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The Phantom in Aboriginal Australia: Educational Comics, National Identity, and Indigeneity

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Superheroes have often been used as symbols for civic virtues. Groups from across the political spectrum, from indigenous activists and community health organisations to government agencies, have taken superheroes beyond their roles as crimefighters to demonstrate the heroism of participatory democracy and promoting public health. As Henry Jenkins has argued, “Superheroes are now a vital element in our collective civic imaginations” (25). However, the roles of these heroes in community service campaigns can vary widely, constructing differing versions of heroism, conflicting civic virtues, and even widely divergent versions of the characters themselves. Accordingly, studying the ways that different groups have employed superheroes in community service campaigns can illuminate the multifaceted meanings of superheroes and heroism in the civic imagination.

This chapter examines community service campaigns conducted for Aboriginal Australians between 1986 and 1996 that repurposed The Phantom, a hero created by Lee Falk for American newspaper comic strips in 1936. Comics scholar Kevin Patrick has discussed how Australian adaptations of The Phantom reflect different interpretations of colonialism alongside “the needs and aspirations of Indigenous people” (“The Wisdom of the Phantom 120). This chapter will chronicle the evolution of The Phantom as a spokescharacter for Aboriginal Australians. The chapter will outline how Aboriginal health organisations came to establish The Phantom as a vehicle for indigenous community service messages by ironically recasting Falk’s character as a member of the Indigenous community¹. While the earliest Aboriginal uses of The Phantom subverted the copyright of King Features Syndicate (which owns the character), later publications licensed the character, and brought it closer in line to the comic strip version. As King Features and larger Australian government organisations became involved in deploying The Phantom for community service campaigns, the character became a voice of conventional authority, and the authenticity and humour of the earlier community-led projects was lost.

A useful lens to understand the history of these uses of The Phantom is John Fiske’s concept of “excorporation” and “incorporation”. For Fiske, popular culture comprises the uses and meanings that people make out of mass-produced cultural products, such as comic strips and comic books. Writing before the Internet had re-wired the structures of popular culture and fan communities, a time contemporaneous with the publications examined in this

¹ In this paper, the word ‘Indigenous’ refers to First Nations peoples in general, while “Indigenous Australians” refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and “Aboriginal” refers to Australian Aboriginal people in particular.

chapter, Fiske argued that since many subordinated subcultures lacked the resources and means of production to create mass culture, they instead refashioned the products of mass culture into expressions of meaning that could be quite different from what their producers initially intended. He designates “excorporation” as this “process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system” (15). Its opposite force is “incorporation”, where the manufacturers of mass culture seek to “adopt” these alternate or oppositional permutations of popular culture “into the dominant system and thus attempt to rob them of any oppositional meanings” (18). Fiske thus sees popular culture as an unsettled struggle over the meanings of mass culture, with subordinate subcultures repurposing media symbols to suit their needs, and the dominant producers seeking to tame those subversions to maintain the status quo.

It is important to note that not all adaptations or variations of a popular culture text are excorporations. For example, the version of *The Phantom* that became popular in Australia was changed in some ways from the American original. However, this should be better understood as a cross-cultural, transnational adaptation, where the meaning of the character is slightly modified to suit a local context, rather than subverted. Indeed, although Falk created *The Phantom* for King Features Syndicate to be published in American newspapers, the character has seen greater success beyond America. As Patrick documents in his monograph *The Phantom Unmasked*, *The Phantom* has “unrivalled status as an adopted national hero” in Sweden, India, and Australia (3). Patrick has argued that “more than just another instance of American cultural imperialism,” *The Phantom*’s popularity beyond the strip’s country of origin “demonstrates the process whereby one culture can take a product of another and refashion it in often surprising and contradictory ways” (“Phans” Not “Fans” 151). When King Features licenses international incarnations of *The Phantom*, it not only builds the value of its own intellectual properties, but also potentially creates a common cultural good that links the countries where the comic is distributed. This has the potential to bring readers into mutual “civic imaginings” of authority, community, and control.

While King Features generally looks to control international variations of the character at a national level by granting country-specific licenses to publishers in Australia, Sweden, and others, *The Phantom* has also been appropriated in more specific, sub-national, and hyper-local ways. For example, the comics examined in this chapter present versions of *The Phantom* that are specifically linked to particular communities in remote, Outback Australia – a *Phantom* from Broome, Western Australia who parties at local music gigs, a *Phantom* from Katherine in the Northern Territory who meets with elders under a gum tree, far away from the urban publishers that have typically printed *The Phantom*’s exploits, such as Sydney-based Frew Publications.

The comics examined in this chapter were created for Aboriginal communities, and feature an (often unofficial) excorporation of *The Phantom* as a civic symbol in an indigenous context. This is intriguing because the character is typically presented as a European man who lives amongst, and is revered by, indigenous people. *The Phantom* can be understood as a superheroic version of Tarzan (Knowles), but his lineage traces back farther. Both Tarzan and *The Phantom* have been interpreted as fantastical extrapolations of White captivity memoirs like Mary Rowlandson’s *The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson*, published in 1682 (Hübinette and Arvanitakis 695-696), and as iterations

of the orientalist convention exemplified in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) of "a European who creates a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island" (Friese 10). In Chapter [X] of this collection, Uribe-Jongbloed and Espinosa-Medina identify how a similar white saviour trope, the "Mohican Syndrome", influenced the development of Columbian superheroes.

In some ways, the nonspecific, Orientalist tropes of "othering" in Falk's Phantom makes the character very easy to translocate. The Phantom's home base is a skull-shaped cave in a jungle called The Deep Woods, located in a fictional third world country that Falk first dubbed Bengal, then Bengali, and later Bengalla. Located originally near Java, then in India, then eastern Africa, the location of the Deep Woods and the nationality of its indigenous Bandar people were fluid for the American Falk, who was concerned only with setting his hero's adventures in a mythical, mystical, Oriental wilderness.

The creators of the Australian comics examined in this chapter used the mutability of The Phantom, and of his milieu, to cast The Phantom as member of the Indigenous Australian community, at times coded unambiguously as Black and Aboriginal. These comics see him take on roles far beyond what is usually expected of costumed heroes: a mediator in custody battles, a lover converted to the virtues of safe sex, and an election candidate in a remote shire council. The earlier comics excorporate, parody, and subvert the colonialist and orientalist tropes of Falk's Phantom, while the later comics, authorised by both King Features and the Australian Government, mostly serve to reinforce those tropes. This allows us to see how The Phantom becomes a site for negotiating visions of the civic imagination, as the character is first used in subversive ways before ultimately being incorporated back into a more conventional role, and made to serve the status quo.

The Phantom in Australia

To understand the Aboriginal variations of The Phantom, it is important to briefly discuss the national Australian context of the character. The prominence of the American-created Phantom in remote Aboriginal Australian communities may seem unusual but, as Russell Marks notes, "The Phantom *is* Australia's favourite comic hero" where he out-sells heroes like Batman and Spider-man, "by as much as ten-to-one" ("The Legend and the Phantom").

The first Australian version of *The Phantom* debuted in the September 1, 1936 issue of *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, roughly six months after the feature began in American newspapers. The weekly woman's magazine printed a page of four daily American *Phantom* strips each week, preceded by a short synopsis of the previous episodes. This synopsis set the Australian context for *The Phantom*, by initially presenting the female lead Diana Palmer as the protagonist of the story. Beginning with the second instalment, the *Woman's Mirror* synopsis also served to localise the strip, describing the location of a besieged ocean liner as "off the coast of Sydney." By the third strip, Diana herself was described as a "Sydney girl". Diana would shortly go on to become the Phantom's love interest, and Falk had the characters get married in a 1977 storyline.

Patrick argues that "*The Phantom's* longstanding tenure in the *Woman's Mirror* – where it remained until the magazine's closure in 1961 – cemented the character's status as a widely

recognised fixture in Australian popular culture for years to come,” and explains why *The Phantom* “retains a strong following amongst Australian women” (“Phans” Not “Fans” 136). It also served to create a readership of the character among the children, husbands, and relatives of the women who bought the *Woman’s Mirror*. As journalist Troy Bramston recalls, “My grandfather and father read *The Phantom* when they were kids. His appeal transcends generations” (“Art Shows”).

In 1948, more than a decade after the Phantom entered the pages of the *Woman’s Mirror*, Sydney-based Frew Publications began publishing a comic book for the Australian market that featured reprints of *The Phantom*. Sales of the comic were strong. By 1950, Frew’s version of *The Phantom* had reached a circulation of 90,000 copies a month (Snowden, 1973, p.6, quoted in Patrick 2012). Frew celebrated its 70th anniversary of continually publishing *The Phantom* in 2018 with regular issues of their comics still available in newsagents across Australia, from the city to the Outback. No other comic book in Australia comes close to matching its storied publication history.

As the Aboriginal lawyer and land rights advocate Noel Pearson has recalled:

When I was a kid, the old and the young read comic books, cowboy stories and magazines. These reading materials would make their way around the village, read by all of the interested members of one household and then passed on to the next. *The Phantom* was, of course, premium (51).

This availability in the farthest corners of Australia may also partly account for *The Phantom’s* enduring popularity amongst remote Aboriginal communities.

Postcolonial critique

Considering Australia’s shameful legacy of subjugating and annihilating its Indigenous people and cultures, it is unsettling but perhaps not surprising that its most popular superhero is essentially, as Mark A. Peterson writes, “a Colonialist fantasy about Black tribal peoples who live in peace thanks to the guidance of a line of wise and powerful white men” (107).

Marks comments on the absurdity of the strip’s racial politics: “Despite living in the ‘deep woods’ for more than four hundred years and twenty-one generations, the Phantom has nearly always married a white woman” (“The Legend and the Phantom”). Even though Kai Friese notes that in Falk’s stories of *The Phantom’s* ancestors, the hero does occasionally marry non-Europeans, “[s]o our twenty-first Phantom is not quite white as a ghost”, the character remains a man who essentially wears a bodysuit of dark skin when out on adventures that can be removed to reveal a blond European underneath (Friese 13). Whatever family lineage Falk or other writers give him is beside the point. The Phantom is a character whose duality allows him to alternatively “pass” as either Western or Indigenous. The appeal of this fantasy to non-Indigenous readers is obvious. Marks muses, “[m]any non-Indigenous Australians would like to imagine their contact with the ‘tribes’ of this land in Phantom terms [...] deputy sheriffs keeping the peace among tiny Pacific nations and modernising the local tribespeople?” (“The Legend and the Phantom”)

Few scholars have considered the way Indigenous readers regard The Phantom, but the wealth and variety of educational comics produced for Aboriginal Australian communities which feature different versions of The Phantom make it clear that the character has resonance for many Aboriginal readers. Some of the appeal of the character seems to be the way that “Falk's imaginary geography recapitulates the disorientations of colonial discovery and loss”, and while these discoveries and losses are starkly different for indigenous communities, The Phantom still provides an opportunity for readers to explore these facets (Friese 11). The excorporations of The Phantom discussed below should be understood in this context: not just as a pop culture messenger for civic and public health messages, but as a vehicle for exploring indigenous identities and agency in the frontiers of postcolonial trauma.

“Why Wanda said No in Broome”

The first example of The Phantom being re-created as an educational tool is a three-page comic published by the Kimberly Aboriginal Medical Services Council in 1986 and reprinted in a 1989 issue of the *National AIDS Bulletin* (O'Riordan; "Why Wanda"). This comic is a key publication for understanding both The Phantom in Australia, and the history of health communication in Indigenous Australian communities, but it has not been reprinted since the 1980s, and currently remains unacknowledged in the many online fan communities that catalogue the character's appearances.

The comic resembles a fanzine and repurposes photocopied drawings from the comic strip overlaid with new dialogue (Figure 1). It tells a winkingly risqué story about the Phantom's attempts to romance Wanda, a girl from Broome who refuses to sleep with him unless he uses condoms. The opening narration tells us “Phantom is peeved ... after a month in Sydney and Perth fighting crime, he can think of only think of one way to really relax. But the lovely Wanda was not born yesterday. Being a Broome girl, she knows what the score is. She's not coming across!” Needless to say, the comic is entirely unauthorised by King Features Syndicate.

This version of The Phantom is rowdier than his canonical counterpart. He is shown downing a pint of beer in the story's first panel and lamenting to Wanda that her refusal of unprotected sex is driving him to drink. While the King Features version of The Phantom is chastely devoted to Diana, the Broome Phantom and Wanda have an implied past together. He implores her for “just one more time? Just for old time's sake?”, but she is wary: “How do I know you didn't moonj around while you were in Sydney fighting crime?” The use here of “moonj”, a Nyoongar word for “something a little stronger than a kiss!” (“Moonj”), and other indigenous colloquialisms marks this incarnation of The Phantom as distinctly Aboriginal. Like the officially authorised serialisation of The Phantom in *Woman's Mirror*, this excorporated version of the strip has been localised. While The Phantom himself is depicted as well-travelled, Wanda is portrayed as a local “Broome girl” in the same way that *Women's Mirror* positioned Diana Palmer as a “Sydney girl.” In addition to these references to the Phantom's travels to Australian capital cities, the comic includes hyper-local callouts. The Phantom first tries to romance Wanda at Gantheaume Point, a popular cliffside rendezvous spot ten minutes outside of Broome. He meets her again at the Broome Civic

Centre for a concert by Scrap Metal, the legendary Broome band who released their debut record in 1987, some months after the comic was published.

Wanda tells the Phantom "I think you're deadly... but I don't want to be dead. Get condoms!", to which he replies "Can't be! I've never worn a frenchy in my life". The word "deadly" means "awesome" in Aboriginal vernacular, while "frenchy" is a slang word for condom. The comic plays up the camp aspect of the normally virtuous hero being shown as sexually frustrated. He is insecure about needing condoms, and worried that Wanda's insistence on them means she thinks he is gay, reflecting a common myth at the time that AIDS was a "gay disease." Wanda finally persuades him by simultaneously breaking the fourth wall and reassuring him of his masculinity, by saying "If Superman can use condoms, so can you." This brings more of the Phantom's insecurities to light, as he broodingly muses "How does she know Superman uses frenchys?" Reluctantly, The Phantom relents to Wanda's request.



Figure 1: "Why Wanda Said No in Broome", page 1. Published by the Kimberly Aboriginal Medical Services Council in 1986.

The Phantom goes off to study up on AIDS and meets Wanda at the Scrap Metal gig prepared. When she asks him, “Did you get wise and get condoms?”, he replies “28 of them my love.” Wanda tells him “that should do for tonight.” Just how the couple uses those 28 condoms is left to the reader’s imagination, but a caption box reassures the reader that “After a night of passion, Phantom is still a he-man – condoms didn’t change that!” The comic ends on a panel of Wanda proclaiming “You’re solid Phantom ... better than before. It’s a good thing I’ve got some spares in my bag.”

This punchline serves to highlight that Wanda herself is just as resourceful as the Phantom. Similarly to Diana Palmer in the *Women’s Mirror*, she can be read as a protagonist in this comic, as she works to manage a romantic partner as unusual as The Phantom. For female readers of this comic, she could serve as a role model in her steadfast insistence on safe sex. Ultimately, Wanda stays resolute throughout the comic, and is successful in convincing The Phantom to change.

If The Phantom is the other protagonist in this comic, his arc follows the archetypical “hero’s journey” common in adventure comics: he is faced with a challenge that he initially refuses, until he undergoes a search for wisdom, overcomes his fears, and finally emerges triumphant. Even though the comic features no scenes of conventional action or adventure, its narrative adheres to a story structure that would be familiar to readers of Phantom comics.

However, even as the comic excorporates art and story structures from the King Features strips, the hyper-local setting, the modern, regional slang, and the previously unknown character of Wanda draw upon Aboriginal cultural resources in equal measure. The hero is repurposed and subverted into an expression that is unique to Broome, and beyond the norms and conventions for the character that had been established in American newspapers fifty years prior. Despite everything it repurposes from King Features, this comic by the Kimberly Aboriginal Medical Services Council essentially creates a new character, The Broome Phantom, an excorporation of King Features’ Phantom. While parodic, the character drew upon the earlier American and Australian iterations of *The Phantom* for a novel purpose: to improve the public health conditions for Indigenous people.

Condoman

In public health terms, there is no record of how the Broome Phantom comic was distributed or received in 1986, but many of its tactics were repurposed by public service agencies over the next several years. A similarly tongue-in-cheek excorporation of The Phantom as an agent for public health was used in the more widespread Condoman campaign developed in 1987 by Aboriginal Health Workers of Australia. Like the Broome Phantom, the Condoman campaign combined imagery derived from The Phantom with local references and slang and had the same aim of promoting condom use in Aboriginal communities. The focus of this campaign was a poster which features an excorporated version of the Phantom wearing a variation of his usual purple costume that is red, yellow, and black, the colours of the Aboriginal flag (Figure 2). He poses heroically beneath a cloudless sky, a bright blue ocean behind him, and holds a small package of condoms in his

right hand. A yellow title emblazoned across the top of the poster in the unmistakable style of the Frew Phantom logo christens this character "CONDOMAN." Next to this title, a smaller word, "SAYS," and directly below his catch phrase appears in a word balloon straight from the masked figure's mouth: "DON'T BE SHAME BE GAME". A comic-strip style caption box at the bottom of the poster proclaims: "USE FRENCHYS!"

From the font used in the poster's title, to the style Condoman is drawn in, to the costume he wears, the poster designers clearly intended their audience to draw connections between Condoman and The Phantom. Besides the characters' names and costume colours, there are small differences in their costumes (Condoman sports a letter C logo and lacks a domino mask). The most significant difference, though, is that Condoman is Black.

Considering Condoman was designed by and for Indigenous Australians, the decision to make him Black seems entirely appropriate. In terms of copyright, it also serves to distinguish the character from King Features' incarnation of The Phantom. Crucially, this race-bending draws attention to the racial identity of the character, and serves as a critique of The Phantom's canonical "Whiteness". The absurd duality of his skin-tight, full body costume also does double-duty in terms of promoting safe sex, as it renders the Phantom almost impossibly fully clothed and yet essentially nearly naked.

The Condoman poster became a minor classic of health communication, "internationally-recognized" as an example of "culturally-appropriate health promotion" (Ward et al.). The copyright-infringing Wanda comic has become essentially forgotten, while the Condoman posters were frequently reprinted (Hill; Laird et al.; Ward; Ware). The character was revived and updated in 2009 with a modified, less obviously Phantom-inspired costume, as well as a female partner named Lubelicious (Mooney and Sariago). While successful in their own right, the modern Condoman campaign materials lack the subversive playfulness of the original poster, which not only invite its audience to not just rethink their previous conceptions of safe sex, but of heroism and authority. Like the Broome Phantom, Condoman presents safe sex as virile and masculine, and power as not White, but Black.



[Australian Electoral Commission comics](#)

While these safe sex campaigns adapted The Phantom, and demonstrated the power of repurposing the character for Indigenous communities they did so unofficially. The Broome Phantom quite possibly passed under the radar of King Features, but Condoman had international visibility and would not have escaped notice. So, when the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) decided to make use of The Phantom for another campaign targeting

Aboriginal communities, they got King Features involved. The AEC officially licensed The Phantom from King Features for two comic books intended to educate remote indigenous communities about the process of voting: *The Phantom Enrols and Votes* (1988) and *Vote 1 Phantom* (1990). While this official licensing arrangement represents a step towards the subversive aspects of the Broome Phantom and Condoman being incorporated into the official, dominant version of The Phantom, the AEC comics seem to have been inspired by the aesthetics and aims of those earlier unauthorised iterations.

Although this version of The Phantom is not shown to be explicitly Aboriginal, he is depicted as a member of an Indigenous community. In *The Phantom Enrols and Votes*, the hero comes across a group of Aboriginal women who are discussing the fact that Aunt Jess, a local elder, is running for Parliament. The Phantom has been away and was unaware of this development, as he explains, "You miss out on a lot of news at home when you're fighting crime." A woman called Dot tells him, "I hope you're enrolled to vote Phantom." Like the Broome Phantom, this version of the Phantom is also shown to be both a community member and a traveller who is out of touch.



Figure 2: *The Phantom Enrols and Votes*, page 3. Published by the Australian Electoral Commission in 1988.

As a group, the women and children take The Phantom to see the Community Electoral Person, a young man who is sitting under a gum tree with a folder of election documents. Eventually the Phantom receives a letter at The Skull Cave that he can vote in the next election. When the election rolls around, his name and address are verified on the electoral roll as “Phantom, Skull Cave via Katherine.” Katherine is a regional town in Australia’s Northern Territory and a historically important meeting place for local tribes. This address, in addition to his neighbourly interactions with the Aboriginal characters, codes The Phantom as a member of the Indigenous community.

There is a sense of catharsis in seeing how some of the colonialist tropes of King Features’ version of The Phantom are excorporated and upended in this comic. In contrast to the colonial fantasy of the King Features comic strip, where a masked, White hero presides as a benevolent dictator over a remote, indigenous community, *The Phantom Enrols and Votes* is a post-colonial fantasy. In this civic (re)imagining, The Phantom is cast as a bumbling relic of Western colonisation who can only participate in democracy because he listens to the patient advice of Aboriginal women. Of course, this is still a fantasy, and it should be acknowledged that the voices of Aboriginal Australians, who comprise a geographically dispersed population, are systematically drowned out of the Australian democratic system by White and urban voters. Nonetheless, the Katherine Phantom is optimistic at the end of the comic, encouraging readers that “[v]oting in elections means we can all have a say in what happens!”

The fantasy element of Aboriginal representation in Australian parliament is made more apparent in the second instalment of the adventures of the Katherine Phantom, published in 1990. While the eight-page *The Phantom Enrols and Votes* had a perfunctory, procedural plot designed primarily to familiarise readers with the mechanisms of voting, the sixteen-page sequel *Vote 1 Phantom* recast that comic as the first in a series of adventures into parliamentary democracy. This second comic more closely incorporates the previously subversive, ironic version of The Phantom back to his conventional role established by King Features of fighting villains and acting as an authority for indigenous people. Faced with “fellas who don’t even live here” destroying the local land, the local Aboriginal community appeal to The Phantom to run for election. After a moment of hesitation, he agrees. Soon he is presenting a stump speech on horseback: “Are you tired of outsiders ripping you off? Then do something about it! Vote for me and I’ll do my best to put it right.” Dot asks him, “Why should we believe you?” and the Phantom replies “You have trusted me before, you can trust me again!” Although this is incongruous with The Phantom’s lunkheaded portrayal in *Enrols and Votes*, we are given no specific reasons for why the other characters in this community see him as a leader.



Figure 3: *Vote 1 Phantom*, page 8. Published by published by the Australian Electoral Commission in 1990.

From this point on, the Phantom himself does not appear again until the end of the comic, as the narrative focus shifts to the community in the run up to the election. On election day, there are long lines at the polls, and someone handing out “how to vote” cards for the incumbent, a candidate called Joe Pug. Eventually, the results are in and the Phantom is declared the winner, as “the new member of Skull Cave Shire Council”.

We then see The Phantom attending his first council meeting. A White councilman in a tie adjusts his glasses and muses, “Business as usual gentlemen, heh heh heh,” but the Phantom replies “No – I don’t think so those days are over & it’s time for a change”. Seeing the Phantom take on a position of authority moves the character closer to his traditional role, but this also moves the comic from the realm of pedagogy to one of fantasy – readers are encouraged not to learn with the Phantom, but to watch him ascend to a place of power, as he so ably does in the traditional comics.

The last pages of the comic are devoted to the Indigenous community members reflecting on the good that the Phantom is doing for their shire and on the power of democracy: “We can choose our *own* leaders who get things done our way.” However, as the leader these characters have chosen is an actual phantom both textually (his character is a cipher with no defining traits beyond campaign rhetoric), and metatextually (he is an imported American comic strip hero from a fantasy world), this conclusion is rather unconvincing.

The Wisdom of the Phantom

Ten years after the Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Services Council created the Broome Phantom as a unique subversion of King Features’ hero, The Family Court of Australia officially licensed the character for a public service campaign that incorporated this idea of using The Phantom as a champion for civic virtue for indigenous audiences, aligning the character even closer to the conventional version. The result was a 1996 comic book called *The Wisdom of the Phantom*, which was designed to provide “counselling information for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.” While superficially polished, it lacked the Aboriginal cultural perspective that had made the earliest campaigns spark. The comic begins once again with the Phantom returning “home” after adventuring. Although his home community is depicted as Aboriginal Australian, this incarnation of the Phantom shares many similarities with the canonical Falk Phantom, and includes supporting characters such as his wife Diana and their children Heloise and Kit. On page two, the Phantom sits with Diana on their sofa next to a fireplace, with his wolf Devil at their feet like a domestic dog, as she takes his arm and explains that while he was away, “Our friends Pug and Ruby have had big family trouble”.

This sofa-sitting Family Court Phantom is a far cry from the carousing Broome Phantom. Diana explains that Pug and Ruby have broken up and are fighting over custody of their children – Pug wishes for them to stay with him “in the community”, while Ruby wants to take them to live with her family in Bengali. The use of Bengali here is unusual, and not just because Falk changed the country’s name to Bangalla in the 1970s. In the other comics examined in this article, Broome and Katherine seem to replace Bengali/Bangala as the

Phantom's indigenous homeland. However, in the Family Court comic, the Phantom is said to live in "the community", while Bengali is depicted as both geographically distinct and culturally distant from the community, somewhere that Pug fears his children will not be able to learn "the ways of our people and understand our traditions and culture".

The Phantom recommends to Pug and Ruby that they meet with councillors from the Family Court of Australia. Ruby expresses scepticism about seeing the court and asks, "But do they understand the ways of our people and our traditions?" The Phantom replies in a full-page illustration where he is juxtaposed against an intricately rendered tableau of scenes of Aboriginal culture, "They will respect our ways and traditions." As in *Vote 1 Phantom*, the comic positions The Phantom as a trusted figure within indigenous communities, although the use of slang and references to specific locations that had marked the earlier incarnations is gone, replaced with a generic collage of "indigenouness" that looks like it belongs on a souvenir tea towel.



Figure 4: *The Wisdom of the Phantom*, page 16. Published by the Family Court of Australia in 1996.

The Family Court Phantom's sole role in the story is to advertise the Family Court of Australia to Pug and Ruby. The Family Court members then recommend that Pug and Ruby share custody of their children, and that Ruby be allowed to take them to Bengali if she agrees to bring them back to Pug and the community. Pug exclaims "But how can I TRUST HER to do this? What if she does not return?!!", a rational outburst in the context of generations of Aboriginal children being forcibly removed from their families and communities and made wards of the State, a policy that only officially ended in 1967.

In the comic, this problem is solved because one of the Family Court councillors is revealed to be Ruby's sister, who vouches that Ruby will keep her word, which satisfies Pug. The episode ends with a scene of Pug's children returning to him after visiting Bengali. The last page of the comic features a final panel of the Phantom's sidekick Guran in front of a portrait of an Aboriginal child next to a fluttering Aboriginal flag. In the stories of Falk's Phantom, Guran is the medicine man of the Bandar pygmy tribe and one of the Phantom's best friends. Here, he speaks directly to the audience about the Family Court: "They are good people who respect our ways. They can help us if we have family troubles."

The fact that the character of Guran embodies a variety of racist, orientalist tropes makes this final benediction almost shockingly tone-deaf, as if the creators of the comic found it suitable to equate their intended Indigenous readers with members of fictional "tribe" of pygmies. While earlier uses of The Phantom in educational comics for indigenous readers subverted or satirised the colonialist fantasies of the original comics, each successive publication became less subversive and more beholden to the tropes of the King Features version Phantom, to the point where the racist power relationships are essentially replicated in *The Wisdom of the Phantom*. This is perhaps the end goal of incorporation –the character is returned to a more conventional and recognisable form, while the subversive, culturally-specific meanings that had animated the earlier excorporation of the character by Aboriginal community groups are stripped away.

Conclusion

The earliest comic discussed in this chapter was an unauthorised parody published by an Aboriginal activist group that was a rather radical interpretation. Later examples, which were published by branches of the Australian government and licensed from King Features, increasingly depicted iterations of The Phantom that were incorporated to be closer to the official version of the character. As Jenkins notes, "Superhero comics provide alternative conceptions of the social good and different models for how to make change" (35), and a close analysis of these comics makes it possible to trace different models for how superheroes can be repurposed for different kinds of civic imaginations. The ways that The Phantom was excorporated and changed by the Aboriginal Australian communities that created the Broome Phantom, Condoman and the earlier Kathrine Phantom suggests that those communities saw heroism quite differently than how it is conventionally depicted in The Phantom comics.

Although "Why Wanda said No in Broome", Condoman, and *Enrols and Votes* depict versions of The Phantom who is an accepted member of the Indigenous community, they

also parody the official Falk and Frew Phantoms in a wry way, letting their audience in on the joke of the ridiculousness of the traditional version of the character and the colonialist values he represents. In these comics, The Phantom himself is either shown as Indigenous or as someone who learns from women in the Indigenous community. In *Vote 1 Phantom* and *The Wisdom of the Phantom*, the milieu of indigeneity is incorporated on a surface level into stories that hew much closer to The Phantom of Falk, Frew, and King Features. In these stories, The Phantom is an authoritative figure who spends more time doling out advice than listening to the Indigenous community he is nominally part of. In particular, in *The Wisdom of the Phantom* he is shown in his more conventional role of being a White protector. While this returns the character to his “canonical” role and is presented in a way that more closely matches the visual style of the official Phantom Comics, the civic re-imagining of the character as community member is lost. Heroism in these latter comics is depicted as coming from an outside figure, a savior like The Phantom who can run for office or recommend government agencies to attend. By contrast, the power of the earlier excorporations of the Phantom is in showing heroism and responsibility as characteristics that originate and are shared within the community.

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