“Translating the Early Americas through Historical Fiction(s), Past and Present”

Organizer: Anne G. Myles, Associate Professor of English, University of Northern Iowa

This roundtable ventures beyond the boundaries of the early modern period to consider an issue that remains closely tied to the conference theme, and one that bridges the disciplines of literature and history: how is the history of the early Americas translated into works of literature? And how do diverse understandings, misunderstandings, and interpretations of the early Americas get transmitted into later periods via their literary representation? How do literary authors translate early American material, what parts of the past do they select for transmission, and what difference does it make?

The issues here are interesting and significant in the intrinsic questions they raise about textual representation and the transmission from historical archive and historical narrative to literature, the shaping effect of literary genres and conventions on historical narrative, and the relationship of historical study and creative engagement as modes of understanding the past. Historical fictions serve as an important mode of constructing consensual visions of national identity—yet, equally, they offer opportunities for alternative, revisionary histories, in which marginal perspectives such as those of women and Native peoples might be newly foregrounded.

This translation into literary modes is not purely a later phenomenon; it begins early on with works such as Susanna Rowson’s *Reuben and Rachel* (1798), or far early with Gaspar Perez de Villagra’s framing of the Onate expedition in epic verse (1610), to say nothing of the centrality of historical fiction as a mode in the first decades of the 1800s. However, I am also very interested in how historical fiction (especially Young Adult historical fiction) serves as a central mode in which people come to “know” (or think they know) about the early Americas. Indeed, for many secondary students, “early American literature” means in part “literature set in early America” (*The Crucible* is one of the most frequently taught literary texts in American secondary schools, and is often taught in the context of an “early American” unit, but recent years have also seen the publication of many important revisionary works, such as M.T. Anderson’s *Octavian Nothing* books and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Chains, Forge, and Fever 1793*). What has been and continues to be at stake in the translation of history into literature, and the transmission of history through literature?

Roundtable participants will be asked to briefly talk about a particular text they find significant and to open up some perspectives on the broader questions raised by the topic in response to some questions I would circulate in advance. The session will then move to an audience-inclusive conversation on the issues. If you are interested in participating, send a proposal indicating your interest or background in the topic, one or two texts you might want to focus on, and some ideas you might want to pursue in discussion, plus a short CV, to anne.myles@uni.edu, preferably by September 1, 2015.