

## English 501.1: Literature of the American West

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*“Ambivalence and ambiguity, like deception, bear upon all definitions of the American West.”*

— N. Scott Momaday

Whether it conjures images of cowboys and Indians, covered wagons and log cabins, Calamity Jane and Buffalo Bill Cody, or majestic mountains and long open roads, the American West is a complex and symbolic region. This course looks to literature from the last 150 years to explore how American identity is associated with “the West,” how Western iconography and mythology have changed over time, and how this regional writing is (and isn’t) distinct from other American literature.

The course begins with the emergence of the Western as a genre in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, with stories about the frontier, set in dramatic natural landscapes, and populated by colorful but often typecast characters. We’ll move quickly into the 20<sup>th</sup>-century as we trace the evolution of the genre, the persistence of its key themes, and the reinvigoration of regional literature into the 21<sup>st</sup>. In the process, we’ll ask questions like: If “the West” contributes to a shared sense of national identity, then what kind of identity is it? Who, exactly, shares it? What relationships between imagination and landscape does literature of the U.S. West reinforce or challenge? What knowledge of the region and perspectives on the nation does literature by indigenous and other non-white authors provide? In what ways is the West enmeshed in a global context, symbolically, economically, and socio-politically?

I encourage you to meet with me individually to talk over questions, concerns, essay and presentation ideas, research methods, career plans, or questions. I also hope you’ll chat with me often about the seminar and your progress in the course. How are things going? What do you like about the course? Are any materials or expectations unclear? What questions do you have that can help you improve your performance and your comfort level in the course? *Please feel free to contact me any time.*

### Learning Objectives

- ✓ Read and write about literary (and other) texts in a range of genres, including: entertaining a range of arguments about a text, developing your own reading of a text, and being able to support that reading using the text itself as well as the work of other scholars in the field—that is, situating yourselves in academic conversations
- ✓ Produce standard features of the profession, including a conference presentation as well as an article-length essay
- ✓ Participate in a lively, comfortable classroom community, and actively shape both the class and your own learning experiences
- ✓ Make connections to contemporary events as well as to literary and political trends

**Required Texts** (any edition):

Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses*

Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (optional: we'll only read the epilogue)

**Online pdfs** (on BbLearn):

Richard White, "Frederick Jackson and Buffalo Bill," from *The Frontier in American Culture*

N. Scott Momaday, "The American West and the Burden of Belief"

Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"

Zitkala-Ša, selections from *American Indian Stories*

Wallace Stegner, "Thoughts in a Dry Land" and "The Sense of Place"

Leslie Marmon Silko, "Landscape and the Pueblo Imagination"

Luis Alberto Urrea, selections from *The Devil's Highway*

Neil Campbell, selections from *The Rhizomatic West*

Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain"

Percival Everett, "Little Faith"

Selected Poetry by Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich

**Requirements and Grading** (out of 1000 points)

Participation (200)

Response papers (250)

Conference proposal (50)

Conference presentation (100)

Critical essay (18-20 pages; 400)

**Participation and Facilitation**

The quality of this course is highly dependent on your contributions to it. As graduate students, you are expected to take charge of your own learning processes by actively participating in the reading, writing and discussion processes. At the minimum, you should come to class having read the day's material and prepared to say something about it. *Contributing to class discussion* is the best way to earn a high participation grade. I hope to foster a classroom environment in which lively discussion and debate occur. At the same time, please be sensitive to how your language choices might impact other students, especially when discussing controversial or charged issues. The role you play in the community of our classroom will factor in to your participation grade, which is worth 200 points.

To earn an A in participation, you will be a leader in class discussions, extending and shaping them in interesting ways. You will *not dominate* conversations, but rather engage your peers (not just me!) by asking productive questions, building on the comments of others, and addressing other people's remarks—always respectfully and thoughtfully. An A student does these things consistently—that is, in every class. What differentiates a B participation grade from an A are subtle differences in the consistency of your performance; the specificity of your comments; the relationship of your ideas to texts; the frequency of insightful comments; etc. The B student may do A work occasionally, but not all the time. The C participation grade is given to those who do not lead the class, but who come prepared to class and periodically contribute to discussions. I do not expect any of you to get below a C in this category; if I see this happening, we'll talk.

Since this is a graduate seminar, I expect you to attend and be prepared for each and every class. If you need to miss class for personal/medical reasons, please let me know ahead of time. Unexcused absences are unacceptable at this level of study and will drastically affect your participation grade.

In addition to attending and participating in each class session, you will also be responsible for *facilitating one hour-long portion of a class session*. Depending on the number of students enrolled in the course, you may have to share this duty with a classmate. The facilitator manages discussion and makes connections between primary texts and theoretical work/ideas. You can prepare discussion questions on assigned readings and call on people, and you may make use of your response papers in class. I encourage you to be creative and try alternative formats, such as small group discussion, in-class exercises, debates, etc. *The goal is to make sure that our treatment of the text(s) stays focused, insightful, and worthwhile, and that stimulating questions are raised and discussed.* You'll be evaluated on how effectively you lead us into a productive discussion. Does your discussion take us into new and exciting intellectual territories? Are the members of the class engaged? Are you able to achieve a nice balance between theory and the specifics of the primary text(s), keeping the discussion grounded in key passages, scenes, etc.? Do you direct the conversation back to our course themes, theoretical concepts, and previous discussions, when appropriate? If the answer to these questions is, for the most part, "yes," then you've done your job well!

## Response Papers

You will choose five readings to respond to (worth 50 points each). Response papers should be about 500 words; they are due at the start of class and should respond to the reading assigned that day. These exercises are a means of digesting and remembering the reading; they also lay the groundwork for fruitful class discussions and your conference presentation and critical essay. *You must hand in at least five response papers over the course of the class. If you hand in more than five, I will only count your five highest grades.* For all response papers, read, mark and think about the assigned readings and come to class eager and prepared to make contributions to class discussion. In addition, *each response paper must include at least two questions that are raised by your reading that you would like to address in class.* Feel free to use these questions to frame your response paper, or feature these questions at the end of the assignment.

*This assignment is not a formal essay.* While response papers must be legible and at least somewhat coherent, they do not need to state and develop a thesis, nor have a narrative thread running through all sections. Feel free to work through one or several ideas/questions in these response papers, and use headings to denote abrupt transitions between ideas and/or employ bullet points. I encourage you to think about texts in light of theoretical ideas, compare and contrast texts with what we have read earlier, and *think of your response papers as a way to run ideas for your conference paper and critical essay by me.* I will do my best to provide ample feedback on those ideas I think are worthy of further exploration in these projects.

Here are some prompts you may consider when writing your response papers:

- Explore your personal, spontaneous response to the text via free writing. Use this exercise to loosen up and generate ideas in an uninhabited manner. Draw a diagram or a word map. Consider what questions emerge from your free writing. How might you start answering them?
- Identify the argument of the text(s), and compare it with other course texts. Think about the text from the perspective of one or two of the main ideas of this course. What questions or challenges does it raise about the West?
- Perform a close reading by focusing on a key passage and assessing literary/craft elements such as style, tone, point of view, figurative language, diction, etc., in relation to course themes and questions. Discuss the significance, connotations and even etymology of particular word choices and think about the connections between form and the argument of the text. In your close reading explain why this passage is important to your interpretation of the work as a whole, especially in terms of the American West, identity, and other course themes.

## Conference Presentation and Seminar Paper

The bulk of your grade in this course stems from skills professional literary critics must hone: giving a conference paper and developing it into a formal essay for potential publication. I'll provide feedback on your conference proposal and presentations, and the class will give feedback as well. In the final session of this course, we'll hold our very own conference in which you will have the chance to present and discuss your ideas with your classmates and conference attendees. Each student will give a 15-minute conference paper and have the chance to field questions from the audience. *Please be sure to manage your time wisely; you will be cut off if your presentation is too long.*

You will draft a proposal of about 250 words that concisely explains what your paper argues, what other scholarship it engages, and why your argument is important to literary and/or U.S. West studies. (We'll look at some models of these proposals.) Some of you may want to send your proposal to a real conference you think you might like to attend; we'll talk about strategies for finding conferences to go to. Conference presentations are typically 15 or 20 minutes, which translates to about 6 to 10 pages of double-spaced text. These presentations should dovetail with your seminar paper. Keep in mind, though, that your seminar paper needs to be 18-20 pages (see below). *Be careful not to choose a topic that will only generate 10 pages of writing.* I would recommend beginning to write your seminar paper first, and then selecting part(s) to highlight in your presentation. As is customary at academic conferences, you may read all or part of your paper. However, more and more academics are bucking the trend and *not* reading papers straight from the page; I encourage you to talk through your presentation, and to integrate audio-visual elements and use any other strategies to make the presentation engaging. Like at real conferences, you will field questions from the class following your presentation.

Your seminar paper (18-20 pages, or about 4500-7500 words) should look to expand and improve upon your conference paper. You could think of this paper as a draft of a scholarly article, or, potentially, as the beginning of your MA thesis (or non-thesis). I will organize students into working groups. You will be responsible for reading the work of each student in your working group and working with that group to improve and expand upon conference papers after we break as a class. *Immediately following the conference students must submit versions of their conference paper and/or essay drafts to their working group.* Of course, I will also be free for consultation during this time and I urge everyone to meet with me in addition to their working group as they transform their conference presentation into their critical essay. After we break as a class, I will also be available to consult with you about your critical essay via telephone, email, Skype, or in-person chat. Indeed, the structure of this class demands that we remain in touch during this time so that I can advise you on your progress.

An A seminar paper contributes something new and unique to scholarly conversations about an author, text, or field of study. The A paper articulates a clear argument and supports that argument with insightful observations from the text. It is well-researched and clearly in dialogue with other scholarship. This paper is persuasive and engaging; it has a distinctive voice that speaks with clarity and authority about its subjects. It has no grammatical, usage, punctuation or spelling errors. A B paper usually falls short for either stylistic or substantive reasons. That is, it may have formal errors, disjointed paragraphs, illogical areas, and/or awkward moments; or, it may be weak in some of its arguments. Still, a B paper is above average and consistently strong. A C paper is basically acceptable, but may be weak in voice, lacking in depth, generic in its use of language, or problematic in formal components. I do not expect any of you to get below a C.

## MLA-Style Resources:

All papers must follow MLA style; *I will not accept any other style of citation.* For help learning the style, visit the Purdue Online Writing Lab's MLA webpage: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>.

**Plagiarism:**

I will not tolerate plagiarism in this course—no exceptions. If I discover that you have cheated on any of your assignments, I will give you a failing grade for the course and refer you to the Dean of Students.

According to university and departmental policy, plagiarism is claiming someone else's work (either ideas or words) as your own. Plagiarism includes:

- Copying, quoting or paraphrasing documents of any kind without proper and explicit citation of sources.
- Use of another person's words or ideas with attribution and explicit citation.
- Submitting another person's work as your own.
- Cowriting work with another scholar and claiming it as solely yours.
- Submitting work for this course that you have previously submitted for a different course, in part or in full.

If you have any questions about what I consider plagiarism, how to cite your work, or university and department policies on plagiarism, please see me.

**Accommodations:**

Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have documented temporary or permanent disabilities. All accommodations must be approved through Disability Support Services located in the Bruce M. Pitman Center, Suite 127, in order to notify your instructor(s) as soon as possible regarding accommodation(s) needed for the course. Contact info for DSS: 885-6307 / [cdar@uidaho.edu](mailto:cdar@uidaho.edu). Website: [www.uidaho.edu/current-students/cdar](http://www.uidaho.edu/current-students/cdar).

**ENG 501.1: Literature of the American West**  
**Reading & Assignment Schedule**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Reading</b>
M June 18	<u>Unit I</u> : The Frontier, Pioneers, and “Winning” the West	N. Scott Momaday, “The American West and the Burden of Belief”; Richard White, “Frederick Jackson and Buffalo Bill,” from <i>The Frontier in American Culture</i> ; Stephen Crane, “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”
T June 19		Zitkala-Ša, selections from <i>American Indian Stories</i> ; Rodolfo Corky Gonzales, “I am Joaquín”; Walt Whitman, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” from <i>Leaves of Grass</i>
W June 20		Willa Cather, <i>O Pioneers!</i>
R June 21	<u>Unit II</u> : A Landscape of Hope, Love, and Stories	Wallace Stegner, “Thoughts in a Dry Land”; Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape and the Pueblo Imagination”; clips from Ken Burns, <i>The West</i>
F June 22		Norman Maclean, <i>A River Runs Through It</i> and selected criticism
M June 25	<u>Unit III</u> : Cowboys, Borders, and the Politics of the “New West”	Neil Campbell, from <i>The Rhizomatic West</i> ; Terry Tempest Williams, epilogue from <i>Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place</i>
T June 26		Cormac McCarthy, <i>All The Pretty Horses</i> ; Luis Alberto Urrea, selections from <i>The Devil’s Highway</i>
W June 27	<i>Brokeback Mountain</i> screening during class; final project workshops in groups and optional conferences in afternoon	<b>Conference proposals due</b> Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain”; Percival Everett, “Little Faith”
R June 28		Sherman Alexie, “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys” and other poems; Louise Erdrich, “Dear John Wayne”
F June 29	<b>Class conference</b>	
Jul 2 - 27	Work on seminar paper	Participate in BbLearn activities; consult with Jenn in person, via email, or via Skype
July 27		<b>Seminar papers due</b>