

Myths about Indians are national myths -- or lies. They are harder to detect, because almost all of us "know" things about Native Americans that are wrong. So it's harder for us, especially for non-Indians, to step outside our education and culture and realize when we are making the same kinds of mistakes.

This is particularly true because we have a national myth that we might even call an archetype -- the archetype of progress. It tells us that the U.S. started out great and that we've been getting better in every way ever since. I really do believe that is the underlying myth that provides the basic story line of American history as it is taught in most K-12 schools -- and certainly as taught in the textbooks that are presented K-12.

As to myths about American Indians, we started out quite harshly some decades ago. We once taught about the "savage" Indians. We -- that is, everybody non-Indian, but particularly whites -- learned that we settled a mostly virgin continent. There were very few Indians, we learned, so we didn't really displace that many people. And the "savage" Indians were just backward and in the way, so they had no choice but to acquiesce to the progressive new civilization that was being formed here on American soil. So we didn't really do anything wrong. That is, of course, a myth.

In the last 30 years, that myth has become much softer, much nicer, if you will. The word "savage" is rarely applied to Indian people. And sometimes they're not even called primitive, although I think it's sometimes implied. The most common notion today is that Indians had their own culture and it was just fine, but they had a tragic unwillingness or inability to adopt or adapt to European culture. As a result, they fell by the wayside.

This is a much nicer story, but it, too, is a myth.

One of the things we do with these stereotypes and myths is put them on the landscape. For example, one of my favorite hated places on the landscape -- if you can have a favorite hated place -- is near Ground Zero in Manhattan. There stands a statue meant to celebrate the Dutch purchase of Manhattan from Native Americans. The Dutchman is wearing a coat. The Native American is almost naked, wearing just a breechcloth and a wonderful feather headdress. The Dutchman is handing \$24 worth of beads to the Native American. This statue is located at the exact spot where this purchase *never took place!*

What the statue really depicts is a primitive person and a civilized person. When we look at it, that registers at some level. Yet we don't notice it because it already fits with our stereotype that Indians were primitive and white folks were civilized. Looking further into the legend, it turns



out, of course, that the Dutch purchased the island from the wrong Indians. They bought it from the Canarsee Indians, who lived in Brooklyn. And beads were not involved at all.

We should also examine our terminology. As we often use them, our words becomes counterfactual. For example, we use the word "discover" to mean the first white person to see something. And we don't just say this about Columbus discovering America, but about the settlers discovering the Mississippi River and so on. We use the term "settler" for whites moving westward and the terms "savage" or "renegade" for Native people who were already living there and had lived there for centuries.

Although part of our problem is terminology, it isn't enough for teachers just to clean up their language. That would be a good start, but it would be even better if they get students to think about these terms and if they find misuse of terms in a textbook or some other source, that they then write the textbook author or publisher and see if they can get the language changed. Even if the publishers don't do anything, it will engage the students and make everybody smarter. And it could even get the textbooks improved.

And fall, with Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, is a terrible time for learning about Native Americans -- to learn *non-true* facts, that is. Historically, many well-intentioned teachers have perpetuated lies and myths regarding these two events as they have been traditionally taught in schools throughout the U.S.

Today, kids as young as second- and third-graders are still told these stories. They are the distortions of the conquerors, and they make the Indians look stupid. And that means that our crimes against Indians are continuing as long as we teach such nonsense. This kind of education has a terrible effect on Native children. I have spoken at American Indian reservations from Maine to Washington State, and I've learned that many Native Americans hated history as it was taught to them in school. How history was taught affected them deeply. It affected their self-confidence; it affected their ability to function in our world. It also has a terrible impact on non-Indian people: it makes us ethnocentric and stupid about other cultures.

The easy mythologies we lulled ourselves with over the decades don't make us more patriotic or better citizens. They serve only to make us stupider.

~ James Loewen
"History Through Red Eyes:
A Conversation With James Loewen"

How have your ideas about Native Americans changed as a result of these assignments? How do these mythologies still affect us today?

1. Please post an *initial* response to these questions of *at least* 150 words
2. Reply (2 or 3 sentences) to *at least* 3 other students' initial postings.

If you are unsure how to use Discussion Board, click the "Tools" tab on your left to access the User Manual.