

Title of Session: American Indian Studies
Moderator: Michael Wilson
Title of File: 20060426amindian
Date: April 26, 2006

Room: American Indian Studies

MichaelDW: This is the American Indian Studies discussion.

HectorMC: That is what I was looking for

BJB2: great, Hector! Welcome

MichaelDW: In the past weeks, there are usually a couple of participants. Not many.

BJB2: we usually start the discussions with introductions. Please tell us where you are located and what brings you to this event?

HectorMC: Great, that means we can have a more personal discussion

MichaelDW: That's right.

BJB2: I'm an art teacher in Pennsylvania

MichaelDW: I'm Michael Wilson, Assoc. Prof at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

HectorMC: I am Hector Chacon, I teach life skills in Los Angeles

MichaelDW: We usually begin with introductions, then to any questions you might have, and then to the topic, which is the idea of the Vanishing Race.

MichaelDW: By the way, BJ, my daughter just received a scholarship to attend art school in Milwaukee.

MichaelDW: Here is the web page for the room:
<http://www.uwm.edu/~michael/tappedin/>

BJB2: congratulations, Michael!

MichaelDW: If you go there, you'll see in discussion images, "the history of racism"

MichaelDW: Please open up those pictures and let me know when you are ready.

MichaelDW: You'll probably have to use Internet Explorer. The new beta version of IE is available.

MichaelDW: All set? Do you see the first picture, Rhetorica Christiana?

HectorMC: Yes

MichaelDW: When I talk about American Indians with my students, I often start here.

MichaelDW: This is a visual representation of relations among religious things, the world of humans, and the natural world.

MichaelDW: What's amazing about it is that everything is ranked, from top to bottom.

MichaelDW: We usually call this a vertical power arrangement.

MichaelDW: If you go to the next picture, you'll see an explanation of the picture.

MichaelDW: In those days, they ranked everything, with God at the top, and Satan at the bottom. They ranked plants, trees, minerals.

MichaelDW: For example, the greatest tree is the oak, the greatest flower is the rose, the greatest animal is the lion, and so on.

MichaelDW: Everything had to be ranked, with something "better" than something else - - vertical, not horizontal.

MichaelDW: And of course they ranked people, with the King and sometimes Pope at the top, then the royalty of dukes, earls, &c.

MichaelDW: They ranked angels too.

BJB2 nods

MichaelDW: Royalty is ranking by class.

MichaelDW: And then they ranked people by gender and by race.

MichaelDW: It was powerfully part of a religious worldview. It seemed perfectly natural to think that white people were "better" than darker skinned people.

MichaelDW: When I deal with students, we take a good bit of time to examine why we think of people as "better" than others -- why we must do so, what in society encourages to frame human relations in this context.

MichaelDW: In some cases, it seems to be a positive thing, because through competition, children are able to excel and succeed.

MichaelDW: But the negative is that one never wins in the ranking systems because it's never enough.

MichaelDW: For myself, I've really struggled trying to understand racism, and I think I bring those struggles to the classroom.

MichaelDW: Questions?

BJB2: is this hierarchy similar in other cultures?

BJB2: . o O (caste system in India for example)

MichaelDW: Yes, it is.

MichaelDW: Indian caste systems, yes.

MichaelDW: Some American Indian systems, the Aztecs, for instance.

MichaelDW: I've been told that some northwest tribes have hierarchical systems.

HectorMC: The Aztecs believed they were divinely favored

MichaelDW: Yes, and that someday the snake god would return.

MichaelDW: It's interesting that we in American educational systems, children don't hear about the civilization of the Aztecs, with cities that rivalled in sophistication many in the world.

HectorMC: But Quetzalcoatl was not their god, rather the god of the people they had vanquished

BJB2 is impressed that Hector can spell Quetzalcoatl!

MichaelDW: I think people are more comfortable thinking of this hemisphere as inhabited by savages who needed the aid of civilization.

MichaelDW: Thank you, Hector. You are right, although I think the Aztecs took up the story as well. I may be wrong about that.

HectorMC: Yes they did, but that was their constant fear, that divine justice would not be kind to them

MichaelDW: That fear was apparently justified.

HectorMC: Unfortunately they mistook the Spaniards for gods

BJB2: oops!

MichaelDW: That's what I've heard, although I wonder about that interpretation.

BJB2: why do you question that, Michael?

MichaelDW: When the Spaniards came the first time, they were driven out of the city and beaten badly.

MichaelDW: They returned and won, not because of their own power, but because they were aided by local indigenous peoples who were tired of being abused by the Aztecs. Also, disease apparently ravaged the Aztec populations in the meantime.

MichaelDW: I think the history most people hear about the Aztecs is less complicated -- that the Spanish Conquistadors simply defeated them.

HectorMC: I understand that the population of Mexico declined from 35 million to 10 million in ten years

MichaelDW: I expect much of that was because of disease?

HectorMC: correct

MichaelDW: I don't know about in the areas of Mexico, but in the Americas disease was interpreted as the hand of God helping out the colonizers.

HectorMC: No doubt with the help of the missionaries

MichaelDW: The next picture is Herbert Spencer. His ideas of social evolution powerfully influenced how American think about Indians.

MichaelDW: The concept of the world moving from simple to complex, savagism to civilization.

MichaelDW: Never mind that the treatment of Indians was often quite savage.

MichaelDW: Civilization is defined as technology, not how you treat your fellow human beings.

BJB2 nods sadly

MichaelDW: Slide 5 is Lewis Henry Morgan, who was one of the many "friends of the Indian."

MichaelDW: He was a strong proponent of moving America from savagism to civilization, even though he himself had good relations with Indians. He probably felt the movement upward was a natural progression.

MichaelDW: Slide 6 you can see some of his basic ideas.

MichaelDW: Slide 7 is interesting.

BJB2: I wonder if he ever reached perfection and happiness?

MichaelDW: You can see the details of how he thinks of civilization, in particular, the concept of writing and individual ownership of land.

BJB2 . o O (Spencer)

MichaelDW: He may have, in his own particular worldview.

MichaelDW: Writing is crucial to civilization. Much of the writing in the Mesoamericans was destroyed.

MichaelDW: Some have felt that they conquistadors needed to destroy evidence of civilization to claim their own.

MichaelDW: In America, it was illegal in some states to teach writing and reading to slaves, because that would be evidence that they were human beings.

MichaelDW: Individual ownership is important because that paved the way for the Dawes/Allotment Act, which parceled out Indian lands and gave 80 - 160 acres to individuals and families.

MichaelDW: This process made sense in the Lewis Henry Morgan vision of the world.

MichaelDW: Individual ownership = civilization

MichaelDW: Boarding schools, where they taught writing and other industrial arts, also supported Morgan's ideas.

MichaelDW: Slide 8 is also interesting because it shows how science contributed to the idea of racism in the 18th century.

BJB2 is listening

MichaelDW: Samuel George Morton measured skulls to show that one race was superior to others because of the size of their heads.

MichaelDW: Of course, as it turns out, the Germanic people have the biggest heads.

MichaelDW: I guess today we quarrel with so much of this science, but on a commonsense level, I wonder why he thought people with bigger heads were smarter.

MichaelDW: That has not always been my experience.

BJB2 chuckles. Nor mine!

MichaelDW: One of the big questions they policy makers had to answer (they believed) was whether Indians were inferior by race or by culture.

MichaelDW: Boarding school proponents felt the culture was backward and needed to be erased.

MichaelDW: Others firmly believe that, as a race, Indians were dying off and would probably be gone by the end of the 19th century.

MichaelDW: And so you get many, many images of the Vanishing Race.

MichaelDW: Slide 9

MichaelDW: In case a Senator of the US Congress forgets, he can be reminded by the statues that surround him.

MichaelDW: Slide 10 is an example of Manifest Destiny.

MichaelDW: Notice how the animals and Indians are part of the darkness that is being moved off the page by white Americans, technology, the angelic figure, and even the weather.

MichaelDW: Is the angelic figure laying telegraph wire or a T3 line?

BJB2 sighs.

MichaelDW: Slide 11 is a well known sculpture by James Frazier.

BJB2: This is really depressing that people can be so stupid.

MichaelDW: Once again, it is the image of the Vanishing Race.

MichaelDW: Actually, Frazier was another "friend of the Indian." He felt sad that the race was vanishing.

HectorMC: A comment about 19th century science

MichaelDW: Ok.

HectorMC: It was often used to justify the most racist of assumptions

MichaelDW: Without a doubt. And people truly believed it because it was supported by their best science.

HectorMC: Anything that seemed alien or different was by its very nature inferior

MichaelDW: Yes, that seems to be the way many people view difference. I wonder if that is how human beings are, or if it is philosophical, because not all cultures view difference as inferior.

MichaelDW: In my classes, I always try to historicize racism because students need to see that they are part of a history.

MichaelDW: The downside of this approach is that they often feel that they are innocent, that racism is a hundred years ago.

BJ . o O (don't we wish)

HectorMC: It is rooted in the Medieval concept, as you pointed out earlier, of a divine hierarchy

MichaelDW: I believe these ideas are deeply rooted in philosophy and religion, not necessarily human nature.

MichaelDW: Anyway, my time's up. I'm sorry to go on and on, but I wanted to get through a few of these pictures.

BJ: Thanks, Michael. Before you go I wanted to ask you a question

MichaelDW: Yes.

BJ: I attended the correctional ed association conference last week..

MichaelDW: Yes, we missed you here.

BJ: and Dennis Bussey was one of the workshop presenters

BJ: he discussed the Circle of Courage

BJ: and Reclaiming Youth At-Risk

BJ: are you familiar with those?

MichaelDW: I'm not.

MichaelDW: Where is he from?

BJ: Dennis lives in Pennsylvania, but I think he's originally from Oklahoma.

BJ: American Indian ancestry

MichaelDW: What kind of work is he doing?

BJ: www.integratedworldarts.com

BJ: he does a lot of counseling in the schools

MichaelDW: That looks like a very positive initiative.

BJ: I had met him once before...does some really good stuff.

BJ: The circle of courage is based on native beliefs

BJ: I don't want to hold you up...just wanted to share that information

MichaelDW: I appreciate it.

BJ: oh...and one more thing.

MichaelDW: Sure thing.

BJ: the guest speaker was Ron Glodoski

BJ: his wife is a principal in the Milwaukee schools

BJ . o O (small world department)

MichaelDW: What do you know.

HectorMC: I bid you good night, see you the next sesison

MichaelDW: See you next week!

MichaelDW: Have a great evening, Hector.

BJ waves goodnight to Hector. Thanks for joining the discussion

HectorMC: Good night

