Comparative Cultural Encounters in North America

Description: This course examines Spanish, French, Dutch, and British encounters with the native peoples of North America during the initial centuries of colonization: 1492-1800.

We will ask comparative questions, including: (1) What common attitudes and behaviors marked the European colonizers? (2) How did the colonial empires differ in their reactions to, and actions toward, the native peoples? (3) What was the range of native responses to the different European empires and their colonists?

And we will also ask methodological and epistemological questions, including: (1) Is it possible for the twentieth-century heirs to Euro-American culture to understand the thoughts and motives of the diverse peoples who lived in North America four and five centuries ago? (2) What combination of materialist and culturalist approaches can best explicate the colonial encounters of the early modern world?

Format: My role will be to facilitate your participation in a group discussion. You should come to each of our weekly meetings prepared to discuss all of the assigned readings. I expect you to bring three topics for discussion from each week’s readings.

You will find it helpful to read the works for a given week in the sequence in which I have listed them. Bear in mind the following questions when you read a work:

(1) What is the problem/issue/questions that the author sets out to solve/address/answer?
(2) What is the author’s central argument?
(3) What evidence does the author employ?
(4) What methods does the author use to seek and to analyze that evidence?
(5) Does the author employ the most appropriate evidence and methods to address the central problem/issue/question?
(6) What issues (if any) are left unresolved by the author’s approach and argument?
(7) How does each author’s work fit with the other readings for the week? Is the work compatible/incompatible with the approaches and arguments of the other readings? Look for points of commonality and of tension.
(8) How does the work fit into the general scholarly trends within early North American history? What interpretive tradition does the work best represent?
Honor Code: All student work is governed by the Oberlin College Honor Code. If you have a question about how the Code applies to a particular assignment, you should raise that question with the professor in advance of the due date.

Attendance: Note that attendance at all sessions is required and that your participation is expected.

Evaluation: Students will be evaluated on the basis of a short essay on the film, Black Robe (5%), a final paper (40%), three sets of peer reviews (30%), and class participation (25%). The instructor reserves the right to exercise some discretion in assigning final grades.

I am averse to late work or incomplete grades. I will hold up my end of the bargain by returning your first two installments with detailed comments within one week of their due date. It is in our mutual interest to complete all of the work for this course on schedule. That said, I am always willing to work out special arrangements in the event of any significant personal hardship.

Purchases: The following nine books are available at the Oberlin Bookstore. They are also available on Reserve at the library.

• Eric R. Wolf, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley: University of CA, 1997)
• Miguel Leon-Portilla, The Broken Spears, The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007)
• Allan Greer, Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits (New York: Oxford Press, 2006)
• Denys Delage, Bitter Feast: Amerindians and Europeans in Northeastern North America, 1600-64 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993)

Schedule of Classes and Assignments

September 6
WEEK 1: Divine Goals

Brian Moore film, Black Robe

Question: Do you see a greater divide between different Native American groups (Algonkin, Iroquois, Montagnais, and Huron) or between the French Jesuit and the Natives? Why? Using the film as evidence, write a brief essay (2-3 pages) that supports your position.

September 13
WEEK 2: The Big Picture

***Film assessment due***


**September 20**  
**WEEK 3: The Big Picture II**  

*Alfred Crosby, Ecological Imperialism*

**September 27**  
**WEEK 4: Predicaments of Culture**


**October 4**  
**WEEK 5: First Impressions**

***First Installment of Paper due ***


**October 11**
WEEK 6: First Encounters

*** First Evaluation of Peer Papers Due ***


Book 3: Miguel Leon-Portilla, The Broken Spears

October 18
Week 7: New Spain I


******************************Mid-semester Break******************************

November 1
WEEK 8: New Spain II

*** Second Installment Due ***


November 8
WEEK 9: New England I

***Second Evaluation of Peer Papers Due ***

Jill Lepore, The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity

November 15
WEEK 10: New England II

*******************************Thanksgiving Break*******************************

November 29
WEEK 11: Dutch, English and French Strategies

Denys Delage, Bitter Feast

Eric R. Wolf, Europe and the People Without History, 158-94.


December 6
WEEK 12: New France

Allan Greer, Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits
December 13
WEEK 13: The Interior

*** Final Papers Due ***

Richard White, *The Middle Ground*

December 21

*** Final Evaluations of Peer Papers Due ***

**Paper Description:** During the semester you will develop a review essay in three installments. Your essay should identify a unifying theme that you will explore in relationship to a growing number of the readings.

Your essay needs to advance your own interpretation, advanced in an introduction and clinched in your conclusion. Our discussions should suggest useful themes to unite your review essay. I do not expect you to try to summarize every aspect of every work (an impossibility). You should meet with me to hone a theme before you begin to write.

I expect your papers to be carefully polished. You should present work of a quality that you would be willing to submit to a scholarly journal for consideration. Consequently, you must pay close attention to professional standards in your writing and citations.

Clarity is the cardinal virtue of good historical writing; simplicity is the essence of clarity. There are no unimportant words or sentences in polished writing; every word and sentence warrants your careful attention and precise craftsmanship.

You should write for an imagined audience of fellow historians who have not read the particular essays and books. Therefore, you should illustrate and explain your points carefully. Your model should be a review-essay published in a scholarly journal (e.g. *The William and Mary Quarterly* or *Reviews in American History*). Upon request, I can provide a copy of a review essay to exemplify the genre.

**Note:** You will distribute each installment of your paper to me and to your classmates.

**Due Thursday, October 4:** The first installment of your paper should assess three articles or two books (or two articles and one book). This paper should not exceed six pages.

**Due Thursday, October 11:** You will submit a one to two-page peer review of each paper submitted. (10% of your grade)

**Due Thursday, November 1:** The second installment of your paper should represent a revision and an extension of your first paper. This version should examine four books (or six articles; or two books and four articles; or three books and two articles) at a maximum length of twelve pages.

**Due Thursday, November 8:** You will submit a one to two-page peer review of each paper submitted. (10% of your grade)
Due Thursday, December 13: The third (and final) version of your paper should assess six books (or twelve essays, etc.) at a maximum length of eighteen pages. (40% of your grade)

The reviewed readings should come from multiple weeks and should reflect a balance spread relatively evenly over the full thirteen weeks. For example, it won’t do to submit a final paper drawn exclusively or primarily from readings assigned for the first two or three weeks of the syllabus.

Due Friday, December 21, by 11 a.m.: You will submit a one to two-page peer review of each paper submitted. Please staple the previous reviews submitted. Include a suggested grade. (10% of your grade)