

From *Nelvana* to *Ice Box*: Popular Constructions of “the Arctic”

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The construction of Canada as a northern nation has been going on for at least the past 150 years. It has taken place within and beyond Canadian borders; it has helped to set those borders; and it has played a strategic and major role in defining who we are as a people and as a nation. However, this construction and self-representation has been carried out largely by southern Canadians whose knowledge and understanding of northern realities and peoples is usually limited and often non-existent. “The North,” like “the Arctic,” has been a fabrication created (until quite recently) to entertain, to develop, to market, and always to serve the interests and goals of a southern, dominant discourse, whether that discourse is in our history books, the speeches and policies of our politicians, the imagery of our artists, the stories of our writers, or the brochures and display cases of our tourist industry.

In the following discussion, I will explore this process of constructing Canada-as-North by examining two small examples from an array of possible representations of the North in order to test my theory that “North” is a discursive formation that operates on many cultural levels, from so-called serious writing, art, and formal institutional discourse to the informal discourse of popular culture and everyday events.¹ If I have chosen my examples wisely, then they should shed light on how and why southern Canada has constructed the “North” as it has, how deeply ingrained and influential these representations are, and how northern representations can appropriate and re-write the discursive formation of “North.”

Nelvana of the Northern Lights and *Ice Box* are comics: *Nelvana* was the first “All Canadian” comic book and *Ice Box* was a comic strip that appeared in *Inuit Monthly* and *Inuit Today*.² The popular form of the comic, using visual and narrative elements, provides the initial basis for my comparison, and the medium of the comic must be kept in mind throughout. Nevertheless, there are some interesting differences in the way the comic form is used, in the stories that are told, and, most importantly, in the cultural and *artistic* histories that inform both texts. My juxtaposition of these two is, of course, deliberate—my own construction of “North” and “Arctic”—if for no other reason than that it allows me to illustrate one of the ways in which (to borrow a phrase from post-colonial theory [Ashcroft et al.]) *the North writes back*. For *Ice Box* is most decidedly

writing back, drawing back, and talking back to the dominant construction of a North that has been a fabrication of the white, southern, urban Canadian imagination.

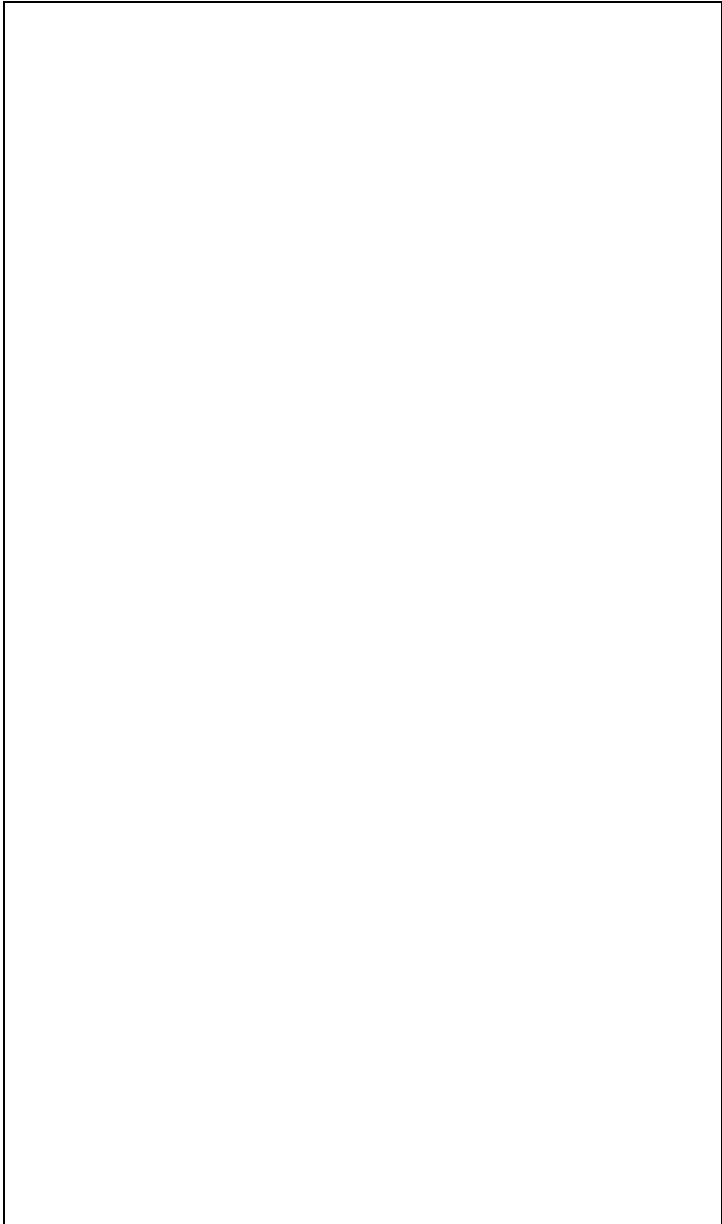
Nelvana of the Northern Lights was created by Adrian Dingle and ran from August 1941 to May 1947 (Bell 9). It was, what is called in the trade, a “white” (black and white comic book), and it belongs to the great “golden age” of Canadian comic books. On 6 December 1940, during WWII, the Canadian government placed a ban on the import of many products from the United States, among them American comic books, which, since their first appearance in 1935, had become fabulously popular with American and Canadian kids. The late 1930s was the era of the birth of the comic book superhero who quickly superseded the comic strips (circulating in North American newspapers since the 1890s) with young readers. When the embargo was placed on the American comic books, enterprising Canadians stepped into the breach and heroes like Nelvana, Dixon of the Mounted, and Johnny Canuck were born.³

Nelvana of the Northern Lights, *Dixon of the Mounted*, *Captain Canuck*, and *Derek of Bras d’Or*, shared many features with their American counterparts *Superman*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Wonder Woman* (though *Nelvana* preceded *Wonder Woman*), but they had some striking differences as well. They had good art, were, comparatively speaking, “clean” (that is free of explicit sex and extreme violence), and they were deliberately Canadian and patriotic. By today’s standards, however, they were unabashedly sexist and racist, and, like the American comic books, they saw themselves as “entering the battle against fascism” (Bell 2). They did so, albeit, from a familiar northern or arctic perspective, and *Nelvana* was the most specifically arctic of the lot.⁴

According to Adrian Dingle, Nelvana was inspired by a story told him by Frank Johnston (Franz Johnston, for a short while a Group of Seven member) about an Inuit mythological figure called Nelvana (Bell 5) whom he described as a “pretty gruesome character” (Hirsh et al. 23).⁵ To create his heroine, Dingle set about transforming her into a suitable goddess. “I changed her a bit,” he explained,

Did what I could with long hair and mini skirts. And tried to make her attractive. Then we had to bring her up to date and put her into the war effort. And, of course, everything had to be very patriotic. (Qtd in Bell, 5)

In Dingle’s hands, Nelvana becomes an immortal goddess, the only daughter of Koliak, King of the Northern Lights, and a mortal woman. She can make herself invisible, “fly and travel at the speed of light along a giant ray of the Aurora Borealis” (Bell 9), call upon the powers of Koliak, communicate telepathically, and wear a magic cloak. Her



adventures include saving the Arctic from an invasion by Nazi allies called (unfortunately?) “Kablunets,” preserve the Alaska Highway against sabotage from swarms of wolves dropped into the area by the Japanese, protect the lost world of Glacia, under the Arctic ice, from an evil scientist with a Germanic-sounding name, and safeguard an Allied secret weapon from the machinations of a German villain called “One-Ear Brunner.” And one last thing about Nelvana: under her other name, Alana North, she lives in Nortonville, Ontario, from where she helps her RCMP boyfriend fight off an invasion of the “Ether People”!

Whatever the Inuit inspiration may have been for the creation of Nelvana, her avatars lie more readily to hand in the exotic “white queen” tradition stemming from Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887) and *Ayesha* (1904) and culminating in Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* (1948), or from representations of the Arctic like this British queen in the pages of *Punch* for 5 June 1875 (Figure 1)—the caption, as befits the goal of imperialist adventure, is: “Waiting to be Won (Arctic Expedition Sailed May 28, 1875)” — or from the images of feminine heroics and the bond between the heroine and a dog in a popular film like Nell Shipman’s *Back to God’s Country* (1919).⁶ John Bell sums up the “white queen” tradition quite well when he says that, “Typically, these figures had names that ended with the letter ‘a,’ were beautiful and immortal, and ruled over ‘primitive’ peoples (often lost races)” (7). Unlike the women in Rider Haggard’s imperialist fantasies, however, neither Nelvana nor her arctic people is ultimately subjugated and destroyed by the white, male representatives of superior, civilized forces, at least not in the comic.⁷ Nevertheless, the racist, sexist, imperialist ideology of the comic is blatant, if also quite socially and politically acceptable for its time and place, and it requires closer scrutiny.

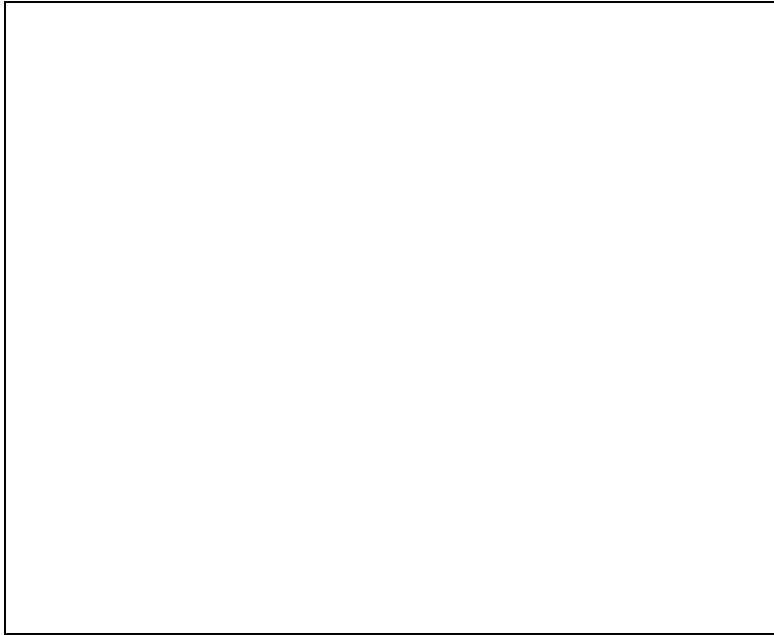


Nelvana of the Northern Lights is definitely not an Inuk, and a brief comparison of her representation with that of the Inuit whom she comes to save makes that clear. In facial features and body conformation she is Caucasian. She is, moreover, very white, beautiful in the comic book feminine style of the forties, elegant, graciously condescending, always in control, all powerful, and clearly impervious to the cold, as her scantily clad body reminds us; no parkas, mitts, and mukluks are needed by this gal! Unlike the Inuit, she defies their indeterminate time and space, can appear and disappear, and can assume a credible, alternative, southern identity as a curvaceous office worker in Ontario, where space is organized and time is measured. The Inuit are her

Others; they are depicted as primitives, an undifferentiated mass of passive, cowering, gaping, racialized faces with lumpish, helpless, heavily clad and equally undifferentiated bodies (Figure 2). They occupy an empty yet vulnerable Arctic world, outside of history and time in “anachronistic space” (McClintock 40). They are, in fact, largely indistinguishable from the Arctic, which is a silent, empty space vulnerable to attack from the Germans, the Japanese, the Ether People, and other post-war bogey-men. As the goddess of the Northern Lights (or Koliak), Nelvana’s role is to guard the great, white, empty, helpless North, otherwise known as Canada, and the gateway, via the Pole, to the entire continent. Oddly enough, her role was not all that different from the Alaska Highway itself, the DEW line, and the air bases, except that these were built and operated during the war by the American military. Nelvana, it could be argued, is a figure of internal Canadian colonization (by ruling over the Inuit) and of Canadian subjection to the rule of the absent father (Koliak, of course, but also the USA) whose imperialist orders she enacts.

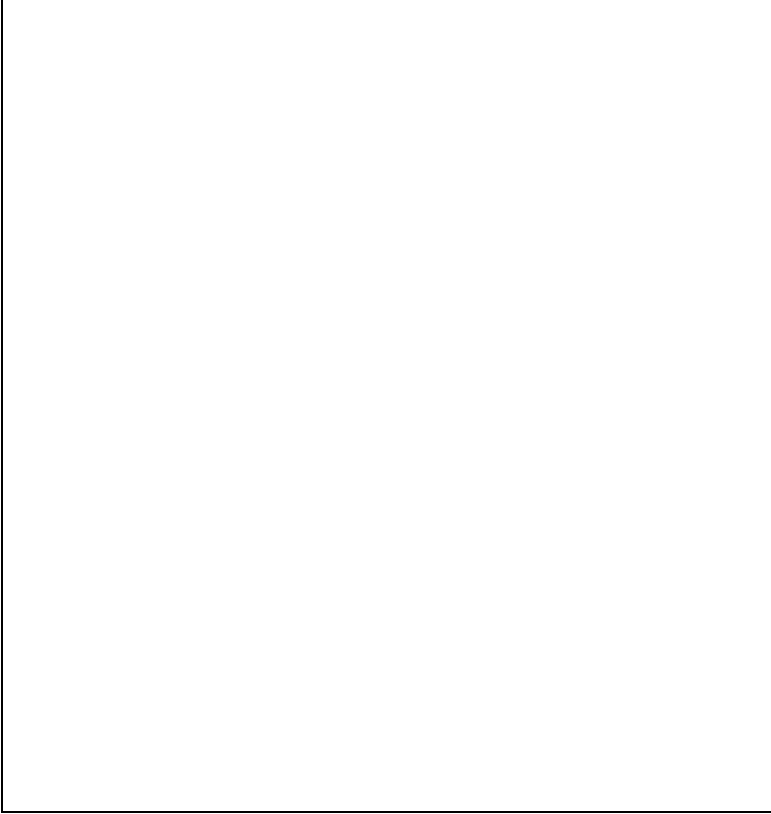
Alootook Ipellie began publishing his cartoon strip *Ice Box* in the January 1974 issue of *Inuit Monthly*, an Inuktitut/English magazine published in Ottawa by the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, after he had spent some years in Ottawa and had been working as a translator and columnist for the magazine.⁸ Trips home to Iqaluit reminded him forcibly of the old “culture that was dying” (Ipellie 158), and he was trying, in his poetry, to “write about the old ways” (Ipellie 158). He describes “the idea” for *Ice Box* as a “mixture of the two cultures [southern, euro-Canadian and northern, Inuit]” in which “you’ll see the setting is the Arctic, but the storyline itself is very often from the South” (Ipellie 159).

This concept of mixing cultures, or of supplementarity (Bhabha 306), is fundamental to much of what is understood today as Inuit literature and art. As Robin McGrath explains, traditional Inuit literature was oral, and contemporary literature comprises either transcriptions in Inuktitut (then translated into English or French) of traditional stories or works “originally composed on paper” (McGrath 195). “Modern Inuit literature,” she reminds us, contains “elements borrowed or adapted from” euro-Canadians, while maintaining “strong ties to the oral material” (195). This artistic hybridity is apparent in both the forms and the themes of Inuit art, but one of the most striking formal examples of this mixing is the combination of visual and verbal modes. Again, McGrath traces this particular mix to the Inuit pre-contact cultural tradition of *illustrating* stories with “music, facemaking, string games, dance, puppets and other dramatic forms” (McGrath 200). Post-contact Inuit culture commonly links narrative with many visual forms, from sculpture and photography to drawing, and these media are, according to McGrath, “an important part of Inuit *literature*” (emphasis added, 201).⁹ Indeed, she goes further to note that “texts are often produced in conjunction with specific illustrations in the manner of Japanese art, and the comic strip form can be found in literature for adults as well as children” (201).

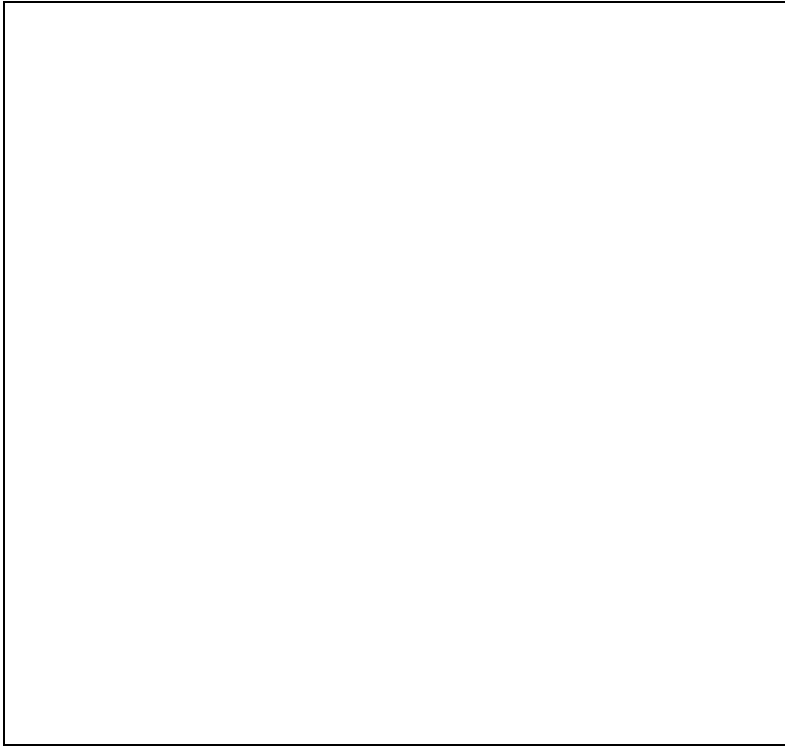


Ice Box is just such a comic strip; it is “literature for adults as well as children.” The line-drawn characters, Nanook, Papa Nook, Bones, and Mama Nook (Figure 3), will appeal to all age groups, and many of the episodes in the lives of these Inuit (school, games, Santa Claus) are directed at children. But the strip cannot be separated from its context on the page where it often contributes to and comments on a particular social or political event (land claims *non*-settlement, environmental policies, communications systems, International Women’s Year, etc.) that is discussed, in Inuktitut and English, in the columns above it. Whatever the particular focus of the strip in a given episode, however, the comic is emphatically family- and community-based; the Nook family is always interacting with the land and the weather (often in extremely amusing ways), with each other, or with the community of Ice Box. That community, of course, is itself a parody of how southern Canadians *construct* the North, and like all good parodies it cuts two ways—against the source of the parody and against those who mis-read the source text. For the non-Inuit southern reader, the comic is full of surprises, not the least of which is that the North has families who are a lot like ours—a lot but not quite!

Although there is a strong Inuit tradition of superhuman mythic heroes (Kivioq is perhaps the best known to non-Inuit), there is nothing heroic about the Nooks. Ipellie's focus is deliberately and strategically on the social and political dynamics of everyday life, an everyday life that is changing as a result of southern, governmental, non-Inuit, technological pressures, while, at the same time, it is full of traditional practices, assumptions, values, and problems. And both sides of this cultural equation are parodied,



satirized, and pilloried. As McGrath has noted, Ipellie “has no hesitation about fusing traditional and modern elements to come up with works that attack Inuit and non-Inuit alike” (198). Consequently, an Inuk can look pretty silly rolling his kayak, harpooning rocks instead of seals, or waiting for spring to arrive, and a Kabloonak can be smelly, useless, and downright destructive (Figure 4). The irony of Ipellie’s image of women’s rights coming to the Arctic is a fine example of his skilful mixture of northern and southern social semiotics (Inuk woman carrying a load on her back that turns out to be the round badge and slogan of the women’s movement); what the narrative adds to the



visual message (or vice versa) is precisely the incongruity and incompatibility of old and new values, especially when the new values are perceived as imposed from without. Ipellie's handling of alcohol abuse is much less complex or subtle, but no less effective: the Arctic and its people must be saved, not from "Ether people" or mad scientists with German names, but from the dangers at hand. In the familiar wham-bang-pow of the last frame, where Papa Nook shoots the bottle, Ipellie uses the visual semiotics of adventure comics to destroy the immediate, tangible enemy within the community (Figure 5).

Before I turn to a brief comparison of how *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* and *Ice Box* differ, I would like to consider what they have in common. Apart from the combination of verbal and visual codes (about which so much more could be said), both texts perform the cultural work of self-representation and the consolidation of identity and values during a time when group identity and values appear to be threatened. Both texts are deeply political: *Nelvana* serves the Allied war effort as propaganda by demonizing enemies and celebrating the values of individual freedom, valour, and goodness; *Ice Box* depicts a family working and playing together despite a harsh climate, government interference, and cultural instability. Both texts use a popular medium that draws on broad aesthetic and cultural traditions to communicate with large

audiences. Both texts are about imperialism and colonization: in *Nelvana* the imperialist forces are the Axis powers, although, from today’s perspective, one might suggest that the forces of imperialism are just as apparent in the American-style adventure/action fantasies and the simplistic, polarized world of the comic or in the southern Canadian representation of the North as empty, undifferentiated, defenceless space in need of help from the great white South; in *Ice Box* the imperialist forces are clearly the agents of southern Canadian government and industry—the census takers, environmentalists, educators, and entrepreneurs who treat arctic communities as marginal colonies without distinct identity or value. And, finally, both *Nelvana* and *Ice Box* construct an Arctic that serves particular ideological ends: whatever their differences, the Canada created in these comics is a northern country that is proud of its position and its people (though who is understood as “its people” varies).

The differences between the two texts are, not surprisingly, extensive and profound. I can summarize them by grouping them into two categories: differences stemming from the social semiotics of the narrative and visual codes; and differences arising from the historical and material conditions of their production. Let me take the second category first. Briefly, *Nelvana* is a comic *book*; it came into existence as a direct result of WWII and must be situated within the Canadian “whites” and comic book traditions (of cultural representation, formal aesthetics, and marketing) of its day. It could only be a southern construction of an idea of the Arctic, complete with cultural appropriation and colonialist ignorance, and its purposes were to serve the war effort by boosting Canadian patriotism and to make money for its Toronto creators. By contrast, *Ice Box* is a comic strip appearing in a monthly magazine, with government support, that is published by a group-identified organization with a specific mandate to communicate with the members of an ethnic group. Its purpose, as far as representation of the North is concerned, is to contribute to the discussion of group-identified issues, to boost a sense of common northern identity and cultural solidarity, and to articulate a counter-appropriative, resistant discourse.

The social semiotic differences of the two texts are rich and can be summarized as follows:

NELVANA	ICE BOX
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · single heroine · nationalist agenda · narrative of action · mythic events (outside time) · Cartesian, polarized world · North as empty space · North as battlefield 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · group hero/family · regional agenda · domestic comedy/political satire · everyday events (familiar time) · integrated social world · North as cultural space · North as home

With more time and space, or with a different focus, much more could be said about these two comics.¹⁰ There are, however, a few tentative conclusions that can be drawn from this brief discussion. Perhaps the most obvious is that southern representation of the North constructs an imagined territory very different from the North constructed by northerners for whom that territory is familiar, home ground. This is true, I would argue, for any product or artefact one might wish to consider. And while this difference may seem too self-evident to mention, it is, I feel, a crucial point because this difference is something Canadians in the south forget and need to recognize and respect. This cultural difference is the voice/semiotics of writing back to which I referred at the beginning, and it is important to see it in its own terms instead of dismissing it as a sign of inferiority or of irrelevance. Both comics attempt to bridge a perceived gap between spaces and cultures and these bridgings are fascinating and complex. I have called the bridging in *Nelvana* an appropriation (of Inuit mythology, representation, and space), but, in doing so, I do not wish merely to condemn: Dingle created his comic in a particular time and place and the combination of aesthetic and cultural elements in it is no less interesting and meaningful for the fact of appropriation. Ipellie is also appropriating, albeit from his cultural and ethnic position on the margins of Canadian society (one could scarcely call his physical place in Ottawa the margin!), and this appropriation—of comic genre, cultural reference and iconography—is a key strategy in a writing back (Ashcroft et al., 38-39, 114-15) that resists appropriation by the dominant group (as represented by Dingle in *Nelvana*) and asserts its own construction of identity and reality. Ipellie has seized the means and modes of communication (writing/image) and used them to assert “mixture,” hybridity, a both/and of cultural discourse that replaces by supplementing the dominant discourse.¹¹

Finally, both constructions of the Arctic demonstrate the ideological investment Canadians have made and are still making in the North and in their identity as northerners. This investment is both practical—a matter of resources and power—and psychological. As Canadians we need to fill the spaces of our lives with stories and images that make the unknown familiar, *heimlich*. Who gets to belong in that home or to feel at home there is precisely what is being negotiated in the frames of these comics. Read separately and juxtaposed synchronically, they point to an unbridgeable gulf in representation—two ideas of “North,” two incompatible homes. But read together dialogically, and positioned diachronically, they tell a very different story. By writing back to *Nelvana*, the Nook family reminds us that things have changed in their home and native land; by writing back they include and supplement *Nelvana* and her southern construction of “North.”

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Expressionism, and the Canadian North. Her most recent study is *Canada and the Idea of North*. She is currently preparing a new edition of Mina Benson Hubbard's *A Woman's Way Through Unknown Labrador* and writing a monograph on Tom Thomson.

Notes

1. The discursive formation of "North" is the subject of my book, *Canada and the Idea of North*, and of articles on Franklin, Atwood, and Kroetsch; see Grace.
2. *Ice Box* first appeared in *Inuit Monthly* 3.1 (January 1974) and continued in *Inuit Today* until 10.1 (April 1982). Another Inuit comic that might have been considered here is *Super Shamou*, created by Barney Pattunguyak and Peter Tapatai, and written by Nick Burns for the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation. However, *Super Shamou* has a single serious purpose—the fight against substance abuse—and it lacks the ironic humour and parodic force of *Ice Box*, qualities that make Ipellie's strip a powerful example of "writing back."
3. Adrian Dingle had started to create his comic book story before he joined Cyril Vaughan Bell with whom he published the Triumph series of comics, including *Nelvana*. Bell had great success with his different series, and at his peak his Toronto publishing house, Bell Features, had over 60 artists, 7 series, and sold over 20 million copies of his "whites." Bell's business began to collapse immediately after the war, when the Canadian government lifted the ban on American comics, and by 1947 the "golden age" of Canadian comics was finished. This summary of dates and events is drawn from Hirsh, Loubert, and Walker's *Great Canadian Comic Books* and from John Bell's *Guardians of the North*.
4. This northern perspective was already familiar to the Canadian *popular* imagination from films about the RCMP (see Berton, *Hollywood's Canada*) or Nell Shipman's *Back to God's Country*, and from radio programs like *Men in Scarlet*, which was aimed at children and at promoting the war effort.. *Nelvana* may have been the first "All-Canadian" Arctic comic book hero, but she was not the last. Indeed, Canadian comics have become synonymous with a northern image and ideology: in the 1970s there was *Northern Light* and in the 1980s there was *Northguard* and the Quebecois *Fleur de Lys*. Even Captain Canada, who runs around in moose antlers accompanied by a beaver side kick, has gone to the Arctic (Bell 41).
5. I have not been able to confirm either that Johnston, who visited the Eldorado Mine at Great Bear Lake, NWT, and spent time with the Inuit of Coronation Gulf (see Macdonald, 568) in 1939, returned with Inuit stories or, if he did, which myth he was referring to. Myths and stories concerning the Northern Lights are common and important across the Arctic and in northern Europe. Key common features include the idea that the Lights are the spirits of the dead, that they can come to earth to communicate with the living, and that their movement and sound come from the ball game played by the spirits, who use a human or walrus skull as their foot ball. Although associated with the dead, the Lights are not always seen by the Inuit as dangerous; however, the Inupiat of Alaska have a cautionary tale about the Lights biting off the heads of disobedient boys (see Brown), and the spirits who join the Northern Lights are often thought of as the souls of those who died from loss of blood (notably premature babies) or by violence. The Inuktitut for aurora is either *aksarnirq* or *alugsukat*, meaning "ball player" or "untimely birth" (Eather 110). However, the association of the

Northern Lights with women is common in Finland and can be traced back to a connection with the Valkyries in Norwegian myth (Brekke and Egeland 1). Therefore, the specific links of the Northern Lights with a character like Nelvana may well owe more to northern European sources than to Inuit. For discussion of the Northern Lights in Inuit and northern European myth, see Brekke and Egeland, Brown, Eather, Falck-Ytter, and Savage.

6. In Shipman's film, based on James Oliver Curwood's story "Wapi the Walrus" (1918), the heroine is befriended by a Great Dane, who is her constant companion. Nelvana is frequently depicted riding on or accompanied by such a dog, which is scarcely the most appropriate canine for the Arctic.
7. In her detailed analysis of Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), Anne McClintock discusses the construction of "anachronistic space" (244) and "patriarchal regeneration" (240). She describes Haggard's novel as an imperialist narrative that legitimates "white ancestry" (244, 247) and "restores" the white patriarch to the position of control over black people and African riches (248-49).
8. *Inuit Monthly* changed its name to *Inuit Today* in 1975 and Ipellie's cartoon strip continued until 1982. He has also created the current comic strip called *Nuna & Vut* for the Iqaluit daily *Nunatsiaq News*. Ipellie, who was born on Baffin Island to a semi-nomadic, hunting family, was educated in Iqaluit, Yellowknife, and Ottawa, where he now lives and works as a writer, columnist, and artist.
9. McGrath, 200. For examples of this close and powerful interdependence of visual and narrative art, one need only look to such beautiful books as *Tales from the Igloo* and *More Tales from the Igloo*, children's books by Michael Arvaaluk Kusugak, catalogues of sculpture such as *Inuit Stories: Povungnituk*, prints, which are often highly narrative, and tapestries by artists like Irene Avaalaaquaq and other Baker Lake artists who tell about starvation and the great removal from the barrens into communities like Baker Lake and Rankin Inlet. Analysis of these texts and of the aesthetics informing them is well beyond the scope of this paper, but the relevant point in this limited context is simply that, for contemporary Inuit artists, story exists profoundly in and arises from the conjunction of the visual and the verbal (be it spoken or written). Their close connection with an oral literacy has enabled this productive mixture of modes and genres that are most commonly treated separately in western European cultures, although, even in this tradition, striking instances of verbal/visual conjunction come immediately to mind.
10. A close examination of the use of drawing space and page in these two comics suggests that Adrian Dingle tells his story in fragmented scenes, whereas Ipellie tells his in a smoother, more visually connected manner. Dingle's representation of arctic space—the ground for his figures—is either completely empty and flat (particularly when compared with the landscape detail he provides for non-arctic spaces) or filled with the other worldly powers of the Northern Lights (represented by lines and shading) and Nelvana herself. Ipellie's representation of space, while simple, is usually of a full world of snow, igloos, animals, and human activity. The existence of words within this space accounts for another striking visual difference because in *Nelvana* we have only English in a fairly formal, expository mode. In *Ice Box* we have English and Inuktitut, predominantly as dialogue. As with the representation of visual space, the verbal semiotics constructs an economy of plenitude and

human social presence in Ipellie's text and a semiotics of absence or void that can only be filled by Logos in the Dingle text. However, I must be cautious in making these generalizations because I have not had access to original documents for the Nelvana comic (they are almost impossible to locate, except in the National Archives or private collections), so the sample examined is small and second hand. Moreover, the Ipellie strip is written in a contemporary English that is bound to sound more colloquial to contemporary ears.

11. In "DissemiNation," Homi K. Bhabha describes the intervention of minority discourse in the culture of a nation as supplementarity: "The supplementary strategy interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative plurals and pluralism by radically changing their mode of articulation" (305). The power of supplementarity that facilitates the emergence of minority discourse within the dominant discourse is not so much a negation of received history but "the renegotiation of those times, terms, and traditions through which we turn our uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history" (306). Ipellie is performing precisely this type of "renegotiation."

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