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# Columbus' invasion of the "New World"

*Five hundred years later a debate is raging, should the anniversary be a party or a wake?*

*"They would make fine servants...with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."*

*In this entry in his October, 1492 ship log, Christopher Columbus describes the Arawaks of the Bahama Islands, the first native people he encountered in "discovering the New World."*

*Five hundred years after Columbus dropped anchor, a debate is raging over how to mark the anniversary, should it be a party or a wake?*

*Already, there have been public-television specials and Smithsonian exhibits, replicas of the Nina and the Pinta docked in model 15th-century Spanish ports. The next year promises even more hoopla hailing the Columbus legacy.*

*And there are sharp voices of dissent, people peeling layers off that myth to reveal the unsavory core of the Columbus story. They suggest that his arrival in America marked not discovery but invasion, not friendship but greed and exploitation. Groups of Native Americans, African-Americans, even the National Council of the Churches of Christ have said a celebration is the wrong way to remember slavery, genocide and the slow ruin of the natural world.*

*The struggle is larger than Columbus and his status as hero or destroyer. It involves entitlement and invisibility. The winners' story makes the losers invisible; gay men and lesbians and all people of color have known that for years. The Columbus debate is really about the right to write history; it comes at a time when people long silenced are working together to find a voice.*

by Susana Santos

**G**reat Grandma said: "A long time ago, before the white man, Spilyay (Coyote) was sent ahead to carve on these here rocks the law that the Creator had given to our people.

*Standing Spotted Owl, why don't you and your kind just go out and save the Man Who Turned to Stone rock spirits that the Chiapples are destroying? Grandma's really worried this time."*

*"No. I can't interfere with Spilyay because if they break down the laws of Mother Earth and all that is known to be sacred, then it is the day of the Man Who Turned to Stone and the salmon won't run to feed the people."*

Since the beginning of ceremonial times, people throughout the Americas were indigenous to the Earth. They painted on caves a celebrated time when the people lived with Mother Earth and learned from the night sky. They built temples to the gods, created earthmounds, sundials and pyramids and left the wonders and works of nature to be.

To further their understanding of nature, they performed elaborate rituals to conceive medicine, war and, ultimately, peace and spiritual direction. This was a means for people to live within certain laws of creation. These laws equated the feminine principle with spiritual power.

In 1492, when Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors arrived in what later became known as the Americas, they found to their disbelief entire native cultures engaged in pagan rituals. These sometimes involved public expression of sexuality as part of their spiritual freedoms. The colonists decreed these acts capital offenses. At that time, European immigrants were fleeing the devastation of half that continent's population by Bubonic Plague. It was also a period that saw the persecution and death of several million women for heresy, branded as witches for their practices of folk spirituality, midwifery and medicinal arts.

On behalf of the Spanish empire and the Judeo-Christian impetus to gain dominion over the new world, an inquisition followed. Its perpetrators committed unspeakable torture against women and "homosexual" religious leaders. Their goal was to eradicate the foremost capital offense—the abominable sin—and punish the people's refusal to submit to a new religion.

To finance the discovery of the Americas and enrich the Spanish coffer, the conquistadors melted

down gold effigies, destroyed ceremonial erotic icons and all other forms of art. Their ultimate purpose was to eradicate the primal spiritual human existence and to force matrilineal or egalitarian societies to submit to a new social and religious order.

During this 500-year historical course which eventually led to the founding of the U.S. government, the patriarchy continued to destroy ceremonial sites. The indigenous perspective believed the great wonders of nature, life and pure beauty were sacred. The theology of the indigenous view threatened the new frontiersmen, the federal government and religious establishments because such concepts posed obstacles to civilizing the "beast-like" Indians and converting them to Christianity.

After the annihilation of most of the country's indigenous population and public outcry against the slaughter and pillage of the people, the government entered an agreement with Native American tribes, including those in Central Oregon. The Treaty of 1855 ceded to the federal government 10 million acres of East-Central Oregon in exchange for what is now the Warm Springs reservation. The tribes reserved certain treaty rights within 'ceded Areas,' for traditional hunting, fishing, medicinal food and plant gathering and religious practices. The treaty nations and fishing societies throughout the Greater Che Wana basin and river tributaries still maintain their struggle for self-determination. The Tygh of Tlxni are descendants of the treaty signators who still fish on the lower Deschutes River at Sherar's Falls, "Falls of a Woman's Hair." (Sherar's Falls is a colonist name.)

In post-modern history, the National Forest Service and other federal agencies played a deliberate role in the process of destroying cultural and geographic sites. By design, both ceremonial landscapes and treaty lands have been plundered in order to create state and national parks, tourist attractions, dams, recreational roads and to ski-lift us into the 20th century.

The genocide of the Americas continues.

*Susana Santos is a traditional fisherwoman, visual artist, poet, political activist, and lesbian. She is a member of the Tygh River Band on the lower Deschutes River.*