

Scripting the Past in the Present:
Early America and Contemporary Culture

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Patrick M. Erben and Rebecca L. Harrison, University of West Georgia

For many present-day readers, early American literature seems a nexus of far removed, boring, stodgy, and simply no longer relevant texts, ideas, authors, and tropes. Yes, we hear politicians frequently invoke the “Founding Fathers” and the ideals of the American Revolution in their rhetoric, but few people voluntarily pick up a sermon by Cotton Mather, an exploration narrative by John Smith, Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, or even Benjamin Franklin’s famous *Autobiography* as pleasure reading. Yet, if we look a bit more closely, early American literature and history pervade contemporary culture, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries. Beyond well-known examples like Disney’s *Pocahontas* and Lin-Manuel Miranda’s blockbuster *Hamilton* that made Aaron Burr a household name, contemporary writers and artists in literary and popular venues take up and rework early American materials in both explicit and implicit ways. Such texts translate the unfamiliar language and sensibilities of early America as a usable past to find common denominators that address (and often problematize) historic and ever-present concerns with social justice and definitions of democracy for the general public. Ultimately, these links reveal the complementary nature of early American themes and their present-day echoes, establishing intricate transhistorical nexuses that scholars and teachers alike must grapple with and purposely deploy to help students overcome temporal, cultural, and linguistic distances that often limit comprehension, familiarization, and the ability to see the present-day import of our nation’s past.

In the spirit of fostering dialogue in this area, we seek paper proposals for two panels—one critical and one pedagogical (complementary approaches often seen as disparate)—that explore networks connecting contemporary and early American imaginaries. Interested panelists should send abstracts of no more than 500 words to Dr. Patrick Erben (perben@westga.edu) and Dr. Rebecca Harrison (rharriso@westga.edu) by July 30, 2021.