

Susan Power

left to right: Louis Owens, Hershman John, Susan Power, Debbie Reese, Philip Red Eagle, Sherman Alexie,
LeAnne Howe, Diane Glancy, Leslie Marmon Silko, N. Scott Momaday, Craig Womack.

English 631-501 (crn 31963)

Graduate Seminar Spring 2009

Contemporary Native American Literature

Tuesdays 5:00-7:45PM Bates 203

Prof. Vanessa Holford Diana

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Office: Bates 015 Office Hours: MWF 1:35-2:35 & by appt. Office Phone: 572-5687

Course Description:

In this discussion-based and student-centered seminar emphasizing contemporary fiction, as well as poetry, autobiography, drama, and film, we will read texts by a range of Native American authors from diverse tribes and geographical regions in the U.S. We will consider texts in specific cultural contexts, and we will explore pedagogical and theoretical debates about approaches to Native American literature in the classroom and the canon. My goal is to approach the class as a conversation among a community of learners, in which we can try out a variety of approaches to critical reading. To that end, each of you will contribute to facilitating class discussion. The semester will conclude with capstone presentations of your individual research findings.

Required Texts (available at campus bookstore):

Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (09); *Flight* (07)

Diane Glancy (Cherokee) *Pushing the Bear* (1998)

LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story* (2007)

Hershman John (Navajo) *I Swallow Turquoise for Courage* (2007)

Owens, Louis (Choctaw-Cherokee) *Nightland* (1996)

Susan Power (Sioux) *The Grass Dancer* (1994)

Red Eagle, Philip H. (Dakota/Salish) *Red Earth: A Vietnam Warrior's Journey* (1997)

Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) *Storyteller* (1981)

*supplemental course materials provided by Prof. D

Assignments and Grade Breakdown:

Weekly Reading Responses: (25%) In order to prepare for each class meeting, you will write a 2-page double-spaced reading response and discussion question, which you'll share during class. The response section is an open-ended forum for you to reflect on themes and/or stylistic aspects of the text you found most compelling. I will assign grades to reading responses based on length (two full pages including question); demonstration that you've completed the reading (you should discuss text in entirety rather than only focusing on a single scene/section); and inclusion of question that prompts discussion by zooming in on one or more *specific passage* in the text and posing an open-ended question about it.

In-Class Dialogue Participation (15%) Responses to and dialogue about the readings are one of the richest aspects of a graduate seminar, and I highly value your contributions. Thoughtful participation in class discussion is essential for this class to be a success; in particular, I urge you to make an extra effort to participate in classmates' facilitated discussions. Each night I will keep track of which students contributed thoughtfully to discussion. Missing more than two classes over the semester will reduce your participation grade, as will coming to class unprepared. Please inform me if you need to miss a class for an emergency, observance of a religious holiday, or other reasons. And of course, please refrain from using electronic devices (texting, cell phones, ipods) during class meetings – if you need to keep a phone on for emergency reasons, please let me know ahead of time.

Long Text Discussion Facilitator: (15%) On the day you are assigned discussion facilitator responsibilities for a novel or other long text, you will bring to class a list of discussion questions and/or other activities to spur close reading and consideration of themes, issues, and/or literary strategies in the novel. In order to introduce ourselves to some the critical approaches to Native American literature studies, your discussion will also draw on one critical article, to be selected in consultation with me. Discussion leaders should plan questions to last 30 minutes. For some long texts, two or three students will lead discussion (drawing on separate critical articles).

***Review of Literature: Annotated Bibliography: (15%)** A review of seven secondary sources compiled for research paper. Annotated bibliographies use MLA works cited page format, adding a paragraph under each citation which summarizes source and describes how source will inform your own argument.

***Research Paper: (25%)** A 12-15 page researched argument in which you formulate a thesis about one or more texts/authors we have read this semester. Topics to be developed in consultation with instructor.

***Capstone Presentation: (5%)** 15-minute presentation to classmates during our last class meeting, in which you will summarize research paper's major arguments.

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Grading: When computing grades, letters will correspond to the following numbers:

A = 94-100 C+ = 77-79 D- = 60-63

A- = 90-93 C = 74-76 F = 59-0

B+ = 87-89 C- = 70-73

B = 84-86 D+ = 67-69

B- = 80-83 D = 64-67

Failure to hand in assignment = 0

Conferences: Because a significant portion of your grade in this course depends on your independent research project, I encourage you to meet with me for individual conferences over the course of the semester, early on as you are selecting a topic for research, and later to focus on progress on the project. I encourage you to call or email any time you'd like to discuss papers or other aspects of the class. I am willing to meet with you before or after class if my daytime office hours are not convenient for you. My email address:

vdiana@wsc.ma.edu

Plagiarism Policy and Academic Honesty: Westfield State College requires every syllabus to contain a reminder that all of the work you do in this class must be your own and must be written especially for this course. Plagiarism and other kinds of cheating are serious offenses and will result in a *failing grade for the course* as well a record of your offence filed with the Academic Affairs Office. Please read the college's statement about Academic Honesty in the *Westfield State College Bulletin*.

Schedule of Assignments

(This schedule is subject to minor changes.)

Each week, all students are expected to read the assigned primary text and write a 2-page reading response, which includes one discussion question.

Week 1

Tuesday, January 20: Introduction to course and each other; discuss poems; assign Womack excerpts and discuss close-reading assignment; introduction to Alexie text.

Week 2:

Tuesday, January 27: Assignments due tonight: 1. Read Craig Womack "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997" (from *Reasoning Together*) (essay is 100 pages long). Re-read your assigned pages and prepare close reading notes using guide I provided with copy. 2. Read Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary*... and write 2-page reading response, including one discussion question.

In class: Focused discussion of Womack essay; Discuss Alexie *The Absolutely True Diary*; Assign Long-Text discussion leader selections

Week 3:

Tuesday, February 3: Diane Glancy *Pushing the Bear*

Discussion Leaders: _____ & _____ & _____

Week 4:

Tuesday, February 10: Discuss Leslie Marmon Silko *Storyteller*. Discussion Leaders: _____ & _____

Week 5:

Tuesday, February 17: No Class, (college follows Monday schedule today)

Week 6:

Tuesday, February 24: Guest Lecture: Debbie Reese

(Our class will have dinner with Professor Reese at 5pm, location TBA; lecture at 6pm in Scanlon Banquet Hall). In preparation for

Debbie Reese's lecture, please visit her blog site at <http://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com/</h2>>

Your assignment is to browse the site to get a sense of various issues discussed; read at least one of the articles listed on right side of home page; and formulate at least one question for Prof. Reese, which I hope you will ask her either at dinner or during the Q&A after her lecture.

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Week 7:

Tuesday, March 3: Discuss Susan Power *The Grass Dancer* & supplemental essay provided by Prof. D. Discussion Leaders:
_____ & _____

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Week 8:

Tuesday, March 10: Louis Owens, *Nightland*;

Discussion Leaders: _____ & _____

Week 9:

Tuesday, March 17: No Class SPRING BREAK

Week 10:

Tuesday, March 24: Discuss Leanne Howe *Miko Kings*; Discussion Leader(s): _____

Week 11:

Tuesday, March 31: Red Eagle, Philip H. *Red Earth: a Vietnam warrior's journey*; Discussion Leader(s):

Week 12:

Tuesday, April 7: Hershman John Poetry Reading (Our class will have dinner with Professor John at 5pm, location TBA; poetry reading at 6pm in Scanlon Banquet Hall). Assignment: Read John's collection *I Swallow Turquoise for Courage*; write reading response and discussion question as usual. Plan to ask at least one question either at dinner or during the post-reading Q&A.

Week 13:

Tuesday, April 14: Discuss Alexie *Flight* Discussion Leader(s): _____

Topic Proposals due

Week 14

Tuesday, April 21: N. Scott Momaday's screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows* (from *Three Plays*) (copy provided by Prof. D).

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Week 15

Tuesday April 28: Completed Annotated Bibliographies due; introductions and outlines due; Film TBA

Week 16:

Tuesday May 5: Last class! Capstone Presentations; course evaluations.

Papers Due: Monday, May 11 by 5:00 PM (email OK using WORD attachment, but if you do not receive confirmation reply from me, you should assume I did NOT receive paper.)

Internet Resources on Native American literature

Index of Native American Resources on the Internet www.hanksville.org/Naresources

"This extensive index provides links to a wide array of resources on Native American history, literature, art, articles on Native American history, language, movies, and other topics. Of particular interest is the collection of electronic texts that includes primary historical documents as well as books, stories, and articles written by Native authors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Goebel from Reading Native American Literature a Teachers Guide).

Native American History and Culture--Smithsonian Institution

http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/History_and_Culture/AmericanIndian_History.htm

"This site offers information on a variety of Native American resources, particularly those provided by museums and universities. It also presents a number of selected exhibitions, such as a gallery of Native American portraits and an activity that explains how to read a buffalo hide painting. This site concludes with links to a variety of bibliographies that focus on Native American tribes or issues". (Goebel from Reading Native American Literature a Teachers Guide).

NativeWeb-- Resources for Indigenous Cultures around the World

www.nativeweb.org/

"This is an issues-oriented news and information site targeted at a Native audience. It includes articles on topics ranging from current events to sports and music and provides links to thousands of sites of concern to indigenous peoples. Particularly useful is the link to specific U.S. tribal websites". (Goebel from Reading Native American Literature a Teachers Guide).

www.NativeWiki.org

A library of information about indigenous nations and peoples (past and present) of the world. Features major sections on Nations and Peoples, Documents and Materials, Geographic Regions and a Picture Gallery of selected images. *Includes special section on Native American Authors Online!* (with helpful links to bio, book reviews, etc.)

Plot Summaries from Amazon.com

Sherman Alexie's *Flight*: A deadpan "Call Me Zits" opens the first novel in 10 years from Alexie (*Smoke Signals*, etc.), narrated by a self-described "time-traveling mass murderer" whose name and deeds unravel as this captivating bildungsroman progresses. Half-Indian, half-Irish, acne-beset Zits is 15: he never knew his alcoholic father; his mother died when he was six; his aunt kicked him out when he was 10 (after he set her sleeping boyfriend on fire because the boyfriend had been forcing Zits to have sex). Running away from his 20th foster home, Zits ends up, briefly, in jail; soon after, he enters a bank, shoots several people and is shot dead himself. Zits then commences time-traveling via the bodies of others, finding himself variously lodged in an FBI agent in the '70s (helping to assassinate radical Indian activists); a mute Indian boy at the Battle of Little Big Horn; an Indian tracker named Gus; an airplane pilot instructor (one of whose pupils commits a terrorist act); and his own father. Zits eventually comes back to himself and to an unexpected redemption. While the plot is wisp-thin, one quickly surrenders to Zits's voice, which elegantly mixes free-floating young adult cynicism with a charged, idiosyncratic view of American history. Alexie plunges the book into bracing depths.

LeAnne Howe's *Miko Kings* is set in Indian Territory's queen city, Ada Oklahoma, during baseball fever of 1907, but moves back and forth in time from 1969, during the Vietnam War, to present-day Ada. The story centers on the lives of Hope Little Leader, a Choctaw pitcher for the Miko Kings, and Ezol Day, a postal clerk in Indian Territory who travels forward in time to tell stories to the present-day narrator. With Day's help, the narrator draws the reader into Indian boarding schools, such as the historical Hampton Normal School for Blacks and Indians in Virginia, where the novel's love story between Justina Maurepas--a character modeled after an influential Black educator--and Hope Little Leader, begins. Though a lively and humorous work of fiction, the narrative draws heavily on LeAnne's careful historical research. The author weaves original and fictive documents into the text, such as newspaper clippings, photographs, typewritten letters, drawings, and handwritten journal entries. "LeAnne's *Miko Kings* is an incredible act of recovery: baseball, a sport jealousy guarded by mainstream Anglo culture, is also rooted in Native American history and territory...[Howe's] compelling stories and narratives...expose the political games of the 20th century that Native Americans learned to play for resistance and survival."--Rigoberto Gonzalez

Louis Owens *Nightland*: After Billy Keene sees a dead body and a suitcase fall from the sky in rural New Mexico, he and his hunting buddy Will Striker, both of them half-Cherokee, decide to keep the \$850,000 they find in the suitcase and so begins Owens's solemn and surely told third Native American crime thriller (after *Bone Game*, 1994). Immediately, the two friends are attacked from above by a helicopter, which they shoot down in a brief battle. They try to hide the money along with any evidence of the shoot-out, but soon the local sheriff informs them of an impending investigation. Their task grows even more difficult when Billy begins a romance with a beautiful, mysterious Native American woman, and when Billy's elderly grandfather, who attempts to call on ancient Native American forces to extricate the friends from their predicament, disappears from the family ranch. After a local drug dealer comes calling to recover the cash, a series of violent confrontations erupts. Owens handles Billy and Will's romantic difficulties with compassion, adding resonance to a well-wrought thriller capped by a twist-filled climax.

Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*: A major talent debuts with this beguiling novel whose characters are Dakota Sioux and their spirit ancestors. Covering some of the same themes as Louise Erdrich but displaying her own distinctive voice and transcendent imagination, Power has produced an authentic portrait of Native American culture and characters who are as resilient and tangible as the grass moving over the Great Plains. In interconnected stories that begin in 1981 and range back to 1864, the residents of a Sioux reservation endure poverty, epidemic illness, injustice and--no less importantly--jealousy, greed, anger and unrequited love. The tales begin and end with Harley Wind Soldier, a 17-year-old whose soul is a "black, empty hole" because his mother has not spoken a word since the accident 17 years earlier in which Harley's father and brother died. Eventually we discover the true circumstances surrounding that event and other secrets--of clandestine love affairs, of childrens' paternity--that stretch back several generations but hold a grip on the present. Meanwhile, Harley falls in love with enchanting Pumpkin, an amazingly adept grass dancer whose fate will make readers gasp. Mercury Thunder and her daughter Anna use magic in a sinister way, and tragedy results. Herod Small War, a Yuwipi (interpreter of dreams), tries to bring his community into harmony with the spiritual world. The existence of ghosts in the real world is accepted with calm belief by the characters, who know the old legends and understand that the direction of their lives is determined by their gods and ancestors. Power weaves historical events--the Apollo Moon landing; the 19th-century Great Plains drought--into her narrative, reinforcing the seamless coexistence of the real and the spirit realm. A consummate storyteller whose graceful prose is plangent with lyrical metaphor and sensuous detail, she deftly uses suspense, humor, irony and the gradual revelation of dramatic disclosures to compose a tapestry of human life. Seduced by her humane vision and its convincing depiction, one absorbs the traditions and lore of the Sioux community with a sense of wonder reflecting that with which the characters view the natural world. This is a book that begs to be read at one sitting, and then again.

Philip Red Eagle's *Red Earth*: In the two novellas included within this book (*Red Earth* and *Bois de Sioux*), the author explores the Native American experience of Vietnam veterans with post-traumatic stress syndrome. His protagonists use mystical ceremonies that have been passed on from their grandfathers in order to relive the situations that have thrown them out of balance with the world. In the first story, Raymond Crow-Belt travels back into time to prevent an ambush of his squad, and in the second, Clifford Goes-First travels back to inhabit the body of a fallen comrade in order to prevent an atrocity. In the act of healing themselves, the characters also save a larger circle of humanity. Time and reality are not linear concepts within these works: past, present, and future fluidly shift around each other. This is the first work published by Red Eagle, and he presents a unique new voice to the genre.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*: Librarians have a difficult time finding a place for this book. Should it go into the autobiographical section? There's a great deal of her past and her family's heritage in this book. Should it be placed next to the poetry books? She has included several of her poems. What about fiction? She has several of her famous short stories ("*Storyteller*," "*Yellow Woman*," "*Lullaby*,") collected here. It's even got photojournalism in it--26 photos taken by either herself or her father. Even the shape of the book is peculiar. Maybe this might disenchant a reader who would rather have boundaries and borders. But I found it amazing.

Diane Glancy's *Pushing The Bear*: First novelist Glancy prefaces her stunning narrative with a stark statement of fact: "From November 1838 to

March 1839 some 11,000 to 13,000 Cherokee walked 900 miles in bitter cold from the southeast to Indian Territory. One fourth died or disappeared along the way." Drawing on these statistics and other surviving documentation, the author imaginatively re-creates a nearly unimaginable experience: the forced removal of the Cherokee peoples from their homes in four Southern states. The story is told in many voices, principally those of the uprooted Native men and women, conjurers, Christians, politicians, leaders, and rebels, but also heard are the white soldiers, settlers, evangelists, sympathizers, oppressors, and opportunists who witnessed their passage to what is now Oklahoma. The fictional testimony creates a graphic and compelling mosaic of human tragedy.