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**MULTI-HISTORIES: CREATIVE AND NARRATIVE  
PLURALITY IN GRAPHIC NOVELS  
EXPLORING INDIGENOUS HISTORIES**

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## **MULTI-HISTORIES: CREATIVE AND NARRATIVE PLURALITY IN GRAPHIC NOVELS EXPLORING INDIGENOUS HISTORIES**

In this paper, I examine select graphic novels that narrativise intersecting histories by artists who possess distinct social positionalities and subjectivities. The first is Luke W Molver's two-part graphic novel about King Shaka, *Shaka Rising: A Legend of the Warrior Prince* (2017) and *King Shaka: Zulu Legend* (2019). This epic illustrates King Shaka's rise to power and his unmatched conquering pursuits that helped form the Zulu Kingdom. The second case study is Zinhle (Zhi) Zulu's – hereafter Zhi Zulu – part-historical, part-futuristic graphic novel *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha: Protector of the Zulu Kingdom* (2019), which visually narrates the story of Nandipha, a superhero whose identity is inspired by King Shaka's mother, Nandipha, and the influential women in Zhi Zulu's life. I am specifically interested in how the positionalities of these two comic artists – Molver, a white man, on the one hand and on the other, Zhi Zulu, a black woman – influence their artistic approach, narrative arc, content selection, stylistics and overall treatment of indigenous Zulu histories. Using the notion of pluri- or multi-histories, I argue that these distinct but convergent comic book explorations of the interlinked lives of King Shaka and Nandipha are poignant artistic exemplars of how indigenous histories should always be retold in the plural.

Settler colonial societies like Canada, New Zealand and South Africa are confronted with the imperative of advancing redemptive de-colonial histories, especially as it pertains to their indigenous peoples.<sup>1</sup> More recently in South Africa, graphic novels have been instrumentalised to translate the complex and convergent pasts of those who were brutalised by colonial and apartheid encounters. Among others, Richard Conyngham's *All Rise: Resistance and Rebellion in South Africa 1910–1948: A Graphic History*,<sup>2</sup> Umlando Wezithombe's *Steve Biko*<sup>3</sup> and, perhaps most famously *Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book*<sup>4</sup> series illustrate key moments and role players in South Africa's liberation struggle. While globally popular forms of comics like anime remain an underground subculture in South Africa and Africa generally,<sup>5</sup> and a distinct and identifiable genre of South African comics is difficult to decipher,<sup>6</sup> the intensification in the production and circulation of homegrown comics specifically focussed on the country's histories is praiseworthy. Many of these emergent Afro-comics that showcase either real-life or fantastical afro-superheroes<sup>7</sup> aim to subvert antecedent Western depictions of indigenous Africans that “devalue both the peoples and the cultures depicted in them.”<sup>8</sup>

The tendency to instrumentalise comics to serve certain socio-political and cultural ideals is not unique to South Africa. Globally, especially in settler colonial societies, comics have been harnessed as tools for nation building and the construction of ethnological unity.<sup>9</sup> Comics are profoundly influential communication tools because they transmit knowledge through casual learning, giving them “a great deal of potential for the teaching of history.”<sup>10</sup> But as Chimamanda Adichie famously warned, much harm can be done when monolithic narratives are transmitted in perpetuity, especially across generations.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is argued in this paper that the inventive (re) discovery and rewriting of illusive indigenous histories must privilege multi-voices and subjectivities over the singular master narrative.

## MULTI-HISTORIES = PLURI-HEROES

The other implicit danger in telling a mono-story is that of lionising and immortalising one heroic figure for triumphs that took collective effort to realise. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the over-representation of the solo heroic saviour – who is almost always male and created by artists who are also almost always male and white in their positionality – is commonly seen in public art projects where sculptures of historical indigenous leaders like King Shaka Zulu, King Sekhukhune, Chief Tshwane and others have been commissioned.<sup>12</sup> The temptation to exceptionalise these historical figures is perhaps most evident in Nelson Mandela’s comic translation of his *Long Walk to Freedom* autobiography. In the comic we see the manufacturing of “Mandela’s serial, contingent, and strategic performances of self into destiny.”<sup>13</sup> While it is artistically and narratively acceptable to romanticise the biographies of Mandela and other important historical figures from indigenous African societies, the limitation in the types of non-diverse stories and positionalities of the storytellers is a major concern.

Biography, as an important secondary historical source, enables comic artists to “emphasize the expressionistic experience of historical events.”<sup>14</sup> Biography enables the narration of personal and highly emotive accounts of major historical events. As part of a wider push to liberate educational content relating to South African history from its colonial architecture, the recent popularisation of biographical graphic narratives that celebrate important indigenous leaders from South Africa’s history is valuable. Yet it remains a problem that these biographical renderings of critical indigenous histories are being mainly told by white creatives – mostly men – who have ease of access to the various comics publishing domains and opportunities in South Africa. Animating indigenous histories, where so-called hard, scientifically verifiable evidence is at a premium, cannot be approached using monolithic accounts by artists emanating from non-diverse positionalities. In the same way that cities evolve as a palimpsest, there needs to be an appreciation for “the nonlinear trajectories, discarded alternatives, and legacies from the past”<sup>15</sup> when producing biographical comics.

Accepting the in-built fictional and imagined nature of comics, I am not so much advocating for the historical accuracy of biographical graphic narratives, but rather for the cultivation of alternative, visionary and varyingly discursive accounts of histories that remain contested and illusive. South African audiences require comics that showcase multi-ethnic and multi-cultural pluri-pasts and pluri-futures. The creation of pluri-histories through multiple voices will bring about new heroes, as seen in Zhi Zulu’s veneration of Nandipha. But perhaps most significantly, the greatest benefit of these pluri-storied historical comics is their ability to cultivate curiosity about history itself because, as Matthew Pustz has argued, comics focussed on history “help readers develop the skill

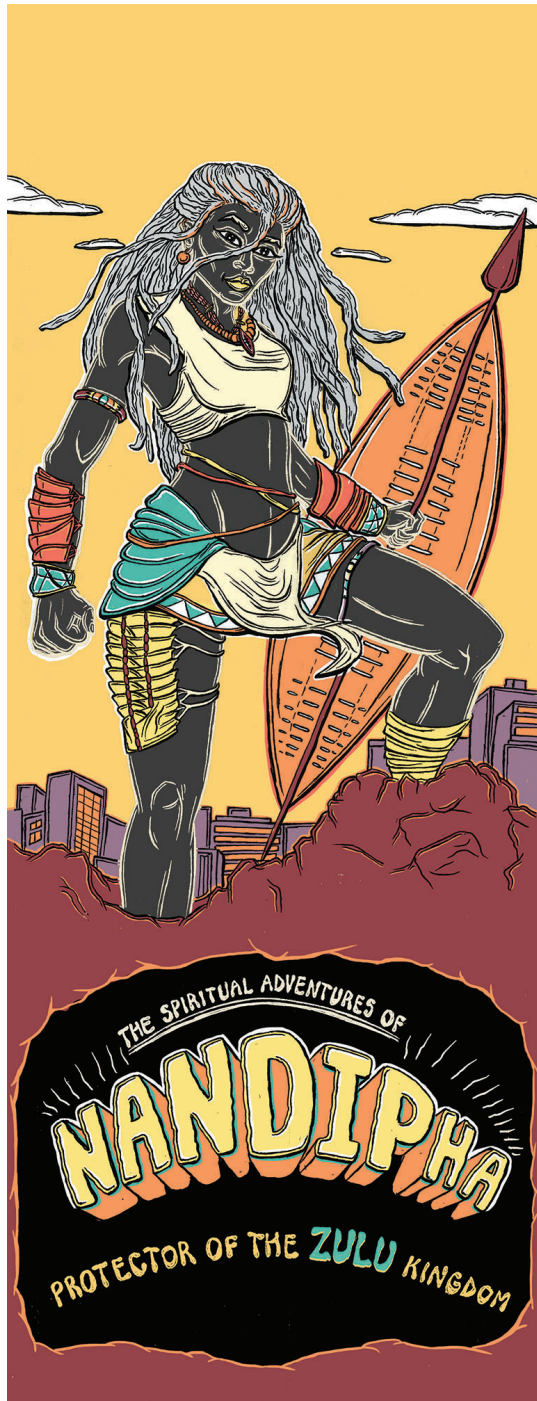
of historical thinking.”<sup>16</sup> Commenting on the Steve Biko graphic narrative biography, Nic Buchanan, creative director at Umlando Wezithombe, explains that the comic book is designed to ignite this thirst for historical thinking among readers so that they can “learn more about Steve Biko,”<sup>17</sup> as opposed to seeing the comic as the only authoritative account of Biko’s complex life.

## MULTI-HISTORIES TOLD THROUGH MULTI-SUBJECTIVITIES

The need to approach history through multi-subjectivities, especially as it pertains to comics, is predicated on the realisation that any comic strip or story is paradigmatically layered with the subjectivity of its maker. Kai Mikkonen observes that the first and most recognisable imprint of the author’s personality in a graphic novel is “detected in the use and combination of stylistic conventions such as the graphic line, lettering, or the spatial organization of the page.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the author’s unique artistic signature is the most direct insertion of their character into a narrative. This signature also influences how the various subjectivities of the main characters in the actual comic materialise. The comic artist’s subjectivity is further woven into the narrative when they assume the voice of “the autobiographical narrator” who articulates the context or chronology of events “alternately in the caption boxes and the balloons, thus alternating between intra- and extradiegetic positions. The different levels of verbal narration allow the autobiographical narrator to relate the story from two different temporal perspectives at once and reflect on both the time of the events and the time of the telling.”<sup>19</sup> Since the influence of the artist on the narrative cannot be redacted, Mikkonen concludes that “the challenge is to know the degree of subjectivity of vision from images alone.”<sup>20</sup> Even the most astute readers of history-based comics are not always able to appreciate the nuances between the author’s creative voice – coded in the image, text and style – and the voice(s) of the historical character(s).

As noted above, the two graphic narratives under consideration in this article were produced by artists with distinct positionalities and subjectivities. Their gender, race, ethnic and, most critically, lived differences influenced their artistic and narrative approach to histories of the Zulu Kingdom, one of southern Africa’s most storied indigenous nations. The specificities of the actual class, educational<sup>21</sup> and social histories of both Molver and Zhi Zulu do not concern me here as much as the meanings that their racial, social and gender classifications imprint on their respective comics. In the spectrum of South African life, to be white and male – versus being black and female – means that these individuals represent a certain type of historical and present-day positionality that speaks to wealth, privilege and infinite opportunity on the one hand, versus deprivation, abuse and precarity on the other. The key is to acknowledge how these distinct positionalities filter into the style, content and narrative execution of the comics these artists have authored.

At the heart of nurturing comics by artists from a plurality of positionalities is the need to cultivate stories about indigenous peoples by indigenous creatives. Randy Duncan and Matthew J Smith make a compelling case for what they term “native comics” in the global production value chain of comics: “The richness of the comics scene in the world today owes much to both the fostering of native comics and the interchange of ideas among different traditions. Their ability to help build a given culture’s identity and the propensity they have to build bridges between cultures are but two more manifestations of the power of comics.”<sup>22</sup>



This power to build bridges through the interchange of ideas is essential to multi-ethnic settler colonial societies where fault lines predicated on race, religion and ethnicity still dominate public, political, economic and cultural affairs.<sup>23</sup> Thus the focus on Zulu history in the two comics under review is particularly poignant. Focusing on one of the dominant black cultural groups in South Africa, Zulu historiographies are possibly among the best documented of works dealing with the indigenous peoples of southern Africa. The growing wealth of literature written by specifically isiZulu-speaking historians who explore the pasts of Zulu people dates back to Magesa M Fuze's *The Black People and Whence They Came* (originally titled *Abantu Abamnyama, Lapa Bavela Ngakona* in isiZulu), first published in 1922, a text that provides an expansive history of Zulu people. Although Hlonipha Mokoena has described the book as "an anti-climax" that does not possess the "depth and detail" found in some of Fuze's other writings published in the *Ilanga Lase Natal* newspaper during the early twentieth century,<sup>24</sup> the book remains a profound contribution to Zulu historiography. Although seen as anticlimactic, Fuze's text is an important imaginative recovery of Zulu history from lived experience. I posit that Zhi Zulu's and Molver's graphic narratives are equally important and valuable contributions to the creative archive and discourse on Zulu ontologies because of the narrative plurality they provide to this ever-evolving history.

Figure 1. Zhi Zulu, *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha: Protector of the Zulu Kingdom*, 2019. © Zuluvisual. (Image reproduced with permission from the artist)

## INSERTING ZHI INTO ZULU HISTORY

During the 2019 Design Indaba showcase in Cape Town, Zhi Zulu exhibited the cover art for a graphic novel titled *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha: Protector of the Zulu Kingdom* (Figure 1). Though incomplete at the time and an offshoot of her Master's degree research project, the concept and execution of this comic book drew immense public interest and catapulted the already award-winning illustrator to eminence as an emerging comic artist. I, too, was intrigued by Zhi Zulu's intentional elevation of Nandipha, King Shaka Zulu's mother, to the status of hero in the retelling of modern Zulu history from the eighteenth century. Zhi Zulu estimates that her narrative is comprised of 40 percent historical information and events, while the remaining 60 percent is imagined.<sup>25</sup> Though Nandipha is a clear reference to one of the leading Zulu Kingdom matriarchs, the character is also inspired by Zhi Zulu's niece and other black women she admires. Thus, the comic is decidedly modelled on Zhi Zulu's own life experiences and visions of the world she occupies. Set in a contemporary but futuristic urban context where minibus taxis roam the streets, this comic book is primarily written for an urban-based, youthful black audience. Zhi Zulu notes that her work seeks to be relevant for this generation, concluding that "documenting culture is about the now. It's not necessarily about how it is relevant, but rather how do we *make* it relevant?"<sup>26</sup>

According to Zhi Zulu, the history narrated in her comic was retrieved by reading existing literature by the likes of Credo Mutwa, a famed philosopher, artist, writer and historian, and the stories she extracted from her grandmothers and uncles.<sup>27</sup> While invested in the history of



Figure 2. Zhi Zulu, *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha: Protector of the Zulu Kingdom*, 2019. © Zuluvisual. (Image reproduced with permission from the artist)

Zulu people, Zhi Zulu, an isiZulu speaker herself, did not want to limit her comic book to yet another retelling of well-documented histories, but rather to generate an alternative future for the Zulu nation in context. The creative and narrative gestures Zhi Zulu uses in the comic speak to the hopes and fears embedded in the current South African climate, where difficult histories and yet unwritten futures collide. *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha* is both a homage to the roles black women fulfil in modern urban African societies and the triumphs of historical figures such as Nandipha, whose memorialisation remains peripheral. In the comic, Nandipha becomes the hero when she is dreaming (Figure 2). It is only when fantasising that her true powers and purpose are activated. In an interview with Lukanyo Mbanga, Zhi Zulu highlights the importance of enacting

the overdue memorialisation of black women such as Nandipha imaginatively and as dreams, because, as happens in the comic, “the realms do end up merging and she becomes a hero in real life, but at-heart I wanted to draw on how, [sic] what happens in the realm of dreams and unconscious states inform what happens in the world around us.”<sup>28</sup>

Zhi Zulu is emphatic in declaring that the comic book is a celebration of her “culture, concepts and stories” and, as she puts it, this is the “absolute best part of my life and I want to express that.”<sup>29</sup> This desire to eulogise her Zulu-ness is an essential creative strategy that inserts a black woman artist of Zulu descent into the pantheon of African storytelling. Furthermore, the hyperbolic glorification of Nandipha as the hero who protects not only herself and those she loves, but the entire Zulu Kingdom, proclaims black women as adventurers and conquerors. Nandipha is illustrated as a warrior princess clutching a spear and shield (Figure 3). This uncommon representation of a black woman as Zulu warrior is suggestive of redemptive creative subjectivities that unsettle the trope of black women as peripheral players in indigenous Zulu history and life. Narratively, Zhi Zulu’s comic is a first-person account of Nandipha’s story, where the character’s experiences and personality are intertwined with the narrator’s voice.



Figure 3. Zhi Zulu, *The Spiritual Adventures of Nandipha: Protector of the Zulu Kingdom*, 2019. © Zuluvisual. (Image reproduced with permission from the artist)

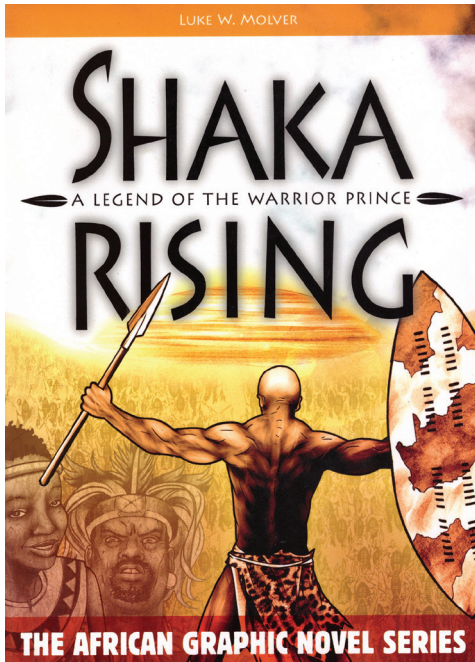


Figure 4. Luke W Molver and Mason O'Connor, *Shaka Rising: A Legend of the Warrior Prince*, 2017. © Story Press Africa: Pietermaritzburg. (Reproduced with permission)

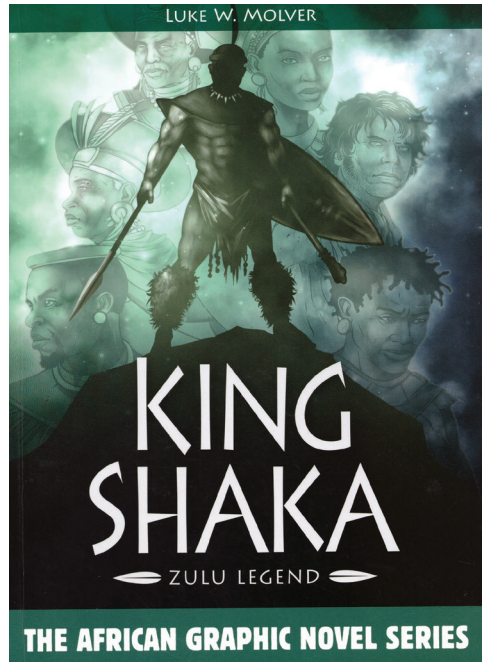


Figure 5. Luke W Molver, *King Shaka: Zulu Legend*, 2019. © Story Press Africa: Pietermaritzburg. (Reproduced with permission)

## NOT A LUKE-WARM TAKE ON ZULU HISTORY

While Zhi Zulu's motivations for creating her comic were intrinsically personal, Luke Molver, also an award-winning artist, was on the other hand commissioned by Story Press Africa to produce a graphic novel series about King Shaka. As a self-published author who had not worked with an established publishing house before, Molver was intrigued by the challenge of weaving into life a graphic narrative about an iconic black historical figure. In an interview with Gushwell Brooks, Molver acknowledges that this venture was not something he would have initiated independently. He was seduced into it by what he termed the "story-telling possibilities" that the legend of King Shaka presents.<sup>30</sup> For Molver, while King Shaka's story is well documented, there was enough room for inserting fictional and imagined components into his legend. Unlike Zhi Zulu's reliance on her lived experience and oral accounts from family members about Zulu History, Molver engaged in intense study to ensure that he did not "write down" to his readers.<sup>31</sup> I believe that Molver's positionality as a white male artist influenced this careful, thorough and sensitive approach to the historical specificities of King Shaka's life.<sup>32</sup> This is by no means to suggest that a black artist would not have done the same, but it is a pragmatic acknowledgement of the minefield of criticism that would entrap any 'outsider' narrator who is seen to perpetuate colonial tendencies of misrepresenting African histories. Any slippages in historical accuracy, even within a comic book story, would have been attached to the artist's whiteness, compromising the otherwise artistic and narrative accomplishments of Molver's work.



In 2017, *Shaka Rising: A Legend of the Warrior Prince* (Figure 1) was published, promptly followed by *King Shaka: Zulu Legend* in 2019 (Figure 2). These two expansive graphic novels unravel the early life, ascendancy to power, reign and final demise of King Shaka. Like the Mandela and Biko biographies, these two novels are educational enhancements of King Shaka's story, which include valuable information at the start and end of the comic books proper as contextualisation and amplification. While celebrating the founder of the Zulu Kingdom, Molver's comic also humanises King Shaka by making his life's story relatable. Unlike the contemporary urban setting of Zhi Zulu's comic, Molver's epic is staged during the early nineteenth century in KwaZulu-Natal. Using pencil-and-ink storyboarding, which was then coloured through digital processes, Molver creates a visual mood that transports King Shaka to the realm of the gods while keeping him mortal. Though there are moments of violence, scheming and betrayal in the comics, the scenes are cinematic, with lush, near-fantastical landscapes and beautifully adorned Hollywood-like characters.

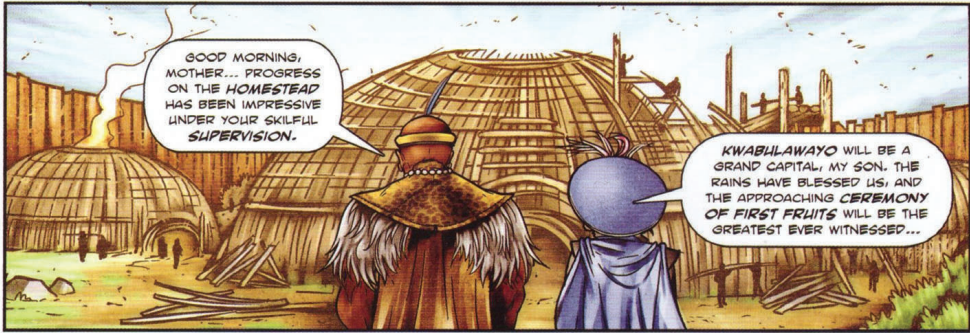
Of further interest are the narrative and stylistic choices Molver infuses into the comics. While Zhi Zulu is more direct in the inclusion of her subjectivity in her comic, Molver adopts the guise of what Mikkonen describes as the "'impersonal' heterodiegetic narrator"<sup>33</sup> whose voice is only evident through the Gogo (grandmother) who tells the story of Shaka to a group of children sitting around a fire. That the story of King Shaka's life in the comic is being told by a woman is an important artistic and narrative choice. That said, while Molver's treatment of female characters in the novel is sensitive and historically sound, it nevertheless privileges the life of King Shaka over his matriarchal influences. The inclusion of King Shaka's mother, Nandipha, is fairly consistent with the peripheral role that women assume in historical narratives of this kind (Figure 3). Though her part is brief, she is shown as a wise and comforting voice for King Shaka. In the final analysis, I believe that Molver's depiction of King Shaka's life was not negatively influenced by the artist's positioning as a white man. Rather, it is this very whiteness that enabled the creation of an epic that celebrates indigenous Zulu histories in redemptive ways.

## CONCLUSION

Artistic subjectivities influence the tenor and character of comics' content. To make the case for the production of pluri-histories when dealing with ontologies of indigenous peoples in settler colonial societies, I deliberately chose case studies produced by seemingly disparate creatives who have varying gender, racial, and cultural dispositions. Zhi Zulu's and Molver's advancement of a plurality of black heroes and lead characters is praiseworthy and as Adilifu Nama contends, black superheroes "serve as a source of potent racial meaning that has substance and resonance."<sup>34</sup>

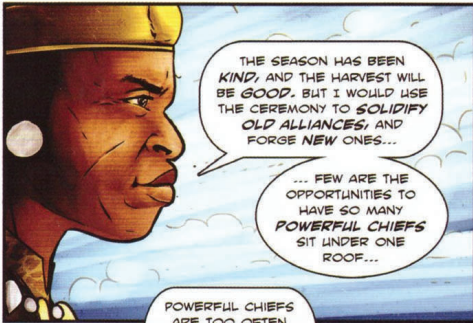
Using various visually persuasive techniques, both comics display a creative sincerity and commitment to multi-African histories and futures that transcend the classifications of gender and race. In these graphic narratives, we are not only introduced to the subjectivities of the key protagonists, King Shaka and Nandipha, but we see these complex historical figures as projected through the eyes of two very different artists. Yet, implicit in both stories is the sense of belonging, affinity and pride relating to indigenous histories of the Zulu Kingdom in its imagined disposition, as seen through the multi-subjectivities of the authors and the characters they represent to us.

Figure 6. Luke W Molver, *King Shaka: Zulu Legend* 2019.  
© Story Press Africa: Pietermaritzburg. (Reproduced with permission)



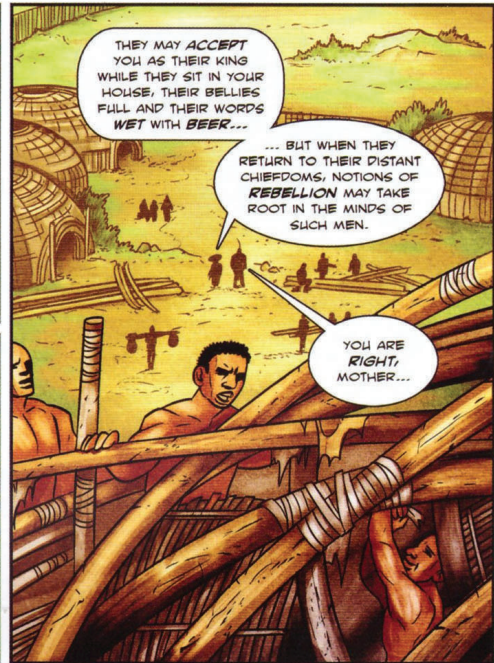
GOOD MORNING, MOTHER... PROGRESS ON THE HOMESTEAD HAS BEEN IMPRESSIVE UNDER YOUR SKILFUL SUPERVISION.

KWABULAWAYO WILL BE A GRAND CAPITAL, MY SON. THE RAINS HAVE BLESSED US, AND THE APPROACHING CEREMONY OF FIRST FRUITS WILL BE THE GREATEST EVER WITNESSED...



THE SEASON HAS BEEN KIND, AND THE HARVEST WILL BE GOOD. BUT I WOULD USE THE CEREMONY TO SOLIDIFY OLD ALLIANCES, AND FORGE NEW ONES...

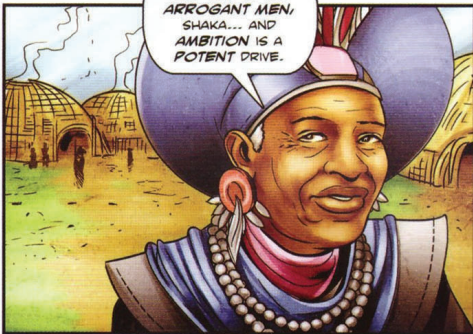
... FEW ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES TO HAVE SO MANY POWERFUL CHIEFS SIT UNDER ONE ROOF...



THEY MAY ACCEPT YOU AS THEIR KING WHILE THEY SIT IN YOUR HOUSE, THEIR BELLIES FULL AND THEIR WORDS WET WITH BEER...

... BUT WHEN THEY RETURN TO THEIR DISTANT CHIEFDOMS, NOTIONS OF REBELLION MAY TAKE ROOT IN THE MINDS OF SUCH MEN.

YOU ARE RIGHT, MOTHER...



POWERFUL CHIEFS ARE TOO OFTEN ARROGANT MEN, SHAKA... AND AMBITION IS A POTENT DRIVE.



... THAT IS WHY I HAVE SELECTED WOMEN AS OVERSEERS OF MY OUTLYING AMAKHANDA.

IN THOSE STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT AREAS OF ZULU TERRITORY, I WOULD APPOINT THE AMAKHOSIKAZI TO PRESIDE AS MY PROXIES, AND TO KEEP A WATCHFUL EYE ON THE LOCAL CHIEFS.

WOMEN OF ROYAL BLOOD, LIKE YOU, AND MY SISTER NOMCOBA. YOU ARE BELOVED BY THE PEOPLE... AND I TRUST YOU.

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5. Trisha Ramrathen, "Rise of the Otaku: Investigating the Anime Fandom in South Africa" (Masters diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016), 13.
6. Moray Rhoda, *South African Comics*, 18 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUODM8Vg6wl> (accessed 10 April 2022). In their *Bitterkomix* collaboration, artists Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes are credited with having produced one of the more distinctive South African comic styles. However, their style has remained their signature and has not matured into a communal approach for producing comics in South Africa.
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13. Lize Van Robbroeck, "The Man in the Arena: The Visual Nelson Mandela," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela*, ed. Rita Barnard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 254.
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15. Timothy Moss, "Refracting Urbanism: The Multiple Histories (as well as Geographies) of the Networked City," *Journal of Urban Technology*, 29:1 (2022), 131.

16. Pustz, *Comic Books*, 2, 4.
17. Jennifer Malec, "Fiction Friday: Excerpt from Steve Biko – The Graphic Novel," *Sunday Times: Books Live*, 24 October 2014, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2014/10/24/fiction-friday-excerpt-from-steve-biko-%E2%80%93-the-graphic-novel/> (accessed 12 May 2022).
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19. Ibid., 103.
20. Ibid., 120.
21. Both artists studied graphic design at institutions of higher learning.
22. Duncan and Smith, *Power of Comics*, 313.
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25. Zinhle Zulu, online interview with author, 26 November 2020.
26. Lukanyo Mbang, "New Heroes and Stories Retold: An Interview with Zhi Zulu," *David Krut Books*, 12 March 2022, <https://www.davidkrutbookstores.com/zhi-zulu-new-heroes-and-stories-retold/> (accessed 14 April 2022)
27. Ibid. Zhi Zulu also credits EA Ritter's iconic text, *Shaka Zulu: The Rise of the Zulu Empire*, first published in 1962, as one of the sources she read on Zulu history.
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29. Ibid.
30. Gushwell Brooks and Luke Molver, "Shaka Rising: A Comic Book About the Life of Shaka Zulu," *Radio 702*, 23 September 2018, <http://lukemolver.com/interview-radio-702/> (accessed 12 May 2022).
31. Ibid. Molver also acknowledges Dan Wylie's *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), John Laband's *The Assassination of King Shaka* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2017) and Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017) as critical reference material.
32. The inclusion of forewords by Professor Mbongeni Z Malaba and Dr Sibongiseni Mkhize adds a degree of gravitas and peer review from authoritative scholars of Zulu history.
33. Mikkonen, "Subjectivity and Style," 120.
34. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 8.