

General Education  
Course Proposal  
Dr. Lori Burlingame

## **Literature 161: Native American Literature**

### **Course Description**

Literature 161 will study the oral and written literatures of Native American cultures—emphasizing memoirs, essays, fiction, poetry, drama, and film of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—examined within their cultural and historical contexts. This course will promote an understanding of traditional Native world views, as well as examine the impact of Native peoples' contact with other cultures.

### **Course Rationales**

Please be aware too that diversity issues are part of studies in the Humanities, ie. these are interrelated General Education categories.

### **Diversity**

Literature 161 will study the oral and written literatures of Native American cultures, with emphasis upon the authored memoirs, essays, fiction, poetry, and film of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Students will read and become familiar with a range of oral traditional and 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century texts by Native American writers from a variety of Native North American cultures, and they should be able to identify continuities between oral traditional and contemporary Native texts. Texts studied will be examined within their cultural and historical contexts. This course will promote an understanding of traditional Native world views, in conjunction with an awareness of the ways in which the ongoing legacy of colonialism and contact with other cultures have impacted Native peoples, and it will explore current debates and issues in the field of Native American studies. Through their exposure to Native literatures, students should become more sensitive to and understanding of other cultures. They should also be aware of their own cultural views and the impact that those views have on other cultures. Students should more readily recognize stereotypes about Native Americans and other groups of peoples. In general, they should become better world citizens through their development of critical thinking skills about cross-cultural issues. Students will be encouraged to make connections to the local Native American community by attending Pow Wows and other available events. Through their studies, students will gain an appreciation of the rich diversity, strength, and beauty in Native cultures and literary traditions.

### **Humanities**

Literature 161 will study the oral and written literatures of Native American cultures, with emphasis upon the authored memoirs, essays, fiction, poetry, and film of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Students will read and become familiar with a range of oral traditional and 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> century texts by Native American writers from a variety of Native North American cultures and literary genres, and they should be able to identify continuities between oral traditional and contemporary Native texts. Students will understand the history of Native American literatures from their oral beginnings to the present; they will be aware of issues involved in studying oral traditional texts in translation, as well as cultural issues raised by the teaching of sacred texts in the classroom; and they will understand the history of Native Americans and examine how texts were read in their contemporary contexts, as well as the interpretive questions that they present for readers today. Students will learn literary terms and understand their application to the analysis of texts; they will become aware of issues in and approaches to literary analysis. They will also study the philosophies and religious beliefs of Native peoples and cultures as they manifest themselves in the texts. Through their studies, students will gain an appreciation of the rich diversity, strength, and beauty in Native cultures and literary traditions.

### **Course Overview (will vary depending upon the teacher)**

The first week of the semester will be devoted to introducing the topic of Native American literature. Our approach to Native American literature will be largely ethnographic; this means that we will examine the literature that we read in the context of the culture(s) of which it is a part and a product. To this end, your teacher will provide you with background and cultural information about the works that we read. Keeping in mind that some Native cultures are as different from each other as they are from African American, Asian American, European American, and Mexican American cultures, we will talk about some general pan-tribal characteristics that are common to many traditional and contemporary Native cultures. We will discuss the history of stereotypes (both literary and Hollywood) about Native peoples and some general and central differences between Western and Native cultures. Your teacher will also provide you with a brief summary of Native American history and United States governmental policies toward Native American tribes.

Before we begin to focus on traditional Native American sacred stories and ceremonies, we will talk about their oral origins (i.e. the oral tradition), and we will discuss the functions of sacred stories and ceremonies in Native cultures. Our first text will be a twentieth century novel, James Welch's *Fools Crow*, set in the mid-nineteenth century; we will begin with this novel to get a sense of what a traditional Native world might look like. *Fools Crow* is a historical novel, and it will provide you with some background on traditional Plains tribes' values and social systems. Following this, we will read memoirs and short stories from the first generation of Native writers writing in English; the themes of this writing include the impact of the boarding schools on Native children and cross-cultural communication. Then, we will read a sampling of traditional "literatures" that includes "creation" and origin stories, "Orphic" stories, and trickster stories, among others.

In the second half of the semester, we will study the works (fiction and poetry) of a number of other twentieth century writers, including Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Sherman Alexie,

Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz, Linda Hogan, and many others. We will examine a number of themes that recur in contemporary Native American writing; these include, but are not limited to, cultural survival; the clash between Western and Native cultures; the quest for identity; language and sacred stories and their abilities to create and to shape identity and reality; the healing powers of traditional Native ideologies; and the central roles that change, adaptation, and Native American self-responsibility play in cultural survival. We will also look at the influence of the oral tradition on contemporary Native writers and the ways in which contemporary Native writers adapt and retell traditional sacred stories. During our discussions of these texts, we will consider and talk about critical approaches to Native literatures and ways to situate Native American literary works both within an emerging Native literature canon and within an American literature canon that has until recent decades excluded them. You will also have the opportunity to view a contemporary Native film, Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals*, which is loosely based upon his novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.

As important as literary and ethnographic analysis of a text is, it is just as fundamental to experience what we read as it is connected to our individual lives and realities, and I hope that you will take from this course a sense of the ways in which the literature that we read speaks to you and enriches your view of the world. As a class, we will all be on a journey of growth and discovery.

Our class meetings will be a combination of lecture and discussion. I encourage you to ask questions, to speak your minds, and to actively engage with class readings and topics; I want to know what you think about and how you interpret the literature that we read.

**See Next Page for Sample Syllabus**

**Sample Syllabus (text selection and sequencing will vary with individual teachers)**

**Weeks 1-2:** Introduction to Native American Literature.

Paula Gunn Allen's (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux) essay, "The Sacred Hoop"  
N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa/Cherokee) essay "The Man Made of Words"  
Overview of Native American History and United States Governmental  
Policies toward Native Nations (based upon Ronald Janke's "Populations,  
Reservations, and Federal Indian Policy," Alvin Josephy Jr.'s *The Indian  
Heritage of America*, and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*)

**Weeks 3-4:** Cultural and Historical Novel/Text Selection--designed to provide students with a living, literary depiction of a traditional Native world, so that they can see how oral traditional stories and ceremonies functioned in a traditional culture:

James Welch's *Fools Crow* (Blackfeet)

**Weeks 5-6:** Oral Traditional Literatures: Creation Stories, Trickster Stories (cannot be taught in the spring and summer due to Native taboos against telling these stories at those times), "Orphic" Stories, Problem/Conflict Stories, Ceremonies (optional)

Creation Stories: from Richard Erdoes' and Alfonso Ortiz's *American Indian Myths and Legends*: the Osage story "Children of the Sun," the Crow story "Old Man Coyote Makes the World," and the Acoma Pueblo story "Emerging into the Upper World"; "The Blackfoot Genesis" from George Bird Grinnell's *Blackfoot Lodge Tales*; The Seneca story, "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky" (from Stith Thompson's *Tales of North American Indians*)

Trickster Stories: from Paul Radin's *The Trickster*: "The Winnebago Trickster Cycle"

"Orphic" Stories from Jarold Ramsey's *Reading the Fire* and *Coyote Was Going There*: "Coyote and the Shadow People" (Nez Perce) Badger and Coyote Were Neighbors" (Clackamus Chinook), "Coyote and Eagle Go to the Land of the Dead" (Wishram)

Problem/Conflict Story: Wasco story: "The Hunter Who Had an Elk for a Guardian Spirit" from Ramsey's *Reading the Fire*

**Weeks 7-8:** Boarding School Narratives and Film and Stories by the First Generation of Native

Writers Working in English (most texts deal with the theme of cross-cultural understanding and communication)

Video Showing: *In the White Man's Image* (deals with the history of the boarding schools)

Memoir: Gertrude Bonnin or Zitkala-Sa's "The School Days of an Indian Girl" (Sioux culture)

D'Arcy McNickle's (Cree/Salish) short story, "Train Time"

D'Arcy McNickle's short story "Hard Riding"

John Oskison's (Cherokee) short story, "The Problem of Old Harjo"

Pauline Johnson's (Mohawk) short story, "A Red Girl's Reasoning"

Pauline Johnson's short story "The Texas Kloutchman"

**Weeks 9-10:** Novel Selection (Moving chronologically, teachers might select a text that deals with early twentieth-century Native life)

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (Ojibwe)

**Week 11:** Poetry, selections from Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) "A New Story," "Survival This Way," "My Father's Song"; Joy Harjo (Creek) "Anchorage" and "She Had Some Horses"; Linda Hogan (Chickasaw) "Black Hills Survival Gathering: 1980"; Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok) "Julia"; Maurice Kenny (Mohawk) "Wild Strawberry"; Carter Revard (Osage) "A Brief Guide to American History Teachers" and "When Earth Brings"; Mary Tall Mountain (Athabascan) "There Is No Word for Goodbye"; Gail Tremblay (Micmac/Onondaga) "Reflections on a Visit to the Burke Museum" and "Indian Singing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America"; and Elizabeth Woody (Wasco/Navajo) "Speelyay, Again"

**Weeks 12-13: Contemporary Short Fiction**

Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) short story "Yellow Woman" (deals with the intersections between oral traditional and contemporary literature) and Peter Beidler's essay "Silko's Originality in 'Yellow Woman'"

Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Cour d'Alene): Excerpts from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*: "A Good Story," "Imagining the Reservation," "The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor," "Indian Education," and "Family Portrait"

**Week 14:** Video Showing of Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* (the first Native American produced and directed feature film—based upon stories from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*) and Class Discussion

**Extra Credit Opportunities (dependent upon the instructor)**

Extra credit opportunities may provide students with the opportunity to make connections to local Native communities and to explore contemporary issues that impact Native literatures and cultures. Students may earn extra credit in one or more of the following ways: attending or volunteering at a Native American Pow Wow; attending a video showing and discussion of Charlene Teters and Jay Rosenstein's *In Whose Honor*; which deals with the mascot issue, through attending a video showing of *Incident at Oglala*; or through responding to a web-caucus discussion.

**Course Requirements and Student Assessment:**

Students' attainment of course objectives will be measured by class and web-caucus discussions designed to encourage students to think critically and to generate ideas about literature and culture; quizzes and in-class writing assignments, designed to gauge student reading and comprehension levels; multiple choice, short answer, passage analysis, and/or essay exams, that may focus on applications of cultural or historical knowledge to Native literatures, as well as thematic and interpretive questions; reflection papers that allow students to explore identity issues, the causes and consequences of social intolerance, ethnocentrism, institutionalized racism, and exclusion in the U.S., issues of diversity and economics, and cross-cultural understanding; and/or analytical papers that help to develop students' knowledge about and ability to analyze literary texts in the context of Native American culture and history.

A possible grade breakdown for a regular-size class might look like this:

Reading Quizzes and In-class Writings	10%
Class Participation	10%
Two Short Answer & Essay Exams	40% (20% each)
Four reflection papers or Two longer analytical paper assignments	40%