

2 First Encounters and the Language of Race

In a society as sensitive to the idea of race as the United States, I prefer to begin my unit on Native American literature with definitions and origins. Such a beginning helps to answer two of the more pressing questions confronted by teachers of multicultural literature in diverse classrooms: (1) How do we help students recognize that the linguistic terms used to refer to race and racial difference are in fact deceptive figures of speech often rooted in cultural bias and stereotype? and 2) How do we help students recognize, in both a historical and present-day context, the pervasive presence of racial stereotype in the texts they read? Helping students learn to identify and critically analyze racist language should be a goal central to teaching any multicultural literature.

I like to work toward this goal by teaching students the interpretive skills necessary to “read race” by first turning to historical texts whose construction of race at key moments in U.S. history is easily analyzed and then to literary texts that explore those same historical moments but with a greater regard for diverse voices. Teachers can choose from among many possibilities regarding contact between America’s indigenous peoples and the settlers who displaced them. William Bradford’s journal of Plymouth Plantation or first-person and news accounts of the Battle of the Little Bighorn might suffice. I prefer to return to that moment of first contact between Christopher Columbus and the people of the Caribbean because Columbus sets in motion a pattern of racist thinking that persists even today. But before exploring my strategies for reading race in this first encounter, it is important here (as it is in the classroom) to begin by defining a few critical terms.

First, at the root of multicultural studies is the concept of culture as a set of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, notions of history, and meaningful symbols that are generally *but not absolutely* shared by the members of a group. As such, a culture can arise from a community defined by nationality, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and other factors. U.S. citizens might share a common culture in part by valuing, among other things, representative democracy, yet many citizens do not; many Catholics might share a belief in the infallibility of the pope—though some professed Catholics do not; many Native Americans share a common cultural interpretation of racism in

America's history, yet some do not. Given that most individuals are simultaneously members in several communities (i.e., Native American citizens who happen to be Catholic) yet often reject the cultural values of the communities to which they seemingly belong, cultural generalizations regarding individuals and groups are at best tentative and at worst stereotypical. The extremes of stereotypes surface when we examine the supposed connection between race and culture.

What is race? Throughout history, the term *race* has referred to two interwoven concepts—physical appearance and genetics (revealed through skin, hair, and eye color; the shape of eyelids, noses, and lips) directly correlating to cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors. Grossly stated, if you could identify a person's genetic "race," then you could also construct a profile of his or her cultural "race." From such a notion, twentieth-century eugenicists such as Charles Davenport were able to draw parallels between national and racial identity:

He held that the Poles, the Irish, the Italians, and other national groups were all biologically different races; so, in his lexicon, were the "Hebrews." Davenport found the Poles "independent and self reliant though clannish"; the Italians tending to "crimes of personal violence"; and the Hebrews "intermediate between the slovenly Servians and Greeks and the tidy Swedes, Germans and Bohemians" and given to "thieving" though rarely to "personal violence." (Kevles 46–47)

Note that Davenport refers here to people who are, by contemporary definitions of race, white. In its early forms, American racism was frequently used to denigrate and justify the economic exploitation of European immigrants from Ireland or Italy just as it was used to signify the supposed inferiority of people from Asia, Africa, or Native America. Upon learning a semblance of Standard English, however, most European descendants could no longer be identified with their ethnic origins unless they chose to be so. Thus, in the United States today, only those "people of color" who cannot pass for white are still identified by race.

Also in Davenport's description of supposed racial difference, race is nearly synonymous with the idea of stereotype, in which individuals are stripped of unique qualities and instead are seen as possessing only the typical qualities of their social group. Consider the following quotes:

In memory, they [African Americans] are equal to whites; in reason much inferior. . . . [I]n imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.

Thomas Jefferson (Gossett 42)

The founding fathers were men of Anglo-Saxon-Celtic race. . . .
Into the camp of this race comes a people [the Jews] that has no
civilization to point to, no aspiring religion, no universal speech,
no great achievement in any realm but the realm of "get." . . .

Henry Ford (Gossett 372)

Both of these statements rely on a rhetorical strategy that links some supposedly unique genetic makeup with certain cultural qualities. From the distance provided by time and social change, we can instantly see the fallacy in Jefferson's and Ford's claims; however, most people of their times were unable to see the errors in their thinking. Americans today are as blinded by social context as any generation before them and would be naive to think that they are less susceptible to the rhetoric of racial stereotype. For this reason, it is important that teachers challenge the very notion of race and racist rhetorical strategies no matter to whom they may apply.

The racist comments of Davenport, Jefferson, and Ford have no logical foundation if the readers of their remarks do not believe in race. Historian Anthony Appiah notes that "contemporary biologists are not agreed on the question of whether there are any human races" (21) that can be distinguished on a genetic level and insists there is absolutely no evidence to conclude that there exists a connection between genetic difference and cultural difference. Instead, race is a form of figurative language or, as Henry Louis Gates states: "Race is a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or practitioners of specific belief systems, who more often than not have fundamentally opposed economic interests" (49). Thus, race is an illusion created through language by those who might benefit economically or otherwise from the misconceptions and stereotypes of others. But while race may be an illusion, people believing in and acting on misguided notions of race have ensured that *racism* has been and continues to be a persistent fact of life in the United States.

For teachers who wish to help students recognize and critique the language of racism, the task becomes one of identifying the common rhetorical patterns of stereotype and unmasking the motivations behind their use. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison lists the following several strategies employed in fiction to manipulate perceptions of African Americans; however, these literary techniques apply equally well to other racial contexts. The terms are Morrison's (67–69), though I have adapted definitions to meet the purposes of this chapter.

1. *economy of stereotype*—physical and cultural descriptions of individuals and groups that are so brief as to render them caricatures with no unique distinctions between them
2. *metonymic displacement*—where a single image, action, or object is used to represent an entire group of people, such as “red skin” or a headband with feathers
3. *metaphysical condensation*—reducing a people’s language, religious beliefs, and values to simplistic description; for example, a multilingual Lakota Indian’s speech might be reduced to “Ugh” and “How” to suit the popular expectations of Hollywood movie viewers
4. *fetishization*—focusing attention on images or acts that evoke erotic desires or fears, such as miscegenation or cannibalism
5. *dehistoricizing allegory*—describing groups as though they were somehow removed from a specific social, political, and historical moment

With these rhetorical strategies in mind, I lead my students through an examination of a couple of firsthand historical documents related to early Spanish and Puritan perceptions of Native Americans, followed by an exploration of similarities in portrayals in current junior and senior high school history textbooks, and then demonstrate how contemporary literary works might help question the racial assumptions of these historical texts.

Some of the first written descriptions of Native Americans were by Columbus’s own hand. His encounters with the various tribes of the Caribbean islands are recorded in his travel journal and letters. What follows are two passages from a letter about his first voyage that he wrote to King Ferdinand of Spain. These passages set the basis for future perceptions of hundreds of diverse tribes throughout North, Central, and South America. Columbus wrote of the Indians:

[T]hey are so guileless and so generous with all that they possess, that no one would believe who has not seen it. They refuse nothing that they possess, if it be asked of them; on the contrary, they invite any one to share it and display as much love as if they would give their hearts. They are content with whatever trifle of whatever kind that may be given to them, whether it be of value or valueless. . . .

They do not hold any creed nor are they idolaters; but they all believe that power and good are in the heavens and were very firmly convinced that I, with these ships and men, came from the heavens, and in this belief they everywhere received me after they had mastered their fear. This belief is not the result of ignorance, for they are, on the contrary, of a very acute intelligence and they

are men who navigate all those seas, so that it is amazing how good an account they give of everything. It is because they have never seen people clothed or ships of such a kind. . . .

In all these islands, I saw no great diversity in the appearance of the people or in their manners and language. On the contrary, they all understood one another, which is a very curious thing, on account of which I hope that their Highnesses will determine upon their conversion to our holy faith, towards which they are very inclined. (See Letter to King Ferdinand of Spain, at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/hns/garden/columbus.html> for the complete text.)

In these excerpts, Columbus reveals an immediate knack for using several of the rhetorical strategies central to racial stereotyping. First, his description is extremely brief and follows Morrison's notion of economy of stereotype. Rather than explore the distinctions between the various tribes, he instead claims that "no great diversity exists" and erroneously states that the various tribes speak the same language. Thus, he sets the stage for future assumptions that all Indians, from Chile to Alaska, are alike. In addition, he selects the image of childish innocence and gullibility to represent the root cultural trait of these Indians. Even his reference to their intelligence, as demonstrated by navigation skills, is framed as a support of the Indians' assumption that Spaniards are divinely superior. And, also important, he reduces their developed religious beliefs to the sole concept of some good and powerful heavenly god. From this description, these complex people become nothing more than kind, moderately intelligent yet simple children.

In contrast, Columbus wrote of one tribe whose behavior did not conform to this early description:

Thus I have found no monsters, nor had a report of any, except in an island "Carib," which is the second at the coming into the Indies, and which is inhabited by people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. They have many canoes with which they range through all the islands of India and pillage and take whatever they can. They are no more malformed than are the others, except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women, and they use bows and arrows of the same cane stems, with a small piece of wood at [the] end, owing to their lack of iron which they do not possess. They are ferocious among these other people who are cowardly to an excessive degree, but I make no more account of them than of the rest.

His entire description of the Carib Indians, their values, beliefs, and institutions, focuses primarily on two elements—ferocity and cannibal-

ism. This description, too, would later be one frequently and randomly applied to a wide variety of tribes. Somehow, during these early years, the word *cannibal* arose from a Spanish variant of *Carib*, and in the eyes of many Europeans, the term *cannibal*, with all its violent connotations, became synonymous with all Native Americans. This bit of racial linguistics would haunt much of Native America for centuries to come. It is important to note that throughout his journals, Columbus is careful to distinguish between Indios and Caribs or cannibals. For the former, he claimed a paternal fondness; for the latter, he voiced hostility. His willingness to distinguish between “good Indians” and “bad Indians” was not a trait shared by many of the men under his command or many of the European explorers and settlers who followed him to the New World. Indeed, the easy transference of one tribe’s behavior to all others can be seen in the very fact that the region surrounding the Caribs became known as the Caribbean.

Columbus had a number of motives that may have shaped his perception of American Indians and encouraged his use of the strategies of stereotyping. First, he believed that this new world, while not the East Indies he had sought, might very well be a form of Eden whose inhabitants necessarily would be innocent and guileless (save for the intrusion of evil Caribs). A more important motivation, however, was Columbus’s desire for wealth, particularly in the form of gold and silver. In the New World, he initiated two different justifications for plundering the wealth of the indigenous peoples. On the one hand, the Indians were too childish to recognize the value and uses of gold and silver, so the Spaniards could, paternally, claim the gold for better purposes by bartering useless trinkets. On the other hand, those Indians like the Caribs who demonstrated a violence unsuited to “civilized” peoples *justified* the use of a righteous military force to strip them of their metals and their lives.

The rhetorical denial of humanity to these indigenous peoples prophesied the physical annihilation that soon followed. Whether stereotype gave rise to virulent racism or stereotypes were generated to justify oppressive acts, the treatment of the Indians was the same. The early Spanish explorers under Columbus’s command came to view the Indians as beasts whose first purpose was to provide gold. According to Peter Martyr, a historian and contemporary of Columbus, a faction of the men under Columbus’s command were “debauchees, profligates, thieves, seducers, ravishers, vagabonds . . . given over to violence and rapine: lazy gluttonous, caring only to sleep and carouse” (Sanders 127). With these men present and the governorship of Columbus largely an

absent and incompetent one, the island of Hispaniola during the first years of Columbus's governorship serves as a graphic example of Spanish colonialist attitude toward Native Americans. As Hans Koning notes:

Every man and woman, every boy or girl of fourteen or older, in the province of Cibao (of the imaginary gold fields) had to collect gold for the Spaniards. . . . Whoever [did not] was killed by having his or her hands cut off. There are old Spanish prints (I saw them in the collection of Bishop Voegeli of Haiti) that show this being done: the Indians stumble away, staring with surprise at their arm stumps pulsing out blood. (83–84)

Since no gold fields existed, except in the imagination of the Spaniards, the Indians were doomed. Many preferred mass suicides through poison rather than death by sword. Genocide was the result: "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 125,000 to one-half million" (Koning 84). Within a quarter century, no members of the tribes inhabiting Hispaniola remained alive.

Columbus could not achieve his goal of collecting riches if he viewed the various tribes that he met as distinct societies with developed religious beliefs, family customs, political institutions, and rightful claims to freedom and property. His solution, conscious or not, was to avoid the moral dilemma altogether by representing the Indians as less than human and thus not deserving of respect or fair treatment. My point here is not to vilify Columbus yet again, but rather to suggest that his text can serve as a valuable tool in teaching students how to read race. His rhetorical strategies are not unique; in fact, Spanish and English explorers and settlers resorted to them with amazing regularity.

Two quotes from Spaniards a generation after Columbus demonstrate how quickly these strategies caught on and how they were used to defend widely different actions toward indigenous peoples. In 1550 the Dominican Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas and the royal historian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda were called before the Council of Fourteen by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, to debate whether Native Americans were sufficiently subhuman to warrant their conquest and enslavement. Las Casas, a witness to much of the horrific treatment of Native peoples, offered this benevolent depiction of Indians at the hands of the conquistadors:

And of all the infinite universe of humanity, these people are the most guileless, the most devoid of wickedness and duplicity, the most obedient and faithful to their native masters and to the Span-

ish Christians whom they serve. They are by nature the most humble, patient, and peaceable, holding no grudges, free from embroilments, neither excitable nor quarrelsome. These people are the most devoid of rancors, hatreds, or desire for vengeance of any people in the world. And because they are so weak and complaisant, they are less able to endure heavy labor and soon die of no matter what malady. The sons of nobles among us, brought up in the enjoyments of life's refinements, are no more delicate than are these Indians, even those among them who are of the lowest rank of laborers. They are also poor people, for they not only possess little but have no desire to possess worldly goods. For this reason they are not arrogant, embittered, or greedy. Their repasts are such that the food of the holy fathers in the desert can scarcely be more parsimonious, scanty, and poor. As to their dress, they are generally naked, with only their pudenda covered somewhat. And when they cover their shoulders it is with a square cloth no more than two varas in size. They have no beds, but sleep on a kind of matting or else in a kind of suspended net called hamacas. They are very clean in their persons, with alert, intelligent minds, docile and open to doctrine, very apt to receive our holy Catholic faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs, and to behave in a godly fashion. And once they begin to hear the tidings of the Faith, they are so insistent on knowing more and on taking the sacraments of the Church and on observing the divine cult that, truly, the missionaries who are here need to be endowed by God with great patience in order to cope with such eagerness. Some of the secular Spaniards who have been here for many years say that the goodness of the Indians is undeniable and that if this gifted people could be brought to know the one true God they would be the most fortunate people in the world. (Las Casas 28–29)

As a Catholic whose humanitarian concerns are shaped by his missionary goals, Las Casas describes a multitude of different tribes as a singular, delicate, passive, beneficent people who could not be better suited for conversion to Christianity. Despite his good intentions, he relies on an economy of stereotype that lumps together all Indians and condenses the metaphysical elements of their culture into an unformed clay of utopian innocence suitable for Christian molding. In the process of arguing against the enslavement and abuse of these peoples, he denies them the complexity of human individuals and of distinct societies.

In contrast to this positive stereotype, Juan Gines de Sepúlveda offered this description of the Indians of Central and South America:

Compare, then, these [Spanish] gifts of prudence, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those possessed by these half-men (*homunculi*), in whom you will barely find the

vestiges of humanity, who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs. Well, then, if we are dealing with virtue, what temperance or mercy can you expect from men who are committed to all types of intemperance and base frivolity, and eat human flesh? And do not believe that before the arrival of the Christians they lived in that pacific kingdom of Saturn which the poets have invented; for, on the contrary, they waged continual and ferocious war upon one another with such fierceness that they did not consider a victory at all worthwhile unless they sated their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies. This bestiality is among them even more prodigious for their great distance from the land of the Scythians, who also fed upon human bodies, and since furthermore these Indians were otherwise so cowardly and timid that they could barely endure the presence of our soldiers, and many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered in flight like women before Spaniards so few that they did not even number one hundred. (qtd. in Berkhofer 11–12)

Sepúlveda demonstrates dramatically all five racist rhetorical strategies in his effort to justify the Spanish conquest of the New World and its people. First, he not only describes literally hundreds of tribes in a single paragraph but also manages to include a flattering racial summary of Spanish character as well. He uses metonymic displacement by referring to Indians as homunculi or little men in hopes of drawing a correlation between their supposed inferior size and their inferior culture. Through metaphysical condensation, he would have us believe that the essential cultural values of all Indians lie rooted in carnal lusts in both senses of that phrase and in a seemingly contradictory cowardice. He fetishizes the images of blood and human flesh, hoping to invoke visceral reaction to all Native Americans. And finally, he dehistoricizes them by removing them from specific geographical, social, and political contexts and placing them instead in a timeless context of mythic figures and divine judgment.

The literary devices these men used reappear in the writings, both fiction and nonfiction, of nearly every American author from the seventeenth through the twentieth century who came in contact with and wrote about Native Americans. Particularly useful examples can be found in William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647*, James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Mark Twain's *Roughing It*, and Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail*.

Rather than look at European American versions of this dubious tradition, however, an examination of how these same rhetorical strategies are used, albeit more subtly, in contemporary high school history texts will provide a glimpse of how stereotypes of Native Americans persist in junior high and high school classrooms. Before examining textbook historians' portrayals of those early Indians who encountered Columbus, a word of caution is in order. The publishing industry dictates much of the form and content of high school history texts, forcing authors to be more concise than they might otherwise have been and encouraging authors to conform to popular views of well-known characters and events in U.S. history. Thus, references to individual historians should be tempered by the understanding that the final texts of high school history books are socially and corporately constructed and reflect perceptions and attitudes that go far beyond the author whose name appears on the cover.

Nearly every U.S. history textbook offers an account of Columbus's journey and his first encounters with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and little distinguishes one textbook's account from that of another. One might argue that this merely validates the notion of objective history, yet, on close examination, book after book reveals the same biases and uses the same rhetorical strategies that result in the dehumanizing of early Native Americans. Here I analyze examples from three history textbooks; another teacher, however, might just as easily choose a textbook at random and produce similar results.

In *This Great Nation*, historian Henry Graff offers his version of the first European-Indian encounter. Under the subheading "The People of Guanahani," Graff tells us of Columbus's claiming of San Salvador, and he attempts to gently undercut Spanish authority by suggesting that "Of course, the people of San Salvador had not been waiting for visitors to give their island a name. They had always called it Guanahani" (36). Nevertheless, the focus and ultimate authority of this passage rests on Columbus. Graff emphasizes the naming of these people as "Indians" and completes his textbook description of this tribe by writing:

Among the Indians, however, Columbus noticed a few who wore golden jewelry. He wasted no time in inquiring where the gold had come from. Columbus reported what the Indians told him:

By signs I was able to understand that, to the south . . . there was a king who had great cups full of gold and possessed a large amount of it. . . . So I resolved to go to the southwest, to seek the gold and precious stones. (36)

What is to be made of the few paragraphs this historian cedes to the description of the first tribes encountered by Columbus? Surely, the subheading “The People of Guanahani” must be read ironically. The hypothetical high school student learns almost nothing about these people: they lived on an island, wore some jewelry, and gave decent directions to neighboring islands. In effect, they *are* merely character foils—stock Indian figures—in the historian’s tale about a heroic Columbus. The Indians referred to as being to the southwest are the tribes on Hispaniola whose devastation Koning graphically documents. Graff chooses not to discuss or describe them at all. The reader can only guess whether the motivation for this omission is rooted in a desire for conciseness or in the fact that the tragic fate of the Indians on Hispaniola distracts from the mythologizing of Columbus.

Such textbook treatment of Native Americans is the norm, not the exception. In *Triumph of the American Nation* by Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, nothing whatsoever is said regarding the peoples who experienced this early contact. Readers *are* informed, however, that Columbus died a “poor, lonely, broken-hearted man” (12). In *The Story of America*, John A. Garraty claims that the people of Guanahani “were astonished and awed by Europeans” and that “[t]hey came forth shyly, bearing gifts” (24)—both claims presumably taken from Columbus’s own testimony in his journals. Of the ill-fated tribes on Hispaniola, Garraty says nothing except that “the inhabitants had substantial amounts of gold; one chief gave him a belt with a solid gold buckle” (25).

Thus, a pattern emerges in the rhetorical strategies used to depict Native Americans in high school history textbooks. First, economy of stereotype is the favored technique. From Columbus’s own shallow perception of these early tribes, the historians select a few key images—innocence and passivity, gold jewelry—which contribute to and do not question the mytho-heroic narrative about Columbus that Americans have known since early childhood. Second, a strategy of invisibility (not listed but implied by Morrison) seems to pervade most accounts. While various Indian tribes may at some point in a thousand-page textbook receive a subchapter’s worth of attention, those whose history is poorly known or whose experiences conflict too greatly with traditional perceptions of heroic men and events are simply left out—their physical annihilation by early explorers and settlers is paralleled by a rhetorical annihilation by historians. At work here is a hidden curriculum. Throughout American history, Indians (and other people of color) were perceived by European Americans and the U.S. government as too insignificant to warrant the protection of their rights, their lands, and their

lives. Textbooks that ignore the presence and treatment of indigenous peoples reinforce this psychology of racism.

What can be done in the English classroom to rectify this situation? Teaching students to read historical documents and history textbooks for racist rhetorical strategies is a partial solution. More important, perhaps, is the effort to seek out texts that offer diverse accounts of culture, history, and significant events. When exploring relatively recent events, this is easy to do. A teacher can, for example, construct a reading list about the Battle of the Little Bighorn that includes accounts by Crow, Sioux, and Northern Cheyenne men and women, as well as by government soldiers, to help students gain a greater sense of the way these stories conflict, converge, and contribute to or are absent from the historical accounts. Students might then examine fictional and poetic portrayals of the same event to see how history translates to literary art. Excerpts from the following texts, for example, might serve as the foundation for exploring the Battle of the Little Bighorn:

- *The Custer Reader*, Andrew Hutton, ed. (including firsthand accounts by General Edward Godfrey, Chief Joseph White Bull (Sans Arc Sioux), and Kate Bighead (Cheyenne))
- *Red Hawk's Account of Custer's Last Battle*, Paul Goble (which alternates fictional Indian and non-Indian voices)
- *Little Big Man*, Thomas Berger
- Articles from newspapers and magazines reporting the event

Similar lists can be created around events ranging from King Philip's War to contemporary times.

More distant events, however, present a problem because the only accounts available are by Europeans. As historian and literary critic Jane Tompkins says, "The problem is that if all accounts of an event are determined through and through by the [European American] observer's frame of reference, then one will never know, in any given case, what really happened" (60). One possible solution to this problem may involve a turn to fiction to gain access to a more accurate *representational* truth. What is missing in the reports of the encounter between Columbus and the people of Guanahani or Hispaniola is an Indian account. While historians have access to a great deal of anthropological and archaeological information about these people, authors of nonfiction cannot in good conscience create the personal and social context necessary to balance their representations. Writers of fiction may be able to get closer to the truth. Informed fictional constructions of the lives and per-

ceptions of historical peoples cannot claim absolute accuracy, but, then, neither can the historical accounts based on Columbus's journals.

Morning Girl, a novel by Michael Dorris, tells the story of a Taino family and the daily lives they lead before the arrival of Europeans. The novel is short and written for elementary school readers; however, it can be quickly read aloud, whole or in part, and offers secondary students an unmistakable example of how representation and bias operate in fiction. Dorris takes great care to develop the characters of a sister and a brother, Morning Girl and Star Boy. Like many siblings, they see the world and their roles in it in different ways. At the beginning of the story, Morning Girl laments:

I don't know how my brother came to see everything so upside down from me. For him, night is day, sleep is awake. It's as though time is split between us, and we only pass by each other as the sun rises or sets. Usually, for me, that's enough. (3)

By alternating point of view with each new chapter, Dorris explores how differently the two describe familial events, Morning Girl believing in the primacy of social interdependence and Star Boy seeking greater independence. Each event in the family's daily life is interpreted from these competing values. In this way, the author sets the stage for an even starker contrast of voices and visions to come.

Dorris foreshadows the arrival of Columbus. Through the thoughts of Morning Girl, he tries to place the concerns of these children, and of the tribe, in a broader context. Thinking of her brother, Morning Girl says, "Yet Star Boy was a trouble that I was used to, an ordinary trouble that, really, was not so bad. Not like real trouble." Her brother, like the other ordinary troubles that visit the family such as bad weather, lost canoes, and the mother's miscarriage, are all survivable. But some troubles are not so ordinary.

In the final chapter narrated by Morning Girl, the Europeans arrive. Here, Dorris offers his interpretation of how the Taino might have perceived these visitors:

I swam closer to get a better look and had to stop myself from laughing. The strangers had wrapped every part of their bodies with colorful leaves and cotton. Some had decorated their faces with fur and wore shiny rocks on their heads. Their canoe was short and square, and, in spite of all their dipping and pulling, it moved so slowly. What a backward, distant island they must have come from. But really, to laugh at guests, no matter how odd, would be impolite, especially since I was the first to meet them. (69)

After formally introducing herself and her family heritage, Morning Girl is taken aback by the Spaniards' response:

All the fat people in the canoe began pointing at me and talking at once. In their excitement they almost turned themselves over, and I allowed my body to sink beneath the waves for a moment in order to hide my smile. One must always treat guests with respect, I reminded She Listens, even when they are as brainless as gulls.

When I came up they were still watching, the way babies do: wide eyed and with their mouths uncovered. They had much to learn about how to behave. (70)

In constructing Morning Girl's response to the Europeans, Dorris offers a believable cross-cultural description, rife with its own bias. The Europeans dress funny, are overweight, poorly handle simple tasks such as rowing, and seem overly awed, indeed slack-jawed, by the appearance of a mere girl. By the civilized standards of this tribe, Columbus and his crew are backward and ill behaved. This description becomes even more believable, perhaps offering a greater representational truth, when the reader realizes how closely it parallels, yet reverses, Columbus's description of the Indians. As a result, readers of this novel and of Columbus's journal will quickly see how two complex human societies, with their conflicting values and beliefs, met with such tragic consequences.

Having demonstrated how different the world can look when seen alternately through the eyes of a brother and a sister, Dorris radically increases the impact of this rhetorical strategy by giving the last word in the novel to Columbus. After the now familiar description of these Indians, Columbus says, "Our Lord pleasing, at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to Your Highness in order that they may learn to speak" (74). By ending the novel with Columbus's reference to the enslavement of these six people, Dorris not only foreshadows the future treatment of millions of Native Americans at the hands of European explorers and settlers but also graphically illustrates the importance of having a voice in history. While Columbus may have the last word in the novel, as he does in most history textbooks, the reader can no longer take his words as objective truth but rather as one perspective in a complex web of human interaction.

This extended examination of racist rhetorical strategies used in describing Native Americans of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is but one example of classroom methods for countering such willful misrepresentation. A similar approach can be taken in examining the treat-

ment of other groups of people. Such a strategy calls for the inclusion of many texts that are too seldom read in secondary English classrooms, such as diaries and journals, government documents, history textbooks, and newspaper and magazine articles. Expanding the literary canon in this way allows students to see more clearly how cross-cultural arguments take shape in societies past and present and better prepares them to “read race” and recognize stereotypes in the context of their daily lives.

I begin my unit on Native American literature with this examination of racist rhetorical strategies because it prepares students in a variety of ways. First, we establish a common vocabulary with which to discuss issues and representations of race. Second, we learn to be wary of trusting any one source or text, especially history textbooks, as an authority on indigenous peoples, and we learn to be wary of our own assumptions. And third, much of Native American literature revolves, at least in part, around questions of identity that is created by these historical, racist representations of indigenous peoples. Understanding the sources, strategies, and persistence of racism toward Native Americans helps students place the concerns of the Native American literary text in a broader context. I continue this contextual approach throughout my unit.

Resources

- Appiah, Anthony. “The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race.” *“Race,” Writing and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
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