

Teaching Colonial America *With* Native Voices: Thinking Through a Decolonial Syllabus

What I bring here today is shaped by a number of factors: personal, institutional, intellectual—all naturally political. I am not American as such, but in a way I know what it feels like. Having immigrated to Israel at a young age, I was just Jewish enough to benefit from hegemonic privilege but quite enough to adopt its perspective. Thus, issues of colonization, displacement and narrative contestation all very close to heart. The continuity of the dominant narrative of Jewish religious-historical claim to the land of Israel with the oppressive politics of the Israeli state makes the decolonial emphasis on the power of knowledge altogether intuitive. At the same time, the very physical location of the Hebrew U campus clearly marks the academia for me as a location within the struggle rather than a neutral vantage point. That said, all too often when I want to address coloniality and Native perspectives in my research, I bounce back citing insufficient sources and insufficient time. This is why when my advisor prodded me to try for the “Decolonizing Pedagogies” panel, my thoughts went less to novel methodologies than to figuring out a practicable intervention within the strictures of current scholarly formations. While there is space to rethink pretty much everything about the Early American survey syllabus, from authority dynamics in the classroom to assignment design, I will be focusing on reading materials—due to both time constraints and because materials availability seems to be a particularly prominent barrier in the early colonial period where I am focused.

Aiming at a broad undergraduate public, I would not assign theory readings, but I would be broadly oriented towards Mignolo’s claim that “What matters is not economics, or politics, or history, but knowledge” (135); knowledge as a sum of stories and assumptions that undergird material practices. Having basically grown up in the poststructuralist tradition, I greatly appreciate the more concrete inflection of the decolonial analysis of knowledge and power over

the easily dispiriting unescapable Foucauldian “discourse.” Rather than tackle the entirety of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality triad, or the fundamental Western notions of objects and denotation as opposed to relationality and fluidity, I would be addressing a far more modest target: the American—meaning the United States—origin narrative as a European transplantation and its counterpart—the myth of the “Vanishing Indian.” While the explicit object of the course will be looking for Native voices in the Early American archive, it will also involve re-examining the canon of American emergence and the basic assumptions about the creation, transmission and function of texts. In the following, I’ll be talking through the narrative arc of the course through the relatively conservative shorter Norton anthology—chosen, rather than the more intentionally diverse Heath anthology, to make the point that we don’t need to look very far for a decolonial re-reading of an Early American classroom (.)

That said, the course would open, beside the necessary historical context, with a pairing of the Iroquois Creation Story with the first three chapters of Genesis. Especially on a Catholic campus—I come from the University of Notre Dame—a Biblical reading can help to dislodge the notion of “text” as an inert document disengaged from actual life as well as to make a point about mindful and respectful handling of texts. Using the heavily footnoted Geneva translation will both defamiliarize the text and demonstrate a living and adaptable quality even in the presumably quintessentially canonized and fixed print object. Genesis in particular can be used to spark a healthy discussion about the political functions of foundational narratives in regard to present controversies such as abortion and gay marriage—not trying to sway the students one way or the other but demonstrating how “knowledge” is “power” beyond the hackneyed maxim. The comparison between the Native and the Christian creation stories wouldn’t go so far as to extrapolate specific stances on particular issues, but just note that there is a range of possibilities:

stories can be transmitted orally and in print (which really applies to both), binaries can be very clear or rather muddled, and while Genesis seems almost universally recognizable, the reverse seems true of the Iroquois story.

The rest of the syllabus would be roughly divided between extricating Native voices from early colonizers' accounts and considering the later more direct Native testimonies. John Smith is perhaps the exemplary unreliable reporter, helping us set the stage for evaluating European relations. It's easy to agree that we can't trust him very far, but there are also productive avenues for engagement with his stories. We can follow in Myra Jehlen's lead to focus on moments of bafflement and uncertainty as places where the colonizer's discourse slips to reveal "human agency" (692). There are definitely moments where his relations don't quite make sense, and we can read them as instances where Smith's heavy-handed ideological impositions of imperial control and personal glorifications slip aside—not quite delivering a transparent window into the past, but perhaps granting us a brighter glimpse of the proceedings. Simple historicization can recast his account of his rescue by Pocahontas in terms of Native adoption practices, reconsidering and revising yet another US origin myth. The numerous scholarly rewritings of passages from Smith are not only educative but frankly hilarious (Firstbrook). They are definitely worth an extended class discussion on the implications of decolonial retelling and can model an engaging assignment.

William Bradford's far more level-headed narration offers a different set of challenges and opportunities. While it will be crucial to point out that his intense Protestant reading of past and present history belonged to a radical fringe, it is still an influential epistemological lens to account for. The more dispassionate account of landing, the unself-conscious grave-robbing and subsequent confused and confusing skirmish with Native warriors give a more reliable depiction

of colonial contact. Bradford is rather more forthright than Smith about the colonists' dependence on Native knowledge and aid in the opening sections, while their relative neglect in the later sections is significant for a discussion of silencing and erasure.

Mary Rowlandson's canonical captivity narrative will help develop these threads, especially as more research is available to offer as a correction, most eminently Lisa Brooks' *Our Beloved Kin* (.). Rowlandson's sensational opening *in medias res* contrasts with the embeddedness of the Wampanoag attacks in colonial expansion and Native resistance that exceeds far beyond King Philip's War as traditionally conceived. Brooks' recovery of Weetamoo and James Printer demonstrates both the narrowness of the colonial captive's portraiture and the crucial fact that with enough dedication to research, fuller accounts can be put together. The irony of James Printer's likely role as the typesetter for Rowlandson's narrative further fleshes out the materiality of stories and their embeddedness in histories and politics of transmission.

Roger Williams' *A Key into the Language of America* provides the exact opposite challenge: a front-and-center ethnography of the Narragansett people full of Native words and written from an exceptionally sympathetic standpoint, it delivers a great deal, and will be worth supplementing with excerpts beyond the Norton selections. At the same time, Patricia E. Rubertone's 2001 book gives a helpful run-through of both the informative limitations of Williams' account, based on later ethnographic and archeological evidence, and the troubling historical trail that the *Key* has left in its canonization as the ultimate authority on the Narragansett people (.).

As we move into the eighteenth century, we find Native writers speaking for themselves, which provide their own pedagogic challenges and opportunities. Samson Occom, like many other early Native writers who left an independent written record, is a Christian minister. His

subscription to an undoubtedly European vision of the world can be used to challenge simplistic notions of “authenticity” and further open up the history of US establishment restrictions on who counts as Indian. His personal narrative shines a revealing light on the differential openness of the Christian establishment: while Occom finds easy access to New Light itinerant preachers, he finds himself exploited and mistreated by the Presbyterian establishment. The Pauline allusions in his language, particularly the reference to his pity and compassion “to my Poor Brethren According to the Flesh” open up a look into a distinctly Native inflection of Christianity, as Occom leans into the popular theory of Jewish origins rather than treat his people as pagan idolaters. This is similarly exemplified in the Sermon for Moses Paul, with its differing addresses to the condemned, to the white “*reverend gentlemen and fathers* in Israel,” and to “My Poor Kindred,” again addressed as “brethren ... according to the flesh.”

Hendrick Aupaumut provides another example of vibrant adaptation, starting with his biographical involvement in the Revolutionary War and his lifelong diplomatic commitment to peaceful conflict resolution between the United States and Native communities. His ethnography of the Mahican people is just as much Christian as it is an insider Native account, offering another complex glimpse at Native existence and self-presentation. Aupaumut can also serve the class to cast a critical look back at Williams’ ethnography. What kinds of blind spots can we identify in Williams’ view of Native culture and history that do not prove a visible problem for Aupaumut? How might their different audiences factor into that? What lines of continuity can we trace between the accounts? What does Christianity mean and do for these two very different Christians?

William Apress, the Pequot Methodist minister, closes the mini-trajectory of Christian Native writers. “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” presents an unapologetic

indictment of White incursions on Native rights and sovereignty. Various drawing on the resources of individualistic capitalism, Christian morality, natural law, and common-sense ethics, he sounds a memorable personal voice that prefigures future resistance movements. At the same time, he addresses very specific issues of nineteenth-century Native existence: alcohol addiction; land expropriation (often fueled through the former), and converging legal and extra-legal forms of oppression. Though voicing a minority position, Apess powerfully decenters White hegemony by reminding his readers that “they are still but a handful” compared to the rest of the world’s inhabitants, and curiously challenges the imaginary of whiteness by proposing that “each skin [should have] its national crimes written upon it.”

The two later Native “thematic clusters” of the Shorter Norton, “Native American Eloquence: Negotiation and Resistance” and “Native Americans: Removal and Resistance,” offer further opportunities to bring together the different strands of the course towards its conclusion. The biographical headnotes invite us to consider the different strands of Native lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the variety, the commonalities, and the gaps in the historical record. The eighteenth-century speeches bring back the issue of oratory as a generic category as well as matters of transmission, translation and reliability. Apess’ relation of “King Philip’s Speech” and the *Cherokee Phoenix*’ announcement of a distinctive Native presence in the world of print entirely “for the benefit of the Cherokees” will help probe different memory practices; rhetorics of utterance and rhetorics of print; and, on our end, respectful practices of critical reading and assessment. The content of the excerpts, from conciliatory diplomacy through aggrieved threats to the Whites and to inward-looking calls to Native people against European influences, again showcase the diversity of Native approaches and responses to historical realities.

Finally, I would finish the course with a full reading of John Rollin Ridge's 1854 *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit* (.). Regarded as the first novel to be published by a Native American, it has enough lurid violence to compete with cinema offerings, and can easily hold students' attention. On the more serious side, a Cherokee writer's fictional biography of a Mexican outlaw's exploits in the newly US state of California opens up questions of solidarity, its failings, and the complexity of Native identities. The subject matter is sure to bring up current political issues, which can be a useful segue to consider the present-day relevance of the texts and topics raised throughout the course.

To conclude, this is obviously only a bare outline of a decolonial Early American course, and I lay no claim to any kind of perfect credentials. I do think that this demonstrates the ready possibility of centering Native voices and perspectives in an Early American survey course leaning on widely available materials, and it can of course be tailored to suit individual preferences and institutional strictures.

- Brooks, Lisa. *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War*. Yale University Press, 2018.
- Firstbrook, Peter. *A Man Most Driven: Captain John Smith, Pocahontas and the Founding of America*. Oneworld Publications, 2014.
- Jehlen, Myra. "History before the Fact; Or, Captain John Smith's Unfinished Symphony." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1993, pp. 677–92. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/1343902.
- Levine, Robert S. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Volume 1: Beginnings to 1865*. 2017.
- Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Ridge, John Rollin. *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1977.
- Rubertone, Patricia E. *Grave Undertakings: An Archaeology of Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001.