

Notes for norton anthology of american lit essay



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•The “ new world” that Columbus boasted of to the Spanish monarchs in 1500 was neither an expanse of empty space nor a replica of European culture, tools, textiles, and religion, but a combination of Native, European, and African people living in complex relation to one another. » full text •The Native cultures Columbus found in the New World displayed a huge variety of languages, social customs, and creative expressions, with a common practice of oral literature without parallel east of the Atlantic. full text

•Exploratory expeditions to the New World quickly led to colonial settlements, as the major European countries vied with each other for a portion of the western hemisphere’s riches.

» full text •The role of writing during the initial establishment and administration of these overseas colonies involved influencing policymakers at home, justifying actions taken without their explicit permission, and bearing witness to the direct and unintended consequences of European conquest of the Americas. full text •The Puritans who settled in New England represented a different type of colonist, one that emigrated for religious rather than national or economic reasons. » full text •Since the English language arrived late to the New World, it was by no means inevitable that the English would dominate, even in their own colonies. But by 1700, the strength of the (mostly religious) literary output of New England had made English the preeminent language of early American literature. full text •The state of American literature in 1700, consisting of only about 250 published works, reflects the pressing religious, security, and cultural concerns of colonial life. » full text Full Text Columbus’s voyage to the Americas began the exploitation of Native populations by European imperial powers, but we

need not think of the intellectual exchange between the two hemispheres as being entirely in one direction.

A Taino Indian whom Columbus seized and trained as a translator, and renamed Diego Colon in Spain, had as much to say to his people upon his return to the Caribbean in 1494 as Columbus did to Ferdinand and Isabella after his triumphant first expedition. The “new world” that Columbus boasted of to the Spanish monarchs in 1500 was neither an expanse of empty space nor a replica of European culture, tools, textiles, and religion, but a combination of Native, European, and African people living in complex relation to one another. After early wonder and awe at their unexpected discovery of inhabited land, Europeans used their technological edge in weaponry (gunpowder and steel) to conquer the region. They were aided in this task by the host of diseases they had brought from the Old World, against which early Americans had no immune resistance. Smallpox, measles, and typhus decimated Native populations, and in response to the lack of a local labor force the Spanish began importing Africans to take their place, thereby compounding genocide with slavery. But by no means were Natives merely helpless victims.

Many adopted European weapons and tactics to defend themselves from invaders, and while some collaborated with Europeans, as did some Aztecs with Cortes’s Spanish force against their king Montezuma, or the Narragansetts and Mohegans with the New Englanders against the Pequots, they did so not out of submission or gullibility but to gain a temporary upper hand against their Native rivals—truly, a resourceful response to an impossible situation. back to NotesThe Native cultures Columbus found in <https://assignbuster.com/notes-for-norton-anthology-of-american-lit-essay/>

the New World displayed a huge variety of languages, social customs, and creative expressions, with a common practice of oral literature without parallel east of the Atlantic. Compared to the three dozen languages, common religion and printed alphabet, and stable boundaries of the European nation-states, the Native peoples were much more diverse. They spoke hundreds of distantly related languages and widely differed in their social organization, from the hunting-gathering, nomadic Utes to the highly structured farming society of the Iroquois confederation.

Eight different creation stories have been catalogued, each attesting to the religious diversity of early Americans. But since no Native peoples had a written alphabet, they relied instead on an oral tradition of chants, songs, and spoken narrative, what some critics have called “ orature,” for their artistic expressions. These verbal genres (trickster tales, jokes, naming and grievance chants, and dream songs, among many others) are “ literary” in the sense that they represent the imaginative and emotional responses of their anonymous authors to Native culture. But our Western sense of “ literature” is mainly derived from the effects of the written word and has little to do with the performance issues of tempo, pauses, and intonation common to verbal genres. Translations of orature, first into English and then onto the page, leave out a great deal.

back to Notes Exploratory expeditions to the New World quickly led to colonial settlements, as the major European countries vied with each other for a portion of the western hemisphere’s riches. Early voyages by Columbus for Spain, Cabot for England, and Vespucci and Cabral for Portugal mapped and claimed large areas for later colonies. Small settlements made on

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Hispaniola by Columbus (1493) and in Jamestown by John Smith (1607) faced organized and more numerous Native adversaries as well as internal dissent and mutiny; the early settlers were followed by waves of better armed and equipped settlers who came to stay. The Spanish were most successful in establishing their empire, which by the 1540s reached from central North America and Florida southward, to northern and western South America.

The Portuguese settled in eastern Brazil, the French along the St. Lawrence River in present-day Canada, first explored by Jacques Cartier and then settled sixty years later by Samuel de Champlain. The English came to the New World late, after several failed expeditions by Walter Raleigh, Humphrey Gilbert, and Martin Frobisher. Once the Jamestown colony survived its first trials of starvation, disease, riots, and violence with the Powhatan tribe, the English expanded from this base up and down the eastern coast of North America. back to NotesThe role of writing during the initial establishment and administration of these overseas colonies involved influencing policy makers at home, justifying actions taken without their explicit permission, or bearing witness to the direct and unintended consequences of European conquest of the Americas. The development of the printing press fifty years before Columbus's first voyage allowed many of his descriptions of the New World to spur the national ambitions and personal imaginations of the Spanish, ensuring new expeditions and future colonies.

The long lag time between sending and receiving directions from Europe meant many written records exist as "briefs," in which better informed explorers attempted to adjust colonial policy written largely in reaction to events abroad or to justify opportunistic actions taken without the crown's

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knowledge, as with Cortes's messages to Charles V about his subjugation of the Aztecs. Writing also recorded the hideous consequences of empire wrought by the Europeans, many of whom reacted strongly against both the unintentional infection of the Natives with Old World diseases and the enslavement of the remainder for plantation labor. It could also be used subversively, as it was by an anonymous Aztec poet who lamented the fall of Montezuma in the Nahuatl language, but in the Roman alphabet. It also afforded opportunities to scribes such as Diego del Castillo and John Smith, who were born into the European underclass, to reshape the possibilities of colonial life away from hereditary privilege and in favor of merit, talent, and effort, all three of which were in short supply but high demand in the New World.

back to Notes

The Puritans who settled in New England represented a different type of colonist, one that emigrated for religious rather than national or economic reasons. The first Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts founded Plymouth Plantation in 1620 and, under William Bradford, began a settlement devoted to religious life: they thought of themselves as Pilgrims.

They were separatists whose beliefs were persecuted by the Church of England; after moving briefly to the Netherlands, they chartered the Mayflower and sailed for America, where with help from the Wampanoag tribe they survived their first winter. When John Winthrop arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630 with many more Calvinist dissenters, Plymouth was subsumed into the larger organization. Pilgrims and Puritans held similar beliefs, such as the doctrine of "election," that God had predestined before birth those who would be saved and damned. But although the Puritans were

rigidly exclusive in their early colonial days, requiring public accounts of conversion before admitting people to church membership and their communion, their faith emphasized rapturous joy and zeal rather than bleak or doleful subsistence. back to Notes Since the English language arrived late to the New World, it was by no means inevitable that the English would dominate, even in their own colonies.

But by 1700, the strength of the (mostly religious) literary output of New England had made English the preeminent language of early American literature. Boston's size, independent college and printing press at Harvard (founded in 1636), and non-nationalist, locally driven project of producing Puritan literature gave New England the publishing edge over the other colonies. But other tongues existed in small enclaves within the thirteen English colonies that gave a foreign inflection to the local culture. In Albany, New York, for example, Dutch and Belgian mixed with French and Spanish speakers, and the inhabitants were immigrants from throughout Europe; Dutch persisted as an everyday language until the mid-1800s. Similarly, German immigrants in Pennsylvania prompted publishers to cater to their native language. back to Notes The state of American literature in 1700, consisting of only about 250 published works, reflects the pressing religious, security, and cultural concerns of colonial life.

Printing presses operated in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Annapolis, and colonists could also acquire works published in England. The most prolific author of the period was Cotton Mather, whose writings recorded the late-century war between New England and New France and its Indian allies, a series of biographies (in the *Magnalia Christi Americana*) of American

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religious “ saints,” and conduct guides for ministers and servants. Other authors focused on relations with Native Americans, including pamphlets on conferences with New York’s important Iroquois allies and captivity narratives recounting the barbarity of their Indian enemies. Still others focused on matters of unsuccessful social integration, as was the case for Quaker dissenters in Boston in 1660, or looked ahead to social problems looming on the horizon, as did Samuel Sewall’s antislavery tract *The Selling of Joseph* (1700).