ENGL 741, Seminar in American Studies,  
“Meta-survey of American literature, beginnings to 1865”  
Spring 2014, Tuesdays 4:00-6:50, Colson G10  
Tim Sweet tsweet@wvu.edu  
213 Colson  Hours: Tuesdays 3:00-4:00 or by appointment

*Literature. n.s. [literatura, Latin] Learning; skill in letters.*  
--Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language (1755)

**Overview**

The course will examine how the standard survey of American literature to 1865, which originated in an uneasy alliance between the New Criticism and the old historicism, has been inflected by subsequent developments:

- Theoretical ferment of the 1970s and following (structuralism, various post-structuralisms, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxism, etc.)
- Identity-based paradigms of the 1980s and 1990s (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, multiculturalism)
- Geopolitically-oriented paradigms of the 2000s (Atlantic world, transnational American studies, hemispheric studies, empire studies)

In different ways, these developments foreground a tension between the two competing principles that organize any survey: literary history (the impulse to recover and include the totality of literary production) and canon-formation (the impulse to judge and value).

Reising will take us from the old historicism through the New Criticism and myth-and-symbol American studies up to era of identity politics that generated the *Heath Anthology*. Guillory interrogates the “exclusion” thesis that governs that many of that era’s accounts of canon formation (e.g., Lauter et al.); however, the extension of Guillory’s Anglo-centric study to American literature remains open to question. Some recent work in early American literature (surveyed in clusters of essays in *ALH* 2010 and *PMLA* 2013) has redirected the archive away from its prior nationalist telos. This redirection has introduced discontinuities between early American literature and the rest of American literary history.

**Texts**

Russell Reising, *The Unusable Past: Theory and the Study of American Literature* (Methuen, 1986). Out of print—but plenty of used copies available through Amazon, etc.  
WVU libraries E-book.

“Projecting Early American Literature,” joint special issue of *American Literary History* (22.2) and *Early American Literature* (45.2, 2010), selections.  
WVU libraries e-journals.  
WVU libraries e-journals.

Other selected essays as listed on the syllabus.
Selected supplementary bibliography on canon formation and the history of the discipline

William Spengemann, A New World of Words: Redefining Early American Literature (Yale UP, 1994).

Assignments and grading

Seven short papers, about 400 words each. For each week of readings in primary texts, write a short essay that addresses the question, What's important in this group of texts? Although the essay should refer to texts from both the Norton and the Heath, the primary focus should *not* be a comparison/contrast of the two anthologies. Rather, the focus should be on the significant genres, forms, themes, ideas, or trajectories indicated by this group of texts. Each paper will be worth 5% of your final grade (i.e., 35% total).

A final project essay that investigates some aspect of canon formation, disciplinary history, or pedagogy for pre-1865 American literature: prospectus and annotated bibliography, review draft, and final article-length paper (~ 20 pp.). You will receive a separate assignment sheet for this. The project, graded primarily on the final paper, will be worth 65% of your final grade.

Policies

Let’s work to support WVU’s inclusivity policy. The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (304-293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see http://diversity.wvu.edu

Notwithstanding the risk to your intellectual development, you are allowed one absence. Each subsequent absence will lower your final grade by one full letter.

Late work will not be accepted. If you have to miss class for any reason and a paper is due that day, email me the paper before class time.
**Calendar**

We’ll take the *Norton* as our baseline, so the readings in primary texts are listed accordingly. You also are responsible for the analogous texts (by period, genre, etc.) in the *Heath*.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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| 1/14 | Before the first class meeting, please read all the prefatory and introductory materials from the various sections of the *Norton* and *Heath* anthologies—and bring all the volumes to class:  
  Before the first class meeting please also read—and bring to class:  
| 1/21 | Russ Reising, *Unusable Past* |
| 2/4 | Native American. *Norton* A.21-34, 52-81, 100-20, 442-55.  
  Non-Anglophone colonial. *Norton* A.34-51 (note that the *Heath* has lots more of this).  
  **Short paper #1 due** |
  **Short paper #2 due** |
  **Short paper #3 due** |
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment/Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td>3/11</td>
<td>Spring Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/18</td>
<td><strong>Prospectus and annotated bibliography due</strong></td>
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**Short paper #4 due** |
**Short paper #5 due** |
**Short paper #6 due** |
**Short paper #7 due** |
| 4/22  | **Draft of final paper due**  
Peer conferences on drafts |

**Final paper due Monday, April 28.**