Framing American Indians as the “First Americans”:
Using Critical Multiculturalism to Trouble the Normative American Story

Annalee Good
University of Wisconsin – Madison

The author addresses ways in which secondary American history textbooks reflect and perpetuate the normative American story and identity by framing American Indians as the “first Americans,” while at the same time silencing indigenous voices in the telling of their own stories. This paper contributes to existing literature by providing an updated and critical analysis of a particular dimension of social studies texts and provides concrete examples and critical discussion of the master narrative at work in curricula. Suggestions are made for applying critical multiculturalism to the portrayal of the origins of humans in North America, using examples of indigenous texts currently used in classrooms that offer a truly multicultural resource for teachers.

Introduction

The first three pages of most American history textbooks tell of a vast land populated as a result of the whims of the last Ice Age. It is either instructed or implied that this is truth because of the work of archaeologists and historians. These first pages explain that American Indians entered the American picture before everyone else, but (a) from somewhere else and (b) into the distinctly American picture—the same neat and essentialized American picture that Protestant pilgrims, African slaves, Irish potato farmers, Chinese railroad workers, Jewish refugees, and Mexican migrant laborers will eventually enter in subsequent chapters of the textbooks. This simplistic, untroubled portrayal of the first people to inhabit North America (as well as later groups) shifts them into a conceptual box, more specifically, into the conceptual box of the mythical and normative American story. Framing American Indians as the “first Americans” or the “first immigrants” goes further than just reflecting our ideas about national identity; it is active in the process of constructing, constrain-
Theoretical Framework

This investigation will apply the framework of critical multiculturalism in analyzing the ways in which American Indians are constructed in history textbooks. Critical multiculturalism is rooted in critical race theory, which is based upon a number of important tenets, including (a) “racism is normal, not aberrant in American society”; (b) “culture constructs its own social reality in ways that promote its own self-interest”; (c) those in power will allow civil rights and social advances only when it is to their benefit; and (d) context matters (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi; see Brayboy, 2005, for a discussion of Tribal Critical Race Theory).

Critical race theory frequently has been employed as a framework for educational research (Tate, 1997). Yet, many suggest applying the principles of critical race theory to the practice of education, specifically through multicultural education. Multicultural education began as a movement to reform curriculum to better reflect the diverse experiences of all races, ethnicities, nations, genders, and religions. As James Banks, one of the earliest scholars of multiculturalism explains, the original intent of the movement went further than just the curriculum and was “designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students, including middle-class white males, will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world” (1993, p. 24; see also Banks, 2001; Sleeter, 1996).

Yet, many lament that the implementation of multicultural education in curriculum and instruction over the last two decades has remained too focused on simple inclusion or content integration. And when multicultural content is integrated into the curriculum, it seldom moves past the “contributions approach,” of which the focus is on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements or the “additive approach,” of which content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum without changing its structure (Banks, 2004). Truly, multicultural education must go further than merely shoehorning divergent names and faces into the existing curricular framework. Such distortion of multicultural education has been termed “corporate multiculturalism,” which actually perpetuates the larger social order (Ladson-Billings, 2005; McLaren, 1994).

In response to corporate multiculturalism, Peter McLaren argues for “critical multiculturalism” (1994). Critical, or resistance multiculturalism, offers alternative ways of looking at difference which is “produced according to the ideological production and reception of cultural signs,” as opposed to other forms of multiculturalism that frame cultural difference in ways which affirm the construction of a common, monolithic, and hegemonic culture (McLaren, 1994, p. 57). The role of signs in critical multiculturalism is central to the process of constructing meaning and identity. Critical multiculturalism maintains that it is through these signs—language and representation—that cultural messages about who is powerful, legitimate, and privileged are transmitted. It offers a map for the process of “deciphering knowledge” which “helps people see through the veneer of inclusion to the ways in which diversity or multiculturalism is being manipulated to maintain and justify the status quo” (Ladson-Billings, 2004b, p. 55).

The American story is constantly recreated and reified in history classrooms through what we teach, how we teach it, and from whose voice it is taught. Wound up in this “master narrative” are normative assumptions about the true American archetype, who can be considered American, and whose version of history is privileged. As Huggins (1991) explains, “In writing our national history, we do so with a master narrative in our heads that sustains our collective sense of national purpose and identity, and resonates with our most compelling myths” (p. 27). Framing the common American story as a “master narrative” reminds us
that the telling of American History is firmly situated within the hegemonic power structures in American society. In other words, those in power foster a narrative that legitimizes and further facilitates their privilege.

The normative assumptions in a master narrative are communicated through the language and representation—the signs—embedded in the content and form of curriculum. A critical framework can decipher and dismantle these signs and powerful knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 2004b; McLaren, 1994). Therefore, this study will use critical multiculturalism to analyze the framing of American Indians in history textbooks as the “first Americans.”

**Literature Review**

**Formation of a National Identity**

It is helpful to first establish and summarize the literature of which this study is in conversation. The formation and preservation of a national, American identity is ubiquitous in public discourse. Debate often inflames during times of real (and sometimes perceived) crisis, such as military conflicts or shifting immigration patterns. The most recent manifestation of such dialogue has authors such as Samuel Huntington (2004) who proclaims, “The ideologies of multiculturalism and diversity eroded the legitimacy of the remaining central elements of American identity, the cultural core, and the American Creed” (p. 18; see also Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 2003). Many of these authors speak of an American creed that forms the basis of our collective identity. Stanley Renshon maintains that this creed—common values and beliefs in America as a liberal democracy—has been central to the development of American culture since the very beginning (2005). They are genuinely concerned about the eroding, or in Arthur Schlesinger’s word, the “disuniting” of the American creed and identity (1988). These authors are important to consider because they articulate and propagate the master narrative in their description of the American identity. In other words, they provide the theoretical framework that justifies the normative American identity portrayed in history textbooks.

**Challenging the Master Narrative in Education**

There are a number of authors trying to consider identity and the American story in a more critical and complex way. They see danger in the way cultural conservatism presents the story because “This is how America has so often been read, imagining a single nation defined by its exclusions of others and its insistent desire to create and maintain a mythic, uniform identity which holds hegemonic power at the centre through consensus” (Campbell & Kean, 1997, p. 298). The master narrative promotes this singular idea of America by privileging certain epistemologies and voices, often to the total exclusion of others.

In addition to the writings of Banks and McLaren described above, Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (2004a) work often addresses the need for critical analysis of the American story. Her scholarship shows how the master narrative promotes a certain version of American history through employing powerful metaphors that affirm its mythical image:

> The United States originally conceived itself as a nation of pilgrims (small “p”). The Mayflower became history’s largest boat, which inscribed on us an identity as pure, persecuted, and preordained. In time, the pilgrim metaphor failed to capture the American reality, and we substituted the immigrant metaphor: The United States is a nation of immigrants. (p. 11)

According to the normative American story, all groups neatly fit into this metaphor, whether as Europeans through Ellis Island, Asians through Angel Island, Africans through “forced immigration,” Latino/as through “synthetic immi-
igration,” or in the case of American Indians, as the “first immigrants” (Ladson-Billings, 2004a, p. 11). Ladson-Billings challenges these essentializing metaphors by proposing the new metaphor of America as “jazz.” Like Engle’s description of jazz: “a composite . . . of seemingly incompatible elements,” Ladson-Billings argues that the story of America is both multi-layered and non-discrete (Engel, 1922, p. 6, as quoted in Ladson-Billings 2004b).

Vine Deloria, Jr. challenged the master narrative in numerous fields over his career, exposing and analyzing institutional racism toward American Indians in many dimensions of American society. For instance, in Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact, Deloria disputes the privilege of scientific explanations in telling the story of American Indians, such as the origin of humans in North America. Deloria (1995) equates science with the myths and artificial propagation of religion, “Science and religion are inherited ways of believing certain things about the world” (p. 15). He asserts that oral historical traditions in indigenous communities should not be subjugated by scientific stories.

Textbooks and Curricula

Numerous researchers have used textbooks as units of analysis in the study of education and schooling. Scholars such as Herbert Kliebard (2004) and Michael Apple (1993, 2004) have shown how curricula are tools to transmit culture’s “official knowledge” to its newest members. Studying school curriculum is critical to understanding how society’s status quo is maintained. Apple and Christian-Smith explain exactly why this process is so important:

Conflicts over texts are often proxies for wider questions of power relations. They involve what people hold most dear, [and texts] signify—through their content and form—particular constructions of reality, particular ways of selecting and organizing that vast universe of possible knowledge [italics in original]. (p. 3; see also Nash 1997)

There have been many textbook analyses published over the last 40 years (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Analytic focus</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costo and Henry</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Over 300 K-12 history and government textbooks analyzed by 32 researchers</td>
<td>None of the books acceptable as a “dependable source of knowledge” due to inaccuracies, omissions, or oversimplification in describing omissions, or oversimplification in describing contributions to American history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axtell</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>16 college-level history textbooks analyzed by author, focused on “Age of Discovery”</td>
<td>Striking similarities in how the first two chapters are presented, omissions, factual errors, “insensitive characterizations and insidious” insensitives characterizations and insidious boundaries, and cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Neill</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Meta-analysis of 10 reports on K-12 and college social studies and textbooks in US, Canada by author</td>
<td>Findings from reports were fairly unanimous that American Indians are portrayed in distorted, simplistic, and stereotypical roles, besides softening of biased language, there has not been serious improvement since the 1960s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetty</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>11 middle and high school level history textbooks analysis by author focused on sovereignty and treaty rights</td>
<td>The textbooks marginalize or omit content and The textbooks marginalize or omit content and discussion about American Indian sovereignty and treaty rights through under-representation, reliance on the dominant historical narratives of American Exceptionalism and Western and Western Progress, and historicization of American Indians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This investigation will contribute to the existing literature by providing an updated and critical analysis of a particular dimension of social studies texts. It takes place on a more penetrating level than most large-scale textbook critiques, which allows for an important discussion around the often subtle signals students receive through their school texts. Consequently, this piece is less about conducting another textbook analysis on American Indian content in history textbooks or providing an exhaustive discourse analysis of entire textbooks. Instead, it is about providing concrete examples and critical discussion of the master narrative at work in schools, while simultaneously juxtaposing the normative story told in American history textbooks with examples of indigenous history texts that offer a truly multicultural resource for teachers.

**Methodology**

The American history textbooks (commonly-used “survey” texts distributed on a national scale) and indigenous history texts (created by either tribes or indigenous authors) analyzed in this study were chosen using two different sets of criteria. A representative sample of six American history textbooks was chosen based on level of use in American secondary schools. Five of the textbooks appear on the list of the most widely adopted American history textbooks in the United States for the 8th and 11th grade levels (American Textbook Council, 2006). The sixth, *The First Americans*, is from a set of middle-level supplementary history books called *History of US*. This volume was included because the series is tremendously popular in middle school history classrooms (as of the 2003 edition, the series sold over four million copies), and it has received critical acclaim since its original publication in 1993 (Lord, 2003, p. 26). In all cases, the teachers’ editions of the textbooks were analyzed in order to examine the suggested activities and additional resources not included in student editions. The textbooks’ publication year and level are as follows:

**Middle school level**


**High school level**


On the other hand, a convenience sample of five indigenous history texts was chosen from the tribes of one geographic area. To create a “case study” of the options available to a hypothetical history classroom in Wisconsin (and due to the difficulty of properly accounting for the tremendous diversity of American Indian cultures and histories across this country), the indigenous texts chosen for the study were limited to those published in the state of Wisconsin, where there are 11 American Indian tribes (Great Lakes Tribal Council, 2006). Wisconsin tribes have created a number of texts currently being used in Wisconsin classrooms to teach about American Indian history in the state. There are also texts from an indigenous author but published by the state of Wisconsin. The indigenous history texts used in this study are as follows:
These indigenous history texts are juxtaposed with the American history textbooks in order to offer examples or illustrations of how critical multiculturalism can manifest in a history curriculum.

The sections of text upon which I focus are particularly related to explaining how human beings came to populate North America or how American Indian tribes came to live where they do—specifically the actual text on the page, headings, photos, graphics, captions, discussion questions, and suggested activities. My analytic lens draws upon critical discourse analysis as a guide, which calls for deconstructing the meaning, assumptions, and motivations behind language, in this case, printed words. Specifically, I look for particular patterns of how a history text framed, described, and organized its narratives around the origins of humans in North America. The deconstruction of text includes a focus on areas such as the choice of words used to describe particular theories or people (e.g., “story,” “history,” “truth,” “expert,” etc.), use of pronouns (e.g., “their,” “our”), or the claims made by texts (e.g., “no people is native to America,” “historians rely on archaeology,” etc.). Careful reading of the text in relevant sections focuses on patterns around three analytic themes: voice, epistemology, and the normative American story.

Although purposeful, this is not intended to be an exhaustive or rigorously systematic survey of either history textbooks or indigenous-generated history texts. Instead, the text selections serve to assist in a discussion of the normative assumptions, frameworks, and regimes behind how the American story is told in school. This analysis can be taken a case study of how different types of history texts available to a hypothetical secondary classroom in Wisconsin offer very different versions of the American story with very different implications.

Analysis of American History Textbooks

A number of patterns emerge in reviewing the way American history textbooks explain how humans first came to inhabit North America. In particular, this study focuses on the voice(s) through which the story is told, what type of knowledge is presented as “true history,” and lastly, how American Indians are placed within the normative American story. There are a number of reasons why these particular themes are important to an in-depth investigation of history texts. They represent a more subtle level of critical examination than is typical in textbook critiques; therefore adding an important layer to the field of existing literature. In addition, these areas (voice, epistemology, and the normative American story) constitute an essential component of the foundational, albeit more hidden, signals students receive from texts about what and whose knowledge is legitimate.

Voice

There are various ways of signaling through whose voice history is told, and the five textbooks and one supplemental volume (The First Americans) provide instances of
both the obvious and subtle. For example, two of the five textbooks make no reference to indigenous origin stories when explaining how people came to North America. The remaining three make reference to a generic “Native American legend” without specifically mentioning from which tribe it came. In this case, the indigenous voice is almost totally silenced. Vague references to “Native American legends” represent a vague, diluted indigenous voice, as opposed to the highly specific and official scientific voice. There are two textbooks that, after a short excerpt of a generic origin story, specifically mention the fact that many American Indians have a different perspective on their early history. In both of these examples, indigenous voice is immediately juxtaposed or opposed with scientific theories. For example, in Call to Freedom (2005), the text reads, “This story is just one of many different ways that Native Americans explain their origins. Many scientists believe people first arrived in North America during the Last Ice Age” (p. 4). Similarly, after a short excerpt from a “Native American legend,” Holt’s (2003) explains:

Native American myths offer many such explanations of the origins of the first inhabitants of the Americas. Scientists offer other theories about the origins of Native Americans. They believe that long after human populations were well established in Europe, Africa, and Asia, the American continents remained empty of human life. (p. 4)

Later, in the middle of a scientific explanation of how differences in environment led to cultural variations, there is an excerpt from an anonymous, Native American “popular myth” that refers to the differentiation of languages. Although it is beneficial that the text returns to a native version of history, it is vague, brief, decontextualized and immediately followed with the scientific explanation.

Two of the textbooks begin their sections on “Peopling of the Americas” with stories about white archaeologists who study how humans came to North America. For example, Chapter One in The Americans (2003) begins with a section called “One American’s Story” that profiles Thomas Canby, a white journalist who follows archaeologists studying the “first Americans.” After quoting Canby the text begins, “Through the work of archaeologists, and the words of writers such as Canby, this world comes alive, and Americans today are able to see what it might have been like to live among the first Americans” (The Americans, 2003, p. 4). Similarly, the chapter entitled “Crossing to the Americas” in Creating America begins with a section “One American’s Story” and describes the work of a white archaeologist. Above her picture, the caption reads, “Archaeologists and other scientists continue to make new discoveries about these ancient people” (Creating America, 2001, p. 27). In both of these cases, the first voice students experience, when studying early indigenous peoples, are white scientists.

Texts also employ more subtle voices in telling history. The use of pronouns can signal to students whose version of history is being told. For example, in the supplementary history text History of US, the particular use of pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “our” implies a specific and dominant voice. Although the text concedes that it makes sense to call the people who came over the Bering Strait “Native Americans” because they were here so much longer than anyone else, it is negated by the following explanation:

Some people use Native Americans instead of Indians, although the word native is confusing [italics in original]. It has two meanings. Anyone who is born in a country is a native of that country, so many of us are native Americans. “Native” also means to have an origin, or beginning, in a country. As far as we
know, no people is native to America. Our ancestors all came from somewhere else. (*History of US*, 2003, p. 21)

There is an assumption in this passage about who “we” represents and what “our” history is that clearly dismisses any indigenous claim to another version of history. In addition, this passage standardizes all people born in the United States, disregarding any unique claim that indigenous people have to being indigenous.

**Epistemologies**

Particular ways of knowing, or epistemologies, are central to how history is portrayed in textbooks. Situating white archaeologists first and central in the process of explaining how humans came to North America not only privileges non-indigenous voices, but also particular kinds of knowing. There is a central message in the textbooks that indigenous-generated histories are exotic and mythical, while the versions forwarded by archaeologists and White historians represent the objective truth, as Grande (2004) explains:

The bases of modern epistemology are positivistic and empirical, where reason is perceived as culture-free, and technology as neutral. “Objective,” “expert” knowledge is elicited to solve problems and address crises and traditional knowledge (defined by its non-rational, subjective nature) is viewed as irrelevant or distortional to the objective understanding of the world. (p. 69)

In other words, history textbooks assume that Western science—based on modern epistemological foundations—is how we know things. For example, both *The Americans* and *Pathways to the Present* plainly distinguish scientific theory as the legitimate explanation: “Most experts believe that Asians, perhaps following migrating herds of big game animals, walked across this bridge to North America (*Pathways to the Present*, 2002, p. 3), and “Experts suspect that most came by foot” (*The Americans*, 2003, p. 5). Although *Creating America* (2001) includes vague indigenous perspectives, they are made oppositional to the scientific explanations:

As many societies do, many Native Americans have stories explaining the origin of their people. Some believe the gods created their ancestors. Others believe their ancestors were born of Mother Earth. In contrast, scientists think that the first Americans migrated, or moved here from Asia. But scientists disagree about how and when this move took place. (p. 27)

The text then specifically discusses both the Bering Land Bridge and boat migration theories, and does not return to the Native American origin “stories” to provide more detail.

Although these texts acknowledge there are differing opinions on the origins of indigenous peoples in North America, it privileges those proposed by science, signaling that only science provides legitimate versions of this history. For example, Holt’s (2003) suggests the following activity: “After reading the Tuskegee and Caddo myths on the Holt Researcher CD ROM, create your own myth about the origins of America” (p. 4). This activity implies that students are capable of developing a version of this history as viable as those kept through thousands of years of indigenous communities. There is no parallel activity asking students to develop their own complex archaeology-based theory of migration. In addition, the common use of the word “stories” instead of “theories” to describe the indigenous perspective contributes to a sense of delegitimization, as well as placing scientific perspectives in opposition to the indigenous versions of origin.

Many texts also portray indigenous people as playing a trivial role in the process of knowing and sometimes are made to appear
oblivious and ignorant of history. History is depicted as something that happened to them, not something they participate in constructing. A passage in History of US (2003) claims, after describing ancient hunters following woolly mammoths over the Bering Strait, “They don’t realize what a big step they are taking. They don’t know they are making history” (p. 16). It is important to note the literal interpretation versus the symbolic interpretation of a passage such as this. Of course, humans rarely realize their ultimate place in history while they are in the middle of living it, so this passage is reasonable in that way. But this passage is located in a text entirely about American Indians, leaving students with the symbolic association of the first people as oblivious and ignorant—that it takes the scientist or in this case, the historian, to realize the importance of human events.

Similarly, texts often remove American Indians from the process of creating knowledge through the privileging of written records over oral histories. For example, Call to Freedom (2005) explains, “The travelers from Asia left no written records. Instead, historians rely on archaeology—the study of the unwritten past” [italics in original] (p. 5). Although Holt’s acknowledges that scientists and other scholars use American Indian “myths and legends” together with “ancient artifacts” to develop a picture of early people in North America, there is still a hierarchy of knowledge and sources. The text goes on to explain, “Because none of the Native American tribes of that era kept written records, much of their history is lost to us. One way we can learn about early Native Americans, however, is through the work of archaeologists” (2003, p. 5). These texts assert that stories are historical only if they are written, therefore disregarding the utility of oral traditions in transmitting and verifying history. In other words, human history is “lost” unless there is a written record or it is reconstructed through science. (In contrast, the work of Charlotte Black Elk, Oglala Lakota author, lawyer, and activist discusses the importance of oral tradition in transmitting history (see Smith, 2006; also US v. Means, 1985.)

American Indians are situated within the master narrative in a variety of ways. On the most basic level, the terms used by the textbooks to describe early indigenous people lock them into the normative American story: first Americans, ancient Americans, Early Peoples of the Americas, The First People in America, The Earliest Americans, etc. The way the story is told grants early indigenous people an identity only when they crossed over the land bridge and became American. For example, Pathways to the Present (2002) explains, “Gradually the human population spread out across the Western Hemisphere, from the Arctic Circle to the southernmost tip of South America. These ancient Americans and their descendents are called Native Americans” (p. 3). In other words, early indigenous people were Americans tens of thousands of years before America was even an entity, let alone an identity.

In addition, framing American Indians as immigrants places them squarely within the mythical American story. For example, the beginning of the first chapter in The Americans (2003) explains, “First, the United States is a nation of immigrants, and this pattern of immigration has been present since the very dawn of American history,” and continues, “It is with the ancient peoples of the Americas that the story of America truly begins” (p. 4). It is significant that the textbooks frame the story of American Indians within the story of America from the beginning to the exclusion of any independent and indigenous perspective.

Although not a part of the opening chapter on the origins of indigenous people on the continent, Chapter Five of Creating America
provides a good example of how the normative American identity is often defined through what it is not. The chapter is titled: “Beginnings of an American Identity” and includes the years between 1689-1763, covering topics such as “Early American Culture,” “Roots of Representative Government,” and “French and Indian War.” It is generally focused on early British colonies in the northeast. The only mention of American Indians in the section on “Early American Culture” was of “captivity narratives.” The text explains that captivity narratives were a popular form of literature at the time that detailed the struggles of colonists who had been captured by Native American tribes portrayed as hostile and savage (Creating America, 2001). This signals two important elements of the normative story: (a) American culture began with British colonists, and (b) Indigenous peoples had a place in the “beginnings of American identity and culture,” but it was that of the “other.” They are what American culture was to be defined against, or in contrast to.

**Analysis of Indigenous History Texts**

This section will discuss three general texts on the history of Wisconsin’s native communities, one on the history of the Menominee Tribe, and one on the history of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohican Tribe. It is important to note that the texts analyzed for this section are either intended to be a survey of American Indian communities in Wisconsin or a curriculum guide on the history of a particular tribe, while the American history textbooks are designed as a survey of American history. For that reason, the amount of space devoted to how humans came to North America will not be analyzed, only the way this topic is constructed.

**Voice**

Many of the indigenous texts make it clear through whose voice history is being told. This is illustrated in the introduction of Native Peoples of Wisconsin, when the author explains:

> As a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, I have not liked many of the history books about the Native Americans of this area. Many of the histories rely on the written words of early European visitors to the Great Lakes area. What these visitors learned is interesting, but not complete—and sometimes not even true. Native people have different ways of telling history. For example, they use stories, songs, cave paintings, and objects that help keep the past alive. In this book, I have attempted to use many of these ways of ‘telling’ history. (Loew, 2003, p. viii)

There are other examples of a strong native voice in the texts. For example, the teachers guide on Wisconsin nations includes a CD-ROM with a number of short videos on topics such as the Ojibwe language or family traditions. These films are literally in the voices of members of Wisconsin’s native communities.

The Menominee history guide makes the process of constructing a voice in texts more transparent. Before relaying the Menominee origin story, the author asks readers to consider the framework through which these stories are transmitted: Elders had to talk through interpreters who often only summarized what was being said, and tribal groups often used metaphors in stories (1998). Identifying the authors and methods of communication not only tells the reader that a voice is present and important, but it also illustrates how the process of expressing a native voice can become complicated and problematic.
Epistemologies

There is an epistemological hybridity in the indigenous texts that intermingles traditional beliefs and archaeological theories about human origins in North America. The exception is the Stockbridge-Munsee text that does not mention archaeological explanations. It instead explains Mohican history solely “according to tradition” (1993). The other indigenous texts illustrate the many “ways of ‘telling’ history” (Loew, 2003) and use them in tandem, not in opposition. There are multiple examples of the intermingling of science and traditional epistemologies in the Native Peoples of Wisconsin and Indian Nations of Wisconsin. After explaining many of the origin stories of Wisconsin tribes, Loew (2001) follows by saying, “Physical evidence of early human presence, such as stone tools, spear points, and pottery, along with campsites and refuse pits, also helps us understand what life was like in ancient times” (p. 5). This text continues to intermingle epistemological approaches with each new chapter that specifically introduces one of Wisconsin’s tribes. It details their particular origin story but intersperses information from archaeology. Later the author explains:

Whereas non-Indian anthropologists explain the tribes’ increasing reliance on agriculture as an evolution from hunting and gathering, some Native elders and historians view their origin stories as proof that they have always had agriculture. However, advocates of both theories agree that the preeminence of agriculture represented a marked change in community life. (Loew, 2001, p. 6)

This text demonstrates epistemological hybridity by including many possible ways of knowing the origin of humans in North America without privileging particular theories or putting them in opposition with one another.

In addition, a number of the texts integrate different ways of conceptualizing time. The teachers’ guide on Wisconsin nations includes an introductory activity called “The Circle of My Year” which instructs students to write the activities they typically do during a particular season into a circle that is divided into four parts or seasons (Malone, 2003). It asks students to think about categories of time in a nonlinear way. Similarly, Native People of Wisconsin includes a graphic in the introduction that illustrates the difference between “Time as a Line” and “Time as a Circle” (Loew, 2003).

The Menominee history guide also illustrates a level of epistemological hybridity. After using solely archaeological and geological evidence to explain the early environment and cultural groups of the Menominee, the history guide segues into the traditional Menominee origin story with “before getting into this period [European contact] something must be said about the early beginnings of the Menominee people” The text continues:

It has been assumed by some archaeologists that the Menominee were descended from the late Woodland cultures. According to other archaeologists, they were part of the Mound Builders which flourished during the Woodland stage, probably because of the mounds that are located on the Reservation. However, according to the Menominee oral history Mound Builders were considered the enemy. (Menominee History Guide, 1998, p. 7)

Not only does the text present multiple archaeological perspectives along with the Menominee perspective, the language stays consistent between the three, and none are presented as more accurate than the others.
American Indians in the Normative American Story

The normative American story that forms the narrative thread through the history textbooks is almost absent in the indigenous history texts. These texts employ a hybridity where each tribe in Wisconsin has their own history and is told in their own voice; these texts cannot be distilled and standardized into the simplistic and mythic “American story.” For example, unlike the American history textbooks, there is no homogenizing immigrant narrative present in these texts. None of the indigenous history texts make reference to their early ancestors as the “first Americans,” “early Americans,” or the “first immigrants.” Their nationhood is always based on tribal or band affiliations, not in terms of “Americanness.” They are never portrayed as immigrants; instead, they are viewed as the first inhabitants of their own nations. It is important to note that the Bering Land Bridge theory does not appear in any of the indigenous texts, whereas it is highlighted, if not central, in each of the history textbooks.

Discussion

Before beginning a discussion of the nature of the content found in history textbooks and indigenous history texts, it is important to restate the political nature of curriculum: “History classrooms are not neutral; they are contested arenas” (Lintner, 2004, p. 27). A critical multiculturalist approach to social studies is imperative in order to dissemble and disassemble politics and bias. This analysis will illustrate how the normative American story is told through history textbooks such as those sampled. In the examples given, history textbooks facilitate and perpetuate the mythical American story in the following ways: (a) presenting one way of knowing history, or epistemological narrowness; (b) placing American Indians into the normative American identity; and (c) the use of “corporate multiculturalism.” The indigenous texts analyzed provide useful counterexamples.

Epistemological Narrowness

Although this discussion of epistemological hybridity employs a critical lens, it is important to first consider Sandy Grande’s argument that underlying the critical theorists’ frame of hybridity (or “mestizaje”) is the assumption that all epistemologies are equal. This assumption fails to acknowledge the ability of indigenous communities to provide a privileged truth based on their connection to place and land, and it actually works to further subjugate indigenous perspectives into the normative, “American ‘democratic’ white-stream” upon which the assumption is based (Grande, 2004, p. 117). Although not ideal under Grande’s framework, critical multiculturalism contends epistemological hybridity is certainly preferable to the singular Eurocentric approach often taken by American history textbooks, and this contention will guide the following discussion.

The history textbooks typically present one, presumably accurate, version of history, based on archaeology. They may mention other theories, but will privilege Western scientific ways of knowing. This epistemological narrowness is problematic in many ways. Sleeter and Grant (1991) explain, “Students are presented in classrooms with usually only one version of reality. That version embodies certain interests, reifies certain interpretations and value judgments, and gives prominence to some pieces of knowledge while rendering others invisible” (p. 97). And when those pieces and types of knowledge are rendered invisible, so are the voices of entire communities of people. This process works in reverse as well. When there is only one voice allowed to tell history, it inherently privileges one epistemology. The power of the master narrative in
history textbooks partly depends on the privileged status of particular ways of knowing.

Conversely, employing epistemological hybridity blends ways of knowing to create a more suitable framework and goes further than just tacking on other ways of knowing to the existing epistemology. This process not only leads to a more holistic picture of history, but also, in many cases, creates a more accurate one (Ladson-Billings, 2000). For example, in Red Earth, White Lies, Vine Deloria, Jr. (1995) provides exhaustive examples and discussion of how, by itself, Western science is an inadequate structure and source of knowledge and works to perpetuate the existing hegemony. Deloria contends that scientific explanations have always been uncertain and often biased.

Some cultural conservatives, such as Huntington, Schlesinger, and Renshon, are averse to the concept of hybridity and a diversity of epistemologies because it challenges the simple, essentialized master narrative from which they benefit. Renshon claims, “There is a tension between diversity and tradition, especially when cultural and institutional practices have been under siege, as they have been in the United States for over forty years,” since the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s (Renshon, 2005, p. 59). We must ask, therefore, is the tension bad? Can we not have both diversity and tradition? Cultural conservatism maintains that a clear sense of identity and the American story is incongruous with confrontation or diversity; whereas critical multiculturalism is positioned against the idea of a romanticized “monoglot ethnicity grounded in a shared or ‘common’ experience of ‘America’” (McLaren, 1994, p. 53). The closer we come to a hybrid, diverse, and complex telling of the American story, the closer we come to its true nature.

The Normative American Story

As with any myth, the normative American story is used to establish and reify society’s assumptions about its origin, values, and identity. There are implicit messages within the story that indicate who holds a legitimate claim to Americanness. It also illustrates and “proves” the existence of what cultural conservatism calls the “American creed” (Huntington 2004; Renshon 2005). The story is an immensely powerful force in the institutional, collective, and individual psyche of the nation.

For example, why should we care about the seemingly trivial difference between the terms “first Americans” and “original inhabitants”? Representation, language, symbolic meaning—signs—are essential to how we make sense of our experiences, identity, and culture. Critical multiculturalism argues, “Signs are part of an ideological struggle that attempts to create a particular regime of representation that serves to legitimate a certain cultural reality” (McLaren, 1994, p. 55). The difference between “first Americans” and “original inhabitants” is far from trivial, and is, in fact, central to the collective and individual sense of self. As signs, they not only signal, but also continuously create the normative and the “other.”

The idea of American Indians as the “first Americans” presupposes that if they became Americans by crossing over the Bering Strait, then America existed before all other nations and identities on this continent. Therefore, America must be somehow both borderless and timeless. This concept perpetuates destructive assumptions about the identity and sovereignty of preexisting communities of people and America’s claim of ultimate and original ownership of this land. Rains (2003) maintains, “In essence, the omission of the existence of an earlier history of peoples, offers blindness and immunity from accusations of theft….The divinely sanctioned right [Manifest Destiny], coupled with omission of indigenous roots, then perpetuate the status quo” (p. 206). Placing American Indians as “proto-Americans” denies them their unique indigeneity (Deloria, 1995).
Another way some textbooks bring American Indians into the normative American story is by invoking the powerful image of the immigrant. There are few metaphors as powerful as the myth of the immigrant. When American Indians are constructed as the “first immigrants,” they are made subject to the sterilizing effects of the American story. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1988) potently describes “the myth of immigration as a cultural stripping away”:

If a social hierarchy’s top and bottom appear to be zones of “zero degree” culture, so too is the zone of immigration, or the site where individuals move between two national spaces. Ideally, that is, from the dominant society’s point of view, immigrants are stripped of their former cultures, enabling them to become American citizens, transparent, just like you and me, “people without culture.” (p. 81)

The American immigrant narrative also equates American Indians (and their particular claim to this land) with all other immigrant groups in the United States. Vine Deloria, Jr. (1995) further explains:

By making us immigrants to North America, they are able to deny the fact that we were the full, complete, and total owners of this continent. They are able to see us simply as earlier interlopers and therefore throw back at us the accusation that we had simply found North America a little earlier than they had [italics in original]. (p. 84)

In arguing that American Indians are often forced into the normative American story, it is not to say they do not create and retain their own unique identities. It is important to understand American Indians are far from passive actors in this process. The native community resists the master narrative, constantly creating and reconfiguring their own identity, but not without a sense of continuity.

Use of Corporate Multiculturalism in History Texts

As discussed in previous sections, a critical multiculturalist framework moves beyond the cultural appropriation typical of some manifestations of multicultural education. It counters the effects of corporate multiculturalism, which is “a strategy for disavowing racism and prejudice without conceding any of the power or privilege the dominant class enjoys” (Ladson-Billings, 2004b, p. 53).

Unfortunately, most history textbooks are written using a corporate multicultural approach, specifically, “the infusion of bits and pieces of ethnic minority groups into the curriculum not only reinforces the idea that ethnic minority groups are not integral parts of U.S. society, it also results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures” (Banks, 1981, p. 158). The silencing of indigenous voices in history textbooks allows for the master narrative to distort and appropriate their story into its own. When there is only the voice of those in power, “content that does not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control, mastered, and then reshaped before it can become a part of the master script [italics in original]” (Swartz, 1992, p. 341). The textbook format itself may be a hegemonic framework, regardless of its content because it asserts: Things are knowable and best when tightly categorized; we can present one absolute truth, and time is linear. This approach privileges a certain way of knowing while silencing others.

Working toward a Critical Multiculturalist Approach

It is counterproductive to only offer criticism without suggesting what could be done to improve history curricula. A commitment to
resistance and a transformative agenda is central to McLaren’s concept of critical multiculturalism (1994). Silencing American Indians in the telling of their own stories and situating them as the “other” is an active process. Therefore, it is important to work to interrupt this process and consider the dimensions of a responsible text explaining the origins of humans in North America.

1. Insure Diversity and Hybridity in Both Voice and Epistemological Approaches

As many of the indigenous texts illustrate, there is ample room for diversity and hybridity in a historical account. A text cannot pretend to have a claim on any one truth or even claim that one exists. For example, the issue is not about exactly how or when American Indians came to this continent, but instead the implications wound up in whose voice is privileged in presenting the options:

Many Native elders say that we have existed on our lands, which many in the North call “Turtle Island,” since the beginning of time. It is not written somewhere like a citation from a scholarly publication, it is what is spoken. It is what is said. Our words. Spoken words, words remembered. A way of thinking, a way of being, a way of understanding and interacting with the world around us. Indigenous epistemologies and paradigms developed over thousands of years of sustained living on this Land. (Rains, Archibald & Deyhle, 2000, p. 337)

Texts must value multiple voices and multiple ways of knowing. As Brayboy (2005) contends, indigenous stories can become “data,” and “the ability to determine a place in the world (power) is enabled by knowledge American Indian communities have that is rooted in both Indigenous and European sources of knowing” (p. 431).

A critical strategy to diversifying voice and epistemology in history curricula is to make indigenous-originated texts central to the study of indigenous peoples. As this paper has illustrated, indigenous-originated history texts have important differences from mainstream history textbooks in both content and form, and it is not enough to simply include quotes or sidebars on famous American Indians. It is also important to note that texts written about indigenous peoples are not the same as indigenous-originated texts. There is an abundance of “well-intentioned” materials by non-native authors that exhibit the same epistemological narrowness as the textbooks they are attempting to amend. Lastly, oral histories are critical components for learning about indigenous histories. There are a number of resources available to teachers interested in using indigenous oral histories in the classroom. These include materials from organizations such as the Oral History Center at the University of South Dakota (www.usd.edu/jais) and state departments of public instruction, as well as resources available from local tribal organizations.

2. Challenge Master Narrative through Carefully, Systematically Problematizing American Story

In challenging the normative American story, critical multiculturalism goes further than merely the “process of mentioning” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). It challenges assumptions that there is one version of history, a simple American identity, and a long history of adherence to the mythical American creed. What history textbooks now offer as an explanation for the origins of humans in North America must be blended, turned on its head, made complicated and diverse. Instead of American Indians being framed as the first immigrants to America, what if the Pilgrims
instead were framed as the first white immigrants to Indian Country (see Richter, 2001)? What if texts purposely led students to perplexity about when America became “America”? Contrary to how it is often portrayed, the signing of the Declaration of Independence did not signal the erasure of all other nations on the North American continent. Nationhood in America is not a zero-sum game. History texts must be very clear about American Indians’ unique indigenous status in the history of the continent and in the landscape of American identity and culture. This approach does not produce a simple, essential, clean version of the American story. As Campbell and Kean (1997) elaborate:

Stepping beyond simplistic mythic or dualistic readings of American enables new perceptions of the nation as “hybrids, mosaics, chimeras,” plural, shifting, and in contestation for power and authority. It is a place where identity is not fixed and where politics is no longer “unity-through—domination or unity—through—incorporation,” but is a new politics of “affinity” and difference. (p. 298)

This is the difference between the inaccurate and essentializing myth of America as a nation of immigrants and Ladson-Billings’ metaphor of America as jazz (2004a, 2004b). A critical multiculturalist approach to America “refuses to see culture as nonconflictual, harmonious, and consensual. Democracy is understood from this perspective as busy—it is not seamless, smooth or always a harmonious political and cultural state of affairs” (McLaren, 1994, p. 53).

Yet, some (Sewell, 2000) feel this will lead to much confusion among students, “The multicultural imagination does not result in better history or, to use the cliché, history, warts, and all. Instead, the changes tend to give students a selective, puzzling, and fishy view of the nation and world” [italics in original] (p. 35). But as Rains (2003) asks, “Have we not matured enough as a country to be able to examine our past with honesty and integrity?” (p. 203); indeed, by its nature, history is “selective”; this nation and the world are “fishy,” and we absolutely want to “puzzle” students about the formation of this country and its identity. In fact, it is honest and right to teach the multitude of American stories in just that way.

References


**About the Author**

**Annalee Good** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Primary Contact Information**

**Mailing Address:** Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 337 Riverside Drive, Madison, WI 53704

**Email:** aggood@wisc.edu

**Article Citation (APA)**