

English 0610: Women and Literature**Instructor: Elizabeth Oliphant****Fall 2013****MWF 2-2:50, CL 206****Office hour: CL 628M, Mondays 3-4:00****Women in the West**

“There might be an overarching and abstract concept of the West, but on the ground there were many different Wests” -Nina Baym, *Women Writers in the West*.

“...I loved the land so much I couldn’t bear not having grown up in it.” –Mary Austin, *The Children Sing in the Far West*.

“That evening, as on other evenings, I went to sleep over my legends” –Zitkala-Sa, *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*.

This course will explore the relationship between women and literature by looking at the ways that female authors represent the American West. We’ll ask how the embattled, contested space of the West could facilitate stories about the embattled, contested positions of women—in the home, in society, on frontiers, among borderlands. We’ll consider these ideas in light of the larger questions that drive *Women and Literature*: What is the relationship between women and literature? Does literature gain special significance when it comes from a traditionally silenced or marginalized group? How do issues of gender intersect with issues of race, class, and history? How does gender illuminate or obfuscate the stakes of a text?

This class interrogates and complicates the “overarching and abstract concept of the West,” that Nina Baym describes above. We’ll do this by looking at examples of women who claimed literary ownership of a region that, for various reasons, might have been popularly thought of as outside their sphere of knowledge. The American West is often represented in popular culture as a masculine space—think Lewis and Clark reaching the other end of the continent, the Marlboro Man on horseback, the Lone Ranger (it’s not accidental that this is also a very white version of the West). Or consider the famous advice from Horace Greely, in 1865: “Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country.” Of course, women *were* in the West when Greely wrote these words, both indigenous women and emigrants. Naturally, some of these wrote about and continue to write about the region.

The story of the American West is one of shifting borders and overlapping nations, both colonial and indigenous. In Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*, you can trace the “growing up” that the country did, but through the perspective of a young woman. Zitkala-Sa tells us that she spent her childhood in the Dakota territory sleeping on land laden with legend and significance for her tribe. Mary Crow Dog’s memoir acts as an update of Zitkala-Sa’s story, providing an account of life in the twentieth century as a Native American woman. In addition to the authors I’ve mentioned, we’ll read works from Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros that explore the lingering legacies of these contested borders and the violence associated with battles over land and ownership.

Required texts:

My Antonia, Willa Cather (0486282406)

Lakota Woman, Mary Crow Dog (0802145426)

Paradise, Toni Morrison (0452280397)

Little House on the Prairie, Laura Ingalls Wilder (0064400026)

Policies:

Attendance: Students may miss 3 classes for any reason. After that, each absence equals the loss of two-thirds a point of your final grade. For example, if you missed 4 days this semester and your final grade was a B, you would receive a C+.

Lateness: Lateness is not tolerated in attendance or in assignments. Because our class meets for a short amount of time, we'll aim to begin right at 2:00. If you arrive after we've begun, you'll be counted tardy. 3 tardies equal an absence. Similarly, late assignments will be penalized by the loss of a full letter grade for each day they are late.

Principle of Generosity (with credit to Shalini Puri, who wrote this statement): This class will be run in a spirit of respectful collaboration and open and exploratory inquiry. It will not reward combative models of academic argument, whether directed towards printed authors or peers. You are not required to agree with your peers or the texts you read, but the seminar does assume that we have something to learn from each of them and that their stances are developed in good faith. One focus of our work together will be to achieve a clear and nuanced understanding of the projects and implications of various texts and peer-contributions by fully entering into the spirit of their work.

Behavioral Expectations: In addition to the above expectations of open-minded and engaged interactions, I expect all students to be prepared and attentive during class. You should bring all the materials we're discussing to each class, as well as paper and a pen.

If you disengage in class, your final grade will be lowered. Disengagement includes, but isn't limited to: spacing out on your phone, talking to your neighbors instead of listening to class discussion, refusing to do in-class work, refusing to productively engage in group or class-wide work, doing work for another class, falling asleep, or leaving class for unreasonable amounts of time.

Assignments and Point Distribution

Participation: 15%

Short response papers: 15%

Critique of a cultural text: 15%

Argument-driven critical essay and annotated bib: 30%

Final Exam: 25%

*You should keep digital copies of all written work for the class. I encourage you to use some cloud-based backup that you can rely on—Google Drive and Dropbox offer plenty of

space for free. You are responsible for providing extra copies of work when they are requested.

*Papers should be turned in at the beginning of class on the date they're due, unless otherwise noted.

Short response papers. 2-3 pages double spaced. One paper will be written for each long text we read. Each paper should focus on some observation or argument about the book we've most recently read, and should also engage one of the supplementary texts we read in conjunction with that book. For example, paper 1 should consider *Little House on the Prairie* in conjunction with the excerpt from *Birch Bark House* and/or the literary criticism we read alongside it. This is not a summary of the book, it's the development of some idea or argument that you're interested in exploring. You are welcome to engage ideas raised in class discussion.

Critique of a cultural text. 3-4 pages. Choose some cultural text that we have not discussed at length in class, and put it into conversation with a critical text we've read. A cultural text, as we'll discuss this semester, indicates a wide range of mediums. I'll name a few of the top of my head: tv commercials, movies, magazine covers, magazine stories, blog posts, photoshoots, news stories, internet memes, books, fashion shows, songs, and music videos. This list could go on—I hope you'll have some fun choosing something that isn't, at first glance, "academic" in a traditional sense. The idea behind this assignment is to take some relatively current cultural object and perform a gender-focused analysis on it. You should choose a critical piece that illuminates something nuanced or surprising about the text.

Argument-driven critical essay. 6-8 pages. This paper will be an expansion of one of your short response papers. In addition to revising and expanding your response paper, you should include at least 2 more critical sources relevant to your topic at hand. Your critical sources don't need to specifically address the text you're writing about, but they should be relevant to the topic of your essay.

Annotated bibliography. This assignment asks for annotated bibs about 4 critical sources (scholarly articles or book chapters) which you might use in your final critical essay, as well as a short (a few sentences) proposal of your topic and argument. Each annotation should include a brief summary of source's argument, how the author situates her argument among other sources, and how you see the argument working with your topic. You are absolutely welcome to disagree with sources in your annotated bib. In any case, you should position yourself alongside each text. What do you find useful? With what do you agree or disagree?

Reading quizzes. I'll occasionally give short answer and/or multiple choice reading quizzes at the beginning of class. Keeping up with the reading is vital to your performance in class, these quizzes are a way to check in and be sure that everyone is reading carefully.

Final Exam: You'll be asked to reflect on some of the theoretical concepts we've discussed in class, and to engage those concepts along with some of the texts we've read. The answers will be short essay. We'll discuss this in more detail, and have a review session, near the end of the semester.

A note on reading and preparedness. I will sometimes begin the class with short free writes—open-ended questions or prompts that are meant to help you organize your thoughts about that day’s reading. Since you’re expected to participate regularly and thoughtfully in class, I’d recommend keeping a notepad beside you as you read, and bringing those notes to class. If there’s a passage that seems important, write down the page number and a few words about why it stood out. If you see a recurring theme or idea in the text, jot it down. For critical articles, notice when the article’s primary ideas are expressed, and how the author supports and complicates her argument. Keep notes for yourself, and you’ll always be prepared to speak up in class. These notes will also be very helpful when you’re planning your short response paper for each book, and when you’re preparing for your final exam.

Schedule:

Week 1: Beginnings

M 8/26: Introductions.

W 8/28: On feminism.

F 8/30: On women and the West.

Obtain a copy of *Little House on the Prairie* and begin reading it for next week.

Week 2: Little House on the Prairie

M 9/2 – No class! Read *Little House* up to chapter “Fresh Water to Drink” (page 147 in my edition)

W 9/4: short critical work on *Little House*, read for Friday (via Courseweb)

F 9/6

Finish *Little House* and read *Birchbark House* excerpt.

*Friday 9/6 is the last day to drop or add classes.

Week 3: Little House on the Prairie

M 9/9: *Little House*. From *Birchbark House*.

W 9/11:

F 9/13: Paper 1, on *Little House on the Prairie*, due in class.

Read Zitkala-Sa excerpts over weekend. These excerpts will be available on Courseweb as a pdf.

Week 4: Zitkala-Sa stories (via Courseweb)

M 9/16

W 9/18

F 9/20

Begin *Lakota Woman*.

Week 5: Lakota Woman

M 9/23

W 9/25: “The Stories We Tell: American Indian Women’s Writing and the Persistence of Tradition,” Jodi Byrd (via Courseweb)

F 9/27

Week 6: Lakota Woman

M 9/30

W 10/2

F 10/4: Paper 2, on Zitkala-Sa and Mary Crow Dog, due in class

Week 7: Women's Nature Writing (via Courseweb)

M 10/7:

W 10/9 -

F 10/11 -

Cultural text paper due via email Monday, 10/14.

Week 8: My Antonia

M 10/14 – No class (fall break)

T 10/15 – Monday classes meet, to make up for fall break.

W 10/16

F 10/18

Week 9: My Antonia

M 10/21

W 10/23

F 10/25: Paper 3, *My Antonia*, due.

Begin *Paradise*. Read to the section titled "Seneca."

Week 10: Paradise

M 10/28

W 10/30

F 11/1

Read *Paradise*, to the section titled "Patricia"

Week 11: Paradise

M 11/4

W 11/6

F 11/8

Finish *Paradise*.

Week 12: Paradise

M 11/11

W 11/13

F 11/15: Paper 4, *Paradise*, due.

Week 13: Sandra Cisneros stories from *Woman Hollering Creek* (via Courseweb)

M 11/18

W 11/20

F 11/22:

Week 14: Cisneros.

M 11/25:

W 11/27: Paper 5, on Cisneros, due via email. (No class)

F 11/29 (No class!)

Annotated bib due via email.

Week 15: Joan Didion, wrapping things up.

M 12/2

W 12/4

F 12/6:

Critical paper due via email 12/9.

Week 16: Exam week

Final exam: Wednesday December 11, 10:00 to 11:50 a.m.