This preseminar will introduce major trends in early American literature as well as in the contemporary fields of American literary studies and American studies. Considering a wide scope of texts ranging from “discovery” through the Civil War, this course will explore the literary, historical, and social aspects of the construction of the United States. Since the earliest European excursions into the land of the Americas, the “new world” was represented as both an opportunity and a problem: a means to garner lands, wealth, and resources, but also a site of complex cultural and social exchange and antagonism. Our approach toward American literature will be to explore the ways it negotiates such sites of crisis and anxiety as the country moves from a network of agrarian colonies into a modern industrial nation state. In terms of reading, we will interrogate how writers and literary genres—from Anne Bradstreet’s poetry and Charles Brockden Brown’s gothic novels to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s fiction and Frederick Douglass’s narratives—respond to tension-wrought aspects of American experience and identity. This reading will be framed by a consideration of a number of scholarly and theoretical debates within the field of American literary studies, including: transnationalism/postnationalism/hemispheric studies, posthumanism and animal studies, biopolitical embodiment, and “queer temporalities” (interrogating the aims of historicism, the place of “theory,” the use of big data analysis, etc.).