

AMST/ENGL 3050-003
Native North American Indian Fiction & Community
Dr. Susan Gardner, Fall 2009

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)

Native peoples find their individual identities in the collectivity of community. (Weaver [Cherokee] 161)

There is always a connection to a core of tribal teachings in Native American literature, even when it expresses distance or alienation from that core. (Walters [Dine] & Reese [Nambe Pueblo] 159)

More than 30,000 manuscripts have been published about American Indians, and more than 90 percent of that literature has been written by non-Indians. (Fixico [Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek, and Seminole] 30)

[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)

If “American Indian Fiction” is “about” anything, it is about community, organized around kinship, a particular place, and a specific language. Even contemporary American Indian novels and short stories about individuals alienated from their home community, belonging nowhere and speaking English only, testify to the significance of community, for such characters usually can only be made whole by reconnecting with it. One Native American literary critic has described every American Indian novel as a “ceremony,” a ritual to heal an individual or a community. Louis Owens (Cherokee/Choctaw) stated that, for Native American writers, “[T]he novel represents a process of reconstruction, of self-discovery, and cultural recovery” (*Other Destinies* 5).

In this course, we will explore what exactly constitutes an American Indian writer and, for that matter, what qualities and values “mark” an American Indian novel; *is* there such a beast? Critic Kenneth Roemer has identified thematic commonalities such as “attitudes about a shared history—attitudes reflecting complex mixtures of post-apocalyptic worldviews, an awareness of the miracle of survival, and a hope that goes beyond survival and endurance to senses of tribal and pan-tribal sovereignty and identity” (*Cambridge* 6). He also identifies other connections including “explorations of complex mixed-blood identity; multidimensional concepts of communal identity; word power and sense of place/place lost, time/timelessness..., traditional spiritualities, and historical experiences; powerful acts of resistance, adaptation, and survival; uses of irony and paradox; ...pushing genre boundaries and creating mixed genre forms” (6-18). Is Leech Lake Ojibwe novelist and critic David Treuer convincing when he contends: “Native American fiction does not exist”? Is Native American fiction *itself* a fiction, constructed and institutionalized by critics? To this claim, critic Arnold Krupat counters: “Native American fiction most certainly exists, and it can loosely be defined as fiction by someone accepted as Indian about some aspect of American Indian life. This sort of definition, to be sure, has all sorts of problems...” (“Review Essay” 136).

My goals for you in this course include:

- Understanding concepts of “identity”, “authenticity” and “community” in American Indian fiction;
- Understanding relationships between oral traditional storytelling and Native storytelling in print form, particularly American Indian novels;
- Understanding the historical contexts giving rise to the themes of contemporary Native American fiction;
- Understanding the counter-stereotypical, resistant features of contemporary Native American fiction.

For the university academic calendar, go to www.uncc.edu and click on “Calendar” at the top of the page.

COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

This syllabus contains the policies and expectations I have established for AMST/ENGL 3050-003. Please read the entire syllabus carefully before continuing in this course. These policies and expectations are intended to create a productive learning atmosphere for all students. **Unless you are prepared to abide by these policies and expectations, you risk losing the opportunity to participate further in the course.**

I will conduct this class in an atmosphere of mutual respect. I encourage your active participation in class discussions and group work. Each of us may have strongly different opinions on the various topics of class discussions. The expression of various **ideas** is encouraged and welcome. The orderly questioning of the ideas of others, including mine, is similarly welcome. However, I will exercise my responsibility to manage the discussions so that ideas and argument can proceed in an orderly fashion. You should expect that if your conduct during class discussions seriously disrupts the atmosphere of mutual respect I expect in this class, you will not be permitted to participate further.

All students are bound by the University’s student academic integrity code; the full university policy statement is at <http://www.legal.uncc.edu/policies/ps-105.html> . Violations of the Code of Student Academic Integrity, including plagiarism, will result in disciplinary action as provided in the code. The university website, <http://integrity.uncc.edu>, includes a student tab.

The English Department has revised what used to be referred to as its’ “multicultural teaching policy.” It is now (as of April 2009) “A Statement to Students about Diversity,” and reads as follows:

“The English Department strives to create an academic climate that respects people of varied cultural backgrounds and life experiences. As a community of scholars and teachers who study language, literature, and writing, we are committed to nurturing intellectual and aesthetic diversity. In all our activities, we invite participation by diverse groups, including, but not limited to, those who define themselves in the following terms: race and ethnicity; gender; political orientation; sexual orientation; special health needs; age; religion; country of origin; and socio-economic status. Finally, by fostering multiple perspectives in our coursework, we can help our students prepare to participate in our increasingly diverse society, as well as in the global community.”

Texts are Ella Cara Deloria (Dakota Sioux), *Waterlily* (preferably the 2009 edition, with a new introduction); Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe, *Love Medicine* (the 1993 expanded edition); Susan Power (Dakota Sioux), *The Grass Dancer*; Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw), *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*. If we have time, we will also read a graphic novel from the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe. Additionally, I am putting a number of materials (which used to be paper handouts) on e-reserves at Atkins Library. Hard copies of the novels may be checked out from Atkins Library reserves overnight. We will read/view the texts in the order given above, except for the text on stereotypes; we will read portions of the text throughout the course. I'm not providing a detailed reading schedule, as I consider these the greatest pieces of fiction I write (along, perhaps, with my resume!). But I will give you reasonable advance warning in class and on our Blackboard Vista calendar, as to what to read next.

Blackboard Vista: All students need to use Blackboard Vista for this course, with its announcements, mail, discussion, calendar and grade book features. You access the course home page by logging in with 49er Express and clicking on "Access Blackboard Vista." If you haven't used Blackboard before, go to <http://bbvista.uncc.edu> for information and trouble-shooting. You will receive email from me often, **so check at least once daily, and always on the day class meets (preferably the night before)**. Make sure to do a browser (compatibility) check when using an off-campus computer; you are offered this possibility when you first sign in. The best program for running Blackboard is Java 6, version 3.

Attendance: You are allowed **three** absences (for whatever reasons), but any thereafter will impact your final grade at my professional discretion. I don't differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. If needed, I will express my concern about absences to you **once**. Keep in mind that you may well get sick, or have an unavoidable, important conflict at our class time, so please budget your absences for these possibilities. Please allow enough time for commuting and parking. **Lateness of more than five minutes will count as an absence.** After five minutes or so, entering the classroom simply disrupts it. I prefer instead that you contact me later (or beforehand, if possible). 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. My least favorite questions are, "Did I miss anything important?" and "How many absences do I have?" I am expecting you to keep your own "absence log," as **I want you to take responsibility for your own absences, and not always ask me if you have "too many."**

If I am late in arriving to class, you must wait a full 20 minutes after the start of class before you may leave without being counted absent, or you must follow any written instructions I may give you about my anticipated tardiness.

I'm encouraging you to attend one public **literary-cultural event**, on campus or off: how can the experience of literature become easily accessible to all members of a community, not just the privileged elite? We are fortunate that, during fall semester, several American Indian-related events are taking place. One is the UNC Charlotte Native American Studies Academy Fall 2009 film series (details to follow). Another is the Mint Museum's exhibit, "Passionate Journey: The Grice Collection of Native American Art," which features New Mexican Native American art pottery, modern Maya weavings and Mexican performance masks. It will run through Sat., October 17th (free on Tuesday evenings, 5-9 pm). It complements the Mint's own outstanding ancient American art collection, which would also be a possibility. Out of town, the third annual conference of American Indian Women of Proud Nations will be held from September 23-26th at UNC Pembroke (www.aiwpan.org). Other events—very many of them free—take place at

bookstores, community centers and other venues, including on campus (the English Dept's Creative Writing Reading Series at the Ritazza in Fretwell is quite popular, as is the "Sonnet Slam"). I'll award a maximum of **5% extra credit** if you attend and describe one literary event, in a format that I call "report/relate/reflect," which I will discuss further and make available on the course web site. You will post your report to the whole class via the Blackboard "Literary/Cultural Events" discussion item. Often this extra 5% makes all the difference with borderline grades. Please do not wait until the end of the semester (I will not accept reports during the last two weeks of class). You are welcome to attend an event I'm unaware of, but please check with me first.

A written learning contract: Just as I have a contract to teach (of which this syllabus is a part), you will have one to learn. I will collect these word-processed, spellchecked documents (submitted by email attachment, **only** in Word 2003 or 2007) from now through Tues. Sept. 8th. In yours state:

- (1) why you were interested in this course (or, at least, why you wound up in it);
- (2) how you learned about it;
- (3) what your goals are in taking it (what skills or content do you hope to learn?);
- (4) how you intend to achieve these goals, including the concrete steps you will take to obtain the grade you want;
- (5) your expectations of me as a teacher;
- (6) your expectations of yourself: what will **you** do to help create a successful class?
- (7) your expectations of your peers;
- (8) your computer skills: Do you use social networking sites? Do you have a Second Life avatar? Games?

You will revise these goals at mid-term, when I will inform you of your progress so far, and again, at semester's end. With hard work, you and I should agree... Write the contract carefully, for it will be an important basis for your final assessment. Please include any other information, such as previous literature or other related courses you may have taken (as well as what critical reading or writing skills you learned in them), what you like to read/view for pleasure; anything else you think it would be helpful for me to know about you (including, if you have a job, how many hours/week and where; the distance you commute to the university). Feel free to approach this requirement creatively: some students have written theirs in "last will and testament" style, others in verse including one in *Horton Hears a Who* style! The livelier the better!

Grading: I am using a simple 100 point grade scale, but those of you who have had me as a professor before will notice that I am changing course requirements and allocations. You will have a syllabus quiz (10 points); microthemes (six, 30%); discussion topics (six, 30%); a mid-term take home essay exam (10%); and a service project (20%). I will only offer six of each, so if you miss one or want to improve your grade on one of either, you will have a chance to rewrite one towards the end of the course.

Micro-themes, a form of brief essay, may be a new experience for you, as they initially were for me. I was impressed with the results! 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, lengthy research or position papers, massive group projects, or what my former colleague Dr. Jacoby (from whom I borrowed and adapted this technique) called “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 color). You will probably 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 to bother with introductions and conclusions—they must be neatly presented, with correct spelling and grammar. Write a draft first. I will collect them at the very beginning of class, another reason not to be late! I will give you rubrics for both microthemes and discussion topics.

In every course I teach about American Indians, I require students to participate in a project that will benefit our local Indian communities. One of them, which I hope to offer with the cooperation of Sigma Tau Delta (the national English honor society) and the English Learning Community, will be to hold book sales on campus to accumulate enough funds to buy copies of all award-winning American Indian children’s literature titles for Atkins Library. The other will be a number of (unpaid) internships with the UNCC Native American Studies Academy (its’ director, Dr. Steven Sabol of the History department, will visit the class to explain these).

You may contact me at my office (Fretwell 290H), by voice mail (704/687 4208) or via e-mail (which I prefer): sgardner@uncc.edu . If you call me, make sure to leave your phone number, and speak it slowly! My walk-in office hours for advising are M 2-5 pm and W 10 am-12 noon ; if these are not convenient, you may also make an appointment at a mutually convenient time (be sure to give me several alternate times). Please do not hesitate to consult with me outside class. You may also leave notes or coursework in my mailbox at the English Dept. main office (275 Fretwell). Materials left under my office door get stepped on.

If you have a disability documented in the Office of Disability Services which may affect your learning, please avail yourself of the resources available at that office and follow its instructions. It will advise me how I can accommodate your needs.

And don't let me forget to mention my pet peeve, which is students packing their bags before the class is over! It drives me nuts and, rest assured, you will get out on time! The use of cell phones, beepers, or other communication devices is disruptive, and is therefore prohibited during class. Turn cell phones off. Do not text from class. Students are permitted to use computers during class for note-taking and other class-related work only. Those using computers during class for work not related to this class must leave the classroom for the remainder of the class period.

And don't let me forget to mention my pet peeve, which is students packing their bags before the class is over! It drives me nuts and, rest assured, you will get out on time! class period. I do realize that I'm beginning to sound like a compound of bitch (49%, perhaps?) and angel (51%, I trust!). I'll conclude by saying that my courses on Am. Indian literatures and film are my favorites to teach, and a number of students in the past have commented that they have transformed and expanded their minds, as they have mine. I feel privileged to teach them.

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