

Troubling Canadian Community in Brian K. Vaughn's *We Stand on Guard*  
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Thanks to the CACLALS organizers, my fellow panelists, and those of you who made it out to this panel today. As is the custom where I live, I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the traditional and unceded Treaty 7 territory of the Blackfoot, Tsuu T'ina [Soot Tenna], and the Stoney Peoples. Last year at Congress, I presented to you some preliminary thoughts on how Canadianness is coded on the page in mainstream — meaning not indie; think Marvel, not D&Q — comics designed primarily for the American market, and in particular how Indigenous bodies are used as a short-hand for Canadianness, tracing this heritage from Nelvana of the North from the WWII-era Canadian Whites comics all the way to 2014's *Justice League Unlimited* run by Canadian indie-artist-turned-big-2-superstar Jeff Lemire. Today's paper builds on that work as I continue to interrogate how Canadian identity is constructed and exploited in mainstream American media for thematic ends, and what identities are appropriated and issues elided in the process.

*We Stand on Guard* is a six-issue creator-owned comic written by Brian K. Vaughn, drawn by Steve Skroce, coloured by Matt Hollingsworth, lettered by Fonografiks and published by Image Comics from July to December of 2015. It sold very well in North America, with sales of 78,000 for the first issue and 35,000 for the last; even at its lowest sales, then, *We Stand on Guard* was in the top 75 of books sold in a month, significant for an independent series in an industry that releases between 300 and 400 individual issues each month through the central distributor, Diamond Comics Distributors. The premise the comics is an old chestnut of Canada-US relations: 200 years in the future, Canada has been invaded by the US (spoiler alert: they want our water, and they're probably going to win) and scrappy Canadian freedom fighters are fighting to take it back. Conveniently, this is the aftermath of a war that began in 2112, making all the predictable and easy War of 1812 references ripe for the picking in this context. It's a

good comic, with a thoughtful and compelling arc. But Vaughn's position as an American comics creator — best known for his award winning creator-owner series *Saga* and *Y: The Last Man* and significant works for big-2 publishers like Marvel's *Runaways*) — offers us an interesting site for questions about how Canadian community is depicted on the page, particularly in light of the limited but illuminating scholarly work that does exist on Canadian identity in the world of popular, mainstream comics. Vaughn's comic is not post-colonial or post-settler, but instead shifts Canada's colonial position from the Commonwealth — as both colonizer and colonized — to the concerns of American colonialism and power and the erasure of Canada. As we question the role of nationalist community and citizenship in a global and multicultural North America, does it matter if Canadian identity in *We Stand on Guard* never lifts above the level of stereotype?

Vaughn is careful to render his Canadian heroes perfectly multicultural in a representation of Canadian ideals and in an attack on American failings. For example, the Haitian-Quebecois character speaks almost exclusively in French (without translation), a Syrian-Canadian recounts her grandparents' emigration to Canada in reaction to their rejection by America, and the burly woodsman is grieving the loss of his dead soldier husband. In this way, Vaughn is following in the footsteps of another American-published Canadian superhero team, Alpha Flight. With its first incarnation premiering as in the X-Men in April 1979, Alpha Flight originally was created by Canadian-born comics creator John Byrne to flesh out Wolverine's backstory, but it went on to a very successful run from 1983-1994, with less successful relaunches in the late 90s, mid-2000s, and most recently in 2011. John Byrne, like Jeff Lemire and Brian K. Vaughn after him, seems to be consciously writing back against the incredibly narrow view of Canadian identity that had been constructed by the previous generations of comics artists. For example, in the Canadian Whites era, not only were all the Canadian heroes white (with the confused and troubling example of Nelvana of the North, as I discussed in this

space last year) but they were, as Bart Beaty has argued, in line with Canada's role as a "middle power" nation in that they never really did anything of consequence. (My favourite example, which I trot out every single time it's even remotely relevant, is Johnny Canuck, who once got in a room with Hitler and *punched him in the face* rather than actually impacting world events in any meaningful way.) More recent Canadian heroes kick against this by constructing a world where Canada is powerful enough for the heroes based here to be important — Alpha Flight runs often occur, for example, in a world where Canada is a superpower. Likewise, from Alpha Flight on, these superhero groups had a much stronger focus on attempting some level of representation, certainly in terms of regionalism and language if not culture and ethnicity, though there has been marked improvement there, too. It's heartening to see this kicking against the problems of the past, though the ends towards which a diverse cast is used are problematic in their own ways, as I will address shortly.

But it is the indigenous characters whose identities are most explicitly connected to rebellion in Canada. Like other American-penned comics situated in Canada, indigeneity and wilderness are used as markers for authentic Canadianness, made more explicit in this case by the lack of indigenous characters on the American side of the battle: as cities are obliterated, the landscape and land become the defining characteristics of nationhood in a fight that is ultimately over the most essential natural resource, water. Two characters are coded as Indigenous. One, known only as Mr. Pittialuk, is a Inuit man and greenhouse farmer in Nunavut who gets arrested by the Americans for allegedly sabotaging the water supply; in his words, however, he is merely "trying to provide for [his] family." The other, Highway, is one of the freedom fighters known as the Two-Four, where his Cree identity is discussed in relation to who will lead the next stage of the revolt. The discussion here is about who is more essentially Canadian: the indigenous man or the grandchild of Syrian refugees. In response to Qabanni's statement, "I'm not trying to take away from your whole First Nations experience," Highway deftly responds, "Which is something

people only say right before they're about to do just that." In both cases, the characters are portrayed in opposition to the United States and essentially connected to the Canadian landscape. There is no mention of Indigenous people south of the border and what their relationship might be to this invasion or the crisis of water shortage; indeed, indigeneity, like immigration, somehow becomes a uniquely Canadian experience within the frame of *We Stand on Guard* and becomes an unproblematically embraced component of the Canadian identity. The Americans in the narrative cannot make sense of any indignity they come into contact with. For example, the American leader can't keep the "fucked up names" of the places in the Northwest Territories straight and doesn't understand the derivation of Great Slave Lake, thinking Canadians have named themselves after their subservient cultural positioning. (It's worth noting that despite the commitment to a diverse cast of characters, the central figure and primary hero of the story is a white woman, and the final image of the series — depicting a moment of calm before the events of the war adulterate the Canadian experience — is of that protagonist's white, nuclear family.) The messaging is that, on these issues, Canada is *good* in contrast to America's *evil*, thus eliding any significant problems with Canada's history and identity.

Vaughn's Canada is idealized through its reliance on largely stereotyped constructions of Canadianness. Because the team faces a more immediate colonizing force to contend with in the shape of a full-powered American invasion, all memory of or reference to Canada's colonial past vis-à-vis the indigenous characters is effectively erased, as is any racist or homophobic history. This allows for the Canadians to be the unambiguous good guys, but it empties the Canadian community in the text of context and history; as such, it is reminiscent of 1990s "Beer Ad" nationalism typified by the Molson Canadian "I Am Canadian" ads of the late 90s and early 2000s. Of course, the most famous of these ad spots was "The Rant," a beer ad so ubiquitous and so beloved it was played at anti-separation rallies in Quebec, performed live on Parliament

Hill as part of that year's Canada Day concert, and found its way into the Penguin Treasury of Popular Poems and Songs. "The Rant" makes a lot of comforting assertions about Canada, all constructed in opposition to the United States: we're nicer, we're bilingual, we're world-respected, we're peacekeepers, we're multicultural. There is no space for critique of this definition of Canadianness in "The Rant" and, by positioning each assertion against an American other, the ad spot explicitly defines Canada as better than America.

In her book *Feeling Canadian: Television, Nationalism, and Affect*, Marusya Bociurkiv describes the affective experience of seeing "The Rant":

As I watch Joe Canadian's rant, even for the second, or fifth, or fifteenth time, I get chills down my spine. This feeling is irrational, given my ardent critiques of nationalism; it has happened before I've had a chance to understand it. It is the body, then, and not the mind, that first registers affect, marking it as pre-discursive and pre-emotional.

This is, of course, why this ad works — it operates in this pre-discursive space to make a connection that is bodily and significant. It's also a deeply comforting version of Canadian identity particularly for members of the dominant culture, and it's a version of Canada, I re-learn every term that I teach Canadian Literature, that we're all too willing to embrace as a country. This uncritical celebration of the best and most comforting aspects of identity are not surprising in a beer ad, of course, but it's worth thinking twice about the aspects of culture where we see these themes repackaged and sold back to us or, perhaps even more interesting, sold to an American audience.

In his article "The Fighting Civil Servant: Making Sense of the Canadian Superhero," Bart Beaty examines some of the tropes of Canadian-created Nationalist superheroes; what is interesting about *We Stand on Guard* is that it, where it challenges, as I've already argued, many of the problems with earlier Canadian comics, it simultaneously falls into many of the same traps that leads to the shallow identity-building in these significantly less-successful early

comics. Beaty mediates at some length on the “bizarre forms of Canadian chauvinism” that permeate these comics, and particularly the “incipient anti-Americanism, a snide reminder of Canadian superiority rooted in historical circumstance” (434). There’s no doubt that *We Stand on Guard* leans heavily on this same sense of chauvinism to construct the narrative of the plucky Canadian upstarts taking on the evil American empire. When Tommy and Amber are discovered in their hide spot in Churchill, Manitoba, Amber expresses regret at not having caught a freighter out of North America. Tommy, incredulous, asks, “And abandon the homeland?” Amber notes that “no soil is worth dying over,” to which Tommy retorts, “Only Yanks are dumb enough to die for their country. We live for it.” Repeatedly the text underscores a difference between Canadians and Americans, with the Americans mere cogs in their country’s mechanisms and the Canadians as smarter, savvier, and (ironically, given my argument) more critical. Likewise, Canada’s value as a nation of immigrants is celebrated repeatedly, particularly (and topically) in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. Qaabanni says:

Look, when my grandparents fled Syria, all they wanted was to give their kids a better life in the States. But you know how many refugees the US accepted? From one of the worst humanitarian crises of all time? A token handful. But we took in legions. I’m just saying, there’s poetic justice to letting a descendent of the very people the Americans turned away use their own tech against them.

Nevermind that when this comic was written, the Canadian commitment to the Syrian refugee crisis was minimal and unrealized (perhaps Vaughn was luckier than anyone with the turnout of last fall’s election). This version of Canadianness is pleasant to read as a Canadian reader, but it also elides a history of problems with integration and acceptance of immigrant communities and denies Canada’s own racist heritage in making decisions about who comes across our borders and when.

One of the things that is perhaps particularly attractive to Canadian readers of *We Stand on Guard* is the use of what Douglas Coupland calls the “Secret Handshakes” of Canadian identity; in his *Souvenir of Canada* series, Coupland argues that in the absence of an overarching national narrative, Canadians develop identity from the pop cultural and commercial artifacts we identify with. In *We Stand on Guard*, this takes various forms: Tim Hortons signs in the background, people reading Canadian books, CN logos dotting the landscape, an Eat-More bar playing a prominent role. In his article on Captain Canuck’s longevity, “The Many Lives of Captain Canuck: Nationalism, Culture, and the Creation of a Canadian Comic Book Superhero,” Ryan Edwardson describes mainstream comics as “a cultural arena where New York overwhelms New Brunswick, and one rarely sees a maple leaf.” He makes this point in relation to the relief comics fans feel at recognizing themselves in the pages of *Captain Canuck*, but the argument has logical consistency for *We Stand on Guard*. And the artist — Canadian Steve Skroce — is careful to include these items as Easter eggs for the reader. The experience is similar to reading the *Scott Pilgrim* series by Bryan Lee O’Malley, who employs a similar technique. As always, there is great readerly pleasure in being included in the in-group for a text.

To contrast the Canadians, the Americans must of course be depicted as the aggressors in this story. In one scene, for example, American soldiers storm the residence of an elderly couple and pistol whip them while they’re watching *The Littlest Hobo*. They refer to the leader of the Two-Four resistance group as a “Nuck Bitches” and other Canadians as “Moosefuckers.” While sales were strong on both sides of the border, and reaction (both critical and popular) largely positive, the LetterCol (comics-speak for Letters Column) showed some discomfort with placing America in the role of the villainous aggressor. As one Kentucky-based reader wrote:

This book is a liberal dream, and I suspect many progressives wouldn’t questions that America is capable of that and more. Brian, is it your contention that the US is so evil

and corrupt that they are capable of such actions? From your writings, readers can tell you are a liberal [...] But the US is portrayed as a nation who murders civilians in a surprise attack on an ally. Then we occupy that ally with major military force to subjugate, not liberate. Brian, our enemies do that, not us.

This letter is a stark reminder that the kind of hoo-rah national mythology building I'm critiquing from Canada's perspective in *We Stand on Guard* is what the vast majority of superhero comics culture is about from the perspective of the US, where heroes are on the side of the American people above all else. So the very discomfort that I'm suggesting Canadians should be pushed to feel and do not in this comics series is what some American readers, depending on political stripe, were experiencing in reading *We Stand on Guard*. The comment sections for reviews of this comic on-line — though it generally reviews well, receiving for example a 7.7/10 on review juggernaut IGN — suggests the frustration many American readers feel with the depiction of their country in this series (and the latent anxiety about national identity on both sides of the border).

The end of the comic is interesting, particularly in terms of fan reaction. At the end of the comic, the key inquisitor — who makes horrific use of torture and is known as The American — claims that it was Canada who struck first in this war, and claims she knows it because she is Canadian by birth; from Ottawa, just like the comic's protagonist. Her parents, we're told, left Canada because it was too isolationist. Many American readers and reviewers seem to have accepted this as a truth and have as a result celebrated the comic's use of ambiguity, suggesting this is a clever way of suggesting there are no right answers possible, no heroes in wartime. But there are hints throughout the series that The American is lying in this scene. She can't pronounce Regina, she doesn't know that "hydro" is used to mean power, and her assertions about Canadian isolationism fit the American narrative of the war but not what we have seen as readers up to this point. Where Canadian readers spend a lot of time commenting



on The American's status — eg. could she really be Canadian with all these buried “tells” in the narrative? — this ambiguity in the central villain is not carefully enough articulated to connect with all readers. Not only does this suggest the significance of the differences between the readership and reactions, but it underscores the self-perceptions of each country: Canadians largely reject the very idea that The American could be Canadian, where Americans are largely received to not remain the villain of the narrative.

Vaughn plays with the idea of American and Canadian comics heritage by exploring a bit of comics history with reference to Superman, a character who we all probably know fights for “truth, justice, and the American Way.” There is a deep mythology in Canadian comics history, largely the fault of historian-come-comics-booster John Bell, that Superman is a Canadian creation. The truth is that Superman co-creator Joe Shuster was born in Canada, but his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio when he was 10 and he never again lived in Canada. While it's true that Shuster suggested the name Daily Star based on the Toronto Daily Star, for whom he had been a paperboy, and modelled the early cityscapes of Metropolis on his memories of Toronto, to call it a Canadian comic is a significant stretch considering its larger publication history. Nevertheless, Canada Post has issued a stamp in commemoration of the role of Superman in Canadian comics history, one of the major Canadian comics awards is named for Joe Shuster, and you've probably seen the heritage moment (that, PS, never, ever happened in real life). This has been a useful anchor for an otherwise largely unknown history of Canadian comics, but any argument of Superman being thematically Canadian seems misguided given that the alien narrative is probably more connected to both Shuster and co-creator Jerry Siegel being the children of Jewish immigrants to North America. But Vaughn makes use of this narrative to further de-centre the typical comics narrative by asserting Superman's Canadianness. In this way, Vaughn's story is challenging American cultural hegemony — my criticism, however, is that he does it by giving the Canadian comics reader a far too easy ride.

As I wrap up my observations on this comic, I think we need to think about here is whether or not any of this matters — after all, it's just a comic, right? There's a good bit of fun for Canadian readers here and, as Edwardson suggests, there's a worthwhile reason for readers to want to see the nation reflected on the page. Likewise, there is some utility in de-centring the American reader as the default audience for mainstream North American comics. But I think it's always worth interrogating our national mythologies and the power media plays in reasserting them. An Environics poll released around the same time as the first issue of *We Stand on Guard*, for example, shows that while only 38% of Canadians believe that immigration levels are too high, but 75% believe ethnic groups should be more effectively assimilated and only 47% acknowledge the presence of any systemic racism in Canada. While media like Molson Canadian's "The Rant" and the easy multiculturalism in a comic like *We Stand on Guard* certainly underscores the positive feelings most Canadians have about the idea of Canadian multiculturalism, it perhaps contributes to a mythology that elides the racism and other societal problems that need desperately to be addressed. When we frame ourselves as *less bad* than our neighbours to the south — the chauvinism Bart Beaty points out in his study of Canadian superheroes and the very trope *We Stand on Guard* relies on to construct its villains — we risk resting on imagined laurels and not pursuing social progress.

In the end, what I find so interesting about this comic is Vaughn's willingness to challenge some of the worst parts of the Canadian comics canon, with which he shows clear familiarity in the LetterCols — the lack of diversity, the lack of cultural agency — while at the same time underscoring the same chauvinism that makes those early comics seem so very provincial in tone and scope. To what extent, I am left wondering, do Canadian audiences demand this particular version of Canadian identity in order to be satisfied with what they see on the page? I don't have an answer to that, but the recurrence of it over and over in the depictions of Canada in mainstream comics leaves much to be interrogated.