

We Are Still Here

The 500 Years Celebration

*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's sword backed 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 at Columbus' face. We
Must remember that, and remember
Laughing Otter the Taino who tried to stop
Columbus and who was taken away as a slave.
We never saw him again.*

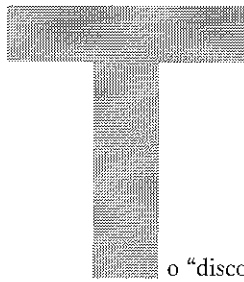
*In school I learned of heroic discoveries
Made by liars and crooks. The courage
Of millions of sweet and true people
Was not commemorated.*

*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?*

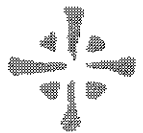
*Columbus Day
Jimmie Durham
(West End Press, 1983)*



o "discover" implies that something is lost. Something was lost, it was Columbus. But unfortunately, he did not discover himself in the process of his loss. He went on to destroy peoples, land and ecosystems in his search for material wealth and riches. Columbus was a perpetrator of genocide – responsible for setting in motion the most horrendous holocaust to have occurred in the history of the world. Columbus was a slave trader, a thief, a pirate, and most certainly not a hero. To celebrate Columbus is to congratulate the process and history of the invasion.

The Taino, Arawak and other indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, the first "hosts of Columbus" were systematically destroyed. Thirteen at a time they were hanged, in honor of the Twelve Apostles and the Redeemer. Every man over 14 years of age was obliged to bring a quota of gold to the conquistadors every three months. Those who could not pay the tribute had their hands cut off, "as a lesson." Most bled to death. The Taino argued with the conquistadors. They pleaded that "when their thousands of people grow enough corn to feed many of the people of Europe – was that not enough of a tribute, of a payment?" The conquistadors would not accept their tribute from the land. So the "idle" ships of the second voyage of Columbus were used to transport back 500 Indians to be slaves of the markets of Seville. The repression was so brutal that many of the Taino, Caribs and Arawaks, faced with brutality and slavery at the hands of conquistadors, chose instead to commit mass suicide.

Sixty years later, in 1552, the Catholic priest Bartolemé de las Casas declared that within the entire western hemisphere, a total of 50 million Indians had already perished, in just over a half century of



Spanish invasion. Las Casas had been an eyewitness to some of the slaughter and depopulation caused by diseases accidentally introduced by the Spanish. In his protest of his own countrymen's "abominable cruelties and detestable tyrannies," Las Casas cried out that five million had died on the Caribbean islands and that 45 million had died on the mainland.

Minimum Estimates of Population

(as a reference, during the same period, the population of European nations multiplied five- to tenfold)

Western Hemisphere

1492: 112,554,000 American Indians
1980: 28,264,000 American Indians

Central Mexico

1519: 30,000,000 American Indians
1620: 1,600,000 American Indians

North of Mexico

1492: 18,000,000 American Indians
1980: 2,000,000 American Indians

Yana Nation (California)

1492: 3000 people
1910: 39 people
1929: 12 people
1973: 20 people

(From: "The Cost of Columbus: Was There a Holocaust?" Robert Venables, in *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, Fall 1990)

Although Columbus himself later returned to Europe in disgrace, his methods were subsequently used in Mexico, Peru, the Black Hills, and at Sand Creek and Wounded Knee. They are still being used in Guatemala and El Salvador, and in Indian territory from Amazonia to Pine Ridge. The invasion set into motion a process, thus far, unabated. This has been a struggle for values, religions, resources, but most importantly land.

The age of "discovery," was to mark the age of colonialism, a time when our land suddenly came to be viewed as "your land." While military repression is not in the North American vogue, (at least with the exception of the Oka-Mohawk uprising in the summer of 1990) today legal doctrines uphold that "our land" is "your land," based ostensibly on the so-called "doctrine of discovery." This justifies, in a so called legal system, the same dispossession of people from their land that is caused by outright military conquest, but today, in a "kinder, gentler world," it all appears more legal.

The reality is that the battering has been relentless. Each generation more land has been taken from the indigenous peoples – either by force or by paper,

but in no case with our consent. Today, Indian people in North America retain about four percent of the original land base – land called reservations in the US or reserves in Canada. Those lands are facing a new assault. Underlying Indian reservations is approximately two-thirds of uranium resources within the continental US, and one-third of all western low sulphur coal. Other lands include vast oil tracts (including that in the so-called Arctic National Wildlife Refuge – the last unexploited portion of the north shore of Alaska), and final stretches of pristine water and stands of unexploited old growth timber. Similar statistics exist for Canada.

What we have is still what they want: whether it is EXXON, ARCO, oil companies, Rio Tinto Zinc (the British mining giant), COGEMA (the French uranium company, which is active in Dene and Cree lands in northern Saskatchewan) or lumber companies from Japan and North America. The North American onslaught is matched only by that in South and Central America, where remaining rain forests and resource rich lands are greedily consumed by foreign multinationals and governments.

The rate of exploitation is astounding. In 1975, 100 percent of all federally produced uranium (in the US) came from Indian reservations. Indians were the fifth largest producers of Uranium in the world. That same year, four of the ten largest coal strip mines in the US were on Indian reservations. By 1985, Dene and Cree lands in Saskatchewan were producing over \$1 billion worth of uranium annually for foreign multinationals. An area the size of France in northern Quebec has been devastated by hydroelectric development, the huge James Bay project which is the largest manipulation of a subarctic ecosystem in history. The lands flooded are those of Cree and Inuit – two peoples who have lived there for 10,000 years or more, in a carefully balanced way of life. Today, thousands more face relocation, as new dams are proposed for European aluminum interests (who will locate in Quebec to secure cheap electricity) and American consumers. The devastation of the ecosystems and the people is relentless. In short, the problem or challenge posed by 1992 is the invasion, and the reality that continues.

We understand that "to get the rain-forest, you must first kill the people," and that is why since 1900, one-third of all indigenous nations in the Amazon have been decimated, while during the same time one-quarter of the forest has disappeared. There is a direct relationship between how industrial society consumes land and resources, to how it consumes peoples. In the past 150 years, we have seen the extinction of more species than

since the ice age. And, since 1492, we have witnessed the extinction of more than 2,000 indigenous peoples from the western hemisphere. Where are the Wappo, the Takelma, the Natchez and the Massachuset?

Most disgraceful of all is the self congratulatory hoopla underway in most colonial and neo-colonial states. In 1992, the governments of Spain, Italy, the US and 30 other countries are hosting the largest public celebration of this century, to mark the 500th year anniversary of the arrival of "western civilization" in the hemisphere. As planned it will outstrip the bicentennials of the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution and the French Revolution in scale and cost, and in the same callous rewriting of history. The multi-billion dollar official extravaganza will feature:

- ◆ A space ship race to Mars between three solar powered space ships named after Columbus's ships the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria.
- ◆ A Tall Ships regatta, featuring replicas of Columbus's original vessels which will leave Spain in the spring of 1992 for a tour of the Americas.
- ◆ Expo '92 in Seville, involving over 100 countries, and emphasizing Spain's contributions to world culture.

(Fidel Castro has been the only leader of a western hemispheric country to condemn the celebrations of Columbus. In an address to a trade union conference in Cuba (1985), Castro frightened his audience by saying, "I feel Indian. I feel aboriginal. I feel equal to you all." He labelled "ill-fated," this October 12 date, after which "our peoples have been raped and reduced to slavery by the conquerors." According to Castro, this so called discovery "opened" one of the most shameful pages of world history.)

It is in the face of this "celebration of genocide," that thousands of indigenous peoples are organizing to commemorate their resistance, and to bring to a close the 500-year-long chapter of the invasion. Indigenous organizations like CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), SAIIC (South and Central American Indian Information Center), the Indigenous Women's Network, Seventh Generation Fund, the Indian Treaty Council, UNI (from the Brazilian Amazon), and other groups have worked to bring forth the indigenous outlook on 500 years.

For several years, indigenous people appealed to the United Nations to designate 1992 as the "year of the indigenous peoples." They faced stiff opposition from Spain, the US and other "pro-Columbus" nations. 1993, instead, has been designated as such. However, a number of indigenous nations are actively working on the United Nations Environment Program Conference in 1992 in Brazil, demanding

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among other things, full participation of indigenous peoples in the "nation state" agenda.

CONAIE and other groups hosted an intercontinental meeting of indigenous peoples in Quito, Ecuador, in July of 1990. The meeting brought together hundreds of people from throughout the Americas, to share in common histories, strategies to mark 1992, and to plan for the next 500 years. The meeting was hailed by the Native people in attendance as a fulfilment to a traditional prophecy of the Runa people of Mexico. The prophecy reports that many years ago, the indigenous peoples of the Americas were divided into two groups, the people of the Eagle (those from the north) and the people of the Condor (those from the south). According to the prophecy, when the tears of the Eagle and the Condor are joined, a new era of life and spirit will begin for Native people. As the delegates joined together in work, prayer and ceremony, they felt a joining of the vision, and the people. According to CONAIE, "the basic objectives of the mobilization are to recover the dignity of the peoples and reject all forms of submission, colonial practices and neo-colonialism."

A number of other meetings and convenings have been held, including a huge First Peoples Gathering held this past June in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and attended by over 500 representatives from the Americas. Other work continues between indigenous nations, internal in the communities and in coalition with other groups. A series of tribunals on colonialism are proposed in several locations in North America, as are educational and cultural events. A number of Native writers, including Gerald Vizenor, M. Scott Momaday, Louise Edrich, Joy Harjo and others are completing books and anthologies on the 500 years. And a great number of indigenous peoples are calling on other groups - nationally and internationally - to mobilize on 1992 as a year to Protect the Earth and People of the Earth.

Indeed, the ecological agenda is what many indigenous people believe can, and must, unite all peoples around 1992. That agenda calls for everyone to take aggressive action to stop the destruction of the Earth, essentially to end the biological, technological and ecological invasion/conquest which began with that ill-fated voyage 500 years past.

In a meeting in Iquitos, Peru, held in May of 1990, Indians of the Amazon called on ecologists from around the world to join a campaign against the 1992 celebrations by moving boycotts and protests against countries and companies furthering destruction of the rain forest and other indigenous homelands. The Native delegates asked groups like Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, and others to pressure South American governments and companies to respect Indian rights and back Native demands for autonomy over their landbase. "We are a part of nature," said the Indians, insisting that the best way to stop devastation of

the environment is to support the rights of indigenous people who live there to continued self determination, and a way of life. These groups also point to thousands of years of "sustainable development" based on an indigenous model, as one crucial piece for the future. Thus far there has been some interest in this coalition with indigenous groups, but the response has been limited, at best. (A recent example of the conflict surfaced this past June in Ecuador, when several North American environmental groups essentially cut a deal with CONOCO over opposition of indigenous peoples.) There is, needless to say, a great deal of work to do.

Through it all, indigenous people will continue to struggle. It is this legacy to resistance that, perhaps more than any other single activity, denotes the essence of 1992. After all the hoopla and celebration by the colonial governments is done, the Native voice prevails. It is like a constant rumble of distant thunder, and it says through the wind: "We are alive. We are still here." ♦

*That dream
 shall have a name
 after all,
 and it will not be vengeful
 but wealthy with love
 and compassion
 and knowledge
 And it will rise
 in this heart
 which is our America.*

Simon J. Ortiz,
 in *From Sand Creek*, 1981

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