

*On the pages of American folklore, a legion of mighty men have left the symbols of their greatness. There was Paul Bunyan's axe, Davy Crockett's rifle. And then, quite unexpectedly, one comes upon a tin pot hat, a bag of apple seed, and a holy book. And strangely enough, these are the symbols of one of the mightiest men of all: John Chapman, a real life pioneer.*

GG: In elementary school, I remember being taught about Johnny Appleseed (or John Chapman, his real name). He was a daring and fearless frontiersman who traveled throughout the American West, a vast, empty expanse, planting his apples wherever he went. He cared deeply for the Earth, was exceedingly kind to animals, and, over the years, became symbolic of an America that was limitless, bountiful, and forgiving. Chapman's legacy, however, is much more complicated than this narrative suggests.

LF: John Chapman is out there planting trees, plotting out land, claiming land at the exact same time that Natives themselves are fighting to not have people like John Chapman out there so I think this is one of the deep historical ironies.

GG: That was Linford Fisher, a professor of Native American history and colonial America at Brown.

LF: You can't blame westward development on John Chapman alone, but he's a part of this impulse that is motivated by the federal government to get people actually physically altering the landscape.

LF: How is it that Europeans mark land as their own? Scholars have talked about the different ways in which European empires do this differently. The Dutch draw maps, the French have these ceremonies of possession, the Spanish read the requirements and then use the resources. How do the English do it? They build fences and houses, and then they clear the land and have huge gardens. So there's a way in which this idea of transforming a "wilderness" into something visibly recognizable as "civilized" has a really long history back to the 1620s, 1630s. John Chapman's seemingly innocuous process of planting these orchards was a continuation of a colonial legacy of laying claim to Native land based upon the planting of something as simple as an apple tree.

*Poor Johnny, he weren't no pioneer and he know'd it. It was all just pretend. And them folks going west to build this nation sure made picking apples look like a plum useless occupation. Well, that's when a miracle happened. Well what's holding you Johnny? Go on, go on out West if that's your choice!*

LF: I feel like there's a lot of unrequited guilt, if that's even a proper way to say it. There's a lot of guilt that we haven't dealt with as a nation, regarding westward expansion, regarding 19th century Indian wars that we know so little about, regarding displacement of Natives, regarding slavery and racism that is deeply embedded in our society today but also has deep roots back to the colonial period, the 19th century. And one way that we deal with this is by highlighting

people that we think represent a purity of what we wish we were. And John Chapman, he's low hanging fruit, no pun intended. He's a guy who has a lot of things going for him, and he's easy to admire, and who doesn't like apples? He's not complicated in the same way that someone like Jefferson is, who was a slaveholder and has this extramarital affair with Sally Hemings, but also writes the Declaration of Independence. John Chapman is basically a good dude, he's just a part of this larger process that is marching inexorably across the whole continent.

LF: I think that it's a very natural impulse. I think we need to balance these things in our presentation to a wider public. Balancing both aspects, right? So if we only tell the good side of everything, I think we come up with a very anemic history. If you only tell the dark side in some ways you only have this horrible, dark nation that starts to emerge in the 1790s, and I think there were some good points, some good pieces of this history. So I'm sympathetic to the impulse to find good things to latch on to, but John Chapman is far more interesting than Disney has made him out to be, than these children songs and nursery rhymes have made him out to be.

LF: I wonder if, and I'm going out on a limb here in some ways, but I wonder if children aren't capable of more. I have kids, I have kids as young as 7, oldest is 14, and we have real conversations about the past. You can imagine the historian's dinner, force feeding them tidbits of history at home, but there's something about our presumed capacity for what children can handle that I think is a part of this problem too. Kids can get complexity, they can understand this. So this guy on the frontier who's part of a process of dispossessing Natives. Why can't kindergartners be told that. You know? They would get it. So in some ways there's a way in which even our mythologizing is unnecessary. Why can't we get complexity? We can. We can handle it. So let's complexify it. Let's just do it.