
NATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES

Sample Lesson 26: This is Indian Land: The Purpose, Politics, and Practice of Land Acknowledgment

Theme: Identity

Disciplinary Areas: Native American Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 3, 5

Standards Alignment:

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Chronological and Spatial Thinking 1; Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View 3; Historical Interpretation 4

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Students will be introduced to the purpose, politics, and practice of Indigenous land acknowledgment in order to show respect for Indigenous peoples and recognize their enduring relationship to the land, raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten, recognize that colonization is an ongoing process, and inspire critically conscious action and reflection. Students will be introduced to the concept of settler colonialism, and identify counterhegemonic truth telling and reconciliation efforts.

Key Terms and Concepts: hegemony, counterhegemony, Indigenous, land acknowledgment, precontact, settler colonialism, genocide, master narrative, counternarrative

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Recognize Indigenous people's enduring relationship to the land
- Analyze histories that are often suppressed or forgotten and critique ongoing systems of colonization
- Collaborate to create, deliver, and propose their own First Nations land acknowledgment statement as part of a broader historical truth-telling campaign
- Understand the environmental issues that affect the Native American traditions and the fragility of Mother Earth

Essential Questions:

1. What makes someone a guest? Do you consider people in your community to be guests? Why or why not?¹⁶
2. What does “guests” mean to Native and non-Native communities?
3. What are the Indigenous protocols involved in being a “guest,” and what are our responsibilities toward our host, Mother Earth? To what extent are our events and actions benefiting our host, Mother Earth?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

1. Start the lesson by asking the class the following questions and having students respond to them in small groups. After each group has responded to the questions, have one point person share their group’s discussion with the larger class.
 - a. When guests come to your home or neighborhood, what, if anything is expected of them? As a host, how do you communicate hospitality?
 - b. When you are a guest in someone’s house or neighborhood, how might you show respect?
2. Next, have each student write a response to the following quotes/prompts:
 - a. “When the blood in your veins returns to the sea, and the earth in your bones returns to the ground, perhaps then you will remember that the land does not belong to YOU, it is YOU that belong to the land.” –Chief Seattle
 - b. “We all need relationships. I don’t believe in fake relationships, instead I try to establish genuine relationships everywhere I go. As a guest/visitor, you do that by being respectful and then this will be reciprocated ... because in the end, we’re only from one place.” –Nipsey Hussle

16 The use of “guests” throughout this lesson draws on Native American epistemology that highly reveres land and the environment and considers all human beings as “guests” on Earth. However, this analogy of “guests” can also be used to discuss settler colonialism and how non-Native people are also “guests” on lands that formerly belonged to Indigenous people. When using the latter analogy, it is important to recognize that some non-Native people, such as African Americans, have more complex histories of forced migration, thus the notion of “guests” will not always adequately capture the nature of non-Native positionalities on the land.

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3. After providing students with 10–15 minutes to respond to the aforementioned quotes, ask students to share their writing and thoughts with the larger class. Below are some key takeaways that should be emphasized as the teacher facilitates this discussion:
 - a. Indigenous peoples have had, and continue to have, an enduring relationship to Mother Earth.
 - b. We should strive for genuine and respectful relationships wherever we go.
 4. After discussing the quotes above, have students reflect on one of the lesson's essential questions:
 - a. What are the Indigenous protocols involved in being a “guest” and what are our responsibilities toward our host Mother Earth?
 5. After splitting the class into two groups, have the first group read an excerpt from *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link293>, click on “Excerpt”). Meanwhile, have the second group read the introduction to *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror* (excerpted below). Ask each group to have a discussion addressing the following prompts and questions after they have finished reading their assigned text:
 - a. What are the main arguments? What does the author assume? Do you agree or disagree?
 - b. In mixed pairs (one person from each group), compare and contrast the two authors' perspectives on how the nation was built and why this matters.
 - c. In those same pairs, discuss which perspective you would identify as the master narrative and why? Which perspective might be the counternarrative?
 6. Create four stations around the room that have copies of the articles and handouts listed below. Allow students to spend at least five minutes at each station to review the provided handouts.
 - a. Station 1: Purpose of Land Acknowledgment: “Indigenous Land Acknowledgement, Explained” (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link294>)
 - b. Station 2: Politics of Land Acknowledgment: Native Artists Speak: This is [fill in] Land Artistic Posters (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link295>)

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- c. Station 3: Practice of Land Acknowledgment: “TDSB schools now pay daily tribute to Indigenous lands they’re built on” (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link296>)
 - d. After reading and sharing thoughts about the enduring relationship to Mother Earth, students will explore different tribal creation stories that demonstrate the importance of the environment and the Native American people. Students are given chapter 2, “Naming,” of *California Through Native Eyes: Reclaiming History* by William J. Bauer Jr. to read before researching a creation story from different local or regional tribes to review the relationship of the people and the land.
 7. After each student has visited all three stations, have students reflect on the following in pairs:
 - a. What are First Nations land acknowledgments and why are they done?
 - b. Should our school begin assembly announcements with a land acknowledgment? If so, what might this announcement sound like, and would it be part of a broader historical truth-telling campaign?
 8. While still in pairs, have students work together to create their own land acknowledgment statement and poster. Start this activity by having each pair identify an area in the state that they would like to learn more about, specifically around the Indigenous people from that area. Have each pair visit <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link297> to research which tribes inhabit the area that they’ve identified, as well as any traditions, customs, languages, practices, and similar.
 9. After each pair has finished conducting research on the area of their choosing, they should begin to draft language to formulate a land acknowledgment statement. Express that there is no exact template or script, so they will need to incorporate their research and draw from examples. Be sure to provide students with an example of your own or the one below:
 - a. At minimum, a land acknowledgment should include the following:
“We acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the ____ People.”
Beginning with just this simple sentence would be a meaningful intervention in most US gathering spaces. However, this statement could also include a recognition of sacred sites, elders, the local environment, and history specific to the tribe, among other topics, to make the statement more tailored and robust. Here are other examples:

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1. Often, statements specifically honor elders:

“I would like to acknowledge that this meeting is being held on the traditional lands of the ____ People, and pay my respect to elders both past and present.”
 2. Some allude to the caring, reciprocal relationship with land:

“I want to respectfully acknowledge the ____ People, who have stewarded this land throughout the generations.”
 3. Acknowledgments may also make explicit mention of the occupied nature of the territory in which a gathering is taking place:

“We would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the occupied/unceded/seized territory of the ____ People.”

“I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are in ____, the ancestral and unceded territory of the ____ People.”
 10. After each pair has come up with their land acknowledgment statement and written it on a poster board (this can also be decorated), have them share their statement with the class. Teachers should consider hosting a larger event where other students, faculty, parents, and community members can hear the students present their school land acknowledgment statements for possible adoption by school community.
 11. To close out the lesson, reiterate the following:
 - a. Acknowledgment should not be approached as a set of obligatory words to rush through. These words should be offered with respect, grounded in authentic reflection, presence, and awareness.
 - b. Statements of acknowledgment do not have to be confined to spoken words.
 - c. Any space presents an opportunity to surface buried truths and prime our collective culture for deeper truth and reconciliation efforts.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

- Students will conduct research on different Native American tribes and draft a land acknowledgment statement and corresponding poster.

Materials and Resources:

- Honor Native Land Guide (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link298>)
- Native Artists' Posters on Land Acknowledgment (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link299>)
- "Indigenous Land Acknowledgement, Explained" (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link300>)
- Map of Native Lands (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link301>)
- "What does it mean to acknowledge the past?" (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link302>)
- "America Before Columbus" (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link303>)
- Interactive Time-Lapse Map of the Conquest of America (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link304>)
- An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link305>)
- *A Patriot's History of the United States* (see excerpt below)
- "TDSB schools now pay daily tribute to Indigenous lands they're built on" (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link306>)
- "Beyond Territorial Acknowledgments" (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link307>)

Excerpt from the Introduction of *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror* by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen

Is America's past a tale of racism, sexism, and bigotry? Is it the story of the conquest and rape of a continent? Is US history the story of white slave owners who perverted the electoral process for their own interests? Did America start with Columbus's killing all the Indians, leap to Jim Crow laws and Rockefeller crushing the workers, then finally save itself with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal? The answers, of course, are no, no, no, and NO.

One might never know this, however, by looking at almost any mainstream US history textbook. Having taught American history in one form or another for close to sixty years between us, we are aware that, unfortunately, many students are berated with tales of the Founders as self-interested politicians and slaveholders, of the icons of American industry as robber-baron oppressors, and of every American foreign policy initiative as imperialistic and insensitive. At least Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* honestly represents its Marxist biases in the title!

What is most amazing and refreshing is that the past usually speaks for itself. The evidence is there for telling the great story of the American past honestly—with flaws, absolutely; with shortcomings, most definitely. But we think that an honest evaluation of the history of the United States must begin and end with the recognition that, compared to any other nation, America's past is a bright and shining light. America was, and is, the city on the hill, the fountain of hope, the beacon of liberty. We utterly reject "My country right or wrong"—what scholar wouldn't? But in the last thirty years, academics have taken an equally destructive approach: "My country, always wrong!" We reject that too.

Instead, we remain convinced that if the story of America's past is told fairly, the result cannot be anything but a deepened patriotism, a sense of awe at the obstacles overcome, the passion invested, the blood and tears spilled, and the nation that was built. An honest review of America's past would note, among other observations, that the same Founders who owned slaves instituted numerous ways—political and intellectual—to ensure that slavery could not survive; that the concern over not just property rights, but all rights, so infused American life that laws often followed the practices of the common folk, rather than dictated to them; that even when the United States used her military power for dubious reasons, the ultimate result was to liberate people and bring a higher standard of living than before; that time and again America's leaders have willingly shared power with those who had none, whether they were citizens of territories, former slaves, or disenfranchised women. And we could go on.

The reason so many academics miss the real history of America is that they assume that ideas don't matter and that there is no such thing as virtue. They could not be more wrong. When John D. Rockefeller said, "The common man must have kerosene and he must have it cheap," Rockefeller was already a wealthy man with no more to gain. When Grover Cleveland vetoed an insignificant seed corn bill, he knew it would hurt him politically, and that he would only win condemnation from the press and the people—but the Constitution did not permit it, and he refused.

Consider the scene more than two hundred years ago when President John Adams—just voted out of office by the hated Republicans of Thomas Jefferson—mounted a carriage and left Washington even before the inauguration. There was no armed struggle. Not a musket ball was fired, nor a political opponent hanged. No Federalists marched with guns or knives in the streets. There was no guillotine. And just four years before that, in 1796, Adams had taken part in an equally momentous event when he won a razor-thin close election over Jefferson and, because of Senate rules, had to count his own contested ballots. When he came to the contested Georgia ballot, the great Massachusetts revolutionary, the "Duke of Braintree," stopped counting. He sat down for a moment to allow Jefferson or his associates to make a challenge, and when he did not, Adams finished the tally, becoming president. Jefferson told confidants that he thought the ballots were indeed in dispute, but he would not wreck the country over a few pieces of paper. As Adams took the oath of office, he thought he heard Washington say, "I am fairly out and you are fairly in! See which

of us will be the happiest!” So much for protecting his own interests! Washington stepped down freely and enthusiastically, not at bayonet point. He walked away from power, as nearly each and every American president has done since.

These giants knew that their actions of character mattered far more to the nation they were creating than mere temporary political positions. The ideas they fought for together in 1776 and debated in 1787 were paramount. And that is what American history is truly about—ideas. Ideas such as “All men are created equal”; the United States is the “last, best hope” of earth; and America “is great, because it is good.”

Honor counted to founding patriots like Adams, Jefferson, Washington, and then later, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. Character counted. Property was also important; no denying that, because with property came liberty. But virtue came first. Even J. P. Morgan, the epitome of the so-called robber baron, insisted that “the first thing is character ... before money or anything else. Money cannot buy it.”

It is not surprising, then, that so many left-wing historians miss the boat (and miss it, and miss it, and miss it to the point where they need a ferry schedule). They fail to understand what every colonial settler and every Western pioneer understood: character was tied to liberty, and liberty to property. All three were needed for success, but character was the prerequisite because it put the law behind property agreements, and it set responsibility right next to liberty. And the surest way to ensure the presence of good character was to keep God at the center of one’s life, community, and ultimately, nation. “Separation of church and state” meant freedom to worship, not freedom from worship. It went back to that link between liberty and responsibility, and no one could be taken seriously who was not responsible to God. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” They believed those words.

As colonies became independent and as the nation grew, these ideas permeated the fabric of the founding documents. Despite pits of corruption that have pockmarked federal and state politics—some of them quite deep—and despite abuses of civil rights that were shocking, to say the least, the concept was deeply imbedded that only a virtuous nation could achieve the lofty goals set by the Founders. Over the long haul, the Republic required virtuous leaders to prosper.

Yet virtue and character alone were not enough. It took competence, skill, and talent to build a nation. That’s where property came in: with secure property rights, people from all over the globe flocked to America’s shores. With secure property rights, anyone could become successful, from an immigrant Jew like Lionel Cohen and his famous Lionel toy trains to an Austrian bodybuilder-turned-millionaire actor and governor like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Carnegie arrived penniless; Ford’s company went broke; and Lee Iacocca had to eat crow on national TV for his company’s mistakes. Secure property rights not only made it possible for them all to succeed but, more important, established a climate of competition that rewarded skill, talent, and risk taking.

Political skill was essential too. From 1850 to 1860 the United States was nearly rent in half by inept leaders, whereas an integrity vacuum nearly destroyed American foreign policy and shattered the economy in the decades of the 1960s and early 1970s. Moral, even pious, men have taken the nation to the brink of collapse because they lacked skill, and some of the most skilled politicians in the world—Henry Clay, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton—left legacies of frustration and corruption because their abilities were never wedded to character.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, there was a subtle and, at times, obvious campaign to separate virtue from talent, to divide character from success. The latest in this line of attack is the emphasis on diversity—that somehow merely having different skin shades or national origins makes America special. But it was not the color of the skin of people who came here that made them special, it was the content of their character. America remains a beacon of liberty, not merely because its institutions have generally remained strong, its citizens free, and its attitudes tolerant, but because it, among most of the developed world, still cries out as a nation, “Character counts.” Personal liberties in America are genuine because of the character of honest judges and attorneys who, for the most part, still make up the judiciary, and because of the personal integrity of large numbers of local, state, and national lawmakers.

No society is free from corruption. The difference is that in America, corruption is viewed as the exception, not the rule. And when light is shown on it, corruption is viciously attacked. Freedom still attracts people to the fountain of hope that is America, but freedom alone is not enough. Without responsibility and virtue, freedom becomes a soggy anarchy, an incomplete licentiousness. This is what has made Americans different: their fusion of freedom and integrity endows Americans with their sense of right, often when no other nation in the world shares their perception.