ENGLISH 261 – Arctic Encounters
Professor Russell A. Potter

http://eng261.blogspot.com

Mondays 12:00-1:50, Alger 108

All courses in the Connections category are upper-level courses on topics that emphasize comparative perspectives, such as across disciplines, across time, and across cultures. “Arctic Encounters” examines cultural contact narratives – both 'factual' and 'fictional' – between European 'explorers' of the Arctic and native peoples in the comparative context of European colonialism and emergent literatures, including British, Canadian, Inuit, and Amerindian texts. We will look at the early narratives of European "explorers," as well as at the oral traditions and testimony of native Arctic peoples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We will look at the way the Arctic was represented – in panoramas, dioramas, and the illustrated press – with a specific focus on the international interest in the fate of Sir John Franklin's last expedition, which disappeared almost without a trace in the late 1840's. We'll continue through an examination of the way the North is framed by the show-makers of more recent years, with reference both to “documentary” film (Flaherty’s Nanook of the North and NOVA’s Arctic Passage: Prisoners of the Ice) as well as feature films (Vincent Ward’s Map of the Human Heart and Zacharias Kunuk’s Atanarjuat). In the final third of the semester, our focus will be on contemporary Inuit life and culture, particularly in the new Canadian territory of Nunavut. We will read a variety of texts both by “Western” and Inuit writers, including Kenn Harper, Tanya Tagaq, Alooktook Ipellie, and Lawrence Millman.

REQUIRED TEXTS (Available at the RIC Bookstore)

Into the Wild, by Jonathan Krakauer
Minik, the New York Eskimo, by Kenn Harper
A Kayak Full of Ghosts, Lawrence Millman
In Those Days: Shamans, Spirits, and Faith in the Inuit North, by Kenn Harper
Split Tooth, by Tanya Tagaq

FILMS

Nanook of the North (1922)
Atanarjuat (2001)
Arctic Passage: Prisoners of the Ice (2005)
Map of the Human Heart (1992)
Avaja (2009)
CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK I (Jan. 27) – Introduction to the course. We’ll go over the structure of the course in detail, step by step. In addition, I’ll give a brief introduction to the geography, cultures, and literature of the Arctic, so that we’ll start with a solid overview of the subject; I’ll also talk about ways that students in every major and every professional school can find and develop connections with the region.

NB: The comment field is at the end of each blog posting. If you use a Google identity, you can automatically tag your posts; you may also simply post anonymously – but in that case be sure to include your name at the end of your post. I also recommend composing your response in a separate file, and then using “paste” to insert it – that way, if there are any technical issues with the posting (remember, your browser needs to be set to accept “cookies” from Blogger), you won’t lose your text. Remember also that you can reply to other students’ posts; when you use the “reply:” function your text will be automatically threaded.

WEEK II (Feb. 3) – What does it mean to walk “into the wild?” We’ll discuss the strongly contrasting views of Chris McCandless’s story, particularly those of Alaskans. You’ll also be responsible for viewing the 2007 Sean Penn film adaptation at home (it’s available via most major streaming services). Reading, Into the Wild, pp. 1-132; Online reading: David A. James, “Into the Wild, Revisited” (2019).

WEEK III (Feb. 10) – What do we mean when we value acts of exploration? Does exploration sometimes veer into exploitation? And what are the politics and economics of exploration, its individual and social costs? Online Readings and viewings: John F. Kennedy, “Why we choose to go to the Moon”; Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon”; “Cost of NASA’s Space Programs”; Ronald Reagan, Speech on the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger; Potter, “Exploration and Sacrifice: The Cultural Logic of Arctic Exploration” (all linked via blog).

WEEK IV (Feb. 17) – Today we’ll examine the historical, political, and cultural significance of the lost Franklin Arctic expedition of 1845, and how its mysteries have been solved using Inuit oral testimony. In-class film, Search for the Northwest Passage. Online readings/viewings Potter, “The Man Who Ate His Boots”; Arctic Ghost Ship (documentary); Keenleyside et. al., “The Final Days of the Franklin Expedition: New Skeletal Evidence”; Conrad, “Geography and Some Explorers”

WEEK V (Feb. 24) – Inuit on Display: Ethnology, Display, and Death. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, dozens of Inuit people were brought to Europe and America in to appear in World’s Fairs and other public exhibitions, including zoos. What are their stories, and how can we understand the politics of ethnological “entertainments” from this era? Online readings on Nancy Columbia, Rosie Midway Spoon, Abraham Ulrikab, “Prince” Pomiuk, and others; Kenn Harper and Russell Potter, “Early Arctic Films of Nancy Columbia and Esther Eneutseak.”

WEEK VI (March 2) – The case of Minik. Minik Wallace was an Inughuit boy who, with his father Qisuk and four others, was abruptly brought from northwest Greenland to New York City by Robert Peary in 1897. They were, studied, poked, and podded by a team of anthropologists that included Franz Boas and A.L. Kroeber, even as all the adults including Minik’s father succumbed to illness. Reading: Harper, Minik: The New York Eskimo: An Arctic Explorer, a Museum, and the Betrayal of the Inuit People.

SPRING BREAK
WEEK VII (March 16) *Nanook* and its Legacy. For nearly a century, *Nanook of the North* has stood as the iconic representation of Inuit people, and been acclaimed as both the first, and one of the best, modern documentary films. Yet so much of its story was falsified, or omitted – among these the fact that the Inuk woman playing “Nala, the Smiling One” was filmmaker Flaherty’s mistress. We’ll look at the vexed cultural history of this iconic film. You’ll be responsible for watching the film on your own (it’s in the public domain, and can be found online). Online readings: Flaherty, “How I Filmed Nanook of the North”; Louis Menard, “Nanook and Me.” Midterm paper due

WEEK VIII (March 23) – Traditional Inuit Culture. Today we’ll look at a variety of traditional Inuit stories and legends, as well as at the more fanciful take on such stories by the late Inuit artist and writer Alooktook Ipellie. Reading: Millman, *A Kayak Full of Ghosts*. Online reading: Alooktook Ipellie, “Self-portrait: Inverse Ten Commandments,” “When God Sings the Blues”; Kimberly McMahon-Coleman, "Dreaming an Identity Across Two Cultures: The Works of Alooktook Ipellie." "

WEEK IX (March 30) – *Atanarjuat* (film available via iTunes).

WEEK X (April 6) – *Map of the Human Heart* (film available via multiple streaming platforms).

WEEK XI (April 13) – Inuit culture in the wake of the settlement era. Readings: Kenn Harper, *Shamans, Spirits, and Faith in the Inuit Arctic*; Alooktook Ipellie, “When God Sings the Blues” and “Self-Portrait: Inverse Ten Commandments” (blog links); in-class film, *Avaja*. Note: The Shamans book is due at the bookstore on April 14th; I’ll have some excerpts on the blog you can read in advance of today’s class.

WEEK XII (April 20) Contemporary Inuit Culture. Reading, Tagaq, *Split Tooth*. In-class listenings to audio version of Tagaq’s memoir, with throat-singing. Online viewing: Selected videos of indigenous musical artists Tanya Tagaq, Northern Haze, and Nive and the Deer Children.

WEEK XIII (April 27) The question of Arctic sovereignty. In the 1950’s a number of Inuit communities were moved, some say to assert Canadian sovereignty over the High Arctic. Even today, the question of who controls the Northwest Passage continues to vex Canada and its neighbors, even as Russia seeks to expand its zone of influence in the Arctic. Online readings and viewings: Cryropolitics Blog, Excerpt from The Long Exile: A Tale of Inuit Betrayal and Survival in the High Arctic; *Exile* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2010); Territorial Evolution of Canada; Community Visit to Grise Fiord

WEEK XIV (May 4) Inuit today. When we say today, we’ll mean right now – in Nunavut, Nunavik, NWT and beyond – looking through online reporting on Canadian territories that have the highest per-capita use of computers and the Web. We’ll also review and sum up our learning experience for the course as a whole. Online reading: Special edition of the *Nunatsiaq News*: *Nunavut Turns 20*; current issue of *Nunatsiaq News*. Final paper due.
COURSE EXPECTATIONS

• Each week, beginning in week 2, a weekly response is due on our class blog, located at http://eng261.blogspot.com/. This should be roughly 1-2 paragraphs in length, and speak as specifically as possible to that week’s readings and viewings. It’s vital not simply to say you liked/disliked or found interesting some image, or passage in a text, but to say why. Your response may be framed in the form of a question (to which others may respond) or indeed you may choose to respond to or comment on the post of another member of the class.

• There will be a mid-term as well as a final essay. Both papers are open to any topic relevant to our class’s topics, readings, and issues. As to length, there is no absolute length requirement for either paper, though generally essay should be in the range of 5-7 pages. MLA style should be used for citations, and a Works Cited list included; there is a link to MLA guidelines on our blog. The midterm paper may be revised and re-submitted, although to have this option on the final essay, it must be handed in no later than April 12th. You must attach any and all earlier drafts to the revised version.

• Plagiarism: Please acquaint yourself, if you have not already, with the statement in the College Handbook on this subject. Clear instances of plagiarism will result in an automatic grade of “F,” and all such instances are reported to the Chair of the Department.

• Final grade: The final grade is determined as follows: Attendance and in-class participation, 25%; Blog responses and online participation, 25%; Midterm Paper 20%, Final Paper, 30%