

Contemporary Revisions of the American West

English 628R, Fall 2009

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(and by appointment)

Seminar Overview

In this seminar we'll lay the foundation for an early 21st-century critique of traditional Western literature and culture by 1) surveying the history of its largely masculinist and elitist construction, 2) examining four ground-breaking late 20th-century Western feminist texts, and 3) turning you graduate students loose to do your own individual studies of some representative post-2000 texts to determine what sorts of revisionist critiques have recently entered into the contemporary Western canon.

If you haven't done it already, please join the Western American Literature Association, which includes a subscription to *Western American Literature*, through Utah State University (usu.edu/westlit/). Act like a real Western Studies scholar beginning now.

Although we'll be focusing primarily on gender and ethnicity in the texts we'll be discussing together, you're free to explore whatever kind of critique seems most relevant to you in your semester project, a 10-12 page conference paper (300 points) designed for submission to a national literary conference. Other graded seminar requirements include a conference paper proposal (100 points), and two 1,000-word perception papers (100 points each). You'll also fill out a reading log entry for each text we study. I'll give you more information on these assignments as the semester progresses.

I expect you to invest yourself fully in our seminar and to conduct yourself in a highly professional manner—including having all your reading and writing assignments done on time and being in seminar every day ready to participate fully. You should know MLA format and documentation conventions (the recent 7th edition of the *MLA Handbook* has a number of changes) and prepare your papers accordingly. Email me immediately should illness or emergency require you to miss a seminar meeting.

We'll follow recent BYU policy on the H1N1 flu virus. You should have received a letter from the university on this matter. Let's do everything we can to stay healthy and trust the flu won't hamper our work this semester. However, we'll also be ready to make changes in schedules or policies or whatever.

We should treat one another with respect and courtesy, especially when we disagree. Our discussions should be lively and rigorous but always tinged with the politeness and good humor that ought to typify collegial scholarship. We hope our discussions will continue in the halls and carrels.

We'll have some optional extracurricular activities that should enhance our study and develop greater seminar cohesion. Early on we'll set up a time for you to visit the Snyder place in idyllic Salem. You're also invited to the Salem 12th Ward's annual "rodeo" on September 12th. Rachel Redfern and I will also be taking our English 364 class to Arches/Moab on 17 October, and we may have room for some of you to come with us. I also encourage you to participate in Heber City's annual Cowboy Poetry Gathering and Buckaroo Fair (3-8 November). Check it out at hebercitycowboypoetry.com!

Whenever you have questions or concerns regarding the seminar, please stop by my office and have a visit with me. If I sense you're struggling or underperforming, I'll invite you to stop by for a visit. I'll also meet with everyone a couple times during the semester.

I decided not to list a formal set of learning outcomes for this seminar because 1) they're already embedded in everything and 2) your own personal learning outcomes are more relevant to you than mine are. I trust that by the end of the seminar you'll be a much better scholar both generally and with respect to contemporary Western American literature and that you'll have an excellent paper ready to present at a national conference.

We'll divide the seminar into the study units listed below. Do your best to stay way ahead of this schedule with your reading and writing assignments.

The Rise and Development of Western Literature: ***Gunfighter Nation* by Richard Slotkin**

We'll review the early establishment of a frontier mythos in American literary history and trace the expansion of that mythos into real American spaces, with particular attention to key archetypal male figures (explorer, mountain man, pioneer, cowboy, gunfighter, and so forth) using the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* to reference iconic texts such as John Smith's *General History*, Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and so forth. We'll supplement Norton with references to other texts such as Jane Tompkins's *West of Everything*.

We'll also review the rise of Western American literature and culture in the 20th century, focusing on key iconic figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, John Ford, John Wayne, and others using Slotkin to provide a critique of these masculine icons and their appropriation of the "Western" values they represent for political and economic gain in national and international contexts. We'll engage Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" argument with emphasis on his critique of the "frontier" theses set forth by Turner and by Roosevelt and the way they've been appropriated and revised over the years.

The Codes of Western Masculinity:
Cowboys Are My Weakness by Pam Houston

We'll examine Western codes of male identity and behavior as they are deconstructed in Houston's collection of short stories written from a feminist perspective. Houston's female protagonists often present a problematic relationship with these codes and the men who embody them—sometimes embracing them wholly, sometimes rejecting them thoroughly, but mostly oscillating between these binary poles—all in an effort to make a space for female discourse and performance within the traditionally male world of the West. It's not so much that Houston views these masculine codes as good or bad, but that she sees them as having productive and nonproductive results in the lives of her characters.

We'll supplement our study of Houston with selected poems and autobiographies, largely by ranch women as collected by Teresa Jordan, and with some selected criticism.

The Lay of the Western Landscape:
Refuge by Terry Tempest Williams

We'll examine Williams's "unnatural history of family and place" as representative of contemporary environmental writing in the West, particularly her critique of nuclear testing as emblematic of the way we've exploited and poisoned the land and air. Williams identifies the landscape in this context as particularly female, following Annette Kolodny's trope, because of the parallels between the literal landscape destroyed by nuclear testing and the female bodies in her family decimated by cancer, the direct result of having been downwind of the nuclear fall-out.

We'll supplement our study of *Refuge* with other texts by Williams, as well as writing from other environmentalists such as Edward Abbey, Rick Bass, and Barry Lopez who have an environmental ethic without the decidedly feminist slant. We'll also do some work with the Utah landscape and Mormon culture that frame Williams's text. We may get into the state of Mormon literature a bit as well.

The Hybridity of Textual Identity: *Storyteller* by Leslie Marmon Silko

We'll examine Silko's multi-generic text as representative of the hybridity and adaptation strategies adopted by American Indian tribes to ensure their survival in the face of literal and cultural colonization by forces that coalesce in the U.S. government. *Storyteller* includes personal narrative, photos, Laguna tribal myths and rituals, historical accounts, poetry, and prose. As a mixed-blood herself, Silko sees her own identity as fundamentally parallel to her hybrid text and, following the example of her grandmother, understands her responsibility as a female storyteller to perpetuate the significant tales of her tribe and family.

We'll supplement our study of Silko with references to Suzanne Lundquist's *Native American Literatures* and to other bicultural productions such as *Black Elk Speaks* and to other multi-generic texts such as N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. We'll also touch on the ethical challenge issued by Arnold Krupat in his preface to *New Voices in Native American Criticism* to read Native American texts from within their tribal contexts.

The Liminality of Border Transgressions: *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa

We'll examine Anzaldúa's multi-generic text in terms of its dialogical construction of the "new Mestiza" and the borderlands she inhabits, both as a very literal place and as a symbolic liminal space. Her revolutionary project is to envision and articulate a sweeping reformulation of border history and myth and language, written against the grain of hegemonic tradition, the rules of which she systematically transgresses. She undercuts, for example, a narrow notion of individuality with regard to American citizenship; monologic language; heterosexuality; border binaries; distinctions between history and fiction, poetry and prose, English and Spanish; and so forth.

We'll supplement our study of Anzaldúa with some reference to post-colonialism and subaltern discourse and to Anzaldúa's impact on gender and border studies.

21st-Century Western Literary Critiques: Conference Papers

We'll devote our last seminar unit to finishing up and polishing your conference papers. We'll do a group oral final based on the MA thesis defense formula: one hour on the seminar and one hour on the conference papers. You should know that I've got something of a reputation for being a tough examiner.

Seminar Outline

<u>Date</u>	<u>Discussion</u>	<u>Reading Due</u>	<u>Material Due</u>
The Rise and Development of Western Literature			
T 1 Sep	Introductions <i>Gunfighter Nation</i>	Course Materials Slotkin Part I	Info Sheet
Th 3 Sep	<i>Gunfighter Nation</i>	Slotkin Part II	_____
T 8 Sep	<i>Gunfighter Nation</i>	Slotkin Part III	_____
Th 10 Sep	<i>Gunfighter Nation</i>	Slotkin Part IV	_____
T 15 Sep	<i>Gunfighter Nation</i>	Slotkin Part V	_____
Th 17 Sep	Research in Western Studies (HBLL)	None	Conference Paper Topics
The Codes of Western Masculinity			
T 22 Sep	<i>Cowboys Are My Weakness</i>	Entire Text	_____
Th 24 Sep	<i>Cowboys Are My Weakness</i>	Review	Paper #1
T 29 Sep	<i>Cowboys Are My Weakness</i>	Review	_____
Th 1 Oct	<i>Cowboys Are My Weakness</i>	Review	_____
The Lay of the Western Landscape			
T 6 Oct	<i>Refuge</i>	Entire Text	_____
Th 8 Oct	<i>Refuge</i>	Review	Paper #1
T 13 Oct	<i>Refuge</i>	Review	_____
Th 15 Oct	<i>Refuge</i>	Review	Proposal

<u>Date</u>	<u>Discussion</u>	<u>Reading Due</u>	<u>Material Due</u>
The Hybridity of Textual Identity			
T 20 Oct	<i>Storyteller</i>	Entire Text	_____
Th 22 Oct	<i>Storyteller</i>	Review	Paper #2
T 27 Oct	<i>Storyteller</i>	Review	_____
Th 29 Oct	<i>Storyteller</i>	Review	_____
The Liminality of Border Transgressions			
T 3 Nov	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>	Entire Text	_____
Th 5 Nov	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>	Review	Paper #2
T 10 Nov	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>	Review	_____
Th 12 Nov	<i>Borderlands/La Frontera</i>	Review	_____
21st-Century Western American Critiques			
T 17 Nov	Individual Conferences: No Seminar Meeting		Paper Draft
Th 19 Nov	Individual Conferences: No Seminar Meeting		Paper Draft
T 24 Nov	Thanksgiving Holiday: No Seminar Meeting		
Th 26 Nov	Thanksgiving Holiday: No Seminar Meeting		
T 1 Dec	Conference Paper Workshop	Review	Paper Draft
Th 3 Dec	Conference Paper Workshop	Review	Critiques
T 8 Dec	Final Revision Preparation: No Seminar Meeting		
Th 10 Dec	Final Exam Discussion	Review	Final Draft

Th 17 Dec

Final Group Oral Examination: 8-10 a.m.

(The final will cover seminar material during the first hour and conference papers during the second hour in the spirit of giving everyone a taste of real thesis defenses.)