



## **'Representations of the Circumpolar North in Literature, Film & Popular Culture'**

### **A new UArctic exemplar course**

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**From a presentation given during Arctic Congress 2024 in Bodø, Norway, on the panel: "Educational Innovation for the Circumpolar North: Tertiary and Postgraduate Education". Thursday, May, 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024.**

### **Critical questions covered in this UArctic exemplar course:<sup>1</sup>**

- How is 'the North' defined? Where is North?
- How has the North and the land been represented from the outside or the south?
- How is North represented by artists with a transient relationship to the region?
- In what ways are media representations connected to colonial and assimilationist politics?
- How have Indigenous peoples been represented in the North?
- How do Indigenous peoples represent themselves in the North?
- How does 'the imaginary North' influence the real and lived North?
- How have mass-cultural portrayals of the Arctic influenced global policy in the region?

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<sup>1</sup> The course lives here and is intended to be a 'living' document:  
<https://laerainstitute.org/resources/exemplar-courses>

When I arrived at then Yukon College to teach English back in 2018, it was during the lead-up to our long-anticipated metamorphosis into Yukon University – Canada’s first university north of 60. This landmark event officially occurred in May 2020 amidst great pride, albeit muted by world events. While the so-called ‘pivot’ to pandemic teaching during that time was certainly disruptive to students and educators everywhere, at Yukon University we quickly found that we had many of the pieces in place already. Most importantly, we had students who not only knew how to learn remotely in a variety of ways, but often really benefited from the improved accessibility to credits and flexible learning. With the main Yukon University campus in Whitehorse, and a further 12 satellite campuses spread widely throughout Canada’s least populous northern territory, mainly in small Yukon Indigenous communities, sometimes with spotty internet connections — educational innovation is something we think about a lot. From land-based courses taught out of canvas wall-tents with wood-burning stoves in freezing temperatures, to high-tech virtual student exchanges with universities in Mexico, climate science students learning first-hand from the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in the Yukon’s only fly-in remote Arctic community, or the first “made-in-Yukon” degree – the Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Governance, flexibility and innovation are key to education in our corner of the circumpolar world.

Also in 2020, The UArctic Læra Institute for Circumpolar Education was established, with the goal to “...support and strengthen UArctic member capacity to deliver locally appropriate and pedagogically high-quality Circumpolar Studies programmes, without compromising their own academic flexibility.”<sup>2</sup> In my six years as a northern educator, getting the chance to work on this UArctic “exemplar course” for the Laera Institute has been my most direct involvement to-date. As a junior Yukon contributor to the educational project of UArctic therefore, it seems important to respect the work and wisdom of those who helped us get here. When I was in graduate school we used to talk about our “academic grandparents” - those people whose past work, vision, and ideas helped shape the departments, fields, programs, and institutions of the present. If UArctic has grandparents, then the Yukon can certainly lay claim to a few of them. Most obviously the late Aron Senkpiel, founding Dean at Yukon College and one of my predecessors as an English teacher, did more than anyone to lay the groundwork for innovative and collaborative, northern focused circumpolar education. Aron was a leading architect of the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, the defining program of the University of the Arctic, and his vision for a “higher education in the North, for the North, and by the North” is coming to fruition today in exciting ways. I must also recognize the ongoing work of my more senior colleagues, Norm Easton and Amanda Graham, in championing northern focused higher education and the Yukon’s UArctic connections.

So, why design an ‘exemplar course’ that focuses on representation of the circumpolar north in film, literature, and popular culture – and how to explain it in 7 minutes?

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<sup>2</sup> About the Laera Institute. <https://laerainstitute.org/>

The usefulness of thinking about representations of north or nordicity is likely apparent to most people here, at least in theory. For new northern students however, a course that affords them time to “look in” on the north, to understand the ideas which have shaped it, the weight of external cultural productions which locate it in popular imaginations, and the ways these texts influence and legitimate real policy – can be an immensely cathartic and important moment of critical reflection. It can help them see themselves in the north. A focus on representation also help students to situate their own work, academic, creative, political, professional within a wider cultural tapestry and to understand the importance of resisting and “re-populating” the north with their stories, voices, and concerns. If a course like this can be made dynamic, responding to a variety of local concerns throughout the circumpolar world, in a multitude of languages and with relevance to a multitude of Indigenous societies throughout the region, then it can be even more powerful. I’m not making *quite* such lofty claims for this exemplar course just yet, but as a work in-progress – hopefully aided in time by contributions from circumpolar teachers who use the syllabus and adapt it with primary source materials from their own regional and cultural contexts – the hope is that could be where it is headed.

Sally Webber, president of Yukon College from 1994 to 2006, wrote that the challenges and possibilities of northern education were in: “Comprehending the diversity of cultures; the individual and social consequences of historical traumas; the community volatility created by boom-and-bust economies; new forms of governance; the national hinterland experience; and the dreams, wisdom, and aspirations of northern peoples, are all essential prerequisites for building something enduring here.”<sup>3</sup>

Given my own location, academic background and embarrassingly anglophone limitations, this course currently speaks most heavily to representations of *and* from the North American ‘north’. Yet, it could be argued that the loud and outsized transnational currency the English-speaking world’s cultural productions have had – for better or worse – over the past century make this an opportunity for students to discuss the homogeneity of northern image-making, the discursive damage of Arctic simulacrum, and the stamping out of difference in mass cultural texts, *before we get into the more exciting and important work or reclamation, reconciliation, and the resurgence of pluralistic circumpolar narratives.* Indeed, this is a challenging balance act which I often encounter in my own pedagogical approach to teaching cultural representation, namely just how many damaging stereotypes, reductive, homogenizing, sexist, colonist or racist texts need to be surveyed to really emphasise the importance of new ones which seek to undo this damage and speak from the north? Cole Pauls, a young Champagne and Aishihik Citizen and Tahltan comic artist, illustrator, and printmaker from Haines Junction, Yukon, has helped us address this problem during artist visits to my classes. Cole sees his own work, which includes brilliant Indigenous language-revival graphic novels which he works on with local Southern Tutchone elders and language keepers, as “fighting back” against the misinformation and southern stereotypes of his land and people:

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<sup>3</sup> 124“Deaning” in the North: Personal Reflections on the Contributions of Aron Senkpiel. Sally Webber. The Northern Review 27 (Fall 2007): 125.

By incorporating traditional language in my comics I'm trying to engage the reader in Yukon traditions in an accessible way that anyone can understand, even if they're not a Yukoner or Indigenous. It's really important to me to create an authentic representation of Yukon First Nations in media and fight back the tropes and racist stereotypes past comics/media have enforced. I am creating the comics I always wanted to read as Yukon youth and including my community in the writing process has helped me incredibly to get things correct.<sup>4</sup>

The argument for a course like this therefore, is to help students decide what exactly to fight back against.

Literature scholar Caroline Rosenthal writes that most Canadians know the North “as a text only, not as a real space or landscape, but as a cultural text rewritten by generations of Canadian politicians and artists.”

Few Canadians have ever been “up North” much less lived there, so the North could turn into a projection space for southern dreams, fantasies, and nightmares, a space either pictured as a vast, hostile, and strange northland, or as a pristine wilderness, or as a resource-rich frontier, but always as a land void of people. National narratives include as much as they exclude. What the national idea of North excluded for the longest time was at first the presence of indigenous peoples at all and later their specific cultural perspective on and relationship with the land.<sup>5</sup>

For our students, the old observation that there is a “real north” and an “imagined north” is of course true – and yet as the circumpolar region diversifies, becomes more multicultural, more international, more multilingual, more accessible, more connected, more politicized, more *populated*, and as its Indigenous peoples achieve new degrees of their own political and cultural self-determination, the blurred zone between those “real” and “imagined” norths will become ever more important for us to inhabit, critique and help students develop the tools to understand. The goal may well be Amanda Graham’s vision of the northern citizen who is “...emerging from the region itself, from northern institutions that are self-consciously nurturing and educating their region’s peoples for a life lived with choice and by choice in the region.”<sup>6</sup>

Sherrill Grace stated, the northern space has been “...semioticized, narrativized, mythologized, and... used as a spatial meta-narrative for the self-conceptualization of the Canadian nation”. This is surely true to varying degrees in all circumpolar nation-states. Grace’s other big assertion of course was that the southern world, and its voting populations especially, needs to be made to understand the north “..in their *imaginations*” and that is what the

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<sup>4</sup> Cole Pauls. Artist Statement. Yukon Prize 2023. <https://yukonprize.ca/cole-pauls/>

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Rosenthal. *Locations of North in Canadian Literature and Culture*. 27. [http://www.kanada-studien.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/02\\_Rosenthal\\_North.pdf](http://www.kanada-studien.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/02_Rosenthal_North.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Graham. *Teaching the North: The Curious Business of Being Inside-out*. Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens (2013). 24. <https://scholar.yukonu.ca/agraham/files/2023/01/graham-teachingthenorth-canadianissues13w.pdf>

humanities do.<sup>7</sup> I would like this course to expand this definition even beyond the humanities and in doing so consider that the north is in fact an inherently interdisciplinary space of enquiry: it can't be anything but.

The course is now online at the Læra institute where I encourage anybody who is interested to look it up, borrow from its sources, and adapt it for your own national, cultural and linguistic contexts. I'd be happy to help in any way I can.

<https://laerainstitute.org/resources/exemplar-courses>

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Breitbart. "They Need to Be Made to Understand in Their Imaginations": An Interview with Sherrill Grace. 124. [http://www.kanada-studien.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/07F\\_Interview\\_Sherrill\\_Grace.pdf](http://www.kanada-studien.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/07F_Interview_Sherrill_Grace.pdf)