

Cathryn Halverson, University of Copenhagen, Fall 2010

Women's Literature of the American West: Community and Individualism

This course examines the ways in which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women writers found their voices in, and helped give definition to, the American West. In looking at a wide selection of fiction and memoir, we will focus especially on representations of western communities and the place of the individual woman/writer within it.

Some of the questions we will consider include: How do women live in and represent landscapes and settlements that have been culturally overdetermined as spaces for men and manliness? Can notions of the West be distinguished from notions of frontiers? What—if any—themes and rhetorical moves link western women's texts across generations to create a distinctive regional tradition?

We will of course pay close attention to the stylistic and formal features that make our chosen texts so absorbing; one of the distinctive features that we will discuss is their reflexivity, the way these texts comment on their own construction. Our readings will remind us that the West isn't always a destination; that it isn't always wild; and, most especially, that it isn't always masculine. Yet we will strive not to fall into the common trap of equating western literature with western history and perusing texts for what they *tell* us about the West. Rather, we will consider how, collectively, they *create* the West.

Primary Texts

Caroline Kirkland, *A New Home—Who'll Follow?* (1839)

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *Lost Borders* (1909)

Zitkala Sa, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* (1902)

Elinore Pruitt Stewart, *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* (1914)

Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

Mourning Dove, *Cogewea* (1927)

Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (1935)

Selections from *The Shirley Letters: From the California Mines (1851-51)*; *The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories (1857-66)*; *The Story of Mary MacLane* (1902)