

English 212/252/307: American Literature and Culture
Dr. Jennifer Ladino

✧ **Western Literature of the United States:**
The West in the American Mind, and Beyond ✧

“Ambivalence and ambiguity, like deception, bear upon all definitions of the American West.”

– N. Scott Momaday

Whether it conjures images of cowboys and Indians, covered wagons and log cabins, Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill Cody, or majestic mountains and long desert highways, the American West is a powerful, complex icon that contributes to a shared sense of American identity. But what kind of identity is it? And who, exactly, shares it? In this course we will read literary texts within their broader historical context in order to see how “the West”—as both material world and cultural ideal—is represented across time and space. Focusing on the themes of the frontier, landscape and identity, labor and pioneering, as well as travel and mobility, we will embark on our own expedition with novels, historical essays, poems, short stories, films, and images as we examine how American identity is associated with Westernness, both in the United States and abroad. We will discuss how diverse texts map the relationships between imagination and Western landscapes; determine what American myths “the West” supports and who is included in and excluded by these myths; consider how the West functions as a symbol for the nation; trace the origins of our own perceptions of the West; and identify continuing conflicts in today’s West by understanding their historical and literary roots.

Required texts:

- Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*
- Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*
- Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses*

Course compendium:

Stories and book chapters:

- Edward Abbey, “The First Morning” (*Desert Solitaire*)
- Rick Bass, “Two Deer” (*The Hermit’s Story*)
- Stephen Crane, “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”
- Charles Eastman. *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (excerpts)
- Gretel Ehrlich, “The Solace of Open Spaces” (*The Solace of Open Spaces*)
- Louise Erdrich, “The Red Convertible” (from *Love Medicine*)
- Sui Sin Far, “Chinese Workmen in America,” and “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*)
- Richard Ford, “Rock Springs” (*Rock Springs*)
- Jack Kerouac, “The Mexican Girl” (*On the Road*)
- Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain” (*Close Range*)
- María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, “The Don in His Broad Acres” (*The Squatter and the Don*)
- Zitkala-Ša, “Land of the Red Apples,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” (*American Indian Stories*)

Poems:

- Sherman Alexie, “My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys,” “Vilify”
- Rodolfo Gonzales, “I am Joaquín” (*Message to Aztlan*)
- Walt Whitman, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (*Leaves of Grass*)
- Marianne Moore, “An Octopus”
- David Lee, “Aspen Pole Fence,” “Pine Valley” (*So Quietly The Earth*)

Theoretical readings and essays:

- Jean Baudrillard, selections from *America* and “The Precession of Simulacra”
- Neil Campbell. “Introduction: Theorizing the Rhizomatic West.” *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*
- Sarah Deutsch, “Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1865-1990” (*Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*)
- Linda Hogan, “Deify the Wolf” (*Dwellings*)
- N. Scott Momaday, “The American West and the Burden of Belief”
- Katherine G. Morrissey, “Engendering the West” (*Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*)
- Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape and the Pueblo Imagination”
- Richard Slotkin. “Introduction: The Significance of the Frontier Myth in American History” (*Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*)
- Wallace Stegner, “Thoughts in a Dry Land,” “The Sense of Place” (*Where The Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*)
- Jane Tompkins, “Landscape” (*West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*)
- Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

Reading Schedule and Thematic Structure:

The Wild West Extravaganza – The Closed Frontier and the Course of Empire

“American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”
– Frederick Jackson Turner

Week 1: Introduction, the Old West

Framing texts:

Powerpoint presentation on Crane and the “Old West,” Buffalo Bill, etc.

Stagecoach clips

Owen Wister’s “To the Reader” (from *The Virginian*)

Jane Tompkins, “Landscape” (from *West of Everything*)

Required reading:

Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

Stephen Crane, “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”

Week 2: Theorizing the West I: The Closed Frontier, Nostalgia and Resistance

Framing texts:

“Across the Continent: Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way”

Required reading:

Charles Eastman, excerpts from *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*

María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, "The Don in His Broad Acres" (*The Squatter and the Don*)

Richard Slotkin, "Introduction: The Significance of the Frontier Myth in American Culture"
(*Gunfighter Nation*)

307: Patricia Limerick, "Empire of Innocence"

Week 3: Theorizing the West II: The Hyperreal West as Simulacra and Rhizome

Framing texts:

Jean Baudrillard, excerpts from *America*

Required reading:

Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"

Neil Campbell, "Introduction," *The Rhizomatic West*

O Pioneers!: Work, Assimilation, and the Building of a Nation

"Come my tan-faced children, / Follow well in order, get your weapons ready, / Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes? / Pioneers! O pioneers!"

– Walt Whitman

Week 4: Assimilation and Labor: Building the Nation

Framing texts:

Golden Spike ceremony, Chinese laborers

Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal*

Required reading:

Sui Sin Far, "Chinese Workmen in America," and "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (*Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*)

Rodolfo Gonzales, "I am Joaquín" (*Message to Aztlán*)

Sarah Deutsch, "Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1865-1990"

Week 5: O Pioneers! Cather and the Immigrant Experience

Framing texts:

Exodusters and African American cowboys

Required reading:

Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

Western Landscapes: Geography and Identity

"The Westerner is less a person than a continuing adaptation. The West is less a place than a process. And the western landscape that it has taken us a century and three quarters to learn about...has now become our most valuable natural resource, as subject to raid and ruin as the more concrete resources that have suffered from our rapacity." – Wallace Stegner

Week 6: Preserving Western Landscapes

Framing texts:

Indian Field Days, Yosemite National Park

National Parks Portfolios – Mt. Rainier, Yosemite, and Yellowstone

Required reading:

Zitkala-Ša, “Land of the Red Apples,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians”
(*American Indian Stories*)

Marianne Moore, “An Octopus”

307: Richard White, “Are You an Environmentalist, Or Do You Work For a Living?”

Week 7: Landscape and Identity I

Framing texts:

Wallace Stegner, “The Sense of Place” (from *Where The Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*)

Required reading:

Rick Bass, “Two Deer” (from *The Hermit’s Story*)

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Katherine G. Morrissey, “Engendering the West”

Week 8: Landscape and Identity II

Required reading:

N. Scott Momaday, “The American West and the Burden of Belief”

Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape and the Pueblo Imagination”

Gretel Ehrlich, “The Solace of Open Spaces” (*The Solace of Open Spaces*)

David Lee, “Aspen Pole Fence,” “Pine Valley” (*So Quietly The Earth*)

307: Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (part I)

Week 9: Managing the West

Framing texts:

Edward Abbey, selections from *Desert Solitaire*

Required reading:

Linda Hogan, “Deify the Wolf” (*Dwellings*)

Norman Maclean, “USFS, 1919” (*A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*)

Wallace Stegner, “Thoughts in a Dry Land”

307: Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (part II)

On the Road: The West as Direction and Spirit

“I was guts and juice again and ready to go.” – Jack Kerouac

Week 10: On the Road

Framing texts:

John Steinbeck, "Steinbeck's Highway 66" (excerpts from *The Grapes of Wrath*)
Thelma and Louise, *Smoke Signals*, *Easy Rider*, film clips

Required reading:

Jack Kerouac, "The Mexican Girl" (from *On the Road*)

Richard Ford, "Rock Springs"

Louise Erdrich, "The Red Convertible" (from *Love Medicine*)

307: Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (part III)

The New West: Postmodern Cowboys and the Politics of Hope

"I've always had this thing about cowboys, maybe because I was born in New Jersey. But a real cowboy is hard to find these days, even in the west." – Pam Houston, "Cowboys Are My Weakness"

Week 11: New Frontiers

Framing texts:

Patricia Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the 20th Century"

Disneyland's Frontierland

Presidential speeches referencing "frontiers" (J.F.K., Reagan, George W. Bush)

Required reading:

Cormac McCarthy, *All The Pretty Horses*

Week 12: The New West and Identity: Postmodern Cowboys

Framing texts:

Modern cowboy poetry

Pam Houston, "Cowboys Are My Weakness" (from *Cowboys Are My Weakness*)

Brokeback Mountain, film clip

Required readings:

Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain"

Sherman Alexie, "My Heroes Have Never Been Cowboys," "Vilify"