

FALL 2007 SEMESTER
ENGLISH 469w — SECTION 01
TIME: M-W-F 9:00
RM: EVANS 262

Course Title: Native American Literatures
Instructor: Drew Lopenzina
Office: Evans 463
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Office Hours:

Texts:

(available at SHSU Bookstore)
Nothing but the Truth, eds. John L. Purdy and James Ruppert
The Singing Bird, John Milton Oskison
A Son of the Forest, William Apess
Fools Crow, James Welch
Tracks, Louise Erdrich

Available from web sources:

Jesuit Relations
American Indian Stories, Zitkala-Sa

*We knew that stories were like medicine, that a story told one way
Could cure, that the same story told another way could injure.*

Thomas King

*But spring is floating/ to the canyon,
needles burst yellow/from the sugar pine;
the stories have built a new house.*

Wendy Rose

Course Description:

This class will offer an investigation of Native American literatures from pre-contact times to the present. We will look at how Native American writings of both yesterday and today have attempted to shore up a sense of cultural identity and tradition through written and orally transmitted stories or narratives. Our approach will be roughly chronological, examining many of the more well known touchstones of Native/colonial relations such as first contacts, Christian missionary movements, forced removals, western plains wars, and the Indian Boarding School programs of the late nineteenth century. But our emphasis will be on how Native communities have sought to define these iconic experiences in their own words and narrative forms, and how they continue to try to wrest representational control of the Native figure from the enduring narrative tropes of the colonizer. For a variety of complicated reasons the image of the American Indian is one of the most ubiquitous and patently false constructs of the American imagination. While representations of Indians abound in our movies, advertising, sporting events, and literature, very few of us know even the first thing of actual indigenous culture and history. Many of us

are inclined to think of *Indians* as something belonging to the past and have very little concept of what constitutes Native identity in our present day milieu. Therefore, one of our objectives will be to consider the role that mainstream literature and media play in our understanding of Native identity. How are we continuously influenced by productions like Disney's *Pocahontas*, the novels of writers like James Fenimore Cooper or Zane Grey, Kevin Costner's Academy Award winning movie *Dances with Wolves* or the more recent HBO documentary, based on Dee Brown's classic, of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*? What is the history behind the narrative tropes that inform these representations and how and why have Native artists fought to reframe them?

Ultimately this class will try to approach an understanding of what exactly it means to be a "native" American in the 21st century. In confronting such an issue one necessarily bumps up against competing claims and complex historical dynamics. If I'm not mistaken, we will discover that much of the literature in question, even from the earliest periods, is intricately wrapped up in the ongoing contestation of such claims. It will be our job to try to appreciate these concerns, however much they may challenge the narrative framework upon which we define ourselves as "American," and to apprehend the important role that language, narrative, and, generally speaking, *literature* play in propagating and contesting Native American identity. My hope is that we will come to a fuller awareness of how Native storytellers today are still very much invested in their communities, their traditional culture, and the narratives that carry these values along from one generation to the next.

Assignments:

Reading – Even though Native societies are often thought of as primarily *oral* cultures, there is a surprising amount of written literature in existence produced by Native Americans going at least as far back as the 16th century and rising to what has been heralded as a Native literary renaissance in the last quarter of the 20th century. We will try to get a sense of the overall literary tradition that coheres around these works, while keeping in mind that there are well over 500 federally recognized tribes in the US, and others unrecognized, many with their own distinct language, culture and traditions to be reckoned with. Nearly every class session will have a reading assignment. I advise you to take notes, write in the margins of your anthology, highlight important passages—in other words, do all those things necessary to help you to recall what you've read so that you may speak intelligently about the readings and contribute to the oral culture that constitutes this classroom. As this is an upper level literature class, it is expected that you will read not simply for pleasure, but with a comprehension of the formal elements of literary analysis. We will be concerning ourselves as much with the cultural and historical implications of narrative content and structure as with elements of plot and style. It is, nevertheless, permissible to enjoy the readings in this class.

Writing – Every two weeks or so you will be asked to write a paper, of no less than two pages, in which you will evaluate the readings of the previous weeks. These papers (there will be six of them throughout the course of the semester) will account for 30% of your grade. A larger, research paper of 5-7 pages will be required in tandem with an oral presentation that you will give near the end of the semester. Papers should be double-spaced, 11 pt. font (Times New Roman is a good standard). Although I do require that your papers be turned in as hard copies, we can do the environment a favor by making the ultimate use of the 8 1/2 x 11 space afforded by your average piece of paper (in other words, don't start halfway down the page, or leave large spaces between paragraphs). This will allow you room to more intricately develop your thoughts and give them their full due. You are expected to hand in your work on time. Failure to do so will result in a grade reduction.

Participation – The seventeenth-century Jesuit priest Father Brebeuf said of the Huron Nation with whom he resided for a number of years, that at councils "anyone who wishes may be present and may

express his opinion, although it is the elders who are in the ascendant and it is their judgment that decides issues.” This may not be a bad model for us. Brebeuf also noted that “propriety, courtesy, and civility, are not lacking among these people,” and this seems pertinent to us as well. I purposefully did not design this class as a series of lectures or readings containing information that you must internalize and master. Rather it is organized around the chance that we will have a series of open-ended conversations in which we process the materials we encounter together, while achieving an increasing level of awareness and rhetorical skill as the semester progresses. Be aware, however, that your comments should be related to materials that we cover in class. You should be able to back up your insights with textual evidence if called upon to do so. In other words, this should be a free exchange of informed ideas and opinions on the readings. I will come into class with strong ideas and opinions of my own. Often we will disagree. I expect this and hope to be challenged, enlightened, and entertained by the views you bring to the table. The quality of your overall participation will be reflected in your final grade.

Attendance:

The rule of thumb is, **anything more than three absences will be sure to effect your grade.** It is not nearly adequate to just do the readings and hand in papers on time. The real learning in this semester (for both you and me) will occur in the discussions taking place in the classroom. There is no substitute for this experience. As you are expected to show up to class on time, three lates will count as a missed class. If for some reason you must miss a class, it is your responsibility to contact me about missed assignments or any materials handed out in class during your absence.

Grading:

The short response papers, considered as a whole, will account for 30% of your grade. The oral presentation, along with its written component, will account for another 30%. A final 30% will depend on your contribution to class discussions. The remainder of your grade will be based upon your attendance, how well you project a comprehension of the materials worked on in class, small in-class writing assignments, and the general spirit of your participation. Keep in mind that according to SHSU grading procedures:

A= Excellent Work. This is work that stands out above the rest, fulfilling all the required criteria for a given assignment in a cogent and original manner and, perhaps, moving a step beyond.

B= Superior Work. Demonstrates a strong grasp of the materials covered in class and an ability to articulate ideas effectively and efficiently. Academic achievement of high quality.

C= Satisfactory Work. Not bad, meets requirements, but maybe lacking in original interpretation of materials or stylistic fluidity.

D= Unsatisfactory. Does not meet the most basic demands required of the assignment.

F= Failure. Naturally any attempt at plagiarism will result in immediate failure of the course.

This syllabus should be considered your contract for the course. If you have any questions about course materials, expectations or grading procedures, please refer back to this document or schedule an appointment to see me.

Schedule

Week 1

Aug. 20

Introductions:

Storytelling

22 Thomas King, "Borders" (*NBT*)

24 A Gallery of Native Images

Week 2

27 Craig Womack, "In the Story Way" (handout)

29 Arthur Parker, "How the World Began" and "The Origins of the Long House"

31 Christopher Columbus and other contact stories (handout)

Week 3 **Paper Due**

Sept. 3 **Labor Day, No Class**

5 1756 Conference with the Indians (handout) or Caleb Cheeshateumauk
Anonymous poem (handout)

7 Melissa Jayne Fawcett, excerpt from *The Lasting of the Mohegans* (handout)
Samson Occom, "A Short Narrative of My Life" (handout)

Week 4

10 William Apess, "A Son of the Forest"

12 William Apess "A Son of the Forest"

14 William Apess "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man"

Week 5 **Paper Due**

17 Marilyn Akwiata, "Selu, Corn Mother" Narrative and "Amazons"

19 Documents of Cherokee Removal (Ross and Jackson)

21 John Milton Oskison, *The Singing Bird*

Week 6

24 John Milton Oskison, *The Singing Bird*

26 John Milton Oskison, *The Singing Bird*

28 Guest Speaker Robert Vann (Cherokee)

Week 7 **Paper Due**

Oct. 1 Diane Glancy, "Aunt Parnetta's Electric Blisters" (*NBT* 254)
Louis Owens, "Blessed Sunshine" (*NBT* 326-332)

3 Dee Brown, from *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (handout)
Wendy Rose, "I Expected My Skin and My Blood to Ripen" (*NBT* 531-532)
N. Scott Momaday, "Wounded Knee Creek" (*NBT* 512)

5 Vine Deloria Jr., "Indian Humor" (*NBT* 39-53)
Charles Eastman, "The Ghost Dance War" (*NBT* 54-61)

Week 8

- 8 Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories*
- 10 Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories*
- 12 Indian Boarding School and Traveling Medicine Picture Show
Arthur Parker "Sources and Range of Cooper's Indian Lore" (handout)

Week 9 **Paper Due**

- 15 Poetry of Louise Erdrich (*NBT* 464-474)
- 17 Pauline E. Johnson, "As it Was in the Beginning" (*NBT* 282-288)
Mary Tall Mountain, "The Disposal of Mary Joe's Children" (*NBT* 375-390)
- 19 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (3-83)

Week 10

- 22 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (84-202)
- 24 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (202-314)
- 26 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (207-314)

Week 11

- 29 James Welch, *Fools Crow* (finish)
- 31 Pete Heflin (Talk on American Indian Movement)
- Nov. 2 Jim Northrup, "Veteran's Dance" (*NBT* 313-320)
Anna Lee Walters, "The Warriors" (*NBT* 396-405)

Week 12 **Paper Due**

- 5 Poetry of Sherman Alexie (*NBT* 416-430)
- 7 *Smoke Signals*
- 9 *Smoke Signals*

Week 13

- 12 Native American History, Culture and Tradition Presentations
- 14 Native American History, Culture and Tradition Presentations
- 16 Native American History, Culture and Tradition Presentations

Week 14

- 19 Native American History, Culture and Tradition Presentations
Thomas King, "Borders" (*NBT* 289-297)
- 21-23 **Happy Thanksgiving**

Week 15

26 Louise Erdrich, *Tracks*

28 Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (supplementary reading)

30 Louise Erdrich *Tracks* (supplementary reading)

Week 16 **Paper Due**

3 Sherman Alexie, "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor" (*NBT* 194-202)

Dec. 5 **Final Class**
Joy Harjo, "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky"