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# Review: Time and Space in American Literary History

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REVIEW ESSAY

# Time and Space in American Literary History

*The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature.*

EMORY ELLIOTT.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

viii + 198 pp.

*Finding Colonial Americas: Essays Honoring J. A. Leo Lemay.*

Edited by CARLA MULFORD and DAVID S. SHIELDS.

Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001.

481 pp.

In one of the 26 contributing essays to *Finding Colonial Americas*, Kevin Hayes reconstructs the reading experience of the early eighteenth-century historian Thomas Prince, who scrupulously read the Virginia texts of John Smith and consulted French historiographic as well as English and colonial American historical texts before writing his own history of New England. The essay wonderfully illustrates the dependence of this local history on a transregional and intercontinental network of texts. The many books Prince consulted helped him to define the temporal mode of his history as well as its spatial shape, for among Prince's sources was Pierre Le Moyne's 1695 *Of the Art Both of Writing and Judging of History*, which distinguishes between *history*—“a *continued Relation*, that has all its Parts fastned together, as those of the Body or regular Edifice”—and *annals*—a collection “whose Parts not being joyn'd, without Correspondence, without Union, are only rude Heaps of Materials” (Le Moyne 54; qtd. in *Finding Colonial Americas* 367–68). While this distinction between history and annals might seem somewhat simplistic, it is also quite thought-provoking in the context of the two titles under review here and their implicit engagement with forms of literary historical narrative. Emory Elliott's *Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* and Carla Mulford and David

Shields's edited collection *Finding Colonial Americas* offer representations of the scope and shape of colonial American literature and culture that are as different in their form as in their content. In fact, while one is quite clearly a completed story, the other might more accurately be called an unfinished map, such that reading these two books together generates critical and fascinating questions about the temporal and spatial frameworks that have organized (or may yet organize) American literary history and have determined (or may yet determine) colonial America's place in that history.

Some of the differences between the Elliott and Mulford-Shields volumes—and part of the challenge of reviewing them together—can be attributed to the demands and conventions of their very different genres. Elliott, for example, writes an introduction, a genre that depends on the retrospective functions of reviewing, synthesizing, and summarizing significant texts and authors, as well as major trends and changes within a scholarly field of study. Elliott is of course a master of this genre, having over the years written a number of useful synthetic overviews of early American writers, as well as edited several indispensable American literary histories. Mulford and Shields, on the other hand, work in the very different generic terrain of the *festschrift*, a collection that brings together contributions that acknowledge and explore the fields of inquiry opened up by a prominent scholar's work. *Finding Colonial Americas* recognizes and honors the influence and vision of Professor J. A. Leo Lemay, who—as this volume amply attests—has likewise left a significant mark on early American studies, and who well deserves this timely collection.

Despite their very different audiences and generic conventions, however, both books offer in one form or another a survey of early American studies. Yet even a quick look at the table of contents in the Mulford and Shields volume indicates that work on the eighteenth century dominates this collection, which also focuses primarily on the regions of the South and Franklin's Philadelphia (foci that obviously reflect the book's goal of honoring and extending Lemay's work). Elliott, on the other hand, focuses just as exclusively on the seventeenth century and concentrates on the region of New England and its Puritan writers. If a relative newcomer to the discipline were to read these two books, he or she might very well conclude that there are two distinct fields within early American studies that share little other than a vigorous interest in Benjamin Franklin.

While I do not wish to overread them, the books' titles *are* revealing of their agendas. *Finding Colonial Americas* is, as the first word in its title insists, prospective, while Elliott's *Introduction to Early American Literature* is retrospective; the former proposes to set out, to seek and locate, while the latter looks back, reviews and orders. Elliott's title employs the modifier *Early*, indicating its subject's anticipatory role in a chronological, linear literary history. Mulford and Shields use the terms *Colonial* instead, characterizing the prenational period in geopolitical more than historical terms. And whereas the Mulford-Shields collection pursues alternative and multiple *Americas* in the colonial period, Elliott's introduction gathers coherent origins for a single and singular *American Literature*. *Finding Colonial Americas* can hardly be defined as the "rude Heaps of Materials" that make up Le Moyne's annals, but what ultimately holds the very disparate parts of this book together is their shared impulse to explore further the rather delightfully idiosyncratic and cornucopic interests of Leo Lemay. Elliott's book, on the other hand, rather neatly conforms to Le Moyne's description of historical narrative as a "*continued Relation*, that has all its Parts fastned together."

Indeed, it may be in their relationship to the narrative forms that support and enable literary histories that the two books differ most profoundly. Elliott's *Introduction* offers a narrative so strongly driven by a teleological (and national) temporality that it all but refuses to look sideways, to radiate spatially outward from the New England Puritans, who offer both grounding and continuity to the by-now familiar story Elliott has to tell about American literature and culture. The Mulford and Shields collection is, by contrast, nearly all radiation and no teleology. Each of its five sections represents one of Lemay's wide-ranging interests: "Comparative Colonialisms" offers fascinating comparative analyses of literature from different regions within the Atlantic world; "Southern Dreaming" represents work on often overlooked texts and writers of the colonial South; "Manor Culture, Cultural Authority, and the Domestic and Fine Arts" offers analyses of material culture; a substantial number of essays are dedicated to the topic of "Benjamin Franklin and His Friends"; and a final section entitled "The Creations of History, American Selves, and American Cultural Memory" includes essays on topics as various as Thomas Prince and John Smith, Thomas Jefferson and privacy, Plymouth Rock and the Old Colony Club, Thoreau and the Puritans, and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and the Civil

War. The volume's contributors are nearly as diverse as its contents, as the book brings into interdisciplinary dialogue the work of literary critics, literary historians, librarians, art historians, and experts in material culture. While it is unlikely that many readers will read the collection from cover to cover, it is almost a certainty that any reader will find several essays of great interest and value among the rich and diverse scholarship collected here. More than anything else, there is much new to be learned about colonial America from this collection: from the differing ethnographic appropriations of native Americans by Franciscan and English missionaries, or Richard Lewis's revisions of court panegyric in his *Carmen Seculare*, to the design of Franklin's Philadelphia house, and the way antebellum Americans misread Sir Walter Scott's medievalism.

Yet Mulford and Shields make clear in their introduction to the volume that Lemay's most signal contribution to the discipline has been to dislodge Puritan New England from its stranglehold on early American studies. "No longer," they announce, "is the inquiry reflecting the single, somehow mystically (and mythically) unified narration of the English founding in New England" (11) but rather the "multiple literary cultures of early America" (12), and they position their book as a revisionist critique of "the dominance of New England in American historiography" (17). The volume does offer a wonderfully rich illustration of just how different colonial American studies looks through a regionally decentralized lens, and this vision is an important corrective to older and narrower conceptions of the field. But while rightfully celebrating these "other" early Americas, *Finding Colonial Americas* also virtually blots out the Puritans and New England from its own early American map. When New England Puritan texts do make an occasional appearance in this lengthy collection, they do so in comparative literary readings — in, for example, the essays by Ralph Bauer, Gordon Sayre, and Karen Schramm. Bauer and Sayre each develop compelling cross-regional and cross-cultural analyses of Puritan texts in relation to, respectively, Spanish histories and French captivity narratives, and their readings prompt significant rethinkings of these genres. Schramm offers a somewhat more overdetermined comparison of the Puritans' representations of the wilderness with those by Thoreau. Yet all three conclude by unfavorably positioning the Puritans (to lesser or greater degrees) in relation to the somewhat more inclusive Franciscans, the less ethnocentric French, or the obviously nature-embracing Thoreau. These comparisons

make sense within the context of these essays, but they leave unanswered an insistent question for the new map of colonial American studies being drawn in the Mulford-Shields collection and elsewhere: how might New England Puritanism signify in simultaneity with other colonial American spaces, rather than in anticipation of later national American times? Or, to borrow the evocative words of Ivy Schweitzer, once New England is no longer “the *omphalos* of things American, what is it?” (Schweitzer 580).

Published a year after *Finding Colonial Americas*, Emory Elliott’s *Introduction to Early American Literature*—whose jacket describes its own project as an exploration of “the centrality of American Puritanism in the formation of a distinctively American literature”—represents precisely the enemy whose demise the Mulford-Shields volume (perhaps prematurely?) announces. And unlike the *Finding* collection, this is a text meant and likely to be read from beginning to end. As Elliott’s preface explains, his book originally appeared as a section within the first volume (1590–1820) of *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, the valuable scholarly resource edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and published in 1994. That first volume of the *Cambridge History* assembled five long essays that each treated specific historical periods and literary genres. Along with Elliott’s essay were Myra Jehlen’s account of early colonization literature, David Shields’s essay on *belles lettres*, Robert Ferguson’s discussion of the Enlightenment, and Michael Gilmore’s overview of the Revolutionary and early national periods. The decision of Cambridge University Press to republish alone from this heterogeneous collection Elliott’s essay on “New England Puritan Literature” under the title of *The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature* is rather bewildering, since their own previous volume, as Elliott himself notes in the preface to the *Cambridge Introduction*, makes clear that “the English Puritans were not the first, nor the only, Europeans to live in and write about their experiences in the Americas” (vii).

Elliott’s *Cambridge Introduction* adds to his earlier *Cambridge History* essay a first chapter, a final chapter, and an afterword. The new first chapter commendably recognizes and reviews the temporal and spatial enlargements that have characterized recent early American studies. But this chapter also reveals the difficulty of integrating these changes into the *grand récit* of a national literary history that positions the Puritan jeremiad at the continuing center of American culture and literature, a narrative to which Elliott’s *Introduction* persistently clings. The result is a chapter whose dis-

continuity, while appearing at times careless, is more likely the product of the effort to integrate this newer literary map into an older literary narrative. Despite the chapter's commitment to reviewing the many cultures, languages, and literatures within colonial North America, for example, Elliott nevertheless insists that it was the Puritans' quest for "religious freedom," their "sacred errand into the wilderness," that would become "the foundational event for the later establishment of the United States of America" (6). A series of more minor narrative confusions follow. He remarks that "the Native peoples were always present in the daily lives and thoughts of the English colonists," and then declares that "the Europeans and their descendents [*sic*] created the myth of the virgin land inhabited by primitive savages as one part of their strategy for justifying the invasion and occupation" of the Americas (10). After a brief discussion of the 1627 Pequot war, Elliott observes that "[f]rom that day forward, the tribal peoples of the northeast avoided challenging the Puritans" (11), though half a page later he notes the "rising tensions between the English and the Native peoples" that led to King Philip's (Metacom's) War in 1676. This first chapter too often seems unsure of just what story it wants to tell, and reads as a result like a botched narrative, one that finally collapses from the exhaustion of attempting to integrate its incompatible parts. It is as if the spatial and cultural enlargement of the literary territory of early America disables the progressivist national narrative that otherwise orders this book.

This problem disappears in the subsequent chapters reprinted from the *Cambridge History*, which focus exclusively on Puritan New England literature and which more easily narrate the linear story that Elliott's *Introduction* is more prepared to tell. Readers looking for a lucid and manageable introduction to this narrower subject will be rewarded by these chapters, which include an especially thoughtful analysis of language in the Salem witchcraft affair, fine surveys of several seventeenth-century New England genres (including the jeremiad, poetry, personal narrative, and history), and an account of reason and religious revival in the eighteenth century, before concluding with a new final chapter suggestively called "Toward the Formation of a United States." Occasionally Elliott integrates a writer or text that does not fit neatly into his narrative framework, leading him to read Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, for example, "as . . . a jeremiad" (108), and to justify the inclusion of Elizabeth Ashbridge's autobiography—despite the fact that she "was a Quaker in the middle colonies

and not a New England Puritan”—because her rejection of Calvinism has something to say about “some of the problems the congregational ministers encountered during the period” (137). The problem is not that these readings are inaccurate but that they are so beholden to the American jeremiad thesis and the declension narrative that govern Elliott’s literary history.

Indeed, we might almost read Elliott’s book as its own jeremiad, a literary historical narrative that longs for renewal in the face of recent failure. And if this is an accurate characterization, we might then ask what colonial American studies desires when it holds onto the story of a lost and recoverable American consensus, particularly at a historical moment when, perhaps, our own consensus of what defines our field is so open to question. Elliott’s afterword (also added since his original *Cambridge History* essay) appropriates Toni Morrison’s phrase “playing in the dark” to suggest that anyone studying even contemporary American writers like Philip Roth, Don DeLillo, or Morrison herself, in ignorance of the Puritan New England tradition, is fumbling, wasting his or her time, playing in the dark. Yet Morrison’s own use of the term brings attention precisely to the significance of what might seem the meaningless or fumbling figures who play in the dark margins of canonical American literary texts. The difference between Morrison’s and Elliott’s use of the phrase is—much like the difference between Mulford and Shields’s *Finding Colonial Americas* and Elliott’s *Introduction*—a difference between looking sideways in order to map regions that have constituted the historical margins of American literary history, and looking straight ahead in order to tell a linear and continuist literary history centered around the American nation.

There are, of course, moments of spatial seeking within the temporal longing that structures Elliott’s book, as well as moments of narrative longing within the exploratory mapping that loosely organizes *Finding Colonial Americas*. And while they serve very different audiences, the two books hardly suggest that the only alternatives for American literary history are a fantasy of national wholeness or the splinters of regional decentralization. But they do together suggest that now may be an opportune time to think about how we write and understand American literary history, time to interrogate not just the nationalist term “American” (as so much excellent recent scholarship has) but also the narrative term “history.” If we want a literary history that accommodates writing from the multiple

regions within colonial British America, a literary history that is colonial rather than national, do we need to integrate into historical narrative what Edward Soja calls a “spatial hermeneutic” that might “create more critically revealing ways of looking at the combination of time and space, history and geography, period and region, sequence and simultaneity” (3)? How might a literary history proceed that is organized as much around the trope of space as that of time, that involves mapping as much as narrating? The newest early American anthologies are organized regionally as well as chronologically; perhaps it is also time to develop a literary geography that might accompany and reform our literary history. As much as anything, these two books expose the challenging uncertainties, but also the urgent renewal, that such a project might bring to the spaces and times of colonial America.

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