American Non-Fiction and Poetry to 1900: Literatures of Exploration, Captivity, Encounter

English 4316 (CRN: 27350)

T/R, 3:00 – 4:20 p.m., Hudspeth 300

Dr. Robert Gunn

This course thematizes early American literatures of exploration, captivity, and encounter vis-à-vis two major recent critical trends in American Studies. On one hand, we will investigate what is often referred to as “spatial turn” in Americanist scholarship—a broad critical orientation that encompasses transnational, transatlantic, hemispheric, and regionalist approaches to critical studies that aspires to supplant, or at least to modify, the traditional nation-state model of cultural studies that is foundational to the field. On the other, we will explore the critical tools of performance studies—particularly as refracted through studies of indigenous and African American cultural practices and embodied discourse—and apply the methods and perspectives of each to a wide range of fascinating texts and performance modes that document Euro-American encounter with Native America, scenarios of enslavement, and explorations of the North American wilderness. Our goal will be to uncover and follow the storylines that traffic between literature, bodies, economies, scenarios of performance, settings of encounter, and archival remainders that contribute to the evolving cultural history of early America. Other topics include: marvelous honeybees and un-killable grizzly bears; cannibalism, plagues, monsters, and invisible bullets; Welsh Indians (and other racial fantasies); calamities at sea; romantic dreams and doomed undertakings; sign language, embodied oratory, and Indigenous archives; Pan-Indianism and Indigenous resistance; daring crimes and miraculous escapes; enslavement and liberation; massacres, starvation, suicide, and the enduring importance of pretending to know what you’re doing. Readings by Cabeza de Vaca, Walt Whitman, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá, Thomas Harriot, Mary Rowlandson, Olaudah Equiano, Lewis & Clark, William Cullen Bryant, Black Hawk (Sauk), Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Jacobs, Susan Shelby Magoffin, et. al.