

Literature and the Contemporary: Border Lords

Spring 2013

T and Th, 11:00 to 12:15

Instructor: Elizabeth Oliphant

email:

Office hour: Tuesday, 12:30-1:30 and
by appointment

Office: CL 628M

“Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.” (25) –Gloria Anzaldua, “The Homeland, Aztlán/*El Otro México*.”

“Driving Benzes, with no benefits. Not bad, huh? For some immigrants. Build your fences, we digging tunnels. Can’t you see we getting money up under you?” –Jay-Z with Kanye West, “Otis.”

This class will explore borders and borderlands—specifically, we’ll be reading literature that takes place among the borders that divide the western United States. Literature and the Contemporary is described as follows:

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.

As that course description suggests, we’ll be thinking about ways that the subject of a border has occurred in both contemporary and historic literary discourse. This class will take up these questions: How does a border shape our sense of place, or our sense of self-identity? How does on-the-ground life in a borderland resist the idea of a clearly marked border? What exactly distinguishes Mexico from the United States? Or an Indian reservation in the Northwest from a nearby town? What divides these things? A river? A fence? A language? Or is it just history? We’ll apply these questions to representations of border spaces in literature, and will think about how characters navigate figurative and literal borders.

This is a writing intensive class, which means you can expect to write and revise regularly. You’ll practice reading and writing with care and close attention, with the ultimate goals of improving your written communication and honing the skill of using writing as a way to more fully explore your ideas.

Some of the books we’ll read in this class are focused on probably the most talked-about border in the West—the US/Mexico border. Others are concerned with borders that no longer exist—say, between the state of Arkansas and the “Indian Territory” now called Oklahoma. All the texts we read allow us to observe the ways

that border crossing can shape a character and how a border can shape a character's relationship to a place.

Grade Distribution

Paper 1 15%

Paper 2 15%

Paper 3 20%

Participation in class 10%

Two blog posts 15%

Blog participation (commenting) 10%

Blackboard posts 15% (in total)

Required texts:

True Grit – Charles Portis 978-1468301250

All the Pretty Horses – Cormac McCarthy 978-0679744399

It Came from Del Rio – Stephen Graham Jones 978-1936500017

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid – Michael Ondaatje 978-0679767862

From the Deep Woods to Civilization – Charles Eastman (available for free on Google Books, and I'll make copies for everyone)

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian – Sherman Alexie 978-0316013697

Required website:

Later in the semester, I'll ask that you consult the maps on Radical Cartography (www.radicalcartography.net). These will supplement some of our discussions about borders. One of your essays will involve choosing one of the maps from Radical Cartography and close reading it using some of the ideas we've encountered in our readings and in discussion. I recommend spending some time on the website early in the semester to get a sense of the kind of information represented.

Assignments

Class Blog: Every student will post two blog posts this semester, and I will schedule these so that we'll have a couple of posts to read each week (you may trade dates with each other, I just want there to be regular posts). I'm using a Blogger account to do this, which means you must sign in with a Google account in order to post on the blog. Creating a Google account is free. If you don't have one, you should make one now. If you have questions about the technology of posting a blog entry through Blogger, we can work through it together during office hours. Don't wait until the day before your post is due to realize you don't know how to do this! I'll post permanent links to the blog and to blogger on our Courseweb page.

About the posts: One blog post can be about any map on the Radical Cartographies website—you should include an image of the map in question, a link to the map, and should offer an explanation and some analysis of what the map represents and why it seems significant to you. Think of this as a trial run for your map-related paper. The other post is more open—you should relate some kind of

outside media to our class—this can be news, popular culture, a historic event or anecdote, a photo, a song, a video, or a piece of poetry or prose. Some examples: You could share a news story you read that contributes to our class discussion in an interesting way. You could post a video—let’s say you think that the trailer from *Django Unchained* is connected to the idea of borders and self identity, so you’d post that. Maybe you see a photograph of a border check point in the 1950s and think it could be discussed in a fruitful way. Or perhaps you read about the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and you’d like to talk about it in conjunction with our class. The point is to bring something to our attention and explain what kinds of questions and ideas it might raise for our class. **I’ll post examples of both of these types of blog posts early in the semester, so you can see what I have in mind.**

You should regularly contribute thoughtful comments in response to these posts. Since the blog is a place for you to try out ideas for your papers, you should think of your comments as helpful to your classmates. If you don’t understand what someone means in a post, explain what’s confusing you. If you’ve got a good idea that they haven’t thought of, it would be nice to mention it! You should offer one *substantive* comment at least every other week maintain an adequate grade for “blog participation.” And whether you comment or not, definitely read the posts.

You don’t have to include illustrations, but they definitely make a blog more interesting—consider making use of some images, even if you’re not writing about a highly visual topic.

Blackboard Posts: You’ll complete several BB posts this semester, the specifics of which I’ll explain in prompts that you’ll get ahead of time. As a rule, expect to complete 400-500 word discussion board posts that are polished, proof-read, and demonstrate critical thought. I’ll grade your BB posts as letter grades, with a C being the lowest grade that a completed post can earn.

Policies and Resources:

Plagiarism: Do not plagiarize. 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 and we can talk about your uncertainty (do this *before* you turn in the assignment in question!) or set up an appointment at the Writing Center for consultation. Check out the English department’s guide to plagiarism here:

http://www.englishlit.pitt.edu/lit_plagiarism.html

* I am familiar with the study guides and summaries available about all of the books we’re reading this semester. Don’t use them as a substitution for doing the reading. Your writing and performance in class will reflect that you haven’t read—and your grade will reflect that you’re not completing your work.

Quizzes: If class participation is lacking, I reserve the right to begin classes with

multiple choice or short answer quizzes about the readings, or to distribute a free-write prompt about our reading. I'll do this to ensure that reading is taking place, and to offer some topics to begin conversation.

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. **This is a safe place to try out good-intentioned and sincere ideas.** 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, being engrossed on your phone, 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.*

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.

January

T 8 - Introductions

Th 10 – Close reading, Stephen Graham Jones.

T 15 – *True Grit* 1-68

Th 17 – **No class! BB post #1 due by 5:00pm**

**January 18 - last day to add/drop classes.*

****Paper #1 due Saturday, Feb 2 by 5:00 pm via email**

T 22 – *True Grit* 69-175

Th 24 – Bring in a draft of Essay 1

T 29 – *True Grit* 175-235

Th 31 – from *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (I will post on BB)

February: Blog posts begin this month

T 5 – *All the Pretty Horses*

Th 7 – *All the Pretty Horses*

BB Post #2 due Friday, February 8 by 5:00pm

T 12 - *All the Pretty Horses*

Th 14 - *All the Pretty Horses*

T 19 – *All the Pretty Horses*

Th 21 from *The Devil's Highway: A True Story*

T 26 – *It Came From Del Rio* (1-56, to the break marked by a bunny)

BB #2 due Wednesday, February 27 by 5:00pm

Th 28 - *It Came From Del Rio* (56-104)

March

T 5 - *It Came From Del Rio* (105-151)

Th 7 - *It Came From Del Rio* (152-209)

**March 8th is the deadline to submit a monitored withdrawal form to the dean's office*

****Paper #2 due Sunday March 10 by 5:00 pm via email**

T 12 and Th 14 – Spring Break

BB #3 due Monday, March 18 by 5:00 pm

T 19 – *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (read the whole thing over spring break—it's short—and we'll talk about it in its entirety on both class days)

Th 21 - *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

T 26 – *From the Deep Woods to Civilization...*

**BB #4 due Wednesday, March 27
by 5:00 pm**
Th 28 – *Deep Woods*

April

T 2 – *Deep Woods*

T 16 – *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (178-end)

Th 4 – *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (1-76)

Th 18 – Essay preparation

T 9 – *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (77-132)

****Paper #3 due Thursday April 25
by 5:00 pm via email**

Th 11 – *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (133-178)