

# The Myth of Discovery

*Ebony Vandross*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Read the definition of the verb “to discover.” How has the word “discover” been used to describe an important moment in U.S. history? Share what you know about it.

Educators across the United States often use the word discover to describe the actions of Christopher Columbus. Ask U.S. school children: “What did Christopher Columbus do?” And many of them will answer: “He discovered America.” The specific details of the story may vary, but the basic idea is that Columbus and his crew embarked on a long voyage of “discovery” across the ocean. They landed in the “New World,” planted a flag on its shores, and claimed its riches. And for doing all this, the history textbooks consider him to be a hero. The federal government even made a National Holiday in his name on the second Monday of every October! But there is a lot that is incorrect and harmful about this perspective.

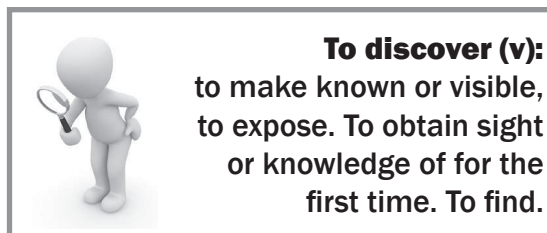
First, Columbus did not discover America. When he arrived in the Americas, there were millions of people already living in North and South

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America. Anthropological evidence shows that the first people to settle in the Americas — to discover it — had done so more than 20,000 years ago, well before Columbus arrived. Reverend John Norwood, a leader in the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Nation, explains that to say Columbus discovered America is to “deny the humanity of the indigenous people. If you’re ‘discovered’ somewhere, that means that you didn’t uncover it to begin with. It only counts when someone else comes and claims it and says ‘Oh, it’s there.’”



Second, did Columbus’s “discovery” really make him a hero? Or was he a thief? The fact is that his arrival in the Americas meant the beginning of the systemic torture and genocide of Native American people and the steady theft of resources, which the colonizers sent back to imperialist countries — such as, Spain, Portugal, and England. “Because Columbus reported a plethora of Natives for slaves, rivers of gold and fertile pastures to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, Columbus was given 17 ships and more than 1,200 men on his next expedition... In the next few years, Columbus was desperate to fulfill those promises — hundreds of Native slaves died on their way to Spain... Columbus forced the Natives to work in gold mines until exhaustion. Those who opposed were beheaded or had their ears cut off... Those who did not fulfill their obligation had their hands cut off, which were tied around their necks while they bled to death — some 10,000 died handless.”

Finally, the textbook telling of Columbus’s invasion of the “New World” has a continuing harmful effect: It encourages students to see history from the point of view of the European invaders. “Most of my students have trouble with the idea that a book — especially a textbook — can lie,” says author and educator Bill Bigelow. “That’s why I start my U.S. history class by stealing a student’s purse... I announce that the purse is mine, obviously, because look who has it.” Bigelow is making the point that just because he “discovered” the purse sitting on the floor, that does not make

it his purse. Yet this is how so many U.S. school children learn history. Bigelow explains that the word “discovery” is the word of the “discoverers.” It is the word that the invaders use to mask their theft. Thus, history is told from

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the European perspective, and the Native American perspective is invisible.

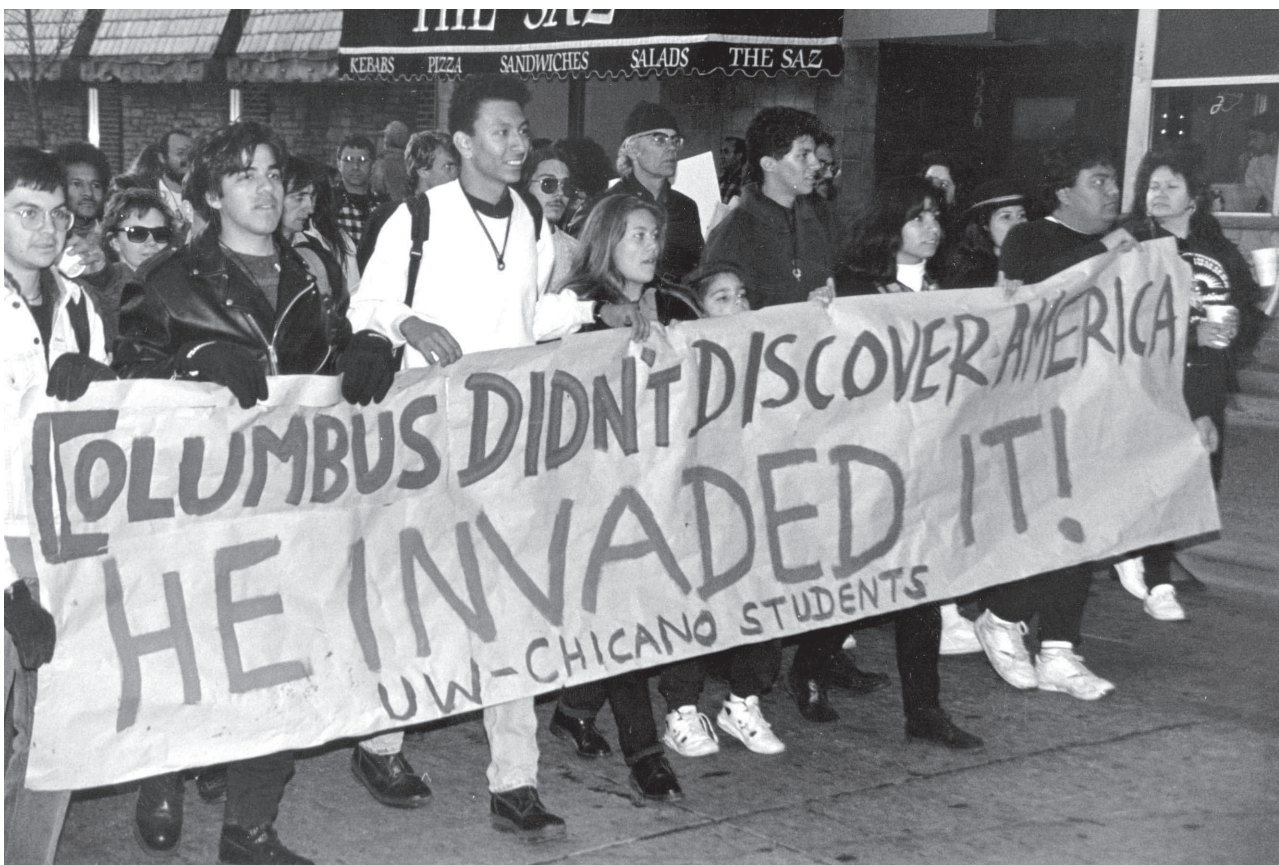
The idea that Columbus discovered America is a dangerous lie. It is dangerous because it glosses over our real history, which is painful but necessary to understand. We should not say “discovered” if what we really mean is “invaded and stole.” As more and more people make the U.S.

their home, we should correct the outdated narratives and tell a more accurate story.

**References:** <news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/06/when-and-how-did-the-first-americans-arrive-its-complicated-/>; <davidkrueger.org/events/american-myths/myth-of-discovery/>; <freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC44\_scans/44.monograph.rethinking.columbus.1991.pdf>; <www.zinnedproject.org>; <thecolonial.org/wp-content/uploads/Best-Rethinking-Columbus-complete-guide.pdf>; <www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/columbus-day-school-holiday/409984>; <progressive.org/dispatches/bill-bigelow-s-statement>; <newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/8-myths-and-atrocities-about-christopher-columbus-and-columbus-day-D4RHJ-PJLkaQC\_BQVRNUBg>.

*Ebony Vandross is a staff associate at World Education, and she participated on the editorial board of this issue.*

**AFTER YOU READ:** This is a classic five-paragraph essay. Examine each paragraph carefully and describe the structure of the essay. What does each paragraph set out to do? Does it succeed?



*Chicano students from the University of Wisconsin at Madison protest Columbus Day on October 12, 1992, the Columbus quincentennial. 500 years of resistance, UW-Madison Library Archives.*