

## White Lies Matter: Decoding American Deceptionalism

**John A. O'Connor**

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*White Lies Matter is a unique artistic investigation into often-repeated lies about American history.*

In concert with digital art, the short essays of John A. O'Connor's *White Lies Matter* convey histories of inequality and dishonesty in American culture, from the time that colonists first arrived in North America, through to the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

Arguing that some of what people consider to be fundamental facts about US history amount to myths and falsehoods, the book aims to dismantle accepted historical "truths." It takes on tales as of Christopher Columbus "discovering" America, George Washington and the cherry tree, the first Thanksgiving, and the biographies of former presidents, revealing evidence of dishonesty and discrimination throughout.

Organized chronologically, the book's historical myths are punctuated by the stories of people who used the Illusory Truth Effect (or, the idea that a lie, repeated often enough and from an early age, becomes akin to gospel) to their benefits, repeating phrases like "read my lips: no new taxes" and "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" to create a false sense of their own virtue.

The book's progression follows an accessible formula: each event or person is treated first with a digital image seen against a vintage school slate, followed by a brief prose explanation of what inspired that artwork. The changing chalk drawings are sometimes appended by related words or phrases; at other times, with pictures; and elsewhere, with abstract doodles backdropping photographs and business cards. Their smaller features are often obscured; this is sometimes corrected with close-up photographs on their opposite pages, which clarify or emphasize their details. Allusions and implied questions are a consistent feature, and the repeating sizes and presentations of the pieces lead to appealing congruence.

The book's brief essays serve to connect the artwork at their opposites to their historical contexts. The quality and delivery of their information varies, though: some are structured like entries in a textbook; others are more causal about explaining the illustrations' reference points. Didactic tones come in: some pieces ask questions of the audience, becoming almost supercilious in doing so, if also encouraging closer looks at the artwork. And the shorter the essays are, the more necessary context they lack. Nonetheless, the book is intriguing in sharing surprising facts and introducing lesser-known stories, and it is often successful in challenging mainstream knowledge.

Taking on the US's favorite cultural talking points, and aiming to reveal the historical roots of America's unjust treatment of marginalized communities, *White Lies Matter* is a unique investigation into often-repeated lies about American history, shared via art and pointed commentary.

DELIA STANLEY (January 14, 2022)

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