

English 280: American Indian Literature and Film

Spring 2022

2:00 to 3:15 p.m. Tuesday/Thursday

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Office Hours: 11-12 MWF and by appointment

Course Description

Since the first Europeans arrived on the North American continent, the representation of indigenous people has been a politically powerful and hotly contested topic. The majority of European American representation has been negative and has been used to fuel the displacement and even genocide of the Native people. In the past century various American Indian artists, writers, and filmmakers have attempted to shift control of those representations to American Indian hands and thereby to improve cultural understanding. The European and Native cultures have been sufficiently different to make this task a difficult one, but in recent years some ground has been gained. This course will provide a cross-disciplinary exploration of the images of American Indians and their relevance to American society in film, literary, and historical texts.

Course Readings

A wide variety of readings on Canvas

The Surrounded, by D'arcy McNickle

The Round House, Louise Erdrich

Little House on the Prairie, by Laura Ingalls Wilder

The Birchbark House, by Louise Erdrich

Course Assignments

- 1) This is a literature course, so there will be a fair amount of reading. You are responsible for completing those readings and being prepared to discuss them in class. Frequent writing responses will help you to comprehend and integrate your readings (potential 10 points for each). They are due by Thursday afternoon but preferably you will them done by start of Tuesday classes so you can participate in discussion.
- 2) Two group presentations will focus on films. The first will look at a transitional film, made by white directors with the intention of shifting definitions. The second will look at a film made by an American Indian director and/or screenwriter to see how they redefine the terms. (25 points for each)
- 3) You will be responsible for three 3-4 page essays corresponding to the three segments of the course. These should be typed, double-spaced, and in MLA format. (25 points each)
- 4) Class participation is especially encouraged. (25 points)

Attendance

“Contained in this classroom is a microcosm of human experience for you to query and examine and ponder,” writes poet Tom Wayman. Don’t miss the opportunity.

Late Work Policy

As in the “real world,” late work will jeopardize your position in the class as well as make you unprepared for class discussions. You are allowed a one class grace period for written assignments. Any further delays should be documented with a doctor’s excuse, police citation, court order, obituary or other relevant paperwork.

Mutual Respect--Because this course often contains sensitive material, I ask that we speak of and to others respectfully. We can disagree without undermining one another’s worth. The best response to a problematic comment is often a question. By listening carefully to the answer we may come to understand the world better.

Scholastic Dishonesty

I have no sense of humor about plagiarism or cheating in any form. I assume we all enter the course in good faith. If you break with it, penalties for plagiarism can range from an F on the assignment to expulsion from school.

Revision

You may revise graded essays for reconsideration by the professor. The higher grade will stand. Revisions should be turned in within two weeks of receipt of the graded essay.

Course Outline

Part I—White definitions and traditions

Week 1—Introduction—How does ideology affect our creation of images? How does it affect our interpretation of images?

Week 2—Puritan conflicts and choices—How did initial contact get sorted out?

Represented? What lasting images were created at this time?

Readings: John Smith, William Bradford, Mary Rowlandson (on Canvas)

Writing: Summary/Response (1-2 pages typed)

Week 3—Western ideals—How did the Western develop? Why did it so capture imaginations?

Readings: selection from Last of the Mohicans, by James Fenimore Cooper and

Little House on the Prairie, by Laura Ingalls Wilder (Cooper on Canvas)

Writing: Summary/Response

Week 4—Playing Cowboys and Indians—Thomas Edison and selections from *They Died with Their Boots On*

“There are not enough Indians in the world to defeat the Seventh Cavalry.”

-- George Armstrong Custer

Readings: selections from *The Invention of the Western Film*, from *Celluloid Indians*, and from *Black Elk Speaks* (On Canvas)

Writing Assignment: Summary/Response

Essay #1 in response to this unit is due February 24.

Part II—Cultural Conflicts and Transitions

Week 5—Indian Education and Assimilation—Can you take the Indian out of the man? What are some effects of education and assimilation?

Readings: selections from Charles Eastman, Mourning Dove, Luther Standing Bear, and *Mountain Wolf Woman* (On Canvas)

Writing: Essay #1 due

Week 6—Early reservation life—How do the various cultural conflicts play out on reservations on the individual and systemic levels? Reading: *The Surrounded*, by D’Arcy McNickle

Writing: Response to reading questions

Week 7— REEL INJUN

Reading: selections from *Celluloid Indians* and from Tonto’s Revenge Writing: Do a quick search on the internet (imdb.com perhaps) for westerns.

How many have been made? By whom? What cumulative effect do you think they may have had on American consciousness?

Week 8—American Indian Movement shifts the terms of discussion/ Group Work

Time Reading: “Indians Today, the Real and the Unreal,” by Vine Deloria Jr. Writing: Write a letter of response to Deloria

Week 9—Group Presentations

Essay #2 in response to this unit is due April 7.

Part III—American Indian Response and Self-Definition

Week 10—Setting the Record Straight—How has historical revisionism changed our

views? How effective is it? Does non-Indian ideology affect our readings/interpretations? Reading: *The Birchbark House*, by Louise Erdrich Writing: Essay #2 is due.

Week 11—Modern life—What can contemporary short stories teach us about more authentic images?

Reading: short stories by Sherman Alexie, Jim Northrup, Thomas King, and Diane Glancy and “Indian Humor” by Vine Deloria, Jr.

Writing: Can you find “Indian humor” in the short stories? If so, where?

Week 12—American Indian Aesthetics—Released from mainstream expectations, how would an Indian aesthetic differ? What challenges and opportunities would that provide?

Reading: *The Round House*

Writing: Respond to reading questions

Week 13— Reading: *The Round House* April 21 Round House/poetry

Writing: Response to the novel April 23 Poetry/Group Work

Week 14— Poetic expressions—Poetry and the poetry of film/Group Work Time

April 28—Work Day

Group Presentations Work

Reading: poetry selections

Writing: Choose a poem and explain it line by line.

Week 15— Group Presentations on Native filmmakers

Wrap-up—Where have we been? Where are we going?

May 10 and 12—Group Presentations

Essay #3 is due by Final Exam Period.