

Philosophy 90G: Native American Philosophy
Spring 2012

Instructor: Shawn Burns
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Office Hours: Thursdays, 1-3

Course Description:

This seminar is about classic questions in philosophy as viewed by contemporary Native American philosophers. Although these philosophers will often guide us through traditional beliefs, practices, religion, or history, the goal is to learn how they answer questions that are familiar to us as Western philosophers: “What is real? What is true? What is right? Who am I?”

In one sense, this way of learning Native American philosophy is completely misguided, since it privileges written, propositional, and (to borrow Thomas Norton-Smith's sentiment here) *inert* knowledge; it also privileges that classically Western division of the philosophical problem space and tries to squeeze Native American answers out of non-Native questions. As we will see, answers to these questions are often thoroughly inter-related, for Native philosophers. Keeping that in mind, we must be careful not to presume to be *doing* Native philosophy in this seminar, in the way we might say we are doing classical philosophy in a course on Descartes. But, insofar as the Native philosophers themselves are writing and presenting for, often, a classically-trained audience (and raising problems with or noting similarities with Western philosophical doctrines on the way), we can say in that sense that we are *learning* Native American philosophy, modestly.

We will be guided in our learning by Thomas Norton-Smith, who presents a brief, and accessible, work on what he thinks Native American philosophy is, what its central themes are, and why as a worldview it is just as legitimate as any other worth considering. We will follow Norton-Smith's blueprint for most of the seminar, supplementing his chapters with readings from Anne Waters' compilation of Native philosophy: *American Indian Thought*. The Native philosophy community is small, and mostly known to one another, so it will often be the case that Norton-Smith will be referencing ideas from one of the contributors to Waters' compilation. I have tried, when I can, to use those very readings from the compilation that complement what Norton-Smith has to say.

Course Readings:

The following texts will be available from the University bookstore:

Ed. Anne Waters, *American Indian Thought* (2004)

Thomas Norton-Smith, *The Dance of Person & Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy*

Course Requirements:

This class is about reading, writing, and talking, so there will be a lot of reading, writing, and talking. Students are expected to come to each seminar having read and considered the material so that conversations can happen. In furtherance of this, students are required to:

- 1) Attend class regularly, and participate actively.
- 2) Submit, by e-mail, short (somewhere between ½ a page and a full page, double spaced), thoughtful responses to one of the readings assigned each week by **11:59pm every Wednesday**, except for a week in which there is a paper due (5th week, 10th week), 7 in total.
- 3) Write two papers, 6-8 pages in length, based either on a prompt I will propose, or one that you clear with me ahead of time.

Grading:

Grades will be computed from the following:

7 Reading Responses: **15%**

1st paper: **35%**

2nd paper: **35%**

Class participation: **15%**

Schedule

Week 1: April 6th: Introduction

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 2 "Nelson Goodman's Constructivism"

Lee Hester Jr. "On Philosophical Discourse: Some Intercultural Musings" in Waters 263-267

Week 2: April 13th: What is Native American Philosophy?

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 1 "Common Themes in American Indian Philosophy"

Vine Deloria Jr. "Philosophy and Tribal Peoples" in Waters 3-11

Viola Cordova "Approaches to Native American Philosophy" in Waters 27-33

Week 3: April 20th: How Do We Know What We Know? What Can We Know? Part I

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 3 "True Versions and Cultural Bias"

Anne Waters "Language Matters: Nondiscrete, Nonbinary Dualism" in Waters 97-115

Week 4: April 27th: How Do We Know What We Know? What Can We Know? Part II

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 4 "Relatedness, Native Knowledge, and Ultimate Acceptability"

Brian Yazzie Burkhart "What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us" in Waters 15-26

Gregory Cajete "Philosophy of Native Science" in Waters 45-57

Week 5: May 4th (First Paper Due): Indianhood

Marilyn Notah Verney "On Authenticity" in Waters 133-139

Leslie Nawagesic "Phenomenology of a Mugwump Type of Life" in Waters 140-152

Anne Waters "Ontology of Identity and Interstitial Being" in Waters 153-170

Week 6: May 11th: Persons and Ethics

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 5 "An Expansive Concept of Persons"

Viola Cordova "Ethics: The We and the I" in Waters 173-181

Lee Hester Jr. "Choctaw Conceptions of the Excellence of the Self with Implications for Education" in Waters 182-187

Week 7: May 18th: Meaning

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 6 "The Semantic Potency of Performance"

Maureen E. Smith "Crippling the Spirit, Wounding the Soul" in Waters 116-129

Week 8: May 25th: What is Real?

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 7 "Circularity as a World-ordering Principle"

Ted Jojola "Notes on Identity, Time, Space, and Place" in Waters 87-96

Week 9: June 1st: Justice and Closing

Thomas Norton-Smith's *Dance of Person and Place*

Chapter 8 "The Dance of Person and Place"

Steve Russell "The Jurisprudence of Colonialism" in Waters 217-228

Dale Turner "Oral Traditions and the Politics of (Mis) Recognition 229-238

Annette Arkeketa "Repatriation: Religious Freedom, Equal Protection, and Institutional Racism"
in Waters 239-248

Week 10: June 8th (Second Paper Due): No Class