



## Debunking the Myth of the American West

Curriculum Unit 01.04.10  
by Dina Secchiaroli

### Introduction

---

When we think of the American West, we often envision a cowboy saving the day and riding off into the sunset. Nostalgia often sets in, and we begin to wish for simpler times when the good guys and the bad guys were distinguishable, when everything was so simple. Unfortunately, those times never existed; what remains in our minds is the romanticized version of the American West Hollywood glorified. For those of us who learned only this American myth, it is hard to realize that we've been lied to. My unit will help uncover this myth of the West. I will explore the history of this myth, when we invented it, why we invented it, and why it lasted all these years. I will then reinvent the narrative of the West using literature, art, and film. I will delve into the "New Western History," as the true historical West is called.

This new history will involve looking at the reasons for migration west and looking at and reading the narratives of natives, including Native Americans and Mestizos. Hollywood has created this image in the American consciousness of the cowboy as the hero and the "Indian" as the enemy. Even after all we know of history, most people still hold this version of the West sacred. There are so many stories left untold. Actually, there is a scholarly endeavor happening all around the country to uncover the truth. It is this movement to uncover the truth and debunk the myth of the West that I wish to explore with my students.

I teach in New Haven in a magnet school called the Sound School. My school is unique in the fact that it is a comprehensive aquaculture school. Sound School students study the water, build boats, fish, and sail. The core classes are also taught, and they are done in a more traditional way. I will teach this unit to my English 3 and AP English classes. My class is made up of a diverse group of students. My students are from New Haven and over 18 surrounding school districts. The diversity isn't simply ethnic or racial, but monetary also. I have students who are white, African American, Latino, and a mix of all three and more. Some of my students come from poverty-stricken families, while others are quite wealthy. My school has a student body of 260, and this diversity is a source of enrichment, rather than a source of problems. I also encounter some of the same problems as inner-city schools including low reading and writing skills. But from experience, I've learned that these units get the students excited. Exploring something in-depth also enhances their analytical and critical thinking skills.

I don't simply want the students to know how to analyze literature and art; I want them to walk away with skills that they can use in life. I teach them to become healthy, productive citizens, and the medium I use is

literature, art, and film. While students are studying the various art forms, they will be exploring their own lives as well. I take every opportunity to make the material relevant to their lives, because this not only increases their involvement; it also helps them to fully understand the material and its importance. Further, we need to make sure that our students leave our classes and our schools with the skills they need for work and for life. We can give them these skills no matter what we teach. It is also important to explore the fact that their own identity comes from their history and the history of their people. That said, students need to understand the multicultural aspects of our society. I also find that white students need to think of themselves as just another group or other.

## Classroom Activities

---

### Researched Essay

The students will be writing an essay during this unit. The essay will include some research using a variety of resources I keep in my classroom and some that can be found on the Internet. It is important for students to be proficient in the use of technology. Students don't often get a chance to work with primary sources, so I want to incorporate them into the research project. We will be reading some primary source material in class as well, but they must find one other piece of primary source material on their own. The reason for this is that what makes history real to us are stories of the real people living the history. Abstract facts and events become tangible; it is almost like we can hold history in our hand and touch it. Students will pick either one of the writers, artists, or topics we have covered and expand on their lives, art, themes, events, etc. Originally when writing this unit I wanted to teach them the broad history of the West, which would have taken up my entire year. Now, I will let the students themselves explore this history a piece at a time and if I were to put all their papers together, a more complete historical record would exist. This is exactly the point. I will give students a grading rubric to use, so they can get the best grade possible on the first try. I have a grading policy that requires students to rewrite until they get an A, and if they choose not to do this, they get an F. I have found this to be a great success. Students learn at their own pace, and this allows them to do so while working towards mastery. This policy also tells the students that I know they have the ability to get an A. For some students they may only need one draft to get the A, and some may take seven drafts. I want them to know how to write a good essay, not how to quit with a C. Some possible topics for the essays could be, but are not limited to: conquest, race, the environment, complexity of the West, women of the West, the Hollywood myth of the West, Japanese Internment Camps, Frederic Remington, Frederick Jackson Turner, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Ian Frazier, Susan Lee Johnson, Mary Murphy, Sherman Alexie, Howard Lamar, Alex Nemerov, John Ford, Jane Ash Poitras, Jesse Cooday, Ernie Pepion, Lance Belanger, Jean LaMarr, Frank Bigbear Jr., David Avalos, Judy Baca, James Luna, Richard Ray, Norval Morrisseau... to name a few.

### Oral Presentation of the Researched Essay

As we all know, students are in need of oral communication skills; unfortunately most students don't get enough opportunities to sharpen these skills. When I assign oral presentations, many students get that deer-caught-in-headlights-look. By assigning more oral presentations, they will hopefully become more comfortable standing in front of a group of people and talking. Based on their essays, students will convert the information into a five-minute presentation. This way the class will learn a more complete history of the West. I will give students a grading rubric to follow so they will know what I expect of them. Students will use note cards for the context of the presentation - I do not want them simply reading their essay aloud. They will also need

visual material for the class, and this can be in the form of handouts, posters, or Power Point overheads.

### **Making of their own myth- Art Project**

Students will also do an art project based on the content in the curriculum. Students seem to be able to interact with art differently than with literature. Students really respond to art. Art is an especially effective medium to use to teach students with poor reading skills. I can still strengthen their analytical and critical thinking skills without adding the skill of reading to the mix. I highly recommend that you not only study it, but also utilize art activities. Since the scholarly endeavor of the unit is to uncover the myths of Western history and debunk them, the students will uncover a myth, or stereotype, from their life and rewrite the myth. Students will first draft their myth on a blank piece of notebook or copy paper. Then using large poster board and either good markers or acrylic paints, the students will on one side of the poster board illustrate what their myth looks like and on the other side, show the truth. Students must learn how to face and deal with adversity and the shortsightedness of others. In order to have a healthy relationship with ourselves, we often need to deal with and let go of the demons in our past. This art project is a safe way to do that. Hopefully, by expressing the falsity of the stereotype laid upon the students, they can have some sort of closure on the event.

### **Class Discussions**

Class discussions are invaluable, and I usually have some sort of prompt the kids write about for a few minutes before the discussion. This enables them to gather their thoughts. Students who have difficulty speaking in front of others often find this helpful. I also find that having a prompt, whether it is a picture or a quote, allows the students to become engaged immediately in the day's task. Often they come in with many other things on their mind, and these "intos", as many professionals call them, get the students thinking about my class and the subject at hand. Examples of some prompts would be: "...They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it." - James Baldwin; "In this case, the danger, in the minds of most White Americans, is the loss of their identity." -James Baldwin from "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation"; "I have no separate feeling about being an American Citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong." - Zora Neale Hurston. Discussion will take place every day, and except for the first few days of teaching the history components, they will take up a large part of the class period.

### **CAPT Practice**

CAPT is also an important part of the curriculum. The test assesses students' abilities to think and express those thoughts. On the Response to Literature section, students are to read a short story and answer thought-provoking questions. Virtually all of my lessons can apply to CAPT, because critical thinking is an objective everyday. This way, I don't have to keep pushing the test down the students' throat. They often don't realize we're doing a CAPT activity, and this is important not only so the students don't get sick of hearing the word CAPT, but also because the thinking and writing skills are the key to any good class, test or no test. Questions asked during discussion and on assignments help students think on all levels of thinking: Reacting, Interpreting, Connecting, and Evaluating - or RICE. I use this RICE method, formally and informally, all the time. Not only is it important for students to think on all of these levels, it is equally important for them to be able to express these thought both orally and in writing.

## The Myth of the Old West

---

When taking on the endeavor of debunking the myth of the American West, one must realize that the topic is enormous, and in order to cover the unit in three or so weeks some information must be left out. To make the subject more manageable, I will work off of my students' preconceived notions of the history of the West. To begin the unit, I will do the activity of "Chalk Talk." In the middle of the chalkboard, I will write the words "American West." Students will then silently, one at a time, go up to the board and write something about what they know of the topic. For example, one student might write "Cowboy" and another write "Indian." This will go on until no one has anything else to write. This activity allows the students to get their minds thinking about the subject, and it allows me to see what they know and what their myths are. The topics we will cover in the unit will largely be based on their initial misconceptions.

Patricia Limerick is a professor at The University of Colorado at Boulder. She has written many essays and books about the New Western History. In fact, she is a leading scholar in the movement. In her *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Desert* and her *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, she debunks the myth of the West and reveals the truth that has been hidden from citizens by citizens for so long. She has been instrumental in my studies and research. She also has written many essays on the topic. Another great book from which I will use excerpts is *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, edited by Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger. This book contains essays from various writers and helps uncover the truth and as the title says, remaps the West.

### What is a Myth?

First I need to make sure students know what a myth is and also how myths can sometimes be misconceptions. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, a myth is "a traditional story of unknown authorship, ostensibly with a historical basis, but serving usually to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of man, or the customs, institutions, religious rites, etc. of a people." Basically a myth represents a culture's values and ideals and/or helps explain to people where they came from. The Yale New Haven Teachers Institute has a collection of units about myths. There are also great definitions of myths. I will use some of these also to help explain. The collection is from 1998 and the seminar is entitled, "Cultures and their Myths." These units can be found on the website [teachersinstitute.yale.edu](http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu).

### Why the Myth?

According to Limerick, all different peoples have some sort of creation myth. Americans, although we like to think we're too civilized to have one, have the American West. The story of the West helps us develop our identity as a people and understand where we come from. The Frontier is our most popular myth. We came over from Europe to a savage nation. We conquered the land and lived through the weather. Once we settle in the East we courageously headed west. Our brave, independent men fought the barbaric Indians, converting the enlightened ones and removing the useless ones. Pioneers built a democratic civilization, as we know it today, and once we conquered all we needed to, a new chapter in our history was written. The myth goes something like that. This myth has had such power in our culture and it has influenced many. Unfortunately, our actual history is much different from this story.

The fact is the history of the West is very complicated. The reason why the myth persists is that it makes it all seem so simple. For some reason, we like to fit everything in neat, little compartments of understanding, and the truth about the West is anything but. The West was and still is messy and confusing. The historians and

teachers needed something manageable, and the endeavor of telling the truth about this time isn't that easy. Further, it isn't even over. We feel nostalgic about the frontier because we think that it has completely ended, but the problems of then are still largely the problems of now. Many of the issues that began during the move westward are still unresolved. As is seen in the lesson plans, the students will look in newspapers, magazines, commercials, and songs for on-going conflicts and stories in the West today, i.e. Native Americans v ranchers, oil interests v environmentalists, etc. Now the fact that the history without the myth is so enormous and perplexing, I don't expect to cover everything with my class. I feel that it is the exploration of the truth that is important. We don't need to understand everything now, but we need to learn to ask the right questions and know how to find the answers.

The myth of the West is filled with stereotypes of all the participants. The "white man" is seen either as a unified group of progressives fighting barbarians or as the victimizers of the natives. The "Indian" is seen as a unified group who were the victims of the whites' conquest. These simplistic views don't tell the whole story. Limerick says, "In Western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, those stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles" ( *Legacy* , 19). Entertainment lets us allow ourselves to believe that the past was a much simpler time with fewer troubles than we have now. When we feel overwhelmed with our lives and our society, we are comforted that it wasn't always this way. Regrettably, some might say, our history was always filled with conflict and trouble.

Frederick Jackson Turner was the founder of Western history. In 1893 Turner presented what is now his famous thesis, "*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*." Turner's thesis has been so respected that for a long time, no one disputed his ideas, which were largely selective. The history that he presented was the myth we all know. According to Turner, Western history ended in 1890 when the census showed that most of the land in America was taken. Turner's idea of the frontier condensed at least 10 groups of people into one simple category. He neglected to explore the diversity and race relations that truly make up Western history. Turner was a very nationalistic man whose story focuses on the English-speaking white man.

## Debunking the Myth

---

The true American West, as I said before, is very complicated and messy. In Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West and Something in the Soil* , she explores the myth and the truth of Western history. Limerick says, "Reorganized, the history of the West is a study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences" ( *Legacy* , 26). The real West was a place where different races overlapped. These races included the Indian American, Anglo-American, Latin American, Afro-American, and Asian. Not only did different people try to live on the same land, within each group came different cultures, languages and religions. The story is not an easy one to tell, and I don't try to tell it all to you now or to my students. Even after all my research I'm still learning what really happened. I'm going to let my students know this too. I'm on a scholarly endeavor and they are too. If you want to teach the historical aspects, you need to read the books on your own. I will be using excerpts from the books in my classes.

### Land Boundaries

One of the problems began when Americans tried to create boundaries, lines on a map, and then expected everyone, including those not benefiting from those lines, to live by them. People wanted to own land, but they also wanted their culture to be the law of the land. Even today, people are still fighting over culture.

When white Americans went West, they expected an easy fortune. They did not anticipate running into natives who showed opposition nor did they expect the hardships of the land. One of the reasons for this was the lack of communication. People in the East were unaware of what was truly happening in the West, so they believed the myth, even then. Further, the West didn't want the East to know of the problems because then no one would continue to come Westward. Westward Expansion was largely about land, not the Hollywood version of John Wayne. Limerick makes a wonderful analogy when she says, "The showdowns would occur in the land office or the courtroom; weapons would be deeds and lawsuits, not six-guns" ( *Legacy* , 55). John Wayne wouldn't have been a cowboy then, rather he'd be a lawyer or a land surveyor. Brilliant analogy. Hollywood does sway our version of the past. Redistributing the land was a difficult task. The movies leave that part out. Even when there were laws, not everyone wanted to obey. The law in Washington D.C. often did not have much control over the law of the West. In fact some control didn't even come from the West. Some Eastern investors sent people for them and reaped the benefits of the hard work of the frontiersmen. Westward expansion was also about politics and statehood. We also tend to think of the pioneer/cowboy as an independent adventurer. Yet, most depended on money from the government, because their profits did not come rolling in. Most Westerners resented the government for the help. One could say that is when welfare began.

### **Conquest**

Our nation's history is largely based on conquest. In fact, the different races that make up the West are all part of the same story - conquest. Cultural domination was the game and the West was the playing field. With all ideas and events, we must remember that it is not as black and white as we like to think or need to think. The Anglos were exhibiting nationalistic pride, and they thought their way of life was the best. They also wanted the land. As Limerick points out, our history is not as different from the histories of other nations as we'd like to think. We think of our own history as exploration and defeating the wild land and peoples, while expanding democracy; yet, we think of the conquests of South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand as barbaric and inhumane ( *Soil* , 20).

The Anglo-American also felt like an innocent victim, rather than a participant in their own destiny. They often felt slighted when the Indian did not accept their help in converting to Christianity or on how to use the land. The Anglos felt that they would be able to swoop in and save the inferior Indian. They also felt that the Indian cultures would disappear. Not only did the cultures not disappear, many Indians fought back to save their culture and way of living. Many Anglos were surprised by this and angered. They then felt justified in their treatment of an ungrateful savage. That is not to say that all pioneers/cowboys were villains. Again, it is not that simple. The truth as hard as it is to understand and grasp, makes our history that much better. It is our history and we should want to know the truth.

### **Complexity**

As I said before, it is not as clear-cut as we'd like as to who are the good guys and who are the bad guys. Limerick uses the term "moral complexity" often in her writing, and this is exactly what people are about. When we do something good or bad, it doesn't necessarily mean that we are good or bad people respectively. Things and people were just as complicated then as they are now. "The deeply frustrating lesson of history in the American West and elsewhere is this: human beings can be a mess - contentious, conflict loving, petty, vindictive, and cruel - and human beings can manifest grace, dignity, compassion, and understanding..." ( *Soil* , 21). As complicated as our history is, we must remember that the Anglo-Americans did start the whole affair and came out on top in the end. But the rest is messy and the sides are blurred.

The "White man" is usually either seen as the brutal force defeating Indians or as the democratic adventurer exploring our land. It is not that easy. Both images are true. Some white men were brutal in their dealing with the Indians, and their bigotry and greed motivated them. But there were also good-intentioned men who truly thought that they were helping the Indians by wanting them to assimilate. A problem lay in different laws regarding property and conduct. Of course confusion and problems occurred. Each contract may have held different meanings to the different groups, and in fact, often only a few members of a tribe who spoke English took part in the contract writing. Many times, these tribal members had no authority over the rest of the tribe. And they wanted the entire tribe to agree to the contract? We tend to lump the "white man" into one group, but they were also very separated, not only by ethnicity, which will be discussed next, but also by economy. The government officials had a very different experience than the farmer or the miner. And the miner had a completely different life than the owner of the mine. Limerick creates a 12-point guide to war, which is funny and poignant. She finds patterns in the history of the American West in her *Something in the Soil*. One of these patterns applies here; "Whites were often quite disunited themselves, so disunited that white Americans sometimes looked as if they might kill each other before the Indians got a chance at them" (*Soil*, 50). The complexity is illuminated here.

In the same way, we lump the "Indians" together, yet we must realize that there are and were many different tribes of Indians and many fought each other way before the Anglos even came to shore. Often, a tribe would take advantage of the white American's need for land and strike a deal that would be disadvantageous for their enemy. "The idea of an Indian war as a conflict of whites against Indians seldom had much to do with reality because Indians were usually on both sides of the conflict" (*Soil*, 47). Some Indians worked with the Anglos against their own, but we must remember not all did. Many accepted assimilation, while others stood firm to maintain old values and traditions.

### **Race and Cultural Relations**

The West is where many ethnicities and cultures came together in the same land. We often think of the race problem as the whites against the Indians, the Mexicans, and the Chinese, but there were so many more people. There were tensions between the Irish and the Cornish miners, too. The environmentalist fought the ranchers to conserve resources. People were busy trying to understand each other in the face of extraordinary obstacles to that understanding. With different cultures, languages, and laws, the different cultures had their work ahead of them, so of course, there were misunderstandings, fights, hostility and problems. It was, again, very complicated. That is not to say that many of the problems could not have been avoided. Compassion, understanding, and empathy are important factors that can make the convergence of cultures much easier to handle. Our history has always been obsessed with distinguishing one ethnicity from another. " 'Distinguish' is, of course, by no means a synonym for 'divide.' Ethnic groups can be distinguished from each other and still be quite compatible, even collaborative and mutually respectful" (*Soil*, 241).

Another one of Limerick's patterns of war is the reminder that before a war happened, there was already a history of tensions between parties. This history was often spanned over many years, yet we often think that a war broke out over night. When the Anglo Americans came to the land, they brought debilitating diseases with them that killed so many Indians whose immune systems hadn't built any antibodies to the illness. Because the two cultures took so long in getting to know and often dislike each other, the racial and cultural lines blurred. The fact that Indians rode horses and used guns shows this. Further, mixed marriages were common, and racially mixed children were the result. When they grew up, they were often torn between cultures and loyalties and sometimes could also mediate between the two. The term "Indian" and "White" became increasingly political as the bloodlines mixed, rather than racial.

## **The Women of the West**

Women were not included in Turner's version of the West. Women of the West were typically seen as oppressed, being taken West by their husbands. The truth is that women were just as involved as the men in making history and settling the West. Under the Homestead Act, spinsters and widows had the right to claim land. Many women took full advantage of this, staking claim for themselves. Further, many wives helped their husbands work the land. They were as invested in their future as the men were. The women were just as cruel and prejudice as the men. When I say this I don't just mean the white women either. They were not saints, nor were they all sinners. Again, the recurring theme is that all people in the West were complicated and couldn't be labeled solely by one category.

Take the prostitutes for example. Hollywood has made the prostitutes of the West look like they loved being prostitutes, made a good deal of money, and were accepted by all of the town. The reality is that there weren't a lot of job opportunities for women, and this was one way to make their own money. Further, prostitutes did not make much money after they took out rent, clothes, food, etc... Married women degraded prostitutes, and they were looked down upon by many - not the happy, go lucky people in the movies. In fact, they had hard lives, not saying that other women didn't. When they had children, it was hard to find childcare. History has found that many daughters became prostitutes like their mothers. The historian Ann Butler has studied the life of the prostitute and has shown that suicide was the most common way to get out of the life of a prostitute. Morality of the West is not as concrete as most people like to believe. We feel we can judge those of the past, when we must make it clear to the students that this would be dangerous. People have layers and are multifaceted. Looking at them through a two-dimensional angle does not tell the whole story. This doesn't go for only the women, but also for the men and for all the different races too.

## **Hammon and the Beans (see lesson plan I)**

---

"The Hammon and the Beans" is a great short story by Americo Paredes. Paredes is considered the father of Chicano literature. This story was published in 1939 and shows the life of a small town on the borderland. The story has political implications and although it seems to be an innocent story, it really says something important about hegemony and life in between cultures. The story takes place in "Jonesville-on-the-Grande", everyday America where whiteness, Jones, is the norm. The town surrounds Fort Jones, and the residents of the town live their lives by the bugles and shots fired in the Fort. Chonita is a young, Latino girl who begs for food outside the Fort's mess hall. She hears the soldiers yell, " 'Give me the ham!' 'Yeah, give me the beans!'" Well, Chonita learns to say, " 'Give me the hammon and the beans!' " and all the kids think she can speak English. The story is told in retrospect and we learn that Chonita dies, and the reader is led to believe by malnutrition or flu. Paredes implies that she dies from being part of a poverty-stricken minority group.

To be able to fully understand the story, the students will need a bit of background information about the way we think of people who live on the margin or border. As we discussed in our seminar, there is one model: the metropole v the periphery. The metropole is the city, the mainstream Culture, or those who were considered to have culture. The periphery is the country, the minorities who lack culture and are made to look ignorant and unsophisticated. By using this model, the periphery is always degraded, creating a desire to assimilate as quickly as possible. Ellis Island is a great example of this. Many coming assimilated so by the third generation, everyone blended in. The new model of the Borderland replaced this model. In the Borderland model, there is no periphery; instead of being either/or, one has more than one identity, and at different moments in life, one



dominates over the other, and often these identities conflict. This creates the notion of culture being everywhere and accessible to all. The border is a metaphor for where two cultures intersect, and we leave with aspects of each. Many of my students live in this model.

We will then conduct a close reading of the short story. Students need to learn to decode text for hidden meanings. First students will learn that the title itself is Spanglish, which is a borderland language. The story starts with "Once we lived" invoking the fairy tale motif, hiding the political allegory. The purpose is to make the story seem innocent, when it is actually a story of dissent. Further, the opening words are retrospective - a way to recapture a forgotten past. In the second paragraph the flag is a very nationalistic symbol, a symbol of white America; yet, the Latinos internalize this value, again enforcing the power of hegemony or, put simply, our ability to internalize values that do not value our identity. The people in this town use the fort to regulate their day, as seen in the third paragraph. They don't stop to realize that it's not their own pattern, but the soldiers. We begin to see class separation when Paredes writes, "...afford to be old-fashioned and took siesta." In an industrialized culture, the ones with money can afford leisure. The only ones who can maintain the authentic culture are those with money. Paredes makes this comment for a reason. He finds this disturbing. The high wire fence that separates the fort from the town creates the metropole and the periphery. The school is named George Washington, national pride, and Marion the Fox was a revolutionary fighter. Paredes brings in Latino history when he mentions Aniceto Pizana, referring to one of the leaders of the plan of San Diego, a time in history not often taught in schools. This goes back to the separatist movement that called for an independent state in the Southwest of people of color. The movement affirmed unity. Around the time of this movement, 1910-1917, there was a peasant uprising in Mexico against Diaz. Zapata led this. In 1915-1917, someone went into New Mexico and killed 17 Americans, spilling over to San Diego in South Texas. The local paper simply called this "border troubles."

The kids in the story are on both sides of the fence, for they represent the borderland model. Chonita crosses the border to the back door of the mess hall to beg for food, alluding to slavery. When she imitates the soldiers in her "English", the kids look up to her. The actual phrase, "Give me the hammon and the beans!" is the language of entitlement. When she speaks this English phrase, she can demand, yet she doesn't understand this because of her age. The narrator is the only one who doesn't seem impressed though. The voice changes as the narrator is now the voice of a man as seen when he says, "In later years..." When the narrator speaks of the doctor, the doctor's name again links to the revolution with the name Zapata. When we learn that Chonita died, the cause is ambiguous, yet we know it is from poverty. The doctor is a victim of hegemony when he says they lived like animals. This adds complexity to the picture, because now it is not just an us v them conflict. Class is added to the picture. We learn that Chonita's father was killed by being shot and hanged. This is the "brown" version of lynching, when rangering was committed by the Texas Rangers. The reference to the Olmito train again alludes to the plan of San Diego. The doctor is ironic when he says that in classical times, it was more humane to smash children against the wall then to bring them up in poverty. He also puts down the revolution when he talks about bandits. The second to last paragraph shows the two cultures mixing during the revolution. Paredes is redefining the American Revolution, making parallels to what happened in San Diego, Texas.

In the last paragraph, the narrator finally cries. It is important for student to figure out why. This is both positive and negative. He finally mourns Chonita's death, which is therapeutic. He also mourns the death of the old ways of life, because in a way, he imagines her as activist during the depression. But her death also represents lost possibilities, a revolution that did not happen. He mourns what might have been. The last word is not the little boy crying though; rather it is the fact that the story is being told as a genuine borderland culture that has a voice.

## ***The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven***

---

Sherman Alexie also provides great text. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* explores the issue of reservation life. The book was made into a movie, *Smoke Signals*. This book is a collection of short stories told by various narrators who live on a reservation. The storytellers link all the stories in some way. Alexie does a wonderful job of satirizing life on the reservation, as well as poignantly showing the hardships and problems faced by Native Americans on the reservation. The stories are sad, funny, and angry all at the same time. The themes in the book are redeeming tradition, storytelling, basketball as the new religion of the reservation, heroes, and family relationships.

A few of the stories have curse words, so I need to be careful and get parental consent. Or I might not use those particular stories. Basketball plays a big part of reservation life and of the stories. A good basketball player is a modern hero, and both men and women can play it well. But, as just published in June's 17, 2001 Sunday New York Times, the article "Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes" discusses how Native Americans are underrepresented in the NBA and college basketball, because for many - it is hard to get off the reservation. Alexie discusses this problem. Alexie calls basketball the new religion. This is a way of reclaiming the past in a modern way. He also reclaims the past by creating artificial traditions to take over the past ones. Car stealing replaces horse stealing as a way for a young Indian to gain honor. Alexie is making a statement that the past world was sacred and he knows that the modern deeds are so small in comparison. He explains the gap satirically. In one sense he is mourning the loss of meaningful traditions, but in another way, he is trying to redeem them too. He is telling a story, as storytelling is a way of reclaiming the past. Thomas is the storyteller in the book. He has the gift and is connected to this tradition of orally recording history.

Because the book is pretty easy reading, I'm going to have the students read the book quickly. This is the kind of material that needs to be analyzed closely, and that is my priority. There are subtleties in the stories that the students will appreciate once understood. It is an important skill for students to be able to read something and pick out lines or phrases that convey something vital to the theme of the story or about a character. These stories are an excellent opportunity for students to work on this skill, because there is so much in each story. They can learn how to do a close reading and hone in their critical thinking skills.

## ***Smoke Signals***

---

If there is time, I will use the movie version of the stories called *Smoke Signals*. The storyline focuses on Victor and Thomas' journey to Arizona to pick up the ashes of Victor's father. Many of the stories in the book are told through flashbacks in the movie. The movie focuses more on the father/son relationship of Victor and his father than the book does. There is great imagery in fire. It is a source of hurt and a source of healing for the characters. It is a good movie and is an excellent study of how a book is turned into a movie.

## 60 Minutes Segment on Sherman Alexie

---

On July 17, 2001, the TV program *60 Minutes* ran a segment on Sherman Alexie. During the interview, Alexie states how he rejects the term "Native American" because that can be anyone born here. He prefers to be called an Indian. The segment shows him on tour where we see his humor and anger; he talks to the public using poignant comedy. He has a new collection of short stories. Alexie also discusses the problem with sports mascots using Indian themes, not because it's Indian, but rather because the mascots use sacred Indian religious symbols. He says we wouldn't have a priest throwing out communion wafers to the crowd or have a rabbi chanting. The program then briefly lists his works. Alexie talks about how he writes about everyday Indians who are also American. He says he likes to write about, "the kind of Indian I am, who is just as influenced by the Brady Bunch as I am by my tribal traditions, who spends as much time going to the movies as I do going to ceremonies." We visit the Spokane Indian Reservation where Alexie grew up and where his family still lives. He then moves on and discusses his life, and the alcoholism that plagued his family and, for a time, himself. We learn that many of his stories are based on his actual life. For instance, he used to watch John Wayne movies and root for Wayne, because he didn't recognize the Indians on TV. He likens those TV Indians to sociopaths with war paint. He knew he had to get off the reservation to make something of himself. He went to a white school in the next town 20 miles away. He compares the reservation and the town's relationship to that of a township and Johannesburg. Alexie was captain of the basketball team, the Indians, and was very popular.

Alexie says he tries to shatter Hollywood's version of Indians. He wanted to include the "diversity of Indian personalities" in his work. He also discusses the movie *Smoke Signals*. The characters in the movie are based on his own family. His dad would leave for days to drink. Alexie said he literally would cry until he got sick when his dad left, until he was about 12 or 13 years old. In the interview we begin to see the scars left from his childhood and his life. He discusses his childhood with his mother. The conversation is very honest. His mom was at first upset with his using true stories in his fiction, but she realizes that the writing was a source of healing for him and a way to keep him sober. Alexie professes that he tries to be a role model for young Indians. He says he "didn't want to be another public figure Indian who would break the hearts of other Indian kids by being drunk." He tours and speaks to Indian children about staying sober. If you can get your hands on this 11-12 minute segment, definitely do.

## *Lonestar*

---

*Lonestar* is a movie by John Sayles. Its themes include healing, recovering the past in order to move on, hybridity, and cultural convergence in one place. The story takes place in a town called Frontera, or the border, and moves from the present to the past and back to the present with a pan of a camera, showing the present is directly and indirectly linked to the past. Sayles is saying that the old Westerns of Hollywood are dead, and his movie is the new and truer version. He is honoring the old movies, but creates the New West with all of its conflicts and buried secrets. All the while he lets the viewer know that his movie is still a myth - it's only a film. He talks about the film as a film and nothing more.

The movie begins with a two men going through the land with a magnifying glass. Visually, we are in the open West, a firing range. One man is looking for old bullets and the other is learning about the vegetation. One of the first lines is "When you live in a place, you should learn about it." Symbolically they are looking to discover

the uncovered history, as is the main character. The hero in this movie is the truth-seeker. The West is an opportunity to learn something about our past. The theme that recurs is that we can get to the conflicts of history, but we have to dig to create an alternative history, but once we do we can let go of this history. Once you deal with our past, it won't haunt us anymore. We may be wounded from the knowledge we uncover - we won't be the same - but there is a redeeming factor.

The schoolroom scene is especially powerful. The teachers, parents, and citizens are fighting over the school curriculum. The argument is whether or not to include Latino history in schools. The scene exemplifies the complexity of a situation when two cultures come together. One character Otis must get an education of his people outside the classroom. He must get it for himself, since the classroom excludes a large part of the residents' history. The comment on education is that it often screens out the truth, making it superficial. Most importantly, the conflict shows that real history is important. There is a need to break out of the myth, and in fact, the only ones the myth satisfies anymore are the local bigots.

The movie is a tool of healing itself. Art can heal. We know this when we find out the man from the beginning uses the bullets and makes art. We also know this at the end of the movie. At the drive in, which is ruins of the past, we learn the truth about Sam Deeds and Pilar - they are half-brother and sister. She says at the end "Forget the Alamo." By digging for the truth in history, we are able to put it in the past. This scene also says that we are all brothers and sisters - that we're part of the same family. Like I said before, conquest makes many different people part of the same story. When recounting history it is important to include all perspectives.

## Art

---

We will explore the art of Remington, whose art embodies the myth of the West. His origins on the east coast and at Yale will be of special interest to the students. Many of our images of the West and of cowboys come from him. Looking into Remington's motivation for his images will explain the why's of his art and enable the class to uncover the truth behind the images. We will also explore Alex Nemerov's views on Remington.

I will also explore art found in Lucy Lippard's book of multicultural art called *Mixed Blessings*. The pieces I will use are mostly Native American art, not because I don't want to focus on Latino art, but because I teach a separate unit on Latino art. I will show Jane Ash Poitras' *Family Blackboard*, which deals with Native education; Jesse Cooday's *Self Portrait* shows he paints the traditional mask in red, white, and blue - American colors; Ernie Pepion's *The Sun Dancer* shows himself stepping out of his wheelchair. He says he experienced discrimination for living on a reservation and relates that discrimination to that which he feels for being paralyzed. Lance Belanger's *The Good Doctor's Bedside Manner* displays a true account of a horrible doctor who actually sewed up a Native American woman using beaded stitches. *They're Going to Dump It Where!?!?*, by Jean LaMarr, creates a modern Native American woman as a symbol of resistance. Frank Bigbear Jr. created a beautiful piece called *Red Boy*, which is a group of images that mixes battles of the Native American with modern societal items. It is amazing. David Avalos' *Wilderness* comments on the notion of wilderness and frontier. He focuses on the myth of the West. Victor Orozco Ochoa's *Geronimo* is a colorful mural, which combines many culturally significant symbols.

I will focus also on the work of James Luna. He did an installation piece at the Museum of Man in San Diego. He drugged himself and put himself on display in a showcase. He had some of his belongings on display also. He

labeled himself and his objects just like artifacts are labeled in a museum. This is such a relevant demonstration, because American history has shown us that our society breaks down other cultures and then tries to keep the cultures alive in museums. But it is only after these cultures are no longer a threat can we appreciate and value them. Luna's work exemplifies this historical problem. America has put the Native American artifacts in museums thinking that Native Americans wouldn't still be around, but thankfully this is not the case.

## **Lesson Plan I: Close reading activity based on the short story "The Hammon and the Beans"**

---

Since the students have historical background of Latino history and of Western history, they will be able to link the story to their background knowledge. I can use this lesson plan as a CAPT activity, because they use their critical thinking and writing skills. "The Hammon and the Beans" by Americo Paredes is a great story about a little Latino girl, a Latino community, and an army base and the relationship between them all. The questions in this lesson will help students do a close reading. The questions will elicit the critical thinking and the analysis of the text that students should begin to do on their own. We will do this exercise aloud as a class. This way if students do not get the answer right away, I can ask probing questions that focus their thinking.

### **Objectives:**

Students will...

- participate in a close reading
- examine the text closely for implied and hidden meaning
- dissect story to understand the text as a written craft
- discuss significant details and overall meaning of story

Questions:

1. What is the significance of the title of the story?
2. Why does Paredes begin the short story using the words "Once we lived...?"
3. Why does Paredes name the town Jonesville-on-the-Grande?
4. Who is speaking?
5. What is the town's relationship to the fort?
6. On the second page, what historical references are made? Why?
7. Describe Chonita.
8. Why doesn't the author look up to Chonita's "English" like the other children?
9. What does the English language symbolize and represent?
10. What is the significance of the "Give me" part of her speech?

11. How does the author let us know this story is told in retrospect?
12. What is the doctor's attitude towards Chonita's death and the community?
13. What evidence in the text allows you to come to your conclusions.
14. What category would you put the diseases the doctor names in?
15. How do we know the doctor experiences hegemony?
16. How does Paredes bring class into this scene?
17. What happened to Chonita's real father?
18. How is the doctor's solution for children ironic?
19. Why is the author finally able to cry at the end?
20. The last word of this story and Chonita's life is not in the boy's crying. Where is it?

## **Lesson Plan II: CAPT Response to Literature activity: Connections**

---

Students will read the article "Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes" by Selena Roberts. The article can be found in the June 17, 2001 Sunday edition of the New York Times. Students will make connections between the article and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. They will follow up this lesson with an essay, which will be for homework. This lesson will take more than one day, because there will be much discussion of the findings. Text: "Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes" - Roberts examines the dilemma of the Native American living on the reservation and sports. There are many good athletes on the reservation, but due to multiple and complex problems, many don't get off the reservation. One notable example is that a coach says that he would rather take an athlete from the inner city or ghetto rather than a reservation, because those

from the reservations are "risky investments" that don't often pan out.

**Objectives:**

Students will...

- sharpen summary skills
- identify major points of arguments made
- evaluate the arguments made in the article
- compare and contrast article to another text

Questions:

1. In two sentences summarize the article.
2. Explain the major points made why Native Americans aren't well represented in professional and college sports.
3. Explain the major points made by Rusty Gillette as to how Native Americans can succeed when given the opportunity.
4. What point is the article as a whole trying to make?
5. Does it do this effectively?
6. How does this article relate to *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* ?
7. Look back in the book and list the specific reference made about basketball.
8. Pick three of the references and explain what Alexie is saying.

Essay Question: In a thoughtful and well organized essay, compare what is said about basketball and the reservation in the article "Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes" to what is said about basketball in the novel *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* . Be sure to consider the role that basketball plays in reservation life and what significance Alexie places on basketball. Also consider the reservation culture and societal influences in both pieces.

## Lesson Plan III: Analyzing the song "*Cowboy Take Me Away*"

---

The Dixie Chicks sing this song on their CD Fly. The song is about a woman asking for a cowboy to come and take her away from the city into nature. She wants to sleep under the stars and see only him. The speaker says "closer to heaven" implying that those on the ranches and out West are closer to heaven than those in the city. I will give students a copy of the lyrics and play the song for them before they answer the questions. Objectives: Student will...

- connect song to previous knowledge of the myth of the West
- express answers to questions completely in writing
- interpret song to find tone and attitude

Questions for students:

1. What do you think of when you think of a cowboy?
2. What does a cowboy represent to the speaker?
3. What do you think the speaker is trying to escape from?
4. What in the song leads you to this conclusion?
5. In the first stanza, what words perpetuate the myth of the independent explorer of the West?
6. In the second stanza, what metaphors are used?
7. What is the tone of the song?
8. What techniques does the writer employ to show the attitude of the speaker?

## Teacher Bibliography

---

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993. A wonderfully funny and sad novel made up of interrelated short stories about reservation life. Through storytelling and memory the reader gets a sense of the complexity of Native American life and a need to reclaim past traditions.



Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* . New York: Vintage Books, 1992. A great short story representing the modern Latino story. The story shows another town. The story tries to figure out the meaning of "Woman Hollering Creek" and finding the cultural roots. Also the story discusses an abused woman and the patriarchal culture, emphasizing the need for the woman to get out of the house.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* . New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987. Very informative look at the myth of the American West and the complicated truth. A must read.

----- . *Something in the Soil* . New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000. A continuation of Legacy. Illuminates different points and is an excellent book and source of information.

Lippard, Lucy. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* . New York: The New Press, 2000. Wonderful collection of multicultural art with explanatory material and information about pieces.

Matsumoto, Valerie and Blake Allmendinger, ed. *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West* . California: University of California Press, 1999. Great collection of essays on the topic. Great to use in class.

Neff, Emily. *Frederic Remington: The Hogg Brothers Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston* . New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000. Great collection of Remington's art and information on the Hogg Brothers' collection.

Paredes, Americo. *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories* . Texas: Arte Publico Press, 1994. A wonderful short story about a Latino town that lives next to a Fort. A little girl, Chonita, begs for food and we see the results of a poverty-stricken life and town. A man tells the story in retrospect.

Ward, Geoffrey. *The West: The Complete Text of the Illustrated Companion Volume to the Acclaimed PBS Television Series* . Boston: Bay Back Books, 1996. Informative book that accompanies the series, but can stand alone.

## Film

---

Alexie, Sherman and Chris Eyre. *Smoke Signals* . 1998.

Sayles, John. *Lonestar* . 1996.

*60 Minutes* . "Interview with Sherman Alexie." July 17, 2001.

## Student Reading List

---

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* .

Avalos, David. "Wilderness." Great art piece on notion of wilderness and frontier.

Belanger, Lance. "The Good Doctor's Bedside Manner." Displays horrors of treatment of Indians by medical profession.

Bigbear, Frank Jr. "Red Boy."

Cisneros, Sandra. "*Woman Hollering Creek*."

Cooday, Jesse. "*Self-Portrait*." Shows himself with red, white, and blue war paint.

Johnson, Susan Lee. "'Domestic' Life in the Diggings: The Southern Mines in the California Gold Rush." Essay discussing the gold mines in the West.

LaMarr, Jean. "*They're Going to Dump It Where?!?*" Art making the woman as a figure of resistance.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* . Excerpts from.

----- . *Something in the Soil* . Excerpts from.

Luna, James. Will look at his installation pieces.

Ochoa, Victor Orozco. "*Geronimo*." Colorful mural.

Paredes, Americo. "*The Hammon and the Beans*."

Pascoe, Peggy. "*Race, Gender, and the Privileges of Property: One the Significance of Miscegenation Law in the U.S. West*." Discuss the law of racial bigotry.

Pepion, Ernie. "*The Sun Dancer*." Art comparing racial discrimination to that of the disabled.

Poitras, Jane Ash. "*Family Blackboard*." Deals with Native education.

Scharff, Virginia. "*Mobility, Women, and the West*." Essay exploring women in the West.

Watts, Jill. "*Mae West's (re)Presentation of Western Religion*." Great essay on Western religion.10

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>