

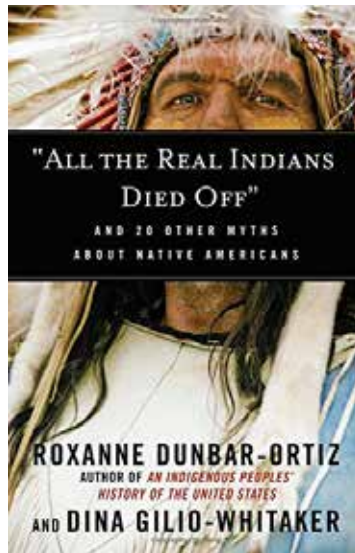
# “All the Real Indians Died Off” and 20 Other Myths about Native Americans

By Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Beacon Press, Boston, 208 pages,  
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Reviewed by Rudolph Rýser

Combining the prose styles of two seasoned writers who have authored many of their own books and articles is a challenge when they attempt a book that is intended for a widely diverse audience. And the challenge is ever greater when they attempt to demystify what for many non-American Indians in the United States includes a series of commonly circulated legends about the varied American Indian nations that remain part of the landscape. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker seemingly make small work of this difficult task in a compact and well-sourced book.

“Twenty other Myths about Native Americans” is both an historical primer and an encyclopedia demystifying American fables about the original peoples of North America—fables long retold by generations of Americans whose ancestors came to claim and settle lands and accumulate wealth only available if the nations they found would simply disappear. For virtually all migrating and settler peoples moving from various parts of the world to new territories (e.g., Britain to New Zealand, India, Middle East and Australia, China to eastern Africa, Spain to the Philippines, Portugal to Brazil, Germany to



Rwanda), the settling migrants would tell themselves the new territory was open for their exploitation and the land was unoccupied or the people they were naturally going to disappear. For generations Americans have told themselves that American Indians were disappearing (there are now more than 5 million) or they were naturally subordinate to the “dominant society.” The authors of this 208-page book (including extensive end notes and a 11 thousand year “historical timeline” gave themselves the

task of changing public understandings about American Indians by attempting to help their readers to “understand how the miseducation about history contributes to the maintenance of systems of social injustice.” The authors accomplish this in a very readable and accessible collection of what I think might be best characterized as fables similar to what a parent might tell a child. When the child grows old enough to know the difference between a fable and real life, it is time to understand and apply mature reasoning to how the world actually works. Dunbar-Ortiz and Gilio-Whitaker have written with the hope of nurturing the mature mind.

As a history and short encyclopedia “Twenty other Myths” asks questions and

answers them with clarity and thoroughness. Are all “Real Indians” dead? Did the Italian *Cristoforo Colombo* “discover” America? Did Europeans from France, Russia, Sweden, Holland, Britain and Spain bring “civilization to the backward Indians?” Are “the only real Indians ... full-bloods?” Did the United States government “give” America’s original nations reserved lands that would be called “reservations?” And here is my personal favorite: “Indians are Naturally Predisposed to Alcoholism.” To further clarify the narrative the authors offer a brief discussion of “terminology” recognizing that the inquiring minds need guidance explaining what can be confusing terms used in the book. Some terms are a product of perspectives—American Indian verses non-Indian. Using the word “Indian” can be, as the authors indicate, a pejorative depending on its context. I am not a big fan of the authors’ alternative “Native American” which found its roots in academic discussions in the 1970s. The word “indigenous” is perhaps a little more useful though it has its social and political baggage too. I prefer the names of the actual names of nations since there are more than 560 in the United States (more or less depending on whether we are talking about communities or nations as a whole.) While using the general terms “Indian,” “native” or even “Native American” tend to create a kind of “pan Indian” vision that tends to undermine the unique character of the various nations, I agree with the authors that interchanging these terms may be the only solution for this type of book.

Posing the questions about fables on their face should have self-evident outcomes and to the authors we owe a debt of gratitude for asking the questions and then supplying the answers. These “20 other Myths about Native Americans” are important questions to which authors bring intelligibility that as clarified

will make a healthier relationship between non-Indian Americans and American Indians. The result is that this book now serves as a bridge between historical and cultural perspectives in addition to its careful and patient distinctions between fable and reality. I recommend this book to non-Indian Americans who in their maturity now seek to grow their understanding of the reality of American Indians. ■

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