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HIST 694: Alternate Plan Paper  
Week 1 Discussion

This is my final course in the graduate certificate program, and I'm looking forward to it as I feel that most textbooks sorely neglect MesoAmerican history and/or paint with such broad strokes that it treats all of the empires as the same as one another. Next year, AP World History is changing its curriculum so that it begins in 1400, which seems like it acts as though history did not exist pre-contact. Because of this, I'm working to bring in a concurrent enrollment college history class to my students to more fully teach global cultures before Europe's impact.

If I were to be more forgiving of the College Board and its course change, I might offer an explanation as to the difficulties of studying the pre-Columbian past. As "The Methodological Challenges of Ethnohistory" notes, Spanish sources were impacted by the self-perceptions, Cieza de Leon's view of himself as a historian, Diaz's as a conquistador "justify[ing] Spanish conquest in response to other contrary accounts" (1). As for the indigenous perspective, Spanish translators and a Spanish audience may have skewed the stories. While it goes too far to say that "one cannot 'attach to oral traditions any value whatsoever under any circumstances whatsoever,'" oral history is mostly valuable as a reflection of a culture's myths, values, and the culture of oral history itself (Krech 345). While archaeological findings might appear to be an objective source, "Methodological Challenges" demonstrates that Western values like territoriality and centrality impact ethnohistory (3).

Despite these challenges, ethnohistory is unquestionably valued, especially in this modern era where not only historians but popular culture embraces the individual and his/her past, renewing interest in neglected or forgotten cultural groups and intentionally separating European impact to reflect the true nature of indigenous peoples, be they in Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Just last year, the Minneapolis Park Board voted to change the name of the lake that I live on from Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska in a reflection of its Dakota heritage. This shifts the focus, and responsibility, from anthropologists to historians; as Krech observed, "conventional anthropology focused on exotic people and presumed that explanatory required theory, typology, and generalization; conventional history on the other hand dealt primarily with non-exotic Western people and with unique or particular events" (348). Ethnohistory marries these fields to build "the reconstruction of the history of a people who previously had no written history" (349). It requires both scientific analysis and sensitivity to implicit assumptions about underrepresented narratives (353).

While both authors discuss the complicated nature of the use of myths, I think that they are a particularly valuable source of information. They often demonstrate a group of people's beliefs about values, their interaction with the environment and attitude and assumptions toward other cultures, and the basis for their traditions that have become critical components of their daily lives. Krech notes that Simmons's work on Indian folklore "bridges the different genres yet maintains an abiding interest in how continuities and changes in native symbolic systems are related to specific historical conditions. "Methodological Challenges" observes that "religion and social memory are both powerful influences on how a society behaves and valuable indicators of their collective self-perception" (4). It also presents such a broad view of the world for indigenous groups that historians can also dive between the stories to "draw from what was omitted from the texts" (4). In the absence of primary source texts and the

presence of artwork and temples devoted to religion and myth, ethnohistorians should consider their value even more than traditional historians to fully understand the past.