

Circumpolar Studies exemplar course:

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

UArctic Course themes:

- Lands and environments
- peoples and cultures
- contemporary issues

Course Description

This course takes a critical look at representations of the North in literature, film and popular culture. We will read novels, short stories, nonfiction essays, poetry, films, digital and visual material in our quest to understand ‘the North’ – both as a cultural idea as well as a real place. Images, themes, myths and symbols emerging from literary representations of the North will be analysed closely, and then connected to self-representations from the communities, peoples and cultures of the region. Through a comparative and critical look at enduring representations of the North using primary and secondary source material, we will analyse ways in which the distinct lands and environments that make up the Circumpolar region have been characterised in the global imagination, and how these characterisations have oftentimes been deployed as justification for forms of colonialism and resource extraction. Texts concerning the politics of representation and the construction of national mythologies will frame theoretical discussion of contemporary issues. Topics relating to the Circumpolar region including Arctic sovereignty, Indigenous resilience, cultural and linguistic resurgence, truth and reconciliation, energy and food security, climate change, defence, and treaty politics. Undergraduate students will study how historical and contemporary culture as well as contemporary media portrayals of ‘North’ shape a global imagination of the Circumpolar region. Students will also reflect on the importance of self-representation and new ‘northern voices’ in order to push back against longstanding misconceptions of the region and better articulate a diverse and urgent Circumpolar future amidst the contemporary geopolitical moment.

NB: Although this is primarily an anglophone course with a focus on North America, where possible translated texts have been incorporated, as well as formative texts from across the Circumpolar North. Instructors are encouraged to elaborate modules and content for their own regional contexts and with further texts they are familiar with.

Critical questions covered:

- 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?

Course Learning outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- present and assess different definitions of North both as a geographical location and as a place of the imagination
- Assess the formation of cultural stereotypes and their shaping of contemporary issues
- Understand the power of image-making and media narratives in a globalized context
- recognize the primary, recurring themes and images in literature and media about the North
- analyse representations of the Circumpolar region and its people as presented by local, and outside writers
- analyse representations of the North and its people as presented by Indigenous writers
- perform post-secondary level analysis of literature, film, television and other visual media
- recognize literary devices and motifs, explain how these contribute to politics of representation in colonial, industrial and globalized contexts
- present ideas in well-organized, thoughtful, and polished essays, and do post-secondary level research into literary and cultural subjects

Module One: Locating ‘North’: Theories of Representation and Place

This module lays out the theoretical stakes of the circumpolar North as well as scholarly traditions concerning place and representation. These readings can be adjusted according to the course credit level and the familiarity of students with the topic. Suggested readings in this module will also serve as extension texts for faculty who are relatively new to this material, in order to gain a grounding in the scholarship and broader stakes of ‘Northern-ess’. The lengthier background reading for this first module should fully ground prospective instructors in the field.

Core Texts:

Breitbach, J. (2011). “They Need to Be Made to Understand in Their Imaginations”: An Interview with Sherrill Grace. *Zeitschrift Für Kanada-Studien* , 31.1, 122–130.

Grace, S. (ed.), 1996, “Representing North, Special Issue of Essays on Canadian Writing”. 59 (Fall)

Hulan, R. (2002). *Northern experience and the myths of Canadian culture*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Kulchyski, P. (2004). [Review of the book *Canada and the Idea of North* by S.E. Grace]. *Études/Inuit/Studies*. Volume 28, Number 1, 2004, p. 197–201
<https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/etudinit/2004-v28-n1-etudinit1096/012653ar/>

Moodie, S. (2024) “A Portfolio of the North: The Conflicting North. University College of the North”. <https://www.ucn.ca/2023/07/article-4-a-portfolio-of-the-north-the-conflicting-north/>

Webb, J. (2009). *Understanding Representation*. Sage.

Suggested Texts:

Berger, C. (1970) *The Sense of Power*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Fjågesund, P. (2014). *The Dream of the North : a Cultural History to 1920*. Rodopi.

Frye, Northrop. 1971. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

Grace, S E. (2001) *Canada and the Idea of North*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Graham. A. (1990) “[Indexing the Canadian North: Broadening the Definition](#) *The Northern Review*, no. 6: 21-37.

Hamelin, Louis-Edmond, 1979, *Canadian Nordicity: It's Your North Too*. transl. by William Barr, Montreal: Harvest

Heinemann, David. 1993. "Latitude Rising: Historical Continuity in Canadian Nordicity".
Journal of Canadian Studies 28, no. 3: 134-140.

Moss, John (ed.), 1997. *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

Urberg, I. (2013). Ryall Anka, Johan Schimanski, and Henning Howlid Wærp, eds. *Arctic Discourses*. Scandinavian-Canadian Studies.

Module Two: Constructions of North: 1700-1900

This module will survey formative literary portrayals of the north and Arctic region dating from the early period of European colonialism through the late 19th century. Readings might be excerpted from longer texts, novels and essays.

Core Texts:

Atwood, M. (1995) Introduction & "Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew" in *Strange things: The malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Dickens, C. (1854) *The Lost Arctic Voyagers'* in Household Words.

Harper, K. (2008) "Charles Dickens and the Inuit". Nunatsiaq News. [Charles Dickens and the Inuit \(nunatsiaq.com\)](http://CharlesDickensandtheInuit(nunatsiaq.com))

Hulan, Renée. (2018). Franklin's Long Shadow: Representations of the Canadian Arctic. 10.1007/978-3-319-69329-3_1.

McCann-Armitage, Z. (2018) "Extractive Dynamics: Reflections on Identity in the Yukon Territory". White Wall Review. <https://whitewallreview.com/extractive-dynamics-reflections-on-identity-in-the-yukon-territory/>

Landseer, E. "Man Proposes, God Disposes", Painting. 1864, Royal Holloway, May 2013.

Moore, A. "Sir Edwin Landseer's Man Proposes, God Disposes: And the fate of Franklin". The British Art Journal, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring 2009), pp. 32–37.

Rosenthal, C. (2009) "Locations of North in Canadian Literature and Culture". *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*. 29.2. 25-38.

Walker, J. (2008) *Passage*. Film. NFB.

Suggested Texts:

Berton. P. (1957). *The Mysterious North*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

- Mitcham, A. (1983). *The Northern Imagination: A Study of Northern Canadian Literature*. Moonbeam, ON: Penumbra Press.
- Cavell, J. (2008) *Tracing the Connected Narrative: Arctic Exploration in British Print Culture, 1818–1860*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cavell, J. (2002). “The Second Frontier: The North in English-Canadian Historical Writing,” *Canadian Historical Review* 83, no. 3 (2002): 364–89.
- Kodzick, J. & Borm, J. (2020) *German Representations of the Far North (17th-19th Centuries): Writing the Arctic*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Mercer, W. (2010). “Representations of the Arctic in Nineteenth-Century French Prose Fiction.” In Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski, and Henning Howlid Wærp, eds. *Arctic Discourses*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars.
- Wiebe, R. (1997). “Coursing a Naked Country”. In J. Moss (Ed.), *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative* (pp. 23–32). University of Ottawa Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cn6s9r.6>

Module Three: Formative literary, film and television treatments of North: 1900 - 1990s

This week we will look at twentieth century representations of the north – primarily using examples from the culturally significant North American film and television industry, as well as literature and criticism. Genre examples will include the ‘Northern’ and Mountie movies of the early 1900s as well as far-reaching representations in popular television shows and their attendant spin-offs.

Core Texts:

- Atwood, M. (2014) *The Stone Mattress*. Toronto: O.W. Toad, Ltd.
- Gould, G. (1967) “The Idea of North”, in: *Solitude Trilogy: Three Sound Documentaries*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1992.

Suggested Texts:

- Cavell, J and Noakes, J. (2010) *Acts of Occupation: Canada and Arctic Sovereignty, 1918–25*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Clemens, M. D. (2022). *Screening Nature and Nation*. Athabasca University Press.

Groß, K. 1994, "From American Western to Canadian Northern: Images of the Canadian North in Early Twentieth-Century Popular Fiction in Canada", in: Konrad Groß / Paul Goetsch (eds.), *Das Natur-, Kultur-Paradigma in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen: Narr, 354-366.

Moodie, S. (1986). *Roughing It in the Bush*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Original edition, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962.

Purdy, Al. *North of Summer*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967.

_____ *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*. Ed. Russell Brown. McClelland & Stewart, 1986.

_____ *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1993.

Richler, Mordecai. *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. Markham: Viking, 1989.

Varga, D. (2012). *John Walker's Passage*. University of Toronto Press.
<https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442664388>

Module Four: Gendering the Arctic: Sirens and Rugged Explorers in the Cultural Imagination

Much has been written in academic discourse as well as popular art and commentary regarding the 'gendering' of the Circumpolar region. From early cultural stereotypes projected onto Indigenous peoples of north, to the fascination with exploration and noble sacrifice in the Euro-American cultural imagination, this week will look at the different ways representations of the Arctic have perpetuated rigid gender assumptions about the region, a dynamic which has often provided a tacit rationale for extractive and colonial adventures.

Core Texts:

Atwood, M. (1995). *Strange things: The malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Grace, S. "Gendering Northern Narratives," in *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narratives*, ed. John Moss (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, (1997), 163–82.

Nonnekes, P. (2008) *Northern Love: An Exploration of Canadian Masculinity*. U Athabasca Press.

Sangster, J. (2011). "Constructing the 'Eskimo' Wife: White Women's Travel Writing, Colonialism, and the Canadian North", 1940–1960. In *Through Feminist Eyes*. Athabasca University Press.

Suggested Texts:

Atwood, M. (1972) *Survival*. Toronto: Anansi.

—. “True North.” *Saturday Night* 141 (Jan. 1987): 141-48.

—. “The Age of Lead.” *Wilderness Tips*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991. 157-75.

___ “Stone Mattress”. Toronto: O.W. Toad, Ltd. 2014.

Wiebe, Rudy, (1989). *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*. Edmonton, AB: NeWest Press.

_____ (1980) *The Mad Trapper*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980.

———— (1994). *A Discovery of Strangers*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

Module Five: Contemporary Indigenous Cinema in the North

This module will introduce students to the importance of Indigenous cinema in asserting political rights and cultural autonomy in the north, but also in ‘pushing back’ against the weight of outside image making through mass media, literature and film from the south. This discussion will be set within a wider look at the forms of cultural appropriation, theft and misrepresentation of Indigenous identities through legacy popular culture, and introduce students to the ‘renaissance’ in Indigenous filmmaking lead by Northern communities in recent decades.

Holmburg, L. (2022) *Qummut Qukiria! Arctic Chills: The Indigenous Horror Film Series* from the Arctic Circumpolar Resurgence: Section 4. Goose Lane Editions.

Selected Films:

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001). Zacharias Kunuk. Isuma Igloolik Productions.

Helander, M. (2018) *Birds in the Earth*, short film

Hjerterått (2013). Nils Gaup and Grethe Bøe-Waal. Original Film AS

Katja Gauriloff, K. (2016). *Kaisa’s Enchanted Forest*. Finland.

Kernell, A. (2016) *Sámi Blood*. Sweden/Denmark/Norway.

Pathfinder [Ofelaš/Veiviseren] (1987). Nils Gaup. Filmkameratene AS.

Additional Recommended NFB productions:

Between Two Worlds (1990)

If the Weather Permits (2003)

Inuuvunga: I Am Inuk, I Am Alive (2004)

Qallunaat! Why White People Are Funny (2006)

The Nunavut Animation Lab

Module Six: Contemporary Circumpolar Indigenous Writing: Language & Cultural Resurgence

This unit will focus primarily on Indigenous language and cultural revival movements throughout the North, using a combination of written texts, graphic novels, children's media and film. Students will be encouraged to think critically about connections between language and culture, and to set these texts in the wider history of assimilationist colonial assaults on Indigenous language and traditions.

Suggested Texts:

Keavy, M. (2009). "Are We Also Here For That?": Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit—Traditional Knowledge, or Critical Theory?. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1-2, 2009, pp. 183-202.

Kistova, Anastasia V., and Natalia N. Pimenova. "History and specificity of literary activity of indigenous peoples." (2016). https://elib.sfu-kras.ru/bitstream/handle/2311/21624/01_Kistova.pdf?sequence=1

Gavrilovna, Smolina Maia. "Educational potential of epics and fairy tales of indigenous minority peoples of Siberia." *Science for Education Today* 8, no. 4 (2018): 217-232. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/educational-potential-of-epics-and-fairy-tales-of-indigenous-minority-peoples-of-siberia.pdf>

Jessen Williamson, K. (2014). "Uumasuusivissuaq: Spirit and Indigenous Writing". *Education*.

Martin, K. (2012) *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*. University of Manitoba Press.

Robinson, Eden. 2000. *Monkey Beach*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

Robinson Eden. *Trickster Series*. 2018-

Pauls, Cole. *Kwändur*. Wolfville, NS: Conundrum Press, 2022

Johnston, Aviaq. *Those who Run in the Sky*. Inhabit. 2017. (English & Inuktitut)

Tagaq, Tanya. *Split Tooth*. Penguin. 2019.

Films:

Je' vida (2023) Finland

Tautuktavuk – What We See (2023) Canada.

My Grandfather's language (2023) Finland.

Miss Campell: Inuk Teacher (2023) Canada.

Images of you (2023) Denmark.

Arctic Song (2022) Canada

Edge of the Knife (SGaawaay K'uuna) (2018) Canada, Haida

Module Seven: Arctic Wilderness and Persistent Mythologies in Pop Culture

This module will look at the legacy of the image making we have covered so far. Using contemporary examples of Arctic representation, including digital, internet and mass-media texts, students will question the extent to which the global imagination of 'North' is still influenced by some of the discourses we have examined over the past weeks. Included in this module will be a critical discussion of 'wilderness' and the relationship between humans and the natural world in our current globalized technocratic world.

Core Texts:

Grace, Sherrill. (1991) "Comparing Mythologies: Ideas of West and North." *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*. Ed. Robert Lecker. ECW. 243-62.

Grant, Shelagh. "Myths of the North in the Canadian Ethos." *The Northern Review* 3/4 (1989): 15-41.

_____. "Arctic Wilderness and other Mythologies," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1998): 27-42;

Hurst, E. (2017). *Going North: Glenn Gould, Stars and the Authentic Self. ETopia*.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1718-4657.36769>

Krakauer, J. (1997). *Into the Wild*. Pan Books.

Reamer, D. (2024). A history of novelty songs about Alaska. *Anchorage Daily News*. March 31 2024. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-life/2024/03/31/a-history-of-novelty-songs-about-alaska/>

Penn, S. (2007). *Into the Wild*. Paramount Pictures.

Suggested Texts:

Clemens, M. D. (2022). *Screening Nature and Nation*. Athabasca University Press.

Penna, J. (2018) *Arctic*. Film. Iceland.

Module Eight: Climate Literature & Environmental Activism in the North

This week will introduce students to some of the writing and film coming out of the Circumpolar region aimed at asserting the region at the forefront of efforts to fight anthropogenic climate change. Set against both Indigenous and non-Indigenous commentary on changing landscapes in the North, students will question the role of literature and creative representations in shaping and highlighting pressing environmental discourses that reach far outside the region.

Suggested Texts:

Griffith, Franklyn, 2007, “Camels in the Arctic? Climate Change as the Inuit See it: ‘From the Inside Out’”, in: *The Walrus*, Special Issue *The Arctic*,
<http://www.walrusmagazine.com/articles/2007.11-arctic-global-warming/>, 27.2.2009

Hulan, R. (2018). *Climate Change & Writing the Canadian Arctic*. 10.1007/978-3-319-69329-3.

Cameron, E. (2015). *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Films:

People of the Ice (2003)

Climate on the Edge (2003)

Never Lose Sight (2009)

Module Nine: Self-representations of Northern Peoples in the 20th and 21st centuries

This module encourages students to shift focus from the more abstract, theoretical or historical representations of Northern-ness we have been looking at, and takes a look at the diverse art and literature of contemporary Arctic societies that are multicultural, pluralistic and connected to global cultures in myriad ways. Instructors and students are encouraged to bring in their own representations of Northern peoples from communities close to them.

Suggested Texts:

Cruikshank, J. et al. (eds.), (1990) *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Films:

The Gullspång Miracle. (2023) Norway.

Tautuktavuk – What We See (2023) Canada.

My Grandfather's language (2023) Finland

Miss Campell: Inuk Teacher (2023) Canada.

Images of you (2023) Denmark.

One with the Whale (2023) USA

Tracks (2022) Sweden

Soviet Barbara – the Story of Ragnar Kjartansson in Moscow (2023) Russia

Kalak (2023) Greenland

Arctic Song (2022) Canada

Eallogierdu – The Tundra Within Me (2023) Norway.

Je' vida (2023) Finland

Home River (2023) Finland

The Cycle (2022) Russia

AV-arkki provides a further resource for Northern films, subscription at: [AV-arkki \(vimeo.com\)](https://www.vimeo.com/av-arkki)

Module Ten: Arctic Futures: sovereignty, securities, and northern borders

The final module of this course asks us to situate our learning in wider geopolitical terms to ask the question: What does a Northern future look like? We have looked at many examples of texts and portrayals that shape a global imagination of the Circumpolar region, but we will end by reflecting on the importance of new 'northern voices' in order to address an urgent Circumpolar future amidst the many struggles of our current geopolitical moment including reconciliation and climate crisis.

Suggested Texts:

Sinevaara-Niskanen, H. (2015). *Setting the Stage for Arctic Development: Politics of Knowledge and the Power of Presence*. Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis 304. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.

Hansson, H., & Ryall, A. (2017). *Arctic modernities : the environmental, the exotic and the everyday*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Mossé, M. (2022). An overview of Inuit perspectives on Franklin's lost expedition (1845–1846): a few avenues for discussion and future research – commentary to Pawliw, Berthold, and Lasserre. *Fennia - International Journal of Geography*. 10.11143/fennia.109784.

Pauls, Cole. *Dakwākāda Warriors*. 2019. Conundrum Press.

Taylor, Drew, Ed. *Me Tomorrow: Indigenous Views on the Future*. 2021. Douglas & McIntyre.