From the 15th century to the 17th century, as time progressed, Europeans saw more and more difference between themselves and people of other ethnicities, and finally even other groups of Europeans. When Christopher Columbus wrote *De Insulis nuper in mari Indico repertis* in 1493, he noted cultural differences between the Spanish and the natives, but his main points were simply observations and comparisons about ways of life. However, as time went on, European colonizers began to create more differences between themselves and Native Americans, based on culture, race, and religion, among other things. Eventually, differences began to be drawn not only between Europeans and non-Europeans, but also between different groups of Europeans. Over the course of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, European colonizers began to create more and more methods of measuring difference between people groups.

In 1493 when Christopher Columbus "discovered" the new land and the natives who lived there, he observed differences between the Spanish and the natives. Naturally, he explained these observations in terms of how Europe is and how Europeans expect natives in an "un-colonized" land to be, because that was his only point of reference. "They are of simple manners and trustworthy, and very liberal with everything they have, refusing no one who asks for anything they may possess, and even themselves inviting us to ask for things," he said of the natives1. As he described them, the natives weren't barbarians, they weren't murderous, but at the same time, they weren't civilized because "they lack[ed] weapons, they [went] naked, and [we]re

---

1 Columbus, 1493
too cowardly". This didn't inherently make the Spanish superior to the natives, but the way the Spanish did things was "right", so the way the natives did things must have been wrong.

By the 16th century, it was established that the Spanish were superior to the natives, and the question became one of how to disseminate their superiority. This was a natural occurrence because "the most powerful and most perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. This... relationship exists among men, there being some who by nature are masters and others who by nature are slaves." Religion became one of the main ways to differentiate between the superior and the subordinate. It was "appropriate and beneficial for these barbarians... to become subject to the rule of those whose wisdom, virtue, and religion have converted them from barbarians into civilized men." Once again, the religion of the Spaniards was "right", so the different religion of the natives was wrong, but this time, this difference made the Spaniards superior.

Moving into the 17th century, race became an important method of measuring difference, and laws were passed regarding a person's role in society based on their race. This called for a hierarchy of categories of difference. What if someone was not European, but was a Christian; what would become the deciding classifier, race or religion? The September 1667 laws make race the deciding factor over religion.

Also in the 17th century, difference became no longer just present between Europeans and non-Europeans, Christians and non-Christians; it became apparent between this group of Europeans and that one, this group of Christians and that one. John Winthrop, when writing about the starting of the Massachusetts colony, claimed that the failure of the Virginia colony was because of their own bad religion and leadership. The Massachusetts colony would succeed,

---

2 Columbus, 1493
3 Sepulveda, 1547
4 Virginia Laws of Servitude and Slavery, 1643-1691 (December 1662 & September 1667)
according to Winthrop, because they were "right" and the Virginia colony failed because they were "wrong".  

However, not all groups of Europeans perceived this same attachment of difference and power, or even of difference at all. For instance, John Eliot saw a difference of religion between himself and the natives, but similarly to Columbus, didn't necessarily perceive himself as superior to the natives, even though he perceived his religion as superior. Roger Williams said there was more than one way to religion and advocated letting people find religion in their own way, rather than assuming your own way is superior and using power to force it upon others. However, these Europeans were very much the exception, not the rule, and for their assumptions that there were less differences present and that difference didn't mean there was one right and powerful side versus one wrong and weak side, they were exiled. Because they saw less difference, they were seen as different from the majority of Europeans, and thus, they were "wrong".  

In fact, once superiority was established through exploiting difference, difference could be found in places where there was no difference at all. According to Increase Mather, Native Americans "barbarously murthered both men and women," in the Pequod War. He accounted barbaric and hostile murders of English men and women on the part of the "Heathen" and "Indians". These murders committed by the English were no different than the countless accounts of Native American murders on the part of Europeans, such as those mentioned by Bartolome de las Casas in *Brevissima Relacion de la Destruycion de las Indias* (1552). Both of these situations involved murder, but because power and superiority had already been established

---

5 Lecture Notes, September 11, 2012

6 Mather, 1676
by the Europeans, their murder was just and the Native Americans' murder was barbaric. Mather
created difference where there was no difference because power had already been established on
his side; and the very power that enabled him to create this difference came from the classifying
categories developed from fundamental differences between different groups of people.

While there were certainly those select few Europeans or groups of Europeans who saw
less difference between themselves and the other groups around them, the vast majority of
Europeans classified their world around them by difference. Difference was used to create
cultural categories, power, and order in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Throughout the course
of these three centuries, Europeans perceived more and more difference, and perhaps the
differences created in this early American history are some of the very classifiers that still haunt
American society today.