



### REVIEW

**James J. Donahue. *Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre*. University Press of Mississippi, 2024. 192 pp. ISBN: 9781496850492.**

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James J. Donahue, in his study on Indigenous comics, offers an extensive overview of Indigenous graphic narratives created by Indigenous authors. His book presents one of the few academic works published on the intersections of Indigenous Studies and Comics Studies, bringing attention to the rapidly growing body of works that Indigenous comics constitute and to the lack of academic attention that these works receive. Echoing Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) and Hilary Chute's *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere* (2017), Donahue highlights the lack of scholarly attention both Indigenous Studies and Comics Studies receive from Literary and Cultural Studies to showcase that the intersections of the two fields occupy an even more conspicuous research gap (3). Comics as an accessible medium facilitates communicating social, political, and pedagogical messages to wider audiences. Their appeal transcends different ethnicities, ages, as well as social and economic backgrounds (Bernardin 481-82), which positions comics as a versatile medium for Indigenous artists to communicate narratives of survivance to a wide audience. In 2008, Indigenous presence within the comics' creative landscape was sparse. Even though publishing companies such as Marvel and DC featured Indigenous characters, they were created by non-Indigenous artists and enforced harmful stereotypes associated with these communities. Michael A. Sheyahshe's *Native Americans in Comic Books: A Critical Study* (2008) presents a thorough study of these works.

Donahue acknowledges the early representations of Indigenous peoples in comics created by non-Indigenous authors but chooses to bring attention to the comics created by Indigenous authors. He acknowledges non-Indigenous artists' collaborations with Indigenous authors while arguing against applying a version of blood quantum to these works to determine to what extent they are Indigenous (14). Rather, he underscores that these collaborations between Indigenous authors and non-Indigenous artists elucidate an artistic realization of how Indigenous and non-

Indigenous people can co-exist. His approach to what constitutes Indigenous comics also evokes Cheryl Barlett and Mikmaw elders Murdena and Albert Marshall's two-eyed seeing principle, which encourages seeing from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous epistemologies and seeing from the other eye with the strengths of Western approaches (Marshall, qtd. in Kovach 191). Thus, these works encourage more than mere co-existence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Rather, the collaborations between these authors and artists accentuate the strengths of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artistic approaches to create narratives that are transformed on the comic book pages. They reflect the agency of the Indigenous authors, and the artistic visions of the illustrators, colorists, and letterers involved in these works.

*Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre* (2024) is organized according to the commonly encountered genres in Indigenous comics. Chapter 1 focuses on Indigenous superheroes; Chapter 2 examines Indigenous science fiction, while Chapter 3 is on Historical Narratives. Genre as a framework provides categorization, however, as Donahue notes, it is also unstable (15). Hence, he focuses on experimental narratives that defy genre conventions in Chapter 4. Even though Donahue mostly employs genre as an organizational tool rather than a comprehensive theoretical framework, he also highlights that Indigenous peoples utilizing certain genres to insert themselves into cultural contexts in which they were misrepresented or excluded constitutes political survivance (18). For instance, he suggests that the scarcity of Indigenous superheroes that do not adhere to mainstream stereotypes in comics denotes that "Indigenous peoples are not seen as strong national leaders who can embody 'America'" (18). Thus, Indigenous superheroes are not merely Indigenous versions of the Marvel and DC comics, but they communicate political commentary on the superhero genre's imperial roots (27), the socio-economic issues in reservation life (28), and the long history of non-Indigenous populations' inhumane treatment of Indigenous peoples in academia and museums (34, 36).

Donahue connects the field of Comic Studies to science fiction through their reception within literary studies as unsophisticated forms of narrative expressions (55). He highlights that even though mainstream science fiction envisions post-racial futures, it also perpetuates colonial ideologies of manifest destiny as well as missionary and anthropologists' fantasies (55-57). Thus, Indigenous science fiction, a genre that has been gaining traction especially after the publication of Grace Dillon's *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (2012), not only confronts settler-colonialism but also works within the parameters of a genre that continues to promote colonial and neo-colonial ideas (59). Exploring Indigenous futurisms in comics, Donahue presents a thorough list of Indigenous works that focus on time and space travels as well as technological advancement narratives in which the Indigenous peoples are positioned beyond the colonial past. Donahue also presents analyses from a variety of works such as *Moonshot* vols. 1-3 and Cole Paul's *Dakwākāda Warriors* (2016) to highlight what Indigenous authors



have envisioned on the pages of these comic books both against and within the parameters of the genre.

In addition to envisioning new futures, Indigenous authors and artists also challenge the hegemonic historical narratives to communicate ongoing Indigenous experiences. Echoing Mark Rifkin's notions of *settler-time* and *Indigenous temporal sovereignty*, Donahue highlights that Indigenous peoples conceptualize time differently from settlers. Rifkin juxtaposes Indigenous temporal sovereignty against what he terms *settler-time* to highlight "the chronogeopolitical dynamics of settler colonialism" (93), which aim to both spatially and temporally dislocate Indigenous presence from "the process of periodizing the U.S. past" (94). Thus, Donahue argues that Indigenous historical narratives should be read as not mere retellings of the past but as a commentary on how the past should be understood (85). Hence, he situates the past within the present as the past actively informs the present lives of Indigenous peoples. To elucidate this, he analyzes two graphic novel series: Katherena Vermette's *A Girl Called Echo*, and David Alexander Robertson's *Tales From Big Spirit*. Both series reimagine the Métis past through prolepsis and analepsis facilitated by time travel through sleep, daydreams, and thoughts of the characters. Donahue's decision to focus on these narratives as historical, though unintentionally, also highlights the unstable nature of genre as these works could easily be classified as "Native slipstream" narratives, which include works that feature time travel components, present time and space in a non-linear manner, and defy genre classifications (Dillon 3).

Use of genre, albeit briefly, expands beyond an organizational tool in Chapter 4, which focuses on Indigenous experimental graphic narratives. Bringing forth Chute's work on experimental literature, Donahue underscores that the designation of *experimental* connotes works that obstruct normal reading (115). Donahue also argues that the designation of experimental in Indigenous narratives is due to their reception by non-Indigenous readers. He suggests that many Indigenous works, such as Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), align with storytelling traditions of their communities but are considered experimental because they do not adhere to the norms of Western literary conventions (116). He also suggests that experimental works require readers' active participation in the meaning-making process or sometimes even in the completion of the final product. (115) As an example, Donahue analyzes Michael Nicoll Yagulanaas's *Red: A Haida Manga* (2009). He highlights that, illustrated in Haida art style, Yagulanaas's Japanese students have also identified *Red* as a manga and thus, were involved in the naming process of the graphic narrative.

*Indigenous Comics and Graphic Novels: Studies in Genre* presents one of the first examples of a much-needed study on Indigenous Comics by Indigenous authors from Turtle Island. The research gap Donahue identifies in his introduction is so

palpable that his work presents a necessary first guide to inform scholars who wish to work within the intersections of Indigenous Studies and Comic Studies. It should also constitute a staple of any Indigenous Comics curriculum at higher education institutions. However, in an attempt to bring attention to as many works as possible (Donahue also provides a list of other works he could not include within his chapters in his Coda), the book can only gloss over most of these works rather than fully engage with them critically. Thus, his analysis of these comics, while valuable, can and should be expanded upon. I perceive this as an invitation for other scholars to engage with Indigenous comics as the number of these works grows rapidly and cannot be contained in a single book. The research gap Donahue identifies to connect the two fields, though accurate, is also not sufficient to explicate why scholars should pay more attention to Indigenous comics. The comics medium, through its multimodal affordances, provides a plethora of opportunities to Indigenous authors and artists to realize their narrative visions. Thus, rather than addressing only the research gap Donahue highlights throughout, scholars should also engage with these works because of what the medium can afford to authors, artists, scholars, and audiences. Even though Donahue does not focus on what the comics medium specifically can do, his analysis of the comics provides readers with invigorating ideas as to what these works offer.

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### **Works Cited:**

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