God’s Country

Colonial Encounters between Puritans and Indians

Course number: 512.250
Room and time: Seminar Room (Attemsgasse 25, Top Floor), Friday, 1:30-3:00 p.m.
First session: March 13, 2015
Lecturer: Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan Brandt · Office Hours: Thursdays, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036) · Email: stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

Description: This class examines early cultural encounters between European pioneers and ‘Indians’ on American soil. In a typical account from the 17th century, the ‘New World’ figured as an ‘uncivilized territory’ inhabited by ‘heathen tribes.’ Such reports were instrumental in endowing the settlers with a firm sense of religious and cultural identity. The self-image of puritan America as a God-fearing country was marked by a number of myths and legends that helped shape social and cultural practice in the colonies (‘Virgin land,’ ‘God’s chosen people,’ etc.). In what way did this clash of world views and spiritual backgrounds between natives and settlers influence the rhetorical as well as the political shaping of colonial life? How did Europeans respond to the New World in words and images? We will discuss a number of foundational texts of colonial America, especially sermons, jeremiads, and spiritual autobiographies as well as documents crafted by Native Americans. Texts will include John Smith’s writings on early colonial life (including the infamous Pocahontas episode), Jean de Brébeuf’s missionary accounts in New France as well as Mary Rowlandson’s tales of her captivity. We will also look at a few films, such as Black Robe and New World.

Teaching and Learning Method: This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, illustrations, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block (or, alternatively, a fact file on a handout).

Materials: All relevant texts will be made available on Moodle.

Aims: A more profound understanding and knowledge of the impact of America’s Puritan past on the literary and cultural practice of 20th- and 21st-century U.S. society.

Assessment: Regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!); active in-class participation; presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions; regular entries in the discussion forum; 2-page research proposal and final paper of 10-12 pages.

Deadline for Final Papers: Friday, July 3, 2015 in class. There is no (!) extension of this deadline.

Syllabus

13 March Introduction: Puritan-Indian Encounters and the Making of ‘America’
Basic texts:

20 March Pocahontas – The Construction of a (Trans-)Cultural Myth
Main text (required):
Captain John Smith, from The Generall Historie of Virginia (1624), pp. 1-9.
Main film (recommended):
Pocahontas (prod. by Walt Disney Company, 1995).
Additional texts (optional):
Keywords: “Baptism of Pocahontas” (painting); Conversion to Christianity; Indian Princess; Noble Savage.

27 March Mythologies of Early Encounters between European Pioneers and American Indians
Film Screening:
The New World (dir. Terrence Malick, 2005).
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Aesthetics of Wilderness; Cinematic Representations of Pocahontas; Mythology.
24 April
“Man Being a Mortal God” – Narratives of a “Divine Empire” on the Soil of the Plantations
Main text (required):
Samuel Purchas, from A Discourse on Virginia (1625), pp. 22-33.
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Calvinism; Chosen People; Colonialism; Divine Providence; God’s Country; Heathens; Predestination.

8 May
Evangelizing the Heathens – Christianity as a Beacon against ‘Barbarism’
Main text (required):
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Christian Mission; Civilization vs. Wilderness; Conversion; Dichotomy; Heathens; “Other”; White Supremacy.

15 May
The Colonial Community as a “City upon a Hill” – John Winthrop and the ‘Covenant with God’
Main text (required):
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: American Exceptionalism; ‘City upon a Hill’; Community; Conformism; Covenant with God.

22 May
Sermons of a Christian Utopia – John Cotton’s “True Holy Commonwealth”
Main text (required):
John Cotton, from: God’s Promise to His Plantations (1630), pp. 58-77.
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Community; ‘Holy Commonwealth’; Plantation Imagery; Salvation.

29 May
Regeneration through Violence – John Underhill’s Account of the Pequot War (1636-37)
Main text (required):
John Underhill, “Newes from America: A New and Experimental Discoverie of New England” (1638), pp. 49-86.
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: ‘Indian Wars’; Massachusetts Bay Colony; Mystic Massacre; Pequot War.

Deadline Research Proposal TODAY, May 29!

12 June
The Birth of the American Jeremiad – Michael Wigglesworth and the Community in Crisis
Main text (required):
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Calvinism; Damnation vs. Salvation; Jeremiad; Punishment.

19 June
The Revival of Piety – Mary Rowlandson’s Spiritual Autobiography
Main text (required):
Additional texts (optional):
Keywords: Captivity Narratives; Frontier; Intercultural Contact; “Other”; Redemption; Trial of Faith.

26 June
Indian Captivity as an Instrument of the Dominant Rhetoric – Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana
Main text (required):
Additional text (optional):
Keywords: Mass Hysteria; Mythology; Salem Witchcraft Trials; Scapegoating.

3 July
Conversions to the Christian Religion – The Native American Perspective
Main text (required):
Samson Occom (Mohegan), from: A Short Narrative of My Life (1768), pp. 1-7.
Additional text (optional):
Samson Occom, “A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian” (1772), pp. 1-17.
Keywords: Assimilation; Christianization; Conversion; Praying Towns.

FINAL PAPER DUE