

*Reading Guide*  
*These Truths: A History of the United States, Part 1, pages 1-149 by Jill Lepore*  
*Chapter 1*

“Most of what existed is gone. Flesh decays. Wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the story of what remains...and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair.” –p. 4

“Are all peoples one? And if they are, by what right can one people take the land of another or their labor, or even their lives?” –p. 16

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*Chapter 1, “The Nature of the Past”*

Reconsider the quote that began this reading guide: “Most of what existed is gone. Flesh decays. Wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the story of what remains...and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair.” –p. 4

Lepore is telling you that *history is not the story of what happened. It’s the story of what various people think happened*, and their points of view—their positionality—colors their narrative and their analysis. This is important to remember about history. It is not set in stone. It changes as new evidence is found, and it changes as we humans change, as we interpret events differently.

It is important to read history as if the outcome was not already known, because the outcome was not known to the players making history. Historians often ask, “What if?” What if

p. 3-7 The Dominican priest *Bartolome de las Casas* plays a very important role in the history of the Americas. In protecting the Taino and other indigenous peoples from Spanish slavery, he played a role in the subsequent enslavement of African peoples in the Americas. (see also p. 23-25)



**Left:** Depiction of Spanish atrocities committed in the conquest of Cuba in Las Casas's "Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias". The print was made by two Flemish artists who had fled the Southern Netherlands because of their Protestant faith.



**Right:** The people of Cumaná (modern-day Venezuela) attack a Dominican mission after a Spanish slaving raid.

Lepore places Columbus in the context of the late 1400s...

p. 7 Where the meaning of “*pack rat*” comes from.

p. 9 “After 1492, the vast wealth carried to Europe from the Americas and extracted by the forced labor of Africans granted governments new powers that contributed to the rise of nation-states.” *This sentence is worthy of heavy reflection.*

p. 10 Why U.S. History begins with 1492, at least in the American mind? See *George Bancroft*. Because one influential historian said so...

p. 12: “To write something down doesn’t make it true. But the history of truth is lashed to the history of writing like a mast to a sail.”

“Columbus widened the world, Gutenberg made it spin faster.” Coincidence matters a lot in history. Columbus made his voyages—and he made four (4!) to the Americas, not one—were made famous because they occurred just as Johannes Gutenberg’s *printing press* was invented. The printing press made his discoveries famous.

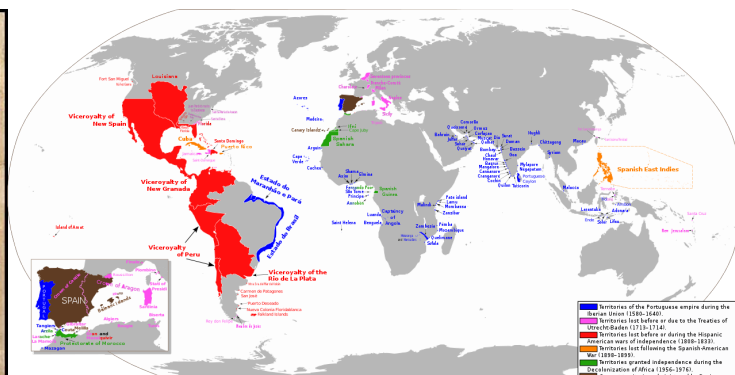
p. 10 “The nation’s founding truths were forged in a crucible of violence, the products of staggering cruelty, conquest, and slaughter, the assassination of worlds.”

p. 11 Prince Henry of Portugal and the slave trade...

p. 14 Amerigo Vespucci and his book *Mundus Novus*, and somehow the “new world” was named *America*.



Left: Map of the New World, by Sebastian Munster, first published in 1540.



Right: Anachronous map of the Spanish Empire

|                                                             |                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anachronous map of the Spanish Empire                       | Territories of the Portuguese empire during the Iberian Union (1580-1640)        |
| Territories until the Treaties of Utrecht-Baden (1713-1714) | Territories until the Spanish American wars of independence (1808-1833)          |
| Territories until the Spanish-American War (1898-1899)      | Territories granted independence during the Decolonization of Africa (1956-1976) |
| Current territories administered by Spain                   |                                                                                  |

p. 15-16 *The Treaty of Tordesillas* leads Lepore to ask –

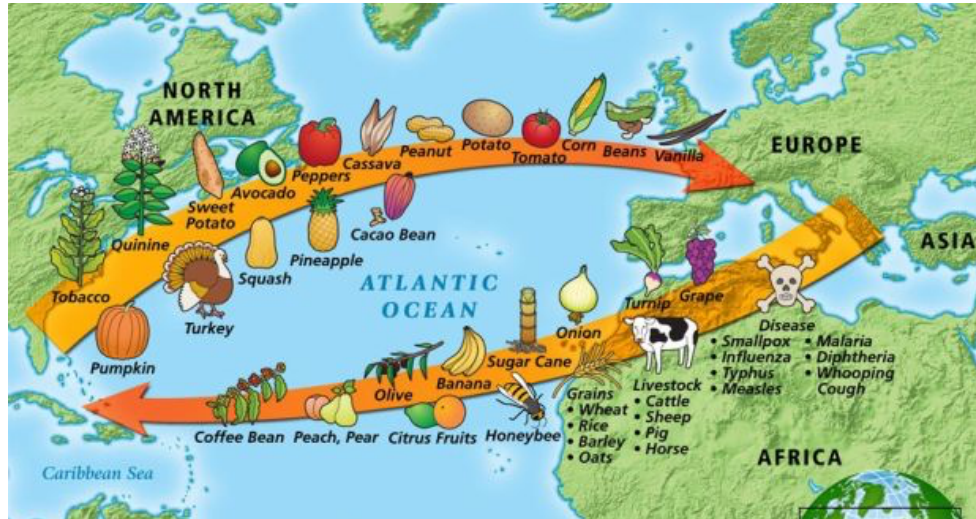
“Are all peoples one? And if they are, by what right can one people take the land of another or their labor, or even their lives?”

p. 16-17 “Between 1500 and 1800, roughly two and a half million Europeans moved to the Americas; they carried twelve million Africans there by force; and as many as fifty million Native Americans died, chiefly of disease.”

“The European extraction of the wealth of the Americas made possible the rise of capitalism: new forms of trade, investment, and profit....nearly two hundred tons of gold and sixteen thousand tons of silver.” But it was the forced labor of Africans—*slavery*—that enabled that wealth to flow from the Americas to Europe.

p. 17-18 An important explanation of the role of slavery in history.

p. 18-19 A brief explanation of some key effects of *the Columbian Exchange* of animals, plants, people, and disease on the Americas.



p. 19-20 Mass death, mainly by disease, also by forced labor.

p. 20 European justifications for their conquests and for slavery.

p.22 *The Requerimiento* – Spanish justification for their conquests... leading to *Hernan Cortes'* conquest of the Aztec capital of *Tenochtitlan*.



Left: Map of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan  
Right: Portrait of Hernan Cortes

p. 23 “The Spanish...did not travel to the New World in families, or even with women: they came as armies of men.” Subsequently, “an intricate caste system marked gradations of skin color...Later,

the English would recognize only black and white...a culture of mixing or a culture of not mixing...*Are all peoples one?*"

p. 23-24 *Bartolome de las Casas*

p. 25-27 The English come to the Americas, partly to harass the rivals Spanish.

p. 28-30 The story of Queen Elizabeth's favorite *Sir Walter Raleigh* and the English colony at Roanoke – "The Lost Colony."

*"In America, everything became a beginning."*