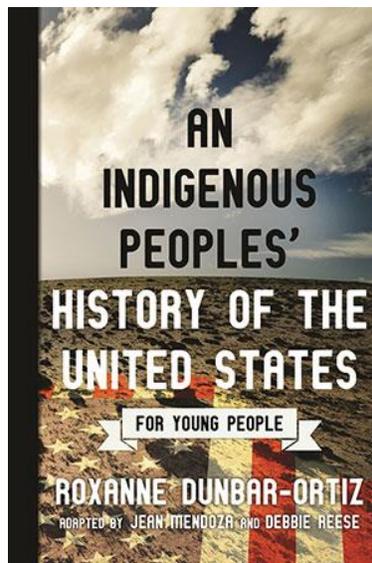


First Opinion: Challenging the Foundation of America Is So... un-American

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the US for Young People*. Adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese. Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Press, 2019. Print.

Janelle Cronin



Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has taken the challenge of giving an overview of United States history with primary focus on the Native American perspective and experience. (*Although the history covered is mainly on Native American/American Indian peoples in the United States it also includes Indigenous examples from other regions of the world.*) This simultaneous history is often purposefully excluded from history books and, as a result, from the critical consciousness. Dunbar-Ortiz writes “It is important to learn and know this history, but many people today lack that knowledge and understanding because of the way America’s history has been taught (1).” United States history has always been taught as a set narrative, with the tones of American

patriotism and exceptionalism guiding the validity of this widely accepted and often unquestioned historical framework.

The shared experience of manifest destiny, heroic conquest, religious supremacy and the pursuit of wealth (land and gold), further explained in chapter two, perpetuates the colonizer-centric rhetoric of conquest. The patriotic urge to conquer and take over resources, land, and people is the foundation of a settler colonial mindset that continues with each generation of immigrants who conveniently forget their colonizer history. The same colonizers who broadly accept the narrative of explorers who “discovered” an uninhabited land of wealth and prosperity, completely ignoring the millions of Native peoples who already inhabited the land. To acknowledge, teach, understand and accept that there are other narratives that exist and even challenge the foundation of what it means to be an American is so...un-American. To confront the indoctrinate nature of academia starting with grade school history is unpatriotic and can shake a nation to its core.

Confronting the Native history, the true history of American soil, continues to be watered down and slowly digested for the comfort of the colonizers. It takes non-Native authors like Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz to compile our complex history as a nation and say what Native people have been fighting to say since the beginning of colonization; we exist, we remember and, because of that, we must tell the horrible truth of what it means to be American. Dunbar-Ortiz reiterates this point within the book’s introduction stating, “this book tells the story of the United States as a colonialist settle-state, one that sought to crush and subjugate Indigenous populations. In spite of all that was done to them, Indigenous peoples are still here. It is breathtaking, but no miracle, that they have survived as people. This is a history of the United States (p. 15).” By reexamining how history has perpetuated racist inaccuracies Dunbar-Ortiz also makes sure to challenge the notion that all Native peoples were “primitive.” Numerous examples are presented from pages 97-98 that talk about the various literary accomplishments from written alphabets and language systems to record keeping and calendars.

To engage with a younger audience, and the educators who ultimately are unlearning history themselves, this book is written with a very accessible and direct path. Accessibly confronting historical facts are not only presented, but also supported, throughout the book with examples and definitions suitable for engaging in critical conversations. For example, starting in chapter four, a *Consider This* textbox uses a well-known example of genocide, the Jewish

Holocaust of WWII, to question the reader as to why the word genocide isn't used more in United States history textbooks. This strategy prompts discussions around definitions, examining maps, and confronting images and facts about what it truly means to learn the history of the United States.

Dunbar-Ortiz's book is the opposite of history textbooks, which can be viewed as convoluted and boring when facts are merely spouted with memorized highlights that purposefully exclude the human perspective, the impacts of the decisions being made, and how exclusionary practices have consequences. By covering broad topics like land, ownership, corn, scalping, land rights, sovereignty, and representation throughout the book, Dunbar-Ortiz opens conversations for understanding the roots of many contemporary issues still impacting Native peoples today. Many ongoing issues include, but are not limited to, stereotyping, tribal and cultural misunderstandings and misconceptions, and continued historical inaccuracies.

In this book, Dunbar-Ortiz opens the conversations to start challenging one's personal beliefs and the doctrine they have been taught in various capacities by giving historical context surrounding renowned historical "facts" or figureheads. My personal favorite, the topic of George Washington, also known as the "Town Destroyer", with the opening header on page 81: "*George Washington: Hero or Monster? Depends on who you ask.*" Although the topics may seem confrontational, the book does create a space to realize the lack of understanding for what American history truly is and provides a space for non-confrontational conversations to occur for the sake of learning.

As a member of the Navajo Nation, I found myself thinking of giving my middle school teacher a copy of this book. I fondly remember him as one of my favorite teachers because of his enthusiasm in the classroom and the various jingles he would create to help us memorize the facts of U.S. history. For example, he would always say "I'm gelling with Magellan," a nod to the Portuguese colonizer and the popular Dr. Scholls insole slogan. What he failed to see was the 60-75% class full of primarily Navajo students who had their own history, experiences, and impacts of colonization. Whose ancestors suffered at the hands of the various waves of conquistadors and colonizers who came to our land. At that age I wasn't equipped with the knowledge I have now and definitely not empowered enough to raise my hand and question my beloved teacher. But as I think about my teacher, a white male, I wonder if he himself would

have been reflective enough to acknowledge the various narratives that existed inside his classroom and, if so, would that have changed how we were taught?

Thankfully, the simple and direct nature of this book allows for it to be implemented within classrooms, but I can't help but think of the process of unlearning history. These coexisting narratives are more widely accessible thanks to modern technologies like the internet and books. However, dissemination of this knowledge will still widely be dependent on non-Native educators to unlearn, learn, and teach to the masses. Due to this unlearning process, is there hope for our history to be widely acknowledged on a national level or will this always remain an elective option, a personal decision, or an expectation when working in tribal communities, but not a state requirement?

A critique of this book, however, is the notable exclusion of the voice and experiences of Native American women. This is an obvious impact of colonization, but is acknowledged at the end of the book. To address this lack of voice, the author has added a list of Native American female leaders and additional reading material for further exploration. These supplemental materials give a nod to the diversity outside of the racist and sexist relics of Pocahontas and Sacajawea. Following the list of Native American female leaders includes a list of various indigenous authors and leaves the responsibility of further research in the hands of the reader.

I would recommend this book to educators across the nation, and not just those working with Native American communities (although they should probably receive the book first) and those in the process of unlearning and questioning history themselves. This book is appropriate to open conversations starting as early as middle school and should continue into college as the level of "not knowing" extends very deep; generationally. This book is also appropriate for both Native and non-Native audiences. As I already shared, I am/was a Native American student, however I did not get to learn my history until I attended Haskell Indian Nations University as a young adult where my history included, encouraged, and incorporated within the curriculum, classroom, and campus environment.

About the Author

Janelle Cronin is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation and is from Gallup, New Mexico. She earned her baccalaureate degree from Haskell Indian Nations University in May 2015 and

her master's degree from Purdue University in May 2018. Janelle is currently a PhD student at Purdue University as both a George Washington Carver Fellow and Alfred P. Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership Scholar. While at Purdue University she also serves as the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program Student Advisory (IGPSA) Board Representative and as the Native American Student Association (NASA) President.