NATURE AND GOALS OF THE COURSE

As the Graduate Catalogue indicates, this is not a survey of American poetry. If you are interested in a survey, begin by consulting Jay Parini and Brett C. Millier’s The Columbia History of American Poetry (1993), the poetry essays in Emory Elliott’s Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988) and the multiple volumes of Sacvan Bercovitch’s Cambridge History of American Literature, and recent anthologies such as Allen Mandelbaum and Robert D. Richardson’s Three Centuries of American Poetry (1999) and Cary Nelson’s Anthology of Modern American Poetry (2000). You can find an introduction to the ways the American poetry canon has changed at my web site Covers, Titles, and Tables: The Formations of American Literary Canons (<uta.edu/english/mal/e/roemer>).

The basic question "behind" this course is: what happens when we juxtapose selected poems by two of the best-known American poets (Whitman and Dickinson) and selected examples of Native American oral and written poetic performances? To be more specific: How do the juxtapositions change or reinforce our views of Whitman and Dickinson and the Native poets? How do the pairings: reflect processes of canonization and exclusion; affect our concepts of "poetry" and the "poet"; and suggest the power of cross-cultural and "within"-culture poetic "influence"? By the completion of the course, I hope that each student will be able to address these questions with regard to the poets examined as well as to other poets they admire.

I divided the course into two interrelated sections. The first pairs Whitman’s "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" with selections from Washington Matthew’s translation of the Navajo Nightway. Although Whitman was fascinated by chant forms and briefly worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, he did not know Matthews’ translation, which appeared after the poet’s death in 1902; and, to my knowledge, no Navajo singers knew of Whitman’s poetry. Hence the basis of comparison is not "influence." Rather the many similarities in form and the numerous differences in function raise the questions stated above, especially about what a poem "is" and "does." The second part of the course does include the issue of influence, though not necessarily Harold Bloom’s concept of "the anxiety of influence." Dickinson influenced Momaday; Momaday influenced Ortiz; Ortiz influenced Harjo; and all three Native poets knew parts of Matthews’ translation.

In some ways this course is cutting edge; in others it is old fashioned. The cutting part reflects the current interests in "comparativist" American Studies, in canon
formation, and in ethnic studies. All these trends are expressed in Kenneth Lincoln's new book Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1899-1999 (2000). The old fashioned part will be reflected in our classroom focus on "close readings" of individual poems, although our readings will differ from "New Critical" readings, since we will be placing our readings within biographical, cultural, and historical contexts. In your research paper you can be as new or old fashioned as you please, though I will expect you to be able to justify your approach(es). (See "Paper" below.)

REQUIRED READINGS

"Poetic Forms and Literary Terminology," Norton Anthology: English Literature (handout)
Matthews / Bierhorst, Night Chant (handout)
Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Norton Critical Ed.) Since we will focus only on "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," you can use other editions.
Dickinson / Johnson, The Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems
Momaday, selections from The Gourd Dancer and In The Presence of the Sun (handouts)
Schubnell, "Momaday's Poetry" in N. Scott Momaday (189-254) (on reserve)
Ortiz, Woven Stone
Harjo, She Had Some Horses, In Mad Love and War, and The Woman Who Fell from the Sky
Course packet of short readings (designated as SR)

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF TOPICS, READINGS, EXAMS, AND PAPERS

Introduction to the Course and to How We Define Poetry 1/19

Reading: "Poetic Forms and Literary Terminology" The degrees to which this standard introduction to poetic forms is and is not relevant to the texts examined in this class will be used as catalysts for our discussion of how we define "poetry."
Note: The reading assignments are short at the beginning of the semester. This would be a good time to decide: (1) which Dickinson poem you would like us to discuss; (2) which Momaday poem you will select for the Oxford UP web site (see below); and (3) what your paper topic might be.

Crossing Over Chantways: Songs of Self and Hózhó (Whitman & The Nightway)

Readings: Matthews / Bierhorst, Night Chant (handout); Map & 1/19, 26; 2/2
Diagrams, Witherspoon, Faris, Roemer, "Nightway Questions" (all in SR)
Readings: Whitman, "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn
Ferry," Emerson, "The Poet" (SR) 2/2, 9
Readings: Whitman and Nightway Compared -- Implications 2/16

Decide which Dickinson poem you would like discussed 2/16
First Examination (Whitman & The Nightway) 2/23
Momaday web page assignments agreed upon 3/1

Emily and Her Native Offspring (Dickinson, Momaday, Ortiz, Harjo)

Readings: Dickinson / Johnson, Final Harvest; Lincoln, from "Strangers Alike" in Sing (compares Dickinson to Sitting Bull), Lincoln, "Dickinson's Privilege to Die" from Sing, Eberwein, Miller (all in SR) 3/1, 8

Second Examination: Dickinson 3/15

Spring Break 3/20-26

Readings: Wiget, Roemer, "Bear and Elk," Maddox, Lincoln "Indian Poetry In Our Time" from Sing (all in SR) 3/29
Reading: Momaday, The Gourd Dancer and "New Poems" from Presence (handouts); Schubnell, Lincoln, "Old Songs Made New" (both in SR); 3/29, 4/5
Momaday web page assignment distributed to class 4/5
Final Draft of web page assignment due 4/12
Readings: Ortiz, Woven Stone; Scarberry-Garcia (SR) 4/5, 4/12
Readings: Harjo, Horses, Mad in Love, and Woman; Wilson (SR), Lincoln, "Sax Dance Stick" (SR) 4/19, 26

Brief Presentations of Papers & Review for Exam 5/3
Papers Due 5/5
Final Exam (Momaday, Ortiz, and Harjo) 5/10

EXAMINATIONS

All the exams are "open book." Each of the three exams will consist of two essay questions. One will focus on a series of interrelated questions about a poem or part of a poem. The other will be a question related to the issues raised in the second paragraph of the "Nature and Goals" section of this syllabus. Grading criteria: I am particularly interested in the logic, support, and focus of your arguments. I expect you to support claims with specific relevant examples from the poems and criticism and to direct all your arguments to the question asked. I use a "blind" grading procedure, i.e., I do not know who I am grading as I grade.
WEB SITE ASSIGNMENT

I am the editor of the Momaday home page for Cary Nelson’s Anthology of Modern American Poetry (NY: Oxford University Press, 2000). (See handouts and <http://ww.english.uiuc.edu/maps>.) I convinced Professor Nelson to include a brief essay (1000 - 1500 words; about four-to-six pages) on each of the ten poems he included. With some combination of anarchy, democracy, and totalitarianism we will parcel out the poems. Each essay should comment on the form and topic or issues of the poem and include a brief bibliography (e.g., the relevant pages in Shubnell’s "Momaday’s Poetry," relevant comments in essays by Wiget, Roemer, Maddox, and Lincoln’s Native American Renaissance and Sing With the Heart of a Bear ). Your approach to the poem is up to you. Before you turn in your "final" draft, all the drafts will be circulated so that we can help each other with our drafts. You will be able to add this item as an electronic publication to your vita. Any of you who are web creative can suggest other written or visual additions to the web. I will contact Professor Nelson about these additions. If he agrees, they will be added. You will get credit for whatever you do.

SHORT RESEARCH PAPER

Approximate length: 3000-3500 words (about twelve-to-fifteen, double-spaced pages). Although we stress a comparative approach in this course, your paper can, if you wish, concentrate on an important aspect of one poet, and you are free to adopt whatever critical or theoretical approach you deem most appropriate for your analysis (provided you can justify your approach). Criteria: your paper should demonstrate your ability to: (1) select a focus, argument, and approach that you can justify as being significant and (in the case of the approach) appropriate; (2) integrate intelligently your own ideas and the ideas of relevant critics; (3) support arguments adequately and organize them in logical and convincing ways; (4) present you arguments in an engaging fashion; (5) submit a final draft that is not marred by "mechanical" problems (e.g., typos or spelling, punctuation, and grammar problems). Your focus should be influenced by the length requirement. Too broad a focus invites superficiality. An overly narrow focus can invite repetition and pose problems in defining the significance of the topic.

Those of you who select Whitman of Dickinson can survey the scholarship for your topic by first consulting James Woodress’s Eight American Authors, revised ed., which covers the scholarship through 1970. Then you can survey the relevant parts of the Dickinson or Whitman sections of each of the annual American Literary Scholarship Volumes. The advantage of these sources is that they offer descriptions and evaluations of the articles, chapters, and books. These can be supplemented with surveys of the Walt Whitman Quarterly and the Emily Dickinson Journal, and of Whitman and Dickinson bibliographies and critical / reference works such as The Emily Dickinson Handbook. For the American Indian poets, begin with the bibliographies for the Native American Writers of the United States DLB essays
(Schubnell, Scarberry-Garcia, Wilson) and with A. La Vonne Ruoff’s American Indian Literatures. Another good beginning point is Studies in American Indian Literatures (SAIL), which has published articles on all three poets. And of course there are a variety of web and home pages and listservs. Which ever sources you use, it is crucial to have some idea of your focus and argument before your begin your searchers. If you don’t, your search will probably be inefficient and frustrating. I require the MLA format for the paper. I am willing to look over outlines and drafts up to one week before the due date, but, except for documented emergencies, I do not accept late papers.

IMPORTANT CLASS AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Class discussion is important. This is a cooperative enterprise. Hence class attendance is important. Professors are not permitted to drop students for excessive absences; however, in this class for every three unexcused absences, the semester grade drops by a half grade. If you withdraw from the course, please follow Graduate School deadlines and University policies. Otherwise your transcript will be graced with an F. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will be handled according to University policies. For a good definition of various types of plagiarism, see the "Writer's Responsibility" section of the Graduate School’s Thesis and Dissertation Manual available at <www.uta.edu/etd/>.

APPROXIMATE GRADING WEIGHTS AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Each of the exams (20%); the Momaday web site assignment (10%); research paper (30%). Improvement and consistent class participation can raise the semester grade. Extra work on the web site will also be taken into consideration. Also I am very willing to work with students with disabilities. At the beginning of the semester, these students should provide me with documentation authorized by the appropriate University office.