

February 3, 2020

To: The Colorado Senate and House Bill Hearing Committees,

Testimony

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Dr. Roger K. Green, I am a professor in the Department of English at Metropolitan State University in Denver and currently working on a second doctorate in Religious Studies and Theology at The University of Denver, where my research deals explicitly with the religious colonization of the Americas. I am here to support repealing Columbus Day in solidarity with the Native communities who have been working on the repeal for thirty years now. While I don't oppose a shift to Cabrini Day, the urgency of my testimony prioritizes the immediate removal of Columbus Day.

Although the historical fact is that European contact with Amerindians began around 1000 CE with Vikings, most Americans will wrongly point to Columbus.¹ This merely points to the power of the eurochristian narrative of 'Discovery' in its legal fiction to legitimate rule.² The transatlantic slave trade would grow to feed an economic greed that the founders of the United States could not resolve. Celebrating Columbus for any European heritage is inherently racist. Even historians who admire him

¹ Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014): 16.

² With clear intent, Columbus baptized the island through a eurochristian ritual, penetrating the land with a sword as he erased the Lucayan name, Guanahani, and replaced it with San Salvador. This act was in direct accordance with a papal bull from 1455 named *Romanus Pontifex*, which had to do with Portugal's emergent slave trade off the coast of West Africa:

... We [therefore] weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso -- to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit -- by having secured the said faculty, the said King Alfonso, or, by his authority, the aforesaid infante, justly and lawfully has acquired and possessed, and doth possess, these islands, lands, harbors, and seas, and they do of right belong and pertain to the said King Alfonso and his successors.

"The Bull *Romanus Pontifex*," doctrineofdiscovery.org, July 23, 2018, accessed January 3, 2020, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/the-bull-romanus-pontifex-nicholas-v/>

Romanus Pontifex drew on a long eurochristian history, including the 1452 *Dum Diversas*, which granted Portugal's claims to West African slavery in exchange for support against Ottoman Turks. But technically, once Columbus baptized the island, its inhabitants became subjects of the Spanish Crown. It did not make the inhabitants Christian, but we also know that the six captured Amerindians Columbus took back to Spain were immediately themselves baptized and given new names. Knowing that part of his own income depended on tradeable goods, but finding little gold, Columbus took prisoners and wrote to the Crown what good slaves the Amerindians would make.

Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014): 46.

situate him as directly responsible for devastation.³ He is a transnational symbol of genocidal devastation across the Caribbean and the two continents.

Our political mythology has for too long prevented acknowledgment of those who have been forced to join a system whose very logic is founded on their extermination - whether by conquest through military and germ warfare, religion, allotment and property, the stripping of Native languages and names in boarding schools, blood laws for tribal membership, or attempts to terminate a reservation system that was itself Hitler's inspiration for concentration camps.⁴

As a professor, my courses are frequently the first time my students have seen actual scholarly treatment of Native issues, the first time in their education that Natives have had their presence acknowledged and their histories affirmed. These are adult students. Many Native students long ago got the message that our education system's treatment of them challenged their very existence. More than seventy-five years of scholarship by Native and non-Native scholars details the fallout of his malicious intent, intent that even the King and Queen of Spain were against in his own day.⁵ Not finding the gold he wanted to fund a Christian crusade in the wake of Spain's ejection of Islam, Columbus turned to human trafficking to try to make money.

My work gives me first-hand witness to the struggles Native students face as a result of the ongoing racism and domination that the Columbus Day holiday celebrates. In my first-year courses,⁶ I see

³ Regarding an exploitative taxation system demanding tribute in gold from Natives not already enslaved, the Pulitzer-winning Morrison writes, "Whoever thought up this ghastly system, Columbus was responsible for it, as the only means of producing gold for export." AND...

"Those who fled to the mountains were hunted with hounds, and those who escaped, starvation and disease took toll, whilst thousands of the poor creatures in desperation took cassava poison to end their miseries. So the policy and acts for which he alone was responsible began the depopulation of the terrestrial paradise that was Hispaniola in 1492. Of the original natives, estimated by a modern ethnologist at 300,000 in number, one third were killed off between 1494 and 1496. By 1508 an enumeration showed only 60,000 alive. Four years later that number was reduced by two-thirds; and in 1548 Oviedo doubted whether 500 indians remained. Today the blood of the Tainos only exists mingled with the more docile and laborious African Negroes who were imported to do the work that they could not and would not perform."

Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little Brown, 1942): 491 & 493.

⁴ See James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

⁵ As the admiral wrote on October 14, 1492: "...as your majesties will discover from seven whom I caused to be taken and brought aboard so that they may learn our language and return. However, should your Highness command it all the inhabitants could be taken away to Castile or held as slaves on the island, for with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we wish." Bartolomé de Las Casas writes of the admiral's flagrant disregard for the Queen's wishes in this passage." The Amerindian people presumably had the same rights as any other Spanish subjects - so long as they were *human* and thus possessed "natural rights."

Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages*, edited and translated by J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1969): 58.

⁶ I am constantly having to fill-in my students with basic information about Native American history and the foundation of this nation against the ideology of eurochristian supremacy that called itself "civilized" as it actively attempted to eradicate Native Americans.

disproportionate inequity and socio-cultural advantages that my students of European descent often have, while Native citizens continue to face the challenges of intergenerational trauma made more acute by the fact that even when Native people have the history correct, they're taught lies in school.

Last year, MSU Denver, officially became a Hispanic Serving Institution.⁷ Due to the long colonization of where we live by Spain, many of our citizens who fall under the broad term "Hispanic" also share Native heritage. While I applaud the more demographically inclusive gesture my institution has taken, I am also keenly aware that what gets *included* into notions of citizenship already too biased by the Anglo-Protestantism of our founders is exactly what has been *excluded* through attempts to dissolve and deterritorialize Indigenous Americans. Repealing Columbus Day and directing our educational and historical energies to this land is a step in the right direction. I'm happy to speak to more specific historical issues if needed.

Concerning the History of the Holiday

- Catholic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus (an Irish organization) have long held a *religious interest* in the civic holiday, due to the discrimination Irish Catholics and later Italians – neither of whom were considered "white" in the nineteenth-century – have historically faced in the Anglo-Protestant dominant U.S. First English, and then Anglo Americans drew heavily on Bartolome de las Casas, who is our closest eye-witness historical source to Columbus himself, and who was devastatingly critical of Columbus's treatment of Indigenous Peoples.
- On socio-cultural perceptions of 'whiteness' see Roediger:

"The term white arose as a designation for European explorers, traders and settlers who came into contact with Africans and indigenous people of the Americas. As such it appeared even before permanent British settlement in North America. Its early usages in America served as much to distinguish European settlers from Native Americans as to distinguish Africans from Europeans. Thus, the prehistory of the white worker begins in the settlers' images of Native Americans."

David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 2007): 21.

- My own scholarly work has given me insight into the cultural constructions of the national myth around the figure of Columbus. It is this myth, and not the historical facts about Columbus and his intentions that is of primary concern, though I'm happy to discuss the history too. Between 1828 and 1942, the most popular American account of Columbus was Washington Irving's fanciful book, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Many of the myths that still surround Columbus, such as his dis-proving a "flat earth mentality,"⁸ come from Irving. Irving's project was to construct an American National identity in a similar way the Brothers Grimm sought establish a German identity.

⁷ http://red.msudenver.edu/2019/msu-denver-earns-hispanic-serving-institution-status.html?fbclid=IwAR272UtFnBeOhhQZgUwKTvvScPsrwYIAnRSB1C7xTXiBXzc_n83isQowGE

⁸ Darin Haton, Washington Irving's Columbus and the Flat Earth, December 2, 2014 <http://dhayton.haverford.edu/blog/2014/12/02/washington-irvings-columbus-and-the-flat-earth/>

- State holidays are an example of what Jean Jacques Rousseau espoused as “civic religion.” They do the culturally binding work of telling who we are and who we are not. They traffic in symbology. Regularly, my students tell me they learned little about Native Americans in school growing up. Their education has too often contributed to the idea that Native Americans “of the past” in the same type of romanticizing that the statue on the east side of this capitol was originally meant to portray when it was commissioned at the lowest population, as its title, “the closing of an era” suggests.
- Civic religion certainly operates on founding myths. We must look at Columbus Day in terms of civic religion and who we are as Coloradans. Coloradans are not all European-Christians, no matter the historical struggles that Euro-Christians bring to this place. Yet because of legal institutions such as the Doctrine of Discovery, Euro-Christianity *in its social – not necessarily theological – formation* has unfortunately come to underwrite the heritages of our fellow community members who have lived here longest.

Concerning Bartolome De Las Casas and his critique of Columbus and the Black Legend

- English people used Bartolome De Las Casas to demonize Spain and Catholicism with the “Black Legend,” itself a Protestant and white-supremacist rhetorical form meant to justify, ironically through appeal to English interpretations of the Doctrine of Discovery, the right to take the territory we live in today from Spain.
- In particular, De Las Casas is critical of Columbus’s attempts to persuade the Spanish royalty that the “Indians” could be exploited as slaves, even if not enough gold was found to take from them. Of course, as new “subjects of Spain” according to his own religious enactment of the “Doctrine of Discovery,” the enslavement of Spanish citizens horrified Queen Isabella. This is not to give De Las Casas a pass. He was trained by the Salamanca school, which argued for the “natural rights” of Natives and for the need to convert them. He considered Columbus to be creating the conditions by which Natives might implement a just war against Spain and wanted to curb that. See Anthony Pagden’s *The Fall of Natural Man* for more detail: Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- British rhetoric following the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 drew on De Las Casas to vilify Spain’s international claims to land in the so-called “new world,” though they had employed their own Italian explorer, John Cabot, to lay claim to the east coast of what is now North America. Animosity between the Anglican / Protestant English and Catholic Spanish was theologically driven; yet when the American Supreme Court Justice, John Marshall, in 1823 cited the 1493 papal bull on the Doctrine of Discovery, he appealed to the Catholic law to settle a land dispute that went back to the found of the United States. From an informed historical perspective, Marshall’s inclusion of the Doctrine of Discovery imbricated Christian theological ideology within the normative legal framework of a nation where church and state were supposed to be separate. Distinctions between Catholicism and Protestantism no longer mattered from a legal perspective, but both were Christian.
- Anglo vilification of “darker skinned” Spanish, Portuguese, and Italians drew on both a religious history against Spanish Moors, who were Muslims pushed out by Catholics, as well as emergent defenses of the enslavement of Native Americans and Africans. This vilification persists today at the southern border of the United States by Anglo-centric politics. For a Protestant Christian

ethics in support of this see Miguel De La Torre's *The U.S. Immigration Crisis and Embracing Hopelessness*.

- Interestingly, in the attempt for some politicians to establish a moral ethos following the populist support of "alt. right" white supremacy, they have turned to "safe" condemnations of the Jewish Holocaust as a tactic to make themselves seem more inclusive, but this is merely a reformulation of the rhetorical structures that granted "whiteness" to Irish and later Italians as a way to politically divide them from newly freed African Americans in the later half of the 19th century.

Concerning Native Genocide

- As Elazar Barkan reminds us, "The devastation of indigenous peoples was always evident to colonists. Europeans on the frontier developed the trope of the vanishing natives, which remains a fundamental frame for our understanding of the relationship between progress and the old. 'Vanishing' is a romantic notion."⁹ Following David Stannard and Ward Churchill, Barkan notes "It is generally accepted that over time the indigenous populations [in the Americas] declined by more than 95, even 98 percent at its lowest point."¹⁰ The situation of temporal erasure persists in the daily speech habits of eurochristians who constantly frame Native concerns as something of a distant past, denying their continued presence.
- Even by the softened language of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, both cultural assimilation and violent death fall under the definition of the crime of genocide. Articles II and III state:

Article II

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Article III

The following acts shall be punishable:

- (a) Genocide;

⁹ Elazar Barkan, "Genocides of Indigenous Peoples," *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

- (b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
- (c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
- (d) Attempt to commit genocide;
- (e) Complicity in genocide.¹¹

- Columbus Day is a celebration of genocidal complicity.
- In *A Little Matter of Genocide*, Churchill cites Lemkin's (who coined the term 'genocide') definition from his 1944 book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. I requote it here:

Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves [even if all individuals within the dissolved group physically survive]. The objectives of such a plan would be a disintegration of political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the socioeconomic existence of national groups, and the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed at the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed at individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group.¹²

- Genocide is an ancient phenomenon. In "Conceptions of Genocide and Perceptions of History," David Moshman cites *Deuteronomy* chapters two and three as evidencing clear cases of genocide with intent that long precede the Shoah, as well as more recent events that take on hazier sets of circumstances yet amount to genocide, such as the "dirty wars" in South America, following Israel Charny.¹³ He then turns specifically to the invasion of Turtle Island. Covering Columbus's invasion, he writes, "The destruction of the Taino of Hispaniola appears to meet all eight criteria" used and debated among various scholars of genocide: group destruction, real group, intent, total destruction, special groups, one-sided, mass killing, and government perpetrator.¹⁴ As he writes:

The destruction of the Taino of Hispaniola, then, qualifies as genocide under any reasonable interpretation of any of the seven definitions considered in this chapter. This genocidal process, in many tragic variations, was to be repeated

¹¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nation on 9 of December 1948, [treaties.un.org](https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf), accessed January 9, 2020, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>

¹² Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492-Present* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997): 70.

¹³ David Moshman, "Conceptions of Genocide and Perceptions of History," *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008): 82-83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

across the Caribbean and then throughout the Americas for centuries to come. Regardless of the definition, the conquest of the New World [*sic*] included a series of genocides that were aimed at, and succeeded in eliminating, hundreds of cultures and nations. The perpetrators had multiple perceptions, motives, and methods, but their intent, and effect, was genocidal.¹⁵

Definitions, however, remain important, and Moshman concludes a few pages later:

It seems reasonable, then, to define genocide as group destruction without regard to means of destruction or type of group destroyed. Moreover, although genocide is usually perpetrated by governmental or quasi-governmental authorities, there is no apparent reason to make this a criterion of genocide. Thus, group destruction is genocide regardless of the type of perpetrator, the means of destruction, or the type of group destroyed.¹⁶

I have cited David Moshman at length to bring my readers quickly up to speed on the scholarship of comparative genocide. I am also signaling Moshman's scholarly acceptance of the extensive work done by Ward Churchill on Native American genocide in *A Little Matter of Genocide*, which remains one of the most important books on the subject.¹⁷

Why Natives Suffer at the Expense of Discussions Founded on White-Black Binaries

- For Native Americans, on whose land Europeans brought their religious and racist wars, the plights of Catholics against Protestant politics do not stand up to the genocide and enslavement of all Natives by Christians. And if we are to truly draw upon the values of a nation that advertises itself as religiously neutral in terms of the government of its citizens, we must reject the religious ties that bind only certain communities to a public holiday meant for all citizens. Columbus Day is just such a holiday.

Why Colorado History Matters

- Native people have been here much longer than anyone and there are little-to-no concerted educational efforts to acknowledge their continued presence.
- Native peoples of various names lived here long before Columbus, who never set foot on the mainland of what we call "North America," arrived in the Caribbean islands. They had

¹⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷ Some readers will know Churchill's name from national media surrounding his dismissal from University of Colorado at Boulder. The court ruled that he was unjustly fired but refused to reinstate him to his faculty position.

developed senses of governance and international trade. Moreover, the products of the so-called “new world” completely changed global commerce. See Jace Weaver, *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000-1927*, Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2014.

- As a community, we Coloradans need to look out for each other. Newcomers need to know our state’s history – good and evil – especially as we become a more diverse and globally recognized region. Furthermore, as Colorado participates in the union of the United States, we must recognize our nation’s decision to join the United Nations’ 2007 *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Even though that declaration is itself fraught, we should recognize our nation’s international commitments. See, Robert J. Miller et al. *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Charmaine White Face, *Indigenous Nations’ Rights in the Balance: An Analysis of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Living Justice Press 2013.
- Although a certain romanticizing permeated the mimicry of Native American democracy – namely the Haudenosaunee Confederacy – in the United States’ *Declaration of Independence*, the best parts of the value of democratic rule by the people remain true to our Native communities today. But the U.S. as a whole has yet to realize the true potential of democracy so long as it refuses to *recognize* Native Americans, to whom the nation is truly indebted.
- Other cities and states have confronted the problem of a civic religion that celebrates Columbus Day by renaming it as Indigenous Peoples’ Day. A small number of our Italian American community in Colorado has seen this move as the ongoing rejection of Italians, who are largely Catholic, from a Protestant-dominant society. Undoubtedly, they were discriminated against by Anglo-Protestant social views, but it is that same sort of bias that Natives are contesting. What we can agree on, beyond respective identity formations, is the importance of democracy and the inclusion of *all*, especially our most marginalized citizens. We should also note, as I alluded above, that social determinations of race, including whiteness, change over time. But Native peoples have cultural histories that precede even modern conceptions of race, which were largely developed by Europeans and later Americans to justify modern slave-trades by asserting their religion over them. Even when we use terms like Indigenous, Native, and Columbus’s own misinformed “Indian,” these are categories applied from the outside that local groups have had to conform to out of a shared circumstance of oppression and attempted erasure.
- Democratic rule is a shared value between both Native and European communities. Democratic rule arguably exists on Turtle Island – what people now call the United States – before the flawed inclusion of Christian doctrines into the national legal tradition. This is a more inclusive and egalitarian version than the classical Greek conception. We would do well to focus more on our education system to inform our fellow citizens of why this is the case. This does not mean eurochristian people can or should “become Indian.” It means respecting both people and ways of being in existence here way before the “rule of law” in its eurochristian sense came to claim that it was the only “civilized” way of being.