**Small Group Seminar Discussions**

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| **Title** | **Role** | **Name** |
| Seminar Leader | Leads discussion, asks questions |  |
| Note-Taker | Takes notes of the discussion by group members |  |
| Sergeant-at-arms | Keeps group members on track when off focus, brings conversation back topic |  |
| Sergeant-at-arms II | Keeps group members on track when off focus, brings conversation back topic |  |

**Focus Question:** Was Christopher Columbus a Hero or Villain?

You should use the primary source documents in order to aid your discussions

**Opening:**

1. What do you think went through Columbus’ head when he arrived in the “New world”?
2. What is your definition of hero? Why?

**Core:**

1. Do you think Columbus should be labeled as a hero or a villain? Why?
2. How do you think early explorers dealt with diversity? Give examples from the text.
3. Which parts of the readings struck you the most and why?
4. Why do you think Columbus is revered today as a great man? Give examples.
5. What struck you as the most significant information from the various texts? Why?
6. What were the greatest things Columbus did for Spain, the USA and for exploration? Why?
7. How did Columbus change history? Was it for the better or the worse?
8. Now look at the new documents. What is the difference in perspective?

**Closing:**

1. How could this information about Columbus help us today?
2. What one or two questions would you ask Columbus if he were here?
3. Has your opinion on Columbus changed? If not, why hasn’t it? If so, how?

**Now use your discussion to answer the focus question. Make sure you include comments made by your group members and evidence from the documents.**

**Focus Question:** Was Columbus a hero or a villain?

**Columbus Day**

by Jimmy Durham

In school I was taught the names  
Columbus, Cortez, and Pizarro and  
A dozen other filthy murderers.  
A bloodline all the way to General Miles,  
Daniel Boone and General Eisenhower.  
  
No one mentioned the names  
Of even a few of the victims.  
But don't you remember Chaske, whose spine  
Was crushed so quickly by Mr. Pizarro's boot?  
What words did he cry into the dust?

What was the familiar name  
Of that young girl who danced so gracefully  
That everyone in the village sang with her--  
Before Cortez' sword hacked off her arms  
As she protested the burning of her sweetheart?  
That young man's name was Many Deeds,  
And he had been a leader of a band of fighters  
Called the Redstick Hummingbirds, who slowed  
The march of Cortez' army with only a few  
Spears and stones which now lay still  
In the mountains and remember.

Greenrock Woman was the name  
Of that old lady who walked right up  
And spat in Columbus' face. We  
Must remember that, and remember  
Laughing Otter the Taino who tried to stop  
Columbus and was taken away as a slave.  
We never saw him again.

In school I learned of heroic discoveries  
Made by liars and crooks. The courage  
Of millions of sweet and true people  
Was not commemorated.

Let us then declare a holiday  
For ourselves, and make a parade that begins  
With Columbus' victims and continues  
Even to our grandchildren who will be named  
In their honor.

Because isn't it true that even the summer  
Grass here in this land whispers those names,  
And every creek has accepted the responsibility  
Of singing those names? And nothing can stop  
The wind from howling those names around  
The corners of the school.

Why else would the birds sing  
So much sweeter here than in other lands?

--Copyright 1993 by Jimmie Durham. Published in "[Columbus Day](http://westendpress.org/catalog/books/columbus_day.htm)," West End Press, 1993.

Source: Bartolomé de las Casas, Spanish Catholic priest who freed his Indian slaves before writing his *History of the Indies,* 1528.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In that year of 1500…, the King determined to send a new governor to Hispaniola, which at the time was the only seat of government in the Indies. The new governor was fray Nicolas de Ovando, Knight of Alcantara, and at that time *comendador* [Spanish title granted to an individual with authority to rule an *encomienda*] of Lares.

At first, the Indians were forced to stay six months away at work; later, the time was extended to eight months and this was called a shift, at the end of which they brought all the gold for minting. The King's part was subtracted and the rest went to individuals, but for years no one kept a single peso because they owed it all to merchants and other creditors, so that the anguish and torments endured by the Indians in mining that infernal gold were consumed entirely by God and no one prospered. During the minting period, the Indians were allowed to go home, a few days' journey on foot. One can imagine their state when they arrived after eight months, and those who found their wives there must have cried, lamenting their condition together. How could they even rest, since they had to provide for the needs of their family when their land had gone to weeds? Of those who had worked in the mines, a bare 10 per cent survived to start the journey home. Many Spaniards had no scruples about making them work on Sundays and holidays, if not in the mines then on minor tasks such as building and repairing houses, carrying firewood, etc. They fed them cassava bread, which is adequate nutrition only when supplemented with meat, fish or other more substantial food. The [official in charge of the mine] killed a pig once a week but he kept more than half for himself and had the leftover apportioned and cooked daily for thirty or forty Indians, which came to a bite of meat the size of a walnut per individual, and they dipped the cassava in this as well as in the broth.

I believe the above clearly demonstrates that the Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom when they are allowed to graze in the fields. But our Spaniards gave no such opportunity to Indians and truly considered them perpetual slaves, since the Indians had not the free will to dispose of their persons but instead were disposed of according to Spanish greed and cruelty, not as men in captivity but as beasts tied to a rope to prevent free movement… When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless, giving them some cassava for the twenty- to eighty-league journey. They would go then, falling into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry." And this was the freedom, the good treatment and the Christianity that Indians received.

About eight years passed under the *comendador's* rule and this disorder had time to grow; no one gave it a thought and the multitude of people who originally lived on this island…was consumed at such a rate that in those eight years 90 per cent had perished. From here this sweeping plague went to San Juan, Jamaica, Cuba and the continent, spreading destruction over the whole hemisphere.

1. Eric Foner, *Voices of Freedom: A Documentary History*, 4th Edition, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)