Unsettling American Superhero Narratives: Super Indian and Deer Woman as Spaces of Native Survivance and Maps to Native Futures

Sophie Novak

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Unsettling American Superhero Narratives: 
*Super Indian* and *Deer Woman* as Spaces of Native Survivance and Maps to Native Futures

Sophie Novak  
May 12, 2021

American Studies 302/3: Senior Project

Molly McGlennen  
Peter Antelyes
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Introduction:

Despite the genre’s widespread popularity, I had limited interest in superhero narratives before working on this project. Indeed, I knew little about superheroes and began only to think of them critically after encountering Anishinaabe and Métis artist and scholar Elizabeth LaPensee’s *Deer Woman: A Vignette* in a class with Molly McGlennen (Anishinaabe) called “Indigenous Women’s Decolonial Narratives” several years ago. I became fascinated with the story’s seemingly simultaneous engagement with and rejection of the notion of superheroism. As I began to further consider and explore the genre, I found that a rich field of study surrounds superheroes and much scholarship has sought to tease out key tensions in American studies that lie within the genre. Particularly given the immense surge in popularity of superhero narratives in the past decade, examining the often naturalized messaging that these stories convey seemed rife with possibility. Superhero narratives imagine ideal bodies, map out futures grounded in preserving the hegemonic, and present acts of righteous, heroic violence inflicted upon vilified bodies. I eventually began to delve into superhero narratives within the context of comics and found that the interplay between visual and textual narratives opened up unique possibilities for examining heroism. While superheroism seemed to lend itself to infinite fields of study, I kept returning to *Deer Woman*. If mainstream (meaning Euro-American, Western) heroes exist to preserve the hegemonic and prevent societal collapse, what might a Native “superhero” instead offer?

At the heart of “American identity” lies the conquest of Black and Indigenous peoples, and much of what Americans consider American exceptionalism stems from the appropriation and genocidal erasure of Native peoples. While I explore this particular conception of American identity in-depth in this project’s first chapter, I acknowledge it here to suggest that any work in American Studies or work that seeks to explore “American identity” must acknowledge settler
colonial violence and include Native voices. I am not Native and do not attempt to obtain or produce any intimate knowledge about Native stories and storytelling. In order to attempt working responsibly within this field of American Studies, I look to Native scholars whose works guide this project; this project particularly leans on and learns from Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo), Gerald Vizenor (White Earth), Mishuana Goeman (Seneca), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), Inés Hernández-Ávila (Nez Perce/Tejana), Joy Harjo (Muscogee), Gloria Bird (Spokane), Elizabeth Woody (Navajo, Warm Springs, Yakama), Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan), and above all, Arigon Starr (Kickapoo, Muscogee) and Elizabeth LaPensee who not only offer creative texts central to this study, but whose theorization and careful positioning of how their texts connect to decolonial work, Native feminisms, and Indigenous futurisms guide everything within this project.

In a question she poses on the first day of all of her Native Studies courses, my advisor Molly McGlennen offers a methodological approach that I sought to closely follow throughout this work: she prompts “What is your responsibility to these texts?” This question lies at the heart of Native Studies in urging students and scholars to recognize the necessity of reciprocity within reader/textual relationships, and stays active in my mind as I consider the scholars listed above from whom I have had the opportunity to learn. I say this not to suggest that I have in any way “fulfilled” or “resolved” my responsibilities to the texts within this project (indeed this sense of “reciprocity” or “responsibility” refutes concrete resolution and remains inherently ongoing), but to acknowledge a methodology that has shaped my engagement with Native Studies and hopefully shapes the work with which I engage here.

Through this project I examine mainstream comic history and the development of the superhero narrative within the medium in order to trace the genre’s connection to quintessential
American conquest narratives. Further, by looking at *Superman* in particular, I better understand the ways in which the *Superman* comics, the first superhero comic to gain immense popularity in America, naturalize a set of American ideals and ideal futures based on whiteness and coloniality. I then use this study to illuminate the ways in which Native women are working through and against the genre. Particularly looking to Native feminist theorists, I explore the ways in which Arigon Starr’s *Super Indian* and Elizabeth LaPensee’s *Deer Woman* create what Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman calls “Native spaces” that can “provide avenues beyond a recovery of a violent history of erasure and provide imaginative modes to unsettle settler space” (2). By using this framework, I reveal how Starr and LaPensee’s Indigenous comics both intervene in and operate outside of whiteness. In denaturalizing the conquest of Native women, Starr and LaPensee create Native histories and modes of storytelling unburdened by settler logics. These spaces offer assertions of Native survivance, which Gerald Vizenor describes as “an active sense of [Native] presence” (vii) and map out paths to Indigenous futures.

My first chapter is divided into two sections. I first look into the history of mainstream American comic books and investigate the genre’s roots in the American Western narrative. I lean on theorists like Philip Deloria (Sioux), Michael Sheyahshe, and Chad A. Barbour to examine how “playing Indian” (Deloria) became a central component in forming a sense of “unique American identity.” These scholars guide further discussions on the ways in which the appropriation of settler imaginings of Indigeneity contributes to the formation of white hegemonic masculinity, which bleeds heavily into the world of comic books and comic book superheroes. The next section examines the first *Superman* comic as a sort of quintessential example of American comic conventions. Through this section, I establish the work that mainstream comics accomplish in reifying American individualism, American hegemonic
conceptions of masculinity based in whiteness, and the preservation of the American settler state. In my second chapter I lay out Native feminist theory that both lies at the heart of *Super Indian* and *Deer Woman*, and also greatly enriches readings of Starr and LaPensee’s works. These theoretical texts disrupt inclinations to place *Superman* binaristically in conversation with Native comics. Particularly focusing on Mishuana Goeman’s exploration of Native literary mapmaking and the formation of “Native space,” I explore how Native comics offer Native feminist spaces that are central to collective healing, inherently future-oriented, and operate wholly outside of a colonial praxis — they, however, remain simultaneously oppositional to settler colonialism and intervene in colonial narratives.

Chapter 3 offers close readings of *Super Indian* in hopes of teasing out a particular methodological and thematic approach to comics that honors Native epistemological histories. I seek to establish that Starr imagines a comic world that both acknowledges realities of Indigenous peoples while depicting vibrant Native presences. She forefronts interactions between generations of women as central to collective continuance, and imagines a notion of heroism rooted in collaboration and kinship rather than individualism. My final chapter explores LaPensee’s *Deer Woman* as it both interacts with and avoids subscribing to the superhero genre. LaPensee, much like Starr, situates heroism as an inherently collaborative construct. However, in imagining bodies as “states of flux” (King, 33) and stories that live through and across time to influence the lived realities of Native women, LaPensee expands and transforms collaboration into something spatiotemporally unbounded. This chapter explores how LaPensee draws on the oral tradition to forge a Native feminist space that honors the body sovereignties of Native women, acknowledges colonial, sexual trauma, creates a space of healing for Native women, and offers pathways to liberatory Native futures.
Superhero narratives overwhelm popular media and Americans eagerly consume the naturalized messaging that these stories often convey regarding American futures based in white masculinity. There is much scholarship that I remain unable to explore within the rich and rapidly growing world of Native comics — anthologies like *Moonshot* and *Sovereign Traces*, for instance, offer potentials for decolonial readings that extend beyond the breadth of this project. I hope this study, however, can reveal the ways in which Native authors and artists are imagining and crafting what Ashon Crawley calls “otherwise possibilities,” or “infinite alternatives to what is” (2). Crawley asserts that “otherwise possibilities” do not float in an abstract future beyond our reach, but already exist (and have always existed). Native peoples have been crafting spaces of Native survivance (“otherwise spaces”) since first contact, and Starr and Goeman’s dedication to imagining spaces that emphasize “an active sense of [Native] presence” (Vizenor, vii) within superhero narratives in comics transforms a medium traditionally associated with whiteness and coloniality into something distinctly “otherwise.”
Chapter 1: Examining Euro-American Comics

From Cowboys to Capes: Comic Book History

Before exploring Super Indian and Deer Woman, I would like to examine how mainstream comics established norms that reified the preservation of American hegemony and rooted ideal American futures in white masculinity. LaPensee and Starr’s projects in Native comics extend far beyond simple, binaristic responses to the colonial messaging that pervades mainstream comics; indeed, I will later explore how both authors create Native feminist spaces that both disrupt colonial narratives and exist completely outside of whiteness. However, in first establishing the logics and narratives that define(d) the medium, I seek to better understand and reveal the decolonial work that LaPensee and Starr accomplish through Native comics. Although serial comics existed in various forms before DC released Superman, the “Man of Steel” launched the superhero comic into a widespread popularity that secured its place as a standard fixture within the medium. While similar to earlier detective and sci-fi fiction, superhero comics occupied their own distinct lane. In a definition that emerged through a copyright court case between Superman and “Wonder Man” in 1952, the court pronounced:

Superhero. A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers—extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generically distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic conventions. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (A Comics Studies Reader, 166)

With this definition, one might begin to trace the development of a grammar of normativity for superheroes; these traits became a generic standard for superheroism, so the specific work that superhero narratives accomplish in naturalizing colonial futures and idealizing the masculine
individual body becomes invisible. These generic developments, often viewed as “neutral” or lacking any socio-political messaging, indeed come from a very specific array of cultural anxieties emerging in America at the beginning of the Second World War. Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, examining the links between the comic book hero and American ideal masculinity, traces the need for heroic bodies to the stress of life in a post-industrial world: “In an industrial society...where man becomes a number in the realm of the organization which has usurped his decision-making role, he has no means of production and is thus deprived of the power to decide...In such a society the positive hero must embody to an unthinkable degree the power demands that the average citizen nurtures but cannot satisfy” (929). To Eco, in order to project the sense of “American individualism” that has run throughout American literature and quintessentially “American” genres (the captivity narrative, the Western, pulp/dime novels) in this next great American genre, the heroic male figure had to be “super” in order to be exceptional—to be truly, uniquely heroic, the protagonist’s body needed the capacity to “beat” technology. Thus, the superhero’s emergence in many ways fortifies hegemonic masculine individualism as a central pillar to the ideal “American identity.” In establishing the cultural context from which the superhero gained immense popularity, one can begin to denaturalize generic conventions that are now thoughtlessly accepted. Doing so allows for individuals to interrogate how these conventions bolster the righteousness of American masculinity, a concept that inherently overlaps with and fortifies white supremacy.

In order to understand the development of the superhero comic as a genre, one must first understand its roots in the Western narrative. Through exploring Native Studies texts that locate the development of American identity in the conquest of Indigenous peoples, I will trace the ways in which superhero comics, regardless of whether or not they explicitly include Native
characters, map out colonial futures in which the “individual” white man offers the model for the ideal American, and hegemonic systems of oppression and violence are reified rather than questioned. Many Native scholars have traced the roots of America’s “national identity” to the simultaneous appropriation and genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples, but particularly helpful to this project is Philip Deloria’s work, Playing Indian, which asserts, “Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self” (3). A sense of national identity (indeed, the very thing that makes America “exceptional”) was formed through settlers’ attempt to “become Indigenous,” and thus naturalize claims to stolen land. For this violent appropriation to be deemed “safe” (meaning not threatening coloniality/whiteness) colonizers needed to kill Indigenous peoples or try to transform them into colonially legible figures. Richard Slotkin, in Regeneration Through Violence, helpfully discusses this transition from settlers’ direct attempts to kill Indigenous peoples to a slower project in making indianness a suitable costume for white people. In reducing indigeneity to a series of colonially legible markers, settlers sought to appropriate indianness, incorporating it into their own unique American identity. Slotkin explains, as “the threat of real Indians was removed from proximity to American civilization...Indian virtues could be symbolically exaggerated and Indian values,” both of which reference Americans’ own ideations of Indigeneity, “accepted as valid for American society” (356-357). In reframing the development of “American identity” in this manner, genocide becomes a central pillar, rather than a mere symptom, of the American colonial project. This philosophy of violent appropriation (a fundamental aspect of settler colonial genocide) became not only central to the American imaginary, but quickly emerged and developed through popular media; through depictions of flattened, caricaturized indians and frontiersmen who were meant to evoke a sense of “American
indigeneity,” quintessential “American” narratives like the captivity narrative, the Western, and eventually sci-fi and superhero narratives built a model for “ideal Americanness” that resided in individualism and conquest.

Popular media (books, movies, visual art, etc.) continues to produce conceptions of Indigeneity that operate to fortify white, idealized American identity. Chad A. Barbour discusses the growing popularity of images intended to signify Indigeneity in his book *From Daniel Boone to Captain America: Playing Indian in American Popular Culture*. He suggests that one can have never seen an object or image before but still be familiar with “what a drawing of [it] should look like” (8) because of its popular cultural iconography. Thus, most people have a concept of Indigeneity based entirely upon Euro-American images in popular culture without having any interaction with Indigenous individuals themselves. Through iconography whose goal is to reduce complex histories into something that can be captured and conveyed through an object, “Indians become both icon and archetype—a singular, static motif—of a glorious American past” (Devoss and LeBeau, 55). These essentialized images/symbols of “authentic indianness” allow for white people to “try on” those symbols and easily “transform” into an Indigenous person themselves — Indigeneity within a colonial vocabulary becomes a costume best suited for white people. As Barbour argues, “The ability of [white] characters to take on different identities indicates their control and authority” (10) — within this formation, the white body appears mobile and open to transformation whereas the “othered” body remains static and available for consumption. These images of settler ideations of Indigeneity pervade mainstream media and produce a culture within comics that encourages white artists and creators to wield *indianness* as a malleable accessory for their own (often colonial) narratives.
Both within and outside of comics, the development of American identity through the genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples also directly ties to the formation of American hegemonic masculinity. While I will look to the scholarship of Native women in this project’s second chapter to explore the conquest of Indigenous women as a central part of forming and maintaining “American identity,” and the ways in which Native women are using comics to push back against settler sexual, colonial violence, most of this section will focus on the construction of hegemonic American masculinity through settlers’ “Simultaneous desire and repulsion” (Deloria, 3) towards Indigenous men. Michael Sheyahshe, in his book *Native Americans in Comic Books*, discusses how this tension between a colonial desire to consume a flattened sense of Indigeneity and settlers’ attempts to erase real Indigenous peoples begins to emerge in literature: “This Mohican Syndrome, in which a white man becomes Indian, manifests itself through non–Native participation in Indigenous ways of life. This formulaic participation allows the non–Native character to absorb all things seemingly positive about Native culture by some sort of osmotic metamorphosis” (Chapter 1, np). Sheyahshe calls upon Deloria’s notion of “Playing Indian” here, a practice that erases all sense of colonial violence and perpetuates the notion that Indigeneity can only live “safely” within a white body. Though I have already touched on this “consumption” of indianness above, before attempting to understand the connections between superhero and conquest narratives, it is important to explore how “Playing Indian” not only served to create American whiteness, but, as Barobor says, “Playing Indian...connotes also a sign of masculinity and strength” (10). Settlers’ attempts to form a unique “American identity” through conquest fostered the development of white American masculinity.
White masculinity in America largely formed around white men’s violent, invasive, cannibalistic interaction with Indigeneity; the ambivalence towards Indigenous men that Deloria references — the “Simultaneous desire and repulsion” towards Indigeneity that pervades hegemonic masculinity — led to a quintessentially American process of white men trying to absorb “indigeneity” without sacrificing their ties to whiteness. According to Richard Dyer’s *White*, “‘The built body in colonial adventures is a formula that speaks to the need for an affirmation of the white male body without the loss of legitimacy that is always risked by its exposure, while also replaying the notion that the white men are distinguished above all by their spirit of enterprise’ (147)” (qtd. in Barbour, 10). Barbour elaborates on this configuration of the white male body noting that those who sought to “play Indian” could theoretically access, “Affirmation or strengthening of manhood, freedom from perceived urban weakness, liberation from domestic obligations, and the fantasy of the individual as hero” (10). “Playing Indian” thus fostered the formation of something “exceptional” in American society and a sense of masculinity that would always remain unstable (balancing the desire for proximity to Indigeneity with anxieties about losing ties to whiteness). These tensions play out both in literature and art. Within the context of 19th century art depicting Indigenous men, “The Indian male body functions in four ways: 1) as an ideal of admiration, especially by white viewers; 2) as dangerous, with the attendant menace of the body; 3) as a figure of dying, specifically in the trope of the vanishing Indian; and 4) as stasis, the artistic freezing of the body in print, sculpture, or art” (Barbour, 14). Cree artist Kent Monkman brings to light and destabilizes these common American images and assumptions in their painting “Icon for a New Empire” (see fig. 1).
Monkman expertly captures settlers’ simultaneous attraction and repulsion to Indigeneity, as their painting depicts settlers’ (particularly white men’s) infatuation with their own essentialized construction of “the indian.” As the white man kisses the Indigenous man, he seems to slowly suck the life out of the figure, ossifying him into a statue of a dying, defeated “indian.” The hammer at the ground signifies the white man’s own culpability in creating the figure of whom he appears so enamored; he indeed embraces merely a flattened caricature made from stone that suits his own colonial needs. The white man wears appropriated “indigenous” clothing: since the statue relies on a “pan-indian” stereotype, the clothing is not regionally specific and merely indicates a white man’s attempt to play dress up in his own approximation of clothing that signifies Indigeneity. Monkman’s work suggests that once the “indian” is “extinct”
or fully turned to a marble relic of the past, the white man can become him and thus become “indigenous” to this land himself. Furthermore, the Indigenous man’s body appears strong, muscled, and hegemonically masculine in every way (besides being white), while the white man remains pale, small, and somewhat feminized; this perhaps points to the notion within the American imaginary that in gaining some proximity to Indigenous men, who presumably embody a masculine eroticism derived from connections to the land (obviously a violent, colonial assumption in and of itself), white men can not only strengthen their claims to stolen land but fortify a sense of uniquely American, “rugged” masculinity. This set of visual markers of perceived *indianness* and the development of a “frontiersman” identity based on appropriation surely appears in popular 19th century American art, but also weaves its way through Western narratives and eventually embeds itself into comic conventions.

Within mainstream comic books, one can find both flattened “Indigenous” characters (whose figures are almost entirely controlled by white artists and who overwhelmingly serve to reflect/reveal something about the white heroes) and white heroes “playing Indian.” Because of the pervasiveness of frontier mythology at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, a “cultural shorthand” (Barbour, 64) developed that imbued images with a wealth of symbolism. “Playing Indian” in the Western was “codified into a set of visual conventions” (Barbour, 65) and the “reductive quality” (Barbour, 65) and “cultural shorthand” central to frontier narratives carried into dime novels and eventually comics. Sheyahshe notes, “Of course, the Western was one of the first pioneers within this new medium [comics]. With the Western came all the same stereotypes about Native Americans that had previously pervaded the dime-store novel. For the most part, Indigenous people became plot devices to move the story along and make the central character (most always a white man) more heroic” (Introduction, np).
Taking care to emphasize that mainstream (white) approaches to writing Indigenous characters in comic books still rely on these conventions, Sheyahshe quotes Bradford Wright’s *Comic Book Nation*, which asserts that until the ’60s at least, “non-white” comic book characters “usually fell into one of three categories” — “the racial threat” “the childlike dupe” or “the sidekick” (Introduction, np). Within these comic spaces, image-making serves as a central colonial tool as white artists can draw and claim Indigenous peoples’ bodies and serve drawings of *indigeneity* (here meaning white imaginings of Indigeneity) up for consumption by a primarily white audience. Although I will later explore how Indigenous women seek to form a comic space in which Native women entirely control the image-making process and are able to thus reclaim body sovereignties, Sheyahshe’s work attests to the fact that mainstream comics, in this violating process of image-making, are uniquely able to violently claim Native peoples’ bodies and Native spaces.

Not only does Sheyahshe trace how mainstream artists draw Native characters as accessories to white heroes, but he also details the construction of white comic masculinity through proximity to *indianness*. Sheyahshe begins his analysis with the “Scalphunter” series, a title that captures this gruesome, violent process of white artists imagining and producing constructions of Indigeneity that only fortify the white American man as an ideal. The comic depicts Brian Savage, a white man “adopted” by Kiowa people in the 1860s who “roams America in search of himself” (Chapter 1, np); it explores the trope of white men fortifying their American individual identities through exploring (conquering) lands and Indigenous peoples. The text also obviously draws on the settler “adoption fantasy”\(^1\) to justify continued colonization and naturalize claims to stolen land. In his analysis of the comics, Sheyahshe describes, “Thus

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\(^1\) Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “Decolonization is not a metaphor” offers a helpful explanation of the histories of “adoption fantasies” and the colonial purposes such fantasies serve.
raised, Savage obtains his Kiowa name: Ke-Woh-No-Tey, which (according to the comic book, at least) supposedly translates into ‘He Who Is Less Than Human’” (Chapter 1, np). The comic’s authors completely fabricate both the name and translation which mythicizes the Kiowa people, calls upon “pan-indian” stereotypes, and dismisses (indeed, seems to practically mock) genocidal histories of settlers and the American government criminalizing Native languages. Sheyahshe goes on to explain, “In their Scalphunter series, DC touts him as ‘a man who lived in two worlds but was at home in neither’” (Chapter 1, np); drawing on the tradition of white men fetishizing and fearing their own conceptions of Indigeneity, the series’ hero occupies a liminal space in his proximity to “indianness,” but his whiteness protects him within that powerful/dangerous space. Importantly, Sheyahshe expresses: “It seems that even though he is biologically white his cultural upbringing affords him an almost supernatural ability to survey and assess the world around him...In this respect, his senses function at levels that most normal human beings are unable to obtain” (Chapter 1, np). Thus, we see comics begin to position “indianness” as a superpower for white people—something white men can try on like a costume to distinguish them from others. However, these heroic men can also retreat into their “normal” lives (and the safety that living in America as a white person provides) whenever necessary. In this way, superhero stories stem from and are intimately entangled with frontier narratives; these comics suggest that something inherently heroic exists about “indianness” living within a white body, and thus begin to frame appropriation (and the conquest of land, women, and Black and Indigenous peoples that often accompanies this violent appropriation) as a kind of superpower.

**It’s a Bird, it’s a Plane, it’s a Conquest Narrative**

I include *Superman* in this study not to examine the comic in and of itself (although much interesting scholarship explores *Superman’s* ties to hegemony and coloniality), but because the
comic serves as a sort of roadmap for most popular American superhero comics; in exploring some of the generic conventions, I can better understand the ways in which LaPensee and Starr work within and outside of the genre to create Native spaces. Rather than attempting to trace the evolution of the *Superman* comics from their inception in 1938 through the 20th and 21st centuries, I focus primarily on the first volume. The comic has transformed and split into so many diverse iterations of *Superman* that seeking to capture common themes and plots would make little sense for this project; therefore, I instead propose that examining Superman’s “origin story” reveals much about narrative conventions that have become quintessential to the superhero genre. Although Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (who both grew up in first-generation Jewish families) actually intended to offer a kind of “openness” of American identity through *Superman* that could run counter to hegemony at the time, the comic certainly never questions the validity of the American empire or the righteousness of American masculinity.

Immediately upon introduction to the comic, we encounter an image that speaks to Eco’s theory that the “super body” must be able to “beat” industry and technology: the cover displays a massive image of Superman lifting a car above his head as his heroic male body proves itself stronger than industry (see fig. 2). In the panels that depict Superman’s “origin story,” the comic reads, “When maturity was reached, he discovered he could easily leap ⅛th of a mile; hurdle a twenty story building...raise tremendous weights...run faster than an express train...and that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!” (see fig. 3). The panels show a man in a suit leaping over buildings, the same blurry figure holding up scaffolding at a construction site with the cityscape looming in the background, and the man speeding ahead of a train on a dark night as the train’s headlights penetrate the darkness in front of him. Visual depictions of Superman “beating industry,” and particularly the image of the train’s headlight, suggest that the
hero can guide “humanity” (America) towards the future. I would argue that most superheroes are geared towards futurity as they often depict ideal or heroic bodies and operate as central forces against “societal collapse” within superhero narratives (I will explore both of these concepts in more depth later in this project); however, these images of Superman battling and ultimately outperforming technology (idealized within the Euro-American imaginary as a symbol for futurity) place Superman, the embodiment of an “American individual” man, as a central vehicle for mapping out ideal American futures.

Before more explicitly exploring Superman’s position as a model of American futurity, I wish to first trace the character’s ties to American hegemonic masculinity, and specifically, a kind of “frontiersman” masculinity established through conquest narratives. In doing so, I can better establish the ways in which Superman, and Euro-American comic conventions more generally, imagine futures grounded in white American masculinity. In depicting Superman’s body as unbounded and always in motion, the comic seems to grant the hero a level of bodily freedom and autonomy that most other characters distinctly lack. When Clark Kent wears his
suit, his body almost always appears to be moving: lines form behind him as he leaps over
buildings and the backgrounds of panels disappear as he lunges towards an enemy. Whereas
Clark Kent’s body often stands motionless, fully captured within frames, Superman’s heroic
body avoids static depictions. This contrast in mobility between the superhero and his human
alter ego reflects a sense of Clark Kent’s body having little agency and being acted upon whereas
Superman’s body acts. Superman also frequently stretches out of frame as he leaps across
buildings or battles “villains,” giving the figure an almost godly aura as his body resists capture
or containment (see fig. 4). In the midst of one of his heroic exploits, for instance, he leaps over
an entire neighborhood and the frame still cannot contain his stride. The celebration of
independence and bodily autonomy lies at the heart of American frontiersman mythology. Much
like Barbour’s earlier notion that “The ability of [white] characters to take on different identities
indicates their control and authority” (10), Superman’s ability to move freely, in this instance
across and through panels rather than across identities, indicates his ultimate autonomy. This
freedom of movement begins to link Superman to the ideal American, masculine individual in its
unflinching emphasis on independence a man’s ability to maneuver his body entirely free from
external influence.
Central to Superman’s first volume is the hero’s steadfast commitment to avoiding close personal ties, further establishing the figure’s connection to American “individual” masculinity; indeed, the comic suggests that in order to maintain his heroism, Superman must channel the quintessential American frontiersman or cowboy and maintain a level of distance from humanity, even while representing that “humanity.” The issue begins by establishing that while Clark comes from another planet, that planet “was destroyed by old age” by the time Clark reached earth. This perhaps suggests that Superman might be “other,” but he is still essentially “American”; he poses no threat as an “alien” because his “place of origin” no longer exists, leaving Earth (America) as his only home. Despite the fact that the comic takes care to establish his upbringing with a “good” “American” “Midwestern” family, Clark also has no family ties when he first becomes Superman. Indeed, the story notes his parents’ death as a primary force pushing Clark to become Superman; above a panel of Clark kneeling in front of his parents’ graves, the text reads, “The passing away of his foster-parents greatly grieved Clark Kent. But it strengthened a determination that had been growing in his mind.” Clark begins his heroic duties utterly unattached, and that lack of human connection allows him to throw everything into his
“super” identity. Much like the quintessential comic book frontiersman Hawkeye/Natty Bumpo who has “no lasting bonds with his race” (Barbour, 51), Superman has no remaining ties to either a family or a people.

Superman’s relationship to sex, sexuality, and women also reveals the character’s complex relationship with hegemonic masculinity—the hero appears both utterly masculine, but also free from a kind of human temptation that could lead to intimate entanglements. In a panel that depicts Clark’s shirtless, muscular body as a doctor tries to give him a vaccine, the caption reads “Nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin!” (see fig. 5). On top of the obvious display of his “ideally” masculine body, this section also seems to suggest a kind of “impenetrability” to Superman’s body; the literary canon has scripted penetration as an emasculating image for centuries, so Clark’s impenetrability signifies something unerringly, perfectly masculine about his figure. However, the comic pairs this sense of ideal, hegemonic masculinity with an insistence that Superman/Kent himself cannot explore sex and sexuality. Indeed, as Clark Kent, the hero’s interactions with Lois Lane remain utterly non-sexual, but even as Superman, the mythic figure descending from the sky cannot be tempted into sacrificing his morality for any “vixen.” When the first “villain” of the series emerges, a lounge singer named Bea who shot a man after he betrayed her, she exclaims “You attract me! Couldn’t we talk this over?” and he answers, “You’re wasting your time! I’m only interested in seeing that you get what’s coming to you!” (see fig. 6). The writers suggest here that Superman’s need for justice overwhelsms his sexual impulses. Indeed, Umberto Eco explores Superman’s odd juxtaposition between ideal masculinity and lack of sexuality:

He shows...the bashful embarrassment of an average young man in a matriarchal society...What characterizes Superman is...the platonic dimension of his affections, the implicit vow of chastity which depends less on his will than on the state of things, and the singularity of his situation...the ‘parsifalism’ of Superman is one of the conditions that
prevents his slowly ‘consuming’ himself, and it protest him from the events, and therefore from the passing of time, connected with erotic ventures. (935)

Essentially, Eco argues that if Superman were to engage in sex or establish any sort of domestic ties, the act would mark an irrevocable progression of plot that would disrupt the careful destabilization of time that the Superman comics seek to establish. However, a Superman with sturdy, unchanging romantic entanglements or children would also diverge from the image of the hero as the “exceptional/ideal” “outsider.” Establishing romantic ties could incorporate Superman too much into “normal” American society, and thus could threaten his ability to protect humanity from above. Indeed, Superman’s rejection of domesticity reveals another one of the character’s ties to classic frontier narratives. Barbour argues that the protagonist of The Leatherstocking Tales’ heroic masculinity lies precisely in his decision to remain untethered to family: “Hawkeye preserves his manliness by shunning the trappings of the settlements and maintaining his vigor and vitality in the company of Chingachgook and Uncas. For Hawkeye, his anti-domesticity and frontier proximity strengthen his character as a man” (53). Much like Hawkeye, the quintessential American superhero (Superman) must maintain a level of distance from humanity in order to preserve his frontiersman masculinity, and properly “protect” the abstracted Metropolis community from which he remains distinctly apart.
Superman’s dual identity is both quintessential and utterly unique to the superhero genre in the fact that the comic frames Clark Kent as a supplemental figure to Superman — Clark Kent must give himself entirely to his heroic duty as the character’s “true self” only emerges when he is “super.” When applying for a job at the newspaper, he exclaims, “If I get news dispatches promptly, I’ll be in a better position to help people. I’ve got to get that job!” He only pursues this day-to-day job to supplement his more important duties as a superhero. Indeed, one of Superman’s distinguishing heroic traits is the fact that he doesn’t wear a mask while he “fights crime,” and his mask (glasses) only appears in his human form. When, after eavesdropping on the newspaper editor, Kent discovers an impending murder, the text in the panel states “In an alley, Clark removed his street-clothes, revealing himself clad in the *Superman* costume…” with an image beneath of Kent ripping open his shirt to reveal the famous S symbol (see fig. 7). This section suggests that the hero always wears his Superman outfit like a second skin under his “normal clothes,” thus positioning the costume as his “real” clothes and everything on top as costume.
The distinction between Kent and Superman could not be more pronounced, and this sharp, concrete distinction between the two figures speaks to a Euro-American notion of body as bounded that, as I will explore further when discussing *Deer Woman* and *Super Indian*, is completely dissolved in Native comics — the body within *Superman* can operate with complete autonomy, free from entanglement with other individuals or environments. In fact, the format of the panels themselves suggests this separation between figures. In the section of the comic discussing his origin story, a sequence of panels displays an image of Clark standing in front of his parents’ graves (wearing distinctly human clothes), then a block of only text stating, “Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit Mankind—and so was created—” before finally revealing an image of Superman flying with his feet covering the cityscape below, but most of his body covering the sky (which in itself suggests that while the hero remains of both worlds, he appears within the realm of the sky more than the city and people who inhabit it) (see fig. 8). I find the box with only text, one of the few of its kind, particularly interesting as it seems to operate as a transition space in which Kent can dissolve his human form to become the superhero that lies beneath. This transition between “ordinary” man and Superman perhaps caters to readers’ desire to undergo a similar transformation. Eco locates
the purpose of Clark Kent (rather than having Superman operate entirely outside the realm of humanity) in the fact that “The image of Superman is not entirely beyond the reach of the reader’s self-identification,” going on to explain that “Clark Kent personifies...the average reader who is harassed by complexes and despised by his fellow men...any accountant in any American city secretly deeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a superman who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence” (930). Thus, as I hope to explore through Deer Woman and Super Indian, unlike Native comics which often serve as affirmations of the lived realities of Native peoples, Superman offers readers an escapism that urges men to fantasize about their own desires to transform into ideal, hegemonically masculine men.

Superman not only serves as a model for ideal masculinity, but his entire existence and purpose is rooted in preventing societal collapse—he serves, essentially, to preserve violent, colonial institutions. Eco perhaps best captures this notion of Superman’s role in protecting hegemony in his pronouncement, “In Superman we have a perfect example of civic
consciousness, completely split from political consciousness. Superman’s civic attitude is perfect, but it is exercised and structured in the sphere of a small, closed community” (940). Here, one of the biggest tensions in the Superman franchise emerges and one of the most prominent sites of colonial ideology appears. Every aspect of the comic is geared towards preserving the hegemonic, upholding society, and preventing apocalyptic catastrophe. Interestingly, in Superman’s most famous introduction into the world, his motto appears: “Superman! Champion of the oppressed. The physical marvel who had devoted his existence to helping those in need!” (paired with the image of the man standing above the city, cape blowing in the wind, this sentiment quite literally evokes white saviorism) (see fig. 8). Rather than combating entire systems of oppression, his interests lie only in “helping the oppressed;” the comic, however, narrowly defines “the oppressed” as those involved in individual, isolated moments of danger or injustice. One might indeed connect Superman’s complicated role as white savior and protector of the hegemonic to another classic American frontiersman, Daniel Boone, a “trailblazer, striking out into the wilderness to make the way for the advancing American nation. He protects the settlements and defends the weak and innocent on the frontier. Like the standard comic book hero, Boone consistently shows up where his help is needed” (Barbour, 98). The first Superman comic, indeed, reveals that while Superman acknowledges “flaws in the system” that allow for instances of corruption to occur, the hero never regards the system (America) itself as violent or broken. Superman’s first heroic act depicts his intervention in the mob’s attempt to “lynch” a man (it feels important to note given the history of racialized violence surrounding that word that while visual cues can’t neatly signify race, the man in this comic appears to be white. Perhaps the authors chose to use this word here to imbue the violence depicted with histories of oppression without having to acknowledge genocidal, systemic violence), and Superman’s
subsequent decision to bring the man back to jail: “This prisoner’s fate will be decided by a court of justice.” He believes fundamentally in American governmental institutions and sees his purpose only as providing supplemental aid to those systems when they momentarily fail. The Superman comics thus frame non-intervention as a virtue and suggest the villainy of acts of violence against an essentially “moral,” “democratic” state—Superman only wields his powers in individual moments of “crime” and fails to recognize systemic violence as worthy of intervention. Eco explores this aversion to intervention, musing,

    Superman is practically omnipotent...His operative capacity extends to a cosmic scale. A being gifted with such capacities offered to the good of humanity...would have an enormous field of action in front of him. From a man who could produce work and wealth in astronomic dimensions in a few seconds, one could expect the most bewildering political, economic, and technological upheavals in the world. (940)

Eco later locates this need for Superman to avoid more active intervention in the fact that radically and permanently modifying Superman’s world would disrupt the “static nature of his plots: each general modification would draw the world, and superman with it, toward final consumption” (940); however, I would argue that this desire to avoid any systemic reckoning serves as more than a plot device. Characterizing a potentially bloody upheaval of systems of oppression and genocide as heroic would go entirely against the American colonial project. Even if Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were “outsiders” because they were Jewish, they were still invested in and benefited from American settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism. Superman presents violence as righteous when the hero inflicts it upon a single, vilified body, or when the violence presumably serves to uphold or protect perceived threats to society. The world of Superman does not position institutions like the state and the police as inherently, systemically violent, so the comic could not justify retaliatory, revolutionary violence.
If a conventional superhero, epitomized by Superman, serves to prevent apocalyptic catastrophe and project a notion of ideal futurity embodied by a white man, what might a Superhero in a post-apocalyptic world look like? Drawing on scholarship from Native theorists and activists like Grace Dillon (Anishinaabe) and Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi) who assert that Native peoples have already faced and continue to live in post-apocalyptic conditions, I will look to the works of Arigon Starr and Elizabeth LaPensee to answer this question. While both authors surely work against mainstream comic book norms that constantly rewrite American conquest narratives and prize white masculinity, *Super Indian* and *Deer Woman* are not confined to neat colonial binaries that place indigeneity as a refracted reflection of whiteness. Indeed, both texts transform comics into distinctly *Native Spaces* that center collective healing, are inherently future-oriented, and remain unburdened by representation that has been historically linked to whiteness.
Chapter 2: Native Comics as Native Feminist Literary Maps

Before directly delving into graphic texts written by Native authors, I would like to first explore some theoretical frameworks that I have found helpful in reading *Super Indian* and *Deer Woman* as maps to Native futures. I will be relying heavily on the work of Mishuana Goeman, who discusses the ways in which Native authors, artists, and peoples have used mediums traditionally associated with whiteness to create distinctly “Native spaces.” Speaking of her childhood in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Goeman states, “Unlike the maps that designate Indian land as existing only in certain places, wherever we went there were Natives and Native spaces, and if there weren't, we carved them out” (5); she goes on to discuss how “In all aspects, [one of the places I lived as a child] wasn't just a surface [my family] crossed, but a place built through intersecting histories, longings, and belongings” (Goeman, 8).

She thus imagines space in a way that differs greatly from the Euro-American tradition—as something flat and static, or something to define and claim—and instead presents it as fluid, transforming/transformative, and interactive. I would like to suggest a way of reading Native comics through this lens that Goeman provides, and imagine Native comics as “Native spaces” carrying complex histories and distinctly Native epistemologies and ways of seeing the world. Native comics are not solely a project in representation (although that is certainly an aspect of their work), but they are able to push back against the kind of messaging of Euro-American comics that insist upon colonial futures, and thus transform the medium into a space that keeps alive Native modes of storytelling, which, for many Native peoples, is a central component of survival.

While comics have by no means developed as a solely white, Euro-American form, texts from BIPOC authors or featuring BIPOC characters tend to remain on the periphery or be
absorbed into a canon oversaturated with white superheroes; regardless of the growth of the Marvel franchise and the popularity of films like *Black Panther, Superman* arguably remains the quintessential superhero model within the world of comics. Theorists like Susan Bernardin, however, would argue that Native peoples have been telling stories through interactive visual, oral, and literary texts for centuries, and thus, comics by no means appear as a new form for Indigenous peoples. In her article “Futures Past,” Bernardin discusses the deep history of Native peoples creating and conveying stories through interacting media: “Indigenous peoples have used non-alphabetic and visual languages to engage each other and their worlds. As layered forms of communication—wampum belts, for example, can be read, couched, seen, recited, and heard—they both embody and compel collaborative efforts of making meaning” (481). Thus, regardless of comics’ hegemonic associations, the medium is uniquely situated to transform into a Native space as it calls upon interactive forms of communication and collaborative modes of storytelling far more embedded within Native communities than within the Euro-American literary canon.

Indeed, many comics scholars have discussed the ways in which comics invite a kind of collaboration and sense of unbounded interaction rarely achieved in other mediums. As well as the blending of mediums through integrating text into images, comics also require the consumer/reader to become a co-producer in the story; the gutters (spaces between panels) present an open space of generative possibility on which the reader must impose his/her/their own assumptions. As prominent comics scholar Hillary Chute notes in *Graphic women: Life narrative and contemporary comics*, “the medium of comics compels because it is so capacious, offering layers of words and images—as well as multiple layers of possible temporalities—on each page. Comics coveys several productive tensions in its basic structure” (5). While all
comics invite this kind of collaboration and fluidity, Native comics can draw on rich histories of interactive, communal storytelling that call upon the oral tradition and transform texts into spaces that convey a distinctly Native way of seeing and interacting with the world. In looking to the scholarship of Simon Ortiz, and specifically his article “Indigenous Continuance: Collaboration and Syncretism,” I hope to position the oral tradition as a central, active presence in Native storytelling and Native comics. Ortiz helpfully explores the ways in which the oral tradition continues to weave through stories by Native authors in ways that foster the creation of Native spaces. He explains:

> Our community holds us like our family; our family is our community. The language of culture in our Indigenous tribal communities is usually in story, song, advice or counsel, and instruction. As we know, it’s called the oral tradition. The old-time, traditional means of conveying knowledge and information was through word of mouth, that is, speaking vocally to one another, speaking among ourselves, elders telling stories and giving advice and counsel. And, of course, oral tradition was done or spoken in the original Indigenous languages—and still is in many, many instances—before we were overcome by the English language. (289)

Storytelling, among many Indigenous peoples offers an assertion of community and a forging of kinship bonds. As Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Lauren D. Stuart Muller, and Jana Sequoya Magdaleno note in the introduction of the book, *Reckonings: Contemporary Short Fiction by Native American Women*, "To tell a story is a great responsibility because words carry power. To receive a story is also a profound responsibility: the act binds the listener/reader to the teller and to the expansive web of storytelling” (XIV). Comics open up space for this kind of generative interaction that reflects the living, fluid role oral histories occupy within Native communities. Bernadin goes on to explore why Native comics serve not merely as responses to a settler colonial medium, but also work within and from a Native methodological storytelling continuum: “In refusing rigid boundaries between literary and visual arts, [Indigenous comics]...re-animate relationships with visual and sequential storytelling practices that stretch
back millennia. Just as these innovative forms affirm dynamic relationships between indigenous pasts and futures, so too do they highlight the primacy of collaboration between genres, media, and artists” (Futures Past, 480). With this in mind, Native comics both adapt and intervene in a traditionally white medium (and thus offer responses to settler colonialism and the colonial violence scripted in many mainstream comics), but also extend an art form that is Indigenous in and of itself.

Comics bring to mind conversations surrounding language and translation that have been present in Native studies for decades. Since the inception of the settler colonial project in the Americas, the English language has been used to euphemize, violate, lie, and assimilate—as part of the genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples and the attempt to fully assimilate Native peoples into whiteness (thus stealing their sovereignties and rights to land), settlers have implemented projects to completely destroy Native peoples’ access to their own languages. Because of policies that criminalized Native languages and boarding school projects, as Inez Hernández-Ávila notes, “In the United States, because we were forced to adopt English only, many of us could, and can, only locate ourselves, position ourselves in the English language” (“Relocations upon Relocations,” 495); she goes on, however, to note that “Now it is the English language and, for some of us, Spanish as well, that we make use of in si(gh)ting ours and our people's sovereignty, not only in academia but also in local and international political arenas” (“Relocations upon Relocations,” 495). Indeed, many Native scholars have discussed the transformative possibilities of the English language when wielded by Native people (and in particular, Native women). Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird are able to expand upon this idea in the introduction of their seminal anthology, Reinventing the Enemy’s language. They explore how

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2 One might look to Margaret Jacobs’ “Working on the Domestic Frontier” for more information on boarding schools.
English becomes a tool of survival and resistance as Native individuals consciously use it to call attention to the atrocities of settler colonialism and capture Native ways of being in and interacting with the world: “When our lands were colonized the language of the colonizer was forced on us. We had to use it for commerce in the new world, a world that evolved through the creation and use of language. It was when we began to create with this new language that we named it ours, made it usefully tough and beautiful” (23-24). Bird and Harjo here speak indirectly to much of Goeman’s work. Through using the English language to capture “a particular way of perceiving the world” (24), Native authors and artists wield something tied to settler colonial violence to build Native spaces (and the language itself transforms into a Native space in the process).

While these authors are primarily theorizing on the use of the English language in literature, the notion of transforming a white, colonial medium into a tool that both draws upon Native epistemologies and resists settler colonial control and erasure applies nicely to comics; as I will later discuss when I delve into Super Indian and Deer Woman, Arigon Starr and Elizabeth LaPensee are able to “reinvent the enemy’s language” and capture “a particular way of perceiving the world” that reflects histories of collaborative storytelling (which acts as resistance to the colonial project).

Native comics resist the American colonial fixation on individualism, and particularly a kind of hegemonic masculinity that exemplifies the “ideal” American individual, both structurally and thematically: through drawing on the oral tradition and establishing a form of “superheroism” that depends on collaboration rather than individualism (and seeks to dissolve

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3 In his article “Indigenous Continuance,” Simon Ortiz helpfully contextualizes the use of the English language arguing, “Even as we speak, write, and think in those languages that instigated colonialism, we have to be ever vigilant...and, obviously as always, we have to be especially careful that the underlying concepts of the enemy’s languages that caused our colonization in the first place do not undermine us. Yes, we must remember to remind ourselves about these things even as, and especially when, we become articulate and eloquent in the languages the colonizers employed to overcome our Indigenous languages. And most important of all, we must not forsake our original Indigenous languages, which empower us” (293).
boundaries between “reality” and story rather that serve as a vehicle for escapism), Starr and LaPensee are able to “(re)map” comics into Native spaces. Goeman states,

(Re)mapping, as I define it throughout this text and in my previous work, is the labor Native authors and the communities they write within and about undertake, in the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making, to generate new possibilities. The framing of "re" with parentheses connotes the fact that in (re)mapping, Native women employ traditional and new tribal stories as a means of continuation or what Gerald Vizenor aptly calls stories of survivance. (3)

Placing this quote within the context of comics, Deer Woman and Super Indian, both in the ways that they map out individual bodies within the texts and in the way they seek to remap comics as a medium, become Native spaces even though (and perhaps because) they do not adhere strictly to conceptions of “pure indigeneity.” Native comics are able to remap and thus reclaim Native bodies (particularly Native women’s bodies, whose conquering has been central to the colonial project), but also remap the physical medium of comics, thus creating Native spaces both thematically and methodologically. Goeman helpfully draws on the work of Edouard Glissant to further imagine how Native women (re)map space:

For Glissant, who speaks to black alienation from the land, poetry and the narrative open up the production of space, providing alternative geographies. These alternative geographies contest dominant histories and geographies, even if they do not displace the regimes of power that assert spatial hierarchies. The Native women's texts with which I work are documents of the violence inflicted on their communities and a critique of the spatial restructuring of their lands, bodies, and nations; they are what Glissant refers to as a grammar of liberation that seriously engages alternative spatial practices to that of making land into property or treating land as purely a surface upon which we act. These women's stories and my Native feminist analysis are not testaments to geographies that are apart from the dominant constructions of space and time, but instead they are explorations of geographies that sit alongside them and engage with them at every scale. (Goeman, 15)

As Glissant says, even if Native comics “do not displace the regimes of power that assert spatial hierarchies,” or directly try to attack the American empire, they are able to establish “alternative
geographies” rooted in collaborative storytelling that begin to form a “grammar of liberation” that in and of itself resists settler colonial domination; the creation of Native spaces through comics and ability to keep “dynamically alive” (Sweet Wong, Hertha D, et al., XIV) modes of storytelling that reflect Indigenous epistemologies resists a colonial power that insists upon the complete genocidal erasure of Native peoples. Harjo and Bird perhaps best speak to the immense liberatory power that the creation of Native spaces can hold: “There is hope that in ‘reinventing’ the English language we will turn the process of colonization around, and that our literature will be viewed and read as a process of decolonization” (25).

Star and LaPensee draw on and incorporate Native feminisms in vastly different ways, but a Native feminist methodological approach certainly shapes both Super Indian and Deer Woman. Both LaPensee and Starr seem to recognize that embracing Native feminisms is essential to decolonial work—they don’t only discuss building Native futures, but they specifically highlight the ways in which Native women or Native feminist theory guides the way towards those futures. While it is impossible to sufficiently summarize Native feminisms within this project, I would like to dedicate some of this space to exploring Native feminist histories that seem to have influenced Starr and LaPensee’s thinking while imagining Native superheroes and the worlds they inhabit.

Indeed, many Indigenous women have theorized on the ways in which violence against Native women has operated as a central tool of settler colonialism since first contact. In Theorizing Indigeneity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism, Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Luiseño and Cupeño) and Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi) discuss how settlers formed and maintained American identity through “conquering” Native women, often through sexual violence:

As part of the settler project to successfully indigenize settlers and their descendants as rightful owners and occupants of stolen land, settlers destroy and redefine the identities of indigenous women...Indigenous women’s identities become marked by features that
render their rape excusable and acceptable. Colonial logic codes Indigenous lands and bodies as objects for the taking. (159)

Within a colonial framework, Native women’s bodies, often positioned as points of access to land, serve as passive sites of violence through which settlers seek to extract resources. Furthermore, settler’s attempts to “control Native women’s reproduction” (Ramirez, 27), often through forced sterilization, was central to America’s genocide of Indigenous people. In “Christian Conquest and the Sexual Colonization of Native Women,” Andy Smith elaborates on the scholarship of David Standard, noting “that control over women’s reproductive abilities and destruction of women and children are essential in destroying a people...He says that Native women and children were targeted for wholesale killing in order to destroy the Indian nations” (389). Disrupting matrilineal and matrilocal modes of living has also served as a central way for the American empire to steal sovereignty from Native peoples. Smith indeed goes on to discuss how boarding schools operated to implant Western patriarchy into Indigenous nations and disrupt the preservation of intergenerational knowledge: “Through the abduction of Indian children into boarding schools, colonizers have tried to prevent Native women from transmitting their culture to their children” (389). Boarding schools, Smith argues, functioned as part of a broader goal to assimilate Indigenous peoples to Western models of heteronormative home and family; allotment policies also demonstrate colonial attempts to disrupt complex models of kinship and relationships to land by insisting that Native communities divide land into plots for individual nuclear families. Essentially, as settlers have sought to claim Native women’s bodies and attempt to destroy the ways in which sovereign peoples understand gender and family since first contact, many Native activists and scholars believe that Native feminisms must be central to decolonial work.

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4 Jane Lawrence, in “The Indian Health Service and the Sterilization of Native American Women” elaborates on the histories of the US government forcibly sterilizing Native women.
Although neither Starr nor LaPensee speaks directly either to Native feminisms or decolonization within their comics, I would argue that their works are guided by the fact that Native feminisms provide necessary pathways (or maps) to decolonization and rebuilding a sense of balance within Native nations. Winnebago scholar Renya Ramirez lays out much theoretical groundwork that perhaps shapes the ways in which Starr and LaPensee think about how Native women and Native feminisms are central to survival and building Native futures. In her work “Race, Tribal Nation, and Gender: A Native Feminist Approach to Belonging” she states: "I assert that race, tribal nation, and gender should be non-hierarchically linked as categories of analysis in order to understand the breadth of our oppression as well as the full potential of our liberation in the hope that one day we can belong as full members of our homes, communities, and tribal nations" (22). She insists that healing from colonial violence cannot occur without a simultaneous reckoning of settler colonialism’s inextricability from Western hetero-patriarchy; Native futures, she argues, “must be reconceptualized from Native women's perspectives” (Ramirez, 29).

While I will more thoroughly explore how the women in Super Indian and Deer Woman carry and impart knowledge that is central for the survival of their families and people when I examine each text, I would like to first draw on the scholarship of several Native women to establish the relationship between Native feminisms and storytelling; Native woman played and continue to play central roles as storytellers within Native communities, and the knowledge that they hold and pass through generations sustains nations and combats colonial erasure. While discussing the kinds of mapping that Native women participate in to create and claim Native spaces, Goeman notes "elements of these maps remain today in oral traditions, contemporary stories, and experiences conveyed through story, and these stories are often carried on through
women” (25). Native women hold the intergenerational knowledge that allows for cultural continuance and protects sovereignty. Laguna Pueblo poet, scholar, and activist Paula Gunn Allen emphasizes the importance of Indigenous women keeping alive oral histories in the fight against colonial violence and struggle to survive and flourish as sovereign peoples: “We must remember our origins, our cultures, our histories, our mothers and grandmothers, for without that memory, which implies continuance rather than nostalgia, we are doomed to engulfment by a paradigm that is fundamentally inimical to the vitality, autonomy, and self-empowerment essential for satisfying, high-quality life” (Who Is Your Mother, 214). Here she speaks to the significance of Native women understanding themselves through knowledge of generations of kin, while acknowledging that the roots that connect them to their histories are living and moving rather than static fixtures—memory, within the framework she provides is central to the project of imagining futures. Through drawing on Native feminist histories, channeling modes of storytelling that both capture “a particular way of perceiving the world” (Bird and Harjo, 24) and depend on intergenerational connections between women, Super Indian and Deer Woman map out paths to Indigenous futures and assert Native survivance.
CHAPTER 3: Networks of Kinship and Community Care: Collective Survival Against Colonial Violence in *Super Indian*

I wish to begin this exploration of Native comics with Arigon Starr’s *Super Indian* as the comic illustrates the principles and practices I explore above; specifically, it draws closely on (and works against) comic conventions established through *Superman*. However, Starr’s work also introduces dissonance to conventional comic aesthetics and plots that urges the reader to question hegemonic depictions of Indigeneity, and also centralizes Native kinship formations and modes of storytelling. Originally adapted from a radio show that Starr created with the same name, the comic presents Hubert Logan, a member of the fictional Leaning Oak reservation, who “ate tainted commodity cheese and gained superpowers.” *Super Indian*, now with two volumes exploring the Leaning Oak community, fixes its gaze primarily on the internal workings of the reservation, and traces the community’s attempts to protect tribal sovereignty against colonial encroachment.

Like the comic itself, I begin my analysis of *Super Indian* by presenting and exploring the characters before I move on to consider the plot. By situating Hubert/Super Indian immediately within a broad network of kin, Arigon Starr establishes “heroism” as a quality rooted in collaboration and connection rather than individualism. From the onset, Superman is established as a figure both above and apart from the people he seeks to protect. The *Superman* comics trace his effectiveness as a hero to his lack of familial ties and rejection of stable, honest romantic connection. His powerful individualism allows him to commit his entire being to heroism and become an abstractly, objectively “good” figure. In *Super Indian*, however, Starr never suggests that maintaining family connections and fulfilling his heroic duties becomes a struggle for
Hubert; indeed Hubert’s interactions and closeness with his family and friends prove central to his heroic success.

By spending the majority of Hubert’s “heroic bio” establishing him as part of a larger network of kin rather than fixating only on his powers and heroic mission, Starr frames connection to one’s community as an essential aspect of heroism within the world she creates in her comics. Within her discussion of the centrality of collective, intergenerational knowledge in knowing oneself as an Indigenous person and imagining Indigenous futures, Jeannette Armstrong expresses, “As an individual, each person is a single facet of a transgenerational organism known as a family. Through this organism flows the powerful lifeblood of cultural transference designed to secure the best probability of well being for each generation” (Armstrong, 199). Armstrong helpfully offers a notion of selfhood rooted in a multifaceted, multigenerational web of connections, and Starr follows in this Indigenous epistemological tradition through Super Indian. Upon introducing her protagonist, Starr writes, “Hubert is the son of Mick and Carrie Logan, born and raised on the Leaning Oak Reservation,” which immediately situates him within his family and his tribe, refuting the “lone wolf, [or] sullen outsider” (“Future Pasts,” 485) trope we see in many superhero comics. Not only do his family members feature as central fixtures in Hubert’s life, but they also remain central to his heroic alter ego—indeed, “Unlike the prototypical superhero, Hubert is embedded in a supportive family who know his secret” (“Future Pasts,” 485). His family offers him immense support in protecting the community, and Starr never frames his acts of heroism as isolated, but instead highlights the fact that the knowledge and support of his family informs (and perhaps allows for) his work as Super Indian.
Providing a sharp contrast to the approach that Superman undertakes in allowing the nominal figure to dominate the panels and narrative arcs, Starr deeply immerses her reader in the community of the Leaning Oak Reservation. Elizabeth Woody perhaps can further illuminate Starr’s choice to centralize community in the world she creates, stating, “Before you become a participating individual, you need to work through family dynamics to understand how you were made and why your family is what it is” (156). The model of “traditional” white superheroism suggests that heroes can most effectively battle “villains” when they remain untethered, but *Super Indian* follows an entirely different philosophy; in order to find balance and succeed in protecting the reservation, Hubert must understand his ties to the people around him and his relationship to the space he inhabits. Indeed, Starr provides a whole lexicon of characters before even beginning the narrative. Under a section titled “The Logan family” for instance, Starr writes “Hubert Logan/Super Indian’s family who know his secret identity and help him when needed,” and then displays a picture and description of each family member (see fig. 9). Interestingly, the comic frames “The Logan family” both as Super Indian and Hubert’s family—Starr suggests no division of self or isolation of Super Indian from the figures that surround Hubert. This refutes one of the most common superhero tropes of secrecy from family; Super Indian does not model the quintessential American individual but appears as essentially, inseparably part of a network of kin. It also seems worthy of note that Starr lists both the names of each family member and each person’s relationship to Hubert—the members of Hubert’s family both emerge as independent figures and part as parts of an inter-dependent collective.
Figure 9
When writing Super Indian’s short biography, Starr notes, “Super Indian is a Reservation superhero and the powerful alter-ego of Hubert Logan. Guided by Flora Logan, his traditional medicine woman grandmother, his handsome exterior is a reflection of Hubert’s innate kindness, curiosity and desire to serve and protect his people.” Unlike Superman, who is positioned as an isolated being from another planet whose perfect body can compete with the marvels of modern technology, Super Indian’s grandmother serves as the hero’s primary guiding force. The generative relationship that the two characters share emphasizes the central role Native women and elders play as storytellers and life bringers within Native communities—Hubert’s grandmother grants him access to a wealth of intergenerational knowledge to ensure the reservation’s future. Much like Hernández-Ávila acknowledges, “Most of what I know about being an indigenous person of this hemisphere I have learned from my own family, from Native American oral traditions, and from active participation in Native American community and ceremonial life” (“America in 1492,” 78), Starr highlights storytelling as a central and valid epistemology within Super Indian, and introduces a notion of the “past” (which lives on through Hubert’s grandmother) as a sustaining force necessary to tribal sovereignty and futurity.

Derek Thunder, one of the comics’ primary antagonists, models the kinds of danger and violence that can arise when a figure with powers lacks (or rejects) ties to a community and responsibilities to a people. Thunder, Super Indian’s foil in many respects, maps out both the internal and external damage one can suffer and inflict by following an individualistic mode of heroism. When Starr introduces him to us, she writes, “Derek Thunder. ——Son of Leaning Oak tribal members Luther and June Thunder. ——Older brother of Tillie Thunder,” immediately situating the “villain” within a family — but in the picture that accompanies this text, Thunder appears alone (see fig. 10). Indeed, the panel captures his retreat from a single burning building
(seemingly a house) as a satisfied smile curls across his face. The panel seems to suggest that Thunder has set the house on fire and now gleefully runs from the scene; Thunder’s depicted flight from the burning house perhaps hints at the character’s later-revealed aversion to familial connection. I do not intend to suggest that Starr uses this image to emphasize the importance of a normative, Euro-American family—Hubert’s extended family and close friends seem as integral to him as his mother and father — rather, Starr perhaps frames “heroic” endeavors as misguided or futile for figures that reject connections to community, family (including extended networks of kin), and the self (Thunder here appears to dismiss Gunn Allen’s assertion that to know himself, Thunder must be able to understand and answer “Who is [his] mother?”). Koyangk'auwi Maidu poet Janice Gould helpfully contextualizes Thunder’s “villainy” in her exploration of Native Women’s literary maps. Quoting Wilma Mankiller (former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation), she asserts, “How can we possibly keep our world from spinning out of balance if we don’t have a fundamental understanding of our relationship to everything around us? We continually fail to see our own insignificance in the totality of things.’ These acts of mapping help put us in relation to everything around us, both physically and verbally” (Gould, 24). Rather than either excusing or reveling in Thunder’s villainy, Star instead contextualizes the antagonist’s actions, suggesting that after rejecting his ties to intergenerational networks of kin, he is lost.
Starr indeed presents readers with an utterly unique “origin story” for Derek Thunder as this frame does not show him displaying his “super” body, facing off with Super Indian, or even obtaining his powers, but traces the “origins” of his supervillain persona to his flight from the burning house (and also his retreat from his own name as it appears on the panel) (fig. 10). Again, this origin story does not exist to valorize normative nuclear family standards, but it instead explores how and why Derek remains adrift from forces that could help him regain balance. Furthermore, in mentioning that after receiving his powers the government captured Thunder to experiment on his abilities, the comic traces his “villainy” to some extent to settler colonial intervention. When we come upon Derek later in the story, he appears through a conversation online with his sister Tillie. After messaging Tille, she expresses that she “wish[es] he would fully disappear.” Although he only sends her cryptic direct messages and seems to do so solely to unnerve her, his attempt to reach out in the first place demonstrates some desire (whether subconscious or not) to forge or rebuild some kind of familial connection. Starr paints an incredibly complex portrait of villainy in Thunder by always linking his actions to isolation.
imposed by colonial trauma (his time under US government control invokes both traumatic histories of boarding schools for Native children and America’s forced sterilization of many Indigenous women) while still recognizing the harm he inflicts upon his people and not excusing it.

While Superman’s motto remains grounded in a vague commitment to “fight for the oppressed,” the comic never frames that oppression as stemming from systemic violence, and it continuously presents “the oppressed” as a category from which the hero maintains a level of both distance and superiority; Superman seeks to preserve the “community” of Metropolis (and in later comics he branches out to saving the world on a larger scale), but holds no intimate understanding of community and harbors few personal attachments to the people who compose it. However, as James Donahue notes in “Super Indians and the Indigenous Comics Renaissance,” “For Super Indian—and for Native heroes more generally—the loftiest goal is the protection of one’s immediate community” (266). Indeed Arigon Starr, and Super Indian by extension, has little interest in the world outside of the reservation (although Starr surely reflects upon how colonial figures and fixtures outside of the reservation affect life within Hubert’s community). In Super Indian’s Introduction, Starr emphasizes Super Indian’s commitment to keeping his community safe noting that “his handsome exterior is a reflection of Hubert’s innate kindness, curiosity and desire to serve and protect his people.” Super Indian acts out of love for his people with whom he remains inextricably entangled rather than serving as an abstract icon that floats above them from a distance.

Furthermore, Starr frames all of the villains as figures who threaten tribal sovereignty or undermine the survival of the community; this positioning of villainy as stemming from colonial intervention further establishes Hubert’s heroism as emerging from intimate communal
connection and kinship. Starr writes, “No one ever said it was all fun and games on the Reservation. Super Indian battles hostile, outside forces intent on taking control of his home’s natural resources.” While Superman serves as somewhat of an “outsider” himself, within the *Super Indian* comics, Starr immediately positions evil figures as “hostile, outside force[s].” Central to Superman’s project is reminding the reader that Clark Kent merely serves as a facade to the hero’s true identity, Superman; thus, the figure’s “outsider” (non-human) status grants him access to heroism. Although he remains disconnected enough from his home planet to avoid earning suspicion from Americans, this sense that Superman’s humanity only operates as an inconvenient, uncomfortable mask further separates Superman from the people he claims to protect; he becomes both the exemplar of humanity (imagined as American hegemonic masculinity) and utterly isolated from other individuals. Super Indian, on the other hand, exists both as an “ideal” iteration of heroism and as an entirely flawed human, and Starr never prioritizes one aspect of the character over the other. Essentially, Starr never uses Super Indian’s heroic persona as a tool to separate him from the rest of the Leaning Oak community. As both hero and man, Hubert/Super Indian is fundamentally entwined with his people and because of this entanglement can dedicate himself unflinchingly to ensuring their survival.

Armstrong’s discussion and definition of community speaks to Super Indian’s commitment to honoring his responsibilities to his people: “A community is the living process that interacts with the vast and ancient body of intricately connected patterns operating in perfect unison called the land” (199); she later elaborates, “It is in your own best interest that all needs are addressed in the community” (202). If we see the world through the lens of communities based on reciprocal relationships and inter-connectedness, and understand that an individual’s well-being depends on the flourishing of surrounding complex configurations of kinship and care...
rather than American (isolated) individualism, then taking care of communities is central to personal survival. In a complete counter to American notions of individualism that value isolated identities and relationships of possession, many Indigenous peoples and epistemologies “recognize our responsibility to [Mother Earth] and to each other” (“America in 1492,” 81). Superman wholly commits himself to “saving the oppressed” and his heroism upholds the valorization of self-sacrifice that often pervades comics, but his acts of martyrdom for people that he cannot intimately know still fortify notions of him as an isolated American individual. *Super Indian* displays an image of entanglement that asserts that a community’s wellbeing as a whole is necessary for individual health to flourish, beginning to map out a path to futurity (both individual and collective) that inherently depends on collaboration rather than individualism.

While Starr’s efforts to place Derek Thunder’s history within the context of colonial intervention and trauma surely indicates that “villainy” resides within settler colonialism, *Super Indian*’s other villains, and the specific forms of violence they inflict, more clearly point to colonialism as the primary obstacle to the Leaning Oak Reservation’s collective survival. Along with the fact that the “villains” Starr creates all reference different forms of colonial violence that could undermine tribal sovereignty (for instance, Professor Karl Von Kelheim, who speaks to the exploitative nature of an anthropological field that often seeks to extract “artifacts” from Indigenous peoples for white consumption, or Vivian Hardy, the “new-age hippie” who references the appropriation of Native cultures central to the new age movement), the goals of these villains lie primarily in “Taking control of [Hubert’s] home’s natural resources.” In specifically invoking forces that seek to undermine tribal sovereignty, Starr offers a radically different source of villainy than the vaguely apocalyptic violence that extends through many superhero narratives or the organized crime and corruption that appears in the first *Superman*
comic. In most superhero narratives, violence becomes a vehicle of death and destruction rather than extraction; in referencing Hubert’s “home’s natural resources,” however, Starr traces the main conflict within her comic to settler colonialism. In its depictions of organized crime and individualised instances of corruption within the government as central antagonistic forces to Superman’s undisputed heroism, the Superman comics ultimately uphold hegemonic notions of criminality as a threat to normative society and the government as ultimately salvageable despite several “bad apples.” In framing the main sources of “villainy” as forces seeking to undermine the government, the first Superman comic positions the villains as forces threatening hegemony. The primary threats that Super Indian poses offer a different set of conceptions about the world: the looming threat of external colonial powers seeking to undermine a sovereign people spurs the hero into action, and Super Indian’s duty, above all, is to ensure the survival of his people. This focus on collective survival necessarily, although subtly, establishes a world that acknowledges the genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples and offers a US settler state that is not inherently legitimate or worthy of preservation.

Starr certainly doesn’t paint her hero’s world as the kind of glaringly post-apocalyptic space we see in Deer Woman (as we shall see in the next chapter), but she destabilizes the world that readers typically enter when reading comics, imbuing classic comic book imagery with a degree of dissonance that urges us to regard her work critically rather than consume it as escapist fantasy; a comic that acknowledges the inherent violence of Euro-American society offers a radically different relationship to readership/consumption than one that merely suggests “glitches” in a functioning American system. We see Starr play with this tension that urges readers to more closely interrogate the text and images appear in Derek Thunder’s origin story, and particularly in a panel that, speaking of the villain, reads, “Powerful, yes. —— But he is no
hero,” along with the image of Thunder as a young boy hoisting a cop car over his shoulders (see fig. 11). Immersed in the world of this comic, in which Starr frequently wields irony to call attention to often naturalized expressions of colonial power both within and outside of the world of comics, the declaration of Thunder’s villainy paired with that particular image seems worthy of more critical thought than one might grant the same image within the Superman comics. Might this panel really intend to simplistically condemn Thunder, or does it seek instead to complicate both Derek and Hubert as they relate to classic definitions of “heroism”? The fact that the image paired with this caption expresses so many contradictions seems to suggest the latter. The image shows the outline of a small boy (the scene is dark and we cannot see the boy’s face but he glows either from his powers or from flashlights that the other figures point at him) holding an empty cop car over his head with the legs and feet of people all wearing the same clothes (I assume guards) appearing in the background and a cop pointing a gun at the boy’s small figure. The boy appears perfectly on display (lit up in fact) to the people within the panel but he remains mostly obscured to us, suggesting his vulnerable hyper-visibility to the crowd and his protection from the reader’s prying eyes. He looks more like a child throwing a tantrum than someone intending to inflict violence (particularly given that the cop car he hoists above his head is empty), but a cop still points a gun at him. Obviously, Starr’s choice to have Thunder disrupting/destroying a cop car on the panel where she definitively proclaims his villainy seems pointed. Perhaps Starr seeks to address the fact that hegemonic heroism generally (at least ideologically) allies itself with the establishment; while comics often present the relationship between heroes and cops as strained, that tension usually stems from the hero’s belief that cops are incapable of sufficiently “protecting the city,” and the cops’ resentments about being outperformed. Superman never fundamentally questions the role of cops in our society or frames
them as essential, intentional tools of white supremacy. While Starr avoids explaining Thunder’s actions directly (besides deeming him a bully earlier on the page) the unspoken fact that cops often operate as violent, murderous forces towards Indigenous peoples contextualizes the image. In her article, “Relocations: Home, Language, and Native American Women's Writings,” Inés Hernández-Ávila explains, “To respond to this insistent objectification [that Indigenous peoples face] requires a humor that gives back the objectified image served up in exaggerated (and reappropriated) language” (501). The image Starr displays is by no means humorous, but when we acknowledge *Super Indian* as a *Native space*, we can begin to look at the fairly conventional images that Starr serves (like a “villain” destroying a cop car) with a degree of tension that they wouldn’t otherwise hold—in the world that Starr creates, colonizer images necessarily don’t hold the same meaning. This interplay of text and image (the image serving to destabilize the concrete proclamation of the text) seems to reflect the destabilization of dichotomies between hero and villain, good and evil in this world—Starr’s comic imagines a world that does not inherently align with the righteousness of cops and acknowledges a degree of systemic brokenness. While comics like Superman urge their readers to escape into fantasy, Starr never fails to remind her readers (with the specificity of references to tribal life and the clear connections between villainous figures and common expressions of colonial power from settlers) that *Super Indian* is drawn from her lived experiences as an Indigenous woman and that the comic critically engages with some of the realities of surviving through settler colonialism.
Whether or not normative superhero narratives have any sci-fi elements, they all have an eye towards futurity in that most superheroes serve to project and preserve the “ideal”; superheroes, in their unquestionable morality, can fight for what the “right” future should look like. In almost all canonical superhero narratives, those futures are white and colonial. Starr not only uses the genre to show a superhero fighting for an Indigenous future rather than a colonial one, but her methodology itself is completely dedicated to preserving Indigenous traditions and thus ensuring Indigenous futures — she creates a Native space that rejects spatiotemporal boundaries and calls upon histories of Native storytelling to open paths towards flourishing futures for Native peoples. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the notion that Super Indian’s heroism derives from his connection to his family is inextricably linked to the notion within Native scholarship and Indigenous communities that the survival of one’s people is dependent on the preservation of generational knowledge through oral histories. In both cases, Starr emphasizes that Native futures depend on collaboration and interaction rather than individualism. In an interview speaking about *Super Indian*, Starr states, “Connecting historical memory and
Indigenous futures comes from showing that Native people have always been here and will continue to survive” (Bernardin, “Vital Kinships,” 72). Through *Super Indian*, Starr accomplishes this: Starr uses this already relational, interactive medium of comics to create a world that reflects Native women’s roles as storytellers in Indigenous communities (and more specifically, a kind of storytelling, like oral histories, that inherently is moving and interactive); this kind of storytelling, reflected in both the making and the plot of *Super Indian*, acknowledges connections between pasts, presents, and futures, and seeks, above all, to preserve Indigenous histories and ceremonies (while rejecting a static notion of tradition) to pave paths towards Indigenous futures. In “Future Pasts,” Susan Bernardin acknowledges the collaborative nature built into comics by speaking about the generative interaction between author, characters, and reader:

> In both form and format, this digital comic invites interaction from its reader-viewers. First, the comics medium not only relies on this dynamic, shifting interplay of image and narration, but on the constitutive role of readers in forging connections of causality, time, and space across the white spaces, or ‘gutters’ separating individual panels...Collaboration extends from the artist’s distinctive visual syntax — the formal elements of perspective, panel placement, shape, and size; word or thought balloons — to cross-cultural references peopling *Super Indian*. (488)

Thus, on every level Starr draws on long-standing traditions of Indigenous peoples ensuring their own survival through collaboration. In many ways, her own work reflects the work of her superhero: she writes a hero who keeps his community safe by drawing on knowledge from his grandmother and connections with his family, while she maps out futures for her own people by drawing on rich Native histories of interactive, collaborative storytelling as a mode of survival—in doing so, she asserts, as her earlier quote suggests, that “Native people have always been here and will continue to survive.”
Chapter 4: Deer Woman: Visual Sovereignty, Surviving Apocalyptic Violence, and Maps to Native Futures

While vastly different in content, tone, and style from Super Indian, Elizabeth LaPensee’s Deer Woman: A Vignette similarly draws from and contributes to Native oral histories, creating a Native space that acknowledges colonial violence and trauma while also imagining vibrant Native futures. Continuing oral histories about Deer Woman passed on to her through her mother, LaPensee “layer[s]” the vignette “with true stories” to paint a complex portrait of the “figure who lures men from fires and whose deer legs are hidden by the light and shadows of the flames until she leads a man off from a gathering far enough to stomp him to death” (LaPensee, “Introduction”). Comics, and Deer Woman: A Vignette specifically, allows LaPensee to draw on Indigenous modes of storytelling (generations of women interacting to preserve the living story of a figure whose presence is not only limited to the page) to assert continued survival, collective healing, and resistance against colonial violence to build Indigenous futures that honor fluid, adapting histories.

One might begin to think of drawing characters in comics in relation to Goeman’s notions of mapping — superhero comics map out bodies, often claiming and consuming them (or serving them up for the audience’s consumption). As established in the earlier section about Euro-American comics, Native characters (and particularly Native women) are presented as essentialized caricatures of white America’s imaginings of indianness; the spaces of popular comics and the bodies depicted in them operate much like Western mapping in that the images claim a violating sense of knowledge and ownership. Goeman indeed discusses how mapping Indigenous bodies is central to the colonial project:

Native space is delegated to exist outside national settler terrains, even while it is controlled and manipulated by settler governance. As Native bodies are constructed as
abnormal and criminal, they, too, become spatialized. Natives occupy certain spaces of
the nation and are criminalized or erased if they step outside what are seen as
degenerative spaces. Colonialism is not just about conquering Native lands through
mapping new ownerships, but it is also about the conquest of bodies, particularly
women's bodies through sexual violence, and about recreating gendered relationships.
(33)

Much of the “(re)mapping” that LaPensee accomplishes in Deer Woman lies in her efforts to
draw Indigenous women with respect and the intimate knowledge that comes with shared lived
experience; she gives the Native women she depicts complete control of their sexualities,
offering them access to a kind of bodily sovereignty that Native women are not often given in
mainstream comics — she creates a model for a kind of visual sovereignty in comics that allows
for Native women to be depicted on their own terms.

LaPensee pushes back on the longstanding tradition of white people consuming images of
Indigeneity by making her hero “inconsumable” and granting her agency over her own body. To
ground the concept of visual sovereignty, it seems helpful here to call attention to the history of
white photographers capturing static Indigenous “objects/subjects” within their gaze as a way of
claiming, consuming, surveilling, and defining (Bauerkemper). This flattening work creates a
notion that Indigenous peoples are non-living, static figures of the past, meant only for white
consumption. Of Dine, Seminole, Muscogee Artist Hulleah Tsinhnajinnie who seeks to forge
reciprocal relationships with the subjects of her art (capturing them with genuine “love” [203,
Fowler]), Joseph Bauerkemper quotes Veronica Passalacqua’s comments on Tsinhnahjinnie’s
art, writing, “In these portraits [she creates of Indigenous women], the authority and power
belongs entirely to the subjects, who control their own identities and look directly out of the
photograph in the way they wish to be imagined” (131-132). Obviously comics offer a radically
different set of circumstances and positionalities than photography because authors draw figures
instead of seeking to capture “real” subjects, but LaPensee still grants her “hero” a level of agency that mainstream comic creators rarely give Native characters. Within *Deer Woman*, I think particularly of the figure’s “origin story” moment when she first fully transforms into the “hero” after experiencing sexual assault. The image reveals the woman staring at her own naked figure in a mirror with a determined, grim expression on her face with the caption “Transform” (see fig 12). Something about this moment of self-identification seems central; her naked body is beheld only by her own gaze. As LaPensee draws her figure, LaPensee grants Deer Woman complete bodily control, and offers her the power to manifest and shape her own transformation.

In an essay on the erotic, “Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy,” Ohlone Costanoan-Eselen scholar Deborah Miranda discusses how the US has claimed ownership over Native women’s bodies and sexualities to create its own identity. She goes on to discuss how when Native women claim and assert their own sexualities and connections to their erotic selves, Native women can undermine US myths that erase genocide and create and present more “‘real’” (145) versions of themselves. In a country in which the settler state claims Native women’s sexualities, the erotic becomes both a very vulnerable (in terms of personal safety) and a very powerful space. In creating and displaying her own erotic self, Deer Woman can illuminate the dissonance between the United States’ origin story, which depends on equating Native women to land and depicting both the women and the land as exploitable, and Native women’s lived realities.

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5 While the erotic remains a complicated, expansive field, I (and I presume Miranda) am imagining the erotic as it appears within Audre Lorde’s “‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.’”
Deer Woman possesses immense power in both her reclamation of her body and the erotic anger that she channels after her transformation; she wields her body with a command and fervor that refutes any colonial claims of ownership. Despite the danger she exposes herself to in displaying/accessing her eroticism — one can see the panic spread across her face when she lures a man into the bathroom of a club and he begins to assault her — Deer Woman is entirely in control of her erotic self. Her acts of self-protection and violence against abusive men demonstrate her rejection of any narrative that naturalizes the exploitation of Native women’s bodies. After her transformation, the largest image on the page shows her standing in what looks like an at-home gym, in a bold stance, seeming to stare down the reader with the caption, “So that it [sexual assault] never happens again——To anyone” — a smaller panel sits on top depicting a deer’s eye (see fig. 13). In depicting mainstream superheroes’ “origin stories,” most comics pointedly display the hero’s newly transformed body; when the comic describes Superman’s power, for instance, it shows him either shirtless or in his uniform performing incredible feats of strength, but here, readers only have access to Deer Woman’s eye. The
vignette highlights Deer Woman’s gaze, and her gaze remains the only one able to watch over her newly transformed deer body.

Indeed, LaPensee gears nothing in Deer Woman towards easy consumption and the images resist the kind of voyeurism that other comic books seem to invite. On the one hand, as I will further explore later in the chapter, many of the images are gruesome—the comic doesn’t display the kind of easy, bloodless violence that leaves the viewer anxiously awaiting the next battle. On the other hand, LaPensee avoids following in the tradition of comics like Superman that constantly highlight heroes’ “ideal” bodies. For much of the comic, in fact, Deer Woman’s hair obstructs her face, giving the impression that we do not have complete access to her; she can selectively invite or refuse our gaze. Furthermore, her appearances throughout the city destabilize any images of “authentic indigeneity” fixed within settler visual traditions that would make her easily “consumable.” Deer Woman does not play into colonial expectations for “purity” that imagine Native peoples as only living on reservations. She appears concretely
throughout the city (which seems to be at least relatively close to present day), which prevents her from becoming an imaginary figure floating through abstracted space, whose pain we feel less because she does not seem real. She is not a caricature or an imagined figure placed in an unspecified “past wilderness,” but a real person who experiences colonial trauma and sexual violence that we as readers must reckon with (and if we are settlers, that reckoning involves accepting a level of culpability in her pain). In this “(re)mapping” of the space Indigenous women occupy in comics, LaPensee opens up possibilities for storytelling that push back against settler colonial rule and assert the presence (and imagine futures) of Indigenous peoples, particularly offering a space of Native womanhood unburdened by colonial imaginings of Indigenous women. Paula Gunn Allen speaks to the importance of creating this kind of textual space, which, in Deer Woman, includes both the narrative and the visual, stressing, “Indian control of the image-making and information-disseminating process is crucial, and the contemporary prose and poetry of American Indian writers, particularly of women-centered writers, is a major part of Indian resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide” (The Sacred Hoop, 42). This project allows for LaPensee to tell Native women’s stories (including her own) entirely on her own terms as a form of resistance to hegemonic narratives that script Native women’s deaths and sexual violence as excusable or necessary.

Central to LaPensee’s crafting of a Native space that begins to establish a grammar of visual and textual sovereignty is the fact that Deer Woman exists completely outside of American individualism and notions of the “individual hero,” and emerges instead from interaction between generations of people and peoples; she fosters communal healing and reflects kinship bonds, and through these forms of connection, peoples can persist through a colonial power that insists upon erasure. Much like Super Indian, LaPensee grounds Deer
Woman both methodologically and textually in collectivism and collective knowledge. Through an understanding of art/comics as inherently collaborative and the fact that Deer Woman has lived through centuries of oral histories to shape LaPensee’s depiction of the character, LaPensee creates a comic space that draws on Native feminist teachings to imagine a notion of heroism (or something that resembles heroism) contingent on collaboration and connection rather than individualism. When introducing her text, LaPensee reveals that her conceptions of the figure come from stories told by her mother, elaborating that “The stories I’ve heard about Deer Woman tell of a gorgeous, luscious, and downright deadly figure.” This introduction of Deer Woman frames the figure’s fluid, unstable life as emerging through generations of contact and connection between kin. LaPensee’s Deer Woman is unique, but appears as a small piece of the network of stories connecting families and peoples. LaPensee’s contribution to Deer Woman stories indeed brings to mind Goeman’s reflections on Native mapping; Goeman states,

Native narrative maps often conflict, perhaps add to the story, or only tell certain parts. Stories and knowledge of certain places can belong to particular families, clans, or individuals. These maps are not absolute but instead present multiple perspectives—as do all maps. While narratives and maps help construct and define worldviews, they are not determined and always open for negotiation. (25)

Like Native maps, the space that LaPensee creates through this vignette does not definitively define or claim the figure of Deer Woman, but contributes to a web of interacting stories that shape the “hero.” Whereas two individuals created Superman as a model for the ideal (liminal) American man, Deer Woman in this story calls upon generations of oral histories to create not just a Native “hero,” but to map out a Native space that asserts the presence of centuries of Native women despite colonial genocide. Similar to Deborah Miranda’s discussions of storytelling and kinship in her “tribalography” Bad Indian — “My ancestors, collectively, are the story-bridge that allows me to be here. I’m honored to be one of the bridges back to them, to
their words and experiences” (xx) — histories of Deer Women stories live within LaPensee and this vignette offers a bridge back to and forward from ancestral knowledge. Goeman eloquently reflects on the value of these intergenerational kinship ties expressing, "Remembering important connections to land and community is instrumental in mapping a decolonized Native presence" (29). Deer Woman contributes to this project of “mapping a decolonized Native presence” by drawing on connections to land and community both methodologically and through the vignette’s depiction of Deer Woman as a multiplicitous, fluid, spatiotemporally unbounded figure.

Deer Woman represents an uncapturability that diverges from understandings of heroism that depend on individual subjectivity; while she becomes intimately entangled with the women with whom she interacts, she is not bound to the defined space of one body, and can engage with any number of women across time and space. Superman was born a “hero,” and thus the comic situates him as naturally above and apart from all of humanity. Deer Woman, however, presents a power to which anyone can have access—her presence in a person does not elevate or separate (indeed it speaks to an entrenched history of connection to a people), it simply empowers. In one of our first encounters with Deer Woman, we see the central figure in the text walk through a door, and above her, a shadow on the ceiling reveals the outline of a deer with antlers (see fig. 14). Within this frame that reads “Survive” Deer Woman emerges from the shadows (clearly not intending to parade around in brightly colored suits shaking hands with government officials) as neither a costume nor a simplistic overtaking of the woman with whom she interacts. She lives as a sort of reflection of the woman and while their bodies collide and merge to create a “hero,” Deer Woman does not encompass the central figure in the same way that Clark Kent is Superman. Goeman, among other theorists like Tiffany King, rejects “liberal humanist”
configurations of the body and instead explores understandings of space and body as “states of flux” (King, 33). Indeed, Goeman elaborates on Doreen Massey’s call to “[re]map” spaces, writing, “[in her book For Space, Massey] asks to reimagine space and ‘to question that habit of thinking of space as surface’ and instead think of it as a ‘meeting-up of histories’" (Goeman, 5). Deer Woman’s complex relationship with the women in the story breaks down Western notions of bounded, concrete bodies and subjectivities to honor a fluid, multiplicitous version of self that depends on interaction and relationality. The comic rejects notions of a selfhood or humanity that relies on isolated individualism, and highlights teachings from scholars like Elizabeth Woody who asserts, “For personal and social health, balanced action, and peace, it is important to see how our lives are shared and affect all things” (165). The vignette, thus, not only refutes notions of heroism that depend on individualism, but offers a depiction of Native womanhood that resists reduction or comprehensibility. The heroic bodies that LaPensee maps out have no clear edges and borders and are thus uncapturable to the colonial eye. This reimagining of body and space undermines colonial logics that position “humanity” as an exclusionary ideal inherently based in whiteness and offers important decolonial work in reshaping body and space on Native terms: "These mental maps found in the stories shape relationships around us and serve to imagine identity and community differently. They are a significant component of Native survival" (Goeman 25). Much like how Deer Woman maps bodies that invoke entanglement and reject binaristic boundaries between body and environment, the vignette also maps a notion of story that depends on connection rather than isolation.
LaPensee paints stories as inextricable and inseparable from the lived realities of Native peoples and asserts that stories mirror and emerge from lived experience, inherently involve interaction, and serve as central paths to survival. The binaristic separation between story and “real life” is a largely Western literary construct that LaPensee thoroughly dissolves in *Deer Woman*. The vignette rejects notions of story as escapism and offers instead a sort of living, moving preservation of histories that actively foregrounds building futures. One might sense the oral tradition’s impression on many Native texts and comics, but oral histories become particularly palpable in LaPensee’s *Deer Woman* as LaPensee draws on generations of oral tales and written works (Paula Gunn Allen’s 1991 “Deer Woman” short story comes to mind, for instance) to write this comic. In an interview with Angels Carabi in *The Spiral of Memory*, Joy Harjo asserts, “Stories create us. We create ourselves with stories. Stories that our parents tell us, that our grandparents tell us, or that our great-grandparents told us, stories that reverberate through the web” (Harjo qtd. in *Reckonings: Contemporary Short Fiction by Native American Women*, XIII). Stories offer and develop from webs of entanglement both on and off the page.
Harjo offers a notion of story that avoids sharp separation from “real life,” but instead locates itself in lived experience and informs daily life — stories move, and do not subscribe to spatial or temporal linearity (and thus resist completion and resolution). LaPensee importantly situates the vignette among this tradition of storytelling in her introduction, writing:

Deer Woman: A Vignette is a comic layered with true stories. The opening page is one of my stories but it’s a version of that story that asks ‘what if?’ What if, in that moment, as a young Anishinaabewi, I had transformed into the Deer Woman from the Sault that my mother told me stories about? What if, as Molly Swain and Chelsea Vowel pose in Métis in space, I had realized the Deer Woman in myself?

_Deer Woman_ is not a story born from escapist fantasy that projects idealist desires; it does not mirror comics like _Superman_ whose authors sought to fabricate a model for the quintessential American man, but instead comes from an immensely personal place. The “heroic” figure does not occupy the realm of fantasy and LaPensee neither owns nor invents the figure for the comic; Deer Woman indeed moves freely among generations of women, and thus is born from the generative interactions between Native networks of kin.

Much like Leslie Marmon Silko, who believes, “The old-time beliefs persist today; thus I will refer to the old-time people in the present tense as well as the past. Many worlds may coexist here” (61), LaPensee does not merely wield the notion of Deer Woman as alive as a metaphor. She details a conversation she shares with Deer Woman during which the “hero” muses, “This is ceremony...and after the story I have to tell you, you’re gonna need a smoke.” Her invocation of “ceremony” here rather than any Western notions of religion seems particularly striking: storytelling as “ceremony” speaks to repetition through generations and intimate interaction (not only interactions with Deer Woman herself, but connections among family and kin). Deer Woman speaks to LaPensee not as a superhero to a human or as a mythic figure to a mortal, but as a friend, mother, sister, or aunt. Deer Woman’s offer to invite LaPensee
to hear her story not only assumes a sense of balance and equality between Deer Woman and LaPensee, but also suggests that familiarity and love runs through the bond between them. LaPensee’s act of keeping “dynamically alive...traditional stories” (Sweet Wong, Hertha D, et al., XIV) through recounting vivid encounters with Deer Woman contributes to a grammar of resistance in its celebration of Indigenous epistemologies despite centuries of attempted colonial erasure. Goeman indeed speaks to the ways in which Native stories dissolve boundaries between the “real” and “unreal,” and how doing so can create pathways toward Indigenous futures.

Native stories extend beyond a beautiful aesthetic and simple moral or fable. These connections are powerful in the struggle against colonialism and empire building—yet they are fragile and need tending. I venture that these stories in their contemporary forms are that tending and will continue to map our future. Mark my words, these imaginative geographies will open up new possibilities and inaugurate new and vital meanings. (39)

Central to LaPensee’s project in writing this vignette is the fact that the comic does not exist on the page in static isolation, and her work does not merely represent a mainstream “superhero” narrative featuring Native characters. Deer Woman maps out Native space through both visuals and narrative, and in doing so, draws on centuries of teachings about struggle against settler colonialism through the oral tradition.

As well as mapping out Indigenous futures through methodologically honoring the oral tradition, Deer Woman offers a different kind of relationship to the reader than most mainstream comics. Unlike many other “superhero” narratives, Deer Woman does not encourage easy consumption for the reader’s entertainment, but instead the comic urges readers to acknowledge and attend to the ways in which colonial violence affects Indigenous women. Deer Woman not only draws on and reflects the lived experiences of many Native women and keeps alive Indigenous epistemologies, but it also offers a relationship to the reader based on reciprocity—this relationship, however, fundamentally differs between settlers and Native women. While
*Deer Woman* urges white readers to actively interrogate their own culpabilities in settler colonial violence instead of offering a pleasant narrative for consumption, LaPensee also describes the text as a space of healing for Native women. Whether the text offers collective healing or a call to arms (or in some cases both) it becomes a space that demands and/or offers intimate interaction and affirms lived realities of Native women.

Deer Woman’s intervention as a man attempts to sexually assault a woman in a club exemplifies the comic’s general resistance to consumability. Deer Woman avoids any sense of spectacle as she “takes down the villain” and rejects calling the police. While involving the police on some level might offer the “easiest,” most obvious solution to violence within most white superhero comics, LaPensee seems to acknowledge that within the world Deer Woman (and Native women more broadly) inhabits, the cops align with (and often are themselves) sexual abusers more often than they actually protect Native women. Deer Woman thus lures the predatory man away from the girl in danger so she can stomp him to death and exact justice herself. In the frame where LaPensee depicts him attacking Deer Woman, her eyes widen with fear and horror as his body covers hers, and half of her face remains obscured as he holds her against the bathroom wall (see fig. 15). Her “battle” with him is ugly and painful and rather than entering it with unflinching confidence and ease, she seems to understand that her encounter could reignite her trauma. Her pain in exposing herself to sexual violence to save other women from experiencing it denaturalizes the cycle of “crime and justice” that appears in mainstream comics (and also quite literally echoes Miranda’s notions of the erotic as both a vulnerable and potentially powerful space).
Figure 15

_Deer Woman_ in many ways offers a counter to the traditional “hero” figure in that Deer Woman’s acts of heroism should not need occur in the first place (LaPensee denaturalizes them) and readers should not seek pleasure or gratification in watching her “heroics;” the comic suggests that the kind of “heroism” that shapes the text burdens rather than strengthens Deer Woman, and her actions only become necessary for survival because of colonial, patriarchal violence. Superhero narratives often reach immense levels of popularity because they feed into people’s desires to consume action and see idealized “good guys” “win”; comics continually produce cycles of “crime” and heroic intervention based on the assumption that the hero’s presence will remain necessary and the societal violence that makes it so remains palatable and potentially gratifying in its resolution. LaPensee, however, avoids gearing this “heroic intervention” in Deer Woman towards easy consumption or entertainment. The “hero” does not proudly, confidently participate in violence, but her actions instead represent a painful necessity
for survival. When we finally reach Deer Woman’s “battle sequence,” her actions exist only within the gutters and only the man’s bright red blood pooling at the bottom of the page hints at any color (see fig. 15). In Superman comics, several panels always brightly display the character’s “super” body in action, battling villains. In a way that calls and expands upon earlier discussions of Deer Woman’s body as unbordered, expansive, and uncapturable, LaPensee refuses to grant us unfiltered, complete access to Deer Woman’s body in action; her body does not exist and move solely for our viewing pleasure, and LaPensee does not present Deer Woman’s acts of violence in response to the sexual, colonial violence she and other Native women face for our easy consumption.

When LaPensee finally allows us to witness the violence that Deer Woman inflicts upon her attackers, she (LaPensee) makes sure to depict a gruesome scene. While LaPensee never specifies the location of the attack, the space, revealed as a boat filled with young, un/underdressed people, alludes to sex trafficking. After a man leads Deer Woman through the space, we see her deer legs appear and hooves and antlers sprout from her face, which long black hair entirely obscures (see fig. 16). Her hand seems to reach inside one of the three men complicit in the trafficking, and blood spurts from his stomach as another man’s head flies from the rest of his body. Again, this kind of violence diverges from that which Euro-American superhero comics depict. The hero’s body conventionally spreads across entire panels while “villains” either remain outside of the book’s gaze or face a defeat devoid of graphic bloodshed. Whereas Deer Woman’s body is not particularly on display (her face remains hidden as we see her only her deer legs and the oversized hoodie that she wears), LaPensee reveals the men she attacks in gruesome, gory detail. Deer Woman does not offer readers an image of the ideal American body, and she defies conventional notions of “role modeling” as individuals would
perhaps resist fantasizing about their own heroic transformations into Deer Woman in the way that young boys and men project themselves into Superman comics. Everything about this scene, from the allusion to sex trafficking to the men’s eventual “defeat,” is ugly and horrific, but necessary for her (and the other young people on the boat’s) survival. LaPensee presents a model of comics that does not offer entertainment for passive consumers, but instead calls upon readers to recognize that the violence depicted in her texts reflects violence that Native women face every day. She offers the hero’s textual, retaliatory violence both as a fight against the violence of consumption that Native characters often face in Euro-American comics and the naturalized violence that Native women face in America. Indeed at the end of her introduction, she frames the entire narrative with this sentiment:

This is a call to recognize that there are over 1,000 missing and murdered Indigenous women of all ages. It is situated along the Great Lakes where young women and many others are involved in sex trafficking via boats. It calls us to take a stance to change the fact that Indigenous women are the most likely to experience sexual assault on Turtle Island and to recognize the lack or rights. I welcome you to experience this comic with the warning that it is a brutal, beautiful, and unrelenting story that shows a glimpse of the serene chaos that Deer Woman is. I hope for more of Deer Woman’s stories to be told, for her to be heard and most of all, for Indigenous women and our families and communities to heal.

Again, while LaPensee surely intends to disrupt violent, mainstream settler colonial narratives that white readers carry and perpetuate, she primarily sees the comic as a space of healing for Native women — a space in which Native women fight against those who wish to claim their bodies, and Native women can regain their bodily sovereignties. In this quote, LaPensee directly engages with her readers, either inviting them into a space of collective healing, or imploring them to hold themselves accountable to their complicity in colonial violence.
In a fundamental divergence from mainstream superhero narratives like *Superman*, LaPensee’s *Deer Woman* operates not from a flawed but fundamentally sound world, but a post-apocalyptic space that inherently carries and facilitates normalized violence against Indigenous peoples; LaPensee invites us into the realities of Native women, and those realities recognize the world’s fundamental brokenness. From this acknowledgment of post-apocalypse, LaPensee can begin to map out paths towards individual survival, which inherently connects to and allows for collective future building. Many Native theorists have speculated on post-apocalyptic realities for Native peoples, as Kyle Whyte details in his piece “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises”:

Indigenous persons see our current situation as already having been through a crisis that is ongoing. Lee Sprague, known most recently for his organizing the Michigan Cold Water Canoe Rescue at Standing Rock, says that we already inhabit what our ancestors would have understood as a dystopian future (Sprague, 2017; Whyte, 2017b). Larry Gross writes that ‘Native Americans have seen the end of their respective worlds. . . Indians survived the apocalypse’ (Gross, 2014, 33). Sprague’s and Gross’ framing of today’s times comes out in Indigenous science fiction expression. Grace Dillon interprets Indigenous futurisms in literature and the arts as expressing how Indigenous peoples are currently living in a ‘post- Native Apocalypse’ (Dillon, 2012: 10). Building on Dillon’s
research, Conrad Scott’s recent study discusses how ‘Indigenous literature, following the culturally destructive process of colonial European advancement and absorption of what is now called the Americas, tends to narrate a sense of ongoing crisis rather than an upcoming one’ (Scott, 2016: 77). (227)

LaPensee speaks from this post-apocalyptic space, and Deer Woman does not stand as a figure to preserve the world’s current state; she does not exist to “save the world,” but rather, to help people survive despite the inescapable violence of living in a settler state insistent upon the genocide of Indigenous peoples (though in many ways, that survival itself is an earth shattering disruption of the colonial project). Indeed, as soon as we enter the text, Deer Woman reveals slanted panels formed from odd, mostly horizontal shapes, and gutters made of thick black lines. The comic’s atmosphere seems to allude to peeking through a slit in a boarded-up door — darkness engulfs the pages and readers can only access mostly-obscured snippets of the story’s action. All of the images appear in black and white besides bright red blood and a single ladybug on the comic’s final page, and the thick, stark lines and a heavy emphasis on shadow establish the tone of the space readers enter: slanted, dark, brutal, fundamentally off-kilter.

LaPensee perhaps most clearly establishes the comics’ post-apocalyptic atmosphere in the first image she reveals of the city, and specifically in Deer Woman’s street corner and house (see fig. 17). The image shows a somewhat shattered world: on one side of the street, far from the focal point of the panel, stark, but neat buildings sit; at the forefront, however, we see a girl walking down into the basement of a house with a cracking facade. The windows tilt awkwardly, cracks run along the building’s structure, and trash lies scattered on the lawn. This panel seems to suggest that while the whole world might not live in post-apocalyptic conditions, Deer Woman most certainly does. The space that she occupies does not reflect the neat streets and buildings that constitute Metropolis, but represents a foundationally broken place. LaPensee captions the panel: “In that moment when it’s already too late, what could I do?” While “too
late” presumably refers to the sexual assault depicted in the previous pages (the fact that the woman could not contact or access Deer Woman until the man had already attacked), paired with the image of the run-down cityscape, the phrase also brings to mind Conrad Scott’s above notion of “a sense of ongoing crisis rather than an upcoming one” (227). Unlike Superman who seems to perpetually strive to hold off an impending societal collapse, Deer Woman works to survive and thrive (and help others do so as well) through a constant state of catastrophe.

Exemplifying the comic’s complete rejection of hegemony (and understanding of the settler state’s inherent violence against Native peoples) is the panel depicting Deer Woman’s encounter with a cop. The panel seems to project Deer Woman’s own perspective as she watches a cop threaten a man lying on the ground with a conciliatory hand raised in the air; the caption reads, “Knowing that everywhere there’s light that’s kept from shining.” Within this panel, LaPensee situates a smaller image of the woman, whose hair again shields her face, as she punches the cop in the back of his head. This smaller panel, stylistically, most resembles the action featured in other comic books with a (non-graphic) depiction of a punch and the word “Wap” captioning the move. However, unlike the world that Superman inhabits, this space offers cops whose allegiance does not lie with the “hero,” and instead, the police stand as central
fixtures of the systemic violence that “keeps light from shining.” Deer Woman’s transformation only comes when the cop immediately pulls a gun on her after her attack — while the comic avoids depicting the fight in detail, we see his figure smash against the wall and his neck seemingly break as his body oddly contorts (see fig. 18). Unlike Deer Woman whose body remains entirely within her own control as it evades our probing gaze, the cop’s body appears in full, gruesome detail. The large panel below the cop’s clash with the wall displays the caption “When you sit in the darkness I have…” and the image shows the cop crumpled on the ground with a gaping (almost monstrous) mouth, eyes that resemble empty sockets, and black blood smearing the wall behind him (see fig. 18). On the one hand the “darkness” speaks to the cop’s existence in the first place — his presence brings darkness, violence, and death, and his existence alludes to a widespread system of violence intent upon killing Black and Indigenous peoples. The ugliness of this bloody mangled body, however, also seems to reflect “darkness,” as if to note that while this violence represents an act of necessary retaliation, it does not merit simplistic celebration. The fact that this violent intervention was needed in the first place speaks to the darkness that the world (white people/settler colonialism) has created and preserves. Referencing the work of Andrea Smith in her demands for Native feminisms to guide decolonial work, Renya Ramirez writes, “domestic and sexual violence within communities of color cannot be affected unless larger structures of violence, such as police brutality, attacks on Indian treaty rights and immigrants, institutional racism, and economic neo-colonialism, are confronted” (27). Here Ramirez speaks to the cop’s presence in this vignette: LaPensee intends to implicate the intersections between police brutality, misogyny, and colonialism as causes for violence against Native women. Deer Woman fights against cops just as she fights against those who inflict
violence against women, suggesting that all institutions that contribute to violence against Native women must be dismantled in order for true liberation for Native women to become attainable.
The next page of the vignette answers the phrase “When you sit in the darkness I have…” with “You become the light;” following this declaration, a subsequent panel shows Deer Woman stretch out her arms in a powerful, epic gesture as an abusive man lies awkwardly beneath her feet (see fig. 19). Her body remains powerful and strong and stretches across most of the panel; while she takes up and claims space, her back remains to us, so her actions do not exist merely for our viewing pleasure. The man’s body, however, lies in a grotesque heap, as blood sprays everywhere and his intestines spill from his stomach. I find LaPensee’s suggestion that Deer Woman’s retaliatory violence offers her a pathway to “becom[ing] the light” particularly striking; hegemonic constructions of “light” tend to fixate on “purity” and completely reject violence. This world, however, exudes darkness and violence, so “pure” light (free from violence) remains entirely elusive. One cannot preserve “innocence” within a post-apocalyptic world. While the “lightness” that emerges within Deer Woman necessarily interacts with the world’s inherent brutality, it continues to form and resist containment. Goeman seems to touch on this complicated notion of “light” when she asserts “(re)mapping is not just about gaining that which was lost and returning to an original and pure point in history, but instead understanding the processes that have defined our current spatialities in order to sustain vibrant Native futures” (3). Both Goeman and LaPensee suggest that colonial trauma can (and must) be recognized when attempting to imagine Indigenous futures. A search for “pure,” “authentic” Indigenous futures only caters to a settler gaze, so fostering “light” that acknowledges trauma but also rejects the framing of trauma as “inevitable” or all-encompassing, becomes necessary in future-building (Haladay, 145). LaPensee (through Deer Woman) fights against this kind of naturalized, expected violence: the character, through literally preventing other women from experiencing this kind of violence, and LaPensee through creating a textual space for women with shared
experiences to collectively begin to heal. Through this project, LaPensee seems to assert the importance of both recognizing apocalyptic violence and the trauma that it carries, while also looking to traditions that move and live within Native communities to heal from that trauma in imagining Native futures.

Storytelling as a mode of preservation and survival through a post-apocalyptic world is central to LaPensee’s project, but Deer Woman also channels Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird’s notion “of beautiful survival,” (30) which asserts a sense of “livingness” (King, 30). Indeed, rather than solely thinking about “survival,” Deer Woman centralizes imagining futures in which Indigenous women can thrive, better reflecting Gerald Vizenor’s conception of “survivance”: “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (vii). Deer Woman does not depict Native women whose lives are consumed only by the overwhelming struggle to survive. In creating a Native space that both asserts the powerful presences of Native stories and seeks to offer material consequences for Indigenous women, LaPensee begins to map out Native futures.
Coda:

Central to the American project is the fervent belief in “novelty” and blind futurity; American exceptionalism rests on a genocidal narrative of “linear progression” that presumes America’s unique “greatness” lies in the country’s transformation of what Frederick Jackson Turner calls “free land” into a beacon of democracy. Paula Gunn Allen in her piece *Who is Your Mother* reflects on this reigning ideology, noting “The American idea that the best and the brightest should willingly reject and repudiate their origins leads to an allied idea — that history, like everything else in the past, is of little value and should be forgotten as quickly as possible” (210). Put in conversation with Native studies, this progressivist ideology fuels and fortifies the genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples as it encourages them to forget their own traditions, epistemologies, and ceremonies and it also turns a blind eye to intergenerational trauma. As Victoria Ybanez (Navajo, Apache and Mexican) asserts in a counter to this narrative that prizes the erasure of both vibrant and violent pasts, “I believe that as indigenous women, we need to move forward, but letting go of the past is not possible. It is part of our history and etched in the ancestral and living memories that each of us carries” (214-215). To forget the past is to forget, and thus absolve, genocidal violence and also to wash away all of the traditions that Indigenous peoples have fought to keep alive for centuries. Ybanez suggests, and both Starr and LaPensee surely follow in this tradition, that in order to imagine healthy, balanced futures, the past must be acknowledged as still alive and engaging with the present.

LaPensee and Starr, as well as many of the other Indigenous thinkers and artists who appear throughout this project, reject linear notions of time that place the past within a static boundary that limits its interactions with the present and future. Rather than imagining the past, tradition, and story as static forces that must not transform or adapt for fear of losing a sense of
“authenticity,” Starr and LaPensee provide us with an always moving web of interaction across time. *Super Indian* and *Deer Woman* speak to an ideology that Hernández-Ávila discusses in “America in 1492: A Native American Woman's Perspective”: “One of the traditional teachings of most indigenous peoples is that we are one, in the present, with the past and the future. We are taught to honor all the ancestors who went before us and to remember their and our history, for the sake of future generations” (79). In tracing the complex path that Deer Woman stories have taken, through generations of women and across time and space, LaPensee indeed offers a kind of futurity that is intimately entangled with and reliant upon the past; *Super Indian’s* emphasis on intergenerational knowledge and communal care as central forces to preserving tribal sovereignty and imagining healthy, balanced futures accomplishes something similar. *Deer Woman* and *Super Indian* present superheroes whose “powers” stem from connections among peoples, bodies, land, and generations creating an “otherwise” space that honors Native pasts to imagine and build Native futures in which Indigenous women do not have to fear colonial, sexual violence. Although the texts diverge in their tones and offer slightly different portraits of collaboration across bodies, space, and time, *Super Indian* and *Deer Woman* both draw on the oral tradition (especially as it stems from intergenerational connections between/among women) to capture “a particular way of perceiving the world” (Bird and Harjo, 24) that, above all, maps out paths to Native survivance.
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