Lit 391.01 Special Topics: 20th Century American Women Writers: Placing Ourselves: Women and Place

MW 2-3:20 LA 336
Professor Nancy Cook

We’ll begin with theories of place and how perception and inhabitation is gendered. Literary texts will range across the century and
continent, from urban to rural, with a focus on the American West. How do women of different classes, sexual identities, ethnicities, ages, and locations write about place? How does place matter to them? If the authors are not household names, why not? We will read novels, short fiction, essays and some criticism. By the end of the course, students will have a better understanding of where they are, how where they makes them who they are, and how gender influences, even determines, one's perception of place. Students will be expected to participate in class discussions, write frequently, and produce one well-researched consideration of a text from the course. Warning: We may poach the 21st century, but just a little.

**Book List:** Please note that some of these books are neither readily available nor cheap. I have put copies of books on reserve. For living authors, try to buy new books, for the deceased authors, buy, borrow, or share the cheapest copy you can find.

- Mary Austin. *The Land of Little Rain*
- Arnold and Reed. *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song*
- Joan Didion. *Play It As It Lays*
- Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar*
- Cynthia Kadohata. *The Floating World*
- Linda Hogan. *Mean Spirit*
- Terry Tempest Williams. *Refuge*
- Octavia Butler. *Parable of the Sower*
- Lucha Corpi. *Cactus Blood*
- Wanda Coleman. *Native in a Strange Land*
- Diane Smith. *Letters From Yellowstone*
Tim Cresswell. *Place: A Short Introduction*

Mona Damosh and Joni Seager. *Putting Women in Place*

**WARNINGS:**
American women in the 20th century had a rough time. These books frequently represent aspects of the difficulties women faced, including, BUT NOT LIMITED TO: economic injustice, sexual assault, victimization by violence, racial profiling, abortion, violence by medicine or lack of medical treatment, poverty, and gross underestimation. You will need to be prepared to engage with representations and the subject matter.

**A NOTE ON REQUIREMENTS, OUTCOMES, ASSESSMENTS:** The following list of activities tries to quantify your expected work. Frankly, no one can "quantify the quality" of your writing or discussion. Grading in arts and humanities courses inevitably entails subjective criteria. Because of that subjectivity, more dialogue between student and faculty can be part of the process of creating and grading humanities “performance.” Literature is a conversation. Literary criticism grows out of conversation. I hope you come to feel that I am open for you to get to know me in the classroom and in my office. Please come see me to talk through assignments or anything else. On written work, both form and content will be graded, and explicit writing standards will be part of each assignment. Grades are based on a combination of 1) 75% written work (content & form); 2) 15% discussion questions, participation, presentations, other in-class writing; and 3) 10% attendance (max. 2 absences = one week of class time). In addition, if you have any certifiable disability that makes meeting the course requirements difficult, I will be glad to work with you on a strategy for success.

**OUTCOME CRITERIA:** 1) Familiarity with women’s writing in the 20th century American West and theories of place 2) Recognition of key cultural and ideological perspectives on those issues in those major texts. 3) Recognition of different methods -- literary and historical, artistic and social, aesthetic and ethical, textual and contextual -- for considering texts. 4) Engagement with themes of the course as they apply to 21st-century lives.

**OUTCOME ASSESSMENTS:**
1) Discussion and Attendance: I’m strict on attendance. As adults you make your own decisions, and the class runs on a combination of readings, discussions, and lectures, all of which need your participation. So I hope you are making a commitment to this conversation. Lectures and discussions both are founded on your attendance; so more than two unexcused absences (one week of classes) can drop the final grade. An excused absence generally requires a medical crisis. Notice of any absence should be given in advance when we can arrange for your make-up
work. Thus the goal here is participation as both a listener and speaker in class discussions of diverse literary texts. (Verbal assessment of Criteria 1-4)

a. Discussion Questions: Student teams will rotate responsibility for supplying questions for a discussion handout on daily readings through the semester. Each member of the team is responsible for at least three substantive questions per handout. One team will make a handout of discussion questions for each class on a revolving basis. That means finishing the reading and preparing the questions, including copies for everyone, before the class when your DQ group is up. You must also email me a copy of your individual questions prior to class when it's your team's turn, and one team member should email me the handout.

b. Discussion groups and full-class discussions. Participation in discussion of daily readings will be in both small groups and the full class. The course is designed for your input. Some of the best lectures happen when there are good questions or comments from the floor. “Participation” can be both vocal and silent, both speaking and listening, but not all of one or the other. Discussion is one of the best ways to learn, and the class depends upon your active engagement. This pedagogy is so crucial to the course that I’ll take a few more lines here to explain: Everyone’s idea is important. When you speak, try to give your idea away to the group. You don’t need to defend it once it’s out there. And equally, when you listen, give each speaker respect. Humor helps too. We don’t need to have everyone agree, but perhaps we can build a community in the classroom where each of us can feel engaged with the questions.

2) Writing skills and critical thinking in analyzing diverse literary texts critically. (Written assessment of Criteria 1-4) Note that the UM Writing Center is open for coaching writers at all levels. Writing assignments will be a combination of response papers, microthemes, a midterm exam, thesis exercises, and essays, all with bibliographic form. On the microthemes and essays, I expect hours/ days of work on rough drafts, which should be turned in as hard copies along with the final draft, which is emailed to me. Generally, if you try to write the paper the day of class or even the night before, you will get a lower grade, so think of this as a writing exercise designed to help boost your skills. Proofreading is crucial as well. See handouts for more info on my grading criteria. In addition, writing skills require an understanding of how to avoid plagiarism (see note below in “Legalities”).

The final draft of your written work must be sent to my email address as a single Word.doc attachment (don't send bibliography separately). Hard copies of earlier drafts must be handed to me in class on the due date, labeled with your name and stapled (no paper clips). My written responses to your papers will be on the electronic copy, which I will email back to you with a different file name, so keep a clean electronic copy on file in case you want to revise it. NB: When you email me, be sure to put the exact spelling of the class rubric, 391, at the front of your email’s subject line. Because of the overload in my inbox, I cannot guarantee that you will get credit for your online work unless you make this the start of your subject line.

a. Response Paper: A single-page response to a reading, focusing on a particular question or issue that catches your mind and heart. The short essay
should include a thesis statement, not only giving your topic, but your opinion as well. These need to be a minimum of 500 words.

b. More formal writings: there will be THREE microthemes due during the semester: 1st Microtheme due 2/12, 2nd Microtheme due 3/12, and 3rd due 4/9. All are take-home short-essays, where you can combine personal response and critical analysis, graded on content and form. Microthemes are a two-page essay analysis of a question or questions on the readings. You should quote, judiciously, from the text(s). Skills in thesis development and in integrating quoted citations into your argument are crucial in written work. Thus plan on a Works Cited page for each essay, with proper in-text citations and bibliographic form. Get to know the MLA Handbook. In addition, those skills require an understanding of how to avoid plagiarism (see Legalities below).

Here’s more coaching on the writing. Too often, students write about a piece of literature without coming to a thesis, i.e., without articulating or sometimes even really knowing what they have to say about it. Focusing on literary analysis, the essays should build three elements of a workable thesis statement that goes beyond summarizing or retelling a piece of literature: 1) narrow topic 2) assertion (not description) 3) preview. Generally, a thesis is preceded (in drafts if not in the final essay) by a focused question. The goal of literary analysis is to (gently) take apart and put back together some dynamic aspect of a text, listing and labeling those parts, so that the reader may understand the text more fully and deeply and acutely, with more insight into form and/or content. Such literary criticism looks beyond what is said to ask how, why, or so what? How does it say what it says? Why is it structured as it is? & So what is the significance of saying and structuring it that way? Writing about literature is one of the best ways to read it, and it indeed can intensify the pleasure of reading.

Repeat: Do not be absent on due dates for take-home papers.

c. Final Project (due 3PM 5/7): You will write a 10-15pg. essay using library resources and again emphasizing thesis development and integrated citations, Pre-work due 4/23: a working thesis, prospectus or detailed outline, and bibliography of research project. The class may consult with a Humanities Librarian on research tools.

d. Peer Editing: We will have workshop sessions for your final project. I encourage teams to meet outside class for peer editing sessions. Editing each others’ work can be one of the best ways to develop yourself as a writer (my thanks to Prof. David Moore for his detailed and useful syllabi. Much of the text following “Note on Requirements, Outcomes, Assessments has been adapted, sometimes very modestly, from his clear syllabi).

NB: The Writing Center is available to students of all abilities: LA 144, phone 243-2266, with on-site tutoring; plus writing and test-taking workshops, etc. Also online tutoring via http://www.umt.edu/writingcenter/
Schedule:

Week 1:
1/22: welcome and orientation to course
1/24: read Cresswell 1-50, Austin: Preface, “The Land of Little Rain,” and “Water Trails of the Ceriso”

Week 2:

Week 3
2/5: Domosh & Seager: xix-66, Arnold and Reed: Intro, Foreword, chapters 1-8
2/7: Arnold and Reed: chapters 9-18

Week 4
2/12: MICROTHEME 1 DUE, Arnold and Reed: finish (chapters 19-24)
2/14: Domosh & Seager: 67-139

Week 5
2/19 NO CLASS HOLIDAY
2/21: Domosh & Seager: 140-173, Didion: the novel

Week 6
2/26: Domosh & Seager: 174-194, Houston: part I
2/28: Houston: finish, and supplementary readings Inada, Inouye

Week 7
3/5: Kadohata: the novel
3/7: discussion possible supplementary reading

Week 8
3/12: MICROTHEME 2 DUE, Hogan: part I
3/14: Hogan: part II

Week 9
3/19: Butler: the novel
3/21: MID TERM EXAM
Week 10: NO CLASS SPRING BREAK

Week 11
4/2: Williams: the book
4/4: discussion, workshops

Week 12
4/9: MICROTHEME 3 DUE, Corpi: the novel
4/11: discussion, workshops

Week 13
4/16: selected sections from Coleman (TBA)
4/18: selected sections from Coleman, workshops

Week 14
4/23: PROJECT PRE WORK DUE, Smith: the novel
4/25: discussion, workshops

Week 15
4/30: workshops, discussion
5/2: discussion
PROJECTS DUE 3 PM MAY 7