# Shaping Lives:

American Indian Life Narratives

Summer 2014

English 3344-001 Office hours: M-TH 1-2 PM or by apt.; 405 Carlisle Hall

Dr. Roemer Please schedule all appointments.

M-TH: 10:30-12:30 Phone: 817-272-2729; please leave name and phone number.

Preston Hall 207 [roemer@uta.edu](mailto:roemer@uta.edu) (CHECK YOUR E-MAIL OFTEN; I send messages to your “mavs” account)

# Nature of the Course

Autobiography is one of the most popular and most controversial forms of Native American literature. There are hundreds of compelling collaborative and single-authored narratives. There are also fake life stories and misleading as-told-to collaborations between Native and non-Natives. We will discuss sections of the most famous collabotation, *Black Ekl Speaks*. But instead of emphasizing the collaborations, the course focuses on life narratives performed or written, primarily in English, by American Indians in the 18th, 19th, and especially the 20th and 21st centuries. The focus invites questions about Native American writing: for instance, concepts of self that blur communal and individual boundaries, and negotiations between written and oral literature. The life narratives also raise issues relevant to all written creations of “lives”: for example: the selection, ordering, and interpretation of experiences; the intended audiences and presumed intentions of the author/performer; and the literary forms. All these help to shape the “self” represented in the text. Form will be especially important to our discussions (hence the title “Shaping Lives.”) We discuss the self defined in song, pictograph, and oral narrative; in Christian conversion and other forms of assimilation narratives; in blends of cultural history and natural history; in collaborations between two Indians; in collections of mythic recreations, non-fiction, fiction, poetry, and visual images (including photography). I also suggest the diversity of the literature by including personae as young as a six-year old and (almost) as old as a century, men and women from different tribes, eras, and regions; and narrative time-spans as broad as several centuries and as concentrated as a pregnancy and birth.

Goals/Assessment

Students who complete the readings and assignments successfully will: (1) be acquainted with 13 significant autobiographical texts written by Native Americans, as well as having a beginning knowledge of how sung, spokesn, written and visual communications represent Native lives; (2) have knowledge of the importance of the various forms of written and performed literature indicated above; (3) be able to address the specific and general autobiographical issues listed above; (4) have experience representing their lives in an identity experiment; and (5) have demonstrated the ability in writing to analyze the influences they bring to reading one of the texts.

For methods of achieving these goals and evaluating student performance, see the Topics, Readings, Tentative Schedule; Examinations; Exercises; Papers; and Approximate Grading Weights sections.

Required Readings/Viewing (CP = course packet)

CP: Wong

<http://faculty.csusb.edu/dcarlson/AmericanIndianAutobiography/index.html>

(Google American Indian Autobiography website)

*By This Song I Walk*

<http://parentseyes.arizona.edu/wordsandplace>

Select “By This Song I Walk”

Neihard and Nicholas Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks* (selections)

Sarris and McKay, *Mabel McKay* (handout, very brief excerpts)

CP: Occom, Apess, Winnemucca

CP: Zitkala-Sa

CP: Eastman OR Standing Bear

Mathews, *Talking to the Moon* (selections)

Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

Silko, *Storyteller* (selections)

Erdrich, *Blue Jay’s Dance*

Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Topics, Readings, Tentative Schedule

To indicate changes over time and the importance of historical/cultural contexts, I organized the course materials chronologically. As Hertha Wong indicates in her essay, there are many other approaches to organization (e.g., form, region, tribes, gender).

6/2 Introductions: to the Course, to American Indian History, to American Indian Literatures, and to American Indian Life Narratives; description of identity experiment

Readings: Handouts (terminology, AIL chart, information on fake autobiographies; guidelines for identity experiment; CP (Roemer, “Timeline”; Wong); browse David Carlson’s Website (see above)

**6/4 Identity Experiment Due**

**Singing, Telling, and Drawing the Self**

6/3 Non-Written Forms of Life Narrative

Reading/Viewing: CP (Wong); *By This Song I Walk* (see web address above)

6/4, 5 Collaborative Oral Performance to Wrtitten Narrative

Readings: *Black Elk Speaks* (Chapters 1-3, 21-25); *Mabel McKay* (handout – brief excerpts)

**6/9 First Exam (One Hour)**

## **Written Selves Transformed: Continuity, Assimilation, Resistance**

6/9 18th- and 19th-Century Childhood and Adult Conversions from the Northeast

Readings: CP (Occom, Apess)

6/10 The Self as Historical / Tribal Protest from the Far West

Reading: CP (Winnemucca)

6/11 Gender and Immersion Transformation: Boarding-School Cases Studies from “Dakota Territories”

Readings: CP (Zitkala Sa; and Eastman OR Standing Bear)

**6/12 Second Essay Exam (Two Hours)**

**Life “Takes Place” (in Oklahoma)**

6/16, 17 Roots Deeper that Walden Pond: Osage Blackjack & Prairie Country

Reading: Mathews’ *Talking to the Moon* (Chapters 1, 2, 8, 14)

6/18, 19 Roots in a Hollow Log that Speaks Three Voices

Reading: Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

**Multi-Media Pueblo Live(s)**

6/23, 24 The Selves of a “Laguna Woman”

Reading/Viewing: Silko’s *Storyteller* (selections)

**6/25 Third Exam (Two Hours)**

**Of Bodies and Birthing: The Miraculous in the Mundane**

6/26, 30 If Thoreau Were a Pregnant Ojibwe Writer . . . .

Reading: Erdrich’s *Blue Jays Dance*

**6/30 Influences Paper (Transformational Associations) Due**

Bluring Autobiography and Fiction

7/1, 2 The Male Adolescence of an On and Off Rez Cartoonist

Reading: Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

7/3 Review for Final Exam

**7/7 Final Exam (Two Hours)**

Examinations

##### The exams will have two parts. The first part will be a closed-book short-answer / identification exam drawn from the readings and classes. The second part will be an open-book essay exam. The essay question(s) will address one or more of the issues mentioned in the “Nature of the Course” section of the syllabus. The class before the exam I will distribute a detailed study guide to both parts of the exam. Grading criteria for the essays: how well you directly address the question posed, how well you support your arguments with relevant examples, and the logic of your argument.

###### Identity Experiment (Due 6/4)

I will describe the nature of this assignment and provide an example the first day of class. *Grading criteria*: A = two sets of contrasting columns with excellent detail that invites readers to imagine different identities for you. B = two contrasting sets with sufficient detail. C = two sets, contrasts unclear, some detail; D = two sets, contrasts unclear, vague language; F = one set, contrasts unclear, vague language; 0 = not turned in on time.

Influences Paper (Transformative Associations) (Due 6/30)

Approximately 5 pp., 1250 words. Each student will select one of the assigned texts. The paper will include (1) a brief general portrait of the student as a reader, (2) descriptions of two important "influences" (transformational associations) that shaped his or her responses to specific parts and/or general motifs or issues in the text, (3) an analyses of the effects of each of the influences, and (4) a statement of how this reading/writing experience either reinforced or modified his or her general assumptions about his or her reading processes. Examination of each of the influences should include a definition of the influence, identification of which part or parts of the text were affected, and a discussion of the resulting response. Typically the most challenging part of the assignment is (3); students have difficulty articulating the effects of their associations. One way to address this problem is to imaging how you might have respnded to the text if you did not have the association.The differnces between this hypothetical response and the response you had should indicate the way the influences affected you.

A good way to begin this paper is to take notes as you read. When you arrive at a particularly strong negative or positive response, note down why you think you responded this way. After finishing the text, see if there are any recurrent patterns that can become the bases for the most important transformative associations discussed.

Grading criteria include the demonstrated ability to fulfill the above-stated requirements of the paper and to write competently (this includes mechanical skills in grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc., as well the ability to invent and construct coherent sentences, paragraphs, and paper sections.) A free writing lab on the fourth floor of the Central Library is available for students who have difficulty writing. Under normal circumstances, no late or e-mailed papers will be accepted.

Approximate Grading Weights

Identity Experiment 5%

First Exam 15%

Second Exam 15%

Third Exam 25%

Final Exam 20%

Influences Paper 20%

Constructive warnings: (1) Dishonesty (including plagiarism) will be handled according to University procedures, which can include expulsion. Chapter 2 of the *MLA Handbook* offers good examples of what constitutes plagiarism. There is also a useful Library tutorial on plagiarism at: library.uta.edu/plagiarism/index.php. (2) Professors are not allowed to drop students for excessive absences. If you drop, please follow University procedures. **In this course for every three unexcused absences, the semester grade will drop by a half-letter grade.**

Encouragement: Consistent and constructive **class participation and improvement** can elevate semester grades significantly. Also I am very willing to work with students who have disabilities. At the beginning of the semester, these students should provide me with documentation authorized by the appropriate University office. Students seeking academic, personal, and social counseling should contact the Office of University College Programs (817-272-6107).

Table of Contents of Course Packet

i. Roemer, Timeline from *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005)

1. Wong, “Native American Life Writing,” from *Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (2005)

12. Occom, “A Short Narrative of My Life (1768)

16. Apess, from *A Son of the Forest* (1829)

31. Winnemucca, from *Life among the Piutes* (1883)

48a. Zitkala-Sa, from *American Indian Stories* (1900, 1921)

49. Eastman, from *The Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916)

60. Standing Bear, from *My People the Sioux* (1928)