

English 591 Spring 2011

POST-WESTERN REPRESENTATIONS

Tuesdays, 4:30-6:50, THH 111

Professor Bill Handley

Office: Taper 404E; phone: 0-3733; *handley@usc.edu*

Office hours: Tuesdays 2-3:30, Thursdays 1-2:30, or other times by appt.

Seminar Description

Haunted by colonial and imperial history, twentieth-century western American fiction, historiography, and film exhibit a broad range of aesthetic and political responses to the question of how the western past can be represented – of what is at stake in the formal means by which writers, historians, and other cultural makers render history’s legibility or illegibility, particularly when western history is marked by trauma and loss. If all histories are narrative constructions, as Hayden White argues, are any less or more “true” than others? (In what ways is that not the most germane question to ask?) Emerging from a literary history quite different from that of the European avant-garde, western modernist writers approached the problem of representation and reality in western American contexts in ways that make it difficult to categorize the politics of their aesthetics (as compared to, say, those of Woolf and Joyce), particularly since they aimed to create what readers wanted: something authentically “real.” And yet it was the American West that later seemed readily to supply European postmodernist theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco with grist for their critical mills (under such categories as the “simulacrum” and the “hyperreal”). We will explore such topics as “postindian simulations”; ecocritical politics and the narrative construction of nature; Los Angeles, postmodernist theory, and *noir* as invisible history – and the ongoing frontiers of race and sexuality in a postfrontier West.

Required texts (in addition to secondary and other readings to be handed out):

Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000)

Raymond Chandler, *Trouble is My Business* (1950)

Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (1953)

Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979)

Percival Everett, *Watershed* (1996)

Judith Freeman, *Red Water: A Novel* (2002)

Brian Hall, *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company: A Novel of Lewis and Clark* (2003)

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian, or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1992)

N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (1969)

Thomas Savage, *The Power of the Dog* (1967)

Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (1971)

James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2001)

Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939)

Films: *Chinatown*, *Lone Star*, *Brokeback Mountain*

Course Schedule:

Jan. 11 Introduction: What is “Post” about “Western”?

NOIR AND THE URBAN WEST

Jan. 18 Reading: Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*

Jan. 25 Reading: Raymond Chandler, *Trouble Is My Business*; Limerick, “What Raymond Chandler Knew and Western Historians Forgot.” Film: *Chinatown* (1974, dir. Roman Polanski).

Feb. 1 Reading: Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*

Feb. 8 Reading: Joan Didion, *The White Album*

FICTION AND HISTORY IN THE FRONTIER AND POST-FRONTIER WEST

Feb. 15 Reading: Wallace Stegner: *Angle of Repose* (through Part IV; p. 310); Stegner, “History, Myth, and the Western Writer.”

Feb. 22 Reading: *Angle of Repose*; Forrest Robinson, “Clio Bereft of Calliope: Literature and the New Western History.”

March 1 Reading: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*; John Beck, “The Prehistory of the Permanent War Economy.”

March 8 Reading: Judith Freeman, *Red Water*

[Spring Break]

March 22 Reading: Brian Hall, *I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company*; excerpts from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*.

POST-INDIAN WESTS

March 29 Reading: N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*; Selection from Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner”

April 5 Reading: Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*; Susan Bernardin, “The Authenticity Game”; Nathaniel Lewis, “Inside Out in the Postmodern West.”

April 12 Reading: Percival Everett, *Watershed*; Film: *Lone Star* (1996, dir. John Sayles).

April 19 Reading: James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

POST-COWBOY WEST

April 26 Reading: Thomas Savage, *The Power of the Dog*; Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain”; James Morrison, “‘Come Back to the Ranch’: Brokeback Mountain and Gay Civil Rights.” Film: *Brokeback Mountain*. (Recommended: William Haywood Henderson, *Native*).

Friday, May 6: Paper Due in Handley’s box by 2pm.

Course Requirements

- It is essential to do all of the reading before the class meeting
- Two oral presentations (10 minutes) to open up discussion
- One final paper (approx. 12-15 pages)