

Rethinking Columbus The Next 500 Years



edited by
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WHY RETHINK COLUMBUS?

Students at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, commemorated the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas by launching a school-wide "discovery." They invaded other classrooms, stole teachers' purses, and claimed them as theirs. Adapting a lesson described in the first edition of *Rethinking Columbus* (p. 17 in this edition), students emptied a purse in front of a teacher and her class, then remarked on its contents: "This sure is good gum, think I'll have a piece ... or two; you all know this is my purse, 'cause this is just my shade of lipstick." Kids in the assaulted classrooms figured out what was going on only when the invaders compared their "discovery" to Columbus's "discovery." The high-school students, with advance permission from other teachers, led discussions and described Columbus's policies toward the Taíno Indians on Hispaniola. They concluded by offering black armbands to students as a way to demonstrate solidarity with Native Americans' 500 years of resistance.

Just two years before, in October of 1990, the *Chicago Tribune* had promised that the Columbus Quincentenary would be the "most stupendous international celebration in the history of notable celebrations." The Portland students' "Discovery Day" is not what the *Tribune* had in mind.

Prompted by widespread Native American activism leading up to the Quincentenary, educators throughout the Americas re-evaluated the social and ecological consequences of the Europeans' arrival in 1492. Teacher unions, community groups, social justice organizations, universities, and school districts initiated workshops and teach-ins. New

curricula, videos and children's books appeared. In 1991, Rethinking Schools published the first edition of *Rethinking Columbus*, which subsequently went through seven printings and sold 225,000 copies. We were pleased to be a part of a movement to question a myth that dismissed the very humanity of entire peoples. We believe this critical work by so many has made a profound impact in schools.

But we have a long way to go. Too many children's books, textbooks, and curricula continue to tout the traditional Columbus myth. For many youngsters, the "discovery of America" is their first curricular exposure to the encounter between two cultures and to the encounter between two races.

The "Columbus-as-Discoverer" myth teaches children whose voices to listen for as they go out into the world — and whose to ignore. Pick up a typical children's book on Columbus: See Chris; see Chris talk; see Chris grow up, have ideas, have feelings; see Chris plant the flag... In these volumes, native peoples of the Caribbean, the "discovered," are portrayed without thoughts or feelings. And thus children begin a scholastic voyage that encourages them to disregard the perspectives, the lives, of people of color. Both the words and images of the Columbus myth implicitly tell children that it is acceptable for one group of heavily-armed, white people from a "civilized" country to claim and control the lands of distant non-white *others*.

During the Quincentenary, a more "balanced" approach to European/Native American conflict also emerged. According to a Library of Congress-produced curriculum that exemplified this seemingly neutral inquiry, "The story of the Americas,

more than any other area of the world, is the story of peoples and cultures coming together," resulting in "a cultural mixture." This newer framework suggested that world history since 1492 has been a series of trades and trade-offs. "They" gave "us" the potato, corn, and a great deal of gold. "We" gave "them" the horse, sugar, and, regrettably, germs. This process planted "seeds of change," in the words of the Smithsonian Institution. While offering important insights, this approach failed to address questions of the origins of racism, economic exploitation, and resistance.

In this new edition of *Rethinking Columbus*, we try to offer an alternative narrative. Our goal is not to idealize native people, demonize Europeans, or present a depressing litany of victimization. We hope to encourage a deeper understanding of the European invasion's consequences, to honor the rich legacy of resistance to the injustices it created, to convey some appreciation for the diverse indigenous cultures of the hemisphere, and to reflect on what this all means for us today.

We have tried to provide a forum for native people to tell some of their side of the encounter — through interviews, poetry, analysis, and stories. The point is not to present "two sides," but to tell parts of the story that have been mostly neglected.

It would be nice to think that the biases in the curriculum disappear after Columbus. But the Columbus myth is only the beginning of a winners' history that profoundly neglects the lives and perspectives of many "others": people of color, women, working-class people, the poor.

Columbus's Legacy

Columbus is dead but his legacy is not. In 1492, Columbus predicted, "Considering the beauty of the land, it could not be but that there was gain to be got." From the poisonous chemical dumps and mining projects that threaten groundwater, to oil spills on the coastal shorelines to the massive clearcutting of old-growth forests, Columbus's exploitative spirit lives on. Likewise, the slave system Columbus introduced to this hemisphere was ultimately overthrown, but not the calculus that weighs human lives in terms of private profit — of the "gain to be got."

We've featured essays and interviews that underscore contemporary resistance to the spirit of Columbus. We believe that children need to know that while injustice persists, so does the struggle for humanity and the environment.

In a very real sense, most of us are living on stolen land. However, this knowledge must not be used to make white children feel guilty. There is nothing students can do to change history. And they should not feel responsible for what others did be-

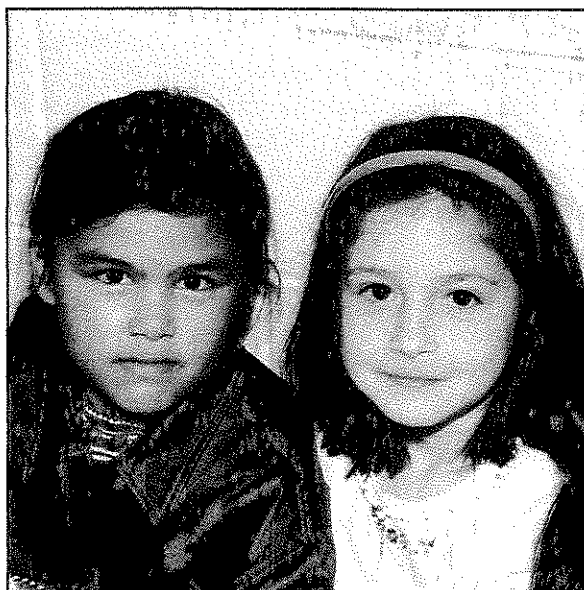
fore they were born. However, we hope the materials in *Rethinking Columbus* will help you teach that people of all backgrounds do have a responsibility to learn from history. We can choose whether to reverse the legacy of injustice or continue it. This is one reason that we've made special efforts in this edition to highlight people who have chosen to stand for justice.

We hope that these materials will also help students to discover new ways of understanding relationships between society and nature. Even the very words used by different cultures to describe the natural world are suggestive: compare the West's "environment" — something which surrounds us — to native peoples' "Mother Earth" — she who gives us life. Native views of the earth challenge students to locate new worlds of ecological hope.

Through critiquing traditional history and imagining alternatives, students can begin to discover the excitement that comes from asserting oneself morally and intellectually — refusing to be passive consumers of official stories. This is as true for 4th graders as it is for juniors in high school. Students can continue to renew and deepen this personal awakening as they seek out other curricular silences and sources of knowledge.

As the scholar Edward Said noted, "Nations are narratives." For too many, this country has been a narrative that started with the myth of Columbus. It's time to hear other voices. We offer this second edition of *Rethinking Columbus* as our contribution to a many-sided and ongoing discussion about the future.

—the editors



WE HAVE NO REASON TO CELEBRATE AN INVASION

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUZAN SHOWN HARJO

Suzan Shown Harjo, who is Cheyenne and Creek, is president and director of the Morning Star Institute in Washington, DC, an indigenous peoples' rights organization. She was interviewed by Barbara Miner of Rethinking Schools about her views on the long-term impact of the legacy of Columbus.

Columbus was just "a man of his times." Why are you so critical of him? Why not look at the positive aspects of his legacy?

As Native American peoples in this red quarter of Mother Earth, we have no reason to celebrate an invasion that caused the demise of so many of our people and is still causing destruction today. The Europeans stole our land and killed our people.

For people who are in survival mode, it's very difficult to look at the positive aspects of death and destruction, especially when it is carried through to our present. There is a reason we are the poorest people in America. There is a reason we have the highest teen suicide rate. There is a reason why our people are ill-housed and in poor health, and we do not live as long as the majority population.

That reason has to do with the fact that we were in the way of Western Civilization and we were in the way of westward expansion. We suffered the excesses of "civilization" such as murder, pillage, rape, destruction of the major waterways, destruction of land, the destruction and pollution of the air.

What are those "positive" aspects of the Columbus legacy? If we're talking about the horse, that's good. We like the horse. Indians raised the use of the horse to high military art, especially among the Cheyenne people and the tribes of the plains.

Was that a good result of that invasion? Yes. Is it something we would have traded for the many Indian peoples who are no longer here because of that invasion? No.

We also like the beads that came from Europe,

It's difficult to take seriously an apology that is not coupled with atonement. It's as if they're saying, "I'm sorry, oops, and we'll be better in the next hemisphere."

and again we raised their use to a high art. Would we have traded those beads for the massacres of our people, such as the Sand Creek Massacre [in which U.S. soldiers killed over 150 Native American men, women, and children at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864]? No.

Isn't criticism of Columbus a form of picking on the Spaniards? Were they any worse than other Europeans who came to America?

In my estimation, the Spaniards were no worse than any number of other Europeans. The economy of slavery and serfdom that existed in northern Europe—how do you measure that in cruelty and in long-term effects against the Spanish Inquisition?

I view the issue more as the oppressive nature and arrogance of the Christian religions. And that continues today.

Our Indian religions are not missionary religions. We are taught to respect other religions. It was a shock when we were met with proselytizing zealots, especially those who thought that if your soul can't be saved, you're better off dead—or if your soul can be saved, you should be dead so you can go to heaven. And that's the history of that original encounter.

How does that arrogance and ignorance manifest itself today?

How? Well, for example, the Catholic Church said that 1992 [the year of the Columbus Quincentenary commemoration] was a time to enter into a period of grace and healing and to celebrate the evangelization of the Americas. My word, how can you be graceful and healing about the tens of thousands of Native people who were killed because they would not convert to a religion they didn't

understand, or because they didn't understand the language of those making the request?

It's difficult to take seriously an apology that is not coupled with atonement. It's as if they're saying, "I'm sorry, oops, and we'll be better in the next hemisphere." That doesn't cut it. We've had empty platitudes before.

Aren't some of the criticisms of Columbus just substituting Native-centrism for Euro-centrism?

Oppressed people need to be centered within themselves. Racism and centrism become a problem if you are in the dominant society and are subjugating other people as a result of your centrism. I don't accept the question. I think it's an empty argument.

What should be the goal and perspective of teachers when telling their elementary and high school students about Columbus?

First, that no one knows the truth about Columbus. His story is a very complex history in and of itself. Too often, this history is posed as romantic myth, and the uncomfortable facts about Columbus are eliminated.

Explaining the unpleasant truths about Columbus does not take away from the fact that he was able to lurch over to these shores in three little boats. In fact, it gives the story of Columbus more dimension. It also makes it easier for kids in school to accept not only Columbus but other things.

Teachers need to respect the truth. What happens if I'm sitting in a classroom and teachers are telling me that Thomas Jefferson was one of the greatest men in the world, and I also know that he owned slaves, but they don't tell me that? What am I going to do when I'm told "don't use or abuse drugs or alcohol"? Will I think there may be another side to that too? What else am I being told that isn't true?

Kids are smart. And they have not experienced enough setbacks to know that they have to be sheep. But that's what they're taught in the public schools — how to exercise not personal discipline, but top-down discipline. It's the "do as you're told" approach to the world, rather than trying to help kids understand their place in the world.

We have to inject more truth in the classroom generally. And that only comes from discussion.

What are the key struggles that Native people face today?

We need, in the first instance, basic human rights such as religious freedom. Or how about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and other things that many people in the United States view as standard fare but are out of reach for Indian people?

There is also the issue of land and treaty rights. We have property that we don't own and we should, and we have property that we own that we don't control and we should.

We have treaties with the United States that are characterized in the U.S. Constitution as the supreme law of the land. Yet every one, without exception, of nearly 400 treaties signed between Native peoples and the U.S. government has been broken. Every one of them.

A good place to start would be for the United States to live up to every treaty agreement. It's also the way you get at resolving some of the problems of poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and poor health.

If we don't handle the big things, we can't get to the manifestations of the problem. We have to go to the basic human rights issues, the basic treaty rights issues.

If we don't resolve these issues, then all people in this country are going to be complicit in the continuing effort to wipe out our Indian people. It's as simple as that.

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Steve Kelley/Copley News Service

AMERICA TO INDIANS: "Stay in the 19th Century!"

BY JAN ELLIOTT

As I was leaving the theater after my first viewing of the movie, *Dances With Wolves*, I happened to be walking between two white couples. All of them were raving about how wonderful the movie was and how "accurately" it had portrayed the Indians. One of the men said, "I'm so ashamed of this culture that we live in and how it treated (past tense) the Indians. If I had been around back then, I would have fought on the side of the Indians."

I couldn't resist asking, "Where were you guys this summer when 4,000 heavily-armed Canadian soldiers were sent into Oka to take 250 Mohawk Indians, most of whom were women and children? And where have you been since 1986 when the U.S. government started its forced removal of the Hopi/Navajo people from their lands at Big Mountain?" His reply was, "Oh, I don't mean those kind of Indians, I meant the real Indians."

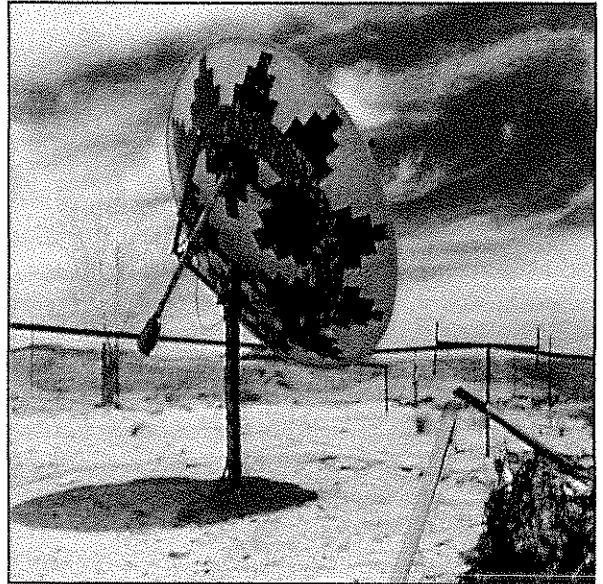
Ignoring Modern-day Indians

I started to wonder why a movie such as *Dances With Wolves* became a major event, and why a movie such as *Powwow Highway*, which became a cult classic in Indian country, was virtually ignored by white America. The answer is that white America doesn't want to know about or even recognize modern-day Indians; it doesn't want to deal with the problems that the reservation system has created in the way of extreme poverty, hopelessness, created dependency, and alcohol and drug addiction that for many are the only way out of the concentration camp horror of their reserves or homelands (called reservations in America).

As Vine Deloria says in Chapter 3 of *God is Red*:

"The tragedy of America's Indians — that is, the Indians that America loves, and loves to read about — is that they no longer exist, except in the pages of books. Rather, the modern Indians dress much the same as any other person, attend pretty much the same schools, work at many of the same jobs, and suffer racial discrimination in the same manner as do other racial minorities."

Except that Indians are the only minority group that the Indian lovers won't let out of the 19th



Stephen Timble/The People: Indians of the American Southwest

Satellite dish painted with Navajo design.

century. They love Indians as long as they can picture them riding around on ponies wearing their beads and feathers, living in picturesque tipi villages and making long profound speeches.

I am frequently invited by elementary school teachers here in Gainesville, Florida, to come and talk to the children about Indians and "tell them what they are like." Always, without fail, they ask if I can wear my "Indian clothes." By Indian clothes, they mean beads and feathers and Indian jewelry. I explain that as a graduate student at the University of Florida, I have very few occasions to wear Indian clothes. But the children, they say, will be so disappointed if I don't look like a real Indian.

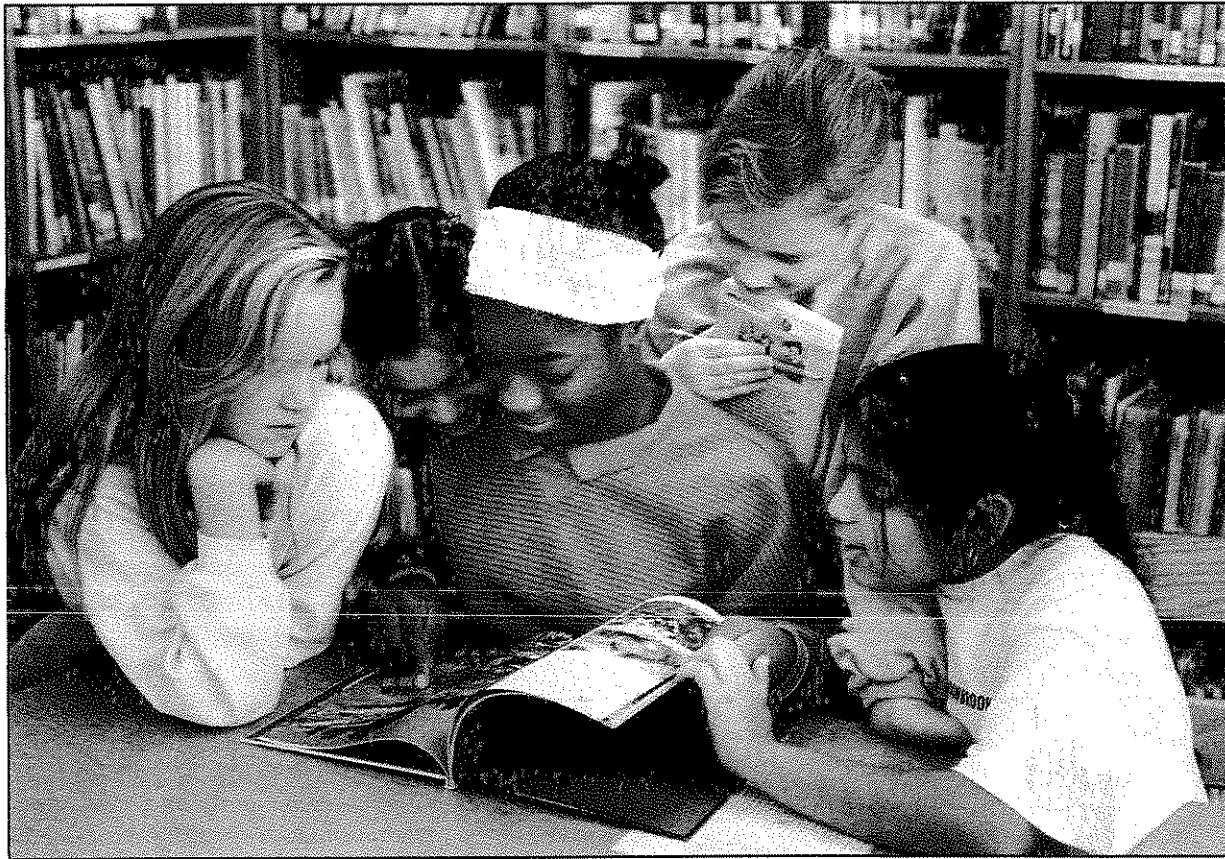
These teachers are asking me to collaborate with them in perpetuating the stereotype of what America wants its Indians to look like. They want us to look like we never moved past 1890. This is almost always the cut-off year for "Real Indians." As we approach the year 2000, America still won't let Indians into the 20th century.

Jan Elliott is a Cherokee activist and scholar of Native American philosophy. A version of this article appeared first in the journal, Indigenous Thought.

DISCOVERING COLUMBUS

Re-reading the Past

BY BILL BIGELOW



Most of my students have trouble with the idea that a book — especially a textbook — can lie. That's why I start my U.S. history class by stealing a student's purse.

As the year opens, my students may not know when the Civil War was fought or what James Madison or Frederick Douglass did; but they know that a brave fellow named Christopher Columbus discovered America. Indeed, this bit of historical lore may be the only knowledge class members share in common.

What students don't know is that their textbooks have, by omission or otherwise, lied to them.

Finders, Keepers

So I begin class by stealing a student's purse. I announce that the purse is mine, obviously, because look who has it. Most students are fair-minded. They

saw me take the purse off the desk so they protest: "That's not yours, it's Nikki's. You took it. We saw you." I brush these objections aside and reiterate that it is, too, mine and to prove it, I'll show all the things I have inside.

I unzip the bag and remove a brush or a comb, maybe a pair of dark glasses. A tube of lipstick works best: "This is my lipstick," I say. "There, that proves it is my purse." They don't buy it and, in fact, are mildly outraged that I would pry into someone's possessions with such utter disregard for her privacy. (I've alerted the student to the demonstration before the class, but no one else knows that.)

"OK, if it's Nikki's purse, how do you know? Why are you all so positive it's not my purse?" Different answers: "We saw you take it; that's her lipstick, we know you don't wear lipstick; there is stuff in there with her name on it." To get the point

across, I even offer to help in their effort to prove Nikki's possession: "If we had a test on the contents of the purse, who would do better, Nikki or I?" "Whose labor earned the money that bought the things in the purse, mine or Nikki's?" Obvious questions, obvious answers.

I make one last try to keep Nikki's purse: "What if I said I *discovered* this purse, then would it be mine?" A little laughter is my reward, but I don't get any takers; they still think the purse is rightfully Nikki's.

"So," I ask, "Why do we say that Columbus discovered America?"

Was it Discovery?

Now they begin to see what I've been leading up to. I ask a series of questions which implicitly link Nikki's purse and the Indians' land: Were there people on the land before Columbus arrived? Who had been on the land longer, Columbus or the Indians? Who knew the land better? The students see where I'm going — it would be hard not to. "And yet," I continue, "What is the first thing that Columbus did when he arrived in the New World?" Right: he took possession of it. After all, he had discovered the place.

We talk about phrases other than "discovery" that textbooks could use to describe what Columbus did. Students start with phrases they used to describe what I did to Nikki's purse: He stole it; he took it; he ripped it off. And others: He invaded it; he conquered it.

I want students to see that the word "discovery"

is loaded. The word itself carries a perspective, a bias. "Discovery" represents the point of view of the supposed discoverers. It's the invaders masking their theft. And when the word gets repeated in textbooks, those textbooks become, in the phrase of one historian, "the propaganda of the winners."

To prepare students to examine textbooks critically, we begin with alternative, and rather un-sentimental, explorations of Columbus's "enterprise," as he called it. The Admiral-to-be was not sailing for mere adventure and to prove the world was round, as I learned in 4th grade, but to secure the tremendous profits that were to be made by reaching the Indies.

Mostly I want the class to think about the human beings Columbus was to "discover" — and then destroy. I read from a letter Columbus wrote to Lord Raphael Sanchez, treasurer of Aragón, and one of his patrons, dated March 14, 1493, following his return from the first voyage. He reports being enormously impressed by the indigenous people:

"As soon ... as they see that they are safe and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have; none of them refusing anything he [sic] may possess when he is asked for it, but, on the contrary, inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves. They also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them, but, on the contrary, men of great deference and kindness."



Spanish colonists use dogs to hunt Native Americans in this detailed engraving by Theodore de Bry (1528-1598).

But, on an ominous note, Columbus writes in his log, "... should your Majesties command it, all the inhabitants could be taken away to Castile [Spain], or made slaves on the island. With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."

I ask students if they remember from elementary school days what Columbus brought back from the Americas. Students recall that he returned with parrots, plants, some gold, and a few of the people Columbus had taken to calling "Indians." This was Columbus's first expedition and it is also where most school textbook accounts of Columbus end — conveniently.

But what about his second voyage?

I read to them a passage from

Hans Koning's book, *Columbus: His Enterprise*:

We are now in February 1495. Time was short for sending back a good "dividena" on the supply ships getting ready for the return to Spain. Columbus therefore turned to a massive slave raid as a means for filling up these ships. The [Columbus] brothers rounded up 1,500 Arawaks [Tainos] — men, women, and children — and imprisoned them in pens in Isabela, guarded by men and dogs. The ships had room for no more than five hundred, and thus only the best specimens were loaded aboard. The Admiral then told the Spaniards they could help themselves from the remainder to as many slaves as they wanted. Those whom no one chose were simply kicked out of their pens. Such had been the terror of these prisoners that (in the description by Michele de Cuneo, one of the colonists) "they rushed in all directions like lunatics, women dropping and abandoning infants in the rush, running for miles without stopping, fleeing across mountains and rivers."

Of the 500 slaves, 300 arrived alive in Spain, where they were put up for sale in Seville by Don Juan de Fonseca, the archdeacon of the town. "As naked as the day they were born," the report of this excellent churchman says, "but with no more embarrassment than animals ..."

The slave trade immediately turned out to be "unprofitable, for the slaves mostly died." Columbus decided to concentrate on gold, although he writes, "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."

Looking Through Different Eyes

Students and I role-play a scene from Columbus's second voyage. Slavery is not producing the profits Columbus is seeking. He believes there is gold and the Indians are selfishly holding out on him.

Students play Columbus; I play the Indians: "Chris, we don't have any gold, honest. Can we go back to living our lives now and you can go back to wherever you came from?"

I call on several students to respond to the Indians' plea. Columbus thinks the Indians are lying. Student responses range from sympathetic to ruthless: OK, we'll go home; please bring us your gold; we'll lock you up in prison if you don't bring us your gold; we'll torture you if you don't fork it over, etc.

After I've pleaded for awhile and the students-as-Columbus have threatened, I read aloud another passage from Koning's book, describing Columbus's system for extracting gold from the Indians:

Every man and woman, every boy or girl of fourteen or older, in the province of Cibao ... had to collect gold for the Spaniards. As their measure, the Spaniards used ... hawks' bells Every three months, every Indian had to bring to one of the forts a hawks' bell filled with gold dust.

If you discover that some among them steal, you must punish them by cutting off nose and ears, for those are parts of the Body which cannot be concealed.

Christopher Columbus, 1494

Deborah Small/1492

The chiefs had to bring in about ten times that amount. In the other provinces of Hispaniola, twenty five pounds of spun cotton took the place of gold.

Copper tokens were manufactured, and when an Indian had brought his or her tribute to an armed post, he or she received such a token, stamped with the month, to be hung around the neck. With that they were safe for another three months while collecting more gold.

Whoever was caught without a token was killed by having his or her hands cut off

There were no gold fields, and thus, once the Indians had handed in whatever they still had in gold ornaments, their only hope was to work all day in the streams, washing out gold dust from the pebbles. It was an impossible task, but those Indians who tried to flee into the mountains were systematically hunted down with dogs and killed, to set an example for the others to keep trying

During those two years of the administration of the brothers Columbus, an estimated one half of the entire population of Hispaniola was killed or killed themselves. The estimates run from one hundred and twenty-five thousand to one-half million.

The goal is not to titillate or stun, but to force the question: Why wasn't I told this before?

Re-examining Basic Truths

I ask students to find a textbook, preferably one they used in elementary school, and critique the book's treatment of Columbus and the Indians. I distribute the following handout and review the questions aloud. I don't want them to merely answer the questions, but to consider them as guidelines.

- How factually accurate was the account?
- What was omitted — left out — that in your judgment would be important for a full understanding of Columbus? (for example, his treatment of the Tainos; slave taking; his method of getting gold; the overall effect on the Indians.)
- What motives does the book give to Columbus? Compare those with his real motives.
- Who does the book get you to root for, and



A classic depiction of Columbus's triumphant act of claiming land for the King and Queen, in the name of God.

how is that accomplished? (For example, are the books horrified at the treatment of Indians or thrilled that Columbus makes it to the New World?)

- How do the publishers use illustrations? What do these communicate about Columbus and his "enterprise"?
- In your opinion, why does the book portray the Columbus/Indian encounter the way it does?
- Can you think of any groups in our society who might have an interest in people having an inaccurate view of history?

I tell students that this last question is tough but crucial. Is the continual distortion of Columbus simply an accident, or are there social groups who benefit from children developing a false or limited understanding of the past?

The assignment's subtext is to teach students that text material, indeed all written material, should be read skeptically. I want students to explore the politics of print — that perspectives on history and social reality underlie the written word, and that to read is both to comprehend what is written, but also to question why it is written. My intention is not to encourage an 'I-don't-believe-anything' cynicism, but rather to equip students to analyze a writer's assumptions and determine what is and isn't useful in any particular work.

For practice, we look at excerpts from a textbook, *The Story of American Freedom* (Macmillan, 1964). We read aloud and analyze several paragraphs. The arrival of Columbus and crew is especially revealing — and obnoxious. The reader watches the events from the Spaniards' point of view. We are told how Columbus and his men "fell upon their knees and gave thanks to God," a passage included

in virtually all elementary school accounts of Columbus. "He then took possession of it [the island] in the name of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain." No question is raised of Columbus's right to assume control over a land which was already occupied. The account is so respectful of the Admiral that students can't help but sense it approves of what is, quite simply, an act of naked imperialism.

The book keeps us close to God and the Church throughout its narrative. Upon returning from the New World, Columbus shows off his parrots and Indians. Immediately following the show, "the king and queen lead the way to a near-by church. There a song of praise and thanksgiving is sung." Intended or not, linking church and Columbus removes him still further from criticism.

Students' Conclusions

I give students a week before I ask them to bring in their written critiques. Students share their papers with one another in small groups. They note themes that recur in the papers and any differences that emerge. Here are excerpts from some students' papers in a class that Linda Christensen and I co-taught:

Matthew wrote: "As people read their evaluations the same situations in these textbooks came out. Things were conveniently left out so that you sided with Columbus's quest to 'boldly go where no man has gone before'.... None of the harsh violent reality is confronted in these so-called true accounts."

Gina tried to explain why the books were so consistently rosy:

It seemed to me as if the publishers had just printed up some "glory story" that was supposed to make us feel more patriotic about our country. In our group, we talked about the possibility of the government trying to protect young students from such violence. We soon decided that that was probably one of the farthest things from their minds. They want us to look at our country as great, and powerful, and forever right. They want us to believe Columbus was a real hero. We're being fed lies. We don't question the facts, we just absorb information that is handed to us because we trust the role models that are handing it out.

Rebecca's reflected the general tone of disillusion with the textbooks: "Of course, the writers of the books probably think it's harmless enough — what does it matter who discovered America, really; and

besides, it makes them feel good about America. But the thought that I have been lied to all my life about this, and who knows what else, really makes me angry."

Why Do We Do This?

The students' written reflections became the basis for a class discussion. Repeatedly, students blasted their textbooks for giving readers inadequate, and ultimately untruthful, understandings. While we didn't press to arrive at definitive explanations for the omissions and distortions, we tried to underscore the contemporary abuses of historical ignorance. If the books wax romantic about Columbus planting the flag on island beaches and taking possession of land occupied by naked red-skinned Indians, what do young readers learn from this about today's world? That might — or wealth — makes right? That it's justified to take people's land if you are more "civilized" or have a "better" religion?

Whatever the answers, the textbooks condition students to accept inequality; nowhere do they suggest that the Indians were sovereign peoples with a right to control their own lands. And, if Columbus's motives are mystified or ignored, then students are less apt to question U.S. involvements in, say, Central America or the Middle East. As Bobby, approaching his registration day for the military draft, pointed out in class: "If people thought they were going off to war to fight for profits, maybe they wouldn't fight as well, or maybe they wouldn't go."

It's important to note that some students are troubled by these myth-popping discussions. One student wrote that she was "left not knowing who to believe." Josh was the most articulate in his skepticism. He had begun to "read" our class from the same critical distance from which we hoped students would approach textbooks:

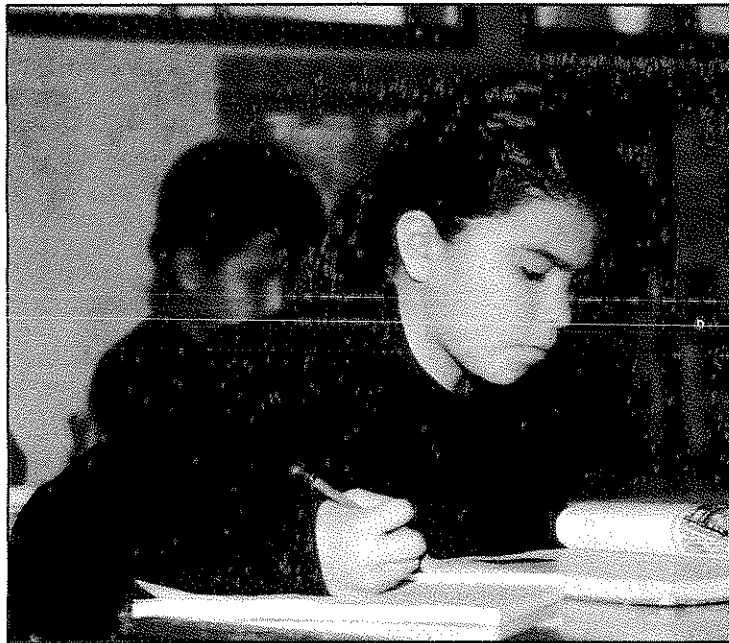
I still wonder ... If we can't believe what our first grade teachers told us, why should we believe you? If they lied to us, why wouldn't you? If one book is wrong, why isn't another? What is your purpose in telling us about how awful Chris was? What interest do you have in telling us the truth? What is it you want from us?

They were wonderful questions. Linda and I responded by reading them (anonymously) to the entire class. We asked students to take a few minutes to write additional questions and comments on the

Columbus activities or to imagine our response as teachers — what was the point of our lessons?

We hoped students would see that the intent was to present a new way of reading, and ultimately, of experiencing the world. Textbooks fill students with information masquerading as final truth and then ask students to parrot back the information in end of the chapter "checkups." We wanted to tell students that they shouldn't necessarily trust the "authorities," but instead need to participate in their learning, probing for unstated assumptions and unasked questions.

Josh asked what our "interest" was in this approach. It's a vital question. Linda and I see teaching as political action: we want to equip students to build a truly democratic society. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire once wrote, to be an actor for social



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change one must "read the word and the world."

We hope that if a student maintains a critical distance from the written word, then it's possible to maintain that same distance from one's society: to stand back, look hard, and ask, "Why is it like this? Who benefits and who suffers?"

"How can I make it better?"

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For additional resources on the arrival and impact of Columbus on the Americas, including Hans Koning's Columbus: His Enterprise, quoted in this article, see page 182.