

Literature and the Contemporary: Way Out West

Tuesdays, 6:00-8:30

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This is the course description for each section of Literature and the Contemporary:

This course questions the relationship between present and/or “contemporary” literature and past literary traditions. It is not a course solely in contemporary literature but a course that compares contemporary texts with texts from other periods. It investigates the contemporary as both a complex reworking of past narratives and traditions and as the production of the experimental and the new.

Literature and the Contemporary is a course designed to question “the relationship between present and/or ‘contemporary’ literature and past literary traditions.” This semester we’ll consider this relationship in light of different literary representations of the American West.

We’ll keep some central questions in mind: How does a text tell a story about a place, or attempt to represent a place? How do the specifics of identity shape these stories and representations? What details and tropes reoccur in texts across many decades? And what aspects fall away or change over time? My hope is that asking these questions about our particular list of texts will give you a sense of how place and experience are represented, and how these ideas are employed in developing a sense of self and nation. As we explore the treatment of a particular region, we’ll also consider more general ideas of place, region, self presentation, and self identity.

As the existence of a genre called “the Western” demonstrates, popular culture views the American West with a certain set of expectations and assumptions. We’ll interrogate that genre and consider the ways that authors writing within and outside the Western tradition challenge and manipulate it.

List of Texts:

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. 2009.

Austin, Mary. *The Land of Little Rain*. 1903.

Bennett, Estelina. from *Old Deadwood Days*.

Johnson, Denis. *Train Dreams: A Novella*. 2011.

Portis, Charles. *True Grit*. 1968.

Solnit, Rebecca. from *Savage Dreams*.

Verbinski, Gore (director). *Rango*. 2011.

Zitkala-Sa. *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*. 1900-1902.

Supplementary readings available as PDFs.

Policies and Grading

Blackboard Posts: 15%

Quizzes: 10%

Attendance and Participation: 15%

Presentation: 10%

Essay 1: 15%

Essay 2: 15%

Exam: 20%

Here's how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade level:

A = superior attainment

B = meritorious attainment

C = adequate attainment

D = minimal attainment

F = failure

Note that “meritorious” means commendable or praiseworthy: a “B,” in other words, reflects an accomplishment, not an average production.

I reserve the right to raise your final grade in order to recognize exemplary contributions to the class-- hard work is your extra credit opportunity. I also reserve the right to lower your final grade for disruptions to our learning environment. See “Behavioral Expectations” for more information.

Attendance: You must be present, prepared, and engaged in every class meeting. You may miss one class for any reason. With each additional absence without a medical excuse, your final grade will be reduced by a letter (so an A grade would be lowered to a B with two absences, a C with three absences, etc). If you know compliance with this attendance policy is impossible for you, you should take the class at another time.

Lateness: Don't be late to class or when returning from break. If you're habitually late it will significantly reduce your participation grade, and several instances of lateness may add up to an absence.

Behavioral Expectations: Students are expected to maintain an environment of respectful and open-minded engagement with every voice we hear in our class-- published and unpublished, written and spoken. I expect you to consider all the ideas and values put forth in this class seriously and thoughtfully. Disruptive, dismissive, disengaged, and disrespectful behavior will not be tolerated. This includes, but is not limited to, spacing out on your phone or laptop, doing work for another class, attacking individuals (this is different from disagreeing with someone's ideas), talking to your neighbor, interrupting other people, refusing to engage with or productively work in a group activity, and falling asleep. **If you violate these expectations, your final grade will reflect the fact that you have disengaged with the class and disrupted**

the learning environment. Furthermore, you'll be dismissed from the class and counted absent for that day.

Plagiarism: Don't do it. All instances of plagiarism will receive zero credit and will be reported to the dean. In order to avoid plagiarism, *you must state your sources, even when you are only paraphrasing*. You do not avoid plagiarism just by changing a few words or lines in a quotation and then pretending that it's yours. If you're unsure about the parameters of plagiarism, contact me right away (*before* you turn in the assignment in question) or set up an appointment at the Writing Center for consultation.

Student Resources

The Writing Center: The Writing Center is located at 317B O'Hara Street. It is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you shouldn't expect consultants to "correct" your paper for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your papers. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. Their services are free, but you should check on-site or call ahead to make an appointment (412-624-6556).

Disability Statement: If you have disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both myself and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/ 412-383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the semester. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course. www.drs.pitt.edu

Counseling Center: Pitt also offers free counseling for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties. The Counseling Center, located in 334 William Pitt Union, offers Psychological Services and Sexual Assault Services. The number for the Center is 412-648-7930.

Assignments

This is a writing and reading intensive class. You must read the assigned materials for each class meeting and come prepared to discuss what you've read-- this includes having page numbers and specific passages in mind. Failure to do so will be reflected in your participation grade. It's perfectly acceptable to come to class with questions about a text, but you must do all the reading.

You should also expect to do some writing each week, both on Blackboard and in class. Any work may be selected for class discussion and anonymous workshopping. For information about how to behave in workshops, see "Behavioral Expectations."

Essays: You'll write 2 essays this semester, and they should expand on ideas that you've put forth in your blackboard posts and/or in your presentation. Late essays will be reduced by a full grade for each day they're late.

Quizzes and in-class writing: I'll give you short reading quizzes to make sure you're reading carefully and completely. The format of these will vary from multiple choice to short in-class writing assignments.

Blackboard posts: At least 300 words unless otherwise noted. You'll write several discussion board posts this semester. Posts are always due on the Monday morning *before* the class for which they're listed. Although I may give you a specific prompt or set of reading questions for one of your posts, you should generally think of them as a record of your response to a text. What surprised you? What seemed strange, or confusing? Do any aspects of the reading remind you of other texts we've read?

These posts should be useful for *you*-- to keep a record of ideas you might want to explore in your essays, and to check in with other people's initial responses to a text. Give your posts specific, descriptive titles (i.e. don't just call your post "True Grit," call it "Rattlesnakes and Booze in True Grit")-- that way everyone check in with other posts that match your interests.

Group presentations: Groups of 2 or 3 will present on a topic related to the readings, each presentation should be between 10 and 15 minutes. The presentation topics provide some useful historical context that will enrich our reading and discussion of each text. I'll provide each group with a secondary source to include in their presentation. Groups are also welcome to include outside research, if it seems pertinent to their topic. Think of this as an exercise in teaching the class-- you should share information in a way that invites the class to relate it to their reading. To facilitate this engagement with the rest of the class, I suggest planning some short exercise: you might write discussion questions, or present excerpts from a text that would facilitate class discussion.

Final exam: You will be responsible for all the material covered in class this semester-- this means keeping up with the ideas covered in class discussion, class presentations, and writing assignments. You will need a record of this information in order to prepare for the final exam. We'll talk more about the exam later in the semester.

Reading schedule

August

28: Intro to the class, assign groups.

September

4: Portis (1-70); Introduction from Tompkins's *West of Everything* (3-19) (pdf)

BB post due by the Monday before class at 8 am.

note: save the Afterword of our edition until the end!

11: Portis; excerpt from Estelline Bennett's *Old Deadwood Days*

18: finish Portis (including Afterword)

25: Johnson (chapters 1-5); from Tompkins's *West of Everything* (pdf)
BB post due by the Monday before class at 8 am.

October:

2: finish Johnson

9: No class. Paper #1 sent to oliphant.dropbox@gmail.com by midnight tonight.

16: All of Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (I recommend taking advantage of the fact that we have no class on Oct 9 to get this done early)
BB post due by the Monday before class at 8 am.

23: from Solnit's *Savage Dreams*

30: *Rango* screening
e-mail me your short response to *Rango* and Solnit (details to follow)

November

6: Zitkala-Sa + TED Talk Aaron Huey (I'll provide a link)
BB post due by the Monday before class at 8 am.

13: Alexie
BB post due by the Monday before class at 8 am.

20: Alexie + Alexie's WSJ editorial (pdf)

27: from Tompkins's *West of Everything* (pdf)
Paper #2 sent to oliphant.dropbox@gmail.com November 29 by midnight.

December:

4: Exam review.