Marisa Montalvo

Professor Carr

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School Issues Regarding Columbus

Every single year the exact same narrative is perpetuated for young children learning about the history of America; Christopher Columbus born in 1451 sailed across the ocean accompanied by three ships, the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. From there, he discovered what we call America, naming him an outstanding figure for his incredible discovery. Children are taught to be grateful for this, that Columbus should be celebrated for what was done; or what they believe was done. Educators in schools teaching the filtered, nicer version of Christopher Columbus perpetuates harmful false ideas regarding the man who has actually done more harm than good and only pushes forward the single-story and deprives people of the full truth that deserves to be told.

To begin, it is true that Columbus sailed the ocean with the three ships and saw “new” land, however, this is where the story takes a turn and begins to hinder from what people are used to hearing. Making a deal with Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, with a desperate need for money, Columbus along with the crew members belonging to the other ships had set off in 1492. The trip was strenuous for both Columbus and his crew, with few sightings for a long majority of the trip, they had seemed to hit a dead end. This was until Columbus spotted a flock of birds, a clue that they were soon to approach land, which they did just a day later landing in the modern-day Bahamas. The land was beautiful; proving to be very useful to Columbus with the various trees and rivers. His first encounter was with the Taino people- however, he had them go by the “Indian” people. The crew immediately took note of their appearances, they lacked clothes and any type of safe protection making them seem vulnerable. He first wrote, “They never refuse anything that is asked for. They even offer it themselves, and show so much love that they would give their very hearts.” (Columbus). The Taino people had proven to be extremely generous and kind even to the people intruding in their land, which gave Columbus the impression of how easy it would be to take over their land. It is important to note that upon arriving and seeing the people already inhabited there, Columbus did not have good intentions, he automatically viewed them as inferior and began to think of ways to surrender them. The following quote comes directly from Columbus, as he documented this experience in a journal. “They should be good servants.... I, our Lord being pleased, will take hence, at the time of my departure, six natives for your Highnesses." (Columbus). From this, Columbus sailed back to Spain with 10 Indians and in shock, the Spanish royalty granted him another trip with better equipment and crewmen. While on the islands, settlers had already begun to treat the Indians as less than with the instructions of theft, slavery, and hard labor. Following his next voyage resulted in an arrest. Lastly, with his final voyage, the Indians on the island were being used to full force, being threatened to death if resisting, or tortured.

The trips had additionally caused many deaths in a different way, by exposing the Natives to new diseases due to their weak immune systems. “As the number of Spanish colonists increased, the native population of the West Indies quickly declined. Tens of thousands of native people were worked to death or died of smallpox, measles, and other European diseases to which they had no immunity.” (Weiner, 2). By the end of the voyages, nearly 55 million, in other words about 90% of the Natives’ population, to begin with, had been killed whether by disease or the brutal forces by the settlers. To any minor inconvenience or mistake, the Natives had to suffer brutal consequences, including whipping and even the severing of body parts. Life as a Taino woman included being “sold” to Columbus’ crewmates where the woman was beaten and raped, which sometimes resulted in preganacy in which the baby was basically left to die. However, Columbus also seemed to break the rules, as Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, had explicitly ordered no injury or harm to be done to the people who had already lived on the Islands.

Columbus had created many rules in order to gain the most out of his “discovery”, for example, a requirement to bring over gold. “He created in 1495 the “tribute system” requiring every person over 14 to provide him with a “hawk’s bell” of gold every three months. Those who complied were given a “token” to wear around their neck. Those who didn’t comply, as Columbus’ son Fernando reported, were “punished by having their hands cut off” and “left to bleed to death.” (Coard, 1). The brutality of Columbus alone begins the question of how anyone can see the man as something good. The story told above is a lengthened, more straightforward version of what is taught to people learning about him for the first time. Looking at that, Columbus cannot be simply called a hero when you take into account the effects of his actions, and when you take into account the millions of innocent lives lost through his voyages, not even accidental but with forceful brutality and torture to those who did not comply. The single-story being told fails to give children and teens the opportunity to see the tragedy that occurred in this situation. It raises questions about the celebration day dedicated to Christopher Columbus. The single-story narrative of Columbus is incredibly harmful, to their knowledge or learners and to the people it is disrespecting by not telling the full history of what happened to their ancestors. The genocide caused by Columbus is not taught when it should be, as stated by Aura Bogado, “In short, Columbus was a murderous, enslaving, sexual-abusing, treacherous colonizer to the peoples he encountered in the Caribbean. Only two-thirds of the Taíno survived just four years after Columbus’ arrival; some were killed, others succumbed to diseases, and fully half of the dead killed themselves rather than live with his tyranny” (Bogado, 1). However, all you hear in school is the watered down version, not even telling that there were already people living on the island therefore Columbus wasn’t even truly the first to discover America.

The controversy surrounding Columbus isn't fairly recent, though day after day people are finding out the real truth surrounding the situation. Columbus Day is celebrated on a Monday in October, the day varies depending on the year but for example, the date in 2021 is October 11th. However, many people have taken it upon themselves to rename this holiday, in remembrance of the lives lost during his voyage, it is Indigenous People Day, even recognized by president Biden. This idea was first proposed in 1977, an article states “the idea was first proposed back in 1977 at a United Nations conference that had been convened to address discrimination against Native peoples.” (Markarian, 1).

Some may argue that without Columbus, where would we be today? Questioning how we can disregard his bravery and determined mind to conquer the land that we all call home. While these are things to consider when drawing conclusions on how Columbus should be taught in school, the same thing is said for how you can disregard the lives that suffered from this discovery and how children are being led to believe this is a nations hero.

In conclusion, the story of Columbus is much more complex and lengthy than people like to talk about, it has time and time again been summed up as the classic three boats leading to the greatest discovery, America, when people fail to see that upon “discovering” America, a genocide was committed. Millions of people had died, millions were tortured and raped, and it is far too much pain inflicted for it to be just written off as some hero who is the reason we are all here today.

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Reflection paper

My purpose for writing this piece was to expose the single story of Christopher Columbus and how for years upon years, this figure has been regarded as the greatest hero due to his discovery of America. What gets left out of that is all the damage caused in the process by Columbus, and how the people fail to see and teach that. In school, we are taught a very basic, simplified version of Christopher Columbus, which is harmful to not only the students for being neglected of the full story but also the people that had to suffer at the hands of Columbus.

My audience would be first and foremost, the general public as part of my purpose is to provide education for those who may not know, but it is also the higher curriculum school educators who have taken it upon themselves to design the course as such; ignoring the hard cold truth. Most teachers are being told to teach a certain way, so here I focus on the head of the school officials.

What prompted me to write this assignment was my strong opinions and feelings on it, and also because of my own personal connection to the single-story surrounding it. I hadn't even known that Columbus was the cause of genocide until my senior year of high school, I had heard of Indigenous People Day and a bit of controversy surrounding Columbus, however, I did not learn the actual truth until very late, causing me to go along with the lie being spread around showing just how harmful both the Columbus narrative and single story is in general.

My stance on Columbus throughout my essay shows that I very much dislike the hero title attached to him, and he is in my opinion much more of a villain. I struggle to see how he can be a hero, how people decide that we should overlook the tragedy that occurred just because of the land that was stolen from the Natives. I also discuss how harmful it is to leave out part of the story, both to the people learning and the people who had to live through it but not even get to have their story shared.

The genre of this essay is an argumentative essay, my work fits into this genre as I express a topic that I feel strongly about and my opinion on it, then include a possible counter point to argue against.