

**THE COLUMBUS PHENOMENON: PREJUDICE AND
AMERICAN IDENTITY**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

For over 200 years, Columbus has been imbedded in American history and idealization. The mythology of Christopher Columbus in the United States has skewed public perspective, which is demonstrated by the disconnection between Columbus's widely accepted tales of heroism and the true consequences of his voyage. The explorer has also been part of an ongoing quest for an American identity, spurred on and continually reshaped by the question, "what is an American?" To understand such a phenomenon, this paper examines how Columbus has been added and amended to the United States' national narrative, from the eve of the American Revolution, to the era of Manifest Destiny, to the 1992 quincentennial of his voyage, and right up to his present day status. To address the emerging and diverging narratives of Columbus's legacy, the role of immigration and influence of Italians and Catholics in the United States, as well as the U.S. Treatment of Native Americans, and how these ideals have been spread by individuals, media, and educational systems, are examined. In conclusion of this research, the Columbus mythology can be cited as one of the roots of racial tension inherent in American society, and is one of the moral and conceptual ideas behind the colonial actions the United States has taken both at home and abroad up until the present. The Columbus mythology will continue to play this role unless pro-colonial, Eurocentric, and white supremacist views can be maintained through mainstream government institutions.

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1. Introduction

As a student, one of the most harrowing experiences of entering upper level histories in high school and then college is having every little bit of information one thought they knew about history be absolutely and utterly crushed. One of these devastating, but eye-opening blows comes in the form of Christopher Columbus, and how, “after sailing the ocean blue in 1492,” he went on to set the precedent for the colonization, rape, murder and enslavement of indigenous peoples in the Americas. The disconnection between Columbus's widely accepted tales of heroism and the true consequences of his voyage demonstrates how significant the mythology surrounding Columbus in the United States has skewed public perspective, and how that idealization has shaped American identity from the 18th century to the present. To understand such a phenomenon, it is necessary to examine how Columbus has been added and amended to the United States' national narrative, from the eve of the American Revolution, to the era of Manifest Destiny, to the 1992 quincentennial of his voyage, and right up to his present day status. To address the emerging and diverging narratives of Columbus's legacy, the role of immigration and influence of Italians and Catholics in the United States, the U.S. Treatment of Native Americans, and how these ideals have been spread by individuals, media, and educational systems must be examined.

2. An American Identity Separate from Great Britain

Columbus's first introduction to the United States' narrative was contrived to fill a cultural void as tensions between the American colonists and the British Crown simmered. Indeed, references of Columbus before the 1760s were few and far between,

but as the American identity steadily divided from British identity, colonists were steadily vying for a unique individuality free from origination in Great Britain.¹ A piece of creating this new identity was to establish historical figures that broke away from those distinguished by the Crown. As it turned out, Christopher Columbus was the perfect fit for America's "search for a usable past," and it was with almost remarkable convenience, that William Robertson's book, *History of America*, featuring Christopher Columbus, became widely available in the young nation.² Published in 1777, this book constituted one of the first histories of America. Robertson, in his section that featured Columbus, largely referenced writings from Bartolomé de las Casas, a friar who traveled to and settled in Hispaniola who was known to advocate for the rights of the native populations that lived there, as well as the biography of Columbus's son, Ferdinand.³ In the wake of the American Revolution, this book became incredibly influential, and its hundreds of pages culminated in a depiction of Columbus that emphasizes the man's enthusiasm and genius spurring his adventurous spirit, which led him to "discover" the new world.⁴ This was convenient for colonists, newly freed from the British and searching for an American hero.

Columbus, through this means, was first introduced and then incorporated into the American historical narrative. To the public, he was enamoring. "For most patriots, I would imagine, two things sufficed. The first was that he wasn't English. The second was that, as it was believed, he had been treated with ingratitude by an Old World

1 John P. Larner, "North American Hero? Christopher Columbus 1702-2002," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137, no. 1 (1993), 50.

2 Heike Paul, "Christopher Columbus and the Myth of 'Discovery,'" In *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), 53.

3 Carla Rahn Phillips, and William D. Phillips, "Christopher Columbus in United States Historiography: Biography as Projection," *The History Teacher* 25, no. 2 (1992), 122.

4 Paul, 54.

monarchy.”⁵ He was not British and had existed outside the colonizing efforts of Britain, and most importantly, much like how the American people viewed their plight, he was treated unfairly by a monarchy he had faithfully served. With this sentiment in mind, writers took up their pens and began to rewrite Columbus into the founding history of the nation. As Paul Heik mentions in his book, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, the purpose of these written works “was to colonize the past in order to invent a meaningful beginning, and they did so by making the figure of Columbus part of their own colonial and postcolonial legacy. Many public figures and writers gathered around Columbus as a historical persona to affirm North American independence.”⁶ In this manner, Columbus became a beacon of American virtue, character, and most importantly, independence during a period in which rebelling Americans needed a patron for their cause. As an extension of this symbolism, Columbus became an American icon as much as important revolutionary figures. In Phillis Wheatley's 1776 poem, “To His Excellency General Washington,” Wheatley refers to America as Columbia. “Celestial Choir! enthron’d in realms of light, **Columbia’s scenes** of glorious toils I write.”⁷ The reference to the union of the thirteen colonies as Columbia became common practice within written works. Most importantly, however, is the mention of Columbia, or Columbus, in conjunction with George Washington. Eventually, even Washington's farewell, made just before his retirement from the presidency, was published under the title of “Columbia's Legacy.” In this manner, it is evident that Columbus was seen on the same level as key revolutionary figures, the harbingers of liberty and independence. Even more telling, however, is how the written sentiment

5 Lerner, 52.

6 Paul, 54.

7 Ibid.

extended further, and even became apparent in the naming of places within the young nation. The capital of the United States was named for George Washington, but in 1791, the government district became known as the District of Columbia. Once again, there was a comparison drawn between Washington and Columbus, symbolic of the country's ideals and representative of American citizens' view of both Washington and Columbus as equally heroic figures.⁸ Although Columbus did not land in America where the colonies resided and did nothing to promote the ideals of freedom and liberty in said society, he was considered a founding father just as much as the people who fought for liberty as the United States now understands it.

The theme of Columbus as a great American hero solidified with Joel Barlow's work, *The Vision of Columbus*. Published in 1787, Barlow's work was the first attempt to make an American epic, the foundation for which rested on Columbus's life and experiences.⁹ The poem depicts an old and embittered Columbus at the end of his life. Miraculously, an angel comes to him and brings him to the New World to see what his toils had wrought, where he could come to visualize and understand the "fruits of his cares and the children of his toil."¹⁰ This angel is known as Hesper, the "Guardian Genius of the Western World."¹¹ Hesper allows Columbus to see the future that he is credited with setting into motion, both good and bad. Columbus was first shown the destruction wrought by the Spanish and sees Cortes's path of destruction through Mexico. Upon seeing the toll of destruction, he laments that he discovered the New World in the first place, and even goes on to implore forgiveness from God.¹² This piece of the story clearly

8 Ibid.

9 Larner, 50.

10 John Noble Wilford, "Columbus and the Labyrinth of History," *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 15, no. 4 (1991), 80.

11 Larner, 51.

12 Paul, 56.

demonstrates that there was some awareness of the misconduct and misdeeds that stemmed from his discovery. Yet, in an act of redemption, Columbus was shown the Revolutionary War, the formation of the Constitution, and then, in an act of far reaching speculation, he sees a congress with every nation, now Republics, in a society resting upon everlasting peace.¹³ As much as this was a tale of American exceptionalism, it was one of forgiveness. Columbus could “rest assured that in spite of the years of agony and suffering (both of the peoples of the Americas and his own), his ‘discovery’ has been meaningful and a blessing for humanity.”¹⁴ Although there were clear misdeeds that clouded Columbus's toils, he was forgiven, as his legacy was considered the foundation from which America, in all its progressive ideas and glory, sprung from, and for that reason alone, Columbus's shortcomings were brushed aside and he was set on a pedestal for Americans to look to with pride.

Overall, Columbus's incorporation into the American narrative represented a deliberate decision on the part of the American colonists. In this sense, he served the colonist's purpose well. “Columbus’s willpower and stamina in the face of sheer insurmountable obstacles embodied the highest degree of individualism – a core American virtue in early discourses of the republic – which ‘makes Columbus an American by temperament.’”¹⁵ In a sense, Columbus was the colonial answer to the question colonists were asking themselves on the eve and in the wake of the Revolutionary War: what is an American? He was a man of adventure, perseverance and creativity, the first man to land on the fledgling nation's soil, who was victimized by the monarchical structure, just as the lands he discovered were. He was a man tenacious

13 Larner, 51.

14 Paul, 56.

15 Ibid., 57.

enough to stand up for his own ideals and individuality, and doggedly cross any hurdle that came his way. While Columbus died bitter and wronged by the monarchy he originally supported, the revolution that was birthed from his legacy sought out to redefine that relationship with monarchy, and set to right past wrongs by obtaining freedom for the colonies. In essence then, to this new nation and this new American, Columbus had laid the foundation for America and in doing so, exemplified the spirit of liberty.

3. The Columbus Myth and Manifest Destiny

Columbus's history had been entangled in the roots of American exceptionalism, and at the turn of the 19th century, very little had changed that sentiment. This foundation of Columbus as an American figure was further popularized by the migration westward and the subsequent removal of Native Americans from their homelands. The tale of Columbus's success echoes closely with the ideals that spurred American settlers to annihilate Native Americans in the name of "Manifest Destiny," or to wipe out their culture under the guise of the "White Man's Burden" of civilizing heathens. Where Columbus set sail to traverse the unknown seas, American settlers did the same across the unexplored continent. The spirit of the frontier was modeled by the spirit of Columbus, of exploring the unknown despite its dangers. As Heike goes on to mention, Columbus's quest to find a new route to India was comparative to the expansion westward made by the United States. "Columbus is a 'symbol of ongoing expansion' and 'of expansive destiny.' From the turn of the century onward, Columbus's 'daring, perseverance, and intrepidity were championed as necessary ingredients to the transcontinental endeavor'

and he 'became the very embodiment of an American pathfinder.'"¹⁶ Indeed, the desire to expand the nation from the east to the west coast was the idealization of grandeur that echoed Columbus's own conquests. Expanding the nation became the means to honor the man that had set foot into the unknown, the man that created the foundation for which the liberties fought for by patriots formed the basis of American society.

In this way, the mythology surrounding Columbus connects with the heart of the United State's own historical record of conquest, rape, murder, enslavement and oppression. The mid to late 19th century saw a change in Native American-United States relations, in which natives change from a people to be conquered to individuals to be assimilated. It is around this time in which ethnic warfare against Native Americans is guided by the slogan "kill the Indian and save the man." In an effort to undertake this process, boarding schools and adoption services took Native American children away from their families and their heritage in order to Americanize them. Columbus's illusion of grandeur was stretched beyond exploration and creating a nation stretching across the country. Instead, Columbus also became an allusion of civilization and modernity. His actions and legacy became euphemistic for the approach to native relations in a paternalistic but charitable fashion. Columbus was the figurehead under which Americans expressed their desire to bring about development in "uncivilized" and "barbaric" Native American societies. As Washington Irving wrote in his biography, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, "instead of ravaging the new found countries...he sought...to civilize the natives."¹⁷ This strong moral compass that Columbus is depicted as having within the biography and other written works takes

16 Ibid.

17 Howard Schuman, Barry Schwartz, and Hannah D'Arcy, "Elite Revisionists and Popular Beliefs: Christopher Columbus, Hero or Villain?" *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2005), 6.

precedent over the Native American perspective. By painting Columbus, and by relation, the United States, as the bestower of civilization, any form of cultural destruction or appropriation against Native Americans was seen as morally right or even as a gift to these “savage” peoples.

This type of pro-civilization sentiment became the status quo in both the process of westward expansion and its depictions in art and media, expanding further with the expansion of the nation. The movement west increasingly marginalized Native Americans, led to appropriation of their lands, and further reduced them between substantially growing white populations, all under the guise that this was the right course of action for both the Native American people and their subsequent transition to modernity, and for the steadily expanding people of the United States.¹⁸ The art of the time greatly reflected this type of anti-Native American sentiment. In Charles Russel's 1893 painting, “The Landing of Columbus in San Salvador,” Columbus is depicted landing in the New World bathed in a heavenly light representative of God's blessing. The Native Americans in the photo kneel in reverence to Columbus, as though it is clear to them a man of significant importance and civilizational superiority stands before them. As Mathew Baigell went on to explain in his Smithsonian article, “Territory, Race, Religion: Images of Manifest Destiny,” the painting was “one of the most blatantly racist works every painted by a major American artist,” as the indigenous peoples “are actors in a white-supremacist fantasy, peacefully welcoming the Europeans as their masters.”¹⁹ As artistic and written outlets continued to spread this form of racism, depicting westerners as saviors and the natives as people desperate to change and serve these godly

18 Matthew Baigell, "Territory, Race, Religion: Images of Manifest Destiny," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 4, no. 3/4 (1990), 18.

19 *Ibid.*, 19.

newcomers, it became apparent that this ideology of civilization and expansion became something not only following Columbus's adventurous spirit, but also became a means to stick to a guise of moral righteousness. Undertaking these acts of racism, the United States followed Columbus's exceptional moral compass, which the nation contrived to serve its own purposes. In this manner, racism and colonial ideology were ingrained deeply into American society, all connected to the same figure that represented freedom and liberty during the American Revolution: Columbus.

The reality of the Native Americans in the face of civilization, while depicted so serenely in art, was a far from anything of the sort. The real Columbus was not the hero that Americans heralded as the light of civilization. “For many Native Americans, Columbus’s arrival in the Americas marks the beginning of colonialism, genocide, rape, slavery, expropriation and displacement, as well as cultural death. Columbus stands at the beginning of a new and for many inhabitants of the Americas deadly era.”²⁰ Columbus, under the guise of what Americans called civilization, set forth the process of cultural destruction, slavery and racism, and because the Native Americans were the “savages” needing western influence to embrace modernity, their plight and situation were overlooked. If Columbus was morally right and he made western expansion morally right, then clearly the antithesis to the situation had to have been the natives and their barbaric ways. This mindset set the precedent for Native American cultural appropriation and destruction throughout the history of the United States. Actions that should have been inexcusable were largely overlooked. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 allowed natives to further be displaced from their homes. The forced march of Cherokee Indians from their homelands to Oklahoma in 1838, a path known as the Trail of Tears, killed an estimated

²⁰ Paul, 69.

4,000 individuals from starvation and disease.²¹ This became the nation's status quo. The United States did not stop at land, however, and began to take children from their homes. The forceful removal of native American children from their families was advertised as some remarkable and loving civic duty. The slogan “kill the Indian and save the man,” was a form of moral duty for Americans to rally under. The cultural destruction of an entire race of individuals was something to be carried out by dominating Native American land and removing Native American children from their heritage. Instead, these children were taught to speak English, were forced to cut their hair short, and were made to learn western forms of etiquette, dress, and education. Columbus, in this way, was more than just an important figure added to the national narrative, he was a means of engaging people, through unbridled racism and nationalism, in the process of destroying culture beyond what was the expected norm of the United States.

4. Columbus as an Ethnic Hero

In an ironic twist, while Columbus's name was used to displace millions of Native Americans in an effort to eradicate their cultural presence in the United States, he also became an ethnic hero for other marginalized groups desperate for a foothold in American society. The further solidification of Columbus's grandeur in the United States came in the form of immigrants who wished to legitimize their presence in the nation. Columbus became the defense for both Roman Catholics and Italian immigrants, who bore the brunt of harsh racism and religious intolerance in the 1800s. By using his narrative as their foundation for their right to also be in the United States, they too

²¹ "Trail of Tears," The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Accessed November 20, 2018, <<http://www.cherokeemuseum.org/archives/era/trail-of-tears>>.

catapulted the imagery surrounding Columbus's supposed heroics further into the national narrative. The first of these two groups, Catholics, arrived between 1830 and 1860, and transformed a population of 300,000 to ten times its original number: 3 million. Faced with a predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and nativist society, Catholics received widespread hostility and began to use Columbus, a Catholic, for their justification in the country.²² In 1882, Irish Catholics organized a fraternity known as the Knights of Columbus. Within this order, Columbus was heralded as a seer and paragon that each knight worked to exemplify. During this period, the Knights, as well as other Catholics in Europe and America, worked to canonize Columbus for bringing “the 'Christian faith to half the world.’”²³ Faced with the prejudice of a new society, Catholics took the Columbus narrative and twisted it around to serve their purposes, much like the colonists vying for an American hero during the Revolutionary War period, as well as those looking for a justification and moral excuse to undertake the process of Manifest Destiny. In this manner, the historical use of Columbus took many faces. The evil Columbus who established a pattern of subsequent behavior was just one aspect of the Columbus historical narrative. Beyond that, the historical use of Columbus included religious narratives, and most importantly, narratives that served as a shield to justify select immigrant populations' presence in the United States. The Columbus characteristic of the United States' historical narrative may have been one heavily shrouded in pro-colonial idealization and strong senses of racial superiority, but his importance in America also served as a foothold for many immigrants who were not Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. If his discovery of America meant that he paved the way for a western dominated society,

22 Lerner, 57.

23 Wilford, 80.

then since he was a Catholic, he paved the way for the spread of the religion, as well as secured a spot for his religion in the country idealizing him the most: America.

The second of the two groups, Italians, faced a very similar dilemma. The 1840s to 1850s saw a second wave of immigrants, largely from Southern Italy. This number steadily grew and from the 1880s to 1924, there were approximately 4 million Italian immigrants in the United States. Much like with the arrival of Catholics, Italians were treated with xenophobia-fueled hostility due to the American nativist perspective. The Italian plight was further compounded by the fact that they were also Catholics as well as considered an “undesirable” ethnic group. Under this mindset, there was “intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections,” due to a fear of these groups threatening “what they considered to be a distinctively American way of life.”²⁴ In this way, Italian and Catholic immigrants were viewed as untrustworthy, treated like some form of foreign invasion, and were therefore highly discriminated against, and in some cases, even assaulted. This idealization was only further perpetuated with the Immigration Act of 1924, which barred immigration from “undesirable” countries in mass numbers into the country. It is no wonder then that Italians, like other Catholics, asserted that they should not be marginalized and subjected to prejudice, especially because of Columbus's importance to the United States. Columbus was an Italian from Genoa, and if his toils were celebrated as the spirit and foundation of the nation, then Italians belonged in America just as much as their ancestor.²⁵ It is during this time that we see a change in the Columbus rhetoric, where the Columbus ideology was turned around and used by marginalized groups, mostly to fit in

²⁴ Paul, 61.

²⁵ Ibid., 62-64.

with American society, and as a result, created this new identity for Columbus as an ethnic hero. As Hans Koning would acknowledge in his article, "The Legacy of Columbus," "I have met Italian-Americans who explained to me that Columbus was their childhood hero, the only name they could use as a shield when they were the victims of discrimination."²⁶ To gain a foothold in American society, these immigrants and cultural outsiders had to latch onto their main connection to the nation, which was Christopher Columbus. Columbus was the shield that protected and justified Italian presence during a time in which they were marginalized, mistreated, and overwhelmingly unwanted in the United States.

In this manner, the Columbus mythology became complex both in its treatment and acceptance by minority populations. On one side, Columbus was a means to oppress and appropriate, to destroy Native American culture and legitimize white, Anglo-Saxon Americans' actions under the guise of upstanding moral superiority. On the other side, Columbus became a way for Roman Catholic and Italian immigrants to legitimize themselves. By using the cultural narrative of Columbus set by the United States, Columbus became a symbol of ethnic hope and validation, and it is through these ideas that Columbus is further ingrained into the America narrative, for it is through the efforts of these populations, pushing for a cultural claim in the broader U.S. Societal context, that Columbus memorials would be revitalized and Columbus day would be celebrated as a national holiday. While these two sides of the Columbus legacy in relation to minorities take opposite directions, one fact remains the same. Whether it was the forced removal of Native Americans from their homelands, or the acceptance of Columbus as part of select immigrant heritage, both played into the idea that the contrived heroics and moralistic,

²⁶ Hans Koning, "The Legacy of Columbus," *Social Justice* 19, no. 2 (48) (1992), 37.

racial, colonial ideals surrounding Columbus were the standard aspects of thought that constituted being an American. Therefore, it is clear that whether one was perpetuating or on the consequential end of this cycle of racial intolerance and the quest for a cohesive and noninclusive definition of “American,” both played into the concept of the American legacy. A legacy which emphasized Columbus as a hero and founding father of the nation, as well as patron of westernization and colonization. These qualities and characteristics remained steadily fastened to the roots of American society and consciousness.

5. Changing Attitudes and the 1992 Quincentennial

It would not be until around 1960, almost 200 years after being added to America's national heritage, that the Columbus historiography would begin to change, culminating with the 1992 quincentennial of his voyage. During this time, historians and civil rights activists began the process of dismantling the Columbus mythology and subsequently, the role his narrative played in the American expansionist agenda. After the end of World War II, postwar America had found itself in a much more open society, something that at first only seemed to elevate Columbus in America. The height of this elevation cumulated with the 1964 election of Lyndon B Johnson, who went on to make Columbus day a national holiday, mentioning that the holiday commemorated the “spirit of discovery,” and “our ability to live and work together, men and women of all national origins, as one united and progressive nation.”²⁷ It is clear from such a statement that the Columbus embodying Manifest Destiny and spurring forward westward expansion, who perpetuated cultural warfare against Native Americans, was still inherent in American

²⁷ Larner, 61.

society. Even after the appropriation and death that resulted from said ideologies, individuals still looked to him as a man who represented cooperation among all races. The guise of racial subjugation by white supremacy as cooperation further shrouded Columbus in this idealized grandeur. “In other words in the wake of the first presidency of a Roman Catholic of Irish origins, a non-Protestant, non-Anglo-Saxon was being admitted to the pantheon. Columbus, you would say, was at that moment the symbol of the underdog in America, made good.”²⁸ In an ironic twist of this postwar time, Columbus, who had been a figure of American exceptionalism and by extension, of white supremacy, had become an underdog somehow reminiscent of every marginalized group in the United States. Yet, it was his name in which systematic oppression was carried out under a pretense of moral righteousness.

Despite this new revitalization of Columbus ideology, the 1960s also saw considerable backlash from marginalized groups against the white majority. The civil rights movement was finally thrusting African American culture, identity, and exceptionalism into the American spotlight in a demand for respect and equality. This paved the way for other groups to take a stand for their rights and address the misdeeds white individuals had wrought upon their societies, culture and lives. Of these groups to rise up against white supremacy alongside African Americans, Native Americans stood up and began to question the actions of America's society. They questioned and pushed back against the formalization of Columbus Day into the the United States narrative, when it was he who set into motion the systematic destruction of their people. For the first time, this set in motion critical efforts to reevaluate the Columbus legacy in the perspective of those who were colonized. “As Indian and scholarly critiques came

²⁸ Ibid.

together, reinforced by the anti-colonial sentiments that had developed in the wake of World War II, major organizations with a much wider reach began to express guilt over what Columbus resented.”²⁹ Although Columbus had been elevated in society as a figure worthy of having a holiday in his honor, the subject became controversial. Individuals began to question his celebration in American culture and the merits he was said to uphold. Historians began to reevaluate the story of Columbus, and did so in a more cohesive, historically accurate and racially sensitive manner. The push against white supremacy, lead by the civil rights movement, spurred a new kind of Columbus historiography. This new methodology questioned the longstanding American traditions of expansionism, colonialism, nativism, as well as the resulting racism and ethnocentrism that were institutionalized in American society.

This new view of Columbus began to grow, and over the course of about thirty years, ascended with the 1992 quincentennial of Columbus's first voyage to the New World. During this time, Native American anti-Columbus protest was at an all time high and celebration of the event was met with opposition. For those who did not scrap the commemoration altogether, it became necessary to depict the whole of Columbus, meaning there had to be light shed on his misdeeds. The exhibit at the Smithsonian followed such a route, depicting, with limitation, both the negative and positive sides of Columbus. Despite that, however, the exhibit focused more on varying aspects of life during the time period, including information on food and disease.³⁰ This was a drastic change in celebration from those that idealized Columbus during the 1792 and 1892 anniversaries of his voyage, and instead of painting Columbus as an untouchable hero,

29 Schuman et al, 8.

30 Ibid.

people discussed the darker side of his history, one which was steeped in ambition and slavery.³¹ In this manner, they did not celebrate Columbus and his story. Rather, they gave attention to those who had been hurt in the aftermath of his toils. “Rather than affirming the Columbian legacy of the United States in a patriotic spirit....the 1992 commemorations clearly also belonged to those who were victimized by this legacy; thus, the event introduced a new kind of national memorial culture and a new kind of critical patriotism.”³² Indeed, this event finally gave voice to millions of people wronged, enslaved, and murdered as a direct result of, or in connection to, Columbus's landing in the Americas and his legacy. In addition, the event constituted a critical reversal against Eurocentrism and historiography that frames history through the view of European actions only. Through these means, the idealization of Columbus, although not shattered altogether, had changed along with American society. While it still required considerable effort on the part of minority groups, for the first time, concessions were made in American culture that changed patriotism from only idealizing the best of a historical figure or time period, to acknowledging the wrongdoings and misdeeds of the past.

6. Conclusion

Despite these changes in Columbus historiography, his place in the United States narrative remains largely unchanged. Columbus, while perhaps not as prominent as he was in the 18th and 19th centuries, is still an American icon. Although these concessions were considerable, the lack of change in overall public sentiment is a surprising, yet contrarily enough, somewhat understandable. First and foremost, although the

31 Paul, 69.

32 Ibid., 72.

quintcentennial was an important win for revisionist historians, revisionist history cannot always compete with popular narrative. Even with the acknowledgement of the misdeeds wrought by Columbus's actions, both in mainstream media and even some school textbooks, the metaphorical damage has largely been done. While these revisionist ideas challenge Columbus's legacy as a national hero, the roots of that legacy run deep and are constantly legitimized through public displays and symbolism. Columbus is still depicted in art and writing, has statues commemorating his deeds, has numerous places named after him, and even still retains the holiday in his honor. "Once the commemoration process gets under way, it picks up steam and operates by a logic...of its own. Not only are records kept, diaries saved and news accounts written, but statues are built, museums endowed, brass plaques engraved."³³ In this manner, despite the attacks against Columbus's character, the sheer mass of the memorials in his honor serve as a shield to keep his constructed heroisms in the public eye. Through these symbols, Columbus is legitimized and lionized, and until they are removed and Columbus day is no longer celebrated, the celebration of Columbus's deeds will be difficult to end.

Secondly, aside from the legitimacy Columbus is granted through American works and symbols, his idealized, pro-colonial narrative is taught and reinforced at a young age in the American education system; all under the guise of discovery and adventure. His mythology is still taught in public schools, where elementary teachers adhere to a curriculum that still teaches a positive view of Columbus, discussing his ships and the bravery of his voyage. By extension, Columbus's toils are represented in elementary reading books, most notably in a series used to teach literacy to third graders as a means to teach reading but also absorbing "historical" content. These books paint

33 Schuman et al, 22.

Columbus in a positive light, highlighting the dangers of his voyage and his subsequent success.³⁴ Furthermore, an inspection of fifteen widely used middle and high school textbooks in James W. Leowen's publication *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus*, showed that “almost everything [written about Columbus] is either wrong or unknowable. The textbooks have taken us on a trip of their own, away from the facts of history, into the realm of myth.”³⁵ This shows that despite there being a variety of new historiography on Columbus that pushes against this idealistic stereotype, they are largely ignored, and books/teaching materials continue to perpetuate this false, purely heroic and innocuous image of Columbus's voyage and the outcomes it had for the New World. If educational curriculum and texts remain unchanged with the new revisionist history that is conducive to the Native American plight and the terrible deeds Columbus committed, then the dissemination of that information is halted and the standard Columbian mythology remains at the forefront of society.

Finally, it is necessary to understand the underlying reasons why changes to the pro-colonial and overwhelmingly racist Columbus idealization remain so minimal in American society. This can be understood in relation to government policy. The pervasiveness of Columbus's figure throughout American history has shaped the United States's actions against minority peoples and has helped sustain the institutionalized inequality and our nations's justification of it hundreds of years after the colonization of the New World. By understanding the core of American ideals regarding colonization, exploration, and race through the use of Columbus as a historical narrative instrument, it becomes easier to understand the central values of the life and liberty of United States,

34 Ibid., 22.

35 Paul, 75.

and what inherent biases lurk within those ideas. Columbus being taught in schools is a means in which colonial ideology can be indoctrinated upon each new generation. “[T]he Columbus story is crucial to Eurocentrism, not only because Columbus was a seminal figure within the history of colonialism, but also because idealized versions of this story have served to initiate generation after generation into the colonial paradigm.”³⁶ Although these protests of the quincentenary gave a voice to Native American and minority populations, the institutionalized racism and inequality have remained, and United State's policy has stayed largely unchanged.

This is, in part, due to the continual use of Columbus as a pro-colonial mechanism, and a subsequent means in which a pro-expansionist, colonialist, and nativist mindset can continually be propagated. Morally, it is difficult to admit the faults of the past. As Koning writes, “it has been so difficult for us to admit the truth both to our children and to ourselves. It is only a step from Columbus and his man-eating dogs to that governor in New England who offered a \$40 reward for any adult Indian scalp and \$20 for any scalp of an Indian child. When we cope with the Conquest, we cannot avoid coping with the history of the United States.”³⁷ It is hard to admit the foundation for society was built on the backs of slavery, injustice and murder, and it is even harder to admit that these inequalities still occur today. Institutionally, the continuation of the heroic Columbus mindset keeps individuals uncaring, complacent and perhaps even supportive of the colonial agenda and white supremacy mindset. Indeed, in the spirit of westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, and the white man's burden of bringing about civilizational changes, settlers were spurred to acquire land from and undertake gruesome

36 Ibid., 74.

37 Koning, 38.

and heinous acts against Native Americans. In reality, little has changed and the ideology that pushed settlers and the U.S. Government to undermine Native American's claim to land echoes closely with the policies undertaken in the present, such as the approval of the Dakota Access Pipeline despite Native American protest and pleas for the protection of their drinking water. Whereas Columbus's dogs were turned on Native Americans in the Caribbean, attack dogs were thrust upon these protesters, who wished only to protect their life and livelihood. In this way, the biases of racial tension and inequality, inherent in American society, are further perpetuated in relation to the celebration of Columbus's legacy, and while those facing the consequences of that ideology struggle, having the system in place serves governmental purposes well. If revisionist history cannot be undertaken by the government regarding aspects such as schooling and memorial sites it controls, then little can change and Columbus will continue to remain a strong component of the United States's national identity.

Overall, from the 18th century to the present, Columbus became symbolic of the “American.” At first, Columbus was the colonial answer to “what was an American?” in the wake of separation from British history and ideology. Columbus, through rose-tinted glasses, was everything an American could dream of. He was not British, had suffered from monarchy, but was brave and heroic, with an audacity to face dangerous situations head on. He was freedom from the British Crown, and an embodiment of the success of hard work and perseverance. When American ideology changed in relation to westward expansion, so to did Columbus. Instead, Columbus became a figure of exploration, colonization, expansion and civilization. When Roman Catholics and Italians needed a means to assimilate and justify their presence in the United States, Columbus became an

example of the success of the underdog in American society. When historiography surrounding Columbus's commemoration faced backlash from Native Americans and civil rights groups, a new type of historiography, focusing on those wronged instead of the solely Eurocentric view of history, emerged. Taking this all into account, then, it must be asked, who was Columbus? A murder, rapist and slaver? A harbinger of civilization? An ethnic hero? The answer, to all of those questions is yes. Columbus's addition to the national narrative dates back to the founding of the nation. For over 200 years, Columbus has been part of the American narrative. He is the underscore of the racial tension inherent in American society, and is one of the moral and conceptual ideas behind the colonial actions the United States has taken both at home and abroad up until the present. Despite the realities of his misdeeds, the public perspective is skewed in a positive light, reminiscent of the United State's misdeeds that get swept from public consciousness. From the values of the American Revolution, to the ethnic cleansing and cultural appropriation undertaken on U.S. soils, the Columbus mythology has played a role and will continue to play a role in racial tension unless pro-colonial, Eurocentric, and white supremacist views can be maintained through mainstream government institutions. Until then, Columbus and his role in American ideology will continue to be the undercurrent of the systematic inequalities inherent in the United States.

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