

The Fall of the 500-Year Reich

1492–1992

David Watson

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“How can the spirit of the earth like the White man?...Everywhere the White man has touched it, it is sore.”
—a woman of the Wintu tribe (California)

Among the many places too numerous to name that have been defiled and destroyed by western civilization, there is a mountain in a place called Arizona, a mountain called *Dzil nchaa si an* (Big Seated Mountain) in the language of the earliest known human inhabitants, Mount Graham on modern maps. This is the abode of the Spirit Dancers (Ga'an), who taught the Apaches their sacred songs and dances. It is the highest peak in the Pinaleno Mountains, situated at the meeting place of four biotic zones—the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts and the Rocky Mountain and Sierra Madre forests.

Dzil nchaa si an rises out of the desert to more than ten thousand feet and contains a wider range of life zones—from boreal forest to Sonoran desert—than any other mountain in the United States (another modern map name, of the empire laying claim to that region and to a good part of the whole planet). The mountain is the last remnant of Pleistocene forests in the American southwest, home to many unique and rare species, among them the red squirrel and the northern goshawk. At least eighteen species of plant and animal are entirely unique to the mountain. The Apaches collect healing herbs and waters and practice ceremonies there. It is an entire cosmos—biogeological, spiritual, phenomenological. There is no other place like it anywhere. It could never be replaced or reconstructed.

Now a familiar array of political, scientific and economic powers are colluding to seize and destroy this place. Through lies, corruption and circumvention of even their own laws, these powers have built roads onto the mountain, locked the herb gatherers out, arrested dozens who have tried to stop the destruction, and clearcut some two thousand acres of irreplaceable forest. They are murdering the mountain because it is prime real estate, shredding a complex life web for an abstraction they worship called property. Property is money, and there is money to be made, power to be consolidated, more imperial adventures to commence.

A consortium of capitalist institutions, from the University of Arizona to other U.S. and European academic institutions, and even the Vatican, plans to build an astronomical observatory—a chain of them, in fact. This could be done elsewhere, surely, but that does not matter. They want this land, this forest, these Spirit Dancers. Having ruined so much of the planet they stand on, they are uninterested in what little so tenuously remains; they prefer instead to gaze into space, perhaps in search of new territories to exploit, or perhaps to see their sky god, harsh father who sends them ever onward to level everything in their path. Even though some of the universities have dropped out due to expense and public pressure (certainly not because of any change of heart), the University of Arizona, the European institutes and the Vatican persist—with the Vatican assuring all that the mountain is not sacred to the Apaches—or at least that there is no evidence to support the Apache claim.

History Symbolic

“The more we come to know of history,” writes Frederick W. Turner in *Beyond Geography*, “the more it reveals itself to be symbolic, as the discrete events, artifacts, and personages tend to lose something of their individualities and become increasingly representative.” How appropriate, then, that this cosmological expedition that will kill a mountain is called—not by its opponents but by its authors—the Columbus Project. And that it is all coming to a head during the year of celebrations by western capital of its initiation, what has been aptly called “the 500-year Reich.”

All of the original elements are present: the greed for gold and glory, justified by a punitive, shriveled, other-worldly religion; the maniacal disregard for the profound interrelationships in time and space that make up the myriad mystery we call life; the attitude that land is nothing but dead resources to be mined, poisoned, reduced to waste; the idea that such waste is plenitude and the highest sign of human health and happiness. That is the story of the whole western world, of course—the story of modern capitalism. It is the story of the United States. It is the story of the University of Arizona, of the Vatican, of all the Columbus Projects and Columbus conspiracies, starting with the first.

Indeed, as soon as Columbus arrived on the island shores around these turtle continents, he looked upon their beauty with the same dead eyes the astronomers now cast on the place of the Spirit Dancers. (And all places have had their Spirit Dancers. Capitalism isn't simply an “economic system”—though that is how it names itself. It is a disorder of the Spirit.)

“They traded and gave everything they had, with good will...and took delight in pleasing us,” wrote the Admiral to his sovereigns of the people he had encountered. “They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor do they murder or steal...I believe that in all the world there is no better country. They love their neighbors as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing.”

The Europeans would quickly demonstrate the differences between good, evil, and value. Of the land the Admiral reported that it was “very green and fertile and the air very sweet,” bearing “trees...more beautiful to see than any other thing that has ever been seen,” and that the crew should earn the natives' trust, “that something profitable might be had, since it didn't seem the land could be anything but profitable, by its beauty.”

Of these people without knowledge of evil Columbus wrote that they were “fit to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and do everything else that may be needed,” and ordered his sailors to kidnap a number of them to carry them back to Europe. Soon to follow was a series of incursions into what the Europeans suspected might even be the terrestrial paradise itself, “looting and destroying all they found,” as the Admiral's son would write of an expedition onto the island of Guadeloupe, where the Europeans slaughtered humans and other animals alike.

Bartholome de las Casas, one of the authentic voices of conscience during the period, would later write that it was “cruelty never before seen, nor heard, nor read of...” Wrote another Spaniard, Alonso de Zuaso, to a friend in Spain, “If I were to tell you all the damage that has been done, I should never make an end...Although these islands had been, since God made the earth, prosperous and full of people lacking nothing they needed; yet...they were laid waste...”

The Legacy of Progress

That letter was written in 1518. How much damage has been done since that time! True, the native people were not necessarily made to be ordered about or to work, and they fought back. But they were pushed back and overwhelmed by more and more waves of invaders. Far from being remarkable, the first Columbus Project was only the first in a long line of outrages. Every single day is the anniversary of some awful calamity.

But capital is commemorating the first encounter both to celebrate and to veil the real meaning of its origins. Those who administer the capitalist power complex understand, if only inchoately, that the conquest of the so-called new world, the enslavement of and genocide against its peoples, the rapid despoliation of the flower and cream of its sacred places, and the kidnapping and enslavement of African peoples—the “imported indigens” who

would work the land under the lash of the whip—all subsidized the emergence and consolidation of power of the capitalist traders as an international ruling class.

Correspondingly, the conquered villages, peasants and artisans of Europe whose commons were stolen and ransacked by that class would be channeled into the armies of conquest in the expanding empire that now rules, in one form or another, the entire planet. Thus, like many mythologies of origin, the Columbus mystique conceals a crime, an original violence. The Columbus hoopla is becoming a deafening din because of the enormity of the crimes it conceals.

That is why they are celebrating in Seville, and in Barcelona (which Spanish dissidents have renamed Carcelona, containing the Spanish word *carcel*, meaning jail, and a suggestion of carcinoma, the same word in English and Spanish, meaning cancer). That is why they are celebrating in all the Columbias and Columbuses named for the Admiral, and in Washington D.C., on Wall Street, at the presidential palaces of death squad dictatorships, at the University of Arizona and the Vatican. That is why, in a gesture evocative of an absurd scene from some magic-realist novel, a tin-pot strongman has been clearing away poor barrios of Santo Domingo to build a preposterously huge lighthouse, far from the sea itself, in honor of the “discoverer” of America.

In just a few centuries of plunder, more damage has been done to the living fabric of the land than in all previous ages combined. That is the legacy of five hundred years of capitalist civilization, of progress. It started with a place misnamed America, a place described by the Admiral as a virgin whose white knight he was fated to be. And its exemplar became, at least until very recently, a powerful cabal called the United States of America. But now there are other rivals; the plague is everywhere. Its progress in methods of ruination has steadily accelerated to a point at which the whole global organism is being unhinged by continued looting and destruction.

Every day is the anniversary of a theft, kidnapping, slaughter, desolation, fraud, immolation, betrayal, abuse. Every day the anniversary of a people’s disappearance, the poisoning of a waterway, the razing of a forest, the extinction of a species, the demise of still another subtle facet of being. Every day the anniversary of the origin of a lie and every day the perpetuation of the lie. Every day the extension and acceleration of conquest, the cut-and-run pillage of a refuge, the declarations of war, the stupefaction of the spirit. Every day its business deals, every day its clear-cuts, every day its oil spills, every day its bombing runs, every day its “collateral damage.”

Today’s expedition setting sail toward the mountain where the spirits dance is not remarkable, either, only exemplary and emblematic. The conquerors will discover, strip the mountain, grind its bones to erect their telescopes. They will commence their reconnaissance of the heavens. Even the stars will tremble with dread.

A Drop of Vengeance

In a powerful essay on the nuclear threat, Alice Walker discusses a very old “curse-prayer” collected by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s, a violent, potent curse “by a person who would readily, almost happily, commit suicide, if it meant her enemies would also die. Horribly.” Walker wonders if the revenge in that curse, which she surmises must have been uttered first by a conquered woman of color, is now coming to pass in the current, global mass extermination crisis.

Might human extinction be preferable to this civilization’s further conquest of the universe? she asks. “If we have any true love for the stars, planets, and the rest of Creation, we must do everything we can to keep white men away from them. They who have appointed themselves our representatives to the rest of the universe. They who have never met any new creature without exploiting, abusing, or destroying it. They who say we poor (white included) and colored and female and elderly blight neighborhoods, while they blight worlds...

“Under the white man every star would become a South Africa, every planet a Vietnam.”

Walker’s essay illuminates that radical despair that induced captives to jump from slave ships into the open sea, slave women to kill their own children to keep them from the master’s grasp, Vietnamese peasants to live in tunnels for years under the carpet-bombing of U.S. B-52s and to continue fighting against enormous odds. It is the desperation beyond despair that prompted the people of Boipatong, South Africa, to taunt the cops to shoot as they raised their guns against the community, after some forty had already been butchered (and the cops did shoot, killing more). It is the desperation beyond all despair that leads enraged human beings to burn down “their

own neighborhoods.” It is the poisonous vengeance fermenting just below the surface of capitalism’s anniversary celebrations.

A drop of this poison, a drop of this vengeance, then, to steel us, to fortify us. But Walker is not arguing for a suicidal conflagration, concluding instead that the earth is her home and that she intends to protect it. This earth is our home, too, this abused continent, this wounded place of the strait between the lakes. We, too, intend to fight for it For all the places where the spirits dance, or where they might dance again.

In some of the old native prophecies the coming of the Europeans set in motion the end of one world, one whole cosmos, and the birth of another. This New World Order was not itself everlasting; it was also limited in time and would eventually end. Just as the catastrophe then had its signs and its omens, there are enough signs now that this elaborate, grisly illusion, this 500-year trail of tears, is unraveling. Where they have ravaged the land they gaze at the sky.

But the sky will not save them.

“I wonder if the ground has anything to say?” declared Young Chief, of the Cayuses, at the signing of a treaty that would confine his people to a reservation. But he knew what the ground was saying, that they “should take good care of the ground and do each other no harm.” Listen now to what the land is telling us—all of us, the remnants and orphans of pillaged and scattered tribes. It is telling us that the time has come, that the empire’s days are running out, that it is time to begin a dance, a variegated, brilliant Ghost Dance for the end of the millennium, that will bring together all the broken villages, the runaway slaves, the rebels who have regained their humanity by deserting the machine, all those who are seeing the signs and beginning to understand that it was always a lie, and that one way or another it will come to its end.

The Forest Beckoning

A multicultural Ghost Dance, then. We are all in need of it Shango and the Delaware prophet and Lao-tse. Shaman dreamers and the general strike. Mad love and the beach beneath the pavement. The forest beckoning. “A lawless people, but...on good terms with the Great Spirit,” as Tatanga Mani (Talking Buffalo) of the Stoney tribe described his people in the last century. Hearing what the ground has to say. Hearing the heart.

According to the Lakota philosopher Luther Standing Bear, the roots of the tree of our lives had to grasp rock and soil, the formative processes of this continent, before we newcomers could ever understand it—or ourselves. And with the passing of time, some have come to a loyalty to the land. Now, out of necessity, because we are squeezed against the edge of a precipice—or perhaps because it was already long ago understood and dreamed—we are beginning to understand.

We are beginning to listen to the land, to let it speak through us. It’s an appropriate time to put an end to the geographical, now astronomical mystique, the empire fever, the mechanical somnambulance, and to pay attention to the spirit dancers. The spirit dancers at Dzil ncha si an, where the conspirators must be stopped; but also the spirits at Big Mountain, at Sand Creek, at Pine Ridge, at James Bay and Wao Kele O Puna and Sarawak, and the Loire, the Amazon, everywhere the spirits might rise and dance. Even here, in this neighborhood, by the Strait, they are struggling to open their battered wings, and we with them.

Let the curse-prayer fall on the conquerors, on the University of Arizona and the Vatican, on the Columbus Project, on the whole imperial procession. Their half-millennium is over. The rest is ours!

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For further information on Dzil ncha si an, contact Ernest Victor, Jr. at San Carlos Tribal Headquarters (602) 475-2361, ext. 275) or Wendaler Nosle (602) 475-2229), or write/send support to the Apache Survival Coalition, P.O. Box 11814, Tucson, AZ 85734.

Information on the struggle at Mount Graham came from articles in *Threshold* (publication of the Student Environmental Action Coalition), particularly the October and November/December 1991 issues (SEAC, POB 1168, Chapel Hill, NC 27514-1168); various issues of the Earth First! Journal, see issues 2/91, 3/91, 12/91 and 2/92 (EF!), POB 5176, Missoula MT 59806).

The newsletter of Cultural Survival recently published an update on the fight. (Cultural Survival, 53A Church St., Cambridge MA 02138)

The following books were cited in this essay:

*Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence*, compiled by T.C. McLuhan (1971)

*The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy*, by Kirkpatrick Sale (1991)

*Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*, by Frederick W. Turner (1980)—available through FE Books.

“Only Justice Can Stop A Curse,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, by Alice Walker (1983)

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