

Send to printer Close window

New Indigenous Superheroes Save the Day

Speaking tribal languages is just one superpower among heroes gracing the pages of comic books.

BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)



COURTESY OF DC COMICS

A Cree girl from a small island town in Ontario, Canada, has an elemental connection to the earth, including powers that change with the seasons. A young man from the fictional Leaning Oak Tribe obtains super-human talents after consuming tainted commodity cheese. And speaking tribal languages help ordinary military men defeat evil dictators across the globe.

These characters—Miiyahbin Marten, Hubert Logan and a handful of Code Talkers representing several tribal nations—are taking center stage in the digital and hardcopy pages of mainstream and independent comic books. While there have been problematic representations of indigenous characters within comic book history, a new crop of artists and writers are helping redefine images and stories of indigenous people in an entertainment medium loved by millions worldwide.

Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo), author of the book *Native Americans in Comics: A Critical Study*, published in 2008, says comic books and their creators have entered an era where consumers demand better representations of the people and world around them.

“There’s a sense of empowerment in the information age we live in, in all the storytelling modes Natives can take part in,” says Sheyahshe, 38, who lives in Oklahoma. “Comics themselves are not good or bad, but represent the voice of what people want or are OK with seeing. In the past, our [Native] people were written as diminutive characters and were very one-dimensional. A lot of people... were okay with these notions of us as Native people subjected to whatever stereotypes dominated the national conversation.”

Writers and comic book creators Jeff Lemire, Lee Francis IV (Laguna Pueblo), and Arigon Starr (Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma) use their Canadian, Southwest and Hollywood roots to explore and develop new characters gaining popularity across Native American and beyond.

“When I was growing up, traditionally, the only people I knew reading comics were other white dudes, young boys, really,” says Lemire, a Toronto-based freelance cartoonist and writer, who created Miiyahbin for a DC Comics series that debuted this year. “As someone who works in comics and loves them, it’s getting so much more diverse in readership, and it’s really time for the medium to grow. We can’t keep putting up the same stereotypes, because those don’t reflect the audience. The reality is the world is full of other kinds of people, so work should represent that if you’re writing any kind of story.”

EQUINOX



DC Comics tapped Lemire to write *Justice League United*, a five-issue story arc that began in April and included the introduction of Miiyahbin, a 16-year-old Cree girl from Moose Factory Island who became Equinox in the fifth issue released in August. Lemire spent nearly eight months researching the culture and traditions, as well as the contemporary issues of First Nations people from that area of the country before coming up with Equinox's look and storyline.

"I got the assignment to write *Justice League United*, and as a pretty proud Canadian, I had the idea of moving the team to Canada – a Canadian-based superhero team... to shake things up," explains Lemire. "How do you represent a country within a superhero comic? Canada is a very diverse country—region-to-region has its own personality, its own feel. It became clear early on how impossible it would be to represent a whole country in one story.

"And I started to think about First Nations people and how under-represented they are, not just in comics, but pop culture in general," Lemire continues. "It was something I didn't know a lot about. I grew up with not a lot of First Nation presence and wasn't in any contact with First Nations people, but had always wanted to learn about them. And I felt a responsibility at that point to learn and write about the first Canadians. Because if I was going to write anything about Canada I couldn't leave them out."

Born and raised in a small, rural farming community in Essex County, Lemire focused his research on the Moose Factory and Moosonee communities of Ontario where he gave presentations on comic book writing and art to elementary and high school students, who inspired the look and back story of Equinox. Lemire took the students' concerns about stereotypes—lots of leathers, feathers and fringe usually combined with a negative story about Indigenous struggles—to heart.

Equinox comes with all the trappings of a beloved superhero—cool look, shiny costume and awesome super abilities. But it's her

history and culture—the details Lemire learned about from his research trips and discussions with the people of Moose Factory and Moosonee—that provide the foundation of her powers. Even her costume is a modern take on regalia worn at traditional dances.

Nathan Cheechoo (Moose Cree First Nation) is one of the many community and cultural advisors Lemire consulted to develop the Equinox character. Cheechoo, a 28-year-old musician, artist and self-described comic book fan, was already following Lemire's work when he heard the comics writer would be presenting in his stepson's seventh grade class. From the time the two met in the classroom in the fall of 2013, they've kept in touch to bounce ideas off each other. Cheechoo says his community has responded positively to the Equinox character and story.

"Everyone is loving it," Cheechoo says. "Everyone was excited to see the youth center and the old radar base. To see our community in a big franchise, it's been a culture shock, I think. I mean, we're in the DC universe. I think that was Jeff's aim, not just to write a story, but to have people be proud of it."

Lemire said a lot of his time in Moose Factory and Moosonee was spent gathering information on how to accurately represent the First Nations community, but also showing and telling Cree youth how to create their own characters and stories.

"I grew up on a small farm. No one around me was really into the arts. I had no one telling me I could do something like this," Lemire recalls. "So I was trying to share with them my experiences and say, 'See? Real people can do this. You can do this.' Because they all have a story to tell... [I]f any of those Native kids – even just one – becomes a comic book artist someday, that will have made all this worthwhile."

Cheechoo is using the tools he learned from Lemire to create his own comic. He says he has enough material for a 24-issue story, which he describes as an indigenous *Alice In Wonderland* meets *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

"It's inspired by the stuff I grew up with, and would be in the fantasy realm incorporating my people's legends and myths, including star people and plant-based people," Cheechoo describes. "That's one way Jeff is giving back. He's helping me sort of hone this story idea."

One suggestion Cheechoo said he pitched to Lemire was to have the original five issues translated fully into the Cree language. Even if that idea doesn't materialize, Cheechoo said the Equinox character and story will have been a success because it broke through the stereotypes so often thrust upon indigenous characters and female superheroes.

"Where Jeff really succeeded was having a connection to what actually happens in our community. The little things, the details he used, like how we give each other nicknames or the high moccasins we use. Those details were fun to see," Cheechoo says. "And I thought her image had a good flow. It was graceful and not oversexualized... she wasn't busting out of anything. Those minor details some people might overlook, but are important for First Nations people."

Critics of the original five-issue arc will say Equinox didn't get a ton of exposure, but Lemire promises bigger and better things from the Cree superhero in the series' next five issues that were set at press time to begin in October. He says he is writing her storyline to endure well past this current arc.

"An interesting thing [happened] in September: All the comics [jumped] ahead five years in the future... We get to see Equinox five years from now, a time when she is *the* superhero, the leader in her character's universe and a key member of the Justice League," Lemire says. "The fun part about having those first five issues is it introduces her and sets up her powers. Once that's done I just get to write her story. Now, she's just part of the team, and has problems and powers like the other superheroes... and now people can see more of her daily life and personality."

Follow the story of Equinox, the teenage Cree superhero, of *Justice League United*, here www.dccomics.com/comics/justice-league-united-2014.

MIGHTY CODE TALKERS

What better superpower could you give someone than their own Indigenous language to save the world? That's the rhetorical question Francis and his growing collective of Native writers and artists at INC (Indigenous Narratives Collective) Comics answered this year with the publication of a series of comics portraying Code Talkers hailing from a variety of tribal communities.

Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers, Vol. 1, published in October by INC Comics, features seven fictional stories about Code Talkers not only from different tribes, but different wars. Code Talkers refer to those Native Americans who, beginning in World War I and through the Korean War, coded their traditional languages to send unbreakable military messages that would later be recognized as instrumental to the victories experienced by the Allies and United States.

Stories from the perspectives of Choctaw, Comanche, Cherokee, Kiowa, Diné, and Muscogee Creek, among others, are featured in *Vol. 1*, with hopes for a *Vol. 2* to be released in 2015, says Francis, INC Comics CEO and managing editor, who is based in Albuquerque.

"What we envisioned was being able to give a broader narrative of the Code Talker initiative, because what happens is, historically, we focus so much on just one aspect, like the Navajo Code Talkers," says Francis, 37, who also writes for INC Comics. "Ours are fictional stories; we didn't feel like it was right to take someone else's story. We're writing about characters who are inspired by, and stay respectful to real code talkers and the privacy of their families, while at same time trying to do them honor. "I mean, they used language to save the world. If that's not a super power, I don't know what is."

INC Comics formed in 2012 to publish stories about indigenous people penned by Native writers and artists. While *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers, Vol. 1*, is the company's biggest undertaking to-date, plans to publish *Pueblo Jones*, *Captain Paiute* and *Kaui (Indigenous Fairy Tales)* in the future are already underway.

The INC Comics creative team includes Theo Tso (Las Vegas Paiute and creator of *Captain Paiute*); Arigon Starr (creator of *Super Indian Comics* and the Code Talker story of Annumpa Luma); Jonathan Nelson (Diné and creator of *The Wool of Jonesy*); and Sheyahshe, who created the character Dark Owl and wrote and illustrated a story about a Caddo Code Talker in the Korean War. About a dozen other Native writers and artists are on deck to be published through INC Comics, which allows creators to keep the rights to their work. Indigenous artists interested in joining the collective should reach out to Lee on the INC Comics website.

"One of the main goals, to be sure, is Native folks are at the center of these stories. They aren't the sidekicks, not some shaman helping the hero," Lee insists. "We want to make sure we're representing in a way that is respectful, appropriate, and real, and comics is a medium where we can change a lot of the negative stereotypes that proliferate mainstream entertainment, because comics is where young people read. Native kids are searching for heroes who look like them... And here comes Captain Paiute, who screws up anyone who comes trying to hurt the rez – that's his job."

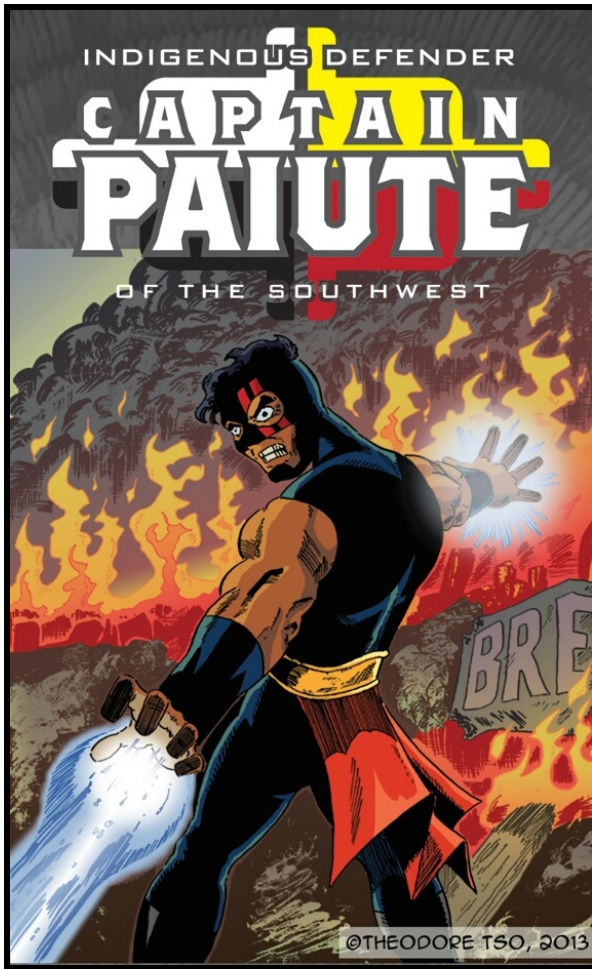
Information about *Tales of the Mighty Code Talkers, Vol. 1*, and other titles, including *Captain Paiute*, *Pueblo Jones* and *Kaui (Indigenous Fairy Tales)*, can be found at the INC Comics website, www.inccomics.com. The group also invites and encourages indigenous writers and artists to join INC Comics. Inquiries can be made on the site's Contact page.

...

SUPER INDIAN

Humor is something Starr relies heavily upon to ensure her *Super Indian* comics remains edgy, relevant, and accessible to Native and non-Native audiences alike.

The California musician, actress, writer and artist began publishing the online webcomic in 2011 with digital half-sheets about Hubert, the young Native man who gains ice and fire breath, super strength, speed, and the power flight from eating tainted



commodity cheese.

The self-taught artist who draws *Super Indian* on a Wacom tablet released a hardcopy compendium of her work in 2012, now in its fifth printing, and will release volume two yet this year. The independently published *Super Indian* features Starr's most famous comic character, although she is creating new work for INC Comics.

"I'm just blown away by how people respond to [Super Indian]," says Starr, who developed the storyline in 2007 as a 10-episode radio show for the Native Radio Theater Project and Native Voices at the Autry. "Some of the Indian humor goes right over the white people in the room, but everyone gets the references to pop culture. Indian people read the comic and say, 'Oh, this happened to me,' or, 'That describes my uncle.' That's what I love about this. It really connects people in a very G-rated, family-friendly way. I want my readers to know us [Natives] as people, to just raise the consciousness of who we are, that we're very contemporary communities and, yeah, we laugh."

The hero, Hubert, has a sidekick named Mega Bear, who has no powers except for a heart of gold. Diogi is the pair's loyal rez dog. Having also ate the tainted commodity cheese, Diogi has the power to communicate intelligently with Super Indian. Villians include Blud Kwan'Tum, a vampire BIA agent who bites full-blood Indians in order to become one himself, and Wampum Baggs, who gains power by stealing an enchanted wampum belt and wants to banish the Leaning Oak Tribe into oblivion.

"Being a woman in a male-dominated industry is always going to be tough, but being a Native woman gets you those extra patronizing tones: 'Oh, it's about Natives? Oh, is one of your characters a shaman?' No, I say, this is humor, mixed with some social commentary," Starr says. "Some of the reactions I get drive me insane, but it's important for me and other Native artists to be out there doing work, not making excuses."

A new half-page from *Super Indian Comics*, about a young man who gains powers by eating tainted commodity cheese, is published digitally every Monday at superindiancomics.com.

(Photo above courtesy of inccomics.com)

...

Taté Walker (Mniconjou Lakota) is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. She is a freelance journalist who lives in Colorado Springs. She can be reached at www.jtatwalker.com.