Introduction

Narratives of Early America Old and New

For many years, the period covered by “early American literature” ran from about 1620 to 1800, or, on one end, from the launch of the Mayflower Pilgrims from the western shores of Cornwall to, on the other, the presidential election of Thomas Jefferson and the end of the Federalist period. In the last twenty years or so, and for reasons many of the chapters in this collection discuss, scholars have widened the temporal and geographic scope of the area and have, as a consequence, both broadened the field’s archive and changed the literary historical perspective a reader today might have on it. No longer exclusively focused on the mostly male-authored texts and experiences of English settlement in New England and Virginia, scholars now consider writing by Spanish, French, and Portuguese settlers; previously ignored writing and communication by both women and Indigenous persons; and writing by both enslaved and formerly enslaved peoples not just in the colonial southern United States but across the Caribbean, the Atlantic ocean, and the Gulf of Mexico. This last area of research, it should be noted, was one of the primary locations of the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic trade in enslaved human beings, one of the key economic engines of imperial colonialism in what are now deemed the continents of North and South America.

Early American literature, as the saying goes, ain’t what it used to be. Perhaps one way to measure the distance between former and current concepts of the field would be a brief return to the first Cambridge Companion to Early American Literature, written in 2002 by the late Emory Elliott. It’s a terrific book in every way, definitive of the Cambridge Companion genre’s commitment to presenting literary history to a range of readerships in readable prose and accessible, sharply framed concepts. The 2002 installment is also a monograph, a solo-authored effort, and one which, in fairness, reflected the scholarship not just of the day but of its author as well. It offers a view of the field through a solitary, albeit widely read and deeply respected voice – I will suggest that such a version of a Cambridge Companion to Early

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American Literature could only with great conceptual difficulty be written today. This is not faultfinding; rather, it speaks only to the idea that a single author could effectively capture the range and diversity of early American literature as it manifested itself at the turn of the twenty-first century. The field’s blossoming has made that idea strange.²

“Early American literature” no longer means the literature of colonial New England, and it does not necessarily even speak English. In 1997, Gordon Sayre published Les Sauvages Americains, a study of English and, significantly, French colonial encounters with Indigenous peoples in New England, Quebec, and what used to be called “Upper Canada.” To be sure, Sayre was not the first to study colonial history in a francophone cultural and historical setting, but it was one of the first such studies written from within a contemporary early American scholarly context with the specific aim of confronting that context’s exclusionary and monolingual traditions. The book was, in retrospect, something of a game changer, and we now have a much more robust set of studies, conferences, conversations, and curricular developments that together assume a multilingual scholarly perspective and sweep. French, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese, African, and Native-Indigenous language(s) are now broadly considered to be part of the linguistic universe and historical record of the early Americas.²

As a consequence of the geographic and linguistic diversification of the colonial archive, the old temporal boundaries have become more fluid as well. They now extend earlier, into the sixteenth and even fifteenth centuries, with Columbus and the Spanish missionary landings in what is now the southern United States emerging as contributing voices of this diversified archive of early American coloniality (as an example, see Allison Bigelow’s chapter in this volume). On the other end of this expanding timeline, we now read later into the nineteenth century, as scholars reconceptualize the persistence of colonialism into the War of 1812 and beyond, even to the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 as signaling the United States’ transformation from colonial to imperial nation. Marion Rust’s chapter in this volume, for example, offers insights into how to read early American novels, ur-novels, and novel-like prose texts produced up to 1827. While some might observe that such broadening entails a blurring of focus and others might judge it to be anachronistic, the generally expansive trajectory of early American literary and cultural studies has made a huge impact on how we teach and think about the nation’s complicated historical pasts.³

And this is altogether a good thing, most would agree, not least because the diversification of the field’s constituent parts, voices, and histories has led to one of the most intellectually exciting periods of professional study in the area. The robust culture of early American literary and cultural studies has
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also aligned with and, to some extent, driven the conversations of the broader community of American studies scholarship.4 Take any one of the important conversations in American studies of the last twenty years, be it race-slavery and its continuing aftermath; Indigenous encounter, removal, or genocide; national identity and America’s exceptional “special status” as a nation; aesthetic development and cultural sovereignty; the transformation of the “commons” as space to “the public sphere” of democracy; women’s rights; questions of citizenship and “belonging”; the persistence (or decline, as one will) of religious influence in American political culture – all of these persistent preoccupations of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century American literary study are absolutely central to the contemporary conversations of early American literary and cultural studies. Indeed, all of these large-scale conceptual issues find their historical antecedent or origin in the colonial period and its study today. The chapters contained in this Cambridge Companion to Early American Literature reflect, comment on, and extend the set of deepened conversations between the earlier and later fields of Americanist scholarship and thought.

That said, the idea that colonial literature and culture gave rise to, led into, and served as an “origin” for the US nation (and its study) that followed is itself a problematical claim. Early American literature was for many years understood to be the immature precursor to a more fulsomely realized and grown-up version of American literature in the nineteenth century: the seed, if you will, of the great bloom that was the American renaissance.5 Early colonial scholarship scanned the colonial archive – and, here it should be said, a primarily English and Atlantic seaboard–located historical archive – for signs of “pre-American” or “proto-American” concepts, language use, and stylistic features. The more interesting poems of Anne Bradstreet, in this older approach, are those in which specifically American themes or preoccupations emerge; Charles Brockden Brown’s novels are worthwhile subjects for literary criticism insofar as they anticipate or give rise to the southern gothic haunts of Poe or the religious searchings of a Hawthorne. Viewed in the specific context of American literary history, the colonial period and its meager and mongrel literary archive mattered less as a worthwhile object of study in its own right than as a kind of rough-hewn “source” for the literature that would really matter.

Most infamously, the religious intensities and ambitions of the Puritans have long been viewed as leading into and securing a narrative of national origin, special status, and ultimate destiny that Americans tell even to this day.6 The “New England Mind,” as Perry Miller identified this historical and religious construct, perforce grounded national identity as a legacy of the seventeenth-century settlement period. This legacy persisted as both
intellectual history and political self-fashioning over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, as scholars refined, criticized, and qualified Miller’s articulation of a dominant Protestant mode of “being American” and politicians positioned themselves in various ways as the true inheritors (or even critics) of the New England way. Although long criticized on any number of fronts, Miller’s thesis was the engine that drove the first fifty years of academic American literary criticism, no doubt fueled by the emergent ideologies of the post–World War II political settlement, not least of which was the “Cold War” between the Protestant United States and the Godless Soviet Union. The point here is that, whether or not one fully subscribes to the “New England Mind” as a defining and still dominant understanding of what matters about the colonial period or its impact on American national identity, it is still understood by many to be the case with which one still feels compelled to argue or engage.

A few decades into the twenty-first century, one would be hard-pressed into find many professional readers of the field who would support this limited view of the colonial period’s legacy today. Instead, we have an essay like Jonathan Beecher Field’s chapter in this volume, which takes a critical view of how “Puritanism” emerges in popular culture today. It is still worth asking, how different is yesterday’s “origins story” from the ones we are telling today? We – following the lead of nineteenth-century authors – used to tell the story of “American cultural independence” from England; today, we talk about “Anglo-American transnational culture.” We used to tell the story of the “rise of democracy” and the tensions between popular and elected sovereignty; today, we talk about “the commons” and the emergence of a tensile “popular voice” as antidotes to the infection of oligarchy and hereditary privilege (see Dana Nelson’s chapter in this volume). However, in both sets of these critical narratives, the colonial still leads to the national, and as a disciplinary frame, “early America” still derives at least some of its internal coherence and authority from its ability to explain the implicitly more important and relevant national story of the United States. In the broader view, one might still be inclined to say, early American literature remains derivative, pre-formational, marginal to the metropole, inchoate, incubatory, arcane, always leading to some more developed version of itself – in a word, colonial. Early American literature has always, to put the matter differently, been about something other than itself.

Our modern conception of the colonial period could be said to mirror this awkward logic. The early period tells us something important, for example, about a national religious origin story we claim as “ours,” at least in part, by forsaking it. The Salem witch episode of 1692, possibly the most mined of the all the colonial ores, indicates much that was regrettable about the nation’s
religious incubation, when it isn’t being recast in contemporary popular media culture or invoked as a metaphor to claim unjust political or institutional persecution. So when we claim the “witch hunt” as a legacy of “our” past, is that a good thing? Or do we invoke such a past only to insist that the “superstitious” religious beliefs and murderous gullibility that animated the Salem witchcraft trials was some sort of process error – something fundamentally different and separate from the “American Puritanism” we might otherwise want to claim as one of the nation’s foundational narratives. It is curious at times to hear today’s politicians claiming the nation’s religious heritage to justify their views on everything from reproductive rights to the so-called war on Christmas while at the same time decrying the terrible injustice of “witch hunts,” a legacy of the same “religious heritage” the same politician is trying to enforce as today’s expression of American Christmas. (The New England Puritans, it is worth noting here, also despised the folk traditions of Christmas and actually banned its celebration from 1659 to 1681. Let us provisionally suppose that those most ready to claim the witch’s victim status tend not to be outstanding students of colonial history.) We read early American literature to learn what it was like to become (but not necessarily to be) American; to learn how or why we became something other than religious, or royalist, or slaveholding, or comfortable with eroticism, and so forth. Or why we didn’t, as the contributions from Ramesh Mallipeddi on the Atlantic traffic in enslaved persons, Paul Downes on how early Black petitions for freedom sponsored a new language of human rights, or Sandra Slater on the cultural politics of sexuality all indicate. Early American literature may be foundational to American origins, but it is neither definitive nor exhaustive. It opens vistas into the still moving picture of settler–Indigenous relationships and recalls the trauma, both inflicted and endured, by settler and Indigenous cultures. It charts pathways from the early to the postmodern American novel; from religious to sentimental feeling; from colonial conceptions of “liberty” to contemporary defenses of its curtailment; from the story of early modern women to the gendered story of national citizenship; from assertions of colonial to national and human sovereignty. We are still, in all of these accounts, talking about stories of continuity from the early to the late, even as we strive not to recapitulate and reinforce the older nationalist models of the colonial origins stories.10 Put another way, early American literature today invokes multiple narratives of American identities rather than perforce insisting that one colonial past gave rise to one national present. Early American literature is nothing if not an incubator for the intellectual and political pluralism many Americans want to privilege as the colonial period’s best and most important gift to the nation.
So where the successful expansion and diversification of early American literature have contributed to an increasingly influential role in American literary and cultural studies more broadly, it hasn’t really solved or explained away some of the field’s most abiding challenges in terms of conceptual coherence, or even, more simply, its appeal to new readers. This isn’t to say that, generally speaking, Americans ignore or don’t care about its colonial past. They do, even if many don’t remember it particularly well or invoke it for the wrong reasons. Early American literature belongs to the nation’s colonial history, its mostly pre-national past, and its relevance to contemporary life in the United States has long been invoked by recalling episodes and events reckoned to be important touchstones in the nation’s founding. The Pilgrims and the Puritans; the frontier “Indian wars”; Salem witchcraft; the “Great Awakening”; the revolutionary troubles and resolution; the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution. This is something of a restatement of the “derivation” problem – that “true” American literature derives from its rustic colonial origins. These widely assumed touchpoints of the colonial inheritance – sources of an American “unusable past” as it has been called – are not in any direct way about literature at all. Political history, religious history, imperial history, intellectual history, national history – but where are the famous touchpoints involving poems, novels, and plays written during the US colonial period? Where is the good literature that everybody knows and loves?

The short answer is that there isn’t any really – at least none that truly extends its reach beyond academic settings into the popular – and this has bedeviled the study of early American literature from its earliest professional beginnings. That is, there is no single or even collective literary effort produced in the period that approaches the notoriety or “obviousness” of the more easily recalled (“The Boston Tea Party”) historical record of the nation. The Journal of Sarah Kemble Knight, a fascinating and virtually unique travel narrative written by a colonial Englishwomen at the beginning of the eighteenth century, is mostly of interest to a handful of academic readers, teachers, and their captive students. The same could be said of Phillis Wheatley’s Poem’s on Various Subjects (1773) or John Marrant’s Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings, written in 1785. The first collection of poetry known to be published by an enslaved woman in the colonial United States; an extraordinary autobiography of a free Black who went on to perform missionary work among the Cherokee – noteworthy, convention-breaking, aesthetically rich they all may be, but none comes close to breaking through into popular awareness on the order of “the Declaration of Independence.” Colonial American literature is interesting for “inside academic” reasons, for historical reasons, one might reasonably say. Yet
there’s not a lot of casual knowledge about Mary Rowlandson (Patty Hearst’s foremother) or Michael Wigglesworth (the notorious Puritan masturbator) out there, and not a lot of clearly understood or deeply researched literary reasons to turn to these religious and aesthetic pioneers beyond the demands of an undergraduate course syllabus or the pleasures of specialist intellectual enthusiasm. As with the colonial period more broadly, the study of early American literature seems dependent on other factors.

One such factor is history, or, more specifically, its manufacture, or historiography. As has long been remarked, the study of early American literature is deeply historical, even more historical, it seems somehow, than even committed “historicist” study of literary outputs in later periods. The generative and complicated relationship between historiography and literary studies has long been remarked, but it probably goes deeper than methodological skepticism or academic-style gatekeeping. For some, what makes a colonial literary text “interesting” is less its literariness than its history-worthy significance. The case of America’s first deliberately published Black poet, Phillis Wheatley, is particularly instructive in respect of this point. Over the years – and, in fairness, many years ago – some commentators have remarked that we read her work today less for its literary significance than for the remarkable fact of its existence at all. Of course, today we read her poems for other, equally if not more important reasons – as an indication of an enslaved person’s resistance to the terms of her captivation; as an alternate account of African American authorship; as part of a Black “counter-public”; or as the voice of a specifically African-inflected voice of Protestant evangelical culture, to name a few. Another accomplished colonial poet, the seventeenth-century congregational minister Edward Taylor, receives attention as much for the quality of his writing as for his having written so many poems at all, for the way he wrote many of those poems (as part of his preparation of formal sermons), for the way he kept his poetic activity a secret – in short, for all of the nonpoetic, which is to say, nonliterary or “para-literary” reasons. As such, both Taylor and Wheatley indicate the “para-American” status of early American literature more generally.

For neither of these writers were, strictly speaking, “American” at all; some would even suggest that the entire field of early American literature is a critical chimera that either has little persuasive evidence to support it or is convened around unexamined assumptions about what makes a literature “national.” Edward Taylor was a seventeenth-century English settler and ordained minister of the Puritan gospel; Wheatley was an African woman, an involuntary settler, stolen from her home and forced into the conditions of human slavery. The older – we tend to call it “classic” now – version of early American literary study found, in these and other authors, “the beginning”
of an American story it was at the time convenient or necessary to tell. The tension between Taylor’s visible ministry and his private contemplative poetry gave us purchase on what would become a tension between public and private American selves that defined a “uniquely American” conception of individualism. Wheatley’s performance offered a glimpse of America’s fantasy of Black American uplift and the personal opportunities afforded by white civilization to the “barbarous” other. Yet none of these ideas were operative at the time Taylor and Wheatley were writing in very different historical circumstances, and the “proto-American” narratives we have appended to their writing have no more historical validity than the idea that the seventeenth-century religious dissident Anne Hutchinson was an intersectional feminist who anticipated the twenty-first-century’s #MeToo movement. We claim these historical figures and their writing— and for good reason, from certain modern political perspectives— as and for the people and texts we need them to be today, but in doing so we rehearse another version of the derivation argument about the early period: that early American literature is of interest, worth talking about, considering carefully again, for reasons having little to do with what the literature really is or was at the time. We read the field as much to better understand what early American literature was in its time as for what reading it teaches us about our American world today.

This, however, is why the study of colonial literature is, perhaps, all the more necessary today: it obdurately reminds us of a truth that applies not merely to the academic study of literature writ large but to the fate of reading and interpretation in the contemporary. That is, we are always— we have never not been— reading within our moment, always thinking about the historical past through the lens of the interpretive present, always looking to create fresh narratives and perspectives about the past that might better help to understand and to act for the present. We used to think this “presentist” perspective was a curse, even a fundamental interpretive and scholarly error (and, to be fair, some still do, although they tend to reside in history departments).

How else do we make sense of the ongoing fascination with someone like Anne Hutchinson? Hutchinson has been an object of historical reflection, more or less, from the time she began holding prayer meetings in her kitchen to discuss the weekly sermons in the mid-1630s. John Winthrop wrote The Short Story about her in 1647— it was anything but short— and we have been writing about her ever since. Edward Johnson, another colonial historian and contemporary of Hutchinson, recorded her theology as political and biological miscarriage and concupiscence. Cotton Mather called her a hydra in about 1702, around about the time he was again
taking heat for his role in the Salem trials. Yet she has also been claimed as a hero, a heroine for some: an early voice in America’s search for toleration and free speech. The mid-nineteenth-century’s Nathaniel Hawthorne told yet another series of stories about her, ambivalently recalling and fictionalizing her involuntary leadership and inimitable moral integrity in one of the most famous novels ever written by an American. Over the course of 200 or more years, professional, amateur, and schoolhouse historians and scholars have all “had a go” at Hutchinson, each providing slightly different and often competing versions of this most unlikely “American Jezebel.” She is both “America” and its undoing; the revolutionary voice of the nation and the impediment to the nation’s unfolding; a proto-feminist heroine for later American women like Angelica Grimke and Susan B. Anthony, and a radical insurgent whose gender identity is completely irrelevant to why she is (or is not) important to us today.\(^4\) All of these “Anne Hutchinsons” offer us something valuable not just about the nation’s historical past but about its contemporary moment as well – that is, to recall the earlier phrase, the fact that earlier American culture is always about something other than itself need not be understood as some sort of liability or shortcoming of the field. It is rather a reminder that, as our present-day needs and preoccupations evolve and shift, so too will the conclusions we derive from our encounter with the past.

In the twenty-first century, “the Americas” as sites of settlement and conquest have emerged as the location where scholars and readers have most significantly intervened in this idea of America’s “usable past” and have therefore as a consequence broadly shifted the terms of scholarship across multiple areas and time periods of study. These shifts have coincided with public and political conversations, in North America particularly, about the continuing challenges of Indigenous and settler peoples and the belief, for many, that a greater accountability for the infliction of trauma and violence on Indigenous peoples must precede any reasonable hope for a lasting reconciliation. Here is where national (and nationalist) histories and divergence separate the United States, Canada, and Mexico from each other, to be sure, but the renewed consideration of indigeneity becomes, at the same time, a basis for reconceiving the entirety of North American settlement history from a perspective that places the Indigenous–settler encounter at the center, rather than the periphery, of contemporary historiography and literary scholarship. The idea of “settlement” has emerged as a more complicated conceptual frame for broadly reimagining early American colonial experiences, or “coloniality” as it is sometimes called. The idea of “settlement” puts the concepts of place, location, and geography at the forefront of the conversation – that questions of how, when, what, and
who cannot be asked independently of “where.” Part III of this volume groups a cluster of chapters that pivot on the concept of place and location.

This ongoing expansion and revision to the field, in terms of both its historical span and its constitutive voices, has produced radically new and robust work on the settlement period and the new nation that followed it. Two of the chapters in this volume, “How to Read Things That Weren’t Written Down in Early America,” by Matt Cohen, and “Indigenous Colonial America,” by Caroline Wigginton, conceptualize both the problems and the opportunities of working closely with Indigenous cultural heritage and memory. Both chapters articulate ways to approach the complex archive of the Native peoples of the Western hemisphere. They also, just as importantly, invite us to think about how the Indigenous historical and representational record complicates and enriches scholarship about settler colonial writing.

Indeed, nearly every chapter in this Cambridge Companion acknowledges or investigates the ways in which Indigenous encounter inflected the emergence of the colonial period’s settler civilization. For example, in her chapter, “How to Read Gender in Early America,” Laura M. Stevens presents a fascinating approach to John Marrant’s well-known A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant that reads the encounter between Indigenous people and Western spirituality as one inflected by the politics of gender in the colonial setting. This work, undertaken by both self-identified Indigenous and settler scholars, has transformed the field, not just in terms of peer-reviewed published scholarship like that contained in this volume but, just as (if not more) importantly, in terms of what and how we teach early American literature in the undergraduate classroom; who we recruit into graduate programs and later into the faculty ranks; and how we include Indigenous perspectives at our conferences, colloquia, and the like. We’ve come a long way, that is to say, from the triumphalist account of the Pilgrims and the “first Thanksgiving,” or the egregiously saccharine story of Pocahontas and the Virginians. This better reckoning of the past holds promise for the contemporary.

How This Book Works

This book departs from the “encyclopedia” tradition of essay anthologies in several ways. Part I invites new and seasoned readers into a series of reflective chapters that offer pathways for reading unfamiliar texts and contexts. Matt Cohen (Chapter 1) considers the challenge of reading “texts” that weren’t recorded as language. The chapters in this section take the invitational gesture to the curious seriously and propose strategies for reading different texts and textual traditions. Molly Farrell (Chapter 2) offers an approach to