

## SYLLABUS

### ENGL 4514 (CRN 12831) – CONTEMPORARY POETRY (Spring 2009)

Monday/Wednesday 2:30-3:45pm, MCB 226

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### **DESCRIPTION**

ENGL 4514 is a literature course in post-1950 contemporary American poetry. While the logical place to begin the course might have been with the hugely influential poetic developments of the “Middle Generation” poets in the 1950’s, we are starting, instead, with three very contemporary (young, hip, living) American poets. Because I wanted us to take advantage of the exceptional visiting poets this semester, I’ve turned the syllabus on its head. This course will attempt to trace the development of several strands of autobiographical poetry emerging after World War II – in particular, the confessionalism of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell; the “journal poem” genre of Frank O’Hara; autobiographical discourses of otherness and displacement found in the poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Allen Ginsberg; Lyn Hejinian’s “open text” autobiography; and the ethno-poetics of the Black Arts movement and their poetic love-children, the Slam poets. I hope that we will both analyze and problematize notions of persona, masking, exhibitionism and confessionalism in contemporary American poetry. While we will examine aspects of Modernism and Post-Modernism within the poets under discussion, and apply critical and theoretical concepts to the poems we study, I am most interested in engaging the class in close stylistic analyses and readings of poems. My aim is to introduce you to what’s going on in the art form today and, most importantly, to get you to appreciate poetry through understanding its various cultural and historical contexts. On the most basic level, what does a poem do? How does poetry make its meanings? Why, why, and why? In this course you must be generous with your self and your peers, since a willingness to be wrong underscores all inquiry. Dedicate yourself to intellectual risk-taking, and to the unlearning of suppositions; in every endeavor, listen, question, hypothesize and, most of all, think. Remember, too, to leave your ego at the door: meanness of spirit compromises what we all do, as writers, scholars, and people.

**COURSE WEB PRESENCE** - <http://scholar.vt.edu>

### **REQUIRED TEXTS**

(available at the Virginia Tech Bookstore, your online retailer of choice, or on reserve at Newman Library)

- *Modern Life*, by Matthea Harvey
- *Wind in a Box*, by Terrance Hayes
- *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, by Sylvia Plath
- *Howl & Other Poems*, by Allen Ginsberg
- *Hardscrabble*, Kevin McFadden
- *Lunch Poems*, by Frank O’Hara
- *My Alexandria*, by Mark Doty
- *My Life*, by Lyn Hejinian
- *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (VOLUME 2: Contemporary), Edited by Jahan Ramazani, et al. (Please note: The 2 volume set can be had on amazon.com for ~\$47 new, and ~\$30 used.)

### **GRADES:**

- Class Participation (which includes attendance, class discussions, any daily class preparation assignments, and any pop-quizzes): 20%

- Portfolio (FOUR pieces of writing): 25%<sup>1</sup>
- Mid-Term Paper 1: 20%
- Final Paper 2: 30%
- Poem Presentation (leading class discussion): 5%

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. **READING:** Obviously, keeping up with the reading is important. You will be reading both entire collections of poems, and selections of poems from your Norton anthology. You will also be responsible for various essays and supplemental materials that I've posted on Scholar. Take notes on the poems and essays you read, underline important or confusing passages, and write down your questions as you go along. If you start each assignment early and give yourself plenty of time, you will not only enjoy it more and learn the material more thoroughly, but you will have more opportunities to consult with me (via e-mail, during office hours, etc.) about questions that you might have as you go along. The reading load for this class will be substantial and cumulative. This means that even after the class periods assigned to a given text have passed, we should have opportunities to discuss that text. Please feel free to refer back to previous texts in our discussions of new ones.
2. **DAILY CLASS PREPARATION:** For some class discussions, I will ask you to bring in specific observations or questions about the assigned readings. I will inform you of these assignments in class, and on Scholar in the "Assignments" section. If you are leading discussion on a day when there's a class preparation assignment due, you are excused from doing it. On any day when a larger writing assignment is due, we generally won't have a class preparation assignment. These will be graded with a check plus, check, or check minus, and be figured into your class participation grade (as will any reading quizzes).
3. **CLASS DISCUSSIONS:** Everyone should strive to make thoughtful contributions to class discussion on a regular basis. Because we all have different points of view and experiences, everyone's routine, informed participation should make discussion especially rich and valuable for us all. Although engaged listening is important, regular—even perfect—attendance does not constitute participation. Attendance is mandatory: more than three unexcused absences will automatically reduce your final grade. Three latenesses (more than 10 minutes late) count as one absence. While I appreciate knowing in advance if you will miss a class, informing me of it does not necessarily mean that you will be excused for that class. Each unexcused absence (after the first 3) will count 1/3 of a letter grade off your final course grade. (For example, if your final course average is numerically a "B," but you have 4 unexcused absences, the final course grade will become a "B-.")
4. **PORTFOLIO WRITING:** You will keep a portfolio of shorter writing for this course—regular entries that will be both analytical and creative. You will write **FOUR** entries across the semester on specific texts that I have assigned you, and you will receive a grade in points for these assignments, with 5 being the highest (e.g. 5/5, 4/5, etc.). These will be submitted electronically, to the "Drop Box" on Scholar:
  - a. **Portfolio #1:** For 2/4 you will be writing a 1-2 page informal response to a poem of your choice from Terrance Hayes's book *Wind in a Box* OR Matthea Harvey's *Modern Life*. (I'd prefer if you wrote on a Harvey poem, but you can do either.) Please use the questions on the "How to Read a Poem" handout (Scholar – Resources – Intro Materials – Portfolio-Related Handouts) to guide you.
  - b. **Portfolio #2:** For 2/18 you will be writing a more formal 2-page close reading paper on a poem of your choice from Mark Doty's book *My Alexandria*. The guidelines for this piece will be up on Scholar in the Assignments section.
  - c. **Portfolio #3:** For 3/23, you will be writing a 2-page book review of *Howl and Other Poems*. The guidelines for this piece will be up on Scholar in the Assignments section.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note: initially, the syllabus had 5 portfolio assignments, each worth 5% of your grade. If you choose to do Portfolio #4 (on *Lunch Poems*) this will still be the case. If you only do the required 4, each will be worth 6.25% of your grade.

- d. **Portfolio #4 (OPTIONAL):** For 4/1 you will be writing a 2-page paper relating an O’Hara poem (as specifically as you can) to an earlier poem that we’ve read.
  - e. **Portfolio #5:** For 4/13, you will be writing a Hejinian imitation. The guidelines for this piece will be up on Scholar (Scholar – Resources – Intro Materials – Portfolio-Related Handouts).
5. **PAPERS:** In addition to your portfolio pieces, you will compose two essays for this course: Paper 1 must be 4-6 pages; Paper 2 must be 8-10 pages. While your papers should engage with issues raised in class, they must focus on your own ideas about the texts that you analyze. Your papers can take ideas from your portfolio entries, or any other small writing assignments you may have done for the class, and develop them. Each paper should expound a thesis (position or argument) of your own design, and each should include substantial, detailed, careful close readings of quotations from the poems under analysis. I strongly encourage you to consult with me about your final paper well before it is due to discuss a final paper topic, or prior to the end of the semester to discuss a working draft of your final paper. These papers must be typed (word-processed) on standard paper, double-spaced, in MLA format, with 1-inch margins, in a standard 12-point font, such as *Times New Roman*. You must follow MLA style when quoting from other texts and creating a works cited list. Be sure to use the proper format for quoting verse, and make certain to use block quotations appropriately. Papers are due during class on the dates assigned, or in the Scholar drop-box—I will specify whether I want hard-copies of your work. Unless advance arrangements have been made, late papers will be penalized.
  6. **POEM PRESENTATION (LEADING CLASS DISCUSSION):** You will each be signing up for a 10-15 minute slot to lead discussion on a poet of your choice using the “Sign-up” function in Scholar. For your presentation, you will be selecting a poem in the assigned book, and preparing notes and questions so that you can lead the class through the poem that you’ve chosen. I will be modeling what I expect from you in class. Since there’s only a slot for your name in “Sign-up” please also go to the “Wiki” and submit your name and a specific poem title (indicating the poem that you’ll be presenting on, so there are no duplications). You can select your poem as late as the night before class, but whoever claims a poem first gets to lead discussion on it. I will be collecting your questions on the day you present, so be sure to have them typed up!

### **SOME LAST NOTES:**

- **GRAMMAR:** Grammar and Mechanics should be correct in all of your writings for this course. If you know you have trouble, see me, or get help at the Writing Center on the third floor of Shanks ([http://www.composition.english.vt.edu/wc/WC\\_Home.html](http://www.composition.english.vt.edu/wc/WC_Home.html)).
- **PLAGIARISM:** The Virginia Tech Honor System Constitution sets forth the vital principle that “Every student has the right to live in an academic environment that is free from the injustices caused by any form of intellectual dishonesty.” Therefore, the Virginia Tech Honor Code will be upheld in this course for all work submitted. See the Honor System website at [www.honorsystem.vt.edu](http://www.honorsystem.vt.edu).
- **DISABILITY STATEMENT:** Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a disability. Students should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), 150 Henderson Hall, 231-3788 (V), 231-1740 (TTY); Susan P. Angle, [spangle@vt.edu](mailto:spangle@vt.edu), [www.ssd.vt.edu](http://www.ssd.vt.edu). “Students with disabilities are responsible for self-identification....To be eligible for services, documentation of the disability from a qualified professional must be presented to SSD upon request.” If you are a student with special needs or circumstances, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or feel that you may need an accommodation because of a disability (learning disability, attention deficit disorder, psychological, physical, etc.) please make an appointment with me as soon as possible during my office hours.
- **ILLNESS:** To excuse an absence due to illness, I will need a note from Schiffert Health Center or a doctor.
- **IMPORTANT DATES:** Last day to add classes or to add/drop audit option – Monday, January 26; last day to drop a class without a grade penalty – Monday, March 2.