

# First essay

**Due date:** Wednesday, October 12.

**Length:** 3-5 pages, doublespaced.

In this first short paper, I would like you to do two things.

1. Close reading: pay close attention to some brief, well-chosen passages from one or two of our texts (the Harriot engravings and White watercolors would count).
2. Synthesis: tease out a question or topic which has come out of our readings and discussion so far.

In the interest of facilitating 2, here are some of the suggestions we discussed in class:

- 1. Customs and identities.** Directly or indirectly, the readings give accounts of native customs in North Carolina and Massachusetts: observers described dress, diet, material culture, the use of technology, forms of work, agriculture and food production among other topics. These are among the many factors that go towards establishing a group identity, a "they are"; and English settlers of course had their own customs. Where do empirical observations give way to judgments of value or right? What happens as customs began to change in the situation of intercultural contact, and especially what happens to identities?
- 2. The shock of the new.** It has been argued that both the Indians and English experienced a "New World" in North America, one created by contact. For the English, this New World was a physically different place, reached by an often traumatic journey which then separated them from much that *was* familiar. Where and how does that "newness" register in the texts? How is it understood, and is it welcomed or rejected?
- 3. The uses of the book.** Each of these texts had a reason for coming into being, as a manuscript or as a printed book. What are we told about the author's relationship to publication and the print medium? How do books, writing, literacy, or translation figure in the text -- as opposed to (for instance) oral/verbal culture, or the inability to understand some form of language?
- 4. Mixed messages.** For all their explicit and implicit agendas, these texts have many points of apparent self-contradiction or at least of internal tension. For instance, Morton asserts that the Indians live better and more happily than the English, but also that they worship the devil. Rowlandson juxtaposes detailed accounts of Indian kindness with the declaration that "I have been in the midst of those roaring lions, and Savage bears" (107). What kinds of propositions are in tension here? How might you account for the contradiction or incoherence in the text?
- 5.** What are the sharpest points of contrast between the English writers on America so far?

These suggestions are far from exhaustive; for instance, I haven't even mentioned religion. So you may have other ideas. If you have found an idea or line of inquiry that interests you, think about which parts of which text will make the most interesting material for your paper. If you are stuck at the general level, think about the texts and parts of texts which interest you the most. If you're still stuck -- and even if you aren't -- recalled I have office hours on Thursday afternoon 2-4, and am available at other times as well (sometimes in person, always by e-mail).