

March 19, 2019

To: The Colorado Senate and House Bill Hearing Committee,

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 and to encourage better historical education for Colorado Day.

What makes Columbus Day such an issue for me is not only that Columbus both historically and symbolically institutes the transatlantic slave trade that fed the economic greed that our nation's founders could not resolve, but that within attempts to be more inclusive we rarely ponder those who are being forced to join a system whose very logic is founded on their extermination, whether by conquest through warfare, religion, allotment and property, the stripping of native languages and names in boarding schools, blood laws for tribal membership, or attempts to terminate the reservation system which was itself Hitler's inspiration for concentration camps.¹

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,² I see 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.

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. I know that many students long ago got the message that our education system's treatment of them challenged their very existence from the time they were little. And for Native parents, what a fraught decision it must be to send their children to school in a state that still legally recognizes the man who both historically and symbolically signals these attempts at erasure.

Last week, MSU Denver officially became an Hispanic Serving Institution.³ 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 gratefully 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.

¹ See James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.

² 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.

³ http://red.msudenver.edu/2019/msu-denver-earns-hispanic-serving-institution-status.html?fbclid=IwAR272UtFnBeOhhOZgUwKTvvScCpsrwYIAnRSB1C7xTXiBXzc_n83isQowGE

Concerning the History of the Holiday

- Catholic organizations such as the Knights of Columbus 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.
- 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,”⁴ 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.
- 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

⁴ Darin Haton, Washington Irving’s Columbus and the Flat Earth, December 2, 2014
<http://dhaton.haverford.edu/blog/2014/12/02/washington-irvings-columbus-and-the-flat-earth/>

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.

- 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.

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 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 and Why We Need to Especially Include Native Peoples

- 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 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. 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 Natives and European communities. Democratic arguably rule exists on Turtle Island – what people now call the United States – before the flawed inclusion of Christian doctrines into the national legal tradition. 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.