

Introduction: A nation misinformed:

In our schools, we teach the history of our state and our nation. This may seem like an innocuous assertion to make, but for many communities of color, the history they are taught does not include the complex existence of their ancestors.

So, for many in these communities, this history feels exclusive, or selective, in its adoration of the past. Our state's history is complex, but many historical accounts portray a paradoxically simple one. A past in which progress has always been the goal, in which human equity was at the forefront of the nation's consciousness, but as many of us already know, this was most certainly not the case.

If our assumptions about the past are wrong, then how do we begin to right these wrongs? How do we bridge our understanding of the present with an incomplete picture of the past? In order to find the roots of our current socio-political situation, it is important to begin to uncover "lost histories" and draw on a more complete historical narrative. In order to do this, we must use something called: The Decolonial Imaginary.

The Decolonial Imaginary: Decolonizing our historical consciousness:

In her book, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, Emma Perez introduces us to the concept of the decolonial imaginary as a tool to question history as it is currently presented to us in our colonial context. For Perez, the decolonial imaginary represents the necessary step between a colonial and post-colonial way of historicizing major events in a society.

This concept does not seek to deny all mainstream historical perspectives or undermine the importance of history as a field of study in general. In fact, the project of the decolonial imaginary is to underscore the value of history as a way to better understand race, sexuality, and even physical sites such as the border.

In our current moment in time, we often view history as unchanging and objective. With the concept of a decolonial imaginary, we can start to view history as it truly is—malleable and subject to change. This does not necessarily dismiss the idea of objective truths in studying history; rather, Perez would like us to question the implications and consequences of our current understanding of historical events.

The decolonial imaginary provides a lens in which to view historical parameters as a societal construct. Simply put, Perez contends that our accepted history is no more real than the decolonial imaginary, and that historians of the past could not escape the constraints put upon them by the dominant historical consciousness of the time.

Utah: Reimagining the cultural history of the West:

In the mainstream public consciousness, Utah's history begins in the mid nineteenth century with the settlement of the Salt Lake Valley by Mormon settlers from the eastern United States. But before this great migration of Mormon pioneers, and before Utah was a part of the United States, it was the northernmost point of Mexico.

Even before this, it was home to the Utes, the name of the native inhabitants before the arrival of the Spanish, and the people for which the state is named.

The Utes, and their linguistic connection to the Aztecs is extremely important in understanding Utah's connection to a new Chicana historical consciousness and Aztlan, the imagined homeland of the Aztec/Mexican people. This connection suggests that many native tribes in the Southwest shared a common ancestry. Using this knowledge, some scholars believe that the ancestral roots of the Aztec/Mexican civilization are in Utah. According to Cecilio Orozco, a historian and anthropologist, the Aztecs were forced to move south when there was a major drought in the area, and eventually settled in the Aztec city known as Tenochtitlan, or Mexico City as it is currently named.

This strengthened the idea that Aztlan was in the north, in what is now the southwest United States. In his book, *We Remember, We Celebrate, We Believe: the History of Latinos in Utah*, Armando Solorzano explains that Mexican-Americans use Aztlan as a way to clarify their place in history and to situate the American Southwest as their place of origin. Solorzano relates it to how Greek mythology was the backbone of Greek society, and how Mormon myths helped to manifest the creation of a Zion leading to the colonization of the Salt Lake Valley. We don't often reflect on the intrusive and illegal nature in which Utah was settled, but this history exists on the fringes of our mainstream colonial consciousness, in the decolonial imaginary.

Juan Maria Antonio de Rivera was the first Spaniard to explore the area around Utah when he set out on an expedition from Santa Fe in 1765. Rivera's goals during his expedition were to map the land and engage with the native people. Rivera's travels would provide the necessary framework for other Spanish explorers to rely on.

The next year, the government of New Spain used this knowledge to send two friars, Silvestre Velez de Escalante and Francisco Atanasio Dominguez north to explore what is now Utah. Accompanying the two Spanish explorers were a group of Mexican Indians who were there for the five-month long, 1800-mile journey through the landscapes of Utah and the southwest as a whole. Along the way, the two friars would attempt to convert the natives they met on their journey, thus the proliferation of Spanish names to the native population became commonplace before the arrival of the Mormon settlers.

Although Mexican explorers were vital to the mapping of the west, their contributions are often overlooked. Many white Utahns tend to downplay the contributions of the Mexican population in the state while simultaneously overpraising the merits of Spaniard explorers in the area. This demonstrates how the decolonial imaginary can inform our current debate on immigration and the border.

As more and more Americans encroached westward, so to did the borders of the United States. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, fur trapping became a

huge industry, and northern Mexican cities provided a crucial space for trappers to rest and resupply on their way to the west coast. The trappers would draw the ire of not only the Native inhabitants of the Salt Lake Valley, but of the Mexican government as well. According to various accounts, the trappers would often hunt animals without a license, smuggle goods across the border, and encourage Mexican citizens to break the law. Some Americans would become Mexican citizens, renouncing their American allegiances in order to cross the border. By this time, trappers and other settlers treated northern Mexico as if it was already a part of the United States, which emboldened rival trappers to stake claim to the region.

This provides a unique perspective in which to interpret Utah's history. In this moment, Americans were the ones immigrating en masse to a foreign land. When we think about the rule of law, and illegal immigration, we often immediately think of Mexican immigrants coming into the United States, but this clearly exposes this idea as an arbitrary one at best. Additionally, this history goes against the mainstream societal discourse by portraying the white population as criminals, and the Mexican population as the victims.

The stated reason for the Mormon migration to the Salt Lake Valley was that Brigham Young and his followers were seeking religious freedom, a place safe from persecution. This may not be entirely untrue, but it was the prospect of fertile land and abundant natural resources that ultimately made those who settled here stay. Armando Solorzano points out that in Utah, "Manifest Destiny was embedded in a religious promise and theological language" (Solorzano p. 6).

In 1846, the United States and Mexico would enter into war with each other after President James K. Polk declared that Mexico had invaded American soil and killed American citizens. As a part of their military strategy, the U.S. army requested that the Mormons fight as an ally of the United States. Over 500 Mormon troops served in the war and made their way to the Salt Lake Valley. After the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed and the war was officially over, the United States annexed 50% of the Mexican territory, including what is now considered Utah. During the next 40 years the leadership of the newly formed territory would struggle with the Federal government to achieve statehood until finally in 1895, Utah became the 45th state of the country.

Conclusion: The struggle for truth:

In order to fully understand the present, we must understand our history. It may seem like a simple rule, but many do not realize that we do not operate on a true understanding of what our history is. The decolonial imaginary exists as a space for communities of color to understand themselves in the current time in history.

The histories of Chicana people in the state are often forgotten. We have crafted a public consciousness around settler-colonialism, which ignores the people who came before settlement. For this reason, our state history will always be incomplete until we include all histories into the discussion.

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