Educating Elementary School Children About California Missions and the Perpetuation Of Genocide

MY DAUGHTER ENTERED the fourth grade four years ago. I remember feeling anxious about how her educators might present California mission history to her and her classmates. When the assignments began coming home, I soon realized that the angst I had felt was justified, as the materials hadn’t progressed much since I was in school. The traumas that I experienced as a fourth grade student came rushing back, and the realization set in that during the last thirty years nothing had changed. For many individuals this issue seems inconsequential. Often natives who complain are labeled as overly sensitive and preoccupied with a history that is no longer relevant to our modern lives. How often have we heard, “Can’t we just all get along?” However, these issues are much more than an unfortunate experience for Native Americans, a small percentage of the general U.S. population. These issues are integral to a cycle of genocide that continues to be perpetrated towards indigenous peoples across the globe.

The representation of native perspectives in the teaching of our histories is a matter of civil rights. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” Specifically in reference to the treatment of Native Americans, he went on to say, “Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles of racial supremacy. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or to feel remorse for this shameful episode. Our literature, our films, our drama, our folklore all exalt it.”

Dr. King was referring to a cycle of genocide that is implemented in eight stages: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation,
extermination, and denial. When viewed alongside California Indian historical experiences the stages become very clear. Stage one, classification, begins by distinguishing the perpetrator and the victim. It can be as simple as “us” versus “them.” Stage two is symbolization, clearly evidenced by the labeling of native peoples as savage, uncivilized, diggers, and redskins. This is followed by stage three, dehumanization, where the victims of genocide are equated with animals, insects, and diseases. California is rich in the history of stage four (organization), as seen in years of sanctioned violence, beginning with Spanish soldiers and continuing through statehood with militia organizations sent out to hunt “unruly” Indians.

Stage five is polarization; here the two groups are driven further apart through propaganda, laws, and social interaction. Examples of this can be highlighted throughout the mission system and well into the twentieth century. We can look from physical segregation in mission quarters to indentured servitude in the 1860s to demonstrate this phase. Stage six is preparation. During this stage the victims are segregated. Boarding schools, reservations, and rancherias clearly evidence this stage. Stage seven is extermination. While a more than 90 percent reduction of the California Indian population after the mission and gold rush eras clearly demonstrates extermination, we can also argue that this stage reaches further. The stereotype of the “vanishing redman” has been a longstanding ideal in the dominant society. During the mission era, the padres often sought to label native people as “the last full blood,” as evidenced by the story of Old Gabriel, who is honored in the Vatican as the “oldest living full blood Indian of the New World.” In 1911, Ishi became famous as “the last of his tribe.” While it is true that in order to survive in post–gold rush California Ishi lived in hiding for thirty years, today there are at least five tribes that claim him as their ancestor.

The eighth and final stage of genocide is denial. In this stage the perpetrators of genocide do not admit that they committed any crimes. Moreover the victims are often blamed for what happened. When we continue to present history in the light most favorable to the victors we are continuing the stage of denial. Thus the framework of genocide remains in full effect. History is subjective and for Americans it is often told in a romantic, optimistic, and patriotic fashion. To overcome denial we must revise the record to reflect a native voice. This voice will conflict with those that are commonly accepted, but it will challenge the “sincere
ignorance and conscientious stupidity” that Dr. King warns us is a danger.

We can begin examining denial through five common myths and misconceptions presented about California mission history.

**Myth #1: California history began with missions**

There are physical evidence and written accounts of California Indians over a hundred years before the Spanish arrived. Evidence of tools dating back centuries before European contact has been found in various parts of California. There are also accounts by European explorers and pirates like Sir Francis Drake, who made contact with Indians before the first mission was established. California Indian oral history dates back much further than European contact.

We do not have any census data that indicates the exact number of Indians living in California during this era. Missionaries only documented how many Indians were in the missions and speculated about how many more lived in the villages surrounding the missions. Many tribes in the north or interior regions of California were less impacted by the missions. Thus the missionaries did not factor these populations into their calculations. The people who settled in those regions during the gold rush did not keep accurate records of the native populations that they decimated in search of gold. Some scientists estimate that there were over three hundred thousand Indians living in California before the missions were established. Other scientists argue that figure is low and it was more likely closer to one million people. Regardless, we know that California was a place rich in cultures and resources. Native populations thrived prior to contact. California history began with California Indians, who remain connected to their lands since time immemorial.

**Myth #2: California Indian people were welcoming and did not resist the arrival of the missionaries**

Some accounts by Spanish missionaries suggest that Indians were welcoming and willingly entered the missions; however, these accounts were highly biased and usually false. In letters to their superiors or to each other, missionaries would have been inclined to make each other believe that Indians had willingly come to the missions in order to make their missions appear to be running smoothly. Missionaries may have also tried to cover up the atrocities that occurred in the missions. By contrast, the personal diaries and private accounts of the missionaries suggest that Indians were resistant to mission authorities. Missionaries forbade California Indians from practicing their religions, speaking their traditional languages, and eating their traditional foods. Many Indians forced into the missions did attempt to keep their cultures alive and were punished for it. The accounts of Indians being punished by the missionaries tell us that Indians resisted Spanish rule.

The Spanish and others had been coming and going in California for over 150 years before the missions were founded. From the accounts of some European explorers, we know that Indians traded with Europeans, but we do not know how much communication occurred or whether Indians were informed of their plans. When the Spanish established the first mission in San Diego, the surrounding tribal villages organized a defensive raid on the encampment within one month of their arrival. This event was not a revolt or an uprising, it was a defense to drive the Spanish out of Kumeyaay territory.

**Myth #3: California Indians were docile and happily accepted mission life**

Most accounts of Indian life in the missions suggest that Indians were unhappy in the missions because they were mistreated by the priests, restricted from practicing their religious ceremonies, and separated from their families. In addition to the early Kumeyaay attacks on Mission San Diego, the padres did not record a baptism for two years. This demonstrates that the Spanish were not very successful in getting the natives to “accept” mission life.

Records reflect very few baptisms during the first years of the missions. The low number of baptisms during the first few years of many missions can be understood as defiance from the tribes around the missions. Many tribes refused to live in the missions and resisted Spanish attempts to force them there. The small number of baptisms performed during this time may have generated an increased effort by the
soldiers who came with the missionaries to round up Indians and take them captive. Without Indians, the missions would not have been able to function. This information serves to debunk the idea that Indians willingly joined the missions or were curious about them.

**Myth #4: California Indians were uncivilized**

In the eyes of the padres, California Indians were considered uncivilized because they looked different, had different religious beliefs and languages, and did not appear to have building structures, governing authorities, and agricultural practices. Many of these elements were part of California Indian societies, but in forms unfamiliar to Europeans, and so the Europeans failed to recognize or acknowledge existing native practices as “civilization.” California Indians did build permanent dwellings, practiced (and continue to practice) their own religions, spoke unique languages, cultivated and harvested foods and medicines from their environments, and governed themselves through political organizations. California Indians were far from uncivilized.

Europeans had a specific motive in labeling native people “uncivilized.” Under European laws “uncivilized natives” and “uncultivated lands” satisfied the elements of the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine empowered European explorers to claim “newly discovered” lands for their crowns. As early as 1095, when Pope Urban II issued the *Papal Bull Terra Nullius* (which translates to “empty land”), the Vatican had sanctioned European powers to seize lands in all non-Christian parts of the world. Thus the practices of war and conquest were justified by the labeling of indigenous people as “uncivilized and less than human” in contrast to the European powers, who were depicted as entrepreneurs engaged in setting forth a “God-ordained” purpose.

**Myth #5: Indians “wandered” to or “joined” the missions**

Unfortunately the two words most commonly used to describe Indian contact with the missions are misleading. The term “wander” implies that the Indians casually arrived at the missions without purpose. Furthermore, it also implies that California Indians existed without purpose prior to the creation of the missions. This was not the case. Indians lived in societies and cultures where every day had purpose, providing for families and community members. They knew the intricate natures of their homelands and did not get lost or wander around. The second term, “joined,” implies that Indians became members of, or enlisted in, the mission system. This suggests that it was a voluntary process. The mission was created under a “feudal manorial labor system,” and Indians were intended to be “absorbed into Spanish colonial society at the lowest level.” They were forced to labor for Spain for “the good of the Spanish crown and its citizens.”

This idea of “wandering” is often used in romanticized accounts of mission life, or to avoid talking about kidnapping and forced labor, which were tactics used by the padres to bring Indians into the missions as laborers. Missionaries banned Indians from using their traditional languages, practicing religious ceremonies, and eating traditional foods; these were a few reasons why Indians did not want to be forced into the missions. Although it is often ignored, California Indians traded with tribes across vast regions and passed on stories about the poor treatment they were subjected to in the missions. Indians were beaten for small crimes within the missions, they experienced excessive punishment and cruelty by the padres. Even if Indians had come willingly to the missions, they would not have stayed, nor wanted to stay, because of these harsh practices.

When presented with a complete picture of California Mission history, many fourth grade teachers face the challenge of how to present massacres, abuses, and sexual crimes to a classroom of nine year olds. Keeping this unit under the requirement of fourth grade social studies standards is an inherent problem. A full analysis of this period is likely more suited for upper school students. However, continuing to perpetuate myths and romantic fantasies is a dual injustice. I often struggle with developing a strategy for overhauling the system. How can we initiate the most effective change? The answer is simple: tell the truth to anyone who will listen. It is time we all shared in the responsibility of correcting the record. We owe it to our ancestors and our children. For more information visit californiamissionsnativehistory.org.