

ENLT 521.3
Fall 2005
W 3:40-6:30, FA 211
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Seminar in American Literature:
Theories and Literatures of Place

This course will place theories about place—from cultural geography, philosophy, environmental studies, anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies and literary studies—in conversation with a body of literary texts in which place matters. We will focus on literary texts that represent the inland west (primarily). We will look at “the West” as an imagined construct as well as a set of geographical locations, with particular attention to the ways in which location figures as gendered, temporal, multicultural, classed, urban, rural, national, historical, geographical, and psychological. Some of the questions we might ask include: How do writers represent place? How does an author’s cultural and historical position contribute to the representation of place? How much of the author’s project involves revision, redefinition, or reclamation of place? How does a writer represent her relationship with/to the land? What are the relationships between genre and the representation of place? How does the text work to make distinctions between places, to set a place apart, to define it? How/what does “the West” mean for each author? In posing these questions, we will be working through critical discourses about place, as we will consider the pleasures and dangers of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work. How are a discipline’s underlying assumptions and values compromised or adapted when used in a different discipline? What theoretical approaches work well for the reading of literature within place studies?

Students will read a literary text each week, a few foundational critical texts, and will present to the class another critical/theoretical text for our consideration. Students may expect to make formal presentations and then produce a theoretically-informed close reading of a literary text as a final project. Required reading includes: Don Mitchell’s *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction*, Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*, and literary works drawn from some of the following writers: Freeman, Gilb, McGuane, Williams, Doig, Ozeki, Stegner, Hoag, Harrison, Brautigan, Houston, Chavez, Welch, Blunt, Norris, and others both familiar and obscure.