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ANTOINETTE BRIDGERS

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THE INFLUENCE OF “SUPER INDIAN” ON NATIVE YOUTH

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BY

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Dr. Heather Shotton, Chair

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Dr. Amanda Cobb-Greetham

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Dr. Joshua Nelson



## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Research Problem .....	7
Purpose of Study.....	9
Significance.....	9
Chapter 2: Review of Literature: .....	11
Representations of Native People.....	11
Bibliotherapy .....	13
Minority Representation in Literature.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	17
Design.....	17
Data Collection.....	18
Sample.....	19
Limitations.....	19
Conclusion.....	19
Chapter 4: Findings .....	21
Representations of Natives in Media.....	21
Ability to Relate to the Material.....	27
Empowerment.....	31

Chapter 5: Discussion.....	35
Conclusion.....	42
References .....	44

## **Abstract**

This study examines the comic book “Super Indian” and the responses it elicits from Native youth between the ages of 9-15. The study includes ten self-identified Native American participants from Anadarko, Oklahoma, who represent various tribal Nations and were recruited through Anadarko Indian Education. The research utilizes an Indigenous research methodology and implemented the use of talking circles in order to collect the responses of the participants. The purpose of the research is to explore ways in which positive representations influence Native youth in addition to exposing the participants to a side of Native American literature that is often overlooked—graphic novels. The study finds that the positive representation of “Super Indian” empowered the participants and encouraged them to contribute to future positive Native American stories, images, and representations. It also shows that positive representations produce positive effects as well as strengthen the need to combat pre-existing negative representations with Native-created positive representations.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Background

We are the canon. Native peoples have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here even longer... Without Native American literature, there is no American cannon.

Womack 1999, 7

While Womack does argue for tribally specific literature, he points out the fact that Native Americans have produced literature prior to European contact, yet literature classes and studies generally do not address this reality. Indigenous peoples have occupied the territory of the United States since time immemorial, but there has been an obvious lack of representation and outright misrepresentation of Native Americans throughout literature. This issue has been addressed in various ways, including Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, but it remains a pertinent issue. Most literature classes, whether in high school or college, do not reflect the reality of a multitude of Native American literatures, as well as the mere existence of Native American peoples.

In my experience, college literature classes do not acknowledge the rich history of Native American writings unless through classes in Native American/American Indian Studies programs. The majority of high school classes omit Native American literature altogether in an act that deliberately writes Natives out of curriculum. Fryberg and Townsend's work on the invisibility of Natives finds that this act is often intentional and serves to uphold the existing status quo in order to continually benefit members of the dominant society while hindering underrepresented communities (Fryberg 2008). Fryberg's work also provides evidence showing that misrepresentations and the lack of representation are both detrimental to the psyche of Native American

youth (Fryberg 2010, Fryberg 2008), yet there is still an abundance of misrepresentation and lack of representation in the form of mass media, school curriculum, and literature that needs to be addressed.

While literature may seem, to some, like an arbitrary aspect of Native American life it is still an aspect of Native American representation that needs to be addressed. Fryberg's work provides evidence that acknowledges the detrimental effects that invisibility and racism have on the self-esteem of Native youth (Fryberg 2010). For example, Native communities are plagued with high dropout rates for high school students, high incarceration rates, and high youth suicide rates. Although identity cannot be, or has not been, determined as one cause of higher suicide rates, it is acknowledged that identity could be a factor (Dotinga 2015). Recently a health article came out saying "Native American communities try to reconnect young people with Indian tradition with an eye toward boosting their pride and promoting 'self-healing'" (Dotinga, 2015). In a step toward counteracting suicide, tribes are implementing programs that attempt to heal fragmented identities that partially result from non-Natives displaying a certain authority over the representation of Natives.

The control that non-Natives exert over the representation of Native people is a crucial component in the negativity that arises within those representations and subsequently translates to the harmful side-effects that manifest in Native communities. There exists a certain level of distrust when non-Natives attempt to create or depict Native characters because they tend to follow the guidelines of popular stereotypes and myths. This occurs due to a lack of interaction with Native communities and results in non-Natives overstepping boundaries and/or producing offensive material. To counter



this existing schism between the majority of Native representations and the actuality of Native people, there has been a rising scrutiny over this outside authority and action is being taken to reverse it. I would argue that this assists in strengthening Native American identity by producing literature, images, and media that reflect the reality of our existence in a more accurate and uplifting way.

Furthermore, as children are notably the future of any given race or ethnicity, it is important to gain clarity about Native youths' perspectives on Native American literature and understand how kids are effected by the images produced through the graphic novel genre. Though many may not believe comic books to be a part of literature, English teacher Rocco Versaci argues for the use of comic books in the classroom because of the way comic books present mature material through a visual perspective that allows more room for connection by providing faces to match the characters within the stories. Versaci also argues that comic books provide a unique examination of themes of race and ethnicity. Versaci says "[u]nlike more 'traditional' literature, comic books are able to quite literally 'put a human face on' a given subject. That is, comic books blend words and pictures so that, in addition to reading the text readers 'see' the characters through the illustrations" (Versaci 2001, 63). From this argument we see an English teacher advocating for the inclusion of comic books based on their unseen complexities and their inclusion of race matters. So, if we were to go even further, would it not be beneficial to examine the impact of ethnic/racial comic books on marginalized communities, such as Native American youth. I believe it would be pertinent to investigate how Native kids respond to the representations that are offered in an accessible form that encourages critical thought, such as comic books.

The need for a study on the influence of comic books is heightened through recognizing the steady increase in comics produced by Native Americans. Starting in the late 1990s comic books created by Natives have been on the rise. “Tribal Force” came out in 1996 and was the first comic book with an all Native American superhero cast (Bailer 2014). Since then, there has been the inception of the Indigenous Narratives Collective, which began in 2011, and is a group of Native comic book creators who work with the purpose of producing non-stereotypical representations of Native Americans through the comic book genre. This group’s agenda is to create a rebuttal to the stereotypical images produced by comics in the past. The collective works very pointedly to create Native superheroes who are not defined by a stereotype. Also, in 2008 the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture created an event entitled Comic Art Indigene, which focuses on comics produced by Native Americans. The event and contributors aim to convey the message that Native comics “articulate identity, politics, and culture using the unique dynamics of comic art” (Museum of Indian Art and Culture 2008) despite a stigma placed on comic books that deems comic art primitive and unworthy of being labeled as literature. This event makes the statement that “it is only natural that this marginal art appeals to oft-marginalized indigenous people, for both have been regarded as a primitive and malignant presence on the American landscape” (Museum of Indian Art and Culture 2008). This event is premised upon the fact that comic book stories and art are more complex than they are given credit for, and that comic books have been used by Native story-tellers and artists as a medium through which to examine contemporary issues within Indian country. The comic book genre is emerging as a critical space to explore Native issues and imagery, thus it seems

appropriate to conduct a study that prioritizes the genre and the responses it elicits from Native youth.

The storyline for the comic “Super Indian” was created by Arigon Starr in 2007 and began as a radio comedy series. Starr’s story and illustrations were transcribed to the production of “Super Indian” as an actual comic book in 2012 when the first issue of “Super Indian” was released (Indian Country Today 2012). The second issue of “Super Indian” was released in 2014. Starr employs the use of the “reservation hero” motif that is common in Native American literature. This motif is most prevalent in the work of Sherman Alexie, as he has popularized the image in the form of recurring characters—Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph. The motif functions as a sort of superhero in most respects, as it is always someone who, in some way, uplifts the community at focus within the story. Starr makes use of the reservation hero in a more literal form by creating a character that has super powers and uses them to protect his reservation community and family. Throughout “Super Indian” Starr presents contemporary Native American issues, such as blood quantum, anthropology, and stereotypes in humorous ways in order to facilitate more non-aggressive conversations about these controversial issues. She uses humor not just for the sake of producing a laugh, but to create peaceful and more approachable discourse on relevant and pervading Native issues. It is through these types of interventions into Native American issues that an examination of Starr and “Super Indian” is necessary and relevant.

My personal history with representations of Native people includes a lot of self-reflection due to the negativity associated with the images and characters I was exposed to as a child, teenager, and young adult. The images I remember most vividly from

movies/television are Disney's Pocahontas, "The Indian in the Cupboard" (both the movie and books), and the various unnamed characters from John Wayne movies. Other images I recall include the books *Mama do You Love Me*, *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush*, and the Cleveland Indians mascot—Chief Wahoo. What all of these images have in common is that they were created by non-Native people and the majority of them cast Native people in stereotypical roles. The Cleveland mascot and John Wayne movies are most notably racist depictions of Native people. I remember seeing these images and being confused. As a mixed-race person who identifies predominantly as Native American, the images did not reflect what I looked like and this is what affected me the most. I would watch Cleveland baseball games with my grandpa and wonder why people thought Natives should be depicted as literally red. I became self-conscious about my nose, my lips, and my skin color, because Chief Wahoo looked so outrageous I thought people would think of me like that.

Aside from how these images made me feel about my physical appearance was the stereotypes that they produced. Western movies utilized "Tonto speech" that made Native people sound dumb and illiterate, the Indian in the Cupboard showcased a level of paternalism and ownership of Native bodies that simply makes me uncomfortable today, and Pocahontas perpetuates the hyper-sexualization of Native women that has quite literally manifested on the bodies of Native women as the rate of rape and sexual assault of Indigenous women is epidemically high. Of course today at age twenty-four I am more equipped to handle these types of images and everything they entail, but my seven year-old self, or even my fifteen year-old self, had trouble with the disconnection I was witnessing. The disconnection I experienced was from all of these images I was

seeing juxtaposed against how I was taught about my culture as a Comanche citizen. Introspectively, I knew that those images did not represent me, but because I didn't have anything that empowered me, I struggled with what those images said about me and my family. Because of my personal experience with representations of Native people on a general level and more specifically, representations of myself, I felt inclined to address this topic. These images and literary texts affected me so deeply that I feel it is necessary for me to explore this issue in depth and possibly bring more awareness to it in order to effect more change for Native kids now and in the future.

### **Research Problem**

The problem with contemporary literature in a Native American context is the lack of representation concerning Native Americans, not only in the words and characters of literary works themselves, but also within the field of literature—the structure of literature classes inherently overlooks Native American literature while it classifies it as a special interest topic. What results from this overarching problem is the crisis that Native American youth face when exposed to a literature class, or literature in general, that neglects to represent them. Stephanie Fryberg's work utilizes social identity theory in order to explain the significance and importance of representation:

Individuals define themselves and others in reference to their social categories (e.g., race, gender, age, employment, religion, and sexuality). People also understand that other people perceive them through the lens of these categories. Self-understanding, therefore, is particularly influenced by prevalent social categories and by the quality and quantity of images and meanings associated with them. (Fryberg 2010)

What can be taken from this theory is that representations/misrepresentations and lack of representations have an effect on youth from any ethnic background.

Because of the lack of Native American representation in the field of literature, which is dominated by non-Natives, and because of a need to express autonomy over our own images and representations there has been a resurgence in Native American literature. This goes back to N. Scott Momaday's 1968 publication of *House Made of Dawn*, which was a watershed moment in Native American literature. The follow-up to Momaday's generation would be our contemporary authors: Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, and Linda Hogan among many others. These authors, most prominently Alexie and Erdrich, produce works for young adults. While these authors may not explicitly set out to combat previous notions of Native identity (as described by non-Natives) they ultimately achieve just that. Because there is so much research and emphasis on the negative effects of Native American identity, I think it is important to explore the positive side. One study conducted on Native American high school and college students focused on their exposure to mascots based on Native Americans. In the conclusion the author stated "[w]e suggest that the negative effects of exposure to these images may, in part, be due to the relative absence of more contemporary positive images of American Indians in American society" (Fryberg 2010, 5). In addition to contemporary positive images we could insert realistic images. Because of the lack of research on the effects of contemporary Native American literature there is a need for a study that examines what effects it has specifically on Native youth and researches how this literature influences identity for Native youth. However, I would argue to move away from Erdrich and Alexie, just for the moment, and allow Native youth to examine another facet within the overall Native American literature genre, which is Native American comic books. Comic books and graphic novels encompass an area of

literature that addresses young kids who fall between the scope of children's books and young adult novels. Graphic novels present material in a fun and engaging way that makes their inclusion in the Native American literature genre necessary. Because of the way material is presented within this format, graphic novels and comic books have been gaining popularity over the last twenty-five years. Due to their popularity and their ability to discuss sensitive topics, graphic novels are beginning to be included in classrooms solidifying their position as useful teaching tools. While considering these factors that give credibility to graphic novels, it is imperative that we explore the responses that Native youth have toward specifically Native American graphic novels.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which the comic book "Super Indian" influences perceptions of identity and belonging for Native American kids who have grown up in a majority Native community in Oklahoma. The intent is to examine whether or not the literature assists Native youth in combatting stereotypes, or racist notions of what it means to be Native American. The purpose is also to examine the representation of Native people within this comic book and how it influences the identities of Native youth—does this representation carry any weight within the modern Native American identity and how does it guide important decisions in the lives of Native youth?

### **Significance**

This study seeks to explore how a contemporary Native American comic book influences the identity of the Native youth. This type of study is important and necessary because there is an abundance of misrepresentations of Native Americans that

Native youth have to deal with daily, but we need to know how positive images produced by Native authors influence Native youth. This study is relevant and important because we don't know much about the effects of contemporary Native American literature on our younger generations and we need to develop a better understanding of the responses Native youth have to positive imagery and literature. In order to assist our youth we have to know the factors by which they are influenced and how they respond to those factors.



## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **Representations of Native People**

Much of the available literature argues that stereotypical images of Native Americans is detrimental to identity formation and self-esteem (Fryberg 2010). These types of studies employ a framework that is based on the social identity theory that says people are viewed by others through lenses of race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. and because of this, people view themselves through these social lenses. This framework also argues that people internalize the judgments that other people make about them and this is the source of lower self-esteem (Fryberg 2010). Social identity theory is prevalent in the article “Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: The Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots.” The purpose of this study was to explore the consequences that Native American mascots have on Native Americans. The findings are rooted in three studies conducted at different reservation high schools in Arizona. The hypothesis generated by the contributing authors is that regardless of whether the mascots are associated with positive or negative attributes, the exposure to these particular mascots results in lower self-esteem, lower community worth, and fewer achievement possible selves. This article is monumental in its findings and conclusion that mascots based on Native Americans have a negative impact on the identity of Native youth.

When searching for representations of Native Americans, the literature is mostly concerned with negativity, detrimental side-effects, or the necessity for Native Americans to retake control of their representations. Chaney and Burke (Chaney 2011) address this theme within the literature in their study on how non-Natives associate real

Native people with stereotypical mascots. The main question guiding this research is do non-Natives view Natives and Native American mascots as one in the same? The study examined this question by exploring the implicit attitudes people have towards Native American mascots and people. The article uses a framework that relies on characterization of Native Americans in the past that permeates contemporary problems and ideas. The study found that non-Natives carry an implicit bias toward Native American peoples based on misrepresentation in mascot images. The findings also concluded that non-Natives view Native Americans as synonymous with mascot figures as well as the fact that non-Natives, when exposed to Indian mascots, were more likely to stereotype Indian people, thus equating Indians with the negative mascots.

Stephanie Fryberg conducted another study on the effects of the mass media on Native American identity formation. This study titled “Frozen in Time” was an in-depth examination of the types of images, stories, and conversations produced by mass media outlets in regards to Native Americans. The study outlines the fact that Native Americans are underrepresented within the media and this results in very specific negative side-effects for Native Americans. The study contends that mass media homogenizes Native American people and denies individualization. In addition to the homogenization, mass media contributes to another aspect of American culture that fails to represent Native Americans and results in feelings of invisibility. The study finds that invisibility produced by the mass media affects Native American identity formations by initiating a type of self-stereotyping that relegates Native Americans to the images they see being shown in the media and denies other ways to be Native American. The findings of this study are significant as they conclude that when Native Americans are

presented with limited, stereotypical, homogenized images their development beyond these types of images are inhibited. In another study titled “The psychology of Invisibility” conducted by Fryberg, she examines the psychological harms of invisibility and finds that invisibility is a form of racism and discrimination in the way it is harmful to Native Americans. The findings also include that it is necessary for Native Americans and all minorities to see themselves represented holistically and in multiple forms in order to transcend the socially limiting qualities that are reproduced by static and stereotypic images through the media.

These studies encompass the main focus of the current scholarship in Native American (mis)representation and identity formation. While these studies offer important findings, the research is rooted in the negativity surrounding Native American identity and cultural representation. This focus on the negative aspects of Native American images contributed to my desire to conduct a study that is grounded in positivity. The premise of my study is based on part of the findings in “Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses” that says “the negative effects of exposure to these images may, in part, be due to the relative absence of more contemporary positive images of American Indians in American society” (Fryberg 2010). This statement made me think about a study that incorporated a more positive side to representations of Native Americans, since the studies on the negative impacts of images, such as mascots, are plentiful.

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy is a relatively new concept that uses stories as a therapeutic tool for troubled kids, especially minority kids that don’t often see representations of

themselves within literatures. In essence, it means that literature can be used to counsel kids and establish a stable identity. Warren Holman (Holman 1996) uses poetry with representations that reflect his subject in order to explore how helpful it is for under-represented youth to be exposed to literature that they can relate to. While this study focuses on a Puerto Rican child, findings related to bibliotherapy are not limited to one race or ethnicity, it can be applied to anyone. I argue that this is definitely relevant and necessary in Native American communities, as Native Americans are a minority that has been so marginalized that any representation of Natives acts as though Natives have ceased to exist. The concepts of bibliotherapy can be extended to positive representations in literature for Native youth. Current scholarship on bibliotherapy have not been applied to Native youth in this context and it would be beneficial to explore how positive images and literature influence their ideas of themselves.

### **Minority Representation in Literature**

Agosto, Hughes-Hassle, and Gilmore-Clough examined the books that are available to middle school kids and the lack of diversity within them. This study found that less than 1/6 of the books examined had at least one minority protagonist. In addition to this reality is the fact that 30% of the United States population are minorities, but this was not reflected in the available literature. This study points to the lack of minority representation within available literature to middle school students. Additionally, the study found that 25% of the books with a minority protagonist featured a Native American protagonist. But again, only 1/6 of the books the authors looked into contained a minority protagonist; that is 661 books out of 4,255 (Agosto 2003).

Hughes-Hassle and Cox studied representations of minorities within board books. Board books are described as designed for infants and toddlers. This study provides commentary on the normalization of the under-representation of minorities in literature. When kids grow up thinking it is normal not to see representations of themselves, it becomes easier to accept negative images. This study argues that when children of color have been exposed to this under-representation from an early age it makes it hard for them to develop positive feelings about their identity; this point is my main concern when working with Native youth (Hughes-Hassle 2010). After years of their identity being denied, or misrepresented, or under-represented, I am curious as to what their reaction to “Super Indian” will be.

Another side of literature that doesn’t include minorities in the classical sense would be to focus on the representations of women. Garner studied the representations of women in literature (Garner 1999) and while it does not focus on women of color it provides a few helpful points. This article argues that fiction does have an effect on identity concepts in its ability to either help or hinder the identity of readers (Garner 1999). The article also deals mainly with stereotypes that women are exposed to and how these stereotypes manifest in reality, which is also a concept I am interested in exploring within the parameters of my own study. This study makes the case for a conscious move to incorporate more empowering images of women; this desire can be transferred to issues within Indian country. More empowering images of Indians would have positive effects on Native youth.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that there are many gaps within scholarship surrounding Native American literature, comic books, and the resulting effects on identity. There is a sturdy foundation within the literature on Native mascots and the side-effects of these images, but from there the literature dwindles out in relation to how positive images influence Natives. There needs to be a shift within scholarship surrounding Native American images; there are studies that focus on the negative side-effects, but say little in regard to the future of representation. The current literature fails to address any type of solution to the problem; it is mainly focused on identifying the problem and proving that there is a problem. This is where I hope my research answers some questions and spurs new research because it is an aspect of identity that I believe needs to be explored. The research on bibliotherapy makes a strong case for the therapeutic power of stories and speaks to the rejuvenating qualities that stories have to offer when they adequately and accurately represent minority people. It's time for a transition to more attention on the effects of positive images that could hopefully initiate a type of remedy to the negativity that has dominated the scholarship thus far.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Design**

My research design is structured and based on an Indigenous methodological approach that is centered on the necessity to facilitate a positive, helpful, and peaceful community to surround the participants of the study. Indigenous methodology focuses on more restorative processes that will benefit the community and people who are a part of the study. This methodological approach prioritizes the needs of the community over the research process—it is not research for research’s sake; it is research that serves to be of assistance. Conducting research with this methodology serves to make the research process accountable to the tribal worldview(s) of the community of focus (Kovach 2009). This approach necessitates acknowledgment of the history of research within Native communities while it attempts to employ more inclusive, holistic, and personal elements into the research (Kovach 2009). This methodology also incorporates a more intimate and respectful relationship between the community and researcher that I believe is necessary in this type of study. In addition to this methodology, I utilized the terminology “talking circles”, instead of focus groups, in order to connote a more open and comfortable environment for the participants, rather than situate the focus on the research aspect. This approach was necessary, because it utilized an approach that was more flexible and allowed for participants to be around people they are familiar with in the hopes that it would stimulate a friendlier environment as well as valuable discussions. This approach established a welcoming climate that contributed to more comfortable and authentic interactions with participants.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected through a system of talking circles conducted with Native American students from Anadarko Public Schools. Talking circles included 3-4 participants and were initiated by a few guiding questions. The talking circles focused on the representation of Natives within “Super Indian,” but were flexible enough to go in a different direction if the participants chose to do so. Before the talking circles were conducted, the students were introduced to the comic “Super Indian” and asked to read and reflect on the story and characters. Students were given copies of the first edition of “Super Indian” and asked to read it over a two week period. After the students completed their reading, we reconvened in talking circles that had no more than four participants per circle. Within the talking circles, I provided ten guiding questions that revolved around identity, cultural connection, and general perceptions about the comic book. The questions were open-ended in the hopes that it would generate discussion about whatever the kids connected to while reading the comic, but some direct questions were necessary in order to initiate discussion and sustain comfort. I let the participants guide the conversation as much as they wanted to, as long as it stayed on topic, because we focused on how “Super Indian” influenced them, and in what ways, not on their reactions to what I believe to be important about “Super Indian.” The talking circles lasted no more than an hour, but I ended each one by asking the participants if they had any more to discuss, or if I had left something out that they were hoping to discuss.



### **Sample**

The participants for this study are self-identified Native American students ranging from 4th to 10th grade who have grown up in, or around, Anadarko, Oklahoma. The students are between the ages of 9-15. There are 10 participants in total: 8 girls and 2 boys. The participants represent various Tribal Nations including Kiowa, Osage, Seminole, Delaware, and Wichita. In order to recruit the participants, I worked with Anadarko Indian Education who reached out to students who they felt would be the most likely to be interested.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are the sample size. While the sample size is manageable, it isn't large enough to make broad generalizations to other communities. The study will specifically address kids who have grown up in, or around, Anadarko, Oklahoma.

### **Conclusion**

Within this study I hope to answer questions surrounding Native youths' exposure to "Super Indian." Based on the available literature, we can conclude that Native Americans are severely under-represented within American literature, so for some of the kids I anticipate to participate in the study "Super Indian" may be their first exposure to a story created by a Native American complete with illustrations. I also hope this study to result in more attention on the effects of Native American literature and the prospects of growing the genre based on the desires of Native youth. If the kids in the study have a strong positive reaction to "Super Indian" then it creates a stronger need for the authorship of our own images and the incorporation of such images in the

classroom setting, because we can't let Native youth be responsible for introducing themselves to the literature. It needs to be incorporated in the curriculum if we are to truly combat such prevalent negative images. Within my research I also hope to spark an interest in this type of examination of literature for future people to continue to fill in the gaps of the pre-existing scholarship.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

Within the data, there were three major themes identified: representation of Natives, the ability of the participants to relate to the material, and empowerment. These three themes emerged organically within each of the talking circles and reflect the genuine thoughts of the participants. The themes encompass much more than the simplicity that their labels suggest, and each theme functions through the many levels. Each of the identified themes include emotional responses that arose from each participant, which caused them to stand out during transcription and the analysis process.

### **Representation of Natives in Media**

This theme functions on multiple levels in the way that participants acknowledged both the lack of Native representation in mainstream culture and then the way this particular representation functions, to them. Each of the participants expressed that they had never heard of a Native superhero before reading the comic book “Super Indian.” Along with articulating the fact that they had never seen a Native superhero before is the fact that all of the participants, except for one, had never read about Native people in any genre. This demonstrates not only the lack of material available for our Native youth, but represents an overall sentiment of happiness about reading and seeing a Native representation for the first time. These feelings prompted one participant four to reflect and say “well, I’ve never seen an Indian superhero. I like it. I think it’s cool. It’s like putting Indians out there.” Participant four’s assertion that this comic book is “putting Indians out there” directly points to the limited representation there is for us, as Natives. In the same talking circle another participant agreed with her statement when

prompted with the question of how this comic book made her feel: “happy and proud a little bit...it’s like what she said, I haven’t seen a superhero like this.” In this statement one can see the emotional response that comes along with the participant recognizing that she hasn’t ever encountered a representation of a Native person. Each participant expressed feelings of happiness after reading “Super Indian” that transitions into another aspect of the representation theme: the necessity of depicting Natives.

Some of the participants conveyed certain feelings of excitement when discussing Super Indian, because it was the first representation, and more importantly the first positive representation, that they have seen. This exemplifies the importance of these representations, because it positively impacts these kids who are stuck in a loop of invisibility (Fryberg 2008). Participant ten relayed that she feels better when she sees art, books, or movies with Natives in them; when asked why it makes her feel better her response was “because it’s like they’re bringing attention to whitewashing.” She went on to discuss how it is important for her to see accurate depictions of reality. Within this response is the acknowledgement of how mainstream media and art depicts reality to be one sided most of the time, which serves the dominant society by maintaining power through erasing representations of contemporary Native realities. However, this participant recognizes that her racial and cultural existence contradicts the normative whitewashing of popular culture.

The importance of these types of representations goes even further to include the necessity of cultural representations. Participants expressed how our Native cultures should be depicted in more artistic works like “Super Indian” so that other people can be educated about our cultures. Each participant was asked what their comic book, or

other creative work, would be like if they were to ever create one and each one them affirmed that they would include aspects of their identity and culture in order to create more awareness, educate people, and help produce more positive images of Natives. Participant ten says that this comic makes her think about how she could help create awareness for her people and Native people more generally: “it kind of like makes me think about how I can do stuff [and] create awareness.” She later discussed how she wants to be a movie director in order to tell Native stories “because sometimes it’s just one-sided” (the participant stated this in response to her earlier comment about whitewashing and why it is important to remedy those types of depictions of the world). Participant one commented that it was important for him to see Indians as heroes; when asked why he responded with “it’s because we don’t all want to see different people out there.” Participant one further expressed his desire to see representations of heroes who resemble him in both culture and ethnicity. In the same talking circle, other participants affirmed their desire to read about people and view images about people who were Native. Participant seven stated, “I felt happy that someone finally created a comic book with an Indian as a hero.” She also indicated that she wouldn’t feel the same way reading a different comic that included White characters. This participant’s fairly direct call-out of mainstream comics pointedly calls attention to the lack of diversity within popular culture and comics. The comments made by participants exemplified their personal reactions to seeing a representation that aligned with what they wish to see and maybe even create; what also arose was emotional responses even if the participants couldn’t always articulate the reason(s) behind those emotional responses.

Another area in which the participants expanded on the theme of representation was when they discussed the author—Arigon Starr’s—implementation of actual Native American figures. In this issue of “Super Indian” Starr dedicated two pages to two “Real Super Indians,” Maria Tallchief and Jim Thorpe. When discussing what aspects of the comic book he liked Participant three stated: “I liked how they put real Native people in the story and [how it talked] about the history.” This participant later revealed how important telling his cultural and tribal history was to him. He communicated that if he were to create something similar to “Super Indian” he would want to include historical facts about his Seminole background in order to educate his readers on a different culture. This line of discussion revealed that participants were especially receptive to the use of real people within a fictional book. Overall, participants believed it to be necessary to bring awareness to real Natives throughout history who may not be typically taught in standard history classes. It also serves as a remembrance for American Indian historical figures who may go unnoticed or are on the verge of being forgotten.

Participant ten viewed the inclusion of historical Native figures in terms of promoting Native success: “it makes me feel [happier] about the book. I think when you put real people in there it makes it more like on a personal level of how we can achieve something.” To this participant, it was important to her to see not only the simplicity of Native representation (that wasn’t full of stereotypes), but also the attention given to Native people who existed and made great accomplishments in reality. This aspect within the broader theme of representations exemplifies the necessity of representation

in multiple forms. These participants had strong positive reactions to the book as a whole, but even more so to these few pages dedicated to actual Native people.

In addition to recognizing the limited existing representations, participants were able to distinguish between different types of representation. One common issue with existing Native representations that was brought up by participants was a focus on anti-Native sentiments. More negative depictions of Natives exist than positive portrayals and the oldest participant was able to articulate her thoughts on this when asked about Native representations in mainstream media. This participant discussed representations of Native people in movies and explained, “they’re usually portrayed like they drink a lot, or they don’t really do anything. In the comic book they have jobs and it’s more like they try to accomplish something.” This particular participant identified stereotypes that are often used when depicting Natives in movies. As movies are more widely viewed, it makes sense that a participant would comment on what she has seen in movies and use that to contrast what she has read and viewed in the comic book.

Another participant was able to highlight this aspect of the theme when he answered the question of why he doesn’t see Native superheroes or popular Native characters in general: “because people don’t pay attention to Indians. They don’t really do stuff for us...because we’re different than all of them.” This statement, from participant three, points to the seemingly unpopularity of being American Indian at least from a popular culture perspective. In saying that “people don’t pay attention to Indians” the participant speaks to the invisibility of Native people within media and society; this goes even further to encompass the general thought that Native people don’t exist anymore, which is commonly thought by communities that have very little

contact or exposure to Native cultures and people. The participants in this study live in a community that is predominantly Native American with about 41% of population identifying as Native American (oklahomademographics.com) yet they still communicated their observations about this type of anti-Native sentiment, because it is something that is so pervasive.

Within the first volume of “Super Indian” the author utilizes the villain “Technoskin,” another member of the main character’s tribe and reservation who also has superpowers, but uses them for evil. This villain attempts to get his people on the reservation to change and adapt to a more mainstream, essentially non-Native, culture. All participants were asked what they thought about this villain and how he acted toward his own tribe. When asked why they thought he would attempt to persuade his tribe that their culture was bad one participant responded, “because he doesn’t like where he is. Because people pick on him or something.” This participant expressed that he believed the villain, Technoskin, was picked on because he was Indian, which resulted in him trying to abandon his culture and force others to abandon it as well. Participant ten also expressed similar feelings regarding Technoskin saying “maybe there’s like a negative connotation with being Native.” She further explained that she believed the villain to be affected by negative stereotypes about Natives and that he was working against those stereotypes by trying to force himself and others to conform to a different culture. As this response was more in depth than the other participants, I stayed on this topic by asking her if she’d met anyone like this in real life. Her answer confirmed this in the way she related it to microaggressions she has encountered throughout her life. Also within this part of the talking circle, participant ten’s



demeanor changed as these particular questions and her responses evoked different emotions than early on in the conversation. She seemed more low-spirited, but this could be accounted for through the connection between the villain and the memories of certain microaggressions enacted against her. It is evident that this comic book evokes a multitude of emotions causing it to serve multiple purposes other than pure entertainment.

### **Ability to Relate to the Material**

Each participant within this study displayed a level of familiarity with the subject matter. The participants' familiarity and comfort with the material was brought out when they began discussing the humor and the visual representations within the work. While each participant commented on the tendency of the comic to lean to a humorous side, they did have trouble relating the visual representation of Super Indian and other characters to people they know or know of in reality. In each talking circle, I asked participants if the character, Super Indian, resembled anyone they know or are acquainted with, but all, except for one, responded by denying that the character looks personally familiar to them. The intended purpose of this question was to learn about how the participants, and potentially other Native kids, view the characters in terms of reality. Essentially, do kids relate these pictures of Native people to their family members, community members, or even themselves? While the participants admitted that they felt represented by this comic and they also felt that the material was familiar they couldn't get past his perfect features—he wasn't realistic enough; he is overly muscular, has perfect braids, has perfectly combed hair, and outstanding bone structure. Though students did not acknowledge that he looks like people they know, they did

express that he looked Indian and they related to that fact about the hero's identity. A few participants made comments about his long hair and his noticeable cheek bones that made him look more phenotypically Native American, but again they didn't make any connections between him and relatives.

The one participant who made a connection between Super Indian and a relative credited it mainly to the long hair and Native features that Super Indian shares with her uncle. While this may not be a profound connection between the two, it does show that there is another level of familiarity within this type of representation for Native kids and maybe society doesn't expect white kids to say that Superman resembles their dad, but do they need to? For Native kids there is already such a lack of positive, accurate, and even inspiring representations showing them that they exist, matter, or are capable of achieving any form of success. For this particular participant to see a similarity between a cartoonish picture and a family member is an interesting and necessary development that will possibly contribute to more realistic comic book art work in order to sustain, or even increase that level of relatability.

The other side of the participants' ability to relate to the comic is the humor that they continually commented on. Each participant spoke about how they found the comic humorous in subject matter, character names (e.g. Agent 49, Edgar Bigboote, Wampum Baggs), and the new take on standard comic book bubble caption phrases (e.g. "POWWOW"). Participant ten discussed the humor within this comic book in terms of other indigenous groups across the world while also discussing it within the context of a survival tactic. She was able to describe the humor as almost dark in the

way that the comic addresses pertinent issues within Indian country, but does so in a humorous light:

10: Can I say something? This book is like the Aboriginals in Australia. They write about things that aren't supposed to be funny, but they make it funny.

PI: What do you mean things that aren't supposed to be funny? Do you mean like turning a bad situation into a humorous light?

10: Yeah.

PI: So what made you think of that? Do you think this [comic] book does that?

10: Yeah.

PI: How so? What's the bad thing they made humorous?

10: The end part.

PI: The villain, Technoskin?

10: Yeah.

PI: So you're saying it talks about a real issue that is bad, but it brings awareness to it in a humorous tone?

10: Yeah, like in "Boy" (New Zealand film by Taika Waititi) there's a bad situation throughout the whole movie, but you're cracking up through it all.

PI: Do you think other people do that who aren't Native...that type of humor?

10: Yeah, but I don't know. It's different. When you watch a Native American movie and then you watch another Native movie from a different country, it's almost the same.

PI: So, do you think our hardships make us look at things in a more humorous light? Just everything we've been through as a people?

10: Yeah.

PI: Do you think we have to look at things in a humorous light?

10: No.

PI: When I say 'have to' I mean do you think it's a part of our survival.

10: Sometimes...for some people, yeah. Because it can be hard.

Through this interaction it is evident that this participant is drawing connections between different Indigenous people groups about the type of humor that we, as generationally oppressed people, produce through our writing and movies. In this comic book the humor accounts for more than a tactic of survival, it is a tactic implemented by the author in order to present the issues that Technoskin encompasses—unpopularity of being Native, a colonized mindset that drives some to want to conform, or assimilate, to mainstream culture, and a contemporary lack of respect for traditions. Participant ten points to a level of recognition that being Native in contemporary times can be difficult,

but our humor and the way we view things assists us in moving forward and confronting these issues. It is clear to see that this specific representation of Natives presents the youth, and any Native person who reads it, with many familiar aspects of a general Native identity.

Another aspect of the relatability theme is the attention the participants gave to the fictional tribe and reservation utilized within Super Indian's world. Leaning Oak is the name attributed to the reservation and tribal people within the comic book. Participants were asked how they felt about the use of a fictional tribe and reservation as opposed to the hundreds of existing real ones. This part of each talking circle brought up the most diverse responses. Majority of the participants were okay with the tribe being fictional, because it meant the author didn't have to adhere to specific cultural norms, it made it possible for kids from different tribal backgrounds to relate to the story, and it allowed for more freedom on the author's part, because the information did not have to be accurate or receive any type of validation from a tribal leader, or a specific community. However, when asked about whether or not they would personally choose to use a specific tribe if they were in Arigon Starr's position, many of them said they would use their own tribe, or a multitude of actual tribes. Six out of the ten participants conveyed that they would use the tribe they affiliate with as a reference if they were to experiment with creative and artistic works, such as "Super Indian," so that they can educate people on specific history and culture that they are more familiar with. Two said they would use a fictional tribe and place so that they could have more freedom with the material they produce, but their product would still include aspects of their identity as American Indian. One of the remaining two participants expressed that

she would use many tribes within her potential comic book, so that multiple Indian Nations are represented. The last participant disclosed that she aspires to be a film director and her movies would consist of a Native cast in order to tell Native stories that can be tribally specific, but also able to support multiple tribal narratives. Each of these responses may vary, but they maintain a focus on the significance of racial and cultural representation and even show their own willingness to contribute to future representations of Natives, whether it is tribally specific or fictional.

### **Empowerment**

The final theme that is supported by the data collected is one of empowerment which manifested within each participant's willingness to contribute to positive representations of Native people. This theme is reflected in the way that each participant answered the question of whether they could, or would, attempt to create something similar to "Super Indian." They all reacted positively to that section of the conversation while relaying that it is a future endeavor they are interested in, after seeing from "Super Indian" that it is possible. Participant ten responded fairly directly when she was asked:

PI: Does the comic or the story make you think of yourself in any way?

10: It kind of like makes me think about how I can do stuff...create awareness.

PI: The author makes you feel that way, or the story does?

10: The author.

This reveals that the representation within "Super Indian" is two-fold in the way it depicts Natives positively within the storyline and in the visual subject matter, but also in having a Native author it shows these kids that they have the potential to follow the steps of people like Arigon Starr in the hopes of producing creative, artistic, and meaningful work.

Furthermore, this type of response that advocates for their own abilities in producing this kind of material confirms their earlier comments on how they haven't seen any, or have only seen very few, representations of Native people. Their responses to questions regarding their personal abilities and desires to produce representations function as a remedy to what they have already described as lacking in content. Whether they were able to articulate this point or not, their comments prove an inherent desire to not only see reflections of themselves, but to contribute to those reflections for other Native youth as well.

When participants began discussing their reactions to "Super Indian" in terms of empowerment and later in terms of assisting their personal capabilities it became clear that these responses were paired with emotional responses. Participant five states it clearly in saying "I felt powerful." The remainder of the participants stated that the book made them happy simply for the fact that they didn't know anything like this existed and it was a happy surprise to find out not only does it exist, but there's even more material out there. Throughout the talking circles it became evident that the participants' emotional responses to the work and representation, as a whole, coincided with their reception of the hero, Super Indian. When asked how Super Indian compared to superheroes the participants were familiar with, they talked about how much better Super Indian was: "he's better than all the others." This was an interesting development simply due to the lack of exposure these participants have had to Super Indian. These participants have encountered the well-known DC and Marvel superheroes for a significantly longer amount of time than Super Indian, yet they still believed Super Indian to be better. Participant one even believes that Super Indian would beat

Superman in a fight. On the exterior this statement might not mean much, but when examined in context it shows how these kids have been longing to see someone who they can relate to at least on the minimal level that they share the same racial identity.

Also present within this theme is the subtle reasons behind the overall feeling of empowerment and other positive emotional responses. Each participant confirmed that this comic made them happy and that this would not be the case if the characters were not Native, but behind this happiness is the underlying fact that “Super Indian” is different from the images and stories that they are constantly being led to. And as participant ten said, those images and stories reflect this type of whitewashing that does not reflect reality for these kids who have grown up around Anadarko, Oklahoma. The existing status quo within literature and comic books is obvious to these kids. Even if they can’t fully articulate it, their emotional reactions to this comic book show just how important it is. Even though participants couldn’t fully express their acknowledgment of the disproportionate racial representations within popular culture in profound terms, they still recognized the lack of diversity. This became abundantly clear when participant seven commented on why she doesn’t feel represented in other comic books: “mostly just because they’re white people.”

In addition to expressing positive reactions to Super Indian, participants displayed a strong desire to read more material similar to “Super Indian.” Each talking circle included the questions “would you read more stuff like this” and “would you recommend this book.” Each participant was eager to hear about more Native comic books that they didn’t know existed and said fairly definitively that they would read them. Each participant also talked about how they would recommend the book to their

friends and family, and some of them already had recommended it. The eagerness behind both the desire to read more and wanting to introduce people they know to this type of literature opens up a layer of pride that extends from empowerment and was even directly brought up by participant two

PI: How'd it make you feel?

2: Like happy and proud a little bit.

PI: How does it make you feel proud?

2: It's like what she said, I haven't seen a superhero like this.

The pride and empowerment that arises from seeing a positive Native representation encouraged participants to read more and attempt to get others to read more, as well.

This representation promotes reading by making the content familiar for the intended Native audience. That familiarity, as previously discussed, creates a representation that facilitates a deeper engagement with the material. This culminates into empowerment through the way that the participants felt more inclined to read more due to the material's effect and ability to make reading fun, as well as familiar.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Findings from this study support previous research on invisibility and misrepresentation. However, the findings also expand on how Native kids react to positive representation through the way the participants expressed their emotional responses and feelings of empowerment. When examined altogether, the themes suggest that these participants are acutely aware of their own racial invisibility within popular media and literature as evident through the reoccurring statement made by the participants acknowledging that they had never, or rarely, encountered Native people in books, movies, television, or comics. The participants showed a certain level of surprise when they recounted what it was like to see “Super Indian” for the first time. The existing research on the topic of invisibility has found that media representations of Native people leads to decreased self-esteem (Fryberg, 2008). The research also shows that “limited representations convey to Native Americans that they do not belong and cannot be successful in atypical domains” (Fryberg 2015). However this study suggests that exposure to the positive representation of “Super Indian” and even exposure to the author, Arigon Starr, promotes the idea that Native youth are capable of not only achieving success outside of “atypical domains,” but also that they can achieve success in a general sense. Fryberg & Markus (2003) refer to this as “possible selves”, or the “ideal selves that people would like to become” (p. 332). This is supported by each participant’s willingness to contribute to future representations of Native people in the form of comics, books, and movies. As found in the data, this desire to create works of art and/or literature is significant in two distinct ways—the fact that the participants feel like they are able to create artistic works that reflect their Native American identity, and

the effect that their creative endeavors sustain this chain of empowerment. Arigon Starr's status as author and illustrator as in itself show these kids that Native people are capable of fulfilling these atypical roles and taking ownership of our own representations. From this, it is clear that the positive impact of "Super Indian" is two-fold in how it details a story of a Native superhero, effectively creating media representations for Native people, and in how its author exemplifies what Native kids can achieve.

What also comes out of these themes is the importance the participants themselves place on seeing images that they believe reflect their own identity. Previous research tells us that when Native kids are flooded with misrepresentations about their identity, which in turn homogenizes all Native American identity into one category, they have a tendency to participate in self stereotyping (Fryberg 2008, Fryberg 2015). When the participants in this study expressed their joy in seeing a Native superhero they push the research to new directions in the way that these kids are implicitly asking for more of this material. The youth in this study repeatedly expressed that they "did not know material like this existed," and in those statements they conveyed a message that they would continue to search for and read more Native American comic books. Each participant commented that seeing this comic book and this specific representation was something that was important to them, because their identity is important to them, and this validates the importance of their racial identity. This further allows them as Native youth to notice the multitude of roles they can strive for.

The theme of empowerment found within the data is possibly the most important. The research that has been done forces us to focus on the negativity—

psychological damages, self-esteem issues, and self-stereotyping—because the first step in addressing a problem is proving that it causes harm. This has sufficiently been done, but while people have proved the majority of existing representations of Native American people have detrimental effects on our youth, figuring out what uplifts them has been neglected. The attention that the participants in this study gave to their feelings of empowerment exemplify what it takes to uplift their perceptions of their identity. The existing literature thoroughly examines representations of Natives in literature and finds that, simply put, it is lacking on every level (Hughes 2010, Agosto 2003). From a young age, Native kids are left out of the majority of children's books that they are exposed to. As the research shows, this causes any representations that they may encounter later in life to seem like an anomaly and thus their racial identity exists as an anomaly. So when participant three says “people don't pay attention to Indians” he hits on the key issue of representation that tends to leave Native Americans out of the media and subsequently, the contemporary American imaginary.

Also gathered from the data is confirmation that this comic book was the first Native representation by a Native author that majority of the kids had seen. The kids ranged in age from 9-15 years old and this was their introduction to Native American literature. I was in college before I learned of the vast field of Native American literature and it was a rush; I felt like it was something that I had been missing without even knowing it. My introduction was in a class specifically targeted toward Native American literature during my undergraduate experience. It wasn't until I was twenty-three that I learned of Native American comic books, and then found “Super Indian.” One of the biggest hopes of this study was that it would expose Native youth to what is

available to them. Part of my reasoning for embarking on this research journey was my experiences with the Native American images and representations I was surrounded by as a kid and young adult. Another part of my reasoning for this research was to hopefully catch at least a few kids at an early age, so they wouldn't be in their twenties reading Native American literature for the first time. Giving Native kids this type of material at an early age is necessary so they don't grow older each year with the embedded message that their existence in American society is atypical. Literature is a potential partial remedy to invisibility. The purpose of this study was not to research the specific impact that exposing participants to Native American literature has on Native youth, instead it focuses on their responses and reactions to the material. With this in mind, the data within this study presents possible research areas for the future.

The fact that participants repeatedly commented on "Super Indian" being the first Native American representation they have encountered speaks volumes to the barriers that exist between this type of material and its intended audience. The majority of comics are published by Marvel and DC, which are widely distributed and can be found in all comic book stores, book stores, and various places online. "Super Indian" is self-published, like many Native American comics, because major comic book distributors and companies aren't exactly interested in these types of stories, or they don't believe it will generate enough revenue for them. Because of these issues, people like Arigon Starr have to find other venues to publish their work. Since Starr self-publishes, she has created a website for her comics—[superindiancomics.com](http://superindiancomics.com)—through which people can purchase "Super Indian" comics, as well as other merchandise. Due to the limited ways in which people can not only access "Super Indian," but also just learn

about “Super Indian” it makes it difficult for Native youth (especially those in remote locations) to discover this material that is actually targeted toward them. Creating awareness, however, is the first step in breaking down this barrier so that Native youth are able to find these stories.

In addition to the barriers around accessing this type of comic book are the barriers that I encountered in conducting this research. Originally, I was going to recruit participants through Mission Elementary School in Anadarko, Oklahoma, however, after the initial recruitment process I was notified that the teacher in charge of the after-school program felt the material in “Super Indian” needed to be checked again by the same parent committee I had already received approval from. The committee met and decided that certain topics in “Super Indian” may be inappropriate for the age group (5<sup>th</sup> graders). The parents and teacher also felt the comic was above the reading level of the potential participants. This particular barrier is problematic in how the administration at this school within a predominantly Native community underestimates the Native youth in not just their reading capabilities, but also in their ability to comprehend material that is targeted toward them. It also raises questions and concerns of why communities are quick to underestimate the abilities of Native youth. In actuality the participants that ended up as a part of the study were able to follow the story and material without much trouble. The group of participants even included at least one child under the age of ten and the study showed that the participants were highly receptive of this type of story, representation, and overall material.

The data from this research suggests that “Super Indian” assisted the participants in this study in building up their self-image as Native Americans while reaffirming their

existence and validity. The reoccurring statement from each talking circle was that this comic book was important and necessary. As previously discussed, participants were not fully able to articulate their reasoning behind this statement, but they continually repeated it and showed why it was important through their answers to other questions. Each participant conveyed that their identity and culture was important to them and that is why the comic book is important. From this, it is clear that the theme “representation of Natives in media” is multifaceted. First, participants were able to acknowledge the lack of representation. Second, participants identified the importance of seeing themselves represented. While, each participant’s ideas about what should be represented and how it should be represented differed, they all shared the common sentiment that representation is important. At ages 9-15, these kids were able to recognize what years of research has been explaining. Furthermore, these particular kids noticed their own desires to contribute to future representations because of how important it is to them, which brings us to the third facet of the theme: an emphasis on more positive representations of Natives in literature. This relates to previous research from Fryberg (2008), which suggests that the negative effects of exposure to Native stereotypes for Native youth is compounded by the invisibility of Native people in mainstream society. Positive images and representation are important aspects of fostering positive self-images and possible selves for Native youth.

While this study discusses “Super Indian” as continuously positive and important, the comic still has limitations in the way it utilizes a sort of pan-Indian approach to the culture(s) displayed throughout the text. Within this limitation, questions of accuracy may arise since a major concern of non-Native-authored images

and representations is that they are inaccurate. In the case of this fictional story, tribe, and reservation that is done through the superhero/comic book genre the point is that the author does not have to be accurate in showcasing one specific Native culture. The fictional culture is purposeful so that the author did not have to tip-toe around what is acceptable to share and what isn't. While this aspect is deliberate it still presents a point of possible contention. When we criticize offensive representations the bulk of the offense is in the inaccuracy of how Native Americans are portrayed. A fictional tribe within a superhero worldview that draws on various diverse aspects of Native American life and culture can be viewed as inaccurate as it is a homogenization of Native peoples that we continually fight against. On the other side of this specific limitation is the ability of Native authors and illustrators to decide what they believe is culturally okay to share with an audience that may not be from their culture. In this case, the author/illustrator did not feel comfortable sharing details about her own tribe and thus saw pan-Indianism as a way around that.

This study also has important implications for representations of Native Americans and bibliotherapy. As bibliotherapy has been used to establish a sturdy foundation of identity for underrepresented youth, the purpose behind bibliotherapy is to foster a positive self-image from exposing children to images and literature that highlights their racial identity whereas popular media fails to address it at all (Homan 1996). The participants in this study responded positively to the opportunity to read a comic book with Native characters on their own. It is interesting to think about what the findings would show if "Super Indian," or another text, were utilized for the specific

purpose of addressing identity formation. Future research is needed to explore the utilization of bibliotherapy in Native populations.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the data collected from this study suggests “Super Indian” facilitates a positive environment in which Native kids can encounter familiar issues and people in literature for the potentially first time. The data gathered shows us that Native youth respond positively to the elements within the comic book that are meant to promote healthy discussion along with identity reinforcement that serves to negate common stereotypes. The comic book shows Native kids humor, encourages literacy, presents historical figures, and does so in an easily accessible genre. This study also presents different areas of exploration for future research that could exponentially help Native youth. As this study had a limited sample size of ten participants and only covered kids who grew up around Anadarko, Oklahoma, it is clear that it lacks the ability to make broad generalizations to Native youth elsewhere, but this presents another area that can be addressed by other people in this field. A larger study could yield more holistic findings and effect even more Native kids.

Despite the relatively small size of this study, it remains an important step in the process of addressing and replacing the negative images that Native kids are bombarded with. And if we are able to show these kids at an early age that there are alternative, better, and more accurate portrayals of Native Americans it’s safe to say that this can help them in the long run with how they view themselves and how they allow others to view them. For the children who were apart of this study, “Super Indian” showed them that they can find appropriate material to read that reflects at least some aspect of their



life. After each participant said they would read more, it is apparent that it had a positive and encouraging effect on them.

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