

Colonialism, Identity, History

The Power of a Name

In this lesson, your students will consider the importance of a name. Ask them to consider their own names: are they named for someone? does their last name reflect their nationality and heritage? do they have a hyphenated name? do they know the history of their name?

Throughout the world, different cultures have different traditions and rules for giving a person a name. In her essay “In History,” Jamaica Kincaid explores the power to name. As the world continues to become globalized, it is important for students to consider how things are named, and why it is critical to know about the history of names and naming.

1. Ask your students to read the essay “In History” (1997) by Jamaica Kincaid.

In this essay, Jamaica Kincaid makes a comparison between colonizer Christopher Columbus and botanist Carl Linnaeus, explaining “the botanists are from the same part of the world as the man who sailed on the three ships, that same man who started the narrative from which I trace my beginning.”

2. For homework, have students answer the following questions:
 - a. How are Columbus and Linnaeus similar when it comes to the practice of naming things?
 - b. What impact does the person doing the naming have upon the people being named?
 - c. What role does naming have in history, according to Kincaid?
3. After students have completed the work, put them in groups, and have them look closely at the following excerpts in order to deepen their understanding of the reading and the concepts.

About Columbus, Kincaid writes:

. . . to have knowledge of things, one must first give them a name. This, in any case, seems to me to have been Christopher Columbus’ principle, for he named and he named: he named places, he named people, he named things. This world he saw before him had a blankness to it, the blankness of the newly made, the newly born . . .

Christopher Columbus met paradise. It would not have been paradise for the people living there; they would have had the ordinary dreariness of living anywhere day after

day, the ordinary dreariness of just being alive. But someone else's ordinary dreariness is another person's epiphany.

About Linnaeus, Kincaid writes:

"If one does not know the names, one's knowledge of things is useless." It was in George Clifford's greenhouse that Linnaeus gave some things names. The Adam-like quality of this effort was lost on him. "We revere the Creator's omnipotence," he says, meaning, I think, that he understood he had not made the things he was describing, he was only going to give them names. And even as a relationship exists between George Clifford's activity in the world, the world as it starts out on ships leaving the sea ports of the Netherlands, traversing the earth's seas, touching on the world's peoples and the places they are in, the things that have meant something to them being renamed and a whole new set of narratives imposed on them, narratives that place them at a disadvantage in relationship to George Clifford and his fellow Dutch, even as I can say all this in one breath or in one large volume, so too then does an invisible thread, a thread that no deep breath or large volume can contain, hang between Carolus Linnaeus, his father's desire to give himself a distinguished name, the name then coming from a tree, the Linden tree, a tree whose existence was regarded as not ordinary, and his invention of a system of naming that even I am forced to use?

The invention of this system (of naming) has been a good thing. Its narrative would begin this way: in the beginning, the vegetable kingdom was chaos; people everywhere called the same things by a name that made sense to them, not by a name that they arrived at by an objective standard. But who has an interest in an objective standard? Who would need one? It makes me ask again what to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone like me?

Assignment: Review and Reflect on Knowledge

Students will write 2-3 paragraphs. Ask students to include at least two specific pieces of text evidence about the process of naming, and at least one detail each for Columbus and Linnaeus. Ask students to relate Kincaid's points about naming to their own lives.