

Dr. John David Miles
Fall 2017, Th 1-4 pm
English 7/8281: Studies in Early American Literature

The Problem and Production of History in Early American Literature

Catalog Course Description

Studies in selected topics in American Literature from European-American contact until 1800. May be repeated for a maximum of 6 credit hours when topic changes.

Extended Course Description

The study of early American literature poses a number of theoretical problems for critics, many stemming from the perception of the period's precarious location at the intersection of literature and history. Writers from the period were often as concerned with the catalogue of their surroundings as they were the self-conscious production of literature in the post-Romantic sense, and these preoccupations have led critics from Perry Miller onward to skew their analyses toward the historiographic. On the other hand, critics interested in the metaphorical power of the period, such as Michael Colacurcio, have focused more on the production of 'great books,' even when the texts themselves seem to fall short of any current notion of such value.

Our class will take this divide not as a chasm to be crossed, but rather as a productive site of investigation. Beginning with Spanish-American contact in the sixteenth century and working our way into the early United States, we will consider how the dual challenges of form and content of colonial history continue to haunt the study of this period and its literature. Along the way we will encounter some of the most famous events from the exploration of the Americas, such as Cortés' account of the conquest of Mexico, as well as the mythic foundations of the United States, or at least the texts upon which that myth-making was based. We will attend throughout to how the demands of genre guide and deform the historical record, as well as how literary form changed to meet the needs of a post-contact world.

Students will assume the role of a scholar of early America and produce work consonant with such a role. Individual progress will be tracked through shorter written assignments, in-class presentations, and a longer seminar paper. Engaged class discussion is required throughout.

Course Objectives

By the end of the semester the successful student will be able to:

- Identify and discuss some of the major texts, genres, and authors of early American literature.
- Discuss the relationship between colonial American literature and later literary and historical movements.
- Recognize and evaluate some of the major critical and theoretical problems motivating the study of early American literature.
- Speak and write with authority about the primary texts and criticism of early American literature.
- Understand the practice of historiography and its role in the production of early American literature.