

Fall 2017

Syllabus for Philosophy 336 Metaphysics: Native American Philosophy

Alejandro Santana
santana@up.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pilotscholars.up.edu/phl_facpubs

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Santana, Alejandro, "Syllabus for Philosophy 336 Metaphysics: Native American Philosophy" (2017). *Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 6.

https://pilotscholars.up.edu/phl_facpubs/6

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact library@up.edu.

8. In fact, a non-native makes this claim in a comedic piece on the use of redskin as a professional team name, created by the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loK2DRBnk24>.
9. I have had students from Asia ask about my use of Indian Country and American Indian. For them, it can be a source of confusion.
10. Even when refuted, the stereotypes often stick around. See <http://opa.ahsc.arizona.edu/newsroom/news/2016/stereotypes-about-native-americans-and-alcohol-debunked-ua-study>.
11. Looking back, I realized that I should have selected even more.
12. Examples like Senator Warren, see <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/is-elizabeth-warren-native-american-or-what/257415/>, or Professor Andrea Smith, see <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/05/is-elizabeth-warren-native-american-or-what/257415/>, come to mind.
13. Referred to as the Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood or CDIB, this card is issued by the U.S. Government and states the amount of Indian blood of the individual. There are too many problems associated with the CDIB and how the degree of Indian blood is determined to mention here. You may want to start by reading this: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED280661>.
14. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/magazine/who-decides-who-counts-as-native-american.html?mcubz=1&r=0>.
15. While many native scholars are happy to share their work, one should also note that, like other philosophers of color, some may be asked to do many tasks (native project, bring a speaker, etc.) simply because of their identity. I encourage those seeking to teach to go out and do some research, just as you would when developing a new course.

Syllabus for Philosophy 336 Metaphysics: Native American Philosophy

Alejandro Santana
UNIVERSITY OF PORTLAND

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

It is truly an honor to have my course syllabus included in this edition of the newsletter. This syllabus is somewhat unusual, so for the sake of making its content and structure clear, some preliminary remarks are in order. To begin with, a brief remark about myself. I am a Mexican-American philosopher and a first-generation son of Mexican immigrants. I do not claim any kind of status as an indigenous person, but my Mexican ancestry inspires me to explore this area of my cultural heritage. The course I teach is not perfect, nor do I teach it perfectly. I teach it in an attempt to genuinely understand myself and engage in my own self-decolonization. I submit this syllabus with profound humility, respect, and gratitude for those who have struggled to study and teach in this area for longer than I have.

Next, a remark about my audience. I teach at a private liberal arts institution with a predominantly white, upper-middle class to wealthy student body. However, there is a sizable Latinx minority, consisting largely of Mexican and Central Americans. There is a very small minority of American Indian students; to my knowledge, I have had the privilege of teaching only one. This course is for everyone, but it has a particular interest in helping Latinx and native students either begin or continue their own process of self-

discovery and self-decolonization. This is also a junior-level metaphysics course, which is one of a distribution of college core courses that every student with a major in the arts and sciences is required to take. The course is therefore pitched to a general audience, usually nonmajors, who have little to no background in metaphysics and perhaps even less in the history and traditions of indigenous peoples.

A few remarks about the course name and description. As I was initially constructing this course (in the spring and summer of 2011), I wrestled with this for some time before I finally decided how to proceed. There is a good deal more to say about this, but overall, the decision was grounded in four considerations: (1) I am the only one in the department who teaches in this area, and (2) there is room in my teaching schedule for only one course like this.

I also have (3) aspirations to teach at least two versions of this course. The first version is a course devoted strictly to the Mexica and the Maya. The second version will be devoted to contemporary North American Indian thought. The syllabus below (for a summer session) is an amalgamation of the two, as I am slowly working now to develop the second version. I should point out that the course description in the syllabus states that the course “explores Native American philosophy with particular emphasis on Mexico *or* the continental U.S.” The disjunctive nature of this statement and its emphasis is intentional so that the description makes clear that the course is *not* intended to represent nations across the entire western hemisphere. Instead, the description is intended to narrow the scope of the course but be flexible enough to encompass the future versions I have in mind as well as versions I undertake far into the future. So the strategy that I employed is to begin teaching the course emphasizing the indigenous traditions with which I am most familiar, and then as I expand my competence in other traditions, I would slowly add content modules to the course until I ultimately ended up with enough material for a new version.

There were also (4) institutional dynamics in play as I was framing the course. To be clear, my department has been totally supportive of me and this course. My university has also been very supportive. There was, however, one member of the upper administration who, at the time I was getting this course approved, had idiosyncratic views on what metaphysics is and should be. Consequently, care had to be taken to make this course recognizable as a “genuine” metaphysics course, which would thereby forestall any potential criticism about the course content. As a result, Western philosophical sources had to be included, but I added sources that would serve to either complement or serve as useful contrasts to the indigenous outlooks we were considering. This, however, put further constraints on what could be covered in the course, which already had to satisfy the learning objectives placed on all metaphysics courses offered at my university. Ultimately, the course name and description seemed to be the best fit for the future plans I have for the course and the institutional context within which it was constructed. This institutional dynamic has changed over the years, as the aforementioned administrator has left the university and the upper administration has more broadly come

to recognize the vital importance of diversity in the core curriculum. However, the course still reflects the distortive effects of its initial construction, and it is probably a good time to revisit the course title, description, and schedule.

I should add that the course title and description is discussed with the students at the beginning of the class so that students are very much aware of the kind of course for which they signed up. On the very first day of lecture, I make three things clear to the students. First, I make it clear that indigenous traditions and philosophical outlooks are far too broad and diverse to be covered adequately in one course. I have therefore opted to focus the course on a few traditions, because they are the ones I know best and could cover well in their proper context. Second, I make it clear that there are many traditions about which I am as yet unfamiliar (those in South America, for example) and that is why they are not included. Third, I use the previous point to emphasize that we (the students and I) are all outsiders and that the guiding principle for the course would be to listen—listen to the voices of a people from a different time, place, and cultural context; listen with genuine sensitivity, openness, and a desire to understand; and listen without judgment, arrogance, condemnation, or romanticism. So, in effect, I use the course title and description as a learning tool to emphasize both my own limitations and the highly particularized nature of studying in this area, which has the derivative effect of disabusing students of their tendency to inappropriately universalize over indigenous peoples and their traditions.

Another important point of clarification has to do with the fact that the course schedule makes frequent reference to course notes that I have prepared for the students. The course notes are an amalgam of notes I have taken from several books. Fundamentally, they are notes from Michael Coe's *Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs*, with notes included from Richard Townsend's *The Aztecs* and David Carrasco's *Daily Life of the Aztecs*. They also include some excerpts from Bernal Diaz del Castillo's *Conquest of New Spain* and Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*. When we discuss Miguel León-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture*, I also include several interpretive updates from Jim Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*. For the Maya, I use Robert Sharer's work in *Daily Life in Maya Civilization* and some of his work in *The Ancient Maya*. I also use León-Portilla's *Time and Reality in the Thought of the Maya* as well as parts of Diego de Landa's *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*. I use other texts; however, the abovementioned texts are used the most.

I put all of these notes together in Power Point lectures that include photos and videos I took while touring multiple museums and indigenous archeological sites in Mexico and Guatemala as well as photos gleaned from reliable online sources. I do this to help students become familiar with the places and peoples that are frequently referred to in class as well as to help students understand the amazing cultural legacy of the Mesoamerican indigenous peoples on which the course is focused. This is neither a tourist nor voyeuristic approach to teaching. Moreover, this is not intended to be an exercise in objectification. Rather, it is

intended to be a dynamic, multi-modal, and immersive learning experience for students who usually know little to nothing about the history and culture of the people whose philosophical perspectives they will be studying. My course notes are intended to help bootstrap students in this historical and cultural context before we begin the process of understanding the details of the overall philosophical outlook. This also helps prevent the students' tendency to either barbarize, primitivize, romanticize, or anachronize indigenous peoples.

Because this is a philosophy class, there is no time to read all of these books on which I have taken notes, so I blend them in course notes, along with the multiple visual aids mentioned above, to provide the necessary context for the philosophical exploration that happens later. I then supplement all of this by requiring students to watch documentaries (almost all of which are available on YouTube) that help fill in gaps and raise awareness about issues that confront Native Americans to this day. The documentaries currently emphasize either more historical context or U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. The latter is done primarily to help students understand the sheer scale and violence of U.S. imperialism, which usually comes as a surprise to a majority of them. It is a regrettable—but, unfortunately, not surprising—fact that many of my students are confronted with issues of Western imperialism, colonialism, and genocide for the first time in my course. No documentary is perfect, but again, I use the imperfection as a teaching tool, as we spend class time discussing inaccuracies, distortions, exaggerations, or filling in overlooked details. One might think that this historical and cultural context should be provided in a different class, but, unfortunately, there is no such class at my university. Several history courses offered at my university cover various facets of this context, but many of the students who take my course have not taken any of them, and they report that my course is their first exposure. I have therefore determined that my course has to provide this context.

Overall, my sincere hope is to teach a good course in a good way—one that respects the indigenous peoples on which we focus, while at the same time bearing in mind good pedagogical practice, the broader institutional context, and my own limitations as a scholar and teacher. I would be happy and honored to receive constructive advice on how to improve it.