways in which certain writers and artists use comics to appropriate or subvert national myths, stereotypes, and narratives. Many times these studies have attempted to localize the ethnoracial features of a particular comic -- for instance, the seemingly indelible Jewish roots of Superman and the Thing, or the essential African Americanness found in the rhetoric of Aaron McGruder's The Boondocks -- or to critique the accuracy of certain ethnic representations (e.g., the gradient of Asian stereotyping found in editorial cartoons). While such investigations can provide useful critical insight, highlighting the otherwise tacit dynamics underlying ethnic visual representations, they nonetheless have their limitations. For example, in determining the "truthfulness" of drawn characters and settings, or how well they adhere to the reality of their prospective cultural communities, one may inadvertently be establishing a set of readerly criteria. In such a case, our appreciation and enjoyment of a comic becomes dependent upon its author's representational reliability and resistance to objectification. Such readings may also run the risk, ironically enough, of generalizing or normalizing a particular ethnic community. By praising a comic that "gets to the heart" of American Jews or the Chicano community, one may be making an unintentional assumption about that community by, for instance, conflating the experiences of both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews; or defining Chicano identity solely through its West Coast expressions.

When reading multiethnic comics, it is important to note the subtleties and particularities of communal representations and to resist the urge to oversimplify. One must be especially careful when critiquing the representations of indigenous American populations in visual literature. With over 560 federally recognized tribal entities in the US ("Indian Entities"), the sheer diversity of histories and traditions makes suspect any attempt to standardize our understanding of native cultures. Yet, comic-book history is littered with examples of the generic Indian, complete with loincloth, feathered headdress, and truncated vocabulary. As Michael A. Sheyahshe states in his treatment of prominent Native Americans in comics, "Tonto and all subsequent Indigenous people seem to be part of some large generic Plains tribe. There is no mention of Tonto's specific tribe and he seems to be able to 'talk Indian' with any Native person he comes across. This fact does nothing to convey a sense of the great diversity that exists in Indigenous cultures and therefore serves as a very negative stereotype" (44). This tendency toward pan-Indian representations has been a weakness in many comics, and critics such as Sheyahshe and Margaret Noori have rightly pointed out the problems of such generalizations.

Given these potential limitations, the trajectory of this essay on recent Native American comics skirts any efforts to gauge a comics text according to its accuracy to specific tribal customs, histories, or cultures. There is no attempt to brand a comic as "unfaithful," misleading, or even
racist in its depiction of indigenous individuals. Instead of setting up a critical litmus test, whereby the value of a comic is dependent upon its representational correctness, my analysis is more focused on the narrative uses of Native Americans cultures and on how they are appropriated to further a particular comics genre, detective narratives. What is more, I am limiting my concern to recent examples of comics that are not set in the historical past and do not function within superhero conventions. In doing so, I hope to complement the work of previous critics of Native American comics such as Sheyahshe, Cornel Pewewardy, and C. Richard King. While their analyses provide a necessary critique of indigenous images in comics -- both as marginalizing stereotypes and as empowering forms of reclamation -- they are primarily focused on representations that are either historically figured or, as is more commonly the case, expressed in the superhero genre. What has received almost no scholarly attention has been the use of indigenous figures in other popular comics genres. In an effort to expose the many stereotypes of Native Americans in comics -- characterizations that are all too exploitable in the superhero genre, largely built, as it is, on good guy/bad guy generalizations -- earlier critics have tended to overlook the more nuanced uses of Indian imagery in another popular genre of comic, and one that is anything but Manichean, the detective or noir narrative.

Noir Fiction and the Example of Harris's *Street Wolf*

Definitions of detective fiction vary -- depending on such contexts and conditions as hard-boiled and intellectual; American, English or continental; nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century, or second-generation noir; whodunits or cozy mysteries -- but most understandings of the genre bear common characteristics. It is often seen as a category of crime fiction, typically with a recurring character -- professional investigator, amateur sleuth, or detective stand-in -- who sets out to solve a crime, often in an urban setting, the significance of which relates to some aspect of modern life. Noir narrative, a highly formulaic sub-genre of detective fiction, stands out in more significant ways. Its tone is usually hardboiled (a tough and unsentimental treatment of criminality) and involves a "detecting" character, often violent and crude, who does not shy away from danger. Many times the protagonist is also a victim of or a suspect in the crime, and what is more, he (males dominate the genre) demonstrates self-destructive tendencies. As such, alienation becomes a major generic theme, with characters feeling paranoid or trapped in their predicaments. Sex is often used to advance the plot, and these relationships almost always find expression through a femme fatale. As its name suggests, noir fiction is dark and foreboding, with gloomy settings and an unrelentingly fatalistic tone. Surfaces are deceptive in this kind of detective narrative, and there is often a chaotic, sinister reality underlying the veneer of law and respectability.

Given the many nuances and ambiguities found in the genre, it is no accident that several comics authors have used detective or noir fiction to explore the contemporary state of indigenous cultures. Not only does this genre provide an opportunity to round out the configuration of Native Americans, an ethnic community often caricatured and represented in broad strokes, but it also allows for contexts beyond the typical (e.g., Western setting, noble/savage dichotomy, historical past). It is an opportunity to present Native cultures within frameworks afforded other peoples. One such example is *Street Wolf*, created and written by Mark Wayne Harris and illustrated by Dennis Francis. A three-issue mini-series published between July and December 1986, *Street Wolf* is the story of Nathan Blackhorse, a street-smart loner adept in the martial arts and dedicated to fighting crime. He is on friendly terms with the police, making him a "sanctioned" vigilante, and throughout the brief series he
crusades against child prostitution, drug trafficking, gang violence, and police corruption. Little is known about his personal life -- outside of his relationship with "Toots" Sweet, his martial arts mentor, and a troubled family history -- but one thing that his creators do make clear early on the narrative is Blackhorse's ethnic roots. This comes up only twice in the series. In the opening scenes of the first issue, Joyce Prescott, an African American reporter, asks Nathan about his background. She inquires, "What kind of Indian are you?" to which he responds, "Navajo, I think. I'm American. That's what's important" (7/1, 3).

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The second occurrence happens at the beginning of the final issue, when Blackhorse first meets Gary, a young boy who has just moved into his neighborhood. After Nathan introduces himself, Gary replies, "Blackhorse? An Indian? Hey! Hey, Man. You're Street Wolf!" (2/5-6).

The scant attention given to Blackhorse's tribal connections -- epitomized by Nathan's tentative rejoinder, "Navajo, I think" -- underscores the tangential significance of Native Americanness in this mini-series. It is almost as if Blackhorse's ethnic identification has no bearing at all on the comic's narrative world. As such, the comic book never falls prey to the kind of stereotyped uses of Native Americans that are all too common in popular narrative. Nothing about Nathan Blackhorse -- his speech, his occupation, his concerns, his looks, or the way he is drawn -- fits into any preconceived notions of Indianness, and outside of his suggestive surname, he could be from almost any ethnic community. Sheyahshe argues that this "minimized" indigenousness "leaves hardly any room to celebrate Nathan's ethnic identity" (117), but given the generic context of the comic, the enigmatic nature of the protagonist is far from a liability. Indeed, Blackhorse's doubly marginalized status -- his Native heritage as well as the silence surrounding his cultural patrimony -- makes him an appropriate hardboiled "detecting" noir figure. Not only is he tough and combative, but the secrecy surrounding him both sets him apart from others and reflects the ambiguous world that he inhabits. In other words, his deemphasized ethnicity contributes to the uncertain tone of the narrative's genre.

Regarding Blackhorse's ethnic background, the comments of Street Wolf's creator are worth noting. In an explanatory note in the inaugural issue, Harris reveals how he could not decide whether to make Nathan a white or a black character. But then, as the writer relates, a friend and former collaborator "calmly shrugged his shoulders and said, quite matter-of-factly, without hesitation, and with annoying simplicity: 'So? Why don't you make him an Indian?' I was struck
speechless. Here I was on the verge of ripping out my hair by the handfuls, and he gives me
the perfect answer without missing a beat” (31). Harris never goes on to explain why making
Blackhorse a Native American was such a “perfect answer,” and nothing about his
representation of Blackhorse sheds any light. One can only speculate as to why the choice left
him "speechless." On the one hand, Harris’s comments on the genesis of Street Wolf would
seem to mitigate the arbitrariness of Blackhorse’s Native American heritage. Yet read within
the context of the detective genre, this silence on Harris’s part only compounds the mystery --
or the shadowy indistinctness -- surrounding his title character. In this way, Street Wolf stands
as an early, albeit short-lived, example of Native noir, which would find fuller form in
subsequent comic narratives.

Detecting Native Customs in DeFilippis and Weir’s Skinwalker

If Harris’s Street Wolf lacks an ethnic resonance, then Nunzio DeFilippis and Christina Weir’s
treatment of Navajo culture sounds a full crescendo. Beginning as a four-issue mini-series
running from May to September 2002, Skinwalker was later collected as a graphic novel in
2003, including previously unpublished material that fleshes out (so to speak) the original
narrative. It is the story of Greg Haworth, an FBI agent, who teams up with Navajo Tribal
Police Officer Anne Adakai to solve a macabre mystery, one linked to a suspect Diné (Navajo)
ritual, skinwalking. According to custom, the practice is one performed by a Navajo witch, a
yenaaldloshi, who wears the skin of a dead animal so as to gain the strengths and abilities of
that animal. The belief is that by doing so, the skinwalker can then use those powers to control
another individual, causing him pain and misfortune, or even forcing him to behave against his
will -- getting under his skin, as it were. DeFilippis and Weir use this legend not to denigrate (at
least overtly) or stereotype the Diné -- it is, after all, an Anglo American in the comic who ends
up exploiting this ritual -- but as a narrative device to propel the narrative into a dark and
ominous world that is endemic to noir fiction.

As more than one reviewer has noted, Skinwalker is a curious mixture of tone, a cross
between a Tony Hillerman novel and an X-Files episode, and the writers go out of their way to
make it a paranormal tale of detection. One of Haworth’s FBI colleagues in the Indian Country
Unit goes rogue while undercover to investigate the tactical uses of various non-Western
cultural and religious practices. The agent, Brian Forsythe, kills and takes the skin of a Navajo
delinquent to see if the ritual works with humans, and then realizes too late that his new skins
are quickly rejected, so that he must find new victims daily -- as well as ingest large doses of
immunosuppressant drugs -- just to stay alive. The bulk of the narrative is concerned with
Haworth and Adakai’s attempts to uncover the mysteries behind the bizarre killings. While they
do so, we see the tense exchanges between the two law officers, which in many ways function
as a synecdoche for indigenous-white relations in general. The various ill feelings and
uncertainties are all generated by the cultural differences between the two: Adakai is angry at
being marginalized by the federal government and suspicious of its motives, while Haworth
feels out of place in the Navajo Nation and is annoyed by his Native colleague being overly
defensive and having a chip on her shoulder.[8]

Indeed, there are several times in the graphic novel when Haworth’s actions threaten their
already tenuous relationship. Twice during the narrative, special agent Haworth asks that
Adakai be his guide in Diné Bikéyah, or Navajo country, and she resists being treated like a
mere stereotype, “like Sacagawea.”[9] Early on in the investigation, when it appears that a
Navajo youth has killed an FBI agent, Haworth tells Adakai that he has to report to the bureau
that “one of your people killed one of ours.” When Adakai takes offense at the phrase “your
people,” Haworth quickly dismisses her sensitivity, claiming, “I don’t have time for semantics.”
Adakai's response crystallizes the rhetorical subjugation that her culture has faced: "Maybe where you come from, how the white man views us is an issue of semantics. But semantics is all we've got out here."

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Such exchanges not only underscore the often-contentious relationship between these ethnic communities, but within the context of the noir genre, establish an alienating and potentially self-destructive coupling that propels the narrative. The breakdown of this scene is particularly telling. As Adakai chastises Haworth, the visual perspective recedes, framing the two officers so that they appear lost and unmoored, as if unable to grasp their dilemma.

Even more significant is DeFilippis and Weir's handing of the skinwalker ritual and its effects on the representation of Native culture. After the first murder -- and in a scene whose text is made up entirely of the subjective narration boxes, a mode of internal monologue reminiscent of the voiceovers so prominent in film noir -- Adakai worries that her community's suspected skinwalker "play(s) into the hands of every white man's fear."

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Later, she verbalizes these concerns by telling Haworth the reasons for her sensitivity: "I'm looking at the FBI coming down here and investigating a crime that is everyone's stereotype of us as savages." Finally, when the FBI's clandestine operations are revealed -- that they are investigating the potential uses of skinwalking as an undercover tactic -- Adakai holds the bureau's Deputy Director at gunpoint, vowing "I won't let you turn our rituals, even the ones we're ashamed of, into a government weapon." Using the noir genre, DeFilippis and Weir are making clear arguments against the exploitation and colonialization of Native cultures, and they do so with conflicted protagonists whose motives are mixed and who, at different times, are seen both as victims and as suspects.

This is most fully realized in the figure of Ann Adakai. In the opening pages of the graphic novel -- and again, in subjective "voiceover" narrations typical of noir narrative -- she expresses her suspicions of Navajo customs, such as the effectiveness of peacemaking (using a tribal mediator, with knowledge of traditional ways, to mitigate legal disputes) or the insistence of her friend, Kokopelli Aguilar, on studying the older ways. Yet in what is arguably an epiphanic moment late in the story, she confesses to Haworth, "My whole career, the 'traditional' ways were things I saw as obstacles. But now, I realize they're most of what we have left. And I'll be damned if I let some white man from Washington take them from us and corrupt them." These words are followed by a solitary silent panel, accentuating the gravity of Adakai's realization.

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Notice here, too, the framing of both Haworth and Adakai together, a stark contrast to the paneled separation of the two earlier in the text (Figure 3). It is as if there is an ethnic détente in progress, and given Adakai's ominous reference to skinwalking, one is encouraged to read the government's actions as an act of cultural (mis)appropriation. The irony of this scene is that it encourages us, in what could be called an unintentional metafictional moment, to note the writers' own purposes behind using the ritual. DeFilippis and Weir are employing a suspect ritual -- one that, according to Adakai's friend Aguilar, is only spoken of "in whispers" among the Diné -- as a narrative device in a comic book, a commercial enterprise. Read in one way, their use of another's ethnic tradition (neither of the writers is Native American) is analogous to the government's exploitive behaviors within the diegesis. What is more, the act of skinwalking, wearing another's skin for manipulative purposes, functions as an apt ethnic
metaphor. By assuming the perspective of an Other, one is professing an authority over that subject, and as such, assumes the responsibilities and burdens of that representation.

Indeed, Rob Schmidt reads *Skinwalker* as potentially insensitive and as a violation of the Navajo’s taboo against death and dead bodies. In his review of the comic, he astutely observes that for some readers, rationalizing the use of cultural taboos for critical purposes can be just as offensive as the narrative depiction of the taboo.[10] Given DeFilippis and Weir’s obvious sympathy for Navajo culture within the narrative -- as demonstrated, for example, by the treachery of the FBI, the heroic roundedness of Adakai’s character, and the fact that Haworth will probably end up in the Indian Country Unit -- it is doubtful that the text is being self-critical, expressing a mea culpa, in its own treatment of the *Diné* ritual. Yet regardless of the authors’ intentions, the fact remains that they employ noir conventions in representing skinwalkers. The dark and foreboding tone of the genre, along with its emphasis on deceptive appearances and narrative uncertainties, create a perfect setting for the ambiguous uses of the Navajo ceremony, both as it is represented within the text and as it (inadvertently) begs a broader discussion of creative use and ethnic appropriation.

Dredging the Rez in Aaron and Guéra’s Scalped

Both *Street Wolf* and *Skinwalker* are illustrative examples of the noir genre, taking readers into the lurid underside of contemporary life. In the “Streetnoise” sections that begin the first two issues of his series, Mark Wayne Harris introduces the kind of pressing social ills that Nathan Blackhorse combats -- specifically child prostitution and drug abuse -- and any potential controversy surrounding his representation of the subject. DeFilippis and Weir take an obscure Navajo practice of witchcraft and use that as a springboard for exploring dark bureaucratic conspiracies. Even more disturbing is the most recent example of Native noir, Jason Aaron and R. M. Guéra’s *Scalped*. Published by DC Comics’ Vertigo imprint, the comic book began with a cover date of March 2007, and, at the time of this writing, there have been 40 issues.[11] The series includes a sprawling array of characters and contexts, but the primary narrative thread concerns Dashiell “Dash” Bad Horse, a full-blooded Oglala Lakota who returns home to the Prairie Rose Indian Reservation (largely based on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota) after a fifteen-year absence. He is considered by many to be a loose canon -- “a borderline sociopath... a violent meltdown just waiting to happen,” as one character puts it (*Indian Country* 77/5). His belligerence quickly captures the attention of Lincoln Red Crow, the consolidated power in Prairie Rose. President of the Oglala council, sheriff of the tribal police force, chairman of the Prairie Rose Planning Committee, managing director of the reservation’s new Crazy Horse Casino, and boss of the mob-like “dawg soldierz,” Red Crow considers himself “the Father, the Son and the Holy fucking Ghost all rolled into one” (17/5). He hires Dash first as one of his tribal police officers and then as part of his personal security team. Unbeknownst to his employer, Bad Horse is an undercover FBI agent sent back to Prairie Rose to uncover incriminating evidence against Red Crow. He is handled by Agent Baylis Nitz, an unscrupulous supervisor with a vendetta against Red Crow, whom he suspects is behind the murder of two FBI agents back in the 1970s as part of a militant Native American activist group (reminiscent of the Leonard Peltier incident in 1975). The bulk of the series is devoted to Dash’s infiltration of Red Crow’s operations and the downward spiral that ensues.

Most reviewers have read *Scalped* within the context of crime fiction -- “Sopranos on the rez,” as many have called it -- but perhaps a more precise way of reading the series is through the lens of noir fiction, a subgenre of crime and detective narrative.[12] More than any comic discussed in this essay, *Scalped* bears the characteristic stamp of noir by almost anyone’s
Dash Bad Horse is certainly a detecting figure, working not only to uncover the criminality of Chief Red Crow, but also to expose the amoral actions of Agent Nitz. Like many noir protagonists, he displays self-destructive tendencies -- as evidenced by his growing heroin addiction -- and becomes an unwitting victim of the world he inhabits. As the series evolves, Dash finds himself with shrinking options, trapped by the uncompromising demands of both Red Crow and Nitz. Against his better judgment, he is irresistibly drawn to the comic's femme fatale, Carol Ellroy, the promiscuous and drug-addicted daughter of Red Crow. She functions as a narrative doppelganger, since both of them are estranged from their one remaining parent -- Dash's father and Carol's mother are introduced only in brief flashbacks -- and both withdraw into themselves, and into their dysfunctional sexual relationship, as the pressures around them build.[13] As such, the tone of the series is both alienating and claustrophobic -- panels framing skewed angles and extreme close-ups are common throughout.

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Guéra's art, gritty and saturated with dark, dull browns and blues, creates a foreboding atmosphere that parallels the sinister fate that seems to await all involved. Even the daylight scenes are illustrated as if under shadow. All in all, the series is one that resonates with the noir tradition established by such practitioners as Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, and James Ellroy.[14]

Yet, what is perhaps most significant about Scalped is its narrative use of indigenous predicaments as a way into the noir genre. More times than not -- and as demonstrated by critics such as Sheyahshe, Pewewardy, and King -- when not represented in the historical past and in Western settings, Native Americans are typecast as superheroes. And usually it is those characteristics most stereotyped, such a shamanistic connection to the spiritual world or the extraordinary ability to "read" nature, that find expression within that genre. Some even claim that Scalped, as is the case with many superhero comics, does harm to Native Americans by playing into common stereotypes. Schmidt, for example, condemns what he sees in the series as an "ultra-negative portrayal of life on the rez," "a grotesque look at reservation life," and a tendency to "tak[e] the worst possible scenario and present[it] as the norm." He bluntly concludes that "[t]o portray Indians worse than the reality isn't 'realistic.' It's a textbook example of unrealistic. Since [Scalped] reinforces a thousand previous portrayals of Indians as drunks, savages, and killers, it's stereotypical as well as unrealistic" (Scalped).[15]
What is apparently at issue in Schmidt's critique is the need for verisimilitude. As with most studies on Native American comics, the assumption here is that the value of a comic should be based largely on the writer's and artist's accuracy of representation. That is, the more "true" one is in one's rendition of Native culture, the better the comic. But faithfully illustrating contemporary reservation life has never been Jason Aaron's primary concern. In his response to Schmidt's review -- one that judged the new Vertigo series solely by its first issue -- Aaron stated, "I'm not writing *Scalped* with any sort of agenda in mind, and I'm not nearly pretentious enough to think that I'm here to educate the country on the state of Native life." Instead, he set out to write "a crime series, so it's obviously going to focus on criminal elements" (qtd. in Schmidt, *Scalped*). Given Aaron's sentiments, the question then becomes, why base the crime (or noir) series in a reservation setting? Aaron has stated elsewhere that Native American history is "just one of those things I'd always read about, especially the American Indian movement and the Red Power movement of the '70s, and the Leonard Peltier story. So all that just kind of worked together with my desire to do a crime series. ... I wanted to do, like, a familiar genre, but something that was a little different" ("Sticking with *Scalped*"). In essence, the comic book has its genesis in Aaron's fascination with generic forms: "It all really came from me loving both westerns and crime stories and wanting to combine the two" (qtd. in Rozier).

Questions of ethnic stereotyping in *Scalped* are certainly open for discussion. Whether intended or not, Aaron's representation of indigenous contexts could strike some readers as unflattering or even insensitive, and this matter has sparked quite a bit of debate on blogs and networking sites devoted to comics and pop culture.[16] However, and as previously stated, this essay is concerned not with the degree to which Native American-based comics adhere to fair or accurate representations, but instead, with how authors use indigenous cultures in noir fiction and why this might be such an advantageous choice. Indeed, and as is especially the case with *Scalped*, the various circumstances surrounding certain tribal cultures provide highly effective contexts for detective fiction. In other words, the overlay of contemporary Native concerns and the noir genre makes more sense than most would initially believe.

One of the common criticisms leveled at *Scalped*, as well as at other popular indigenous narratives, is the disproportional focus on crime, poverty, and especially alcoholism on the reservation. While a case could certainly be made that such an emphasis tends to dehumanize Native Americans, another way of reading these social conditions is that they underscore the fatalism so common in noir narrative. Seen in this context, the reservation becomes a naturalist arena -- hardboiled or noir fiction is often linked to pessimistic determinism -- with characters trapped by social forces over which they have little control. The dark and inescapable underbelly of reservation life is analogous to the kind of urban landscapes that are the settings to many noir narratives. Similarly, the corruption found in most hardboiled fiction is given ample expression in *Scalped*. The most visible manifestation of this can be seen in Chief Red Crow's organization, but there are other, and less sympathetic, instances of corruption in the comic. Aaron taps into many readers' assumptions surrounding reservation life, such as that there are no clean hands in its functioning, and utilizes them for generic purposes. Both the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the FBI, especially as represented by Agent Nitz and undercover Special Agent Brett Fillenworth, are mired in sleaze and are represented with almost no redeeming qualities. These agencies help cast a gloomy and alienating tone over the text, creating a "no way out" scenario under which Dash and even Red Crow must labor.

More than any other character in the series, Dash Bad Horse is trapped in a violent world over which he seems to have little control. Having returned to the Prairie Rose Indian Reservation after being sent away by his mother at the age of thirteen, Dash is now unable to leave. Even
when it looks like he has fulfilled the mission Nitz sent him to complete, implicating Red Crow in a murder, he is still emotionally fated to the place. This is articulated clearly in the most recent collected volume, *The Gnawing*. As expressed through internal subjective dialogue, similar to the “voiceovers” that characterize noir narrative, Dash realizes that his predicament is not so different from that of others on the reservation:

> I came back here against my will to do a job. ... At long fucking last, it looks like that job's about to be finished, leaving me free to do what I've been dying to do every second of every day for the last few months...to get the fuck outta here and never come back. Goodbye, shitheads. You fucks are stuck here for the rest of your lives. But not me. I'm getting the fuck outta here. I'm getting the fuck outta here. I'm getting the fuck outta here. So why don’t I feel good about it yet?[17]

Dash's awareness of his own confinement, taking place as it does in the police station's cramped bathroom, is appropriately revealed as he looks at himself in a mirror -- and what is more, his predicament is heightened by being doubly framed, both within the bathroom mirror and within the panel's borders. Bad Horse articulates his impasse even more poignantly earlier in the series. After having apprehended a particularly difficult perpetrator, Dash meets with the snitch who provided the information that lead to the collar. His informant, realizing that the suspect has escaped custody, worries for his own safety, and Dash tries to console him:

> If I ever did find myself in such a situation, I imagine I'd have the sense to know that it was bound to get hairy now and then. That the burden of lies might feel like it's gonna crush ya at times. And that after a while ya might start to forget whose side you're really on, and then wonder if it even matters. I suppose ya could try to comfort yourself with the thought that you're doin' the right thing, even if ya ain't. And you could tell yourself that the people you're talkin' down had it comin', but then, who doesn't? Really, at the end of the day, Mack, I think you'll find the only thing that'll ever give ya any sense of peace...is the simple satisfaction of a job well done.[18]

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What is so significant, and ironic, about this passage is that Dash is inadvertently describing his own dilemma. Furthermore, Dash's speech nicely encapsulates the dark, alienating tone of the comic. Unsure of who his friends are, where his allegiance lies, or in what direction he should turn, Bad Horse is left without a moral compass, and as such, finds himself in an existential crisis.

But Dash is not alone. As the series develops, we learn that Red Crow, too, becomes one of the narrative's victims and that his motives are anything but self-serving. Much like Bad Horse, he becomes a conflicted and self-destructive protagonist, fighting against the disruptive forces that he has nonetheless helped to perpetuate. At the end of the fourth collected volume, *The Gravel in Your Guts*, the tribal boss has just murdered a couple of outside gang members who have threatened the safety of the reservation. In a series of subjective dialogue boxes -- much like those of Dash, using self-reflexive staccato "voiceovers" -- Red Crow rationalizes his actions:

I consider myself an honorable man. Spiritual. Respectful of my elders. Kind to animals. A friend of nature. A tender lover. A benevolent politician. An honorable man, sure, but that doesn't make me a nice guy. If there's one thing I aint, it's a nice guy. I've killed many men. Women too. Some with the wave of a finger or a spoken word. Some with my own two hands. And I'll kill a hundred more, if that's what it takes to see my vision through. To carve a better place in this world for my people. Like it or not, that is who I am. Who I'll always be. I do what I do because someone has to.

(140-43)

Here Red Crow becomes a lone "cowboy" figure, reminiscent of such hardboiled characters as Hammett's Sam Spade and Chandler's Philip Marlowe. And in the individual panels during this final scene, as Red Crow ruminates, he is often presented in shadow, framed by himself or turning away from others.

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What is more, his actions have unforeseen consequences and make him estranged from the world he has sworn to protect. This is most clearly demonstrated after the opening of the Crazy Horse Casino, when he pays off the regional director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Todd Jigger. The latter tells him, "You know your problem chief? You done spent too long playin' the part a' the poor, old pissed-off 'skin who wouldn't be caught dead workin' for the man. 'Cause now you are the man. And you don't know what the hell to do with yourself." And then, sitting among the filth and degradation in the casino's private suite, Jigger pronounces, "You won. This here's what you was fightin' for all that time. Welcome to the white man's world" (*Casino Boogie*). As if to underscore Red Crow's alienation, Guéra presents him in shadows, standing away from the action and alone at the bottom of the panel.

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Another generically significant element of *Scalped* is the text's sense of dislocation and defamiliarization. Diegetic time is heavily fractured throughout the series, and this fragmentation becomes particularly acute in the first two collected volumes. Aaron constantly begins an installment in medias res, and then has the narrative jump backwards and forwards by years, days, and minutes. These temporal moves function as more than mere flashbacks or opportunities for exposition. Given the frequency and the intensity of the sequential shifts -- and the tendency to break up the event time of more than one narrative thread at a time -- the effect can be disorienting, especially on first reading the series.[19] This unsteadiness is further intensified by Guéra's art, with its abundance of close-ups and the uneven overlay of his panels. Not only does such a narrating strategy intensify the theme of isolation and dread so common in noir fiction, it also emphasizes the indigenous predicament. Denied a history that they could genuinely define on their own terms, it is as if Native Americans are people out of time, and this rupture is reflected in *Scalped*'s splintered chronology. Once again, the strategies for signifying both ethnic and generic concerns effectively coincide.

Similarly, Aaron and Guéra ensure the foreignness of the sequences by injecting moments of fantasy within the text. This is most effectively engendered through the figure of Catcher. Born Arthur Pendergrass, Catcher is a former Rhodes Scholar and had once been a member of
Red Crow's militant Native activists. Now a hopeless alcoholic living on the outskirts of the community, he believes that the Thunder Beings of his people are sending him visions, and that these messages foretell the doom of those on the Prairie Rose reservation. Although here Aaron flirts with the stereotype of the Native American as spiritualist -- what Sheyahshe calls the phenomenon of "instant shaman" (55) -- he does so for generic purposes. Catcher plays a central role in the series, literally framing the first narrative arc -- his is the first and last voice in Indian Country -- and instigating one of the most significant threads of the series: the mystery surrounding the murder of Gina Bad Horse, Dash's estranged mother. More importantly, Catcher can see people's totems and becomes an unwitting harbinger of the future events. He first meets the adult Dash (Catcher had known him as a child) on the opening night of Red Crow's casino, claiming to be sent by wanblee galeshka, the great eagle, to watch over Prairie Rose's future leader. When Bad Horse asks who is, Catcher replies, "Maya owicha paka. Ya know the phrase? It's loosely translated as 'fate,' but more literally it means, 'he who pushes ya off a cliff'" (Casino Boogie). His erratic visions not only disorient him, but also momentarily make surreal the flow of this otherwise realistic comic. These narrative disruptions give the story, at times, an unnatural feel, and, along with the temporal fracturing, contribute to the alienating atmosphere of the text.

Catcher's visions also help highlight another feature of noir fiction: the question of deceptive appearances and what is "real." At times, he questions the nature of his prophesies, and given his history with alcoholism, those around him (such as Granny Poor Bear) doubt the reality of his revelations. According to one of Catcher's visions, the spider is Dash's totem. Several times throughout the series, Dash is framed along with spider images, or even encased in webbing.

Alternative content
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As such, Bad Horse, the central detecting figure in the series, is associated directly with Iktomi, the spider-trickster. In Lakota legend, Iktomi is a shapeshifter, serving both positive and negative functions, and who, by metaphorical webs, is able to connect or bring people together. Such mythical links are not only appropriate to Dash's prophetic role as a tribal leader, but they underscore the mixed and conflicted nature of this noir protagonist.

The theme of misleading forms resonates even more in the figure of Special Agent Brett Fillenworth. He is one of the least attractive characters in the series, and his cover is doubly
He is a white man parading as a Native brave -- he claims to be one-sixteenth Kickapoo -- and he is an undercover federal agent acting as a leader in Prairie Rose’s band of traditionalists. Going by the name of Diesel (as in diesel engine/injun), he functions both as signifier of deception, a characteristic of much detective fiction, and as a site of ethnic debate. His desire for indigenous identification raises the question of ethnoracial authenticity: how do we label particular communities, in this case Native Americans? How much “blood” or experience is needed for an individual to be considered ethnic? And how do we define “Indianness”? His subject position in the text, much like Catcher’s spiritual visions, highlights the dilemma of authenticity, and complements further the trajectories of both Native and noir narratives.

**Toward a Broader Understanding of Native American Comics**

When surveying the history and significance of indigenous populations in comics, it is important to note that their presence extends far beyond the “usual suspects” of superhero titles. While previous critics such as Cornel Pewewardy and C. Richard King have shown the dynamics, as well as the liabilities, under which Native Americans have served as superheroes, little has been written on the ways they function in other genres. This emphasis on superheroes is not without its problems, in that it inadvertently corroborates a popular misconception: that superheroes and comics, even those designated as “mainstream comics,” are synonymous. Furthermore, by focusing their critique primarily on this highly visible genre, critics may be inadvertently (and counterproductively) marginalizing the place of indigenous people in popular narrative. As is the case with other communities, the full roundedness of Native American identity is best demonstrated by their presence in a variety of cultural and generic contexts, and their representation in comics is no exception.

Given the limitations of space, I have confined my analysis to the detective genre comic. However, an investigation of other non-superhero genres would prove equally revealing. In the science fiction sub-genre of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narrative, for example, one could provide insightful readings of Native Americans in such titles as Timothy Truman’s *Scout* (serialized Sept. 1985-Oct. 1987), Jamie Delano and Richard Case’s *Ghostdancing* (serialized Mar.-Sept. 1995), and Malcolm Wong and Guillermo A. Angel’s *Dog Eaters* (the first three issues released between Nov. 2008 and June 2009, with future plans to complete the series in graphic novel form). In terms of the “weird western,” readers could see the genre-bending uses of Native figures in such titles as Jeff Mariotte’s *Desperadoes* series (so far collected in five volumes), David Gallaher and Steve Ellis’s online werewolf western *High Moon* (2007-present), or Doug TenNapel’s steampunk western, *Iron West* (2006). Likewise with more educationally-based comics created to instruct readers on tribal histories and customs, many times with formal tribal affiliation. Examples of these would include *Chickasaw Adventures* (2004-2005; produced in part by the Chickasaw Nation, and seven issues to date), *A Hero’s Voice* and *Dreams of Looking Up* (1996, 1999; published by the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe), Brandon Mitchell’s *Sacred Circles* (2003, three issues), Chad Solomon and Christopher Meyer’s *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws* (2006-2009, three volumes to date), and the series of health education comics from the Canadian-based Healthy Aboriginal Network.[20]

What is needed are more studies on American ethnic comics, and Native American titles in particular, that extend beyond the superhero genre. There is nothing wrong with highlighting the significance of Echo’s mixed heritage, the intermittent usage of Super-Chief, the technological savvy of Forge, or the moral evolution of Spider-Man’s former nemesis, Puma. But as this study of recent Native noir has suggested, tribal characters and contexts are given
equal, if not more sophisticated and nuanced, expression in other comic genres. Perhaps even more significant, the very nature of contemporary Native American culture -- its troubled history, its mythologies, the social challenges it faces, and the isolation it has had to endure -- lends itself well to particular generic translations. In the case of noir fiction and Native representation, the mystery is not one of appropriate applicability. The actual mystery revolves around why more practitioners have not taken advantage of such rich potential.

Notes

[1] Since the Modern Language Association has yet to formalize guidelines for referencing comics, the citation and bibliographic style in this essay partially reflects that adopted by the Comics Art and Comics area of the Popular Culture Association. As such, and when citing comics, bibliographic distinctions are made between writers and artists, and specific panels are parenthetically cited along with page numbers. For more detail, see Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide at http://www.comi....org/CAC/cite.html.

[2] The emerging literature concerns graphic narrative within the context of ethnicity in general, as well as comics as a function of a particular ethnic community. By far the most prevalent of these studies concern the links between comics and Jewishness. See, for example, works by Simcha Weinstein; Danny Fingeroth; Paul Buhle; Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman; Arie Kaplan; Joël Kotek; Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon, and my own upcoming special issue of Shofar. Some of the most notable scholarship and anthologies on African American comics include those by Jeffrey A. Brown; Fredrick Stömborg; William H. Foster, Ill; and Damian Duffy and John Jennings. Frederick Luis Aldama (Your Brain on Latino Comics) gives a detailed analysis of Latino comics, Michael A. Sheyahshe provides a survey of Native Americans in comic books, and Jeff Yang, Parry Shen, Keith Chow, and Jerry Ma have recently pulled together an anthology of Asian American superhero comics. For studies focusing on the broader landscape of comics, race, and ethnicity, see Aldama (Multicultural Comics) as well as my own guest-edited special issue of the journal MELUS.

Similarly, there have also been a number of museum exhibitions dedicated to comics and ethnoracial expression. For example, Philadelphia’s Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies sponsored Ethnic Images in the Comics(15 Sept. - 20 Dec. 1986), the main library at Ohio State University presented Illusions: Ethnicity in American Cartoon Art(26 Oct. - 11 Dec. 1992), Atlanta’s William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum held ZAP! POW! BAM! The Superhero: The Golden Age of Comic Books, 1938-1950 (24 Oct. 2004 - 28 Aug. 2005), the Jackson State University Art Gallery presented Other Heroes: African American Comics Creators, Characters and Archetypes (5-27 Apr. 2007), the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, NM, showcased Comic Art Indigène: Where Comics and the Indigenous Meet(11 May 2008 - 4 Jan. 2009), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Krannert Art Museum exhibited Out of Sequence: Underrepresented Voices in American Comics(24 Oct. 2008 - 4 Jan. 2009). Catalogues or exhibition materials have been published for each of these events.

[3] In her treatment of Native American comics, Noori localizes her readings by looking specifically at characteristics and icons of the Anishinaabe people.

[4] Although the main thrust of this easy is on the narrative uses of indigenous images in recent detective noir comics, and not on the truthfulness of representation, I will nonetheless note instances of stereotyping in these texts, especially in light of the possible generic functions of the stereotypes. When gauging distortions or misrepresentations of Native Americans, one could not do better than reference Raymond William Stedman's outstanding study of Indian stereotypes in American popular culture. His final chapter, “Lingering Shadow,” is particularly useful in that it provides sensible criteria for critiquing Indian imagery. He asks that readers consider the following eight questions: “Is the vocabulary demeaning? ... Do the Indians talk like Tonto? ... Do the Indians belong to the feather-bonnet tribe? ... Are comic interludes built upon firewater and stupidity? ... Are the Indians portrayed as an extinct species? ... Are the Indians either noble or savage? ... Is the tone patronizing? ... And, Is Indian humanness recognized?” (240-52).

[5] My understanding of “superhero” follows that of Peter Coogan, who delineates the genre as comprising characters with a pro-social and selfless mission, superhuman or technological powers, and a secret identity complete with codename and/or costume. Furthermore, these figures must participate more closely within superhero-genre conventions than those found in other narrative genres, such as science fiction, western, and detective. For example, Timothy Truman's Scout, while demonstrating some of the characteristics of a superhero (e.g., a
selfless mission to undermine the military/industrial complex and extraordinary fighting skills), has no dual identity and is more closely associated with general science fiction conventions, specifically the post-apocalyptic subgenre. As such, Scout would not be considered a superhero. A similar case can be made in the detective genre for Mark Wayne Harris’s Street Wolf, a figure that I will discuss later in the essay.

My choice to limit the focus of this essay to representations of contemporary, or non-historical, Native Americans necessarily precludes the vast majority of comics making use of this population. Recent (non-superhero) examples of these include Jeff Mariotte’s Desperadoes series (e.g., Desperadoes: Epidemic!, 1999; and Desperadoes: Buffalo Dreams, 2007, serialized Jan.-May 2007), Terry LaBan and Steve Parkhouse’s Muktk Wolfsbreath: Hard-Boiled Shaman (serialized Aug.-Oct. 1998), Don Hudson’s Gunpowder Girl and the Outlaw Squaw (2005), Scott Chantler’s Northwest Passage (2007; serialized 2006-2006), the two-volume comics adaptation of Orson Scott Card’s Red Prophet: Tales of Alvin Maker (2007, 2008; serialized Mar. 2006-Mar. 2008), and Marvel’s adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans (2008; serialized July-Dec. 2007). Stedman, in his criteria for Indian stereotyping, cautions against the popular tendency to represent Native culture as a relic of the past, as if it were nothing more than a museum piece (247-48). Michael A. Sheyahshe likens such historical limitations to a “sepia-toned prison” (94), and argues instead for the necessity of contemporizing indigenous images in comics:

seeing Native Americans in modern settings allows the audience to view them as more than just pieces of history; placing Indigenous characters in more modern times forces creators to provide more modern clothing beyond the usual fringe and feathers; and putting these Indian characters into modern environments has the potential to get more Native people involved in the creation process. (99)

Given the fact that many of these comics set in modern times are clearly genre-based – and that, furthermore, the non-superhero genres have received little critical attention – I am particularly interested in the way these narratives function.

[6] In his two studies of Native American images in comics – the latter a more elaborate version, at times word-for-word, of the earlier – Pewewardy looks almost exclusively at its superhero manifestations. Furthermore, his discussions of Native American representations are often overshadowed by a more general focus on ethnic minorities as a whole in comics. While Sheyahshe’s analysis is more thorough and far-reaching, he tends to highlight those comics that are either based in the historical past (as in the case with characters such as Tonto and Little Beaver, or the comic book series Red Wolf and Turok, Son of Stone) or feature superheroes. These latter make up the bulk of Sheyahshe’s observations, which include discussions of such figures as Thunderbird, Warpath, Forge, Dani Moonstar (all associated with the X-Men), Echo, Butcher, Talisman, The Raven, Wyatt Wingfoot, Risque, and the teams found in Peace Party and Tribal Force. King likewise focuses mostly on the superhero genre – which he unfortunately calls “mainstream” comics (216) – although he, like Sheyahshe, discusses independent or small press comic books that reclaim and celebrate tribal histories and cultures. Perhaps the most democratic treatment of Native American comics – superhero as well as non-superhero – can be found on the Website of Blue Corn Comics. Its creator, Rob Schmidt, maintains an ongoing database of titles, reviews, and resources devoted to indigenous representations in comics and other popular media. He is also the creator of Peace Party, a multicultural comic book featuring Native Americans. For a general overview of contemporary comics and Native imagery, including brief interviews with Sheyahshe and Schmidt, see Emmett Furey’s “Native Americans in Comics.”


[8] Interestingly enough, the question of ethnic oversensitivity comes up as well in Street Wolf. During one of the few scenes where Blackhorse’s Native roots are discussed, reporter Joyce Prescott assumes that Nathan is touchy about his heritage. “I was stereotyping,” she says by way of apology. “People think all Indians are bitter and on a heritage kick. I’m sorry!” (7/5). In different ways, Harris, DeFilippis, and Weir are all working off of the stereotype of the “angry Indian.”

[9] Skinwalker is not paginated, and because of this, I will include no parenthetical panel numbering when citing this graphic novel.
In his review, Schmidt queried a variety of Native Americans, with different tribal affiliations, on the use of this tabooed subject, and the results were mixed. Some found that it violated Navajo culture for commercial purposes, while others were not as critical. For their part, DeFilippis and Weir illustrate the complications underlying the representation of skinwalking through the figure of Kokopelli Aguilar, a scholar of Navajo traditions who understands the taboo nature of the subject matter, but nonetheless writes a book on the topic.

As with most mainstream publisher titles, issues of *Scalped* have been regularly collected in "graphic novel" form, six volumes to date. All references in this essay are to the collected editions.

"*Sopranos on the rez*" is a phase used by many reviewers, and a simple Google search brings up innumerable comparisons between *Scalped* and the HBO series. In one interview, R. M. Guéra does call his artwork "noir stylized," but stops short of associating it with detective fiction ("Western Meets Noir").

In the most recent narrative arc, the series betrays still another characteristic of noir fiction: sexual tension as a plot-driving device. Dash and Carol's relationship has always been edgy, but now it has been given added narrative significance with the advent of Carol's unexpected pregnancy.

Perhaps it is no accident that two of the series' leading characters, Dashiell Bad Horse and Carol Ellroy, share names with two of these classic noir writers.

Schmidt's online review of the series is in two parts. The first was published in January 2007 and the second, a reaction to the audience response generated by the original, in February 2008. Since both online entries share the exact same title and concern the same topic, I am referencing them as one source.

The "Newspaper Rock" blog on *Blue Corn Comics* is the site of the most intense debate on Aaron's perceived stereotyping, with Rob Schmidt, the blog's creator, leading the charge against *Scalped*. In a recent overview of the issues involved, John Lees presents a more even-handed assessment of the series. In particular, he claims that the most scathing criticisms of the comic come from those who have only read the first several issues – before the characters and their various narrative threads have had time to develop – and persuasively argues that the most frequently cited example of blatant stereotyping, Lincoln Red Crow, is actually one of the series' most developed, conflicted, and well-rounded figures. He concludes that such conflicted characters actually speak for the series' fairness and lack of prejudice, since it "demonstrates that a Native American character can be just as flawed and damaged as a white character."

Unlike some of the other collected volumes of *Scalped*, *The Gnawing* has no pagination, and as such, I am including no parenthetical panel numbering.

As is the case with *The Gnawing*, the volume *Casino Boogie*, from which this passage is taken, is unpaginated, so I include no panel numbering.

In fact, this disjointed sense of time is augmented when read in the original comic book. Serialization of the events, coming in monthly installments, complicates the interpretive process even further, forcing readers to go back, refamiliarize themselves with, and piece together previous actions. Reading the series in graphic novel form, where individual issues are bound into a more coherent whole, helps to mitigate the disorder.

See Margaret Noori for enlightening discussions of several of these educational titles.

References


Given my interests in Native American literature and genre fiction, it is inevitable that I’ve also become interested in the ways in which the indigenous peoples of North America are represented in science fiction and fantasy. For the purposes of this particular article I’m thinking primarily of their representation in Anglo-American sf and fantasy, and I’ll be focusing on, so far as I’m aware, representations by non-Native writers. (Nor is this intended to be a comprehensive survey of appearances by Native Americans in sf though that may be a project for the future.) “Native Noir: Genre and the Politics of Indigenous Representation in Recent American Comics.” ImageTexT: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies 5.3 (2010). “Meddling with ‘hifalut’n foolishness’: Capturing Mark Twain in Recent Comics.” The Mark Twain Annual 7 (2009): 22-51. “What to Make of Roth’s Indignation; Or, Serious in the Fifties.” Reading Blog Categories. Select Category Adaptation Alternative Comics Announcement Audiobook Biography Bob Dylan Comics Criticism Education Ethnicity Fiction Film History Horror Humor Jewish literature Mark Twain Metafiction Music Narrative Noir Nonfiction Philip Roth Politics Popular Culture Superhero Uncategorized. Search this site, won’t you?