

ALLAN BEATON'S "OOKPIK" WAS HERE

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Before *Ilanaaq the Inuksuk*, a symbol for the Vancouver 2010 Olympics, became famous, there was Ookpik, the stylized owl that was an official mascot at Montreal's Expo 67. It was the first Inuit design appropriated by Canada and, according to *Maclean's*, remains the best-ever mascot design because it is irresistibly furry, goggle-eyed, and easy to mass-produce as a souvenir (Geddes).

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The original Ookpik design was less than six inches tall, made of sealskin, sported an oversized head and eyes, pointed beak, and flat, fanciful feet. Created around 1962 by Jeannie Snowball at the Fort Chimo Co-operative in Kuujuaq, Québec,¹ it reached international prominence at the Philadelphia Trade Fair, held November 11-16, 1963. It starred in the Canadian government's promotional campaign and, subsequently, by 1964 was popular in Canada. Supplies of handmade Ookpik dolls, due to the rising cost of sealskin and laborious production methods, could not keep up with demand.

Due to Ookpik's astounding popularity, the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources registered the trademark, copyright and industrial design of its likeness and name on March 4, 1964. Although protected under Her Majesty, the agreement allowed the Fort Chimo Co-operative to grant rights for the use of its image and name.

As a national and cultural symbol in the mid-1960s, Ookpik became a commercial success and protected emblem of Canada. It was licensed to several consumer products produced by and for the southern Canadian market, with a portion of the revenue going to Snowball and the community. Commodities included plush toys, opossum fur reproduction dolls, jewelry, clothing, medallions, and a daily comic strip. This paper will focus on the "Ookpik" comic.

On November 3, 1964, then-Minister of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources Arthur Laing wrote to former Prime Minister Lester Pearson that arrangements were

made to have Allan Beaton of the *Toronto Telegram* draw an internationally syndicated cartoon strip with Ookpik as the protagonist. Laing believed that “Ookpik” would give “the Canadian people a humour which is peculiarly our own, the comic strip will also be an excellent educational feature in our attempts to orient Canadians more completely to the development of Canada in depth” (The LB Pearson Papers). “Ookpik” would provide a Canadian cultural identity in newspapers’ funny pages at a time when the government and nationalists were increasingly concerned with American cultural dominance (Edwardson 186-87).

138 With the intentions of Laing in mind, I analyze Beaton’s comic focusing on Ookpik’s adventures and actions. The comic was envisioned as an educational text, yet recycles stereotypes about the Arctic before fully transforming it into a modern, northern city. Although “Ookpik” takes place in an exotic setting, it more often educates its readers about southern Canadian life in the 1960s. Nevertheless, Beaton’s comic offers a glimpse into Canadian cultural identity: it begins with an owl living in the undeveloped Arctic wilderness who, once personified, settles in a town populated by other animal-citizens, and Ookpik responds to similar challenges and problems as his readers.

In the postwar era, the Canadian Government enacted policies and adopted symbols² in an effort to shape a unique Canadian culture and identity that was different from Britain or America (Arnold, “The Men of the North” 453; Graburn 5; Lennox 2-3; Pupcheck 191). Laing’s educational goal for “Ookpik” is not unusual because during this time, the federal government—specifically his Department—actively promoted Inuit art as a symbol representing Canadian identity at home and abroad. Since the 1950s, and continuing today, this was accomplished by financially supporting, promoting, and marketing Inuit art by circulating travelling exhibitions, presenting gifts to foreign dignitaries, distributing print portfolios, and disseminating images on stamps and coins (Bauldic, Grussani 36-52; Lennox 7-13). The government would not have adopted Inuit art if Canadians had not already accepted it; since 1949, public demand for it, divided between aficionados and nationalists, exceeded supply (Pupcheck 191).³ With this in mind, Ookpik benefited from government protection and promotion because it was trademarked as a symbol of Canada.

The story of Ookpik begins with a young Jeannie Snowball, who was born in approximately 1900, travelling in the backcountry of Nunavik with her family in search of food. An unaware owl landed close enough to Snowball that she was able to capture and eat it, saving their lives. It was repeated, in news reports and on manufactured goods after March 1964, that she paid tribute to the Arctic snowy owl that gave its life by representing it.⁴ Beaton’s comic is one of the few licensed Ookpik commodities that does not reference Snowball’s harrowing tale.

The “Ookpik” comic, perceived as an educational tool by the government, was meant to capitalize on the owl’s popularity and increase newspaper readership. Arrangements for a comic began in July 1964 when Ray Argyle, Editor and Manager of the *Toronto Telegram News Service*, indicated the company’s interest in produc-

ing a syndicated daily. The OOKPIK Advisory Committee (hereafter referred to as OOKCOM), tasked with recommending suitable product licensees for the Ookpik brand to the Department of Northern Affairs and Fort Chimo Co-operative, considered his request over three months. OOKCOM had two objectives in its administrative role: they sought to “protect OOKPIK as a whimsical little creation of the North which helps to define Canadian culture and at the same time to substantially raise the standard of living of the members of the Fort Chimo Co-operative” (“Ookpik—Trade Mark, Copyrights and Marketing, 20 April 1964”). Argyle wanted use of the name and image with his talent freely producing the strip. The original concept had Ookpik appearing daily as a “sage philosopher of the north woods” satirizing world news (“Ookpik—Trade Mark, Copyrights and Marketing, 24 August 1964”). This was rejected because ongoing negotiations for Ookpik as a main character in children’s stories and a television series required a consistent image. By the end of negotiations, Argyle received editorial freedom within a broad framework, on the condition that Kuujuaq’s Fort Chimo Co-operative would own all the characters developed in the comic.⁵

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In early October 1964, OOKCOM recommended the contract to the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resource to sign on behalf of the Crown. The final license agreement stipulated that all rights to the supporting characters would be held by the Fort Chimo Co-operative, and that the comic was to be written and drawn on a high moral plane without any religious or political controversies; not criticize the Crown or the government; be of educational value by portraying a realistic northern environment; and, to ensure the comic is of high quality, employ Allan Beaton (“Ookpik—Trade Mark, Copyrights and Marketing, 13 October 1964”).

Beaton (1923-67) was favoured as the creator because of his success and renown as an editorial illustrator. His career began in Kitimat, British Columbia, prior to 1953, and he then worked as an editorial cartoonist for the *Vancouver Province* (Beaton). Gaining recognition on the west coast, he was recruited by the *Toronto Telegram*, where he worked from May 27, 1961 until his early death on August 24, 1967. Beaton’s editorial illustrations in the *Telegram* gained international prominence: Time frequently used his illustrations, he won top prize at the International Salon of Cartoons in 1965, and the Queen Mother, Lester Pearson, and John Diefenbaker all owned original cartoons that they requested (Beaton). “Ookpik” was the only cartoon strip he created, but like his editorial work, it reveals information on Canada in the 1960s.

“Ookpik” was not the *Toronto Telegram*’s first comic based on an iconic symbol of Canada set in the North. In 1933, it published “Men of the Mounted,” written by Ted McCall and drawn by Harry Hall, featuring Mounties bringing justice to the North. Well received in Canada, it never achieved international syndication. “Men of the Mounted” was abandoned in 1935, as the American syndicated “King of the Mounted” began under a similar premise (Bell, “Invaders” 34).

Beaton’s “Ookpik” is also not the first Canadian comic protagonist based on Inuit source material. This distinction belongs to the first Canadian nationalist superhero,

Nelvana, who was part Inuk and part goddess, from Adrian Dingle's "Nelvana of the Northern Lights," published from 1941 to 1947 (Arnold, "Nelvana of the North" 95-96; Bell, "Guardians" 5; Bell, "Invaders" 62). A comparison between Dingle's "Nelvana" and Beaton's "Ookpik" provides insights into the changing perception of southern Canadian writers' depictions of the Arctic in the postwar period. Arnold ("Nelvana of the North" 96) explains that "Nelvana" illustrated the public perception that the Arctic and its resources needed to be defended in the 1940s with Nelvana fighting super-villains, Nazis, and space aliens. By the mid-1960s, the Arctic represented in "Ookpik" is securely part of Canada. Nelvana's adventures reflect southern concerns about protecting Arctic resources and sovereignty (Arnold, "Nelvana of the North" 96); "Ookpik" illustrates a humorous adaptation of a southern Canadian city in the sovereign Arctic. The North, used by both artists and several Canadian cultural producers (see Grace), is an exotic location where adventures take place.

Laing (The LB Pearson Papers) believed the comic would educate and orientate readers about Canada and Canadian identity in its consumption. The messages received consciously or unconsciously could be adopted because Ookpik embodied national values as a registered symbol of the country (Dittmer 144). Recently, scholars have considered how graphic art situates preferred national narratives, characteristics, and identities (Arnold, "Nelvana of the North" 95; Beaty 429; Dittmer 144; Dittmer & Larsen 735; Edwardson 184). Beaty, focusing broadly on Canadian superheroes, states: "Popular culture was to be embraced not for its own sake but for what it could tell us about the nation and national preoccupations" (431). More specifically, Arnold ("Nelvana of the North" 95) discusses superheroes as symbols that are frequently used to communicate national ideologies. This is because governments need, and claim, popular heroes (Edwardson 184-85). Dittmer and Larsen (750-51), building on Edwardson's positioning of Captain Canuck as a cultural artifact, locate him as a cultural resource in the production of a Canadian national identity in popular culture. The three authors also reflect on "Captain Canuck," from the 1970s onward, changing to suit the preferred national identities as they shift over the course of its publication. At different moments, superheroes mobilized clichés of Canadian nationalism because they reflect the era in which they were written, and that era's nationalist ideologies (Beaty 431, 435).

Expanding on the scholarly research of the previous scholars, I now focus on the expression of Canadian national identity in "Ookpik." It ran daily from November 30, 1964, until June 27, 1966. Besides the *Toronto Telegram*, approximately fifty Canadian and American newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, carried it (Beaton). In the beginning, Beaton reinforces stereotypes that romanticize the Arctic as harsh, cold, and empty. It is a two-dimensional place, always snow-covered and occupied by igloos, dogsleds, and polar bears. For the most part, the represented environment reflects anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson's *Friendly Arctic* (1921), because it is not dangerous, but is a place of adventure, discovery, and hi-jinx.

For example, in the strip published on December 1, 1964, Ookpik is tightly tucked into a sleeping bag, facing the viewer with an annoyed look and arched eyebrows. The background is visually noisy: the sky is full of swirling loops identified with text as "Northern Lights" between the almost seismic-looking lines. On the very right of the panel is a long string. As the strip progresses, the lights dancing in the sky, Ookpik rolls on his back and, in the third panel, reaches for the string. In the final panel, having turned the power off, Ookpik lies in the dark with his eyes closed.

The comic was contractually obligated to portray the Arctic environment realistically, thereby giving it educational value. The strip does not explain the frequency, or how or why the northern lights (or aurora borealis) occur. Instead of providing scientific knowledge or even illustrating circumpolar mythology, Beaton instead entertains the southern Canadian readers with a sublime, but controllable Arctic environment.

Throughout December 1964 and into January 1965, "Ookpik" has no storylines and very little text; instead, it is comprised of visual jokes focusing on the wintery northern climate. Another example, published on January 13, 1965, has Ookpik reading a book as it snows. The text states: "Contrary to common belief...above the Arctic Circle...it doesn't...snow much." Throughout the four panels the snow gradually builds until Ookpik is covered. The contradiction between text and image is humorous, but not educational. These earliest examples illustrate Beaton depicting the Arctic as a pristine and empty wilderness, devoid of human presence.⁶

As it progresses, the comic strip forgoes contained narratives; instead, Beaton personified Ookpik and wrote extended storylines. By the end of January 1965, "Ookpik" reflects young adult life in southern Canada. It begins as he courts Piknik, a female Arctic owl who wears a skirt and bow headband. They get engaged. Their development as a couple imitates dominant North American relationships, even though they are owls living in the Arctic. They celebrate their engagement, look to buy an igloo, apply for a mortgage, plan their honeymoon, and get married. Ookpik faces relatable stress, such as a difficult mother-in-law, finding a job, buying a car, and other pitfalls.

Many of the events do not depict life in the Canadian Arctic during the 1960s, a time of social upheaval from a semi-nomadic lifestyle to settlement (see Tester & Kulchyski; Dorais). Only two "Ookpik" storylines partially reflect the ongoing transition. For example, after his honeymoon, Ookpik prepares to go hunting. His new wife, however, makes him go job hunting, where he unsuccessfully tries to sell vacuums before securing an unspecified office job. Prior to that, he had sold miniature dolls of himself and went fishing. The depiction of arts and crafts production and hunting are major economic activities in several northern communities; but in "Ookpik," they are portrayed as leisure activities.

The second example, a storyline published in September 1965, has the couple preparing for winter. Piknik needs a fur coat, a fashionable necessity; yet, after visiting several retail stores, they realize they cannot afford one. Ookpik tries to hunt various wild Arctic animals that are depicted without clothes or language, unlike the animal-

citizens in his community. He is unsuccessful. Trapping animals informs readers about the northern economy, but the comic entertains more than it educates.

“Ookpik,” for the most part, is less about the Arctic in the 1960s than about southern Canadian life enacted in an exotic setting. The final two storylines illustrate this, as they are taken directly from newspaper headlines. On March 25, 1966, although not the first article, the *Toronto Telegram* published a photograph of either two flying saucers or swamp gas, taken near Ann Arbor, Michigan. The newspaper continued to report that UFOs had been sighted across Ontario and in several American cities on March 28, 1966.

142 Beaton was familiar with the UFOs and alien news stories; he drew three editorial cartoons of them between March and April 1966. Since “Ookpik” was drawn weeks in advance, aliens appeared in it at the end of May until mid-June. The aliens befriend only Ookpik and Piknik; they are unseen and unacknowledged by the rest of the town. Ookpik tries to arrange contact between them and the mayor, but is quickly institutionalized because no one believes him. This resembles news reports that discredited the witnesses. An example, reported by the *Toronto Telegram* on March 31, 1966, is that of Canadian heavyweight boxer George Chuvalo who, with his wife and cousin, described seeing UFOs the night before. The journalist discredits his account because he recently fought Cassius Clay. It was a typical article, beginning with the witness’s accounts, and ending with experts either giving scientific reasons for a natural phenomenon or discrediting the witness. By May 1966, UFOs were no longer making headlines; cheekily, Beaton’s storyline ends with the aliens leaving because they were unbelievable.

Without transition, the final storyline examines modern art, artistic practice, and aesthetic criticism. It begins with Ookpik at home studying the History of Art. On June 22, 1966, he mails an entry to the local Modern Art juried show, believing anyone can win. He tells Piknik he has studied modern abstract art and shows her examples, literally scribbles, from his art book. They both laugh at the paintings. Despite studying several abstract examples, he instead painted a portrait of his mother-in-law, entitled *Piknik’s Mother*, at the last minute. It is nearly identical in composition to James McNeill Whistler’s *Arrangements in Grey and Black No. 1* (commonly known as *Whistler’s Mother*, 1871, Musée d’Orsay). Unfortunately, as Ookpik rushes to take the wet painting to judging, he falls on it, smearing it into an abstract image. Ookpik complains about the painting being a mess, but in the next day’s strip, his dog has taken *Piknik’s Mother* out of their igloo and heads towards the art contest undetected. The couple attends the juried exhibition and is surprised to see first place awarded to their dog and the smeared painting. As they walk home, Ookpik complains, and Piknik agrees, that he cannot win.

The critique of abstract art, what art is and should look like, takes its inspiration from public debate over Henry Moore’s *Three-Way Piece No. 2* (also known as *The Archer*, 1966, Nathan Phillips Square). In 1966, then-Toronto Mayor Philip Givens announced the intention to buy the sculpture to install in the recently completed

Nathan Phillips Square. Public uproar, evident in newspaper editorials, public debates, and at Toronto City Hall, occurred. Citizens were upset because it was a monumental piece of abstract art by a foreign artist valued at \$120,000. Public opinion overwhelmingly declared that the funds would be better used elsewhere (such as hospitals, infrastructure, or schools). Givens was forced to privately raise the funds for the sculpture (Plummer). The critics, presumably those who know art, decided that abstract art deserved to occupy a public space and, in the case of the ruined *Piknik's Mother*, win the top prize.

"Ookpik" ended without notice on Monday, June 27, 1966. The last strip stated: "When Ookpik and Piknik walked off into the sunset Saturday, it was the end of a happy 19-month association between the little owl and The Telegram. It is with regret that we bid farewell to the creation of Telegram Editorial Page Cartoonist Al Beaton who, for health reasons, has had to discontinue this popular comic strip." On the right, Ookpik waves and says "Tagvauvutit," translated in the lower corner as goodbye, as he floats away on an ice flow. The image replicates the negative stereotype that suicide was accepted and frequently practiced in Inuit culture, but is inaccurate (Steckly 104-12).

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Read in hindsight, the comic's end can be seen as signaling the decline of Ookpik. It was never able to be more than an adorable mascot that served its country at a time when the federal government was expanding Arctic administration and simultaneously searching for emblems to unite all Canadians. Its success, due to its adorableness, was fleeting in consumer culture because it lacked sustenance, as illustrated in Beaton's comic. Ookpik, unlike the Mounties or Nelvana, was not a guardian of the Arctic or Canadian sovereignty; instead, he was personified as a northern jester adjusting marvelously to southern Canadian impact across what began in the comic as his home in an empty landscape.

Taken in its entirety, "Ookpik" demonstrates Rob Shields's (165) analysis of the two sides of the North: the imaginary space that is the frontier, empty, white, blank and belongs to Canada; and the ideological North that is an empty page used to project Canadianness against the urban Canada. At the beginning of the comic, Beaton depicted a blank landscape sparsely populated by animals. As it progressed, the Arctic came to look more like a southern Canadian city, forcing Ookpik to vacation at his summer igloo in the backcountry to be re-invigorated by a "truer" North. Beaton's Arctic has no real relationship to the place it is imagining (Arnold, "The Men of the North" 453; Rosenthal 103-05; Shields 194, 198). Instead, he portrayed the Southern audience's preconceptions: polar bears, igloos, dog sleds, and the aurora borealis. These popular characteristics, symbols, and stereotypes illustrated in "Ookpik" legitimize Canadian northern identity (Grace 19-75). The North becomes an exotic and national landscape.

Nations are narrations (Bhabha 1); symbols, including those from visual and popular culture, describe Canada as a community. To pinpoint a single Canadian identity is impossible; it is a complex negotiation that continues to take place. Yet,

since Confederation, politicians and cultural producers have looked north to provide a sense of belonging and a unique identity. Ookpik was strategically used to strengthen a northern national identity, but its potential was limited in the imagining of a national narrative for Canada. Ookpik was briefly a symbol to unite the nation, remind the citizens of their nordicity, and keep the North in southern consciousness, as the Canadian federal government increased its involvement in administrating the area, people, and resources.

NOTES

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1. Formally the settlement was known as Fort Chimo, Quebec. The co-operative's name has not changed.
 2. Examples are the Royal Commission on the Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (commonly referred to as the Massey Commission), enacting the Canadian Bill of Rights, adopting the Maple Leaf flag and designating "O Canada" as the official national anthem. The Massey Commission, because it emphasized the role of culture in articulating Canadian identity nationally and internationally (see Litt; Tippett), shaped Canadian cultural policy that included supporting efforts to make Inuit art representative of Canada.
 3. This began in 1949 with regular offerings of sculptures for sale, followed by the annual releases of print editions a decade later. But Pupcheck (191) states that not every Canadian will respond to Inuit art—or the Mounties, hockey or the beaver—as representing Canadian identity; however, it has remained popular and somewhat unquestioned.
 4. This narrative is gathered entirely from southern Canadian sources such as government files at Library and Archives Canada, newspaper articles, and on Ookpik commodities (examples include the packaging for the Ookpik plush toy by the Reliable Toy Company and the commemorative Ookpik medallion by the Canadian Token and Medal Company). Marion Kunstler interviewed Jeannie Snowball, asking why she made Ookpik. She replied, "They asked us to make sealskin animals, but I wanted to do something very different, not just animals like the caribou. So I made my ookpik" (Kunstler 12).
 5. The Toronto Telegram News Service was the only contract to consent to this request. Negotiations for a television show produced by Crawley Films ended because of this stipulation. It also led to very few children's books being produced in either Canada or America.
 6. There are two exceptions in the first two months. The first is an illustration of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Lines, which has Ookpik electrocuted by biting a wire that he thought was a worm. The second is the military presence of NORAD in the form of jets chasing him as he was flying. People are not illustrated, but their presence is implied with the technology. It is also worth noting that Beaton's North is entirely devoid of Inuit, Métis, or Dene peoples. When Beaton does depict humans, they are usually attractive white women in the background.

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