

This guide is a companion to “Finding What's Missing,”¹ and will help antiracist educators to think about ways to supplement what's missing from curriculum resources.

THE QUESTIONS

Do they discuss Indigenous Peoples and societies as they existed before European arrival?

The erasure of Indigenous Peoples from students' consciousness begins with sentences like that in Example 2, *When Columbus landed, he thought he had reached India. He called the people he met “Indians.”* Notice that the peoples he encountered – the Taíno people – are identified only from Columbus's perspective. The postcard assignment in Example 3 urges students, in their role as explorers, to write home about their encounters with “the locals.”

When Indigenous Peoples are included, look for balance and integration. The outline in Example 1 promises to cover the Native Americans in North and Central America, but only after providing an overview of European history going back to Greece and Rome. No similar review of Indigenous Peoples' culture, politics and traditions is provided. The message is clear: America's heritage comes from Europe, and Indigenous Peoples' contributions are insignificant. In fact, their presence is an obstacle to be overcome.

Does the material describe European explorers and their motivations in mostly positive terms?

A key truth of history (and the present) is that events and motives are complex, and few humans are all good or all bad. Yet students are too often presented with child-friendly historical figures whose reputations have been scrubbed free of any negative information. One such figure is Christopher Columbus, whose role in mistreating and exploiting Indigenous people is rarely mentioned.

Carefully review how figures are described both explicitly and implicitly. The outline in Example 1 suggests that the explorers will be represented as heirs and transmitters of European civilization. “The Age of Exploration” describes Columbus in glowing terms: he is studious after having been hired by Spain. He brought unnamed “evidence” back, described his “adventures,” and inspired others to follow in his footsteps. The fruits of all this? New knowledge.

This picture of adventurous, swashbuckling, knowledge-seeking explorers emerges again in the postcards example which also suggests, without any evidence, that these explorers were “forced” to leave the people they knew while they sought gold and glory. The assignment explicitly asks students to identify with the explorers.

And all of them omit important information that, if it were included, would temper students' admiration for the explorers while giving them a truer, richer, and more complex understanding of both history and humanity.

What needs to be added? Students should know that Columbus wasn't simply a sailor, but that he'd been active in the Portuguese slave trade in Africa before he approached the Spanish monarchs about financing his voyage. His main motive wasn't to increase human knowledge; it was to acquire riches, primarily gold. The “evidence” he brought back to Spain included human beings he seized as captives on the first day he arrived on land in the Caribbean. Over the course of his career in the region, he forced Indigenous people to work on plantations and in mines. He enslaved Indigenous people and sold them to buyers in Spain. Before his last voyage, he transported enslaved Africans to Hispaniola. He launched the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

¹ https://antiracistfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/care_2021_whats_missing_1of2_FINAL.pdf

Do students learn only the names of European individuals and societies?

That's true, at least in these three short examples. "The Age of Exploration" includes names, portraits, and short biographical sketches of five European explorers. In your texts, look for the names of Indigenous Caribbean peoples, like the Taíno, and let students know that their descendants live in the Caribbean today and are keeping their heritage alive.² As European colonization spread into North and Central America, students can learn more about the cultures, political organization, and beliefs of more Native Peoples, including their names and how they responded to European settlement.

Does the text describe the encounter as an invasion?

The explorers, conquistadors and others who followed Columbus continued his legacy of conquest, forced labor and subjugation. To the Indigenous Peoples they encountered, they were invaders, not explorers. Students deserve to have that perspective.

Does the text discuss the systems colonizers devised to exploit and enslave both Africans and Indigenous Peoples?

When slave traders brought the first African captives to the British colony of Virginia in 1619, forced labor – of both Indigenous Peoples and Africans – had already existed in the Americas for 125 years. Most U.S. history programs limit American colonial history to the experience of the British colonies that would become the first 13 states. Virtually every part of what is currently the United States, however, was affected by the colonial enterprises of Spanish, Dutch, French, Russian, and British powers. Although their approaches to economic exploitation and settlement differed, all the colonial powers seized lands, extracted resources, and enslaved Native and African people. The systems they developed, from the Encomienda system³ of the Spanish to the American system of race-based chattel slavery, have left a legacy on U.S. history.

None of our examples, and few popular U.S. history texts, tell the story of Indigenous enslavement.

Explicitly addresses how colonizers used racial and religious distinctions to justify their actions?

For students to understand the social construct that is race and begin to grapple with the enduring legacy of racism, it's important for them to understand how and why the idea of race was developed, grew, and took hold. The roots of this distinction can be found in colonialism, as conquerors and settlers looked for reasons to justify both enslavement and the seizure of Indigenous land and resources.

The samples here – and the larger works they represent – avoid naming or discussing the existence of racism, let alone the reasons it developed. Without that underpinning, students are left to believe that racism is natural, has always existed, and is inevitable.

LEARN MORE

Websites:

History Before Columbus: <https://www.thoughtco.com/history-before-columbus-4133294>

Native 101: <https://nativephilanthropy.candid.org/native-101/>

Native Knowledge 360: <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360>

Books:

Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2015). *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mann, C. C. (2005). *1491: New revelations of the Americas before Columbus*. New York: Knopf.

Reséndez, A. (2016). *The other slavery: the uncovered story of Indian enslavement in America*. Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

² <https://global.si.edu/success-stories/caribbean-indigenous-legacies-project-celebrating-ta%C3%ADno-culture>

³ <https://nativephilanthropy.candid.org/events/encomienda-system-of-communal-slavery-and-rise-of-mestizo/>