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It's been said that education is what you are left with after forgetting everything you learned in school. And unfortunately for us, American history books already forgot to mention a few things: like human beings inhabiting North America for over 20,000 years before Europeans. In fact, the Europeans our history books call the "original Americans" and "Founding Fathers" didn't start calling themselves Americans until they started to see themselves becoming more like the indigenous peoples they encountered – a special kind of free people who belonged to this land.

Inside the U.S., it is almost impossible to get a standard education in U.S. history and come away with the knowledge that the United States was founded on genocide, the largest in world history up to that time. And it's even harder to learn about the nearly 3 million indigenous peoples still living in the United States today, comprising 500 federally recognized indigenous nations and communities.

These are the issues addressed in Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's new book, "An Indigenous People's History of the United States." Dunbar-Ortiz is a renowned activist and scholar who has written extensively on indigenous issues in North America and has spent years organizing with the American Indian Movement. Dunbar-Ortiz is making a rare Pacific Northwest appearance in the middle of this month, with three scheduled talks.

Dunbar-Ortiz will be hosted at Portland Community College's Cascade campus in the Student Union Building, Room 204, on Tuesday, Feb. 17 from 3 to 5 p.m. The next day, Feb. 18, she will speak at Reed College in Eliot Room 103 from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., and then at PSU's Native American Student and Community Center from 6 to 9 p.m.

I caught up with Dunbar-Ortiz to talk with her about her new book and to get her views on the state of indigenous resistance today.

**Stephyn Quirke:** *Could you describe your background in the indigenous rights movement, and how that has informed your academic research?*

**Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz:** I was an anti-war, civil rights and women's liberation activist during the 1960s while a graduate student at UCLA. It was actually my dissertation research that led me to



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*Nez Perce leader Chief Joseph, whose community was driven off its land in Oregon by the U.S. government. After his surrender, he continued to argue against the injustice of the U.S. government. This photo of him is from 1897, about 20 years after he surrendered.*

trust fund with the funds, which have now grown to over a billion dollars. This is one of many land issues that must be resolved with restitution of land; in nearly every case, the disputed territories are sacred sites for the particular Native Nation, including the Black Hills. And, in nearly every case, these lands are held by the federal or state governments, not private land holders or municipalities.

**S.Q.:** *You write extensively about the myth that Native Americans disappeared after European settlement, which seems closely related to the myth that the continent was sparsely inhabited or barely managed before Europeans. Could you give readers a rough sense for how long and how extensively this continent had been inhabited by indigenous peoples prior to the start of Official U.S. History?*

**R.D.O.:** The estimate for the original population at the onset of European colonialism is 100 million, with 30 million in North America, including Mexico and Central America, some 10 million north of the Río Grande. Up to the 1960s when native scholarship developed and questioned the figures, the estimate was 10 million for the whole hemisphere, and 1 million north of the Río Grande. Both the fields of demography and archeology (and of course, anthropology) were highly politicized in their pseudo-scientific attempts to keep numbers low, presumably to lessen the charge of genocide.

Even with the new figures, there remains the master narrative of the "germ theory" of the horrific initial death rates associated with European colonization, supposedly reducing the populations throughout the hemisphere by some 90 percent. This argument, which ignores the other causes of death and disappearance, particularly genocidal warfare and forced removals, also lessens the charge of genocide, as it's said to be unintentional. However, we know that the majority of Jews subjected to concentration camps died of disease and starvation, not in gas chambers, and this is the case in a genocide.

As to the peopling of the Western Hemisphere, another pseudo-scientific myth remains dominant. The "Bering Straits" theory, which poses the absurd scenario of a single entrance to the continent from Asia, near the North Pole, and spreading to the South Pole, rather than following indigenous

## Native voices

*A conversation with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, author of "An Indigenous People's History of the United States"*

involvement in the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council in 1974. I was recruited at that time to serve as an expert witness in a federal hearing on the 1868 Treaty, which is what the Wounded Knee uprising had been about. That involvement brought me to focus on oral history as the bedrock of my academic research and writing.

**S.Q.:** *You talk a lot in your book about the importance of naming colonialism and genocide, which is not something everyone is accustomed to doing in U.S. history. Could you tell readers why we need these terms to understand U.S. history?*

**R.D.O.:** These are technical terms of international human rights law that were codified in the post-World War II period in the response to the massive people's liberation movements in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and Caribbean. They delineate precisely what native peoples in North America have experienced under United States colonization.

**S.Q.:** *I recently learned about the history of the Black Hills in South Dakota, a natural formation sacred to the Lakota, and the*

*compensation arrangement you described in your book after it was blasted with dynamite and renamed Mount Rushmore. Could you give readers a brief sketch of this story, and what it says about the kind of justice we need for indigenous peoples?*

**R.D.O.:** As the period of decolonization began, and with the founding of the United Nations, the United States government responded to indigenous nations' demands for land restitution or self-determination by establishing the Court of Indian Land Claims, but with the proviso that no land would be returned, or monetary compensation for Indigenous lands confiscated without consent by treaties or agreements. The Lakota Sioux did not file for a claim because they did not want financial compensation, rather the return of the Black Hills. Militant actions over two decades, culminating in the Wounded Knee siege of 1890, and the subsequent founding of the International Indian Treaty Council to take the 1868 treaty to the United Nations, led to the 1980 Supreme Court decision, which acknowledged that the United States had taken the Black Hills illegally, but ordered only monetary compensation, which the Sioux refused. The U.S. established a