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Guest Viewpoint by Stan Taylor

Seeing Red: Indigenous Perspectives on Peace and Justice

This year Lane Community College embarked on a Cultural Competency Professional Development initiative designed as educational programs for faculty and staff about the history, culture and current experiences of diverse peoples and communities. In this context, the Lane Peace Center Committee chose to focus our upcoming 8th annual peace symposium on Indigenous Peoples. Our purpose is to look at the history and culture of the United States from an indigenous perspective. To borrow a phrase from one of our keynote speakers Suzan Harjo, "Seeing Red".

For many Americans, our national narrative and mythology casts the colonial settlers as brave individuals coming to a new frontier and overcoming hardship to establish a country built on the principles of freedom and democracy. This viewpoint holds that while indigenous people existed, they were scattered nomadic bands who unfortunately succumbed to diseases inadvertently carried by the European settlers. As a result, it was a virtually empty frontier which providence had provided for the Anglo settlers.

From the point of view of indigenous peoples the narrative is quite different. Far from being an empty land at the time Columbus "discovered" the Americas, about 40 million indigenous people lived in the countries we now call Mexico, the United States, and Canada. At the same time, the population of Western and Eastern Europe was about 50 million. Instead of being scattered tribes, Indians were farmers and builders, engineering canals in Mexico, and establishing trade routes that spanned the continent.

According to our second keynote speaker Dennis Martinez, Indians lived in the Americas for hundreds of generations, far longer than the United States has existed. Survival across these many generations required an intimate relationship with the land. For example, the Salmon people of the Northwest and Buffalo people of the Great Plains base their cultures on their relationship with nature. When the land was taken and the salmon and buffalo driven to near extinction, indigenous peoples experienced cultural genocide.

If we accept these alternative narratives as valid, we must face our histories and ourselves. We must include the reality that the settler colonists were part of a

European culture of conquest that dated back to the Crusades. The land was brutally taken from indigenous peoples. Presidents like Andrew Jackson came to prominence by leading military campaigns intended to exterminate whole nations of Native Americans to make room for white settlers. From the time the United States was established under the banner of "continental destiny" until the early 1970's, official policy toward Indians alternated between annihilation and assimilation, virtually erasing their voices and cultures from our national narrative.

Today American Indians and indigenous peoples everywhere continue to experience an assault on their remaining lands. The same American historical narratives of improvement and gain are still leading to the destruction of indigenous lands, cultures, and ways of life.

There is much to gain by facing our histories and opening ourselves to a more complete narrative that recognizes the experiences of all people, that seeks to reconcile the facts and take responsibility.

This year's Lane Peace Symposium is entitled "Seeing Red: Indigenous Perspectives on Peace & Justice". Our keynote speakers are Suzan Harjo and Dennis Martinez. President Obama awarded Dr. Harjo the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her work as a writer, curator, and activist, to improve the lives of Native peoples. She was a key figure in the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. As the founder of the Morning Star Institute she helped to found and curate the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Dennis Martinez is the Founder of the Indigenous Peoples Restoration Network. He works internationally with community-based Indigenous Peoples on cultural rights, climate change, eco-cultural restoration, and bridging Western Science with Traditional Ecological Knowledge. He is a recipient of an Ecotrust Indigenous Conservation Leadership awardee for Pacific North America.

The symposium will be on Thursday, April 30th at Lane Community College, with a morning in the Longhouse from 10:00 am to 12:30 pm and evening session in the Center for Meeting and Learning from 7:00 to 9:30 pm. You are invited to attend. For more information go to www.lanecc.edu/peacecenter

Stan Taylor is an Instructor at Lane Community College and the Chair of the Lane Peace Center. He teaches Environmental Politics; Civil Rights and Liberties; and a year-long sequence on Peace and Conflict. He received his J.D. from McGeorge School of Law, his Master in International Law from Georgetown University Law Center, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Oregon.