

Colonial Encounters: Latin in the Early Americas

As Europeans discovered the Americas, they used Classics as a framework to understand and domesticate what they found there—even as they renegotiated the meaning of Classics in light of the discovery (e.g., Pagden 1993, Grafton 1992). When colonizers came to stay in the Americas during the sixteenth century, the Latin language came with them. It did not remain European property. Native peoples learned Latin, too, using it as a medium of communication, a form of cultural capital, and a sophisticated means of resistance. This panel aims to address how and why Latin was used by and about indigenous Americans.

In investigating these questions, we address a broad geography—from Mexico to Canada—with the idea that the methodologies being used to study different texts, times, and places will be mutually informative. We build upon recent work in Neo-Latin studies (e.g., the contributions in Moul 2017, Knight and Tilg 2015) and fledgling studies of classical receptions among native peoples in the colonial Americas (e.g., Laird 2018, 2019; McManus 2021) to account more specifically for the political, social, and geographical dimensions of the Latin language in the Early Modern Americas. The first and fourth papers address Latin texts by indigenous American authors navigating intercultural social and political conventions. The second and third address Latin texts by Europeans who frame indigenous American people in dialogue with their landscapes.

The first paper, “Possession and Dispossession: the First Nahuatl-to-Latin Translation in the Real Audiencia of New Spain,” addresses Juan de Tlaxcala’s 1541 *Verba Sociorum Domini Petri Tlacauepantzi*, the first Nahuatl-to-Latin translation by a Native of New Spain. The

presenter will focus on the interaction between the Latin and Nahuatl languages and the related questions of cultural translation, self-accommodation, and self-erasure within the constraints of the chaotic legal system imposed by Real Audiencia of New Spain. Ultimately, the text reflects the anxieties produced by the deep differences and the subsequent difficulties that erupted with contact across both cultures, especially when it came to understanding what possession meant across the Spanish-Nahua cultural divide.

The second paper, “Indigenous People and Landscapes in Francisco Cervantes de Salazar’s *Aliquot Dialogi*,” addresses the adaptation of classical models in this 1554 work by the Spanish academic and early rector of the University of Mexico. The presenter will demonstrate how Cervantes de Salazar privileges Latin ethnographic and geographic vocabulary over how indigenous people viewed themselves and their landscapes. Ultimately, Cervantes de Salazar’s efforts to create permanent spaces for Latin in the educational and legal structures of what is now Mexico City had tangible negative environmental consequences for the region.

The third paper, “Amantacha and the Canadian Environment in the Jesuit Gaze,” takes us much further north to discuss some similar questions in a different context. The presenter will focus on two seventeenth-century Latin portrayals of Amantacha, a Huron who spent 1626–1628 in France after his father volunteered him for the trip. In an elegiac poem by Laurent Le Brun (1608–1663) and the prose writings of fellow Jesuit Paul Ragueneau (1608–1680), the story of Amantacha’s acculturation is a metaphor for France’s potential to overwrite Canada’s native landscape with French priorities. Filtered through Latin idiom, Amantacha’s wildness and Canada’s wilderness are both assessed and measured for their potential to be Gallicized.

The fourth paper, “*Diligo gentem meam et compatriotas*: John Mettawan and Native American Survivance,” explores a 1736 letter of thanks in Latin to the London-based Society for

the Propagation of the Gospel in New England written by John Mettawan, a Native American student of the Rev. Samuel Whitman in Connecticut. The presenter will look closely at Mettawan's text itself in dialogue with another Latin text by a Native American student in colonial New England: the longer and more elaborate letter of thanks to English benefactors written in 1663 by Harvard student Caleb Cheeshahteamauk. These two students' letters can be read in continuity with characteristic themes of Native North American literature over the generations, including communitism, survivance, and indigeneity itself.

Together, these papers will introduce audience members to the conversation and will also make a substantive contribution to the scholarship on the performative possibilities and frustrating limitations that resulted from importing Latin to the Americas.

Works Cited

Grafton, A. 1992. *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery*. Cambridge, MA.

Knight, S. and S. Tilg., eds. 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of Neo-Latin*. Oxford.

Laird, A. 2018. *Antiquities and Classical Traditions in Latin America*. Chichester.

Laird, A. 2019. "American Philological Associations: Latin and Amerindian Languages," *TAPA* 149.2: 117–41.

McManus, S. 2021. *Empire of Eloquence: The Classical Rhetorical Tradition in Colonial Latin America and the Iberian World*. Cambridge.

Moul, V., ed. 2017. *A Guide to Neo-Latin Literature*. Cambridge.

Pagden, A. 1993. *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*.
New Haven.