

**Myth, Storytelling, and Native North American Indian Literature**

Dr. Susan Gardner, Spring 2003

**American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language.**  
(N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa, qtd in Ruoff 1)

**[T]he Indian ... is a product of literature, history, and art, and a product that, as an invention, often bears little resemblance to actual, living Native American people.**  
(Louis Owens, Cherokee/Choctaw novelist and critic)

**Since the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere neither called themselves by a single term nor understood themselves as a collectivity, the idea and the image of the Indian must be a White conception. Native Americans were and are real, but the *Indian* was a White invention and still remains largely a White image, if not stereotype.... The first residents of the Americas were...divided into at least two thousand cultures and more societies, practiced a multiplicity of customs and lifestyles, held an enormous variety of values and beliefs, spoke numerous languages mutually unintelligible...and did not conceive of themselves as a single people--if they knew about each other at all.... Whether as conception or as stereotype, however, the idea of the Indian has created a reality in its own image as a result of the power of the Whites and the response of Native Americans.**  
(Berkhofer 3)

**If only I were an Indian, suddenly alert, on a galloping horse, leaning against the wind ...** (Franz Kafka, 1883-1924)

Some years ago, when I first proposed teaching a course on American Indian literature at another university, the chair of the English department dismissed the notion as "Eccentric and irrelevant, of no interest to undergraduate teaching"! On the other hand, when I remember this incident, I'm equally amazed at my own naivete. For the brief is impossible, of course: in 15 weeks, to introduce you to forms of verbal art stemming in their oral form from at least 30,000 years ago, and written more recently in non-Native languages such as English, Spanish or French. Native American Indian stories are thus the first in the Western hemisphere, and they offer a unique viewpoint concerning human beings, their function on earth -- "this island on turtle's back" -- and their relationship to all the rest of creation. This course, which fulfills general education goals X or X, aims to introduce English majors and non-majors alike to some of the ancient story-telling traditions and their recurrence in modern, written fiction and poetry, emphasizing both continuity and innovation in Native American storytelling, whether in oral or written form. The roots of all the world's literatures, of course, are in oral-aural storytelling, and oral traditions in Native America have not ceased, to be superseded in some "evolutionary" sense by the written word. (Reasons for the relatively late access of many Native North American Indians to literacy in English will be discussed in lecture). Indeed, orality and literacy can influence and feed into each other.

Should American Indian literature be confined to separate course offerings? How does it "fit" (to anticipate my claim in class: it doesn't) into the conventional schema of "American" (mainly Euro-immigrant American) literature, starting in English on the colonial eastern

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seaboard and parceled into genres, time periods, and "major authors" within a "canon" (contested as it has been, with the inclusion of "minority" authors, most students can still readily reel off who is "great" and what is "important")? Is it the only truly "American" literature? Or should American Indian authors be "integrated" into any American literature courses (as, indeed, they can be)? Do they lend themselves to classification as "postcolonial" and/or "Third World" literatures?

My own (always evolving) preference is that American Indian literature bears likenesses to the last of the above and it is best understood comparatively. By this, I mean in the context of other world indigenous literatures (e.g., various African; Maori; (Australian or Canadian) Aboriginal or "First Nations"; Inuit; Native Hawaiian and other native Pacific peoples, and indigenous Latin American). Despite invasion, conquest, settlement of their lands, and uneven absorption into or envelopment by the mainstream population, more than 250 million indigenous peoples survive worldwide. Four percent of the global population, living in over 70 countries (modern nation-states), they are sometimes said to constitute a "Fourth World." While varying enormously from each other and from "us" (for convenience, I understand "us" to mean those socialized predominantly in mainstream, largely Euro-immigrant culture, whatever our ethnicity or national origin), they share a common situation on humanitarian, cultural, and legal grounds.

[T]oday as in the past they are prey to stereotyping... By some they are idealized as the embodiment of spiritual values; by others they are denigrated as an obstacle impeding economic progress. But they are neither: they are people who cherish their own distinct cultures, are the victims of past and present-day colonialism, and are determined to survive. Some live according to their traditions, some receive welfare, others work in factories, offices, or the professions.... Where they have maintained a close living relationship to the land, there exists a co-operative attitude of give and take, a respect for the Earth and the life it supports, and a perception that humanity is but one of many species.  
(Burger 15)

OK, from the global to the local (= this classroom). Your texts for this course are Barbara Duncan, ed., **Living Stories of the Cherokee**; Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw), **American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities**; and Lawana Trout, ed., **Native American Literature: an Anthology**. All are available at the UNC Charlotte bookstore, and I've placed all of them on three-hour reserve in Atkins Library. You could also try buying them used on the Internet via [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). Because of the emphasis on oral storytelling in this class, we will also host four guest speakers: Keith Brown (Catawba), Jacque Garneau/Red Leaf (Cherokee/Choctaw), Freeman Owle (Eastern Band of

Cherokee) and Howard Phillips (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma). (Mr. Owle is featured in Duncan's text, and Dr. Phillips is Professor of Electrical Engineering at UNC Charlotte.) We will also view a number of videos, and occasionally I will assign supplementary readings, either handouts or via electronic reserve. Tests and other assignments will be based on these, as well as your lecture notes. I will award **5% extra credit** if you attend, and report on, Indian-sponsored or -related events on campus or in local communities during this semester. You will also need pocket/wallet folders or sheet protectors, and a supply of 5x8 (and **only** 5x8!) index cards.

Please bring me, by the latest on **Tuesday Jan. 21st**, a **written learning contract** outlining/explaining the work you intend to do in this course. Just as I have a contract to teach (of

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which this syllabus is a part), you will have one to learn. In it state: (1) why you were interested in this course; (2) how you learned about it; (3) what your goals are in taking it (including what you would like to learn about Indians during the course); (4) how you intend to achieve these goals, including the concrete steps you will take. You may also include your expectations of me as a teacher. You may revise these goals as the course progresses; write the contract carefully, for it will be an important component in your final assessment. Please include any other information, such as previous literature or other related courses you may have taken, what you like to read/view for pleasure, any experiences with Indian peoples... Submit your word-processed, spell-checked contract in a folder or sheet protector.

I'll announce my "walk-in" office hours soon, but you can always make an appointment at a more convenient time for us both. My office is FRET 290H (enter the English Dept. and turn right; I'm near the end of the hall, on the left). My phone, with voicemail, is 704/687 4208; the English Dept. FAX is 704/687-3961; and you can email me (which I rely on very heavily): [sgardner@email.uncc.edu](mailto:sgardner@email.uncc.edu) or [susangardner@earthlink.net](mailto:susangardner@earthlink.net). (I tend to consult the EarthLink address more often, but check my university email at least once/day.) All students need to use email in this course, whether through a private Internet service provider or through the university. **If you are not now on email your first step in this course should be to acquire an email account (for free) at the university.** Go to UNCC's home page ([www.uncc.edu](http://www.uncc.edu)) and click on "Library" for information on opening student e-mail accounts and access to computer labs. Otherwise, go to one of the computer labs and ask a TA on duty to organize your account. Complete information is on page 3 of the 2002-03 Campus Directory. **All students must be on line by Jan. 21, 2003**, as (read on!) you will spend out-of-class time (often in preparation for in-class time) contributing to our class listserve, which I'll be giving you further information about soon.

... ays there are many web sites concerning American Indians (including those of the Carolinas) and American Indian literatures; here are a few that you may wish to explore.

- \* Catawba Cultural Preservation Project (a tribal home page is presently under construction), <http://www.cppcrafts.com/menu.html>
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- \* Cherokee Indian Reservation Official Homepage, <http://www.cherokee-nc.com/main.htm>
- \* H-AMINDIAN, discussion, news and resources for anyone with a scholarly or professional interest in the indigenous peoples of North America. <http://www.asu.edu/clas/history/h-amindian/>
- \* Lumbee Indian Tribal Links, <http://www.lumbee.org/tribal.htm>
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- \* Metrolina Native American Association, <http://www.indiantrailonline.com/mnaa.htm>
- \* Native American Sites (Lisa Mitten), <http://info.pitt.edu/~lmitten/indians.html>
- \* NativeAuthors.com, specializing in work by American Indian poets, writers, historians, storytellers and performers, <http://nativeauthors.com/index.html>
- \* NativeWeb, resources for indigenous cultures around the world, <http://www.nativeweb.org>

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- \* North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs, <http://www.doa.state.nc.us/doa/cia/indian.htm>
- Storytellers: Native American authors online, <http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/>; see also <http://www.hanksville.org/> and <http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/>
- \* **Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers**, <http://www.wordcraftcircle.org/>

### **COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES:**

**All students are bound by the University's student academic integrity code, and English Dept. policy mandates adherence to its statement on multiculturalism (in the broadest senses of that sometimes maligned word). These policies are attached to this syllabus.**

Some of your assignments will be microthemes, a form of brief essay, which may be a new experience for you. They make splendid preparation for discussion, whether in small groups or a whole class setting. Neither you nor I have to endure extensive reading journals, massive group projects, or what my colleague Dr. Jacoby (from whom I borrowed and adapted this technique) calls "knuckle-whitening oral presentations." Because they are written in a small space (5x8, and **only** 5x8, index cards -- I won't accept any other size, or hastily scribbled, last-minute themes on a ripped-out sheet of paper!) -- you become practiced in stating your ideas clearly and concisely. The themes may be typed, word-processed, hand-printed or hand-written (if legibly, and **only** in dark ink; no pencil!). You may use both sides of the card, but you may not write on more than one card. All microthemes must have your name and the microtheme number in their upper right hand corner. Although these are not formal papers -- therefore, you don't need introductions and conclusions -- they must be

neatly presented, with correct spelling and grammar. I will collect them at the very beginning of class, a good reason not to be late! Although I will not assign microthemes for every class, I will assign them often. Some examples of the forms a microtheme could take are the following:

- offering and defending an informed opinion or more formal argument
- recording, comparing, contrasting, analyzing and evaluating data
- applying newly learned concepts

I will distribute periodic updated reading schedules on our class listserve (in addition to announcing them in class).

**Absences:** I don't differentiate between excused and unexcused absences; you are allowed a maximum of two, after which your final grade will be impacted at my discretion. And do try not to be late! After five minutes or so, entering the classroom simply disrupts it. I prefer instead that you contact me later. Please keep in mind, though, that my responsibility stops when I tell you what we covered and if you missed any assignments. For lecture notes, you will have to rely on your fellow/sister students. Please turn any cell phones off or down.

Our class listserve, of which I am the "owner," is being organized now. We'll conduct a lot of interactive class business, including discussion, on this listserve. This is how I will communicate with all of you between classes (especially important since we have a long gap

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between Thurs. and Tues.); you should check it once a day, and always the day before class meets. You are required to respond to five prompts during the semester. I will discuss this interactive portion of the class work more fully during the first week of classes. Another listserve which you may want to know about is the one the English department uses to send information to all majors (and, by implication, minors). This is [ENGLMAJ@listserv.uncc.edu](mailto:ENGLMAJ@listserv.uncc.edu). You have to subscribe to it if you wish to receive it, and I will explain to you how to do it.

**Grading:** Absences, and how well you live up to your Learning Contract, will not formally enter the scale except at my discretion (i.e., if they are problematic). Your final grade will be based on the following:

Microthemes  
Mid-Term  
Listserve Contributions  
Project

Finally, when I offer this course, student evaluations represent a continuum between these poles: "I learned that Indians had a bad rap and could write. Big deal!" and "This course has totally changed my life and should be an absolute graduation requirement." Without necessarily tending to either extreme, I hope that you will come to feel comfortable with American Indian materials, as well as non-Western modes of reading and understanding literature (and, for that matter, life). I don't think you would be here if you didn't already have an interest in "Indians"; my aim is to introduce you to their literature without romanticism or nostalgia, and with respect; good luck!

#### WORKS CITED

Berkhofer, Robert F., Jr. *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. [1978], NY: Vintage, 1979.

Burger, Julian, with campaigning groups and Native peoples worldwide. *The Gaia Atlas of the World's Indigenous Peoples: a Future for the Indigenous World*. Foreword Maurice F. Strong. NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1990.

Owens, Louis. *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. U of OK P, 1992.

Ruoff, A. Lavonne Brown. *American Indian Literatures: an Introduction, Bibliographic Review and Selected Bibliography*. NY: MLA, 1990.

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