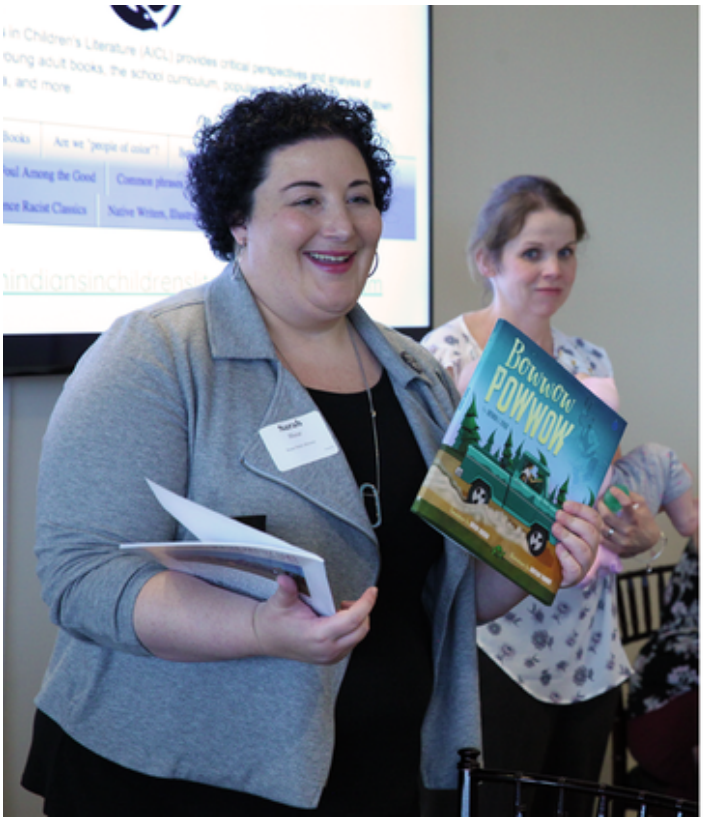
Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

National Museum of the American Indian

Smithsonian Voices | National Museum of the American Indian

Indigenous Peoples' Day: Rethinking American History

October 7th, 2018, 9:00PM / BY Dennis W. Zotigh and Renee Gokey



Sarah Shear (left), assistant professor of Social Studies Education, Penn State University, and teachers working with students from kindergarten through high school take part in an Indigenous People's Curriculum Day and Teach-In presented by Teaching for Change and the National Museum of the American Indian. September 2018, Washington, D.C. (© Rick Reinhard)

"The most American thing about America is American Indians." —Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche)

The first documented observance of Columbus Day in the United States took place in New York City in 1792, on the 300th anniversary of Columbus's landfall in the Western Hemisphere. The holiday originated as an annual celebration of Italian–American heritage in San Francisco in 1869. In 1934, at the request of the Knights of Columbus and New York City's Italian community, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared the first national observance of Columbus Day. President Roosevelt and the U.S. Congress made October 12 a national holiday in 1937. In 1972 President Richard Nixon signed a proclamation making the official date of the holiday the second Monday in October.

In the forefront of the minds of many Native people throughout the Western Hemisphere, however, is the fact the colonial takeovers of the Americas, starting with Columbus, led to the deaths of millions of Native people and the forced assimilation of survivors. Generations of Native people have protested Columbus Day. In 1977, for example, participants at the United Nations International Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Populations in the Americas proposed that Indigenous Peoples' Day replace Columbus Day.

Indigenous Peoples' Day recognizes that Native people are the first inhabitants of the Americas, including the lands that later became the United States of America. And it urges Americans to rethink history.

The movement to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day has gained momentum and spread to states, cities, and towns across the United States. The first state to rename Columbus Day was South Dakota in 1990. Hawai'i has also changed the name of its October 12 holiday to Discovers' Day in honor of the Polynesian navigators who peopled the islands. Berkeley, California, became the first city to make the change in 1992, when the city council renamed Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day. In 2015 an estimated 6,000 Native people and their supporters gathered at Randall's Island, New York, to recognize the survival of the Indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The demonstration's success and the worldwide media attention it attracted planted the seeds for creating an Indigenous Peoples' Day in New York City.

The following states now observe Native American or Indigenous Peoples' Day:

- Alaska
- Hawai'i
- Minnesota
- Oregon
- South Dakota
- Vermont

Cities have often led the way, including:

- Anchorage, Alaska
- Flagstaff and Phoenix, Arizona
- Berkeley, Burbank, Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Fernando, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, and Watsonville, California
- Boulder, Denver, and Durango, Colorado
- Moscow, Idaho
- Evanston and Oak Park, Illinois
- Davenport and Iowa City, Iowa
- Lawrence and Wichita, Kansas
- Berea, Brodhead, Burnside, Corbin, Crab Orchard, Frankfort, Harrodsburg, Hopkinsville, Junction City, Lancaster, Liberty, Livingston, London, Louisville, Mt. Vernon, Perryville, Prestonsburg, Richmond, Russell Springs, Science Hill, Somerset, Springfield, Stanford, and Taylorsville, Kentucky

- Bangor, Belfast, Brunswick, Gouldsboro, Orono, and Portland, Maine
- Amherst, Brookline, Cambridge, Northampton, and Somerville, Massachusetts
- Alpena, Ann Arbor, Detroit, East Lansing, Traverse City, and Ypsilanti, Michigan
- Bemidji, Grand Rapids, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Red Wing, Minnesota
- Kansas City, Missouri
- Bozeman, Montana
- Lincoln, Nebraska
- Durham, New Hampshire
- Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Akron, Ithaca, Newstead, Rochester, and the Village of Lewiston, New York
- Asheville, Carrboro, and Kernersville, North Carolina
- Fargo, North Dakota
- Cincinnati and Oberlin, Ohio
- Anadarko, El Reno, Lawton, Okmulgee, Norman, Oklahoma City, Tahlequah, and Tulsa, Oklahoma
- Corvallis, Eugene, and Portland, Oregon
- Lancaster, Pennsylvania
- Austin, Texas
- Nashville, Tennessee
- Salt Lake City, Utah
- Charlottesville, Virginia
- Bainbridge Island, Olympia, Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, and Yakima, Washington
- Harpers Ferry, West Virginia
- Madison, Wisconsin

Even so, in 2018 Columbus mythology continues to be young American students' first introduction to encountering different cultures, ethnicities, and peoples. Teaching more acccurate and complete narratives and differing perspectives is key to rethinking history. Universities and schools across the country are considering this and have changed the holiday's name. This September the museum and Teaching for Change, a Washington-based national education organization, hosted an Indigenous People's Curriculum Day and Teach-In for more than 100 teachers working with students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Sessions ranged from how to join the movement to Abolish Columbus Day; to skills-based sessions such as critical literacy, art, and facilitated dialogue; to inquiry-based lessons on American Indian Removal available in the museum's Native Knowledge 360° online resources.

The Teach-In began with a keynote presentation by Dr. Sarah Shear, assistant professor of Social Studies Education at Penn State University–Altoona, who has researched U.S. national and state history standards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Her research—conducted with Ryan T. Knowles, Gregory J. Soden, and Antonio J. Castro and published in 2015 in "Manifesting Destiny: Re/presentations of Indigenous Peoples in K–12 U.S. History Standards"—includes a statistic now cited by many different stakeholders in education: 87 percent of references to Native Americans in U.S. curricula are in the context of American history before 1900. "The narrative presented in U.S. history standards," Dr. Shear and her colleagues believe, "when analyzed with a critical eye, directed students to see Indigenous Peoples as a long since forgotten episode in the country's development." They see serious implications in the way the United States teaches its history:

> When one looks at the larger picture painted by the quantitative data, it is easy to argue that the narrative of U.S. history is painfully one sided in its telling of the American narrative, especially with regard to Indigenous Peoples' experiences. . . .
>
> The qualitative findings further illuminate a Euro-American narrative that reinstitutes the marginalization of Indigenous cultures and knowledge. Indigenous Peoples are left in the shadows of Euro-America's destiny, while the cooperation and conflict model provides justification for the eventual termination of Indigenous Peoples from the American landscape and historical narrative. Finally, a tone of detachment, especially with long lists of legal and political terms, dismisses the humanity of Indigenous cultures and experiences in the United States.

But things are changing. On Monday, October 8, 2018, states, cities, towns, counties, community groups, churches, universities, schools, and other institutions will observe Indigenous Peoples' Day or Native American Day with activities that raise awareness of the rich history, culture, and traditions of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. They will do so thanks to Native people, their supporters, and others who have gathered for decades and continue to gather now at prayer vigils, powwows, symposiums, concerts, lectures, rallies, and classrooms to help America rethink American history.

Renee Gokey (Eastern Shawnee/Sac and Fox/Miami) is an education specialist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Dennis W. Zotigh (Kiowa/San Juan Pueblo/Santee Dakota Indian) is a member of the Kiowa Gourd Clan and San Juan Pueblo Winter Clan and a descendant of Sitting Bear and No Retreat, both principal war chiefs of the Kiowas. Dennis works as a writer and cultural specialist at the Smithsonian's National Musem of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Tags:

American History, Education, Learning, Native