

OFF THE BEATEN WARPATH: NATIVE REPRESENTATION AND THEMES IN CHRIS

CLAREMONT'S *X-MEN*

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OFF THE BEATEN WARPATH: NATIVE REPRESENTATION AND
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ABSTRACT

“Off the Beaten Warpath”: Native Representation and Themes in Chris Claremont’s *X-Men* Chris Claremont, the long-time writer on several *X-Men* titles, used the opportunity to develop his own cast of original and highly diverse characters. Several of these new characters either were of Native heritage or became Native through the course of the narrative, and he created one of the first storylines focusing on Native themes, *The Demon Bear Saga*. The British-born Claremont uses Native themes throughout his tenure on the *X-Men* titles, sometimes adhering to, but often defying the conventions associated with Native American literature. Although not without some problematic elements, by presenting Native characters and themes in a complex, well-developed manner, Claremont’s work is one of the first mainstream comic book titles to subvert stereotypical depictions of Native Americans. Claremont’s *X-Men* provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of Native themes when presented by a non-native author.

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of Native peoples in superhero comic books has often been constructed using reductive tropes that stereotyped Native characters and cultural associations as being only capable of performing certain functions or roles. Native characters were often portrayed as being mystical Shamans, trackers, angry veterans, or a combination of all three. Their appearance, personalities, powers (if they had powers), and abilities adhere to Native stereotypes. These characters often serve subservient roles to the more traditional white male characters that were prevalent in superhero comic books.

In the May 2019 issue of *PMLA*, Hillary Chute closes the responses to her work *Why Comics?* with the essay “Drawing Is a Way of Thinking”. Chute sets forth the importance of Comics Studies with its “wide range and thrilling quality of work and its ability to seize the attention of readers, students, and fans of all ages” (635). In a personal interview, Chute also said that there is a lack of scholarship focused on superhero comic books (Chute, 2019). This lack of scholarship is ironic, as superhero comic books are most often the genre associated with the medium of comic books, and it is this absence that I seek to help fill by focusing on one of the longest running and enduringly popular superhero comic book series of all time.

Beginning in 1975 and continuing until 1991, Chris Claremont’s initial run as the writer of *Uncanny X-Men* featured several characters that Claremont either created or developed who were of Native heritage. These characters, John and James Proudstar, Forge, Scalphunter and Harpoon subverted several of the tropes associated with Native superheroes, with varying degrees of awareness that demonstrated a better understanding and respect for Native culture than several of their contemporaries, and all of them manage to subvert the worst of the tropes associated with Native characters. Their powers, appearance, motivations, personalities, and

roles they occupied ranged beyond the traditional Native tropes, making them more aware and culturally sensitive representations than the other mainstream superhero comic book representations.

Debuting in 1982 as a spin-off title to the massively successful *Uncanny X-Men*, *The New Mutants* gave then-writer Chris Claremont the opportunity to develop his own cast of original and highly diverse characters. Several of these new characters either were of Native heritage or became Native through the course of the narrative, and one of the first major storylines, *The Demon Bear Saga*, involved a Native spirit. I argue that the character Dani Moonstar best represents Claremont's ability to present a Native character who is richly complex and defies most of the tropes associated with Native characters. The British-born Claremont uses Native themes throughout *The Demon Bear Saga* and his representation of Dani Moonstar, sometimes adhering to, but often defying the conventions associated with, Native literature. Although not without some problematic elements, Claremont presents Native characters and themes in a more culturally aware manner that exhibits a better understanding of Native culture. Claremont's work in *The Uncanny X-Men* and *The New Mutants* are two of the first mainstream comic book titles to subvert stereotypical depictions of Native Americans. This subversion provides Natives with mainstream superhero characters that better reflect their culture and gives the wider audience less stereotypical depictions of Native characters, helping them develop an awareness of the complexities of Native culture. The early issues of *The New Mutants* alongside Claremont's *Uncanny X-Men* provide a unique opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of Native themes when presented by a non-Native author, and provide a roadmap for future writers to build their own culturally aware Native characters.

SIGNIFICANCE

Studying the Understudied

In their chapter “Historical and Cultural Contexts to Native American Literature,” Joy Porter argues that although Native cultures had been writing in English since the late eighteenth century, Native literature did not find a place in literary canons until the 1970’s (Porter 9). The Civil Rights Movement helped develop an interest in Native literature, and, as Kenneth M. Roemer says in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2010), “in 1969 academics specializing in Native literatures were practically non-existent” (Roemer 1), and although there has been “a dramatic increase in the visibility of Native American Literature (Roemer 1), the field is still relatively new. This is not to suggest that a “substantial body of criticism worthy of recognition” (Roemer 1) has not developed in the short time since it began to be formally recognized, but even with the increased visibility, there are gaps in the research of this understudied body of literature.

Similarly, in his textbook *Comics Studies Here and Now* (2018), Frederick Aldama provides a look at the brief history of comic books in academia. Aldama notes “within academia’s hallowed halls, the study of comics is a rather recent phenomenon” (Aldama 1). Although comic books have been around since the turn of the 19th century, “it is only in the twenty-first century that we begin to see dissertations and theses published more en masse” (Aldama 1). As it has been a short time since comic books have been recognized as being worthy of scholarly review, there will also be gaps in the research. Native literature represents the voice of underrepresented people whereas comic books are a medium of storytelling, so the comparison is not completely successful, but they are both “new” entries in the field of literature studies, which speaks to there being gaps in the research, especially when looking at the intersection of both fields.

The importance of analyzing the intersection between Native literature and comic books comes out of comic books' ability to give voice to a different form of storytelling. In her article,

“Future Pasts: Comics, Graphic Novels, and Digital Media” (2016), Susan Bernardin notes this ability: “in refusing rigid boundaries between literary and visual arts, they also re-animate relationships with visual and sequential storytelling practices that stretch back millennia” (Bernardin 480). Comic books allow Native writers (to include writers using Native themes) the ability to tell stories outside the strict boundaries of the English language, a language that was forced upon Native people by their colonizers.

FRAMEWORK

Terms

In order to properly frame my argument, working definitions of key terms are required. These definitions are by no means an attempt to provide a conclusive explanation for the terms used, but are instead an attempt on my part to reduce any ambiguity in the argument presented. This is especially true in the case of the first term I will be defining: “Native American.”

According to Deborah Madsen in their introduction to *The Routledge Companion To Native American Literature* (2005), there are several terms “used to describe people who inherit, by descent from the first inhabitants, claims to the territory now known as the United States of America” (Madsen 2). I’ve chosen the term Native American because of “its inclusivity, encompassing all tribal groups within the United States and Alaska” (Madsen 2).

Although “Native peoples often self-identify according to tribe” (Madsen 2), designating themselves as Cheyenne or Apache for example, I will be using the term Native American because, while it is less specific, it speaks to the characters and themes presented in my argument as not exemplifying one particular tribe, but instead serving as broad characterizations and representations of Native American themes. The characters presented here are better seen as representing “Native-ness” in a broad sense, rather than being meant to represent the specifics of one certain tribe over the other. Because of the often limited ways in which Native characters are portrayed in superhero comic books, this broad level of representation is still more culturally aware than is typical in the genre.

Another phrase I will be using throughout the argument, “Native American themes,” will be used to indicate the common themes used in what David Treuer’s work, *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual* (2006), refers to as “points of comparison” found in many Native

American novels (Treuer 182) and the tropes codified by both the page “Native Americans Tropes” (TVTropes.org), a website dedicated to cataloging and analyzing themes or tropes found in popular fiction (2020), and Michael Sheyahshe’s *Native Americans in Comic Books: a Critical Study* (2016), as typically being used in fictional depictions of Native Americans. Treuer’s “points of comparison,” that the works have characters who have been orphaned, that those orphans are usually raised by a grandparent or someone from an older generation who can teach them their culture, that the “generation skipping” that results from being orphans “is linked, thematically, to the central characters’ relationship with and distance from the community, culture, and tribe,” and that “the absence of parents makes literal, and immediately compelling, the search for connection” (Treuer 183). There is usually a spiritual character, or one closely tied in to the beliefs and customs of a tribe, and that character lives separate from the central location of the novel, there is a clear division between urban and natural landscapes, none of the main characters speak their tribal language, and there is usually “an ending that is hopeful if not happy,” “a mixture of relief, hope, and pain that, when it’s all over, resolves into satisfaction with survival and continuance, if not happiness” (Treuer 184). Treuer is quick to point out that not all novels featuring Native Americans have these points, but they reoccur often enough to warrant attention.

Lucy A. Ganje, in their chapter “Native American Stereotypes” appearing in *Images that Injure, Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media* (2003), argues that Native characters also exhibit a similar set of personality traits. They vary between the Bloodthirsty Savage character and the Noble Savage character (Ganje 110). The Noble Savage is a character who existed to show the more modern characters the simple wisdom of living closer to the land, a stoic, unchangeable monolith whose existence was rooted almost completely in the past. This inability to let fictional

Native characters grow past the trauma of their real-world counterparts is represented in other forms of fiction as well, and is a problem closely associated with the ongoing nature of colonialization. The Bloodthirsty Savage character, another holdover from colonial representation of Native Americans, is a fictional character that also cannot escape the past of their real-world ancestry. They are angry at the world, fiercely defiant of the colonizers influence, while simultaneously conforming to the colonizers impression of them (Ganje 109)

TVtropes.org, a website that provides definitions and examples of common tropes used in fiction, is one of the largest online resources for dissecting the use of tropes in fiction. The site focuses on popular culture and includes a section dedicated to tropes found in superhero comic books. The page “Native Americans Tropes” defines Native American tropes as “tropes associated with Native Americans,” although the page description reads “Native Americans have been a popular subject in many cowboy stories, westerns, and other stories of the history of the United States. Ever since the Wild West died out, they mostly disappeared out of popular culture” (TVTropes.org). This framing of Native Americans as belonging to the past, as being a culture incapable of change or of creating new stories not rooted in the popular depictions of their past, is a theme that reoccurs in numerous depictions of Native Americans (Sheyahshe 3). This characterization can be demonstrated by several examples of the tropes listed on the page: “Magical Native American” (wherein a character has magical abilities that are directly tied in to his Native heritage), “Injun Country,” “Noble Savage,” “Peace Pipe,” “The Savage Indian” and “Tonto Talk,” all of which harken back to a bygone era and past representations. Both “Braids, Beads and Buckskins” and “Magical Native American” feature elements of appearance and abilities that are codified as Native that are frequently used in superhero comic books as well. (TVTropes.org)

Because superhero comic books usually involve characters with superpowers, there is another unfortunate tendency to give Native characters a narrow range of superpowers to go along with the similar personality traits they often share. Native Americans in superhero comic books usually have a specific set of powers and abilities, almost always having to do with their Native heritage. Their powers are usually physical, possibly due to the (primarily white) authors' associating Native characters with the warrior-type character, as demonstrated under the trope "The Savage Indian" (TVTropes.org). They are physically stronger, more durable, more dexterous, or a combination of all three. Enhanced senses, possibly tied in to some kind of animal totem, are also prominent. The combination of these elements creates a character who is predetermined to be a warrior due to their physical abilities, reinforcing the idea of Natives as having been warriors, the past tense reflecting their continued relegation to the past.

In addition to those powers, the Native characters could usually be counted on to have some sort of spiritual connection, almost always referring to some higher spirit, typically leading to the character having some sort of mystical abilities, usually on top of their physical powers. This reinforces the idea that Natives are somehow closer to a higher power due to their "simpler" (or "less advanced") lifestyle that comic books portray Natives. The characters can almost always track over any terrain, regardless of their upbringing, which is a direct reflection of the prevailing depictions of Native characters in earlier works. The Native American was usually portrayed as being more in tune with nature than his or her (but usually his) non-Native teammates or colleagues (Sheyahshe 55). In *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study*, Michael Sheyahshe has an entire chapter on Indigenous trackers, and then another on Indigenous Shamans. Even a Native character whose power has nothing to do with their Native identity, Forge, a character created by Claremont who will be explored in more depth later, has the power

to build any machine, also has Shamanic abilities. It is almost surprising that somehow these super-strong magical paragons of being one with nature aren't more prominently featured in stories, but they almost always exist as sidekicks or guides for the other, primarily white, characters.

My argument that Claremont's depictions of Native Americans are more culturally aware and representative of more complex Native themes depends on comparing these depictions to other depictions within the same genre. While choosing a metric by which to judge the cultural awareness of fictional characters and themes, I have decided to rely primarily on how a work answers the questions posed by Raymond William Stedman in *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture* (1982):

Stereotypes in American Culture (1982):

Is the descriptive language debasing towards Native American culture? Do the Indigenous people talk like Tonto? Do they appear to be one pan-Indian tribe? Are there attempts at humor that stem from the notion of stupid or drunk Indians? Are they portrayed solely as an historical or extinct people? Are Indigenous people portrayed as either noble or savage? Is the overall attitude condescending towards Native Americans? Is there a sense of humanity within the Indigenous characters?
(Stedman 240)

My reasoning behind choosing these questions as part of the metric for success is because several of these questions highlights an area of concern that was brought up by another author. The question of a sense of humanity is at the core of this argument, as Claremont's characters *feel* more human, more real, than the typical depictions of Native characters. This humanity can be difficult to define, but by asking how these characters answer the questions posed by Stedman leads to a better understanding of how that humanity is represented. The issue of language is also

addressed by Treuer in his “points of comparison,” the idea that Native Americans are either noble or savage is addressed by Lucy A. Ganje, in their chapter “Native American Stereotypes” appearing in *Images that Injure, Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media* (2003), and Native Americans being depicted as being relegated to the past is brought up by Porter as well. Similarly, the more negative stereotypes associated with Native Americans and their powers and abilities can nearly all be found in both TVtropes.org and Sheyahshe’s *Native Americans in Comic Books*.

When referring to traits that speak to Native American themes, I will distinguish between which source I am using, whether it be Ganje, Stedman, Treuer, TVtropes.org, Sheyahshe, or any combination of the five. My goal in using the collective “Native American themes” is to reduce the differentiation between Native American themes as they are portrayed in novels, tv shows, movies, or, especially, in comic books.

The final term that requires definition is “comic book”. My argument is that Chris Claremont’s Native American characters as being more sensitive to cultural themes than other Native American characters in comic books in that they defy the stereotypical depictions associated with Native Americans. Although “comic books” is often synonymous with “superhero comic books,” comic books as a medium has as many genres as can be found in any type of literature. Having said that, it is not my goal to speak to the whole of the comic book medium, nor is that something I am capable of. Instead, when I say “comic book,” I am referring to superhero comic books, specifically those published by Marvel Comics or DC Comics, the two largest comic book publishers in the world. When using examples from outside of superhero comic books, like the early Western pulp comic books, I will differentiate between the two. Also, any examples I use from outside the medium of comic books, such as Apache Chief from the

cartoon *The Super Friends*, will fall under the “superhero” genre, and the medium those examples appear in will be noted. As comic books are an inherently visual medium, I will also include images of the characters and storylines discussed in order to make the concepts clear to the reader.

Finally, a note about citation. Although Chris Claremont is the primary writer of the issues being discussed, this is by no means an attempt to diminish the contributions of the artists (to include the pencilers, inkers, colorists, and letterers) and editors involved in the creation of these comic books. Claremont is, however, the sole consistent creator of the comic books being analyzed, and, due to the unique nature of his tenure on the books, his influence cannot be overstated. Because of this, and for the sake of simplicity, these comic books will be referred to as being “by” Claremont. Also, due to the monthly publication schedule of comic books, instead of citing collections or trade paperbacks, I will be citing specific issue numbers in order to be as clear as possible on where each citation comes from. As Claremont is the writer of each of those issues, in-text citations will be in this format: (*Uncanny X-Men #101*).

Historical Context – Real Life

In order to properly analyze Native literature, which Claremont has contributed to by using Native themes and characters, it is important to acknowledge the historical context that informs the real world Native American culture. As Joy Porter states in their chapter “Historical and Cultural Context to Native American Literature,” “Indians, after all, are not just fictional, they are real” (Porter 19). This section will provide a brief outline of Native American history. It is by no means meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but is instead meant as a means to develop a baseline of knowledge from which the conversation can begin.

Although the origins of Native Americans before first coming into contact with European colonizers is widely debated (Porter 41), what is not debated is that Native Americans were already living in North America when it was “discovered” by Western Europeans (Porter 41). Porter explains “the distant past is imagined within the United States, Indians belong there since Indian peoples had formed a close relationship with the spirit of the land long before first contact” (Porter 41). Native American oral traditions were their primary method of storytelling, and there were an estimated five hundred different languages spoken (Porter 44). Columbus, upon his arrival in 1492, concluded that as the Native Americans did not speak his language, they had no concept of language at all (Porter 41). Columbus “went onto progressively rename and recontextualize the islands he encountered so as to mark non-Indian possession of them, and to rename all the indigenous peoples of the Americas with one single collective descriptor, Indian” (Porter 41).

Columbus “ignored the indigenous rights to indigenous lands” (Porter 45), a doctrine which was later upheld by The United States in a 1823 Supreme Court case (Porter 45). The colonizing powers of the time, Spain, France, and England, began a process wherein each Native American society they encountered were deemed “Indians,” reducing and essentializing a large, culturally vibrant group into one large category (Porter 45). During this period, the stereotypical depictions of Native Americans as either “Noble Savages” or “Bloodthirsty Savages” became prevalent (Ganje 110). “The colonial exploits of Spain, France, England...cause massive demographic and ecological change and exchange within Indian homelands” (Porter), and although there was continuous military, political, and religious resistance, the Native Americans eventually found that “the most successful Indian strategy for resisting Anglo-American conquest was the move to further settle the relatively isolated Great Plains region of the North

American heartland” (Porter 49). This era, beginning around 1700, resulted in the most common Native American stereotypes, those found in depictions of the fictional “Wild West,” depictions which can still be found in comic books today (Sheyahshe 10).

After the American Revolution in 1776, the new Americans “created a national mythology that consigned Indians to a ‘savage’ past” (Porter 50). A long history of treaties signed between Native Americans and the United States began, with at least 367 such treaties existing. A complex and brutal combination of renegotiated treaties, violated treaties (Porter 50), and “ethnic cleansing” (Porter 50) culminated in the passage of the Indian Removal Bill in 1830, which included the forced relocation of Native Americans to what is now Oklahoma (Porter 51). Eventually known as the “Trail of Tears,” this forced relocation “reduced the tribal population by 25 percent” (Porter 51). Other groups of Native Americans found themselves being relocated to federal Reservations as well (Porter 52).

With the military power of Native Americans largely destroyed, “the United States set about attacking Indian tribalism and Indian values at their core” (Porter 51). “Reservation education for about two decades was dominated by the thinking of one army captain, Richard H. Pratt, whose motto was “Kill the Indian and save the man!”” (Porter 52). This thinking led to the development of “Indian schools,” schools designed to assimilate Native Americans into a culture that would never truly allow them to assimilate, as they would never be seen as equals (Porter 52).

After the Dawes Act of 1887, Native American land was largely under the control of the federal government (Porter 53). This inability to self-govern or “practice their traditional modes of economic, social, and religious life,” Native Americans eventually attempted an insurrection which ended in the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee Creek where 150 Native Americans were

killed (Porter 54). After the events at Wounded Knee, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner said that the American frontier was “closed,” and the idea that Native Americans had “vanished” began to solidify (Porter 54). “Fascination with frontier conflict and with a dime novel and movie version of the West that never existed, rather than with actual Indian cultural adaptation and development, would characterize American life until at least the middle of the next century” (Porter 54). Native Americans were seen as a relic of the past as opposed to a going concern.

Today, the Native American population is on the rise, with the majority of them living in urban areas away from Reservations (Porter 40). There are still several issues that Native Americans face. In 1999, 31 percent of all Native Americans lived below the poverty line (Porter 39), and according to the 2002 census, “the lowest US median household income of all was at Buffalo County, South Dakota, home of the Crow Creek Indian Reservation” (Porter 39). “The larger context for Indian urban and reservation life remains one of endemic disadvantage rooted firmly in the history of colonialism” (Porter 39). Despite this, Native Americans have a rich culture and history, replete with rich storytelling and vibrant humor (Sheyhshe 10). It is their rich storytelling that makes it so important to have the sensitive, aware representations of Native characters that Claremont provides. By relegating Native characters to the past, by limiting them by the powers they are “allowed” to have and the skills they are assumed to possess, the perceptions of Native people as being defined by the tragedies of their history and the depictions of the past are continually reinforced. This further victimization is a disservice to a culture that has continually shown an appreciation for the power of storytelling.

Historical Context – Fictional Representations

Native representation in superhero comic books being problematic can be traced back to the precursor of superhero comic books, the dime-store novels (Sheyahshe 9). Frontier stories featuring cowboys and their Native antagonists normalized the colonizers behavior and perspective, and Native characters were continually the others.

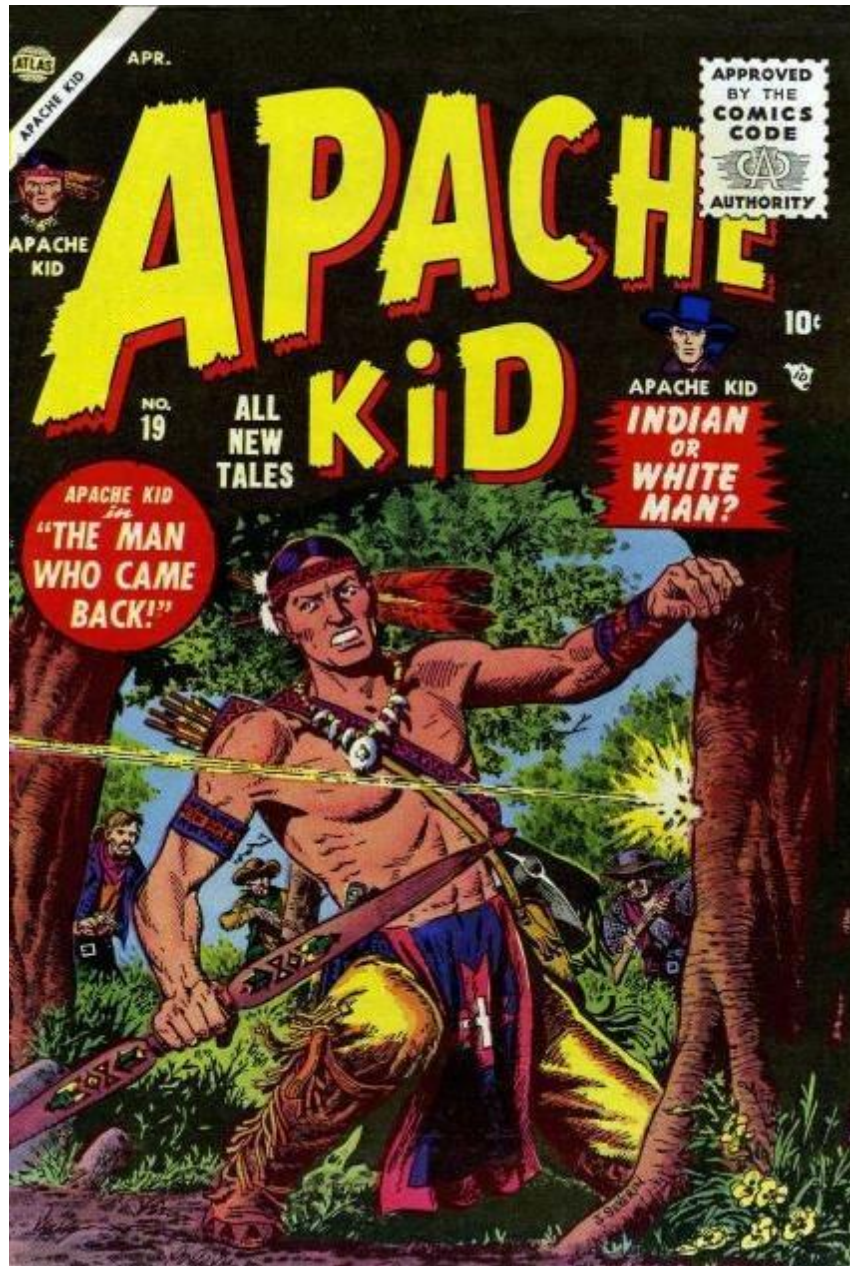


Fig. 1. Apache Kid.

In Figure 1 (above), the cover asks the question “Indian or White Man?,” defining the character by his inability to fit in either world, reinforcing the idea that the two operate as a binary. Someone is either one or the other, and the two cultures are forever separate. Even after the advent of the superhero comic book (generally considered to be Superman in *Action Comics* #1), Native characters were not well represented. “I think it’s safe to say that up until the 1960’s,

the primary function of non-white peoples in comic books was to play stereotypical, formulaic roles” (Sheyahshe 10), these roles, the racial threat, the childlike dupe, or the sidekick, persisted far longer than they did in most other mediums such as traditional literature, television, or movies. Comic books, specifically superhero comic books, deal with extremely overt and obvious themes, usually relying on tropes in order to tell a cohesive story over the course of several months or even years to an audience that, at the time before trade paperbacks became prevalent, had to try and catch up each time a new issue came out. This kind of trope-reliance often led to stereotyping any non-white male voices by the predominantly white male writers. Black representation in superhero comic books didn’t become relevant until nearly a decade after The Civil Rights Movement, and gay characters weren’t allowed to appear in Marvel Comics due to an editorial mandate that was still in effect until the late 80’s, a practice that Claremont subverted on several occasions, most notably with the characters Mystique and Destiny, who were written as being in a queer relationship. Native American representation, with its stereotypical characterization deeply ingrained in American genre fiction, has proven to be a difficult set of tropes to avoid or subvert, a problem that becomes more and more ingrained the longer it is allowed to persist. One of those stereotypes, the powers that superpowered Native characters receive, has been particularly persistent, and is deeply rooted in the perception of Natives belonging to the past. Natives as being warriors is a call-back to their earliest depictions in comic books, when Native characters were expert warriors and trackers who served subservient roles to other characters.

Besides powers and abilities, Native characters also exhibit a similar set of personality traits. They vary between the Bloodthirsty Savage character and the Noble Savage character (Ganje 110). The Noble Savage is a character who existed to show the more modern characters

the simple wisdom of living closer to the land, a stoic, unchangeable monolith whose existence was rooted almost completely in the past. This inability to let fictional Native characters grow past the trauma of their real-world counterparts is represented in other forms of fiction as well, and is a problem closely associated with the ongoing nature of colonialization. The Bloodthirsty Savage character, another holdover from colonialization representation of Native Americans, is a fictional character that also cannot escape the past of its real-world ancestry. They are angry at the world, fiercely defiant of the colonizers influence, while simultaneously conforming to the colonizers impression of them (Ganje 110).

There are several examples of Native Americans in superhero comics. A search for the most popular Native superheroes brings up a list of eight on *Ranker.com*, a website devoted to ranking different items in a specific category (Fernandes 2020). Three of the eight most popular Native characters (Forge, Warpath, and Moonstar) were created by Claremont (Fernandez 2020). Warpath, Shaman, American Eagle, the previously mentioned Forge, Turok, Dawnstar, Apache Chief, and Moonstar all have some variations of the powers or abilities mentioned above. Shaman is, not surprisingly, a shaman. Turok has no powers but uses his hunting and tracking abilities to hunt dinosaurs. American Eagle and Warpath both have enhanced senses and are expert trackers, and Dawnstar, who is such a good tracker that she can follow people through the vacuum of space. Moonstar is not spared this typical representation either with her ability to speak to animals.



Fig. 2. Apache Chief.

Apache Chief (pictured above in figure 2), who has the ability to grow to superhuman height and is also a tracker, is also an excellent example of how Native characters are typically portrayed. The character has the ability to grow to enormous size, but is still dressed in a stereotypical manner in order to represent his Native heritage with his headband and buckskin vest.. The character is given little in the way of personality outside of his “Native-ness,” and his cultural heritage takes the place of actual personality traits.

CLAREMONT AND THE X-MEN

Chris Claremont began his run as the writer of *X-Men* (later retitled *Uncanny X-Men*) in 1975, and would continue as the writer until 1991. During that time period he would also create and write the spin-off title *The New Mutants* from 1982 until 1987 (*The New Mutants* #54). During this time, *The Uncanny X-Men* was one of the highest selling comic books, and Claremont would be inducted into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame for his work in 2015. This success, combined with his unprecedented run as writer of these titles, a run that has only been surpassed by only a few creators (Dave Sim and Erik Larsen, for example), gave Claremont the opportunity to be extremely protective and territorial with the characters he was writing, according to *Jay and Miles X-Plain the X-Men*, a podcast devoted to reading every issue of *X-Men* and related titles in order to better explain the increasingly complex continuity surrounding the characters. Because of his long tenure on the book, Claremont was able to develop the characters more thoroughly than most creators working on a company-owned comic book, as opposed to an independent book (like the ones Sim and Larsen worked on). An earlier example of this is when he gave the character Magneto the backstory of being a Holocaust survivor, a development that gave the character some much needed depth and pathos, and a development that was allowed to influence the character because Claremont stayed on the title for so long, making it an important aspect of Magneto. The unique nature of Claremont's work on the books may be part of the reason why his use of Native American themes and characters is more successful than many other attempts. Other creators may have tried to develop more sensitive portrayals of Natives, but those efforts may have been ignored by the creators who came after them.

Positioning Claremont as a Writer of Native Fiction

By arguing that Claremont has written sensitive, aware depictions of Native characters and themes, I am not attempting to claim that the British born Claremont speaks for Native Americans. I do, however, argue that he is an author who writes Native American characters and uses Native American themes, and that makes the work worthy of analysis through the lens of Native American literature, precisely because of his emerging self-awareness of much-needed layering of deeper, culturally expressive (non-reductive) personality traits or powers and storylines of Native characters. In David Treuer's work *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, he argues that just because a work was written by a non-Native author does not mean it shouldn't be considered Native literature. To do so would mean engaging in "an endless and agonizing game of identity politics and strivings for personal, authorial authenticity" (Treuer 186). By only defining Native American literature as literature written by a "real" Native American (the definition of "real" depending almost entirely on the point of view of the reader), there is a risk that quality literature will go unnoticed in favor of works of lesser quality that are considered more culturally authentic by a wider audience, an audience that primarily seeks voices that affirm their already held beliefs about Native Americans. Although Treuer describes certain similarities between several works of Native American literature, similarities that have been outlined above, he argues that those characteristics do not define a Native American work, and neither should heritage. Claremont's heritage is not the important thing to focus on, it is the sensitivity of his portrayals and the humanity with which he imbues his Native characters that is worth analyzing.

SOMETHING NEW, SOMETHING DIFFERENT

John Proudstar

Originally appearing in *Giant-Size X-Men #1* (1975), John Proudstar (superhero codename Thunderbird), was created by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum, but it was under Chris Claremont that the character received the most development, if however briefly. It is important to contrast John Proudstar's initial appearance and characterization with his later characterization under Claremont in order to demonstrate the more complex themes that are introduced by Claremont. The character was created as part of a new line-up of *X-Men* characters, and was recruited on to the team by the founder of the X-Men, Charles Xavier.



Fig. 3. John Proudstar's first appearance.

In his initial appearance, a portion of which is pictured above in Figure 3, John Proudstar demonstrates several of the tropes typically associated with Native characters. His personality

closely matches the definition of “The Bloodthirsty Savage” (Ganje 110). Proudstar’s immediate reaction to Xavier, as shown above, is to call him both “white-eyes” and “Custer”. He demonstrates his anger at the world, a fierce defiance of the colonizers influence, and simultaneously conforms to the colonizers impression of him when he allows himself to be goaded into joining the team. This is also similar to the trope identified under the TV Trope “The Savage Indian,” which says that Natives were sometimes portrayed in fiction as “a bloodthirsty man or woman who only wishes to kill and hunt trophies” (TVTropes.org).



Fig. 4. John Proudstar.

John Proudstar’s appearance, a closer look at which is pictured above in Figure 4, contains several aspects of the “Braids, Beads and Buckskins” trope (TVTropes.org). The headband, fringed sleeves and boots, and “thunderbird” pattern are all meant to evoke his heritage. They add nothing about the character as an individual, although the lack of full sleeves is usually meant to highlight super strength. Otherwise, there is nothing about this costume that would feel out of place on any generic Native character.

Proudstar's abilities also closely uphold the tropes associated with Native superhero characters. He is superhumanly strong and durable, although not as strong or durable as Colossus, another X-Man introduced in the same issue. Proudstar has enhanced agility and dexterity, although he is not as agile as Nightcrawler, who was also introduced in *Giant-Sized X-Men* #1, and he has enhanced sense, making him an excellent tracker (although not as good of a tracker as Wolverine). Proudstar's powers and abilities become problematic on two levels. First, they perfectly conform to the tropes most often associated with Native superhero characters. Second, although he is a superpowered individual, none of his abilities are unique on the team, or even that impressive, when compared to those of his teammates. Proudstar did manage to avoid the "pan-Indian" stereotype, because he was explicitly identified as being Apache, as opposed to just being broadly Native.



Fig. 5. John Proudstar's death.

Under Claremont, John Proudstar only appears in two issues (*X-Men #94* and *#95*). By the end of the second issue, the character dies (shown above in Figure 5). His death is portrayed as being largely his own fault after putting himself in a dangerous situation out of a need to prove himself, as demonstrated above in Figure 5. This conforms with the “Bloodthirsty Savage” trope, referring to himself as a “warrior of the Apache” trying to prove that he’s more than “an outcast,” as the character is unable to let go of the perceived slights of the past. Proudstar has little in the way of agency, serving as a cautionary tale for his surviving teammates.



Fig. 6. John Proudstar’s inner monologue.

Although there are several stereotypically Native elements incorporated into the character of John Proudstar, Claremont makes an effort to humanize him beyond simply being Native. Although he continues to act in the same short-tempered, confrontational way that he did in his

initial appearance, under Claremont the character is at least given some internal narration as shown above in Figure 6, where the character acknowledges that his actions, primarily his temper and desire to prove himself, are damaging and self-sabotaging. This also creates an interesting subversion of the “Bloodthirsty Savage” trope which characterized Proudstar’s initial appearance, as the reader can assume that although he continually acted out of anger, the character still had internal narration that the reader was not privy to, and that narration showed a deeper understanding of his own flaws. Proudstar is at least aware of his shortcomings, and recognizes them in himself. His taking ownership of some of the elements of his personality that coincide with the “Bloodthirsty Savage” trope centers it more on himself as an individual character and less like something that exemplifies an entire people. Proudstar is an individual, one with faults that eventually lead to his death, but those faults are his and his alone. They are not portrayed as belonging to an entire people. By claiming himself to be a “Warrior of the Apache” while attacking the plane that was carrying him, his death is shown as being caused by a desire to conform to a perception that he has placed on himself, not on an immutable set of character traits that is possessed by all Native people.

James Proudstar

John Proudstar’s younger brother and inheritor of the codename “Thunderbird,” James Proudstar was created by Chris Claremont and originally appeared in *The New Mutants #16* (1985). The character shared the same powers as the original Thunderbird, and, after his initial appearance as a member of the Hellions (a more antagonistic group of mutant students who repeatedly battled The New Mutants), wore the same costume, complete with the same Native elements, for a time.



Fig. 7. James Proudstar’s first appearance.

James Proudstar, pictured above in Figure 7 fighting Wolverine, had many of the same issues as his brother. As shown, the identical costume and powers that he shared with his brother did little to separate him from other, more stereotypical depictions of Native characters, and his initial portrayal was characterized by his desire for revenge over the death of his brother, causing him to exhibit several personality traits in common with the “Bloodthirsty Savage” trope. The loss of his brother, a loss of his heritage, speaks to his “distance from the community, culture, and tribe” that Treuer references.

Two things separate James Proudstar from typical Native superhero characters. First, he is explicitly stated to be Apache, as opposed to broadly being labeled as Native. This is more of a result of the character being a legacy character as he is sharing the same tribal affiliation as his brother, but it is a trend that Claremont would continue to use when developing his Native X-

Men characters. Although having a specific tribal affiliation does not mean that these characters are meant to represent specific elements within their tribe, it does give the characters more depth than those typically analyzed by Sheyahshe and his idea of “pan-Indians”. The second redeeming quality about the character, the one that keeps him from being entirely made up of Native tropes, is his personality.

James is the leader of the Hellions, serving as their field commander while on missions. This is presented as being because of James’ dependability, and it is a responsibility he takes seriously. He is shown to care about his teammates, even those who are basically villains. He doesn’t condone their actions, but he still tries to act in their best interests, putting his responsibility ahead of his personal values. The resulting internal struggle, which the reader gets to see through the characters internal narration makes him more complex than simply being the “Noble Savage”. James also rejects the “Bloodthirsty Savage” trope when he chooses not to kill Xavier when given the chance, even though he believes Xavier is responsible for the death of his brother. His internal struggle, which drives the plot of the issue (*Uncanny X-Men #197*), separates him from the stereotypical depictions of Native characters.

Although still possessing several traits associated with negative depictions of Native characters, James Proudstar as written by Claremont is given more depth of character than is traditionally associated with Native depictions in superhero comic books according to Sheyahshe (111). The character would later be given further characterization under other writers (who were working off of Claremont’s portrayal of the character), changing his codename to Warpath. Although the name “Warpath” harkens back to the stereotypical idea of Natives as the Other who would attack settlers on the plains, it at least distinguishes and separates the character from his brother John. James’ uniform has become consistently less “Native” as well, displaying neither

fringe or buckskin, and his personality has further developed beyond most other Native characters. Although James Proudstar still had several problematic elements under Claremont, he has since become a consistently high-quality example of an entertaining, intriguing Native character. The character can be viewed as an attempt by Claremont to improve upon the initial characterization of John Proudstar, a character that Claremont inherited. James is a more nuanced character rooted in a better awareness of his Native heritage.

Forge

Created by Claremont in *Uncanny X-Men #184*, Forge (which is presented as being the only name the character has, as even his government contacts refer to him simply as “Forge”) is a mutant with the ability to build anything he can imagine. He is introduced working for the United States government, making weaponry for use against renegade mutants. His ethnicity is ambiguous at first, as are his origins and motives. After his initial introduction, Forge receives a great deal of characterization during the *LifeDeath* storyline (*Uncanny X-Men #186*), where he develops a relationship with the leader of the X-Men, Storm.



Fig. 8. Forge and Storm.

Through the course of the story, it is eventually revealed that Forge is a Vietnam veteran with several cybernetic replacements for limbs he lost during the war. He considers himself lucky, as his abilities allowed him to create better prosthetics than are available to most amputees. He discusses his heritage, he is Cheyenne by birth, and although proud of his heritage, there are parts of it he has rejected as shown above in Figure 8 when he says that he is “proud of his heritage,” but also that it “has nothing to do with who I am or the life I lead,” rejecting his perceived destiny to become a shaman. Forge was meant to become a medicine man, but instead chose to rely primarily on technology, largely ignoring his “mystical” abilities. During the war, Forge was forced to use his magical powers to avenge his fallen comrades and accidentally freed an ancient evil, a demon called The Adversary. With the help of the X-Men, The Adversary is eventually defeated in the *Fall of the Mutants* storyline (*Uncanny X-Men* #227) and Forge comes to terms with his experiences in Vietnam (*Uncanny X-Men* #263), although he never embraces the mystical elements of his heritage.

Forge as written by Claremont is a complicated character, one that defies easy categorization. His mystical abilities, which are directly tied in to his heritage, invokes the “Magical Native American” TV trope (TVTropes.org). His mutant ability, the ability to create any machine that he can imagine, firmly grounds the character as being forward thinking, using advanced technology that makes him closer to a science fiction character than the traditional depictions of Natives being grounded in the past. His past as a soldier is in line with Sheyahshe’s argument that Native characters consistently being portrayed as members of the military harkens back to the “Warrior” archetype (Sheyahshe 157), but the injuries he suffered and his ability to overcome those injuries using technology undercuts the idea, making him appear vulnerable, inventive, and introspective.

Forge's mutant ability to create any create any machine he can imagine, is a direct contrast to both stereotypical Native superpowers and the standard superpowers seen in superhero comic books regardless of the ethnicity of the character. His ability does not aid him in combat, and the constant threat of combat is a standard of the genre that is best exemplified in with the "Who would win in a fight, Character A or Character B" discussion that was a mainstay of my childhood and hopefully many others. There is an acknowledged expectation that these characters will have to physically fight some sort of fantastic enemy, and Forge has a power that is largely useless in combat. Forge, however, is never portrayed as being a liability to any team he is on, and under Claremont he is consistently portrayed as being a skilled and highly effective fighter.

In Forge's first appearance (*Uncanny X-Men #184*), the character Naze is also introduced. Naze is an exceptional representation of one of the tropes that Treuer puts forward as a "point of comparison," that of the member of an older generation trying to teach the younger generation about their heritage. The difference here is that instead of seeking out a connection with his heritage, Forge is outright rejecting a part of it. In Figure 8 he tells Storm that he is proud of his heritage, but that he wants nothing to do with the "Magical Native American" aspect of it. Naze is shown having just had an argument with Forge, trying to convince him to fulfill his destiny, which involves using his mystical abilities against The Adversary. Naze looks like a traditional depiction of a Native character which directly contrasts with Forge and his more modern attire, to include his cybernetic parts. Naze serves Forge's storyline more than he has any agency of his own and could almost be read as the "sidekick" character that Sheyahshe says Natives often occupy (Sheyahshe 39). The character of Naze, however, serves as a direct connection to Forge's heritage, asking him to serve the purpose he is "destined" for, a purpose that conforms to Native

stereotypes. Forge outright rejects his destiny and the stereotypes they represent, choosing instead to build a different destiny, one based on technology. Instead of using magic or spiritualism, the tools often given to Native characters in superhero fiction, Forge chooses to rely instead on his mutant powers, an inborn ability that has nothing to do with his heritage. Forge's defiance of easy categorization is the main reason that he is not just a successful representation of a Native character, he is a successful character, full stop. Under Claremont, Forge is consistently portrayed as a complex, fully-realized character with his own internal motivations, who also has agency and impact on the story around him.

Dani Moonstar

First appearing alongside most of the main cast of *The New Mutants* in *Marvel Graphic Novel #4*. Moonstar is originally portrayed as being very closely aligned with traditional Native tropes. She has a mountain cat, Ridge Runner, that she can communicate with telepathically, an ability that has nothing to do with her mutant power and one she also uses to communicate with her teammate, Wolfsbane. Her powers are illusory based, she can telepathically project an image of a person's greatest fears or greatest desires. She has enhanced senses and is an expert hunter (she will later be shown to be extremely proficient with a bow and arrow). She is immediately hostile against the very idea of leaving the Reservation she has grown up on to go live with Professor Xavier in order to learn to control her mutant powers: "A white?!" she exclaimed, followed by "You would send me with an Anglo?!?" (Claremont) Moonstar, upon first appearance, seems to conform with the Native tropes common in superhero comic books of the time.

Moonstar also, upon initial examination, meets several of the requirements for perceived authenticity that David Treuer puts forth in *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. She is an

orphan, and she has been raised by her wise old grandfather, both tropes that Treuer describes (Treuer 183). She is distanced from her tribe and has a spiritual connection through her grandfather, Black Eagle. Moonstar doesn't speak her native language, and there is not a clear distinction between urban areas and nature, which defies Treuer's characteristic of Native characters being associated with nature (Treuer 184).

But even here, in this initial appearance, Moonstar's heritage is displayed with more sensitivity and awareness than typical Native representation. Her powers, the ability to manifest illusions showing a person's greatest fears, is a psionic power as opposed to being physical or mystic, as would be typically found in less sensitive portrayals of Native characters. Instead of being essentialized as being Native, she displays a more well-rounded personality that is not easily categorized as being simply "Noble" or "Bloodthirsty". Although she definitely comes across as being closer to Bloodthirsty, this contrasts her with the rest of the original New Mutants team, most of whom are generally peaceful children, and this contrast further develops her character and is used to display her leadership abilities when she drives them to train harder because of her aggressive tendencies. Her compassion for her fellow teammates, her leadership abilities, and her fear over not being able to control her powers, all of which are displayed in her earliest appearance, distance her from those character types. The villain of the graphic novel, Donald Pierce, refers to Moonstar and her grandfather as "noble savages" (Claremont), but Pierce is never portrayed as anything more than being virulently racist at every turn, since he is a character defined by his desire to exterminate mutants. It does not come across as being a "true" (in this case true refers to representing the real world situation) statement, but instead reads as another example of a bigoted cyborg (Pierce is a racist cyborg) saying bigoted things. Claremont displays a sensitivity to the language, being able to distinguish that the phrase "Noble Savage,"

which has been used by (hopefully) well-meaning but misguided authors in the past to demonstrate Native-ness in a positive light. Claremont shows that even terms like “Noble Savage,” which could be read as positive, are still essentializing and stereotypical, relics of the past that anyone more sensitive than a racist cyborg should avoid.



Fig. 9. Moonstar in uniform.

At the end of the graphic novel, when the other characters have all donned their new costumes as seen above in Figure 9. Moonstar keeps her boots, braids, and belt, symbols of her Native heritage, in defiance of Professor Xavier's wishes. Xavier, the older, white authority figure, even acknowledges on the page that trying to make her give up those reminders of her heritage would be wrong. Moonstar's heritage is given weight, but it is never the only thing about her character that is compelling, it is just one more interesting thing about an interesting character.

After their initial appearance, Moonstar and her teammates began appearing in their own title, *The New Mutants*. Even in the first few issues, Moonstar was distanced away from the stock Native characters, and continued to progress further and further away from Treuer's requirements. Her grandfather, the potential guide into the mystical part of her heritage, is killed off in his first appearance by Pierce's minions. Moonstar encounters a Native spirit in *The Demon Bear Saga*, but never gains mystical powers from her Native connection, although she does gain mystical powers eventually, something that also happens to another Claremont creation, Illyana Rasputin. Both characters are given the ability to gain greater power, as opposed to typical Native representation wherein their mystical powers is a result of their heritage. At first believed to be an orphan, it is eventually revealed that her parents are alive. She is still separated from her homeland, but due to the international nature of the New Mutants team, it is rarely mentioned as it is a common trait amongst all of her teammates. Moonstar misses home, but it is never portrayed as being because her home is closer to "the land" or any kind of earth spirit, it is simply because she misses home. The psychic link she shares with her teammate, Wolfsbane, is eventually portrayed as not being something that she can do with all animals, but is instead shown to be more a result of the two women being soul-mates. Instead of this being shown to be a result of Moonstar's Native heritage, several Claremont characters, regardless of race, share this ability.

Toward the end of Claremont's run on *The New Mutants*, Moonstar gains the powers of an Asgardian Valkyrie. These powers were mystical in nature, but had nothing to do with her Native heritage. Typically whenever a character receives similar powers from Marvel Comics' Asgardian mythology, they assume the personality characteristics typical to those characters, demonstrated in the archaic speech patterns they develop. The Jane Foster version of Thor in the

Jason Aaron run on Thor is a good example of this as shown below in Figure 10. Jane Foster, while in her “Thor” form, speaks in the highly stylized Marvel Comics version of Thor’s typical speaking patterns, even when referencing a very modern phrase like “calm your tits.”



Fig. 10. Jane Foster as Thor.

A Native character like Moonstar having her personality altered (or colonized) by an overbearing European culture would have been extremely problematic, but instead, the powers were incorporated into the existing character without changing her personality. She maintained several Native elements of her appearance as well, incorporating the Valkyrie elements into her modified New Mutants costume as shown below in Figure 11. She has the feathered headpiece that is consistent in Marvel’s Asgardian characters, as shown in Thor’s helmet in Figure 10, but she still maintains the feathers and buckskin boots and gloves that represent her Native heritage. This melding of the two cultures, as opposed to Thor’s characterization wherein her culture is overwritten by the Asgardian influences, displays Claremont’s sensitivity to how Native-ness can be portrayed.



Fig. 11. Moonstar as Asgardian.

Moonstar's superpower, to create illusions based on a person's greatest fears or desires, are, like Forge's ability to create machines, not particularly useful in combat, which again is a constant genre expectation of superhero comic books. Her abilities are especially hindered by her reluctance to use them, as intruding on someone's mind goes against Moonstar's concept of consent, a concept that is often overlooked when superpowers involving types of mental control or mind reading are involved. As is the case with Forge, however, Moonstar is never portrayed as being a liability in combat and is generally, under Claremont, one of the most effective fighters in *The New Mutants*.

The biggest differences between Moonstar and most Native characters up until this point, however, have nothing to do with her abilities or powers. It is her personality and agency which sets her apart from characters like Warpath, Apache Chief, or Shaman. One of the differences

between *The New Mutants* characters like Moonstar and other traditional superhero characters from either Marvel Comics or DC Comics is that for a long period after their initial appearance, their creator, Claremont, was the writer most consistently using the characters. This meant that Moonstar and the other *New Mutant* characters had a consistent voice developing their characters, as opposed to characters like Spider-Man, who might have as many as four writers writing monthly stories about him for years, leading to some inconsistencies in how the character is portrayed. These circumstances gave Claremont the unique (among comic book creators at Marvel Comics or DC Comics) opportunity to give each character their own distinct personality traits, something he did very effectively with Moonstar in particular.

Moonstar's personality under Claremont grew from the initial angry attitude she showed around Xavier into a more well-developed character that was at times brave, fearful, compassionate, selfish, and several things in between. Instead of fitting easily into one of the personality categories, she quickly became too multifaceted to categorize. Moonstar became co-leader of the team along with Cannonball, the only straight white male on the team at that point. Instead of serving as the spiritual leader of the team, or a mystic conduit to some higher knowledge who advised the real leader of the team, Moonstar was the tactical field leader of the team, whereas Cannonball was the emotional center of the team (*Jay & Miles X-plain the X-Men*). This is a subversion of the usual team dynamic in superhero comic books wherein the white male character is typically the sole leader of the team. Moonstar is a Native woman who is also a mutant, making her a minority three times over. By having her be the leader of the team, she is given the opportunity to be first among equals, to have agency when it comes to how the team reacts to any given situation as opposed to typical Native representation, wherein the Native character usually serves as a guide or sidekick, aiding the other characters who have more

agency while serving a secondary role. Claremont would subvert the trope of male team leader in a similar fashion with Storm in *Uncanny X-Men*, demonstrating that he was aware of the subversion and used it intentionally.

Moonstar's co-leadership of the team, along with her being the focus of many early stories, contributes to her character having agency where other Native characters sometimes do not. The first few issues of *The New Mutants* are focused on her in several ways, from her being able to sense that something was wrong at the mansion (Xavier was host to a Brood alien at the time) to her fear of not being able to control her mutant powers (another reoccurring theme that Claremont would explore with several characters, notably Cyclops and Rogue). The character was arguably the main focus of the book in the beginning, a clearly different dynamic than what other Native characters were experiencing at the time.

Moonstar as presented by Claremont (and various artists) is not without her issues, of course, as Michael Sheyahshe mention in his chapter on Moonstar. "Initially, Dani's look was somewhat stereotypic" (Sheyahshe 169). Leather fringe, a headband, a knife in a leather sheath, and a turquoise belt were all present, elements of her Native heritage that were incorporated into her New Mutants costume. She used a bow and arrow with proficiency, which, although explained in-story as being a result of her being raised by her grandfather, is still stereotypical. Most unexplainable in-story is her ability to communicate with animals, an ability that has nothing to do with her mutant powers or the Valkyrie powers she gains later. Claremont develops the Native elements in such a way that they are no longer stereotypical. Instead, they become another facet of a character who is multifaceted. Any of the above elements, if taken on their own and used as one of the key signifiers of that character would be problematic, but the way

Claremont combines all of them with the other aspects of the character to create a sympathetic, culturally aware character.

The Demon Bear Saga

Claremont, because of his long tenure on both *Uncanny X-Men* and *The New Mutants*, was able to lay the groundwork for future storylines months or years before those storylines appeared. One of the first *The New Mutants* storylines he developed with this method was *The Demon Bear Saga* (1984), a three issue storyline that demonstrates his ability to use Native themes in superhero comic books in a way that is both entertaining, but also progressive in regards to the treatment of Native characters and themes within.

The Demon Bear Saga is consistently ranked as the “best” storyline in *The New Mutants*, and is considered one of the “best” storylines in all of the *X-Men* titles (*Jay and Miles X-Plain the X-Men*). Bill Sienkiewicz, taking over on art from Bob McLeod, brought a more abstract art style to the book, creating an aesthetic that was something other than traditional superhero storytelling. This difference was readily apparent in Sienkiewicz’s portrayal of the Demon Bear character as shown below in Figure 12, which is drawn in a more abstract style than was seen in traditional superhero comic books at the time. By changing the tone of the book so dramatically, this storyline, which highlights Claremont’s use of Native themes, is given greater weight than if it had been another “generic” looking superhero story. Sienkiewicz’s art, which shows the bear as taking up almost the entirety of the panel, gives this character a uniquely dangerous feel, making it more effective as a villain than typical superhero villains, especially villains who are rooted in Native themes.



Fig. 12. Demon Bear.

Although *The Demon Bear Saga* did not begin until issue 18 of *The New Mutants*, the Demon Bear character originally appeared in issue 3, a full year before the storyline began. The character appeared throughout the intervening issues, usually haunting Moonstar as she dreams of images of a massive, demonic bear, as shown above in Figure 12. The bear claims that it has killed Moonstar's parents, and would soon kill her. During the first full issue of *The Demon Bear Saga* (*The New Mutants* issue 18), Moonstar trains for her upcoming battle with the bear that has been haunting her, as her teammates do not fully believe her when she says she is being hunted by a demonic bear, even though one member of the team comes from a lost Roman colony that has remained untouched by time for centuries and another is a demonic sorceress from Limbo.

Already portrayed as being independent from the group by her refusal to conform to the New Mutant costumes (*Marvel Graphic Novel #4*), Moonstar chooses to face the Demon Bear on her own. She loses the fight and is seriously injured, resulting in the rest of her team taking her to a local hospital.

Moonstar remains unconscious for the remainder of the storyline while doctors are operating on her, and is at one point diagnosed with a broken spine that will leave her unable to walk. Her teammates face the Demon Bear in another dimension, called “The Badlands,” a representation of North America “untouched by the white invaders” (*The New Mutants* issue 20). During the battle, two bystanders, a police officer and a nurse, are transformed by the bear into monstrous versions of stereotypical Native characters, and fight The New Mutants. Once they are freed from the bear’s influence, they are still referred to as “red Indians”. The inference, that being Native is something that can “happen” to a person, that if a person is put in the body of a Native, they are then Native, is problematic, but because of the nature of the story, existing as it does in another dimension, I read it as them not becoming “true” Natives, instead they become the imagined, essentialized version of how Natives can be perceived in adventure fiction. The two characters, Sharon Friedlander and Tom Corsi, gain super strength as well after the transformation, which lends weight to the idea that they are not “real” Natives, they are reflections of how Natives are often portrayed. After their transformation, the characters are never depicted as displaying stereotypical Native tropes like “pigeon English,” and they never attempt to appropriate Native mannerisms.

The team eventually defeats the Demon Bear, returning to their home dimension. It is revealed that the bear is actually Moonstar’s parents, trapped in the Demon Bear form by some unseen threat, a threat that is never resolved during Claremont’s run on *The New Mutants*.

Moonstar's parents are freed from their curse. Moonstar awakes to find Storm, leader of the X-Men and a character who shares several similarities with Moonstar (female minority character leading a team, a role that would traditionally belong to a straight white man in most superhero comic books), informing her that she has been healed by a mutant with healing abilities.

Moonstar reunites with her parents, and the issue ends with Professor Xavier, the highest authority figure in *The New Mutants* at this time, telling the entire team that he is proud of them.

The Demon Bear Saga has several Native elements within the story. Claremont makes several moves that uses these elements to create a unique villain, setting, and characters. The Demon Bear itself, a combination of an animal spirit and a "Great Spirit," is a representation of Moonstar's heritage that haunts her throughout her earliest appearances. It serves as a monstrous reminder of the pain that has been inflicted on her heritage by specifically affecting her parents, severing her ties to that heritage. The Demon Bear can be read as a metaphor for the atrocities inflicted upon Natives, as opposed to most animal totems or "Great Spirits," which usually serve as a metaphor for nature, stripping away the human, Native elements of those themes.

The Badlands serve as a symbol for Native lands unspoiled by colonizers, a land that is slowly devoured by the Demon Bear just as the land was slowly devoured by the colonizers in real life. As Moonstar's friends try to stop the slow advance of the Demon Bear's influence, they become increasingly desperate. This mirrors the plight of the Native people, a move that demonstrates Claremont's sensitivity to and awareness of Native history. Instead of using Native imagery as a metaphor for nature or getting back to nature, the metaphor of the Demon Bear and the Badlands instead keeps the human elements of Native history paramount.

The Demon Bear, an animal-themed Native spirit, subverts one of Treuer's "points of comparison" by returning Moonstar's parents to her, returning the broken connection with her

heritage that is prevalent in Native literature. The animal theme is a reoccurring stereotype, but a combination of several elements gives it more complexity and agency within the story. The visual depiction of the character, which is unlike most traditional depictions of evil spirits in mainstream superhero comic books, makes it unique, which is in itself a rejection of the stereotype. The slow build-up to the climax of the story, taking place over several issues leading up to *The Demon Bear Saga*, lends a sense of dread to the character as it hunts Moonstar, and by nearly killing her during their initial battle, establishes the character as a real threat, giving it a prominent place as the villain of the piece. These moves by Claremont use Native themes to create a compelling, interesting story that also displays a sensitivity usually not found in Native representation in superhero stories.

Moonstar being rendered unconscious in the first issue is a direct result of her choosing to face the Demon Bear on her own terms. Although this act removes her from the action for the remainder of the storyline, it is explicitly stated to be the fault of the team, as they did not believe that Moonstar was really being hunted by a demonic bear (*The New Mutants* issue 18). This storyline ties Moonstar closer to the rest of the team, and all of their actions are taken to protect her after their initial failure to believe her. Although Moonstar is not directly involved in the final battle, her presence is felt throughout the story as opposed to her Native-ness being used as a plot device to give the other characters something to fight. This argument is only possible because Claremont kept Moonstar paramount throughout the series up until this point. Her being unconscious allowed *The Demon Bear Saga* to serve as a New Mutants storyline, as opposed to just being a Moonstar storyline. It involves the other characters in Moonstar's story without using her story as a device to further the characterization of the other members of the team.

Although *The Demon Bear Saga* contains several elements that appear to adhere to Native stereotypes that are prevalent in superhero comic books, the quality and complexity of the storyline makes it a more developed, nuanced portrayal of Native themes. Instead of using Native themes as set dressing, the trappings that provide a bare framework for a larger story, the Native themes are used to create a compelling, quality story that consistently ranks among the best *X-Men* storylines of all time. This storyline highlights the importance of Moonstar as a character, and demonstrates the importance of her heritage, and is an example of how Chris Claremont subverted Native stereotypes during his tenure as the writer of *The New Mutants*.

Dani Moonstar, as written by Chris Claremont in *The New Mutants*, is a different, more complex, representation of a Native character than is typically seen in modern superhero comic books. Claremont takes the time to develop the character into more than just a set of Native tropes or characteristics. Although it should not be considered “true” Native American Literature, and by no means should it be used to silence or take the place of Native voices, Claremont’s characterization of Moonstar is still an example of how the medium can be used to effectively portray a Native character without essentializing or minimizing their heritage. Moonstar becomes an entertaining, engaging character that is more than the sum of her parts, and should be recognized as a positive portrayal of a Native character.

Representation Matters

I argue that Claremont created or wrote several Native characters who defied the traditional stereotypes associated with Native characters, an argument that is only made possible by contrasting his characters with existing Native characters who uphold those stereotypes: characters with animal-themed names and powers, tracking and mystical abilities that never elevate them beyond the role of sidekick and that only have a stock set of personality traits. By

continually resorting to stereotype, comic book creators are essentializing Native people, as defined by Craig Womack in his book, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, defining them by “a unique set of rules that apply to static cultures set in the past rather than viable nations facing contemporary political realities” (Womack, 64-65). Defining Native characters by their past, by only giving them abilities or personality traits that reflect a specific idea of what a Native person is, limits their ability to become more complex, to develop an importance beyond their ability to serve the plot by bringing in mystical elements or being able to track the villain. It ignores the humanity of the Native people, essentializing and limiting them. Claremont’s portrayal of Native characters shows a sensitivity and awareness of how Native themes are used, showing ways in which those elements can be turned into something more than just a stock collection of tropes used in service of the non-Native characters.

Having more sympathetic, aware portrayals of Native characters matters because representation matters. Having Native characters that are not easily stereotyped gives the readers a better sense of Native people being more than just essentialized caricatures that belong to a static past. It also give Native readers the opportunity to see themselves represented in fiction in a capacity other than the sidekick or the villain, an opportunity all too often reserved for their straight, white counterparts. The importance of this representation can be demonstrated with the following excerpt in Figure 13 from an early letter column that was printed in response to the death of John Proudstar (*Uncanny X-Men #97*):

of James Proudstar, Thunderbird's brother with a similar appearance and powers who also has a more interesting personality and motivation, the ability of a character who appeared so briefly to still connect with an audience and provide representation demonstrates the effectiveness of using characters of different backgrounds in superhero comic books. It allows readers of all backgrounds the opportunity to see themselves in their heroes.

A Guide for the Future

Claremont's Native characters, especially Moonstar, James Proudstar, and Forge, defy many of the tropes associated with Native characters and provide a guideline for how Native characters can be treated in superhero comic books. By making the characters central to the storyline and giving them non-stereotypical powers and personality traits, there exists within comic books a chance to use the unique genre conventions associated with superheroes to give readers a broader view of Native culture without restricting it to the past. By moving past the traditional roles assigned to Native characters, it gives writers the opportunity to explore themes that resonate with the lessons that can be learned from Native culture and history.

An example of this can be seen in Moonstar's most recent appearance as of this writing, in the new volume of *The New Mutants*, shown below in Figure 14.



Fig. 14. Recent depiction.

Here Moonstar is having a conversation about the newly established mutant nation that could easily be applied to a conversation about Native American boarding schools and how they failed as institutions (*The New Mutants (vol. 4) #1*). She tells Sunspot that “human ideologies

and institutions were never built for something better,” by reading “human” as “white,” the metaphor of mutants in the Marvel Universe can easily be applied to Natives. Superhero comic books create opportunities to address these real world concerns and concepts in a unique way, and ideally characters like Moonstar will continue to be used to take advantage of these opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The superhero genre has often failed to portray Native characters and themes with subtlety or nuance. The combination of how Native characters were historically portrayed in the medium, going back to Western comics and the unfortunate placement of Natives as the villains of those early stories, along with the genre requirements of adventure fiction, have led to Native characters often being portrayed in reductive, stereotypical ways. There has been a preponderance of animal themes, characters with similar powers and personality types, and Native characters are often being relegated to the role of sidekick.

It is perhaps due to this perceived lack of subtlety or nuance that superhero comic books are under-analyzed by scholars. Although Comics Studies is becoming a more respected and recognized area of critical analysis, superhero comic books continue to be underrepresented in scholarship. This paper serves as a reminder that this body of literature, the superhero comic book, contains themes that are worth exploring and analyzing, and that the superhero comic book is as worthy of a place in academia as any other work.

Chris Claremont, during his tenure as the writer of *Uncanny X-Men* and *The New Mutants*, has created Native characters and used Native themes in complex, entertaining ways that have defied the stereotypical, trope heavy representation often seen in superhero comic books. By creating multiple characters with different powers, defying one of the most common tropes associated with Native superheroes, Claremont differentiated his creations from the stereotypical, “Apache Chief”-style characters, especially with Forge and Moonstar. By having Forge’s powers be rooted in technology and Moonstar’s powers be telepathic in nature, Claremont expanded what was possible for Native characters in mainstream superhero comic books. Although not without problematic elements, Forge being a shaman and Moonstar being

able to communicate with animals for example, Claremont's characters and their powers are excellent examples of Native characters who are more than just stereotypes.

More importantly than the powers associated with the characters, the personalities Claremont created and the roles of the characters in the comic books further differentiated them from typical depictions. John and James Proudstar, both proud warriors that could have easily been stereotypes during their first appearances, were developed beyond the "bloodthirsty savage" archetype. Forge, with his attempted rejection of his heritage and his guilt over his time in Vietnam, is a very complicated, nuanced character of any heritage, and his Native-ness is always kept as an aspect of his character, but never the defining aspect. This honoring of heritage without it defining a character is a key aspect of Moonstar as well, and her role on the New Mutants team, that of team leader, further propels the character beyond the restrictions of a stereotypical Native heritage. Moonstar is never just a well-developed Native character, she is just a well-developed character.

Claremont's work, something of a rarity in modern mainstream superhero comic books due to the long-running nature, serves as an example of how to use Native themes in non-stereotypical ways. By never defining his characters as only being Native, by making sure that the characters have motivations of their own, powers and abilities that cannot be read as being the result of their Native heritage, and roles within the book beyond serving as the spiritual voice for the white main characters, Claremont displays both a sensitivity to and an awareness of how Native themes have been represented in the past, and a way in which those elements can be used to craft effective, engaging stories that reflect the humanity of Native culture, not just the history. Chris Claremont's work on *X-Men* provides a framework that current and future writers of

mainstream superhero comic books can use to create thoughtful, aware stories using Native themes and characters.

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