

DECOLONIZING THE CORPS OF DISCOVERY: A COLLABORATIVE REVIEW OF *TEACHING CRITICALLY ABOUT LEWIS AND CLARK*

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In 1911, American high school students encountered *An American History*, a new textbook written by historian David S. Muzzey. The book was the first of many editions that millions of students read over fifty years and led the *New York Times* to claim in 1965 that Muzzey had “perhaps as much influence as any modern writer on the American conception of history.”¹ Muzzey’s account of “The New Republic” and the presidency of Thomas Jefferson addressed the 1804 expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean in one short paragraph that detailed the origins of the expedition. Muzzey succinctly credited Lewis and Clark with “making important studies... of the natural features of the country and the habits of the Indian tribes.”² In a later edition in 1943, Muzzey also included a few details about the scientific nature of the expedition and then added a line, “It seemed not to trouble the President much that the expedition, after passing the Rockies,

1 “Dr. David Muzzey, Historian, Is Dead,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1965, 33.

2 David S. Muzzey, *An American History* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1911), 210.

would be trespassing on territory beyond the western boundary of the United States.”³

The fact that neither of Muzzey’s accounts even considered the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous peoples reflects the ways in which dominant historical narratives have long framed the role of the Corps of Discovery in shaping American history. While *An American History’s* racist, Eurocentric lens appears deeply problematic today, his last line about the precarious legality of the expedition also hints at the irony that Muzzey faced a litany of attacks from conservative groups in the twenties. Organizations such as the Sons of the American Revolution and the American Legion labeled the textbook as a “treason text” that was “subversive” and “un-American” because Muzzey dared to acknowledge the flaws of colonial Americans during the American Revolution and was not sufficiently critical of the British.⁴ Muzzey faced numerous and well-publicized calls to ban his textbook for being far too progressive as part of what a historian at the time identified as a “revival of intolerance, racial prejudice, nationalistic egotism, and the desire to enforce conformity” that emerged in the years after World War I.⁵ Muzzey had no shortage of enemies, complete with cartoons in Hearst newspapers that depicted him as a large rat chewing on a school building, and yet apparently no one ever objected to his troubling accounts of the Corps of Discovery.⁶

More than a century after Muzzey’s first edition, *Teaching Critically about Lewis and Clark: Challenging Dominant Narratives*

3 David S. Muzzey, *A History of Our Country* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1943), 225.

4 Charles G. Miller, *Treason to American Tradition: The Spirit of Benedict Arnold Reincarnated in United States History Revised in Text Books*, Sons of the American Revolution in the State of California, Los Angeles, 1922; Harold Rugg, *That Men May Understand: An American in the Long Armistice* (New York: Doubleday, 1941), 136-139.

5 Harold U. Faulkner, “Perverted American History, *Harper’s Magazine* 152 (February 1926), 344.

6 “Dr. David Muzzey, Historian, Is Dead.”

in *K-12 Curriculum*, written by Alison Schmitke, Leilani Sabzalian, and Jeff Edmundson, argues that a “medieval white supremacist Doctrine of Discovery” lay at the heart of the Lewis and Clark expedition and its historical significance.⁷ The book’s thoughtful introductory chapters highlight the intersection of history, social justice, and pedagogy as the authors aim to “frame colonization and indigenous dispossession as an ongoing legacy” that Indigenous peoples continue to resist.⁸ In contrast to most U.S. history textbooks and curricula, from Muzzey’s account to recent publications, the bulk of the book includes fourteen lesson plans for both elementary and secondary students that foreground the importance of “Indigenous perspectives and contemporary issues.”⁹ The lessons reflect a larger anticolonial framework that emphasizes the historic and contemporary role of place, the presence and perspectives of Indigenous peoples, identity and “political nationhood,” as well as the potential of partnerships between schools and Indigenous peoples to enrich historical understanding.¹⁰ The lessons pay specific attention to the goal of promoting historical thinking, and a great deal of the resources for secondary students are applicable to college survey courses. The authors’ efforts to empower students, as both scholars and citizens, to learn and then reconceptualize dominant narratives of exploration and discovery will undoubtedly make the book an invaluable and controversial contribution to contemporary battles over history education.

Teaching Critically about Lewis and Clark centers its discussion of the expedition in 1804 on the role of the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal legacy of a process in which Christians in medieval Europe, often armed with Papal decree, justified taking the lands and

7 Alison Schmitke, Leilani Sabzalian, and Jeff Edmundson, *Teaching Critically About Lewis and Clark: Challenging Dominant Narratives in K-12 Curriculum* (New York: Columbia Teachers Press, 2020), 2.

8 *Ibid.*, 3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, 4-5.

religious freedoms of non-Christians. Embedded in the larger context of European imperialism and, in terms of the expedition, transferred from France and Spain to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase, the Doctrine of Discovery was enshrined in American law in the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823). The doctrine fueled the idea of Manifest Destiny and, as the authors and other scholars have argued, has served as the foundation of federal policy toward Indigenous peoples ever since. The book's use of the doctrine helps teachers frame westward expansion, Native American subjugation, and other developments such as African enslavement as part of a larger trend of imperialism rather than unique historical moments. Challenging students to rethink the idea of "discovery," the doctrine allows teachers to flip the traditional narrative in order to explain how the Louisiana Purchase was so much more than 827,000 square miles sold to the United States for \$15 million. The implications of this purchase have extended far beyond the notion of any single real estate transaction.

Part of the transformative nature of the anticolonial curriculum stems from the author's attention to the role of language in reifying traditional narratives. To the authors' credit, many teachers will find themselves reflecting on their own academic background and use of existing curriculum materials as the book capitalizes on the recent work of scholars such as Dolores Calderon, Jean O'Brien, and Emma LaRocque to address the sometimes explicit but often subtle ways that language "naturalizes colonial curriculum."¹¹ The authors, in a feature that will be especially valuable to novice teachers, describe specific examples such as "settler grammars," "firsting and lasting," and a "civ/sav dichotomy" that have long been common in both

11 Dolores Calderon, "Uncovering Settle Grammars in Curriculum," *Education Studies* 50(4), 313-318; Joan O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Emma LaRocque, *When the Other is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990* (Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

primary and secondary sources. For example, Native Americans “wander” and Europeans “explore” while traditional narratives often identify Europeans as having “discovered” an “uncharted” or seemingly empty West. Other examples include references to European settlers as the “first” to accomplish a feat or language in both educational materials and historical evidence that suggest to students “Indian inferiority and Western superiority.”¹² Such discussion in *Teaching Critically about Lewis and Clark* serves multiple purposes as careful attention to the nature and power of language helps students understand the origin and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery while also providing both teachers and students with the “anticolonial literacy” to critique additional historical narratives.¹³

The authors, all of whom have experience in K-12 classrooms and higher education, integrate their subversive approach to understanding and teaching about Lewis and Clark into fourteen ambitious lesson plans for elementary and secondary students. While teachers may find some of the lessons lacking in terms of using online links rather than including supporting materials in print, all fourteen of the lessons are student-centered and promote opportunities for student inquiry via valuable primary sources. The lessons, consistent with emerging efforts to promote historical inquiry and encourage informed action, often include the scaffolding of essential skills and ask students to evaluate multiple and often conflicting perspectives as part of both learning and challenging normative narratives. The seven elementary lessons include varied activities such as card games, one-pagers, and historical investigations. These activities are designed to build historical empathy and teach young students to analyze, infer, and consider the perspectives of Native Americans. For example, lesson #3 is centered on the Jefferson Peace Medals

12 Schmitke, Sabzalian, and Edmundson, 27.

13 Ibid., 32.

that Lewis and Clark bestowed on Indigenous leaders as part of asserting military and political power in the West. Students focus on the historical perspectives of Indigenous peoples, part of the [Tribal Legacy Project](#), as they encountered the medals as tangible expressions of the Doctrine of Discovery. The fourth elementary lesson also promotes the skills of historians as students reexamine ubiquitous historical references to Sacagawea, the Indigenous woman often described as an invaluable interpreter and guide for the expedition. The lesson highlights the problematic efforts of historians to draw conclusions about her life from limited and conflicting evidence as students learn historical methods and challenge the simplistic narratives of recent U.S. history textbooks.

The seven lessons for secondary students also include valuable historical investigations, especially the third lesson in which students examine the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1823) and participate in multiple activities to unpack the meaning and enduring impact of the Doctrine of Discovery on both American legal and intellectual traditions. Another lesson (#6) uses a role-playing teaching strategy as secondary students collaborate, despite the varied perspectives of different stakeholders, to design a bicentennial public history exhibit. The seventh lesson uses an innovative application of the four themes of [Teaching Hard History: American Slavery](#): freedom, enslavement, resistance, and families to reexamine the life of York, an African American slave owned by William Clark who participated in the expedition. Students explore personal letters from Clark that illustrate York's important contributions to the effort, his experiences as an enslaved person in Kentucky, and York's lengthy efforts at emancipation. The lesson is especially effective in helping students analyze the role of power and race in antebellum America. Finally, the emphasis on empowering students as both historians and citizens is apparent in *Teaching Critically about Lewis and Clark's* creative effort to link the past

with the present. The first lesson for secondary teachers, “The Stories Maps Tell,” asks students to compare maps from Too Né, an Arikara, and Clark from the early nineteenth century (1804, 1814) to maps and demographic data from the last ten years. The purpose of the comparison is to engage students in exploring the dispossession of Native homelands over time. Another effective lesson entitled, “Standing Rock and the Larger Story,” is framed as a mystery in which students examine the nature and legacy of the Corps of Discovery through the lens of recent activism by Indigenous people regarding the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The result is an appreciation of how colonial logics continue to shape both public policy and Indigenous resistance in the United States.

Together with informative chapters on the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and additional resources such as a book review and essays on art and public history, the fourteen lesson plans integrate history and civic education in powerful ways that are consistent with recent calls for anti-racist education, teaching hard history, and decolonizing the curriculum. A hundred years after David Muzzey’s popular U.S. history textbooks sparked a conservative backlash, such efforts have led most recently to renewed calls for history education as the promotion of American patriotism. In the early 1920s Judge Wallace McCament, the chairman of the Sons of the American Revolution’s “Committee on Patriotic Education,” proclaimed that “The chief purpose to be subserved in teaching American history is the inculcation of patriotism.”¹⁴ This fall President Donald Trump promised the audience at the Republican National Convention that he would “fully restore patriotic education” as an effort to fight “left-wing indoctrination,” and he held a “White House Conference on American History” in the Rotunda of the National Archives on Constitution Day to announce plans to create a “1776

14 Faulkner, 340-343.

Commission” to promote a “pro-American Curriculum.”¹⁵ This latest battle in the long cultural war over history and the schools only underscores the importance and potential of the authors’ stance that “teaching about histories and legacies of conquest, Indigenous displacement, paternalism, and colonialism is necessary in order to teach a more complex, accurate, honest, and critical account of this shared history.”¹⁶

15 Moriah Blingit and Laura Meckler, “Trump Alleges ‘Left-Wing Indoctrination’ in School, Says He Will Create National Commission to Push More ‘Pro-American’ History,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 2020. The American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians issued statements on this conference on September 24 and September 25, respectively. See the AHA Statement [here](#) and the OAH Statement [here](#).

16 Schmitke, Sabzalian, and Edmundson, 3.