The perception of social and cultural differences (1400 to 1700 AD) among the players on the stage of the Americas

It is the purpose of this paper to ponder the complex question of whether more kinds of people saw more difference or less difference over the course of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. At first glance when confronted with this issue, one might expect to see a decrease in perceived difference among social groups once they learned more about each other and interacted for some length of time. However I will here argue that while the Natives of the Americas as a whole do have this tendency, the same thing cannot be said for the opinions of Europeans, at least when confronted with the differences in race and religion.

When Columbus first “discovered” the American continent in 1492 he arrived with certain expectations towards the Natives. He expected severe difference in intelligence and people capable of “monstrosities”.1 What he did find was less different than he had expected. He encountered “fearful, kind, generous, nonviolent” people without “government” with whom he had difficulty to communicate. The women worked, the people were well formed and intelligent. These were things he did not expect and struggled to understand. However, these facts made the “savages” of this new world less distinct and much more similar than expected. These views he naturally conveyed to his fellow Europeans and thus became the norm in the 15th century.

Simultaneously, the culture of perceiving divergent properties was by no means a novel one among the countries of Europe. The centuries of war between countries, the constant controversy in political and religious views as well as the extreme sorting of people into classes and hierarchy combined with the novel experiences of the expanding trade empires gave Europeans a means to distinguish between people on much smaller scales.2

The 16th century experiences more variety of perception in regard to the New World and its indigenous peoples. The mainstream Europeans (many of whom never even saw an American shore) strongly believed that the Natives were devoid of intelligence, only “pretended to be civilized”, were natural slaves and had only scraps and “vestiges of humanness” in them.3 On the other hand the dissenting Europeans, who in turn often had visited the Americas perceived the indigenous in a different light. Las Casas describes them as “guileless”, “obedient”, “loyal”, “rational”, with much intelligence and an “aptitude” for Christianity.4 In fact he paints a picture of the indigenous that in his descriptions make the Natives better humans, albeit their inferior status as

1 Columbus, 1493.
2 Lecture notes, August 30th and September 4th 2012.
3 Sepulveda, 1547.
4 Las Casas, 1552.
slaves. In contrast he illustrates how violently and degradingly malicious the Spanish conquistadors conduct themselves.

As good Christians and “civilized” societies, both opinion strands (mainstream and dissenting Europeans) would have believed themselves to be intelligent, rational and good people. Thus we can conclude that whereas the mainstream Spanish perceived great and fundamental differences between themselves and the Natives, the dissenting members of the same society did not share this view, and rather saw less difference than even the people a century before did.

In the beginning of the 17th century, settlers’ perspectives of Native Americans and then slowly also those of the “Old World” Europeans begin to evolve. A stylized or all-inclusive picture of indigenous in 16th and 15th centuries is of a reasonably unthreatening, backwards, uncivilized and gentle nature. This began to change especially for the mostly British settlers in North America. As plantations and settlements grow and the newcomers struggle to survive their unpreparedness and the harsh conditions, they begin to develop a new image of the Natives: that of a threatening, fear-inducing and formidable “Enemy”.5 The Settlers are outnumbered “32 to (...) 3000” 6, and have good reason to dread attacks to their tentative settlements.

The mid and late 17th century is accompanied by a new wave of defining and coping with differences previously unknown to western and colonial society. With the difficulties of servitude, slavery, Christianity versus “heathens”, race and the novelty of mixed races, the British and European settlers face a new age of defining rules and laws that draw the black and white lines of new social and cultural divergences in an attempt to cope. 7 The settlers, dissenters and mainstreamers alike, distinguish between Christians and heathens (later increasingly so also between different Christian churches and new reformation8), masters, servants (for life and for time), slaves, runaways, mulattoes, negroes, whites, Indians, women of different races and social statuses etc.9 In regard to the indigenous, the Europeans eventually differentiate between assimilating Indians (meaning those who start to convert to Christianity as well as give “their land to the protection of the colonies”, and support colonial interests in trade and warfare10) and those who try to distance themselves and occasionally turn violent towards the settlers. However threatening the Indians may become to the colonies, they are still viewed as inferior of race and birth and thus deserving of the “benefits” the “chosen people of GoD” can give

5 Increase Mather, 1676 p.76.
6 Frethorne, 1623.
7 Lecture notes, September 6th 2012.
8 Increase Mather, 1676 p.7 (for example)
9 Virginia laws, 1643-91.
10 Increase Mather, 1676 p.77, p.11
them. Nonetheless, as the "Heathens" start to convert (although even after being baptized, some of the colonials keep referring to them as such) the "blind barbarians" start to become literate and begin preaching to other Indians. Thus the perception of indigenous is split in two: between the "murderous Heathen killers" that they supplied with guns and ammunition and the slowly civilizing and adapting Christians.

Another indicator for the increased importance of social discrepancies and differences is Noyes discussion on the evil of "periwigs". The extreme emphasis on the importance of not disguising the self God made, and thus being able to determine social and cultural statuses shows how much colonial civilization depends on these definite lines that categorize people. Thus by the beginning of the 18th century the colonial people lay great store in determining differences between even colonial Europeans, much less towards people of different races.

Contrasting to this is the Native attitude towards the settlers from Europe. When Columbus first lands in the Americas he describes how the indigenous believed him and his crew to be celestial people, sent from the gods. In the 16th century there are accounts of the Native believing the Europeans to be "immortals" due to the lack of women in their company and the thus perceived conundrum of procreation. During the course of this century, though the Spanish settlers and newcomers from the old world create enough strife and terror among the Indigenous that they quickly become disillusioned about the great otherworldly differences between their two races and come to see the Europeans as violent and barbaric.

Thus the indigenous views diverge from the perceived great differences of inhuman superiority of the "whites" to the much more humanly cruel and faulted invaders they then begin to fight and protect themselves from.

In what is today South and Central America, the indigenous civilizations soon learn to respect the Spanish for their trade opportunities as well as the military aid against other clans while they rapidly convert (willingly or no) to catholicism. In the North they suffer from similar situations. When time moves on to the 17th century, Natives start to assimilate more freely and convert to Christianity and must view the colonies as a protecting institution that provides more opportunities than previous convictions and alliances.

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11 Winthrop, 1630.
12 Increase Mather, 1676 p.3.
13 Increase Mather, 1676 p. 6.
14 Increase Mather, 1676 p.73.
15 Increase Mather, 1676 p. 10, 12.
16 Noyes, 1703.
17 Columbus, 1493.
18 Hariot, 1590.
19 Las Casas, 1552.
But contrasting with this assimilatory strand is also one that strongly tries to preserve their culture, heritage and attempts to distance itself from the colonials as much as possible. It is between these two strands that eventually most of the wars take place, more so than between warriors of the indigenous and colonial "soldiers".  

Thus while the indigenous begin with perceptions of great differences in the 15th century, with time they perceive less differences between the “white” and “red” race. However one must differentiate that those who preferred not to assimilate would have seen decidedly more differences than those who assimilated. 

Now for the history of blacks in the Americas: There is not much documentation on African perception. However in the 16th and early 17th century there were a few select, eventually free blacks who had come to the new world as servants and eventually gained freedom. Later in coordination with the new wave of colonial differential rules and laws, all blacks (most of which were imported slaves) were slaves by status and race. Overcoming that social low was nearly impossible. The “negroes” would have been viewed as inferior and increasingly more different over the centuries by the colonials. Parallel to this their view of the planters and owners would have probably evolved.

Thus I conclude that while there might be many different possible interpretations to this question of whether more or less kinds of people saw more or less difference in the course of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries depending on interpretation of different sources, in order to satisfy the outlines of this paper I categorize my findings as follows. More of the Europeans (colonials and old-worlders) saw more difference during these three centuries. These differences however evolved from more general specifications into much more detailed and varied divergences in the 17th century. The 16th century brought with it a dissenting audience that saw stronger tendencies of less difference. The Indigenous of the Americas began their encounter with the Europeans with an impression of large difference that with time, experience, disease and war turned into a perception of less difference. The indigenous too however are not homogenous in their convictions and there are two strands of perception: those of the assimilators and those of the “preservionists”. The assimilating populations perceived less difference by the end of the 16 hundreds and the traditional populations saw only somewhat less but certainly different distinctions. Black slaves saw a slight increase in differences over the centuries. Thus we can conclude that overall more kinds of people saw more differences over the centuries. This is true if you consider the number of different European ethnic and religious immigrants, as well as the import of slaves and the many tribes of Indians.

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20 Increase Mather, 1676 p.77. 
21 Virginia laws 1643-91.