

**English 318: Topics in Creative Writing  
Creative Writing and Folklore  
Spring 2014**

**Section 1, CRN 11231**

**Location: Armstrong 203, Thursday 4-6:50**

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and by appointment

It is our job as writers to examine our world. We look around us, form questions, find connections, and try to communicate. One of the clichés of writing is to write what you know, and much of what we know is based on folklore. The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage defines folklore, or folklife, as follows:

The traditional expressive culture shared within various groups: familial, occupational, religious, and regional. Expressive culture includes a wide range of creative and symbolic forms, such as custom, belief, occupational skill, foodways, language, drama, ritual, music, narrative, play, craft, dance, drama, art, and architecture. Generally these expressions are learned orally, by imitation, or in performance.

We navigate the world based on formal education, but just as importantly, we understand the world from our “informal” education, too. Much of this informal education is from folklore. Essentially, it helps shape our worldview. This is what we learn from interacting with other people: the way to make our mother’s lasagna, the way to properly dress a deer, the stories we tell each other—ghost stories and fairy tales and “folktales,” of course, but also the jokes we tell, the urban legends, family stories. Folklore is adaptable and is unique for each person, but it keeps a consistent thread. Folklore is about who we are, where we are, and where we come from.

In her introduction to *Living Folklore: An Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*, Martha C. Sims begins to define folklore as both what it is and what it isn’t:

Yes, folklore is folk songs and legends. It’s also quilts, Boy Scout badges, high school marching band initiations, jokes, chain letters, nicknames, holiday food...and many other things you might or might not expect. Folklore exists in cities, suburbs and rural villages, in families, work groups and dormitories. Folklore is present in many kinds of informal communication, whether verbal (oral and written texts), customary (behaviors, rituals) or material (physical objects). It involves values, traditions, ways of thinking and behaving. It’s about art. It’s about people and the way people learn. It helps us learn who we are and how to make meaning of the world around us.

As writers, it is important for us to think about how we “make meaning of the world around us.” An understanding of folklore can help us come to a better understanding of ourselves, our groups, and our world. This will help strengthen our writing. In this class, we are going to examine how folklore can inform creative writing. We will be reading and writing texts that use elements of folklore. We will be studying this from a craft perspective, thinking about how folklore informs content, structure, image, and voice. We will then find our own folklore and create writing that only we can create.

**Required Texts**

Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek*. 1991. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.

Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. Reissue. New York: Harper Perennial, 2004. Print.

Harjo, Joy. *She Had Some Horses: Poems*. 1983. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. 1975. New York: Vintage, 1989.

Rash, Ron. *Nothing Gold Can Stay*. New York: Ecco, 2013. Print.

Additional PDFs on eCampus. Either hard or digital copy due for class discussion.

**Grade Breakdown:**

**Exercises 20%** (Letter to Me, Verbal, Material, Customary, Place, and Transcript)

**Final Creative Project 25%** (Workshop 10%; Final Draft 15%)

**Final Project Critical Writing 10%** (Proposal, Transcript, Fieldwork Reflection, Introduction/Reflection—weighted twice as much)

**Reading Journals 15%**

**Workshop Responses 10%**

**Quizzes 10%**

**Participation 10%**

## Description of Requirements:

### Writing

All work must be original to this class. You cannot turn in work used for other creative writing classes unless you talk to me. Otherwise, any previously used work will be given a grade of zero and will be counted as plagiarism.

### Exercises

Throughout the semester, you will be turning in smaller creative works. Please see eCampus for prompts. All exercises should be between 2-3 pages of prose or 1-2 poems. You have three days after the due date to turn in an assignment with a decreased grade of one-letter grade. After three days, the most you can receive on an assignment is half-credit. If you need an extension, please speak to me at least one week in advance.

### Final Creative Project

During the semester, you will consider the different types of folklore you know and participate in. Then, you will do fieldwork and collect folklore (see note below on Final Project and on eCampus). After you have collected the folklore, you will write creative work inspired by it. This can be in the form of creative nonfiction, fiction, poems, or a combination of the genres. Your final draft should be between 10-15 pages of prose or 8-10 poems. No more than half the material can come from your exercises.

You will workshop the first draft of your creative work. This will receive a grade (10% of your final grade), so this should be a polished draft. You will then spend the rest of the semester revising the work. On the last day of the class, you will turn in the final draft of your project (worth 15% of your final grade).

### Final Critical Project

In addition to your creative work inspired by the folklore you collect, you will also have small critical writing essays connected to this project. You will write a one-page proposal to me about your topic, you will type up a short transcript from your fieldwork, a one-page reflection about the fieldwork, and a two-to-three-page introduction and reflection to your final draft (weighted twice as much as the rest of the writing). See syllabus for due dates.

### Reading Journals

As writers it is important that we read for pleasure and also for craft. I want you to start thinking about writing this way by keeping a reading journal that you will post on eCampus (I will be the only one to see it). You can access this on the Course Content page on eCampus. You do not have to respond to every reading. See below for the required number of reading responses. You can simply respond to and explore elements of the reading that intrigued you, look at it from a craft perspective, discuss how folklore is incorporated, or write about how it relates to your own writing. You do not have to write in paragraphs. You can use bullet points or questions, but I expect to see critical engagement with the text (summary is unacceptable).

These are the required number of responses:

Weeks 2-6: Respond to at least 2 of the creative works due each week. For example, for on 1/16, we are reading work from Alexie, Rios, and Rash; you need to respond to at least two of the authors. Your weekly response should total about 3/4-1-plus page. \*You can skip one week.

Weeks 8-10: Write a total of two pages in response to Erdrich's *Tracks*. Due by class 3/20. Weighted twice as much as a response from weeks 2-6 or week 11.

Week 11 (3/27): Respond to at least 3 Joy Harjo poems. Should be about a page long.

Weeks 12-14: Write a total of two pages in response to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Due by class 4/17. Weighted twice as much as a response from weeks 2-6 or week 11.

### Quizzes

For each reading assignment, you will have a quiz. If you are absent, you cannot make up the quiz. I will drop one quiz at the end of the semester.

### Workshop

You will workshop the first draft of your final creative project. Your first draft should be at least 8 pages of prose or 5 poems. You are required to make copies for everyone in class (about 18 copies) You are required to hand these out to the class the class period before we workshop your story. If you need to email your story to the class, your workshop grade will be lowered one-letter grade.

Everyone is required to read and respond to the stories. You are required to give marginal comments and to type up a response. Plan on a half-page to a page response. Please print out 2 copies of your response (one for me; one for your peer). You are required to give feedback to the student the day that we discuss the story in class even if you are absent. You can always email me the written response and then turn in the marginal comments later. If you are absent the day someone passes out a story, I will have copies in my mailbox.

### Participation

Strong participation means showing up to class prepared and being engaged in the class's activities. Showing up to class unprepared, not paying attention, and/or being disruptive is unacceptable and will result in a lowered participation grade. If you are being disruptive or are not prepared to participate, I reserve the right to ask you to leave, resulting in an absence for the day. Cell phones are to be off and put away. Excessive cell phone use can result in a lowered participation grade and up to an absence.

### **Additional Policies and Information**

#### Attendance

Attendance is necessary for a workshop-based class. Therefore, it will factor into your grade. You are allowed one absence without it affecting your grade. At two absences, the most you can receive in participation is a C; and at 3, a D. After 3 absences, you will fail the course.

#### Extra Credit

There will be extra credit opportunities throughout the semester. One extra credit opportunity is to attend a reading. Check eCampus for an updated list of readings. While attendance is not mandatory, you should try to attend the readings because we have some amazing authors visiting. Plus, it is always helpful to hear other perspectives on writing. However, if you want some extra credit, you can attend a reading and write a one-page summary. You can do this for up to two readings. They are due no later than one week after the reading. Each response can replace either one reading journal grade, replace two quizzes, a workshop response, or raise an exercise up by two-letter grades.

List of readings as of the beginning of the semester. Check eCampus for any new additions.

1/30 Karen Osborn Gold Ballroom, Mountainlair, 7:30 p.m.

2/13 Mark Brazaitis, Ethel Smith, and Maggie Glover, Robinson Reading Room, Downtown Library, 7:30 p.m.

3/5 Tom Noyes, 130 Colson Hall, 7:30 p.m.

4/2 Diane Glancy, 202 Brooks Hall, 7:30 p.m.

4/17 Calliope Reading, 130 Colson Hall, 7:30 p.m.

4/24, MFA Reading, Rhododendron Room, Mountainlair, 7:30 p.m.

#### Office Hours

My office hours are in Colson 323 on M,W,F 1:20-2:15 and 3:30-5; and Thurs. 3-3:45. If you cannot make any of these times, we can schedule a meeting. Please stop by if you have any questions or concerns. You can email me as well with any questions or concerns and expect a response within 24 hours Monday through Friday.

#### Social Justice Discourse Policy

WVU takes their Social Justice Discourse Policy very seriously as do I. In order to create an environment where different perspectives can be heard, our classroom needs to be an environment that does not tolerate any form of discrimination.

#### Accommodations

If you anticipate needing any accommodations this semester, please see me as soon as possible. At WVU, we encourage everyone to participate and will make sure that any special accommodations required are met. Please know that special disability services are offered at the university. West Virginia University Office of Disability Services, Location: G-30 Mountainlair, Phone: 304-294-6700, Email: [access2@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:access2@mail.wvu.edu)

#### Carruth Center

During the semester if you feel overwhelmed or in need of assistance, I urge you to seek help at the Carruth Center. (304) 293-4431.

## Schedule of Class

Subject to change based on class's progress. Please check Mix or eCampus regularly for any updates.

### **Week 1 (1/9).**

Class Activities: Get acquainted, discuss folklore and folkgroups, flash nonfiction writing exercise.

HW: Go to eCampus for PDFs of Alexie, Rios, Hass, and an Alan Dundes essay about folklore. Read Ron Rash's "A Servant of History." Respond to at least 2 of the creative readings in your Reading Journal.

Letter to me due by email 1/14 (instructions on eCampus).

Begin Exercise 1: Verbal Folklore, due 1/23 (instructions on eCampus).

**DUE 1/14:** Letter to me by email. Instructions on eCampus.

### **Week 2 (1/16)**

Class Activities: Continue understanding of folklore, discuss forms of verbal folklore, ethics of collecting folklore, writing exercises, discussion of creative work.

HW: Go to eCampus for PDFs of Walker, O'Brien, Ortiz Cofer, and an excerpt about material folklore. Read Ron Rash's "Cherokee." Respond to at least 2 of the creative readings in your Reading Journal.

Exercise 2: Verbal Folklore, due 1/23. Instructions on eCampus.

**Week 3 (1/23) DUE:** Exercise 1: Verbal Folklore

Class Activities: Discuss forms of material folklore, foodways, writing exercise, and discussion of creative work. Sign up for day to meet with me about project (your proposal is due the day that we meet).

HW: Go to eCampus for PDFs of Sedaris, Ray, Stewart, McKinney, and an excerpt about customary folklore. Respond to at least 2 of the creative readings in your Reading Journal.

Begin Exercise 2: Material Folklore, due 2/6. Instructions on eCampus.

### **Week 4 (1/30)**

**\*Karen Osborn Reading Tonight at 7:30 p.m., Gold Ballroom, Mountainlair**

Class Activities: Discuss customary folklore, writing exercise, and discussion of creative work. Sign up for Workshop.

HW: Go to eCampus and read PDFs of Silko, Bender, and excerpt about folktales. Read Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek." Respond to at least 2 of the creative readings in your Reading Journal.

Exercise 2: Material Folklore, due 2/6. Instructions on eCampus.

**Week 5 (2/6) DUE:** Exercise 2: Material Folklore

Class Activities: Discuss folktales and fairytales, writing exercise, discussion of Silko, Bender, and Cisneros.

HW: Read Ron Rash's "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "Those Who Are Dead Are Only Now Forgiven," and "Three A.M. and the Stars Were Out." Respond to at least 2 in your Reading Journal.

Begin Exercise 3: Customary Folklore, due 2/20. Instructions on eCampus.

**Week 6 (2/13) DUE** by today: Proposal (due at meeting with me)

**\* Mark Brazaitis, Ethel Smith, and Maggie Glover Reading Tonight at 7:30, Robinson Reading Room, Downtown**

Class Activities: Discuss Ron Rash and writing exercise.

HW: Read Sandra Cisneros's "Never Marry a Mexican," "Anguiano Religious Articles Rosaries Statues..." and "Bien Pretty." Respond to at least 2 of the creative readings in your Reading Journal.

Exercise 3: Customary Folklore, due 2/20. Instructions on eCampus.

Read and Respond to workshop.

**Week 7 (2/20) DUE:** Exercise 3: Customary Folklore

Class Activities: Discuss Cisneros and workshop.

HW: Read Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* to page 32 (to Chapter 3). Can begin *Tracks* Reading Journal response if you want (need a total of 2 pages by the end of the novel).

Read and respond to workshop.

Begin Exercise 4: Place, due 3/6. Instructions on eCampus.

### **Week 8 (2/27)**

Class Activities: Begin discussion of Erdrich, workshop, and writing exercise.

HW: Read Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* to page 96 (to Chapter 6). Can work on *Tracks* Reading Journal response if you want (need a total of 2 pages by the end of the novel)

Read and respond to workshop.

Exercise 4: Place, due 3/6.

**\* Wednesday, 3/5, Tom Noyes Reading at 7:30 p.m. 130 Colson Hall**

**Week 9 (3/6) DUE** Exercise 4: Place

Class Activities: Continue discussion of Erdrich, workshop, and writing exercise

HW: Finish reading Erdrich's *Tracks*. Can respond to *Tracks* in your Reading Journal if you want (need a total of 2 pages by the end of the novel).

Read and respond to workshop.

Begin work on writing up Transcript and Exercise 5: Transcript, both due 3/27. See eCampus for details.

**Spring Break! 3/10-3/14**

**Week 10 (3/20)**

Class Activities: Workshop and finish discussion of Erdrich.

HW: Read selections from Joy Harjo. See eCampus for list of poems. Respond to at least 3 poems in your Reading Journal.

Work on writing up Transcript and Exercise 5: Transcript, both due 3/27. See eCampus for details.

Read and respond to workshop.

**Week 11 (3/27) DUE** Transcript and Exercise 5: Transcript

Class Activities: Workshop, writing exercise, and discuss Harjo. Introduce Final Project criteria.

HW: Read Kingston's "No Name Woman" and "White Tiger" (pages 1-53). Can begin *The Woman Warrior* Reading Journal response if you want (need a total of 2 pages by the end of the memoir).

Read and respond to workshop.

Begin Fieldwork Reflection, due 4/10. Instructions on eCampus.

**\* Wednesday, 4/2, Diane Glancy Reading at 7:30 p.m., 202 Brooks Hall**

**Week 12 (4/3)**

Class Activities: Workshop and discuss Kingston.

HW: Read Kingston's "Shaman" (pages 55-109). Can work on *The Woman Warrior* Reading Journal response if you want (need a total of 2 pages by the end of the memoir).

Read and respond to workshop.

**Week 13 (4/10) DUE** Fieldwork Reflection

Class Activities: Workshop and discuss Kingston.

HW: Finish Kingston ("At the Western Palace" and "A Song for the Barbarian Reed Pipe," pages 111-end). Finish Reading Journal response to *The Woman Warrior* (need a total of 2 pages).

Read and respond to workshop.

**Week 14 (4/17)**

**\* Calliope Reading tonight at 7:30 p.m., 130 Colson Hall**

Class Activities: Workshop and discuss Kingston.

HW: Final Project due in class on 4/24 (Introduction/Final Reflection and Final Draft of Creative Project)

**Week 15 (4/24)**

**\* MFA Reading tonight at 7:30 p.m. Rhododendron Room, Mountainlair (Note: Extra-credit response for this reading due Friday, 4/25 by email)**

Class Activities: Read around, foodways.

\*There will be no final for this class.