Throughout the early 16th century and into the late 17th century, change and adjustment were constant factors present in America. Social diversity would be forever altered upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus and other Europeans to the “new world” in the late 15th century. The Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans were three groups that faced ongoing changes and adjustments while living in America during the 16th and 17th century. These changes varied from group to group, and some changes had greater impacts than others. While many people embraced the changes that were occurring, there was also a great amount of the populace who opposed it. In most instances, the changes occurring were often inevitable and unavoidable. A majority of people were experiencing more change, and a smaller amount of people were experiencing less change between the early 16th and late 17th centuries for Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans. The amount of change occurring at a specific time varied from group to group and sometimes went unnoticed by those experiencing it; however, change was constantly and consistently present for most throughout the 16th and 17th centuries.

After the arrival of Europeans, there were two groups of Native Americans: those who chose to assimilate to European culture and those who resisted the change of accepting a new culture. Both groups of Native Americans faced the most change during the early 16th century when the Europeans began to colonize the “new world”. The mainstream of Europeans believed that the Native Americans were barbaric, uneducated, and uncivilized.¹ For this reason the Europeans did not agree with the different lifestyle that the indigenous led and decided that it would be out of rightness and justice to “destroy [the] barbarism and educate these people to a more humane and virtuous life.”² The Europeans felt the most appropriate and affective way to assimilate Native Americans to the European culture would be to force this change on the
indigenous and not provide them with any other option. Their rights were immediately changed upon arrival of the Europeans when the Requerimiento was read. ¹ If the Native Americans tried to refuse the Europeans rule “they may be compelled by force of arms to accept it.” ² The Native Americans faced the most change during this time because if they chose to resist the assimilation, it could cost them their lives. Those who chose to assimilate to the European’s new lifestyle faced a great amount of change because they no longer practiced their traditional lifestyle. They were now forced to practice the same religion of Catholicism, share the same land, and practice the European lifestyle.¹ Change occurred even to those who tried to resist this new European lifestyle. Native Americans who rejected this new rule faced massive violence by the Europeans who were “killing, terrorizing, afflicting, torturing, and destroying the native peoples, doing all this with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty, never seen or heard of before.” ³ Such massive violence caused the resisting Native Americans to change because they began to act in a violent way in order to fight back and protect themselves. In 1493 Christopher Columbus said the indigenous would “march out, as soon as they saw our men approaching, they would quickly take flight.” ⁴ These same people were now fighting back to the Christians, “they took up arms, but their weapons were very weak.” ³ Changes to Native Americans, although not as defining, continued up until the late 17th century in instances such as the Act of Submission in 1644 when the Nanhgansets said they “freely, voluntarily, and most humbly to submit, subject, and give over ourselves, peoples, lands, rights, inheritances, and possessions” ⁵ to the English.

Most change occurred to the Africans who were sold into slavery rather than the Africans who were responsible for the selling. More change occurred to the Africans who were sold into slavery because before 1691 not all blacks were enslaved, blacks were not inferior to whites, and
some blacks even owned slaves. The separation of blacks and whites, and the enslavement of blacks was a gradual process. The first change that occurred to African slaves was when a slave code was written specifically for the Americas in 1685 called The Code Noir which limited black slave’s rights and specified the punishments for black slaves who broke the rules or did not act in a correct manner. The next defining change that occurred to African slaves was when the enslavement was actually set into place in 1691 in Virginia Laws of Servitude and Slavery when it was stated “that no negro or mulatto be after the end of this present session of assembly set free by any person or persons whatsoever.” This was a defining change for Africans who were sold into slavery because they were now defined by their race instead of their ethnicity and religion. Africans sold into slavery were now “slaves, in respect of the time of their servitude, because it is for life.” Less change occurred to the Africans who were slave sellers because they were not forced to become slaves even after the law of servitude and slavery was set into place in 1691. African slave sellers remained in demand because “Europeans looked to Africa as a source of human bodies.”

Europeans were continually experiencing and overcoming change between the 16th and 17th centuries. The two main European groups that populated the Americas were the mainstream Europeans who were unconcerned about the mass murder of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, and the Europeans who dissented. The mainstream of Europeans went through more of a change in the early 16th century when they began to use massive violence on the Native Americans. The new violence tactics being used on Native Americans indicated a cultural change for mainstream Europeans because they were described as “never seen or heard of before.” This newly brutal behavior enacted by the mainstream of Europeans was a change that revolved around forcing the natives to become assimilated to the European culture. This
change was justified by inventing “rightness” and manufacturing “virtue”. The Europeans who dissented went through more of a change during the early 17th century around 1630 when there was a cultural change of striving to become a “Citty upon a Hill.” City upon a Hill was a utopian vision the dissented Europeans had, which would allow them to gain preservation of social unity and social order. This new vision would revolve around homogeneity, stability, and order which was very different than what Europeans had always known. The dissented Europeans wanted a City upon a Hill to be nothing like England, Virginia, and the Native Americans. This new utopia would contain changes such as personal discipline, social surveillance of “private” life, social regulation of sexuality, and focus on education. The dissented Europeans took these new cultural changes very seriously and believed it was of the highest importance to obey the rules, fulfill your social role, and always set an example. The dissented English felt a great deal of cultural anxiety from these changes because they believed that if they failed, they would “be made a story” and would “shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned into Cursses upon” them.

Although change may have varied from drastic to minor, noticed to unnoticed, and good to bad, change remained prevalent throughout the early 16th century and into the late 17th century in America. Between the 16th and 17th century a majority of people were experiencing more change, and a smaller amount of people were experiencing less change for groups such as the Native Americans, Africans, and Europeans. The way change affected each group varied from situation to situation and the outcome of the effects were often unpredictable. The economic, social, and cultural changes that occurred in America during the 16th and 17th century will continue to remain an important element of America’s history today.
1 Lecture notes, September 9, 2010
2 Juan Gines de Sepulveda, 1547
3 Las Casas, 1552
4 Christopher Columbus, 1493
5 Act of Submission, 1644, pp. 81
6 Lecture notes, September 16, 2010
7 The Code Noir, 1685, pp. 31-36
8 Virginia laws of servitude and slavery, 1643-1691
9 Lecture notes, September 21, 2010
10 Robert Beverley, 1705
11 People From the Sea, Bender pp.36
12 John Winthrop, 1630
13 Lecture notes, September 23, 2010