

Designing the Early American Literature Component of the Undergraduate American Literature Survey Course

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The latest American literary histories published by Columbia and Cambridge University Presses and designed by a variety of prominent Americanist scholars employed by a variety of prominent American and English universities introduce early American literature as modern American literature in embryo. The latest anthologies of American literature, under the general editorships of a variety of prominent Americanist scholars and designed by a variety of younger scholars trained by them, do likewise.

There are several esoteric philosophical, methodological, and empirical reasons, and even a few more obvious political reasons, to resist this way of conceptualizing the relationship between the surviving written record of the European colonies of North America and the literature of the modern U.S. These objections are to be raised, on the relatively rare occasions when they are permitted to be raised, in specialized scholarly journals and monographs addressed to specialists in American literary historiography.

There is another, pedagogical, reason to resist it: it doesn't work in classrooms filled with non-specialist, never-to-become-specialist, fickle, browsing, general-education students who will never become convinced—I have become convinced after over thirty years trying to teach them

—that Mary Rowlandson’s seventeenth-century account of the death in her arms of her six-year-old daughter Sarah after Rowlandson’s capture by an Algonkian war party anticipates William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* or that Jonathan Edwards’s eighteenth-century letter to an acolyte describing his childhood fondness for retiring to a “booth in the swamp” for religious contemplation anticipates Thoreau’s *Walden*.

But how, then, are these same students to be exposed, in all pedagogical responsibility and fairness, to what may not work for them, but which has been a remarkably successful—virtually the unanimous—approach to early American literature since certain nationalist mid-nineteenth-century journalists began developing an amateur interest in American literary antiquities? How to expose students, as quickly and as painlessly as possible, to the wisdom received from any number of dry, scholarly, emphatically non-belletristic sources extending back even long before Perry Miller and the Harvard American Civilization program?

Forcing them to read anything is hard. Forcing them to read Benjamin Franklin or (try this some time) Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards is very, very, hard. Forcing them to read secondary sources—in the case of my courses it would have to be a sampling of the modern scholarship that is responsible for establishing the canon of early American literature that includes men like Franklin, Mather, and Edwards—you might call child abuse.

Getting them to sit through the openings of Ridley Scott’s *1492, Conquest of Paradise* and Bruce Beresford’s *Black Robe* is a cinch. And afterward it’s only a little harder to get them to recognize how the rhetoric of what is doubtless to them the most familiar of all current media—

that is, motion picture, along with all of its equally familiar para-cinematic ancilla (music, movement, titles, sound, etc.)—might be functioning subtly to modernize what seems on the surface a transparent, scrupulously faithful representation of various archaisms of the medieval counter-Reformation Catholic culture that sponsored the Spanish and French explorations of what would eventually be known as North America.

It takes about ten minutes to show both excerpts and maybe another ten to try to defamiliarize them. So in about a half hour I think I can manage to unpack several cinematic manipulations the way I have been trying to unpack—over many many years in what has become by now probably hundreds of pages of highly theoretical meta-critical and largely unread prose—how modern American scholarship has for many more years been bending to modern interests certain favored ancient facts.

1492, Conquest of Paradise is Ridley Scott's 1992 quincentenary homage, not just to Columbus, but multiculturally to all three of the cultures that found themselves involved in Christendom's eventual discovery, exploration, and settlement of what came to be called—ironically much more by much later U.S. commentators than by the original discoverers, explorers, and settlers themselves—the new world. The opening credits—and this is true also of the opening credits of *Black Robe*—para-cinematically begin the process of modernization even before the action proper starts. Composer Vangelis artfully weaves together three, easily recognizable motifs—generically native-American drumming and wood flutes, solo male voice recalling Islamic call to prayer, and finally unison chorale recalling medieval Christian plainsong—thus suggesting musically at the outset the possibility of an eventual reconciliation among the

three cultures that of course harmonized only very sporadically, while spending most of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries mainly trying to annihilate one another; proof that the score sounds uplifting and inspirational to pretty much anybody can be found in its having been pirated to accompany a hyper-nationalist amateur video—“2008 China Stand Up”—that went viral in China after the Beijing Olympics (the amateur filmmaker, Tang Jie, found the soundtrack when he searched “solemn music” on a Chinese search engine). As the music plays and the opening credits roll, the camera pans slowly over period woodcuts in close-up through a colored wash—precisely this, too, occurs in the credit sequence of *Black Robe*. The introduction implicitly emphasizes the individual craftsmanship of the individual craftsmen who made the images, transforms them from medieval and early renaissance craftsmen into proto-modern artists and transforms their images into museum-worthy artworks. But what it implicitly disguises is both that whatever signature genius early individual craftsmen might have possessed is evidently so much beside the point for the early culture that they remain, almost every single one of them, unacknowledged and anonymous, and also that the whole structures of the maps and woodcuts they made, which would be apparent were the maps and woodcuts shown in their entirety in wider shots, would of course look to the modern eyes of modern moviegoers either primitive or ignorant or un- or only barely intelligible. And even the key component of films as constituting the uniquely modern genre—that films are, of course, motion pictures—is also foregrounded by what may seem on the surface the antiquarian restriction of the credit sequence to period still images; in addition to modernizing and humanizing, the credits also implicitly narrativize because the extreme close-up scrutiny of individual images of North American Indians and

colonists makes the images appear far more mimetic than the images would if witnessed in the original visual context, the flat non-perspectival and routinely alternating supernaturalistic and naturalistic iconography of the whole early maps and woodcuts—again, all of this appearing also, virtually identically, in the credit sequence of *Black Robe*.

Lest all of these visual and aural cues be lost on the audience, the credit sequence concludes by rolling the following epigraph: “500 years ago, Spain was a Nation gripped by Fear and Superstition Ruled by the Crown and a Ruthless Inquisition that Persecuted Men for Daring to Dream /One Man Challenged this Power/Driven by His Sense of Destiny, He Crossed the Sea of Darkness . . .”.

The action opens with a long shot of Columbus sitting with his youngest son, and eventual biographer, Ferdinand seated in front of him and with a mule behind them on a rock outcropping at the edge of the ocean in the midst of a wild surf; their silhouettes seem in the distance as jagged as the rocks they’re sitting on—the jaggedness of the silhouettes is enhanced by both Columbus and Ferdinand wearing identical period angular hats—and the silhouettes are the same shade of brown as the rocks, making the human beings seem indistinguishable from the rough shoreline; although the boy is securely situated in the near embrace of his father, the mule, no doubt conveniently present for this purpose, is shying backward because the surf is wild enough for the spray to reach it. Nature, in the form of a violent sea pounding a very treacherous shoreline—a shoreline that may exist someplace in western Spain but that of course is nowhere present in the inland Seville from which Columbus actually set sail—thus constitutes no more than a bracing challenge, even to a father with a young child in tow, and will soon be

transformed by Columbus into a teaching moment. A ghastly public execution in the square at Seville will prove to be far the more traumatic threat to little Ferdinand in the scene two scenes later that is obviously designed to recall the opening one, and to encourage an invidious distinction between the menace of “a Ruthless Inquisition” and that of “the Sea of Darkness,” no matter how dark.

Columbus is peeling an orange, both a treat for the boy and also, before it gets eaten, an aid to pedagogy, while they both watch a mast on the horizon slowly disappear. “Close your eyes, and don’t cheat,” Columbus tells Ferdinand, for no really good reason, since the gradual disappearance of the mast as the boat sails away would presumably be as effective a proof of the earth’s shape as would be the mast’s vanishing while Ferdinand’s eyes are closed. But that Columbus combines treats and child’s-play with instruction—even what would be taken to be revolutionary, epochal instruction by the majority of American audiences doubtless not apprised of what was actually generally known about the earth’s shape by even moderately educated fifteenth-century people—makes of Columbus a precociously gentle, child-centered Piagetian authority figure, one who implicitly is to be distinguished from and of course preferred over the brutal authoritarians who rule the old world through “Fear and Superstition.” When at the end of the scene Ferdinand, eyes open, quizzically regards an empty horizon, Columbus laughs, brandishes the peeled orange in front of him: “It’s round! It’s round!” Which lesson of course had been learned around the time of Aristotle, something the film takes care to acknowledge, although rather a long time later, in a scene dramatizing Columbus’s examination at the University of Salamanca, but which lesson can always already be learned even especially by the

unlearned, even by children, by simply looking. Prior to the end of the first scene, while the mature voice of the adult Ferdinand who would become his father's biographer voices over that his father wanted "to get behind the weather," the camera frames in extremely tight close-up and shallow focus Columbus's left eye, and then quickly shifts focus to reveal the rough sea that had been out of focus behind him. Show it the next time you try to explain to your students the relationship between romantic epistemology and romantic ontology; there is to my knowledge no more striking visual representation of how one might understand Emerson's famous but often somewhat mystifying claim in "Nature" to have turned himself into "a transparent eyeball."

After the next scene at a monastery, during which Columbus gets to vent a variety of frustrations to a largely sympathetic senior monk and to suggest his disappointment with his elder son Diego, who, unlike Ferdinand, was lost to his father by becoming a novice there, Columbus rides into Seville with Ferdinand behind him—on a very tired mule if it's the same one that was earlier frightened by the ocean spray. The palette in the square is reminiscent of the one at the ocean, except now the browns are the color not of rocks but of an indistinct and noisy roiling crowd rushing to watch the spectacle. When Ferdinand jumps off of the back of the mule and loses himself in the crowd, Columbus, very unlike the case in the opening scene, can neither find nor shield him. And what Ferdinand ends up witnessing when he manages to get himself up close, at the foot of the scaffold, is this: a female victim is offered the opportunity to repent, she accepts and kisses the cross, and then, in very tight close-up, in what is designed to shock and appall not only little Ferdinand but modern audiences, very few of whom would know what was

considered mercy by fifteenth-century Inquisitorial standards, she is not freed but is garroted, so to spare her being burned at the stake.

When, long after the female victim's tongue lolls out of her mouth while she is being strangled, the film dutifully acknowledges the primarily religious rationale which was at least the Crown's public justification for sacrificing the resources needed to sponsor Columbus's expedition—a Thanksgiving for what was considered by Christian Spain the miracle of the retaking of Granada after centuries of Muslim rule—and when, in passing, the film also notes dutifully that another of these Thanksgivings in 1492 was the expulsion, forced conversion, or execution of every single Jew who could be found to reside in that year in Spain, it does little to nuance a very old and simplistic moral that continues to obtain, especially in the U.S., especially among U.S. schoolchildren: contrasted to what civilization had devolved into in the old world, what nature promises to evolve into in the new proves mankind's best hope to depend on the eventual founding of what Perry Miller would famously celebrate as Nature's Nation.

Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe*, the 1991 Australian-Canadian movie much praised, especially for the fidelity of its depictions of early, post-encounter native American culture in Quebec, and adapted by the Irish-Canadian writer Brian Moore from his 1985 literary novel of the same name, begins with a credit sequence that, as I've already noted, rolls over another slow close-up pan through a colored wash across period woodcuts and maps. The action begins with a clever, as it were natural, fade-in from the black of a close-up of the back of Father Laforgue's robe as he walks away from the camera, inviting viewers to follow him into a Williamsburg- or Old-Sturbridge-Village-esque living history reenactment of life in seventeenth-century New

France. Laforgue's proto-multiculturalist credentials are quickly and efficiently established with his curt rebuke of a French trapper named Mercier for trading the Indians brandy for pelts. The film's own multiculturalist credentials have I suppose already been established by its implicitly endorsing Native American popular culture with its title, which is a less-than-respectful Indian slang term for the Jesuits; equal sympathy for period French popular culture is quickly and efficiently established through a salacious little exchange among some common builders seen using period tools to raise a post-and-beam structure: "Remember the priest who came back like that?" miming a mangled hand. "That's just fingers. You could lose, eh, something more useful," followed by a knowing wink—the film is as careful as *1492* about its historical references: castration was not unknown among Amerindian tortures. Finally, even the Royal governor's multiculturalist credentials as an authority figure equally as incredibly caring and as precociously evolved as *1492*'s Columbus are quickly and efficiently established by restricting Champlain's brief cameo in the opening of the movie to his being shown tolerating two, extremely fierce-looking, Indian warriors to play some sort of indigenous counter game on the floor of the anteroom of his headquarters in Quebec, and his very visible concern—in tight close up—for the earthly welfare of the hero missionary Father Laforgue—"Fifteen hundred miles, by canoe, in that country, at the beginning of the winter. Death is almost certain, Father Bork," which concern is made to seem all the more advanced in contrast to the much more historically correct, theistic indifference concerning death, which is "not always a great evil" according to Champlain's conveniently present interlocutor, the New France Jesuit Superior Father Bork.

And finally there is the very personification of multi-cultural hybridity, a handsome young green-eyed wild-haired French *voyageur*, who is glimpsed briefly helping the builders but who does not, significantly, participate in their ribaldry. Rather, he silently follows Father Laforgue into a rude chapel into which a group of native Americans has been lured with the promise of witnessing momentarily the chiming of “Captain Clock,” a period French timepiece placed on the altar in an excellent dramatization of the kind of evangelical trickery that the Jesuits’ iconoclast Reformation opponents so loathed. Father Laforgue motions to Daniel to approach; Daniel approaches, but it becomes pellucidly clear, although it remains unspoken, that Daniel has, fortunately, divided loyalties, being locked into a powerful, virtually an occult, intimacy with a beautiful Indian maiden—the first film role of Sandrine Holt (remember Pocohontas in *Pocohontas The Legend?*), a generically exotic, French-Chinese face seen in tight close-up among the many other, genuinely native-American, ones waiting for Captain Clock to speak. The connection between these two is shown to be so strong that it can transcend even physical space, much less the expected linguistic and cultural barriers: Daniel, walking slowly toward Father Laforgue, is staring from behind her, in tight close-up, at the back of her head, at a distance of several yards, at one point with a chapel pillar intervening, and yet she, also in tight close-up, feels a gaze she's not even looking at and chastely lowers her eyes. At the end of the movie Father Laforgue won’t survive his journey into the interior; Daniel and his Indian maiden will not only survive, but will mate to produce a progeny that promises literally, genetically, to constitute the new, improved, hybrid race that their parents can embody only in prospect, in their xenophilic passion for one another

The text that I assign after showing the openings of both *1492* and *Black Robe* is Isaac Jogues's *Novum Belgium*, an account included in a letter to his Jesuit Superior of his 1642 capture by Iroquois in New France, which was first published in old France in 1655. (For the longest time I had to xerox copies of Jogues's *Novum Belgium* for my undergraduates out of the long-out-of-print *Held Captive By Indians*, Richard Van Der Beets's 1973 University of Tennessee Press collection. The new millennium has seen the publication, under the general editorship of the editor of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* and multiculturalist *par excellence* Paul Lauter, of *American Captivity Narratives*, edited by Gordon Sayre, whose third chapter reprints Van Der Beets's reprinting of John Gilmary Shea's [S.J.] 1857 translation—from what Jogues, himself, calls “the less common idiom,” Latin—of Jogues's account.) That Père Jogues's sympathies are much more in keeping with those of the Jesuit Superior depicted in *Black Robe* than with those of *Black Robe*'s Champlain can be made brutally, and not a bit ironically, clear by recalling the vow Jogues made to Pope Urban VIII on the occasion of being granted the indulgence of permission to return for a second, which would turn out for Jogues to be a fatal, missionary assignment to New France in 1646 despite having been relieved by the Iroquois of his left thumb in the earlier mission recorded by Jogues in *Novum Belgium*, and thus being technically disqualified from handing out the Host: “Yes, Father, I will all that our Lord wills, and I will it at the peril of a thousand lives” (Shea 84). Such a radically ascetic, more than a genocidal, an omnicidal, promise can be represented to students as much more than a customary genuflection to seventeenth-century counter-Reformation piety or Papal authority—or what Jogues's most recent modern editor Sayre worries might repel modern readers as “a bizarre

masochism” (92); it can be read as a blunt declaration of what has been to a modern readership the nearly undetectably subtle supra-nationality of the entire account, beginning with Jogues’s introductory explanation of his choice of Latin to communicate it. Beyond ensuring that “this letter will be less open to all,” in particular to the Dutch Calvinists who save Jogues’s body but who threaten, because of their Reformation Christianity, not only Jogues’s soul but the entire soul-saving Jesuit missionary enterprise, “the less common idiom” helps to sustain “the character I here bear imposed on me by God as a preacher of his Gospel, a Jesuit and a priest” despite appearing “a savage now [my]self in form and dress,” and, most important for my purposes, helps transport Jogues not only out of his immediate surroundings in North America but out of the world entirely: Latin is the language of the Catholic bible, thus making Jogues “better able to use the words of Holy Scripture, which have been, at all times, my greatest consolation,” words to which he returns to interrupt and distract attention from the most eventful events of his captivity, whenever, he confesses in the final paragraph of *Novum Belgium*, he finds himself “almost without God in so tossed a life” (95, 121). Imagine the delight of those many of us who would detect the origins of our own modern melting pots in the Euro-Indian dramas of the early Americas, whether through the amateur hindsight of modern filmmakers or the professional researches of modern early Americanists, had Jogues only chosen to write in some creolized multi-lingual combination of the three languages—European vernacular, North American Indian vernacular, elite scholastic acrolect—in which he is fluent, or had he only chosen to narrate in a little detail as a proto-modern novelist or historian some of that “tossing” of all of his adventures among the Indians, or as a proto-modern anthropologist to absorb himself in those unique,

primitively natural native American practices that depart shockingly from European custom, and that Jogues chastely declines to report: “here, willing or not, you must often see what elsewhere is shut out, not only from wandering, but even from curious eyes” (121).

The title of Irish-Canadian Brian Moore's next novel—after *Black Robe*—is *No Other Life*; “there is no other life” were according to Moore the very last words whispered to him by his very pious Irish Catholic grandmother, having apparently experienced an eleventh-hour non-conversion, realizing on her deathbed what Edward Said knew all along: no matter how fanatically religious a modern nation may claim to be, it lives in the world, as a worldly state, after all. I exaggerate only slightly by concluding that, especially in the midst of “so tossed a life,” Jogues dwells on a Latin scripture that not only propels him out of the North American wilderness but that is to him also only insignificantly reminiscent of the civilized world of France or Rome or even Jesuit Catholicism—or when after Jogues the celebrated Anglo-American captive Mary Rowlandson or before Jogues the celebrated Latino-American captive Alvar Nuñez Cabeza De Vaca both give thanks to God and attribute to God what they both summarily declare to be simply the miracles of being able somehow repeatedly to cross the many rivers that confronted all the peoples of early North America as prime topographical barriers, feats that seem to us to owe nothing to the supernatural and everything to early American frontier skills doubtless mastered by their Indian captors, skills that the world of European conquest and colonization would have profited greatly from learning, but that are never described by any early Euroamerican captives in any detail—I exaggerate only slightly by concluding to my students that for all three of them, there is only other life.

Works Cited

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