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**“Heathens, Infidels, and Savages”:
Columbus Day, the Western Shoshone,
and the Christian Foundations of American Empire**

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On October 8, 2004, a slight woman with grayed hair and bright eyes took the microphone in front of a gathered crowd at Cuernavaca Park in Denver, Colorado. The occasion for this gathering was the Four Directions–All Nations March, an event held to coincide with the national celebration of Columbus Day and the local production of the Columbus Day Parade. This woman, an elder of the Western Shoshone Indian Nation named Carrie Dann, looked over the surroundings and began by speaking the following words:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Good evening all my relatives.

I've never been to a gathering like this, you know, where a figure in history [is recognized] that claimed to have discovered people, or a country maybe "without people." Christopher Columbus when he came aboard said he discovered paradise. When he found that the people that lived there were not of Christian faith, he then called them heathens, infidels, and savages. I always say I am very glad to wear those labels, if they want to lay labels on us. Because the indigenous peoples in the Western hemisphere were—and we still are—a very sharing people... I admire you people for taking Columbus out of the history books. Please do so, because we were here, and he did not discover our land because we were here already.¹

This last statement invited spontaneous applause from the crowd, a diverse group who had come together in support of the March's stated mission to "transform the Columbian legacy of colonialism and genocide into a mutually respectful interaction between all peoples."² To the participants of this event, the celebration of a federally-recognized Columbus Day holiday represented an affront to their sense of justice, a validation of oppressive policies, and a betrayal of historical truth. Such an attitude is deserving of critical attention. Why would many persons of different backgrounds come together to oppose the recognition of a historical figure who lived over 500 years ago? How can an individual like Carrie Dann connect the struggles of her people, whose homeland includes parts of what are today the states of Nevada, California, Utah, and

¹ Carrie Dann, Four Directions All Nations March, Denver, Colorado, 8 October 2004, address. Audio recording may be found at "Carrie Dann Western Shoshone Land Rights and Colonialism," *Transform Columbus Day*, The Transform Columbus Day Alliance, web, 2 November 2009, <<http://hearsoundstories.net/2004.html>>.

² "Four Directions All Nations March," *Transform Columbus Day*, The Transform Columbus Day Alliance, PDF File, web, 2 November 2009 <<http://www.transformcolumbusday.org/TCDarchive/2004/4directions.pdf>>.

Idaho, to the legacy of a man who never set foot on the mainland United States? Cannot Christopher Columbus be properly understood as a heroic adventurer and pillar of Christian faith, whose discovery of the “New World” initiated a process which has culminated in the rise of the most free, prosperous, and advanced nation on earth, a “rock in a raging sea”?³

In order to address these and other related questions, I organize my presentation in this paper around three main sections, broadly sketched as follows. In the first section, the myth and reality of Christopher Columbus are briefly considered in order to distinguish how this figure has come to function in the creation and maintenance of a dominant Narrative about notions such as “the American nation” and “the American experience.” Second, the beginnings of a theoretical approach to understanding this American Narrative is proposed, along with an exploration of some of its vital dynamics. Finally, the third section includes an analysis of Columbus and the American Narrative through the lens of Western Shoshone history and experience. In this way, the claims of individuals like Carrie Dann regarding the “Columbian legacy of colonialism and genocide” are evaluated in light of competing assertions and historical evidence.⁴

³ George W. Bush, “Inaugural Address,” 2001 Presidential Inaugural, Capitol Building, Washington DC, 20 January 2001, United States Department of State, web, 4 November 2009 <<http://infousa.state.gov/government/overview/pres66.html>>. Bush stated, “Through much of the last century, America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations. Our democratic faith is more than the creed of our country, it is the inborn hope of our humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along; and even after nearly 225 years, we have a long way yet to travel.”

⁴ Following Ward Churchill, I use the term “genocide” throughout this paper to describe the systematic targeting and destruction of Native peoples and cultures which has occurred in the Americas since 1492. This process has taken many forms; yet, the primary objective has remained the extinction of Native bodies and worldviews. For a detailed exposition of this topic, see *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997).

Reflecting on this evidence and analysis, I argue that cases like that of the Western Shoshone clearly demonstrate the way in which the American Narrative has simultaneously concealed and validated oppressive Euroamerican⁵ cultural beliefs about a hierarchy of being and the genocidal disposition of the reigning politico-economic system. Such dynamics are both prefigured and promoted by the figure of Columbus, whose own record of greed and violence becomes deliberately obscured beneath layers of religious validation and a mythical shroud of heroism. As a foundational element of the Narrative, Columbus continues to act as sort of totem or cipher which supports the perpetuation of images of America as a long-standing bastion of freedom, democracy, justice, and prosperity in spite of significant historical evidence to the contrary. This process becomes manifested perhaps most essentially in the struggles of American Indian nations like the Western Shoshone, whose culture, land, and very existence remain a threat to established American identity and order. It is for this reason that these groups have been targeted for destruction, and that members like Carrie Dann have chosen to fight back.

A Brief Preliminary Note on Social Location, Method, and Scope

It is important to mention at the outset that I do not claim to offer an expert voice nor emic perspective on Western Shoshone culture and history in this paper. Following Akim Reinhardt in his exploration of politics among the Oglala Lakota, I instead maintain that “[These] people are quite capable of speaking for themselves, and I would not be so

⁵ Although my use of the term “Euroamerican” does relate to a possible ethnic categorization, it is primarily meant to signify a particular worldview (and those who subscribe to it) arising out European Christendom and transplanted to the Americas with the first invasions of explorers and missionaries.

presumptuous as to speak for them. Rather, this is simply a monograph that synthesizes their words, documents, and actions, along with numerous other sources, to produce an academic history.”⁶ As a male writer of Euroamerican and Christian background, the particular stories told as history in my culture—along with the notion of history itself—must necessarily become vital elements of my exploration. Christopher Columbus represents one character in the dominant American (his)story, a story whose components are presented and accepted as fact even when authentic corresponding antecedents are nowhere to be found in reality. Thus, I attempt to remain mindful of the ways in which my perspective has been colored by this background throughout my analysis.

In order to do so, I build in part upon a methodological process too seldom employed or respected in the Academy: listening and reflection. In other words, I seek to actively listen to different stories about *what has been* and *what is* vis-à-vis America, and then to honestly reflect upon the merits of these alternative ways of seeing and knowing. Although seemingly simple, such a method actually supports the pursuit of complex objectives by allowing the explorer to dig beneath the surface of the dominant Narrative, to sift through whatever contradictory beliefs, images, or words might be discovered there, and to hopefully recover a more faithful (as opposed to faith-based) account of history. Of course, this type of recovery represents a monumental task. This paper can only begin to address some characteristics and challenges of that task, and can only do so well by adopting and operating within a fairly narrow scope. It does not seek to present a fully comprehensive and coherent biography of Columbus, theory of American

⁶ Akim Reinhardt, *Ruling Pine Ridge: Oglala Lakota Politics from the IRA to Wounded Knee* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), xxviii.

Narrative, or exposition of Western Shoshone culture and history.⁷ Instead, each of these elements is integrated to the extent necessary to begin unraveling the critical questions and evaluating the thesis claims posed in the introductory section. This process may not be especially fast or efficient, yet it does attempt to model the type of patience, perseverance, passion, and perception required for deep and lasting cultural transformation.

Using the words of Carrie Dann to frame each section of my exploration, I look first to the figure in and with whom the American Narrative originates: Columbus.

Christopher Columbus as Man and Myth

And so as I look out at the people today...Let us all work together as one. Let us not consider ourselves as red, black, white, yellow. We are one people, we have one Creator. Our creation stories tell us about the creation, about the four colors of people. And we are all equal! We are supposed to be. When they came ashore what they call the United States today, they were welcomed; and yet [despite] this welcome, when they were welcomed here, they destroyed and made attempts to destroy. If they destroyed us we wouldn't be here. But we are still here.

And I'd like to say to mothers and fathers, teach your little babies to be proud. Teach them to be proud of who they are. And if you can, use your own traditional language. The traditional language of the mountains, the valleys. I know they have names.⁸

– Carrie Dann

⁷ Of course, each of these topics has been explored in great detail elsewhere. I will draw on several of these sources during the course of my exploration.

⁸ Dann address, 8 October 2004.

In the traditional telling of the tale, Columbus looms over history as a prototypical and inspirational model of both Christian faith and Americanness. He is portrayed as the heroic adventurer who, through diligence and skill, overcame great obstacles to realize the vision of achievement and prosperity he had been granted by revelation. Along the way, he magnanimously blessed the people he encountered with knowledge and order, fulfilling a divine mandate to spread the gifts of Christian truth and European civilization to barren and forbidding lands. This presentation suggests that from its earliest days America has represented a new and righteous project which is the logical culmination of a supernaturally-guided progression of history. Americans are therefore understood to not only possess an unlimited potential for spreading prosperity and justice, but also a sacred responsibility to pursue this potential with all the gusto of their earliest predecessor. Summarizing this aspect of the American Narrative in brief, Claudia Bushman states:

According to the mythic story, Columbus discovered America. The land was pure, new, empty, pristine, virtually uninhabited. The few people who lived there were considered primitive and uncivilized, just waiting to be improved by western culture and religion. Europeans had been led to this fresh new world by God to establish freedom and Christianity. A humble, visionary man had overcome the prejudices of wise men and the hazards of nature, following his own star to a magnificent destiny. Because of his example, we can all sail uncharted seas, bound by our dreams rather than by the experience of others.⁹

⁹ Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How An Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1992), 8.

But while this particular image continues to be widely recognized even today, Bushman notes that it did not always carry such salience. Although commemorations of Columbus in narrative and verse appeared in Europe soon after his death, it was not until the late 1700s—more than “three hundred years after the first landfall”—that this figure began its rise to prominence in the American Narrative.¹⁰ This rise accelerated through the 1800s and coincided (not coincidentally) with the struggle of the newly independent United States for political and social order. Coming out of its war with England, this new entity remained to a significant degree a rogue state on the international scene and a tenuous collection of ethnic and religious settlements on the domestic front. Such tensions would come to a head in the Civil War era, augmented by growing conflicts over race, labor, immigration, and urbanization. Furthermore, and of vital importance to the construction of a national story and identity, the issue of managing relations with the original inhabitants of the land had yet to be effectively addressed. Groups newly christened as “Americans” retained significant political, economic, social, and geographic ties to Native nations, ties which only took on greater magnitude with the escalation of westward expansion. In light of this expansion, a new, coherent narrative containing powerful symbols was needed to encourage the consolidation of a unified American identity and validate the status and objectives of the country’s emerging politico-economic structures.

In Columbus, one such symbol was identified. Reconstituted as the “first ‘founding father,’” the figure provided “a history and hero everyone could agree upon, whose success lay in

¹⁰ See Bushman, 60-64, 1. A stylistic note: When referring to Columbus as a historical man, I employ the pronoun “he.” When referring to the imaginary figure promoted in the American Narrative, I utilize “it.” I maintain this distinction in order to emphasize the vast difference between the actual person and his fictional representation.

his piety, industriousness, ingeniousness, and bravado,” and who could “cut across regional, political, and ethnic boundaries.”¹¹ It provided a link between American society and what was considered the best of the “Old World’s” structures and values, while also proclaiming a break from its perceived decadence and stagnation. Over time the symbol became a critical avatar in the process of socialization, with millions of schoolchildren repeatedly encountering it in their history books, classroom studies, and the popular media. Generations of young Americans have grown up with the ability to recite the dominant version of the Columbus story from memory; however, the ability to recognize and name the ways in which this story has shaped their view of self, nation, and history has not necessarily followed.

In fact, it might be argued that the dynamic of concealment was intentionally built into the Columbus figure from its earliest incarnations. After all, even though accounts of “the Admiral’s” greed and vicious treatment of Native peoples had existed since the 1500’s,¹² these details were conveniently omitted from mainstream portrayals. Such omissions testify to the fact that the figure has never been intended to function as a didactic tool for the understanding of American history (if by “history” one means an attempt to recount events which actually occurred). Rather, it has been designed to act as a force of cohesion, validation, and inspiration

¹¹ “Columbus in History,” *The Columbus Doors: A History*, University of Virginia Department of American Studies, web, 7 November 2009 <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/COLUMBUS/col3.html>>.

¹² See Bushman, 24. One particularly relevant example is Bartolomé de Las Casas’ *Historia de las Indias*, written in the mid-1500’s. As Bushman notes, Las Casas, “who knew Columbus and was a resident of Hispaniola...admired Columbus but deplored his policy toward the natives and was harshly critical of it.”

which signifies only the “imagined community” of the American nation¹³ and the constructed Narrative which supports it. Although this Narrative may present itself as history, its contents have few actual referents in reality and leave no room for multiple perspectives.

So if the figure of Columbus as traditionally portrayed has functioned to obscure the actual man, what *can* be confidently asserted about this historical person? To begin, it should be noted that much about the life of Christopher Columbus remains a mystery. Even a characteristic as basic as his national origin cannot be postulated to a great degree of certainty. Although he has traditionally been presented as an Italian explorer (born in Genoa) sailing for Spain, credible evidence suggesting other possibilities does exist. As Ward Churchill reveals, over the course of “253 books and articles” devoted explicitly to the topic, Columbus’ background has been variously tied to Italy, Spain, Portugal, Corsica, Greece, Chios, Majorca, Aragon, Galicia, France, Poland, and the Jewish Diaspora. In consideration of such diverse claims, Churchill concludes: “In the final analysis, it is patently clear that we really have no idea who Columbus was, where he came from, or where he spent his formative years.”¹⁴

But while Columbus’ background persists as an open question, the record of his whereabouts and actions from 1492 on seems more secure. On the whole, this record is not nearly as flattering as the American Narrative tends to suggest. Disputing the opening claims of this Narrative, Churchill states:

¹³ For an exposition of the concept of “imagined communities,” see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁴ Ward Churchill, “Deconstructing the Columbus Myth: Was the ‘Great Discoverer’ Italian or Spanish, Nazi or Jew,” *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 89-92.

Columbus did not sally forth upon the Atlantic for reasons of ‘neutral science’ or altruism. He went, as his own diaries, reports, and letters make clear, fully expecting to encounter wealth belonging to others. It was his stated purpose to seize this wealth by whatever means necessary and available, in order to enrich both his sponsors and himself.¹⁵

In addition to quenching his own greed, this prototypical American sought to fulfill the related purpose of spreading the twin European-styled systems of Christianity and civilization (including a sort of proto-capitalism) to the peoples he encountered. These various objectives were mutually supporting and justifying, grounded as they were in the firm conviction of European Christians that their “absolute and exclusive” possession of ultimate truth and chosen status made them superior to “virtually all” other peoples.¹⁶ For Columbus and his successors, the exchange of scripture and salvation for wealth and land was often regarded as not only fair but also obvious and inevitable.

How were these objectives pursued? As exposed by Tink Tinker and Mark Freeland, Columbus’ actions in this regard can perhaps be best described as nothing short of criminal. In fact, this criminal behavior might be organized into three main categories: theft, slave trading, and murder.¹⁷ Each of these categories is deserving of a brief exposition here.

Theft: Arriving in the Caribbean with intention of appropriating whatever wealth might be found there, Columbus’ first act was to declare possession of the nearby islands. This

¹⁵ Churchill, “Deconstructing,” 85.

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9.

¹⁷ See Tink Tinker and Mark Freeland, “Thief, Slave Trader, and Murderer: Christopher Columbus and Caribbean Population Decline,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 23/1 (2008): 25-50.

declaration, prefiguring the later formal institution of *Requerimiento* in 1513, unilaterally claimed the lands in question for Spain and Christendom, and announced the authority of the Spanish crown over whatever peoples might reside therein. This theft of land was augmented in 1495 by a law of tribute which required that:

Every Taino over the age of fourteen...supply the rulers with a hawk's bell of gold every three months (or in gold-deficient areas, twenty-five pounds of spun cotton); those who did were given a token to wear around their necks as proof that they had made payment; those who did not were...“punished”—by having their hands cut off...and left to bleed to death.¹⁸

Of course, considering the relative paucity of substantial gold ore deposits in the Caribbean archipelago, such a policy translated into great suffering for the local Native population. This reality was not lost on contemporary Spanish observers such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, who described the system as “irrational, most burdensome, impossible, intolerable, and abominable.”¹⁹ Yet Columbus’ own fear and desire—fear of not delivering his promised quotas to the Spanish court, and desire for ever more wealth and power—prevented him from amending the law even after its foolishness had become apparent.

Slave Trading: According to Tinker and Freeland, “That Columbus...was a slave trader is a matter of historical fact.”²⁰ In the years before his first voyage to the Americas, the future national hero had engaged in Portuguese slave trading efforts along the African coast. This

¹⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1990), 155.

¹⁹ Quoted in Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, volume II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1942), 173.

²⁰ Tinker and Freeland, 26.

experience would come to intimately inform Columbus' later endeavors, as Native peoples were pressed into slavery both on Hispaniola and after transportation to Europe. In these early manifestations, the Atlantic slave trade began in earnest. Native peoples were traded for work animals and necessary goods unavailable in the Americas. But while the economic benefits which accrued to the invaders through such a process are self-evident, scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt note that Columbus' motivations for pursuing the slave trade cannot be summed up in such straightforward terms.

More deeply, the pursuit of slave trading was informed and inspired by a particular view of human nature and natural law. In this religious and epistemological perspective, the exotic religio-cultural beliefs and practices of Native peoples were regarded as a sign of their subhumanity (or at least their inferiority to Europeans). Because such beliefs and practices fell outside the bounds of what was considered socially acceptable or decent from a European perspective, these peoples were regarded as being in violation of natural law. And as all good Christians knew, the consequence of violating natural law was eternal damnation. Thus, slavery became envisioned as a path to salvation for those Native persons who refused to acknowledge the superiority of the European way and submit to it. This path allowed European invaders to justify their self-serving behaviors through an appeal to the Christian responsibility to save souls. As the following extended passage from Greenblatt explains, Columbus was deeply indebted to this "divinely endorsed" perspective on slavery:

Beasts of burden will be exchanged for beasts of burden: so many Indians for so many cattle. Columbus cannot be content, however, with a purely mercantile transaction, nor is this his overriding interest. He cannot allow himself, for

reasons both tactical and more deeply spiritual, to say simply, “We need cattle; we have slaves; let us trade one for the other.” The exchange must be presented as undertaken in the interests of the enslaved. We might call this enslavement with a human face, or rather, liberating enslavement...not an economic transaction but a dream of marvelous transformation. Those Indians identified as cannibals will be hunted down, seized, torn from their lands and their culture, loaded onto ships still stinking of the animals for whom they are being exchanged, and sent into slavery. But the economic transaction as Columbus conceives it will be undertaken for the welfare of the souls of the enslaved: the Indians are exchanged for beasts in order to convert them into humans. This transformation will not enfranchise them; it will only make them into excellent slaves. But they will have gained their spiritual freedom. At the heart of the transaction is not wealth or convenience, though these are welcome, but a metamorphosis from inhumanity into humanity.²¹

Of course, the identification of certain Native groups as “cannibals” had much more to do with European fears and prejudices than actual Native practices.²² Yet, this and other related labels (such as “savage,” “warlike,” and “primitive”) served their purpose by identifying certain peoples as appropriate targets for subjugation.

Murder: Although there can be little doubt in the contemporary informed mind that Columbus was responsible (directly and indirectly) for many Native deaths during his time in the Caribbean, the question of “how many?” remains surprisingly persistent. Such persistence stems in part from the existence of diverse and contradictory accounts related to the population of Hispaniola and other nearby islands prior to European invasion. Although Columbus’ own

²¹ Greenblatt, 72.

²² For more explanation and sources, see Ward Churchill, “‘Nits Make Lice’: The Extermination of North American Indians, 1607-1996,” *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 136, footnote †.

journals describe these places as “densely populated” and “extensively cultivated,”²³ some reports have suggested that only a few hundred thousand people lived in the entire region at the time of European arrival. In contrast, Tinker and Freeland contend that the most reliable estimates available today indicate a figure closer to 8 million. What is not under contention, however, is the reality that by the mid-1500’s the region’s Native Taino inhabitants were nearly entirely gone.²⁴

The process by which this population decline occurred may have been multifaceted, but it was wholly sinister. Many Native persons bled to death as a result of the tribute law, fell victim to European-induced warfare, or were killed simply for sport. The disruption of social networks and access to sources of food, water, and medicinal plants instigated and exacerbated sickness and injury. Various resources were exploited to the point of inducing scarcity and starvation. The suppression of Native cultural expressions and languages represented a tactic of psychological warfare which targeted the foundations of communal identity. Further, significant numbers of Native peoples were afflicted with various European diseases to which they had little or no immunity. Although this last circumstance has often been cited in support of attempts to reduce the culpability of individuals like Columbus, such arguments rest upon feeble foundations. There can be no doubt that European policies, which deliberately undercut every aspect of Native life, brought about malnutrition, and forced work unto exhaustion, severely aggravated the effects of disease. Even after such effects became obvious, no efforts were made by Columbus or other prominent Europeans to reduce Native exposure, improve living standards,

²³ Quoted in Tinker and Freeland, 30.

²⁴ For a fully detailed exposition of the population question, see Tinker and Freeland.

or reduce workloads. More often than not, the spread of disease was simply interpreted in light of already operative ideas about divine providence. Since sickness was regarded as God's punishment for those who chose to violate natural law and resist attempts at conversion, the only logical response was to pursue the process of colonization with even greater determination.²⁵

On one level, it might be argued that to focus on the numbers or types of deaths over which Columbus presided is to miss the point: murder is murder, whether committed once or one million times, whether accomplished through warfare or disease. Yet an accurate portrayal of the gruesome details of conquest—including not only theft, slave trading, and murder, but also rape, torture, mutilation, extortion, deceit, and any number of other inhuman cruelties—has significant implications for the development of a meaningful theory of American Narrative. This portrayal is so critical because it has been precisely such details that the Narrative has been designed to conceal. With the official promotion of an attractive and sanitized alternative story, one in which the horrific record of figures like Columbus is replaced by imaginary tales of a heroic and visionary adventurer, the historical reality of American colonialism and genocide has been opened to easy debate and denial. The opening of this type of space between historical realities and the widespread perception of history makes the maintenance of status quo politico-economic structures and policies exponentially more feasible. A more in-depth examination of how this space has been continually recreated is pursued in the next section.

²⁵ See Churchill, "Deconstructing," 86, and Churchill, "Nits," 137-157.

“A City upon a Hill”: Toward a Theory of American Narrative

We are now facing what I call “spiritual genocide.” We suffered the physical genocide from the east to the westward movement by the people of the United States of America. The visitors from across the ocean. And when I say “spiritual genocide,” it is documented that ninety-eight percent of our indigenous population, our indigenous people, died from the east to the westward movement. But we have been faced with one thing, and that is that they denied us, or tried to deny us, our right to practice our culture and our belief...

And as we walk to this path we look at what the government has done to us across the whole United States of America. They have made every attempt to dehumanize us, to take away our dignity, our honor. I have seen this happen time and time again...And one of the things I always say is “Are we mentally retarded, or are we children? What the hell are we?” ...We were not mentally retarded [then], and today, they [still] treat us as if we are. And I resent that very much.²⁶

– Carrie Dann

When the truth of Columbus and its cover-up become plainly recognized, the importance of the figure to the functioning of the American Narrative also comes into the light.

Representing, as Columbus does, the beginning of a genocidal outlook and process which continues to operate into the present day, the figure casts a shadow over all that has followed.

Summing up this long legacy, Churchill states:

²⁶ Dann address, 8 October 2004.

As a symbol, then, Christopher Columbus vastly transcends himself. He stands before the bar of history and humanity, culpable not only for his deeds on Española but, in spirit at least, for the carnage and cultural obliteration which attended [the entire history of Euroamerican racial supremacism, conquest, and genocide...²⁷

Of course, this is not the symbol that has been developed in the American Narrative. Instead, it is the converse of this image which has risen to prominence. The reason for and likelihood of this reversal, which may seem difficult to comprehend at first glance, become more apparent when reflected upon in historical context.

In Columbus early American political, economic, and religious elites identified a larger-than-life figure capable of anchoring the new story of history which would validate their common quest for dominance. Perhaps the most fundamental problem faced by these elites—a problem still exceedingly relevant today—was the contradiction between their proclamation of freedom, democracy, justice, and prosperity as universal values and their actual oppressive treatment of huge numbers of people (often of non-Euroamerican or non-Christian background). Acknowledgement of this contradiction, if it were to become salient in the population at large, had the potential to undermine the very foundations of social order, government, and economy. Of course, the primary exemplar of this contradiction was the ongoing genocide of Native peoples and the occupation of their lands by the rapidly expanding United States. Early invaders such as Columbus, who harbored not even a pretense of Native equality and behaved as such, thus embodied both an obstruction and an opportunity for American elites. The historical record of these individuals threatened to expose the lie that the American experiment represented a

²⁷ Churchill, “Deconstructing,” 92.

significant and natural advance in civilization; yet if accounts of their exploits could be significantly modified, their very presence in the hemisphere could help validate the existence and growth of the country. Specifically, by erasing the true motivations behind Columbus' voyages, he could be recast in the hero image and presented as a noble exemplar of a naturalized American quest to bring truth and prosperity to the entire human race.

Without such alternative stories, the American denial of “guilt associated with the death of a large population at the hands of euro-western violence,” along with the continued perpetuation of oppressive and death-dealing policies, would be made exponentially more difficult. To genuinely acknowledge and address the truth of American history could destabilize a vast range of foundational structures and dynamics, including legal precedents, individual and corporate wealth, national identity claims, church-state relations, and virtually all land title in the United States. Or at the very least, in a country where apocalyptic visions have been present in religious and popular culture from its earliest days,²⁸ the *fear* of such destabilization has remained persistent and potent, thus creating the need to deny history.

The power of this need to deny is rendered starkly manifest in the Columbus Day holiday. Despite the plethora of painstakingly documented, persuasively argued accounts of Columbus' true motivations and deeds available today, zealous defenses of the imaginary figure promoted in the American Narrative resurface every year around the twelfth of October. As the following excerpts from a recent article by Diane Alden reveal, such accounts often build upon several

²⁸ To mention just two examples, one might compare the popularity and influence of early American religious leader Cotton Mather's sermons to the more recent fervor surrounding the *Left Behind* series of novels or the plethora of apocalypse-themed films available in American cinema.

related notions involving Columbus as simply a man of his times, the inherently savage and warlike nature of Native peoples, and the inevitable and ultimately beneficial process of conquest:

- “Christopher Columbus was merely following the trends of his era, just as young people today want to become millionaires before they are 40. Like any young fellow with a penchant for adventure and a desire to increase his standard of living, Columbus went to sea at age 14 and spent years learning his trade.”
- “It is uninformed to think that in a century of discovery no one else besides Columbus would have found America. It is nuts to think the process of exploration and colonization would not have happened without Columbus. Most likely the decimation of the native population would have taken place no matter who had discovered America.”
- “Aztecs had many gods, each controlling a part of life and each demanding a sacrifice to accommodate and benefit that aspect of the Indians’ lives. Sacrifice was the center of life. Yes, they had math, writing, science, history, art, music, dance, and plumbing, as well as architectural wonders. BUT they also did to each other what Europeans did to them: enslave, rape, pillage, collect tribute, and spread disease” (emphasis original).
- “Before Columbus, American Indians killed and maimed and enslaved their fellows...Arms and legs were chopped off living people, and children were a favorite delicacy. Bodies were dismembered, and indications are that they were butchered the same way as wild game.”

- “The Plains Indians as well as those in the upper Midwest were constantly warring with one another. Every conceivable torture and physical horror were [sic] visited by one tribe on another.”²⁹

To modern apologists of Columbus, the fact that such notions have been effectively debunked through careful scholarship is of little relevance. The real man simply does not fit within what they “know” to be true about themselves and their history. Thus, attempts to expose the reality of conquest are typically dismissed as politically correct nonsense or the esoteric dronings of the liberal academy. It should be noted, however, that such attempts have not been completely unproductive. Efforts to engage historical truth through word and action³⁰ have succeeded in raising popular consciousness related to the truth about Columbus to some extent, hence the appearance of apologists like Alden. Yet while more individuals might know about Columbus’ actual record today than fifty years ago, many would still agree with the major themes which the imaginary figure was designed to support. This interesting phenomenon, whereby knowledge of the falsity of a concept’s supporting details does not necessarily lead to the rejection of that concept, represents an important subject for future consideration. Many Americans today might admit that Columbus “did bad things,” yet remain unable to articulate answers to the corollary questions such as “What bad things?” “How and to whom did he do

²⁹ Diane Alden, “Columbus and His Judges,” *Newsmax.com*, 12 October 2000, web, 9 November 2009 <<http://archive.newsmax.com/commentmax/get.pl?a=2000/10/11/175858>>.

³⁰ By word I refer primarily to the body of scholarship devoted to the topic, including many of valuable works cited here. In terms of action, I allude to collective events such as the Denver Columbus Day Protest, along with the various efforts and speech acts of individuals who choose to confront ignorance in their everyday lives.

them?” and, most importantly, “Why?” Moreover, it is arguable that many would not express much concern over this conundrum.

While a comprehensive examination of these dynamics is outside the scope of this paper, it might be constructive to briefly reflect on how they point to the beginnings of a theory of American Narrative. The Narrative may perhaps be best understood as a flexible container in which old image-themes³¹ may be mixed with new content in order to create a mystifying concoction that can respond to the unique issues of each era. It is clear that the purpose of this concoction is to promote social cohesion, the denial of historical realities, and the defense of status quo politico-economic structures among the American population. Yet, the label of “narrative” may be somewhat misleading in relation to the phenomenon in question, at least in

³¹ I connect the words image and theme with a hyphen in an attempt to reflect the way in which images within the American Narrative are often matched to a specific content which may or may not correspond to historical reality, and the way in which themes are often supported by specific images to which they may arguably have little rational connection. As the name implies, image-themes might be understood to incorporate two sides: first, the image or representation, and second, the theme or intellectual content. Each side complements the other, while either may appear as the primary presentation. To offer a single example, one might consider the relationship between the representation of Columbus planting a flag upon San Salvador and the intellectual content of conquest. Each of these sides is implicated (at least in part) by the presentation of the other side, although this relationship is not exclusive (e.g. the intellectual content of conquest may be implicated through a variety of representations). The key definitional characteristic of an image-theme lies in its inherent relationship: representations (or figures) in the American Narrative always refer to certain assigned intellectual contents, and vice versa. By design, these relationships and their implications often go unacknowledged on a conscious level; thus, the image of Columbus planting his flag (which was fabricated in the first place) makes the theme of conquest seem heroic, justified, and entirely divorced from any real history of injustice and suffering. This concept borrows heavily from, but is not identical to, the phenomenon of “image-schemas” as advanced by theorists of cognitive science. For an insightful explanation and application of image-schemas to American sociopolitics, see Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008).

one sense of the term. For while alternative stories about American history and identity do represent the vital core of this phenomenon, it would be imprecise to posit the existence of a single coherent tale which sounds the same to all who hear it and remains static over time. More poem than prose, the Narrative functions as a delicate and living nexus of icons, ideas, characters, and emotions which may lay claim to internal consistency only at the most surface of levels.

In this way, the American Narrative might be more helpfully illustrated through the metaphor of a scrapbook. Unlike the linear coherence and internal consistency implied by the concept of narrative, scrapbooks can be defined by two related characteristics. First, they contain a series of images which, if left to their own devices, may be interpreted in a variety of ways and may not necessarily seem related. A picture may speak a thousand words, but *which words* are spoken may depend quite heavily on the background and context of the viewing individual. Thus, scrapbooks also tend to establish a hierarchy of authority, wherein certain narrators (and here is where the metaphor of narrative does retain some utility) are regarded as more capable of communicating the “right” words to go along with each image. This second characteristic is crucial for an understanding of the American Narrative. In a family, it may be a grandparent who is identified as the authoritative voice and is looked to whenever the “family story” must be told. In the United States, this function is usually performed by political, religious, and at times even economic elites, who are generally regarded as more “in the know” than the average citizen. The main image-themes of this scrapbook may not change, but they may be narrated, prioritized, or connected in very different ways depending on the motivations of

(or threats to) these elites at any given time. Such flexibility and resilience has enabled status quo power structures to retain their basic integrity in the face of events such as the Women's Suffrage and Civil Rights movements which may seem to portend revolutionary change.³²

Thus, one helpful approach to formulating a theoretical model of American Narrative might incorporate a three-tier structure, in which each image-theme in the nexus is considered in terms of motivation, narration, and consequence. In other words, one might ask three related questions: What is the motivation behind the promotion of this particular image-theme? How is it being narrated, illustrated, or explained? What is the consequence of this promotion and narration? Another way of expressing this triad might be in terms of belief, language, and action. What beliefs or desires underlie the expression of this theme? What words or phrases are being used in order to convey them? What action is suggested, undergirded, or validated by this particular expression of belief?

The usefulness of such a model is demonstrated by the type of reflection and analysis pursued earlier in this paper concerning the figure of Columbus. To properly interpret the meaning of this figure, one must first understand what motivations or beliefs have been served and supported by the concealing of historical reality and promotion of an imaginary alternative. Second, the way in which such concealment and promotion has occurred must be considered, and the fabricated story contrasted with the man's actual record. Finally, one must examine what

³² Of course, such movements for genuine justice can force important changes upon the dominant system. However, it is important to note the manner in which the American Narrative may be used as a tool to interpret and assimilate such changes so that the ultimate force of their impact may be reduced. This tool facilitates efforts to replace the prophetic visions of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., with sanitized alternatives in the official portrayal, and to convert the historical man into another fantastic supporting character in the status quo story.

the results of this process have been for those who have participated in creating the figure, those who have been persuaded to accept it, and those who have rejected it.

In order to further explore the possibilities of this theoretical model, I briefly introduce four other image-themes linked within the American Narrative: Discovery, Manifest Destiny, Exceptionalism, and Wonder. I choose these four particular examples because each demonstrates important connections to both the Columbus figure and the case of the Western Shoshone, indicating just how sweeping and ruthless the reach of the Narrative can be. Further, I contend that any meaningful theory of American Narrative must be compatible with a robust integration and analysis of these image-themes.

Four Central Image-Themes: The image-theme of *Discovery* relates to a doctrine which has been developing in Euroamerican legal thought and practice for several centuries. In starker terms of relevance to my exploration here, Discovery might be described as an intricate fiction which has nevertheless come to dominate relations between the United States government and Native American nations. It represents a foundational premise upon which genocide has been enabled to occur and by which it has been justified; yet, its moral standing and intellectual etiology have gone largely unquestioned in the American political, jurisprudential, and academic systems. As with all image-themes within the American Narrative, one must consider not only what this doctrine says, but also what motivations underlie it and what consequences it has wrought.

It is important to note that the legal definition of Discovery has not remained static over time. In fact, its relative plasticity represents a hallmark of its ideological development typical of

the American Narrative's basic image-themes. Tracing the legal doctrine as far back as the time of the Crusades, Robert J. Miller notes that it was initially developed by "European, Christian countries to control *their own actions and conflicts* regarding exploration, trade, and colonization in non-European countries..." (emphasis added).³³ By undertaking legal rituals such as the planting of a flag, European voyagers could claim for their respective countries exclusive rights to economic relations and the possibility of obtaining land from its inhabitants. As such, Discovery was built first and foremost upon a preoccupation with power, originally the European balance of power, even as it was affected by events in faraway lands. The consolidation of politico-economic authority in North America following the American War for Independence necessarily instigated shifts in the interpretation and application of the doctrine, articulated perhaps most clearly during the reign of John Marshall over the Supreme Court. Yet, these shifts had less to do with a reimagining of the doctrine's fundamental premises than with the newly emerging political climate surrounding the American quest for "nation-building."

For this reason it might be argued that American statesmen and jurists, following their European predecessors, have been quite content to leave this intellectual and legal form intentionally vague and malleable. By retaining an openness to different interpretations and contents, it has proved an invaluable mechanism for invaders seeking to formally explain and defend their maximization of competitive advantage and profit in any given context. The morbid beauty of the doctrine, then, lies in its ability to create a self-sustaining and self-reinforcing validation of conquest that quietly buries its human costs. After all, one must remember that the

³³ See Robert J. Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2006), 12.

doctrine's original purpose was simply to create a mutually recognized standard by which European nations could most efficiently expand their respective political and economic purviews without ripping *each other* apart. Although the "natural rights" of Indigenous nations were nominally recognized in this standard to some extent,³⁴ the actual value of such recognition has historically risen and fallen dependent upon the self-perceived ability of the invading entity to effectively control the territory in question. In such calculations of *realpolitik*, economic and military considerations—"might makes right"³⁵—have taken center stage.

Thus, and for example, while Britain could not afford to totally discount Haudenosaunee claims to sovereignty and territorial possession in the historical context of 1600 to 1776 (as much as it might have wanted to),³⁶ the United States could seek to utterly dismantle Cherokee society (among others) through the early to mid-1800's without fear of significant reprisal. It is not that these two invading entities acted out of vastly divergent worldviews, were motivated by significantly differing desires, or acknowledged quite dissimilar legal constraints. Rather, their distinctive responses were to a large degree representative of their respective positions in discrete fields of power. The standards of Discovery did not dictate what these nations *should* do, but rather provided a means and justification for what they *could* do. And so it has gone with the doctrine from its earliest formulations. Interpretations have shifted over time, yet the central preoccupation of and root motivation for making Discovery claims has remained largely the

³⁴ See Miller, 12-14.

³⁵ See Miller, 11-12.

³⁶ See Howard R. Berman, "Perspectives on American Indian Sovereignty and International Law, 1600 to 1776," *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the US Constitution* (Santa Fe: Clear Light, 1992), 128-129.

same. Further, it has primarily been practical and contextual limitations, and not necessarily legal or moral ones, which have historically bounded the scope of the doctrine's application.

Fueling the preoccupation of power at the base of the concept has been a moral and theological claim involving a hierarchy of being. This claim informed Columbus' approach to conquest, and continues to exist (albeit often in more camouflaged forms) in American policies to the present day. Put simply, this claim states that humans are separate from and superior to animals and the natural world, and that certain peoples are higher in this hierarchical order than others. These separated and superior folk are entitled to seek and hold greater power not only because they are believed to be naturally more intelligent and capable, but also because they have been "chosen" as the bearers of truth and civilization.³⁷ This chosen status is revealed by allegiance to certain religious and politico-economic ideologies (manifesting today as Christianity and democratic capitalism), and by membership in certain privileged racial and cultural categories which are reified to varying degrees (whiteness, maleness, etc.). The lifeways, desires, and territories of those who do not demonstrate such markers of truth and civilization can thus be legitimately and legally snuffed out so that "development" and "progress" can be pursued by the chosen ones. Moreover, the chosen believe themselves to have

³⁷ The question, "Chosen by whom?" is usually answered in the Euroamerican context in an overtly religious manner. Those who reject religious responses (such as the philosopher John Passmore) often appeal to secular humanist ideals such as the predominance of Western science. Further, the recognition of chosen-ness may be implicit as often as explicit. In any case, I argue that the notion of chosen-ness is clearly theological in essence, consistently self-nominated in application, and firmly Euroamerican in cultural grounding.

a responsibility to save or civilize inferior beings—expressed in racialized terms as the so-called “white man’s burden”—even if those beings are destroyed in the process.³⁸

In the American Narrative, underlying beliefs regarding a hierarchy of being are expressed through an image-theme which might best be called *Exceptionalism*. American Exceptionalism builds on theological and sociological claims arising from the dominant Euroamerican worldview, and posits that the American experiment represents the highest realization of the natural, teleological progression of civilization. Although a full exposition of the origins and historical development of this worldview cannot be completed here,³⁹ one of its most significant components might be traced back to the Judeo-Christian theological expression of elective monotheism. As outlined in the work of Martin S. Jaffee, the theological construction of elective monotheism might be distinguished from other constructions of monotheism, especially that which might be termed metaphysical monotheism. With early examples in both Greek and Asian thought, metaphysical monotheism can be described as a way of looking to first principles in order to explain the coherence of the world, or as “the conceptual activity that yields abstract reflections on the nature of the one Being who sustains all beings.”⁴⁰ Primarily an

³⁸ For a revealing exploration of the deep relationship between Christian theological precepts and American legal structures, see Newcomb.

³⁹ Although more work may yet be called for, several valuable analyses of the origins, developmental history, and oppressive characteristics of the dominant Eurochristian worldview do already exist. Some of these analyses can be found in the work of scholars from which I draw in this paper, along with figures such as James Cone, Vine Deloria, Jr., Barbara Mann, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Cornel West, and others.

⁴⁰ Martin S. Jaffee, “One God, One Revelation, One People: On the Symbolic Structure of Elective Monotheism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69/4 (2001): 759.

exercise of thought, metaphysical monotheism has certainly influenced the development of thought and practice within certain religions over time.

Yet, Jaffee notes that its import cannot simply be merged with that of elective monotheism. Unlike metaphysical monotheism, which might be most precisely located within the realm of philosophy, elective monotheism represents a theological construction which posits the selection of a specific community by the one God to become the one chosen people. Jaffee explains:

The unique Creator of the world discloses his love and will in a unique moment of self disclosure to a unique human community. As a result of this self-disclosure, the community embarks on a collective endeavor of obedient response to the Creator's love and will. The purpose is to bring all of humanity into proper moral relationship with the Creator. The unfolding of time between the original self-disclosure and the community's successful completion of the mandate that called it into being is the historical process. History is the stage of the community's struggle to be worthy of its call.⁴¹

In this way, elective monotheism sets up a cosmic dichotomy between the chosen community, who envision themselves as knowing and following the will of the Creator and attempting to spread this will over all creation, and what might be called the other—those who fall outside that community and fail to heed the creator god's call. This dichotomy and its inherent struggle are perceived as playing out in the historical process, and predicted to culminate in the “explicit physical and spiritual annihilation” of the other at the eschaton.⁴²

⁴¹ Jaffee, 760.

⁴² Jaffee, 769.

As evidenced in text and practice, such a perspective has historically played a significant formative role in the Euroamerican worldview and its sophisticated expression in the American Narrative. America is consistently depicted in theologically loaded terms which lay claim to its unique, chosen nature. It is the “city upon a hill” envisaged by John Winthrop in 1630 and praised by Ronald Reagan in 1989,⁴³ the “last best hope of earth” promoted by Abraham Lincoln,⁴⁴ and the beacon of freedom and prosperity referenced by hundreds of political and religious leaders before and hence. As such, the nation is also envisioned as possessing a divine mandate to spread its greater gifts to the world. Of course these gifts, which are often summed up in the quartet of freedom, democracy, justice, and prosperity, can themselves be understood as image-themes built upon a particular metaphysical perspective on race, progress, and culture and targeted toward specific, inequitable outcomes. Nevertheless, they are consistently promoted in the Narrative as universal goods which may only be properly appreciated and nurtured when understood in the American way.

In this sense, then, the image-theme of Exceptionalism also ties in closely with that of *Manifest Destiny*. Although the exact etiology of the term is somewhat unclear,⁴⁵ it is certain that the general thrust of the idea was widely circulating within political, economic, and religious

⁴³ See John Winthrop, “We Shall Be as a City Upon a Hill,” 1630, sermon, Vincent Ferraro, home page, Mount Holyoke College, web, 11 November 2009 <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm>>; and Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” the White House, Washington DC, 11 January 1989, address, *The American Presidency Project*, web, 11 November 2009 <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29650>>.

⁴⁴ Quoted in William Lee Miller, *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 272.

⁴⁵ See Robert D. Sampson, *John L. O’Sullivan and his Times* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2003), xv, footnote 7.

circles from at least the time of the Jefferson presidency. In short, Manifest Destiny originally described America's "relentless, predestined, and divinely inspired advance across the continent."⁴⁶ Miller augments this definition by noting that "historians have for the most part agreed that there are three basic themes to Manifest Destiny.

1. The special virtues of the American people and their institutions;
2. America's mission to redeem and remake the world in the image of America; and,
3. A divine destiny under God's direction to accomplish this wonderful task.⁴⁷

Working thus intimately and interrelatedly with the image-themes of Discovery and Exceptionalism, this rationale represented perhaps the primary inspiration and justification behind foundational historical moments such as the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark Expedition, Trails of Tears, Annexation of Texas, and Gadsden Purchase. However, its limits were not reached at the Pacific coastline. On the contrary, the reach of Manifest Destiny continues to represent a motivating factor behind American domestic and foreign policy today, as control is exerted over the territories of other political and national entities both within (e.g. Western Shoshone) and outside of (e.g. Iraq) officially recognized borders.

This interrelation of these image-themes is clearly articulated in the following excerpt from a speech by Senator Albert J. Beveridge delivered in Congress at the turn of the 20th century. Speaking specifically of one concrete manifestation of Manifest Destiny—the occupation

⁴⁶ Miller, 2.

⁴⁷ Miller, 120.

of the Philippines–Beveridge connects the political situation under review with a much deeper vision of American identity and purpose. He states:

Mr. President, this question is deeper than any question of party politics, deeper than any question of the isolated policy of our country, even; deeper even than any question of constitutional power. It is elemental. It is racial. God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns. He has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adepts in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world. This is the divine mission of America, and it holds for us all the profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world's progress, guardians of its righteous peace. The judgment of the Master is upon us: "Ye have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things."⁴⁸

Like Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" expressed during the same era,⁴⁹ Beveridge's words indicate his belief that the fundamental purpose and unique nature of the American nation may only be fully realized through the adventurous penetration, control, and transformation of the chaotic, untamed, uncivilized realm of the other. Of course, this process of

⁴⁸ Senator Albert J. Beveridge (IN), "In Support of an American Empire," *Congressional Record*, 9 January 1900, 704-712, TeachingAmericanHistory.org, web, 11 November 2009 <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=639>>.

⁴⁹ See Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), especially Chapter 1, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 1-38.

penetration, control, and transformation is always understood as being mandated by God (a male image of God, not coincidentally), and regarded as being in the other's best interests. "It is only natural that America would intervene in such ways," this line of reasoning insists, "for this is the very *raison d'être* of the nation." Assuredly, for such a basic rationalization to be persuasively articulated in the American Narrative, its expressions must be continually re-molded to suit the social and cultural currents of the time. For example, while Beveridge's unrestrained depiction of "savage and senile peoples" might have been rhetorically effective in 1900, such language would likely have come across as at least somewhat uncouth and unconvincing in a culture influenced by "political correctness" in 2000.⁵⁰ But if any doubt might exist regarding the continued relevance and potency of underlying image-themes such as Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and Exceptionalism, I submit the following fragment of a 2002 speech given by George W. Bush on the occupation of Iraq for comparative consideration:

America believes that all people are entitled to hope and human rights, to the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity. People everywhere prefer freedom to slavery, prosperity to squalor, self-government to the rule of terror and torture. America is a friend to the people of Iraq. Our demands are directed only at the regime that enslaves them and threatens us. When these demands are met, the first and greatest benefit will come to Iraqi men, women and children. The oppression of Kurds, Assyrians, Turkomen, Shia, Sunnis and others will be lifted, the long captivity of Iraq will end, and an era of new hope will begin. Iraq is a land rich in culture and resources and talent. Freed from the weight of oppression, Iraq's people will be able to share in the progress and prosperity of our time... We did

⁵⁰ Of course, old terms have simply been replaced by newer, more seductive ones. The hijacking and selective application of these new terms (such as "terrorist", "fundamentalist," "jihadist," "radical," etc.) serves the Narrative well in an era dominated by 24 hour cable news networks, conservative talking heads, and 30-second soundbites.

not ask for this present challenge, but we accept it. Like other generations of Americans, we will meet the responsibility of defending human liberty against violence and aggression. By our resolve, we will give strength to others. By our courage, we will give hope to others. And by our actions, we will secure the peace and lead the world to a better day.⁵¹

As such exemplars demonstrate, while the preferred expressions and manifestations have changed, the central image-themes of the American Narrative have remained fairly constant. The statements of Beveridge and Bush also subtly reveal another image-theme which I have heretofore only mentioned in passing: *Wonder*. In general terms, Wonder might be described as the overwhelming feeling of awe and bewilderment which is provoked by some encounter with the “marvelous.” More specifically, the functioning of Wonder as a tool of oppression and possession predates the American Narrative proper and can be traced directly back to Christopher Columbus himself. As Stephen Greenblatt notes, “Columbus had a highly self-conscious interest in the marvelous.”⁵² His own descriptions of the “New World” as found in his journals are characterized by a palpable amazement at the land, its ecology and geography, and its inhabitants. In many early accounts of European invaders, everything that is encountered seems to be enveloped in a wondrous mystery which is, at least to some extent, utterly other and unknowable. But while the expression of Wonder may seem honest and innocent at first glance, it is also seen to harbor a quite nefarious underbelly upon further reflection.

⁵¹ George W. Bush, Cincinnati, Ohio, 7 October 2002, address, *Guardian.co.uk*, web, 13 November 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/oct/07/usa.iraq>>.

⁵² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 53.

As Greenblatt argues, Columbus' development of a discourse of the marvelous represents a deliberate process by which he attempts to posit the "New World" and its inhabitants as a blank slate upon which an emerging Euro-Christian imaginary can be written—and thereby possessed. This discourse enables and veils Columbus' most significant sleight-of-hand: the creation of a narrative wherein distinct and even contradictory epistemological and moral claims are rendered mutually intelligible and converted into equivalent units for exchange. Recognition of Native intelligence makes way for declarations of subhumanity, blatant theft of land dissolves within contrived and "uncontradicted" legal rituals,⁵³ and ethical scruples related to violent enslavement disappear into the benevolence of proffered salvation. The presentation of wonder dazzles the mind and induces "ideological forgetting," allowing even the most grotesque excesses and glaring inconsistencies to be legitimated and interpreted as necessary and logical in light of secular and religious law. In essence, Columbus' use of the marvelous "fills up the emptiness" between his desired politico-economic and spiritual goals and the real human consequences of his actions.⁵⁴

Although the strategic consequences of advocating Wonder have remained remarkably stable over time, the specific terms of the wondrous interaction and objects of the marvelous gaze being cited have undergone some shifts. In contrast to the accounts of Columbus, more recent formulations tend to rely less upon an outward looking expression of the marvelous nature

⁵³ Greenblatt, 58. As a means of validating his claim, Columbus notes that his declaration of possession over the islands at which he had arrived was "not contradicted." Of course, such an assertion appears as simply foolish when placed in context, considering both the inability of the Native peoples to understand Spanish and the fact that there were no Natives present at the pronouncement.

⁵⁴ Greenblatt, 80.

of the places and peoples being referenced, and more upon a sort of reflexive self-application of Wonder. For example, what Beveridge and Bush present as the primary object of their marvelous gaze is the special virtues and divine mandate—the Exceptional quality—of the American system and nation, rather than the wondrous nature of the Philippines and Iraq, respectively. Of course, that is not to say the applications of Wonder pursued by Columbus on the one hand, and statesmen like Beveridge and Bush on the other, are entirely divergent. Certainly, Columbus presents his own exploits as marvelous, while both Beveridge and Bush allude to a sort of unknowable otherness of the populations whose lands and lives they seek to possess. But considering their colonial histories, neither the Philippines in 1900 nor Iraq in 2002 could be persuasively presented as “new worlds” in the way the Americas could be in 1492. New devices and representations were needed to respond to the contemporary context, and one such expression was found in the growing idea of America as marvelous in and of itself.

In a sense, then, it matters little what is being presented as marvelous, as long as the presentation is convincing enough to mystify. For as Greenblatt reveals, “To wonder is to experience both the failure of words...and the failure of vision, since seeing brings no assurance that the objects of sight actually exist.”⁵⁵ Just as Columbus uses the language of Wonder in order to conceal his own violent control of Native territories and peoples, Beveridge and Bush appeal to the marvelous nature of the American experiment in order to mask the true motivations and consequences of occupation. Wonder validates possession by obscuring the actual oppressive circulations of power which are in process, and by making unjust exchanges and destructive

⁵⁵ Greenblatt, 133.

erasures seem fair and benevolent. Thus and for example, from the perspective of Beveridge and Bush, any reluctance on the part of another nation to accept the benevolent gift of American-style freedom, democracy, justice, and prosperity only proves the extent to which that nation is in dire need of intervention and salvation. The tautological nature of the argument becomes lost in the veil of Wonder, so that in the end even the most heinous manifestations of Discovery and Manifest Destiny may appear as logical, inevitable, and justified.

Ultimately, then, the image-themes of Discovery, Exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny, and Wonder work in conjunction to validate possession and naturalize unequal power relations. These image-themes can be understood as having been developed over time to serve complex intellectual, political, theological, and legal functions, the most primary of which being the simultaneous concealment and promotion of a surprisingly simple claim at the basis of the dominant Euroamerican worldview: that some people are naturally superior to others. They have enabled American elites to feign strength and benevolence in positions of weakness, and to label positions of blatant aggression as both justified and inevitable. They have even supported the destruction of entire societies and ways of life deemed inferior or expendable by the chosen. Such flexibility has ensured the longevity of these image-themes as tropes to power (to use the phrase of Gerald Vizenor), and masks to the genocide of “up to 99 percent” of the indigenous population of North America.⁵⁶ In turn, their longevity has helped enhance their credibility even

⁵⁶ Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 129. Churchill also notes that the motivations for genocide almost always involve the “tangible or imaginary attainment of profit, racial/ethnic/national/religious supremacy, and ideological purity” (251). There can be no doubt that the Doctrine of Discovery has historically been interpreted to encompass all these issues.

in the face of immense historical contradictions. One such contradiction, virtually ignored by the popular media and unknown in the population at large, continues to be unmistakably demonstrated in the relations between the United States and the Western Shoshone Nation.

The Most Bombed Nation on Earth: American Empire and the Western Shoshone

Always remember, the [bad things] happened to the Indians first, then everybody else follows sooner or later. And that is the way I see it. I want to talk a little bit about these little kids running out here. They are our future generations. They are the mothers and fathers of the future that is yet to come.

In Nevada we have big gold mines. I understand it's the third largest gold producing area in the world. And you know where that's located? On the Western Shoshone land. The land that they're going to force 15 cents an acre down our throats for. Ladies and gentlemen, I will never accept money for my land, never. I will never accept money for these children's children, and their grandchildren to be. Never. We as traditional leaders, we cannot do that. Because they are our future. The earth belongs to them.⁵⁷

– Carrie Dann

As Western Shoshone scholar Stephen J. Crum writes, “Long before the coming of the whites, the Newe had developed their own distinctive way of life, characterized by the concept of living in harmony with the natural environment.”⁵⁸ Relations with the land, and in particular

⁵⁷ Dann address, 8 October 2004.

⁵⁸ Steven J. Crum, *The Road on which We Came: A History of the Western Shoshone* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 12.

the homeland called *Newe Sogobia*,⁵⁹ were of paramount importance (For a map of *Newe Sogobia*, see Appendix A). Due to the arid conditions and relatively limited resources of *Newe Sogobia*, various complex subsistence strategies were developed in order to ensure the thriving of the people. These strategies were mediated through social and political structures based upon the peaceful coexistence of several communities of small extended family groups. These communities tended to recognize complex cultural practices which enabled scarce resources to be efficiently shared, and maximized production while minimizing labor. One such resource was the nut of the piñon pine tree, described by Crum as “without a doubt the most important overall plant food source for the Newe.”⁶⁰

As one of the few plant foods readily available in the region, the annual harvest and processing of piñon nuts provided the Western Shoshone with an easily storable source of nutrition. Piñon nuts therefore represented a foundational component of an overall wholesome and diverse diet which included rabbit, antelope, ducks, and various foodstuff and medicinal herbs, seeds, roots, and plants. Not surprisingly, these nuts also figured prominently in the cultural and spiritual perspective of the people. As Crum relates, Western Shoshone oral tradition holds that the people “were placed in their homeland by the Creator (Uteen Taikwahni), whose complexion was the same color as that of the natives,” and that piñon nuts were brought

⁵⁹ The word *Newe*, which translates as “people,” refers to the traditional name by which the Western Shoshone called themselves. *Newe Sogobia*, then, may be approximated as “the land of the people.” Crum notes that while the exact etiology of the term “Shoshone” is largely a mystery, and almost certainly a product of white, Euroamerican invention. Following Crum, I choose utilize this latter term in this paper despite its problematic origins, because “it has been widely used and accepted by both Indians and non-Indians after contact” (x).

⁶⁰ Crum, 3-4.

to the region from the north through the intervention of figures like Coyote, Crow, and Crane.⁶¹ Such histories helped give shape to Western Shoshone identity and provide a significant basis for cultural and spiritual worldview. Further, as the location of harvests varied from year to year, these events offered regular opportunities for various communities to come together, exchange information and socialize, and perform important ritual practices. As a sort of lynchpin of Western Shoshone cultural and spiritual imagination, economic strategy, and socio-political structure, the piñon pine literally and symbolically embodied a crucial link between the people and their land. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, it also became a central feature in the ongoing struggle of the Western Shoshone to prevent *Newe Sogobia* from being usurped into the American Empire. But in order to understand this connection, one must first look to the beginning of intercultural contact.

Although evidence indicates that the Western Shoshone were involved in trade networks implicating Euroamericans from at least the 1600s, prolonged direct contact began to take on greater significance around the mid-1800s.⁶² Four interconnected events impacted this shift: a) the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, in which Mexico ceded the Great Basin region to the United States; b) the discovery of gold in California; c) the beginning of permanent white settlement of the region; and d) the opening of official relations between the United States

⁶¹ Crum, 1, 5-6.

⁶² For two early (and in some ways, problematic) studies related to the topic, see Francis Haines, "The Northward Spread of Horses among the Plains Indians," *American Anthropologist* 40/3 (1938): 429-437; and Clark Wissler, "The Influence of the Horse in the Development of Plains Culture," *American Anthropologist* 16/1 (1914): 1-25. Although some Western Shoshone may have acquired horses by this time (perhaps through the intervention of other Native groups), there is little evidence to suggest prolonged direct contact with Euroamericans prior to the 1800s.

and the Western Shoshone.⁶³ Passing through *Newe Sogobia* to reach the gold fields, many Euroamericans failed to acknowledge their presence on another nation's territory. The Western Shoshone and other Native groups were often perceived (in the manner of the American Narrative) as inferior races, and were treated accordingly. For example, Crum notes that Euroamericans "used the Indians for target practice and sexually abused the women."⁶⁴ Further, large numbers of "49'ers" who had been unlucky in their search for gold began to settle in the region without regard for the indigenous inhabitants or natural balances of this sensitive ecosystem. Native peoples were killed outright or forced into starvation in the face of vanishing resources, without remorse or recompense from their new and unwanted neighbors.

The Western Shoshone did not suffer these imposed burdens in silence. On the contrary, when the intentions and lack of respect of the Euroamerican invaders became clear, Native communities chose to respond with various tactics including sporadic guerilla warfare and the reacquisition of property claimed by whites.⁶⁵ To the Shoshone, the advance of Euroamerican settlers represented a direct threat to life and culture, and nothing short of an illegal and unethical invasion of another nation's homeland. On the contrary, from the perspective of Euroamerican settlers (a perspective which was encouraged by the emerging American Narrative), the choice to move westward was understood as not only a God-given right but also the divine imperative of a chosen people to secure the continent in the face of dangerous and backward heathens. It was further regarded as a legal entitlement under the general contours of the doctrine of Discovery.

⁶³ See Crum, 17-26.

⁶⁴ Crum, 18.

⁶⁵ Crum, 18

Although the United States lacked the practical capability at this historical moment to fully support this westward advance in military and economic terms, it did seek to lend ideological and political support when possible. For example, throughout the 1850s US government officials were authorized to communicate with Native communities and offer minor concessions and gifts in order to prevent the feared outbreak of widespread violent conflict and, in the words of one such official, to “soften their hatred toward the whites.”⁶⁶ However, such tokens could do little to remedy the basic grievances voiced by these communities.

And with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the United States could not afford to have a smoldering crisis on its western front. Further, in order to finance the war effort the government required an efficient means by which to transport precious metals out of California and what was soon to become Nevada. The most direct route to the East, approved by the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, crossed directly through the heart of *Newe Sogobia*. However, with Western Shoshone communities responding to ever-growing threats to their well-being (a reality which was perverted by the mainstream perception of Indian peoples as excessively “warlike”), the security of this route could not be guaranteed to the government’s satisfaction. Thus, negotiations with these communities were commenced in 1862, a process which culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Ruby Valley on October 1, 1863. This “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” officially recognized Western Shoshone ownership of a sizeable portion (approximately 24.5 million acres) of *Newe Sogobia*, but it came at a price. In exchange for this

⁶⁶ Quoted in Crum, 19.

recognition, its corollary usage rights, and twenty years of annuity payments, the Native representatives agreed to several stipulations. These stipulations involved assurances that:

- All violent activity against Euroamerican settlers would be ceased (Article I);
- Routes and methods of travel across Native lands, the functioning of telegraph lines, and the building of military forts would not be impeded (Articles II and III);
- Mining of “gold and silver, or other minerals” would be permitted, along with the taking of timber (Article IV); and
- Communities would move to one of several reservation areas set aside within *Newe Sogobia* “whenever the President of the United states shall deem it expedient for them to abandon the roaming life, which they now lead, and become herdsmen or agriculturalists” (Article IV).

(For the complete text of the Treaty of Ruby Valley, see Appendix B)

Of course, as with many if not most of the treaties negotiated by the United States with Native nations in this era, the government’s promises were never fulfilled. Only one reservation area was established, and annuity payments fell short of agreed amounts.⁶⁷ However, perhaps the key aspect of the Treaty was its undeniable recognition of Western Shoshone ownership of the land. This recognition was clearly articulated in the text, and confirmed by the statements of government officials in the aftermath of its signing. For example, one official was quoted in a local newspaper, the *Reese River Reveille*, as stating that “the treaty is in no instance considered as extinguishing Indian title to the land described in their limits.”⁶⁸ The lack of ambiguity

⁶⁷ For a detailed explanation of these shortcomings, see Crum, 31-41.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Crum, 26.

present in the US position in 1863, however, would slowly give way to a much different perspective over the next hundred years. This shift seems to have occurred in inverse proportion to the growth in US regional power in relation to the Western Shoshone. In other words, as the ability of the government to control the territory as it desired increased, its recognition (in both word and action) of Shoshone ownership decreased accordingly. This dynamic exemplifies the typical functioning of image-themes like Discovery and Manifest Destiny in real world American political strategy.

The Usurpation of Newe Sogobia: Although the United States showed little interest in *Newe Sogobia* in the years following the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, a significant change in attitude began occurring around the mid-1900s. This change was precipitated by a confluence of events. First, Euroamerican settlement in the region began to approach a critical mass. Although Western Shoshone and whites had coexisted in the region (albeit somewhat tensely) for decades, land conflicts began to escalate around the onset of the Great Depression.⁶⁹ Second, in 1951 US Atomic Energy Commission chose to begin testing nuclear weapons at their Nevada Test Site, located in the heart of Western Shoshone homeland on the Nellis Gunnery Range (for a map of this and other related nuclear sites, see Appendix C). With the Cold War moving toward its zenith, such tests were deemed of highest importance to national security and could stand no impediment. Finally, new discoveries and emerging technologies allowed a new wave of gold mining to be pursued. Although the region had been

⁶⁹ Ward Churchill, "The Struggle for Newe Segobia: The Western Shoshone Battle for their Homeland," *Struggle for the Land: Native North American Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide, and Colonization* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2002), 173-174.

mined for silver from at least the 1860's, new operations were initiated in the mid-1960's to take advantage of the previously unknown deposits such as the Carlin Trend utilizing developing processes such as open pit mining and heap-leaching.⁷⁰ These operations have continued to expand up to the present day, especially following the discovery of another significant deposit in 2003.⁷¹

Considering this confluence of events, possession of *Newe Sogobia* suddenly became a topic of considerable interest to the United States. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on one's perspective), the promotion of the American Narrative had already enabled certain devices to be put into place which would facilitate the process of gaining possession. Perhaps the two most powerful devices included the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 and the Indian Claims Commission (ICC), instituted in 1946. The IRA, also known as the Wheeler-Howard Act or the Indian New Deal, represented a sort of reversal of the Dawes Act which had guided federal Indian policy since 1887. The brainchild of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Commissioner John

⁷⁰ See Simon Walker, "Cortez Hills: The Latest Chapter," *Mining Magazine* (January/February 2009), 20 February 2009, web, 18 November 2009 <<http://www.miningmagazine.com/mine-of-the-month/cortez-hills--the-latest-chapter>>. This article explores Mining Magazine's "Mine of the Month," Cortez Hills, and the string of discoveries which have led its owners to seek expanded operation. Cortez Hills is located directly within the territory claimed by the Western Shoshone. Of course, the vast range of environmental damage already wreaked by mining operations, and portended by its expansion, are not discussed. In particular, heap-leaching has come under severe scrutiny from Native communities and environmental activists for its detrimental effects on regional water tables.

⁷¹ See "Cortez," *Global Infomine*, web, 18 November 2009 <<http://www.infomine.com/minesite/minesite.asp?site=cortez>>. The article notes that "proven and probable mineral reserves" at the Cortez site alone were valued in 2005 at "11.1 million ounces of gold." At current (18 November 2009) prices of approximately \$1,000 per ounce, this claim is thus worth over \$11.1 Billion.

Collier, the IRA claimed to return to Indian tribes⁷² a measure of self-government and control over land bases. However, in order to fully take advantage of such provisions, tribes were required to adopt Euroamerican-style constitutions and electoral processes. In effect, these shifts instigated rifts within many Native communities between those who remained faithful to traditional political and religious ways (often called “traditionals”), and those who favored greater assimilation of Euroamerican values and structures. Whether intended by Collier or not, such consequences mirrored the type of “divide and conquer” strategy which had been employed by European and American invaders against Native nations for centuries.

As Crum notes, the Western Shoshone were not immune to the divisive effects of the IRA. Thus, when a lawyer from the East named Ernest Wilkinson appeared to the Temoak band in 1946 desiring to represent them in front of the ICC, a confusing array of events followed. The ICC was designed to resolve land claim issues by providing Native nations with a monetary payment in exchange for ostensibly clearing US title to their traditional lands. It did not provide for any return of land, nor acknowledgment of land title never abrogated. In the view of many traditionals, Native ownership of the land, which was of paramount importance, had been clearly established by the Treaty of Ruby Valley and as such could not be furthered by appeal to the ICC. Some other Western Shoshone, however, saw potential in such an appeal for alleviation of poverty through the acquisition of “more money for immediate use to purchase practical goods,

⁷² Following Reinhardt (xxv-xxvi), I acknowledge the problematic and pejorative nature of the term “tribe” as applied to Native nations. However, as the term does possess a specific legal connotation within US federal Indian law, I utilize it sparingly, and only when referring to the particular official legal status of the entity in question.

including cattle, farm equipment, and more land.”⁷³ Wilkerson and his colleagues, who had helped design and implement the original ICC legislation, manipulated this divide by portraying the ICC arena as a place where the deeply held interests of both sides could finally be fulfilled. In other words, they attempted to induce a sense of Wonder about the legal process which would mystify the people as to its actual consequences. Of course, in the end the only interests which were actually served in any substantial way through process were those of the lawyers and the government, an outcome which had been intended by design.

Although Wilkerson’s firm explicitly told the Temoak council that it would “represent their interests” to the ICC, the actual claim it eventually filed in 1951 asserted that “the Western Shoshone had lost not only their treaty lands, but also their aboriginal land extending into Death Valley, California. [They] put the date of the loss at 1872 (only nine years after the Treaty of Ruby Valley), and...included in the twenty-four million acre claim some sixteen million acres that the Shoshones insist were not occupied by anyone but Indian bands, and that were never in question.”⁷⁴ Of course, such an assertion was never approved or desired by the Temoak band or any other Western Shoshone entity. Further, although Wilkerson’s services had only been officially retained by the Temoak band, the ICC agreed to allow the claim to be presented for the entire Western Shoshone Nation. From a US legal standpoint, this claim was thus interpreted to negate whatever title might have resided in the 1863 Treaty and to validate US possession of the territory. Expanding upon this process, Glenn T. Morris writes:

⁷³ Crum, 124.

⁷⁴ Churchill, “Struggle,” 175-176.

In 1962, the commission conceded that it “was unable to discover any formal extinguishment of Western Shoshone to lands in Nevada, and could not establish a date of taking, but nonetheless rules that the lands were taken at some point in the past. It did rule that approximately two million acres of Newe land in California was taken on March 3, 1853 [contrary to the Treaty of Ruby Valley, which would have supplanted any such taking], but without documenting what specific Act of Congress extinguished the title. Without the consent of the Western Shoshone Nation, on February 11, 1966, Wilkinson and the US lawyers arbitrarily stipulated that the date of valuation for government extinguishment of Western Shoshone title to over 22 million acres of land in Nevada occurred on July 1, 1872. This lawyers’ agreement, entered without the knowledge or consent of the Shoshone people, served as the ultimate loophole through which the US would allege that the Newe had lost their land.⁷⁵

Even after Wilkerson’s contract to represent the Temoak band expired and was not renewed, the BIA decided to extend the contract “on the Indians’ behalf” through the end of the Claims process.⁷⁶ The ICC eventually decided in 1972 to award the Western Shoshone approximately \$21 million for their loss of traditional lands, an amount which was based upon 1872 land prices of 15 cents an acre. The award was increased to \$26 million in 1979.

The overall Western Shoshone response to this decision has been fairly unequivocal: not one cent of federal money has been accepted over thirty years. However, the process had already set in motion a chain of thought and events which, regardless of the inherent injustice and manipulation involved, provided an ideological veneer thick enough for the government to press its case. And of course, this case has continued to be presented in the terms of the American

⁷⁵ Quoted in Churchill, “Struggle,” 176-177.

⁷⁶ Churchill, “Struggle,” 177.

Narrative. Thus, when deliberations were held in the US Congress in 2003 over House Resolution 884, which was designed to force the distribution of ICC-awarded monies to the Western Shoshone, the legislation was promoted as being in the best interests of the Native nation. For example, then Representative (and current Governor) Jim Gibbons of Nevada noted that “what we are trying to do with this bill is to allow for the justice to meet the needs of Western Shoshone people in the State of Nevada.”⁷⁷ Inherent to Gibbons’ stance was the contention that the United States was entitled to usurp *Newe Sogobia* under the auspices of Discovery, Manifest Destiny, and Exceptionalism, and that the payout would simply help Native peoples assimilate into the mainstream population. And after all, why would they not desire greater integration into the marvelous entity called the American nation? He supported this sentiment by asserting that “about 90 percent” of the Western Shoshone population supported the distribution, although was unable to offer a source for this figure.⁷⁸ The bill also gained backing from the leadership of some tribal bands, who alleged to speak for the people but were of course also quite well positioned to benefit from the proposed distribution.

The questionable nature of claims regarding popular support for the distribution is laid plain by the attitudes—both expressed and silent—of many Western Shoshone people. Such attitudes are captured in the following statements by Raymond Yowell and Glenn Holly, as reported by Churchill. Yowell maintains, “We entered into the Treaty of Ruby Valley as co-equal sovereign nations... The land to the traditional Shoshone is sacred. It is the basis of our lives. To

⁷⁷ See “HR 884, ‘Western Shoshone Claims Distribution Act;’ and HR 1409, ‘Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Land Exchange Act of 2003,’” United States House of Representatives, legislative hearing, 18 June 2003, web, 18 November 2009 <<http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/house/>>.

⁷⁸ HR 884.

take away the land is to take away the lives of the people.” Echoing this sentiment, Holly emphasizes, “Nothing happened in 1872. No land was ‘taken’ by the government. We never lost that land, we never left that land, and we’re not selling it. In our religion, it’s forbidden to take money for land. What’s really happening is that the US government through this Claims Commission, is stealing the land from us right now.”⁷⁹ Further, for every Yowell and Holly, there have been at least an equal amount of individuals who have simply chosen to indicate their attitude of dissatisfaction and disillusionment by choosing to boycott what they perceive to be an inherently unjust and deceitful process.

What is remarkable about such attitudes is the fact that despite the experience of widespread poverty, many Western Shoshone remain steadfast in their refusal to choose money over land. Contrary to the view of politicians like Jim Gibbons, many communities do not envision the distribution of ICC monies as an example of justice served, nor do they desire greater integration into American consumer culture. Certainly, an increased standard of living is desired by many, along with greater access to educational and employment opportunities. Yet to these communities, true justice is tied to a restoration of balance which can only be attained through a free relationship with the land. Such values and priorities do not fit easily within the confines of the American Narrative, establishing a cultural and theological clash whose roots reach back even to the first acts of Columbus. Thus, the traditional Native worldview has remained almost entirely unrecognized in official governmental processes such as the ICC.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Churchill, “Struggle,” 177-178.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, House Resolution 884 passed through Congress and was signed into law by George W. Bush on July 7, 2004.

Declaring War on Piñon Pine: During the same period in which the general theft of *Newe Sogobia* was occurring, a complementary and more intimate crime was also being perpetuated. This crime was launched, as many in the American age have been, under the cunning auspices of progress and efficiency. Beginning around 1960, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) instituted a strategy of replacing certain plant species with others deemed more useful or desirable from its perspective. Although this strategy was implemented in many states, it particularly impacted Nevada and *Newe Sogobia* due to the BLM's control over large swaths of "public domain" land in the region⁸⁰ and the special relationship between the Western Shoshone and piñon pine strands. In a comprehensive study of this phenomenon, Richard O. Clemmer terms the BLM strategy as "ripping resource replacement." He explains:

In this strategy indigenous plant species are literally ripped off the land. Sage, piñon, and juniper are removed by chaining, plowing, or spraying, and replaced with...other grasses or forbs suitable for either wildlife or livestock. The purpose of the chaining, plowing, and spraying projects is in the words of one chaining advocate, "to decrease less desirable plants and increase desirable species." The rationale is that "there is a high demand for the forage products and low demand for the tree products obtained from the piñon-juniper type." Thus, "trees are

⁸⁰ Currently, 67% of Nevada's land base, or approximately 48 million acres, is regarded in the government perspective to be under BLM jurisdiction. This figure has held fairly consistent for at several decades. See "Nevada" US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 16 November 2009, web, 19 November 2009 <<http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en.html>>.

being removed or reduced on large areas in an attempt to increase forage production for livestock and, in some places, for big game.”⁸¹

Calculated in the economic terms of supply and demand and cost-benefit, the BLM’s ripoff resource replacement strategy was grounded in two related presumptions. First, the governmental entity assumed that by clearing space for what it considered to be “more desirable species,” several greater goods would be effectively served. Not only would the strategy make land more useful to ranchers, it would also improve the overall environment and offer benefits to large animals like deer and cattle. This first presumption was predicated upon the second, that woodland had actually been encroaching over several decades upon a region which was initially largely grassland. Thus, the strategy of replacement was portrayed as a restoration of original conditions rather than a fundamental reshaping of the ecosystem. Although the BLM could produce no hard evidence in support of this second presumption, it nevertheless clung to its publicized rationale and went ahead with the strategy.

In the end, both presumptions were shown to be less than reliable. As Clemmer reveals, chaining did not improve deer habitat; in fact, deer were actually observed to prefer unchained plots. Further, many of the replaced species, and especially piñon pine, were quick to retake

⁸¹ Richard O. Clemmer, “The Piñon-Pine: Old Ally or New Pest? Western Shoshone Indians vs. the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada” *Environmental Review* 9/2 (1985): 138. Clemmer describes the process of chaining, which was particularly destructive and oft utilized, as follows: “Chaining, which is similar to cabling, was begun in the early 1960’s and was developed to a high art by the Ely, Nevada, office of the bureau of Land Management in the late 1960s. Chaining is used to uproot not only stands of piñon-juniper, but also big sage. The ‘Ely Chain’ is a 90-pound-per-link ship’s anchor chain 150 feet long with 18-inch pieces of iron rail welded onto each link. The chain is hitched to two crawler caterpillars and is dragged across the piñon-juniper stand. The chain tears up the vegetation by its roots; the area is then seeded, and the chain is dragged across the area again in the opposite direction to complete the uprooting job and to cover the seed” (139).

cleared plots. These “undesirable” species simply proved to be better adapted to the growing conditions of the region than their replacements.⁸² This latter statistic helps to discredit BLM claims regarding the original state of the ecosystem. As Ronald M. Lanner and Thomas R. VanDevender confirm in a 1998 article, “Notwithstanding any merits that are perceived to follow from woodland eradication, no persuasive evidence has yet been brought forth to support the idea that piñon pines have been engaged in a regional invasion, or migration, into historic grasslands or shrublands.⁸³ Considering these realities, one is forced to ponder why the BLM would choose to undertake such an expensive and time-consuming strategy when its basic premises and goals were at best uncertain.

An analysis of the nature and consequences of the ripoff resource replacement program yields a few possible answers to this question. First, one must consider the possibility that the BLM bureaucracy simply acted incompetently by failing to properly investigate its hypotheses. While this perspective may be in part correct, it is nevertheless limited in that it fails to integrate the historical, political, and sociological context in which the program was pursued. Thus, perhaps a more complete perspective might be grounded in the Latin principle of *cui bono*. Who benefited from the program, and who was harmed?

Certainly, white ranchers represented one of the major beneficiaries. The chaining of piñon pine significantly increased the amount and quality of land suitable for grazing livestock

⁸² Clemmer, 140. Also see Ronald M. Lanner, *The Piñon Pine: A Natural and Cultural History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1981), 136-140.

⁸³ Ronald M. Lanner and Thomas R. VanDevender, “The Recent History of Piñon Pines in the American Southwest,” *Ecology and Biogeography of Pinus*, ed. David M. Richardson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 179

such as sheep, goats, horses, and cattle. This fact was not lost on the ranchers themselves. In fact, during one of the most prolific periods of ripoff resource replacement (1966 to 1973), nearly half of the BLM's clearing work was expressly requested by ranchers, who also paid a large portion of the costs.⁸⁴ The willingness of the BLM to bend to the wills of these ranchers speaks to the political and economic power wielded by the industry in the eastern counties of the state at this time. Although the 927 livestock operators active in 1970 represented only somewhere between 3-4% of the population of the area,⁸⁵ they nevertheless were able to disproportionately influence the remaking of large portions of the environment, perhaps up to "a third of a million acres."⁸⁶ Who else benefited? Perhaps the only other direct beneficiaries of the program were the BLM employees whose paychecks were tied to the clearing of the land. Hunters were not positively impacted, as big game was for the most part adversely affected. Nor, obviously, were the Western Shoshone, who vehemently opposed the chaining of piñon pine from the start.

In fact, one might argue that the ripoff resource replacement program embodied a basic clash of worldviews. Considering the value of the piñon pine from different perspectives, Clemmer reveals, "To the aboriginal Western Shoshone its value depended on its productive

⁸⁴ Clemmer, 140.

⁸⁵ Clemmer (140-141) notes that "fewer than 30,000 people" resided in the eastern counties of Nevada in 1985, while "927 livestock operators" were active in 1970. Considering that the population of these counties did not likely increase substantially in the intervening years (in light of the mining boom in the late 1960's), and that at least some of the registered livestock operators were likely Western Shoshone with relatively small herds, I estimate that ranchers represented somewhere between 3-4% of the 1970 population.

⁸⁶ Lanner, 133.

health; to the non-Indian miners and [livestock owners] its value required its death.”⁸⁷ From the standpoint of BLM and US government more widely, the value of piñon pine was evaluated in exclusively economic terms: since the land was more profitable with the trees removed, no other considerations were necessary. However, even this already narrow estimation of value was further constricted as only certain approaches to economics were incorporated. Ranching, largely a Euroamerican invention, was considered an appropriate livelihood and use of the land. On the contrary, Native practices such as the collection and processing of piñon nuts were regarded as both inefficient and inferior. Regardless of the fact that such practices had allowed human, plant, and animal life to thrive in conjunction in the region’s difficult conditions for several hundred years, they were nevertheless deemed lesser forms of economy in Euroamerican hierarchical conception of civilization. This hierarchical perspective also extended into the non-human world, where the clearing of piñon pine was justified in the name of supporting “superior” forms of life such as deer and cattle.⁸⁸

Through the physical expression of this clash of worldviews in the destruction of piñon pine, the Western Shoshone were directly harmed while the US government became an indirect beneficiary. It is important to recall that the height of the ripoff replacement era coincided with the most intense period of conflict regarding the Western Shoshone ICC case. Although Article IV of the Treaty of Ruby Valley stipulated that “Mills may be erected and timber taken for their use, as also for building and other purposes in any part of the country claimed by said bands,” the destruction of piñon pine nevertheless represented a direct challenge to Western Shoshone

⁸⁷ Clemmer, 137.

⁸⁸ Clemmer, 139.

control of the territory. In effect, while the Treaty established certain usufruct rights which the United States could exercise *in Western Shoshone lands*, the actions of the BLM suggested the exact opposite interpretation. The Western Shoshone were now forced to press their rights in the face of a government which was claiming ultimate jurisdiction. And since piñon pine represented a vital aspect of traditional Native culture, politics, religion, economy, and identity, its destruction dealt a powerful blow to the people.

Although the government never officially acknowledged that the program was designed to undermine traditional Western Shoshone lifeways and identity, there can be little doubt that this objective was both operative and embraced at some level of understanding. The most significant evidence in support of this assertion is the fact that the nearly all local Native communities publicized their opposition to the program, and their rationale for opposing it, quite vociferously. There could be no mistaking the Western Shoshone perspective that the ripoff resource replacement strategy was harming not only the environment, but the Native peoples as well. When numerous appeals to local government officials went largely unheeded, the case was taken to the national stage through the 1974 premiere of a feature film documentary of the subject called “Broken Treaty at Battle Mountain.” The film raised awareness of the Western Shoshone case among a wider audience, which in turn brought greater scrutiny on the BLM. Pressured by the film’s success, ongoing local efforts, and related legal struggles, “the Bureau of Land Management finally capitulated to the obvious fact: not only were piñon pines on the ‘public domain’ part of the Western Shoshones’ cultural heritage, but also they might actually

still be under the legal ownership of Western Shoshones.”⁸⁹ Piñon pine chainings remained an official BLM strategy after 1974; however, after this time their implementation tended to be pursued on a much more selective basis and smaller scale, if at all.

Thus, the controversy over ripoff resource replacement acted as a microcosm of the larger conflict between the Western Shoshone and the United States. Clemmer summarizes:

Embedded in the controversy were some very basic issues: treaty rights and land ownership; the ecological soundness of trying to replace trees with grasses; the effectiveness of the eradication process; and the moral and ethical rights of ecosystems as opposed to the monetary dictates of economic systems.⁹⁰

Interestingly, the conflict might also be interpreted as exemplifying of one type of “psychological mechanism”⁹¹ functional within the colonizer mind as exposed by scholars such as Tinker and Freeland, Churchill, and Greenblatt. For while the BLM attempted to portray the piñon pine as an invasive outsider which required destruction in order for the proper inhabitants of the land to flourish, it actually represented a keystone species of the region. After all, some of the trees which had been chained were found to be between 200 and 300 years old.⁹² In light of such a contradiction, one must wonder if the government officials were simply projecting their own presence in *Newe Sogobia* onto the ecological debate, and, like the early European invaders, reacting to their own denied feelings of guilt and insecurity by attempting to exert control through a remaking of the landscape.

⁸⁹ Clemmer, 146.

⁹⁰ Clemmer, 131.

⁹¹ See Tinker and Freeland, 42.

⁹² Clemmer, 139.

Nuclear Wasteland: The remaking of the landscape of *Newe Sogobia* has extended far beyond the destruction of piñon pine. Instead, much of this land has been transformed into a sprawling complex of military bases and training grounds to which the Western Shoshone (or any other non-approved personnel, for that matter) have no access. Part of this complex includes over 750,000 acres designated as the Nevada Test Site and described by the federal government as a “unique national resource.”⁹³ Originally run by the Atomic Energy Commission, the Test Site currently rests under the jurisdiction of the Department of Energy. During the period of 1951 to 1992, this “proving ground” witnessed the detonation of 1,021 nuclear devices, including 220 above-ground detonations in the first three years alone.⁹⁴ Occurring entirely within the boundaries of Western Shoshone land, this explosive history transformed the “the peaceful and pastoral Newes, who had never engaged in an armed conflict with the United States, into ‘the most bombed nation on earth.’”⁹⁵

⁹³ “Nevada Test Site,” National Nuclear Security Administration, Nevada Site Office, 17 November 2009, web, 20 November 2009 <<http://www.nv.doe.gov/nts/default.htm>>.

⁹⁴ See US Department of Energy, Nevada Operations Office, *United States Nuclear Tests: July 1945 through September 1992* (Las Vegas: US Department of Energy, 2000), web, 20 November 2009 <http://www.nv.doe.gov/library/publications/historical/DOENV_209_REV15.pdf>. It is important to note that some observers suggest that this official government total of 1,021 detonations does not take into account the full range of tests completed. Further, Churchill notes that a “subcritical plutonium device” was detonated at the Test Site as late as 1997 (“Struggle,” 183).

⁹⁵ Ward Churchill, “Cold War Impacts on Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonization,” *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 326. Although the exact etymology of this term is somewhat unclear, Churchill attributes it to Western Shoshone Chief Raymond Yowell (see footnote 117).

Such an inauspicious designation brought gruesome consequences. Describing the relationship between the nuclear testing establishment in Nevada and local peoples, Valerie Kuletz states:

For the Native inhabitants of these places, military/scientific occupation meant, at best, low-paid jobs to help build, maintain, and clean the emerging cities. At worst, Indians and other local populations were ignored completely – rendered invisible by a mixture of racism and a perception of desert lands as vast, uninhabitable wastelands. Worse than this, Indians and other local people may have been regarded as expendable subjects for radiation experiments—a gruesome possibility that has only recently been acknowledged with the release of previously confidential reports documenting the deliberate radiation releases from laboratories and undisclosed, secret nuclear tests, exposing downwind populations to fallout.⁹⁶

Strengthening such claims, evidence indicates that the Atomic Energy Commission and Department of Energy would “deliberately wait for the clouds to blow north and east before conducting above-ground tests...[meaning] that the Shoshones would get a larger dosage.⁹⁷ The nuclear tests distributed approximately 12 billion curies of radiation into the atmosphere and contaminated groundwater tables with radioactive substance levels up to 3,000 times the maximum “safe” level.⁹⁸ The destruction wrought by such a course of action complemented the other ecological “enhancements” being pursued by the government.

⁹⁶ Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 43.

⁹⁷ Winona LaDuke, “Nuclear Waste: Dumping on the Indians,” *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1999), 99.

⁹⁸ Churchill, “Cold War,” 326-327.

Of course, the health of Western Shoshone communities has been significantly impacted by the range of harmful actions perpetrated in their homeland. Physically, rates of various types of cancer (including leukemia and thyroid cancer), birth defects, and other diseases have tended to be both abnormally high and vastly underestimated by the government.⁹⁹ Mentally, the trauma brought on by a range of stressors has exacerbated physical ailments and affected communities in complex ways.¹⁰⁰ In addition to experiencing the toxification of their sacred lands, Native communities have been forced to remain eternally vigilant in the face of ongoing and new threats to their lives, culture, and territory. In addition to the traumatic experience of nuclear testing and its aftermath, Western Shoshone also endured great stress related to the potential development of the MX nuclear missile system and the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository.

The MX missile system was, in Churchill's words, "an entirely offensive weapon which was, of course, dubbed the 'Peacekeeper.'"¹⁰¹ Designed to counter Soviet first strike capabilities with high yield, multiple warhead devices, the MX system was envisioned as a mobile platform which would have "brought approximately 20,000 additional non-Indians onto Newe land, [created] another 10,000 miles of paved roads, and [drawn] down 3.15 billion gallons of water

⁹⁹ See Valerie Kuletz, "Invisible Spaces, Violent Places: Cold War Nuclear and Militarized Landscapes," *Violent Environments*, eds. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Eric Frohberg et al., "The Assessment of Radiation Exposures in Native American Communities from Nuclear Weapons Testing in Nevada," *Risk Analysis* 21/1 (2000)

¹⁰⁰ For two in-depth analyses of the psychological impacts of colonization and genocide on Indian peoples, see Eduardo Duran, *Healing the Soul Wound: Counseling with American Indians and other Native Peoples* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2006); and Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra M. DeBruyn, "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief," *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research: The Journal of the National Center* 8/2 (1998): 56-78.

¹⁰¹ Churchill, "Cold War," 332, footnote *.

from an already overtaxed water table.”¹⁰² The Yucca Mountain facility, promoted as a sort of central depository for the country’s nuclear waste, portended similar disastrous consequences. Over 90,000 shipments of nuclear waste from all over the country would have brought to *Newe Sogobia* and stored within the mountain, a sacred site for the Western Shoshone and Paiute Nations. Although safe storage programs for nuclear waste are inherently controversial topics no matter where they proposed or how they are designed, the track record of the United States in this arena is particularly bleak. In particular, Native communities have been coerced to bear a significantly disproportionate portion of the government’s blunders over many years due to many related factors.¹⁰³ The Yucca Mountain program embodied this dynamic by integrating cost-saving but less reliable technologies, adopting a storage site “undercut by no less than 32 geological fault lines,”¹⁰⁴ and utilizing a radiation safety standard far below typical regulatory levels.¹⁰⁵

Impacted in part by passionate Western Shoshone leadership and activism in forging cross-cultural alliances, both the MX missile and Yucca Mountain programs were abandoned in

¹⁰² Churchill, “Cold War,” 184.

¹⁰³ For an excellent analysis of this issue, see Kristin Shrader-Frechette, “Environmental Justice and Native Americans: The Mescalero Apache and Monitored Retrievable Storage,” *Natural Resources Law Journal* 36 (1996): 943-954.

¹⁰⁴ Churchill, “Cold War,” 339.

¹⁰⁵ LaDuke, 109. The author notes that while the radiation standard for Yucca Mountain was set at 100 millirems per year—a level equivalent to a 1 in 286 lifetime risk of cancer—governmental regulatory levels for pollutants have typically ranged from between a 1 in 10,000 to a 1 in 1,000,000 lifetime risk of cancer. The unsuitable nature of the Yucca Mountain proposal is also explored in Corbin Harney, “Yucca Mountain: No Place for Nuclear Waste,” Nuclear Information and Resource Center, October 2000, web, 21 November 2009 <<http://www.nirs.org/radwaste/yucca/yuccaltrbycorbin102400.htm>>.

the face of technical hindrances and growing public opposition by 2005 and 2009, respectively. But despite these victories, the government's various nuclear activities in Nevada remain noteworthy recent embodiments of the American Narrative in action. For example, by portraying the harnessing of the power of the atom in terms of Wonder, elites within the political and military-industrial complexes could effectively frame blatant instances of injustice to the Western Shoshone and others in terms palatable to the mainstream population.¹⁰⁶ Further, nuclear tests were situated within the larger story of Cold War, wherein the divine right of American Manifest Destiny was being threatened by the nefarious aspirations of the Soviet "Evil Empire." A different type of projection was at work here; rather than a psychological projection (although this dynamic may have been in effect as well), the conversion of Nevada into a nuclear wasteland represented a projection of power by the United States against not only overseas adversaries but also perceived internal threats like the Western Shoshone. By remaining steadfast in and drawing greater public attention to its refusal to back down from its defense of *Newe Sogobia*, this supposedly inferior nation continued to undermine the work of the Narrative and threaten the long-term stability of status quo attitudes and structures.

The Case of Mary and Carrie Dann: It is ironic—or perhaps strangely fitting—that against the backdrop of the mighty American military's nuclear power complex two poor sisters rose up to become embodiments of the specific Western Shoshone struggle and the larger multifaceted struggle to expose deceptions of the American Narrative. Having experienced nuclear bombings, the destruction of relatives both human and non-human, and the deliberate undermining of their

¹⁰⁶ In this regard, I think of the promulgation of official video publications which had the effect of inducing awe and disbelief at the sinister beauty of mushroom clouds rising over the desert floor.

culture, these sisters chose to take a stand against the continued genocide of their people. In many ways, the story of Mary and Carrie Dann stands out as an antithesis of the Columbus story. For unlike Columbus, who used various deceptive devices to conceal the violent possession of other's lands and bodies and ensure his own selfish benefit, over the past forty years the Danns¹⁰⁷ have endured great personal sacrifices in a quest to reveal the true nature of relations between the United States and Native nations and bring an end to the injustice perpetrated by American imperialism. In response to such efforts, the US government has cast the Danns' actions as misguided at best and criminal at worst. Whereas Columbus has been largely celebrated in spite of historical reality, the Danns have been either ignored or portrayed as ignorant agitators in dominant accounts.

Although more in-depth accounts of the Danns' complex legal struggles may be found elsewhere,¹⁰⁸ the inclusion of a brief timeline of pertinent events may be useful here. Such a timeline might be outlined as follows:

- 1974: Mary and Carrie Dann are charged with trespassing by a BLM ranger after being found herding their cattle without a permit on land considered by the government to be "public domain." As Clemmer notes, "Of course, to the BLM, the fact that the Danns happened to be Western Shoshone Indians and combined traditional subsistence techniques with modern ranching on land which they and their ancestors had used for centuries was of no particular consequence...It was time to require the Danns to either obtain grazing permits or get their stock off the

¹⁰⁷ Mary Dann passed away on April 22, 2005.

¹⁰⁸ See Churchill, "Struggle"; Clemmer; Kristine L. Foot, "United States v. Dann: What it Portends for Ownership of Millions of Acres in the Western United States," *Public Land Law Review* 5 (1984): 183-191; and Jerry Mander, "The Theft of Nevada," *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of Indian Nations* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991), 303-318.

Government's land."¹⁰⁹ Despite being threatened with fines and imprisonment, the Danns refuse to capitulate to BLM demands. Both parties agree to settle the conflict in the court system, and a trespass suit is filed against the Danns in April.

- 1977: The US District Court for Reno finds the Danns guilty of trespassing and levies a fine in the amount of \$1000. The sisters had mounted a defense based on the theory that since the land was technically still owned by the Western Shoshone, they could not be found guilty of trespassing on their own land. John O'Connell, head attorney for the Danns, described the legal strategy thusly: "We have asked the government over and over again in court to show evidence of how it obtained title to Shoshone land. They start groping around and can't find a damn thing. In fact, the relevant documents show the United States never wanted the Nevada desert until recently."¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, upon decision the Danns are forced to appeal their case to the Ninth Circuit Court.
- 1978: The court of appeals remands the case back to the lower court, holding that "title to the disputed lands had not yet been litigated" and that "the ICC's actions were grounded on a stipulated taking date."¹¹¹
- 1979: Back in the district court, the government engages in a "conspicuous pattern of stalling"¹¹² as it awaits the finalization of the Western Shoshone ICC settlement. The finalized settlement is then used to "prove" the extinguishment of the Native land claim. In response to this turn of events, the district court finds that although the Danns cannot be punished for actions which occurred prior to the ICC settlement of December 1979, they may no longer use the land without proper government approval. Both parties appeal the decision.

¹⁰⁹ Clemmer, 146.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Churchill, "Struggle," 178.

¹¹¹ Foot, 185.

¹¹² Churchill, "Struggle," 179.

- 1983: The Ninth Circuit Court of appeals rules on the argument proposed in the second district court decision, that the finalization of the 1979 ICC settlement extinguished aboriginal title. As Churchill explains, this argument effectively “demolished the articulated basis—that a title transfer had been effected more than a century earlier—for the [ICC’s] award amount. It also pointed to the fact that the [ICC] had comported itself illegally in the Western Shoshone case insofar as the Indian Claims Commission Act explicitly disallowed the commissioners (never mind attorneys representing the Indians) from extinguishing previously unextinguished land titles.”¹¹³ In light of such contradictions, the court of appeals reverses the Reno court’s ruling. The United States then appealed the case to the Supreme Court.

- 1985: The Supreme Court reinstates the district court’s 1979 ruling, stating that the Western Shoshone’s possession of the land as a collective whole had indeed been extinguished and thus could not be accepted as a legitimate defense. The justices did leave open the possibility, however, that the Danns’ *individual* aboriginal rights to land title might still be extant. But as the lower courts had not considered this possibility, the Supreme Court decided it too would offer no substantive judgment.¹¹⁴

- 1986 to 1990: Once again remanded to the Reno district court and appealed to the circuit court, the case continues to be argued in relation to the question of aboriginal land rights. The court of appeals upholds some aspects of the Danns’ individual title claims, but ultimately rules that these claims must be regulated in a similar fashion to those of other (non-Native) private citizens. Interestingly, in their decision the judges of this court note, “We would have thought that the Supreme Court's decision would have shifted the focus of this case away from tribal aboriginal title and placed it squarely on individual aboriginal title. The Danns continue, however, to rely heavily on Western Shoshone aboriginal title. A

¹¹³ Churchill, “Struggle,” 179.

¹¹⁴ See *United States v. Dann*, No. 83-1476, Supreme Court of the United States, 20 February 1985.

great deal of their argument on this appeal is devoted to an attack on the claims proceedings and to an attempt to limit the effect that the claims award must be given under the Supreme Court's decision in this case.”¹¹⁵ This time, it is the Danns who appeal to the Supreme Court, but the justices decline to hear the case.

Although this denial cut off one line of attack against the government, the Danns and their kin have kept up their assault on injustice. For example, shortly after the 1990 Supreme Court response a new case was brought to the Reno district court by the Western Shoshone. Building on previous decisions, attorneys for the Native nation argued that if, as the courts had held, collective aboriginal land title had only been extinguished through the 1979 ICC settlement, then the Western Shoshone were entitled to billions of dollars in mining and trespass fees garnered in the years since the signing of the Treaty of Ruby Valley. It is important to note that despite the billions of dollars in gold which has been ripped from the bosom of *Newe Sogobia*, not one cent in royalties has been transferred to the land’s original, and rightful, inhabitants. The case was rejected by the Reno court on technical grounds upon its initial application; however, as scholars like Jerry Mander note, it “may yet re-emerge.”¹¹⁶

Although US courts have demonstrated their unwillingness to stray from the discourse of the American Narrative in relation to the Native nations, other judicial bodies have proven slightly more amenable. Issuing judgment on cases brought by the Western Shoshone, two such bodies—the Human Rights Court of the Organization of American States, and the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination—found the US in violation of several

¹¹⁵ United States of America v. Mary Dann; Carrie Dann, No. 873 F.2d 1189, United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit, 11 January 1989.

¹¹⁶ Mander, 316-317.

domestic and international legal precepts. In 2001, the Human Rights Court issued the first ever international judgment on US-Indian relations, declaring that the “government is violating human rights in its treatment of Western Shoshone elders Carrie and Mary Dann,” and denouncing the ICC process as “erroneous and even fraudulent.” In the same year, the UN body instructed the US to reverse policies “that threaten irreparable harm and enter into negotiations” with Native nations in ways that “ensure effective participation” for the fair resolution of land disputes.¹¹⁷ While these decisions represented momentous victories and an unprecedented show of international support for the Western Shoshone, the lack of enforcement mechanisms within their issuing bodies ensured that the US would not immediately be held to task. In other words, while these international courts brought increased scrutiny upon US Indian policy, they could do little to directly affect significant changes.

Thus, viewed in light of historical context, one might notice that the actions of the US government in relation to the Danns in particular and Western Shoshone more generally look eerily similar to those engaged in by Columbus and his successors upon their arrival in the lands which would be christened the “New World.” Seeking to prove and validate their possession of these lands, the invaders performed a variety of what Greenblatt calls “legitimizing gestures”: choreographed formal legal rituals which were carefully recorded, physical alterations and

¹¹⁷ See Jennifer Wolowick, “The US Supreme Court, the Western Shoshone, and the Fight for Human Rights in the International Arena,” *Human Rights in Global Light: Selected Papers, Poems, and Prayers*, San Francisco State University Annual Human Rights Summits, Treganza Museum Anthropology Papers 24 and 25 (2007-2008): 62.

markings of the land, and the construction of official buildings upon particularly important places.¹¹⁸ Analyzing the purpose of these gestures, the author notes:

Here, and throughout the early discourse of the New World, the reassuring signs of administrative order – bureaucratic formulas already established in a very large number of earlier military, diplomatic, and juridical encounters in Europe and Africa – are deceptive; consciously or unconsciously, they draw us away from a sense of all that is unsettling, unique, and terrible in the first European contacts with the people of America. It is important, I think, to resist the drift toward normalizing what was *not* normal. We can demonstrate that, in the face of the unknown, Europeans used their conventional intellectual and organizational structures, fashioned over centuries of mediated contact with other cultures, and that these structures greatly impeded a clear grasp of the radical otherness of the American lands and peoples.¹¹⁹

As the soporific droning of European-style bureaucracy became (deliberately) established in the Americas, an apathetic and disorienting drowsiness began to be induced among the colonizer and colonized alike; although for the latter group, the state of stupefaction could be sharply punctuated by the real experience of suffering of various and sinister types.

Unfortunately, little has changed in the years since 1492. Many of the same legitimating gestures utilized by Columbus are still practiced by the US today, albeit on a much larger and more destructive scale. For example, it is evident that the government has sought to “simply wear out the Indians over decades of struggle,”¹²⁰ by seeking to ensure that procedures become bogged down in legalistic and bureaucratic mazes, and that opponents become mentally,

¹¹⁸ Greenblatt, 56.

¹¹⁹ Greenblatt, 54.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Churchill, “Struggle,” 180.

physically, spiritually, and financially exhausted. Further, these gestures have often prevented any genuine dialogue from occurring between the dominant culture and Native nations. It is somewhat understandable, then, that the officials of US courts could express surprise over the Danns' consistent pressing of collective rights over individual ones throughout their legal struggles. For these officials, steeped as they were in the American Narrative, individualism represented the very basis for private property statutes and as such embodied a higher good than any sort of collective claim. From this perspective, the Danns' prioritization of collective ownership of the land—and even worse, their rejection of the Euroamerican concept of ownership in favor of a Native view based on relationship with the land—could only be seen as a strange example of otherness which simply did not compute. Luckily for them, the judicial processes with which they were entrusted did not require them to consider how genuine justice might figure into such a conflict of worldviews. Instead, their role was simply to ensure that the American Narrative, encoded as it was in existing legal structures, would not be violated.

Conclusion: Columbus Day and the Quest for an Anti-Imperial American Identity and Praxis

Although revealing insights about the motivations and actions of the US in relation to Native peoples like the Western Shoshone might be gained through an honest exploration of the figure of Columbus, it is also important to recognize that the 21st century world is not the same as that of 1492. Unlike Columbus, whose encounters represented in many ways an entirely novel experience, Americans today have had the benefit of over 500 years of shared history and the imposition of a common colonial language in order to develop meaningful processes of cross-cultural communication. The fact that such development has been so utterly neglected in

the mainstream population, despite the genuine efforts of many cultural minority groups to the contrary, attests to the power and priorities of the American Narrative. Further, and unfortunately, there exists no higher authority today with the ability to remove American elites from power as Ferdinand and Isabella eventually did with Columbus. The oppressive nature of American hegemony has proven largely resistant to the opinions of international governmental structures like the United Nations, and US military spending is designed to discourage any large-scale challenge to this position.

Yet challenges do occur. As the Western Shoshone example demonstrates, individuals and communities can undermine the dominance of the American Narrative through a dedication to historical clarity and a willingness to sacrifice for the requirements of contextual justice. Even within many Christian churches, traditional theologies and identities are being disputed (although one might argue that satisfactorily coherent and comprehensive alternatives have yet to be promulgated). Despite the established resilience of the Narrative and its flexible web of image-themes, there remains an inherent fragility to processes which seek to legitimate identity claims and structural dynamics based on fabricated accounts of history and hierarchical conceptions of being. The tenuous nature of such processes is not lost on those who benefit from them, as the government response to the case of the Danna suggests. Implicit within the government's perspective throughout this legal struggle has been a recognition that any capitulation on its part might threaten to bring down the house of cards which has been built upon federal Indian policy. By contesting this policy and its supporting assumptions—that Americans have the right to consume *Newe Sogobia* through the dictates of Discovery and Manifest Destiny, that Native

cultures and lifeways are inherently inferior to Exceptional nature of Euroamerican civilization, and that the Wonder of American power and technical expertise justifies the oppression and assimilation of non-mainstream groups—the Danna and their relatives have come to be perceived as a hazard which simply cannot be tolerated.

Thus, as we near the end of our exploration, we are poised to view the work of Carrie Dann and others to transform Columbus Day with greater comprehension and admiration. Not only is Columbus' true record as a historical man nothing to be celebrated, but his fictional image has functioned to support the promulgation of an American Narrative which conceals and validates a continuing legacy of genocide and oppression. This legacy has negatively impacted not only Native peoples, but also all Euroamericans and Christians who have been tricked into accepting—and passing on—a false view of themselves and the world around them. Although certain material benefits have accrued to (at least a portion of) this latter group due to the functioning of the Narrative, these benefits have come at the extreme cost of living in existential ignorance and being implicated in the suffering and death of hundreds of millions of others. The breaking of this cycle of violence will require a common effort to unravel the tapestry of lies which has been woven. It will further call for the envisioning of a new American story which has room for many stories, and the creation of a truly “New World” in which many worlds fit.¹²¹

Echoing the sentiment of Carrie Dann that “we must all work together as one,” Churchill affirms:

¹²¹ The phrase, “a world in which many worlds fit,” is taken from Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, “Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle,” *¡Ya Basta!: Ten Years of the Zapatista Uprising* (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 669.

Herein lies what may be the most important lesson to be learned by those attempting to forge a truly American radical vision, and what may ultimately translate that vision into concrete reality: Native Americans cannot hope to achieve restoration of the lands and liberty which are legitimately theirs without the support and assistance of non-Indians, while non-Indian activists cannot hope to effect any transformation of the existing social order which is not fundamentally imperialistic, and thus doomed to replicate some of the most negative aspects of the present system, unless they accept the necessity of liberating indigenous land and lives as a matter of first priority. Both sides of the equation are at this point bound together in all but symbiotic fashion by virtue of a shared continental habitat, a common oppressor, and an increasingly interactive history. There is thus no viable option but to go forward together, figuratively joining hands to ensure our collective well-being, and that of our children, and our children's children.¹²²

The forging of genuine partnerships and alliances between diverse groups may represent a step toward the establishment of an enlightened and liberatory American identity and practice, but it will not occur unless traditions like Columbus Day are exposed and contested. And while it has become more acceptable of late to add certain disclaimers to the mainstream telling of the Columbus story, the full historical meaning of this and other seminal but largely fabricated figures such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln has remained largely unacknowledged and obscured. The quest to transform such traditions and figures must not be viewed simply in terms of the struggle of Native Americans or any other minority group, for its consequences impinge upon the lives of all who have participated in or experienced oppression in some way.¹²³ It is therefore ironic that the fictional representations presented as history in children's

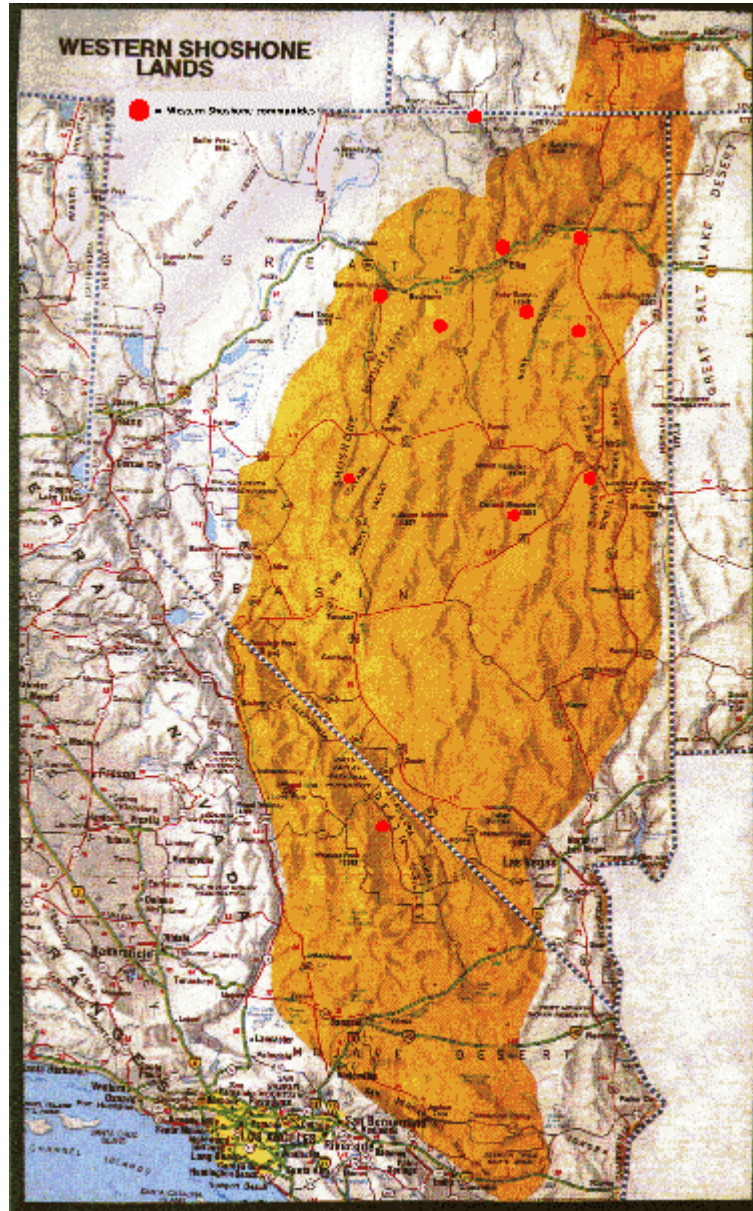
¹²² Churchill, "Struggle," 186.

¹²³ Tink Tinker, personal communication, 19 November 2009.

schoolbooks do, in one sense, quite effectively fulfill a quintessentially American promise to not discriminate by class, creed, or background. After all, such image-themes populate and give form to a “land of opportunity” in which all with the misfortune to encounter them are offered an equal chance to be mystified in the face of a marvelous—but largely imaginary—American story.

Appendix A

Map of the traditional territory of *Neue Sogobia* (“Land of the People”)



Map taken from: “Western Shoshone Lands,” Western Shoshone Defense Project, web, 17 November 2009 <<http://www.wsdp.org/>>.

Appendix B

Treaty of Ruby Valley, 1863

Treaty of Peace and Friendship made at Ruby Valley, in the Territory of Nevada, this first day of October, A.D. one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, between the United States of America, represented by the undersigned commissioners, and the Western Bands of the Shoshonee Nation of Indians, represented by their Chiefs and Principal Men and warriors, as follows:

ARTICLE I

Peace and friendship shall be hereafter established and maintained between the Western Bands of the Shoshonee nation and the people and government of the United States; and the said bands stipulate and agree that hostilities and all depredations upon the emigrant trains, the mail and telegraph lines, and upon the citizens of the United States within their country, shall cease.

ARTICLE II

The several routes of travel through the Shoshonee country, now or hereafter used by white men, shall be forever free, and unobstructed by the said bands, for the use of the government of the United States, and of all emigrants and travellers under its authority and protection, without molestation or injury from them. And if depredations are at any time committed by bad men of their nation, the offenders shall be immediately taken and delivered up to the proper officers of the United States, to be punished as their offences shall deserve; and the safety of all travellers passing peaceably over either of said routes is hereby guaranteed by said bands.

Military posts may be established by the President of the United states along said routes or elsewhere in their country; and station houses may be erected and occupied at such points as may be necessary for the comfort and convenience of travellers or for mail or telegraph companies.

ARTICLE III

The telegraph and overland stage lines having been established and operated by companies under the authority of the United States through a part of the Shoshonee country, it is expressly agreed that the same may be continued without hindrance, molestation, or injury from the people of said bands, and that their property and the lives and property of passengers in the stages and of the employees of the respective companies, shall be protected by them. And further, it being understood that provision has been made by the government of the United States for the construction of a railway from the plains west to the Pacific ocean, it is stipulated by the said bands that the said railway or its branches may be located, constructed, and operated, and without molestation from them, through any portion of country claimed or occupied by them.

ARTICLE IV

It is further agreed by the parties hereto, that the Shoshonee country may be explored and prospected for gold and silver, or other minerals; and when mines are discovered, they may be worked, and mining and agricultural settlements formed, and ranches established whenever they may be required. Mills may be erected and timber taken for their use, as also for building and other purposes in any part of the country claimed by said bands.

ARTICLE V

It is understood that the boundaries of the country claimed and occupied by said bands are defined and described by them as follows:

On the north by Wong-goga-da Mountains and Shoshonee River Valley; on the west by Su-non-to-yah Mountains or Smith Creek Mountains; on the south by Wi-co-bah and the Colorado Desert; on the east by Po-ho-no-be Valley or Steptoe Valley and Great Salt Lake Valley.

ARTICLE VI

The said bands agree that whenever the President of the United states shall deem it expedient for them to abandon the roaming life, which they now lead, and become herdsmen or agriculturalists, he is hereby authorized to make such reservations for their use as he may deem necessary within the country above described; and they do also hereby agree to remove their camps to such reservations as he may indicate, and to reside and remain therein.

ARTICLE VII

The United States, being aware of the inconvenience resulting to the Indians in consequence of the driving away and destruction of game along the routes travelled by white men, and by the formation of agricultural and mining settlements, are willing to fairly compensate them for the same; therefore, and in consideration of the preceding stipulations, and of their faithful observance by the said bands, the United States promise and agree to pay to the said bands of the Shoshonee nation parties hereto, annually for the term of twenty years, the sum of five thousand dollars in such articles, including cattle for herding or other purposes, as the President of the United States shall deem suitable for their wants and condition, either as hunters or herdsmen. And the said bands hereby acknowledge the reception of the said stipulated annuities as a full compensation and equivalent for the loss of game and the rights and privileges hereby conceded.

ARTICLE VIII

The said bands hereby acknowledge that they have received from said commissioners provisions and clothing amounting to five thousand dollars as presents at the conclusion of this treaty.

Done at Ruby Valley the day and year above written.

James W. Nye

James Duane Doty

Te-moak, his x mark

Mo-ho-a

Kirk-weedgwa, his x mark

To-nag, his x mark

To-so-wee-so-op, his x mark

Sow-er-e-gah, his x mark

Po-on-go-sah, his x mark

Par-a-woat-ze, his x mark

Ga-ha-dier, his x mark

Ko-ro-kout-ze, his x mark

Pon-ge-mah, his x mark

Buck, his x mark

Witnesses:

J. B. Moore, lieutenant-colonel Third Infantry California Volunteers

Jacob T. Lockhart, Indian agent Nevada Territory

Henry Butterfield, interpreter

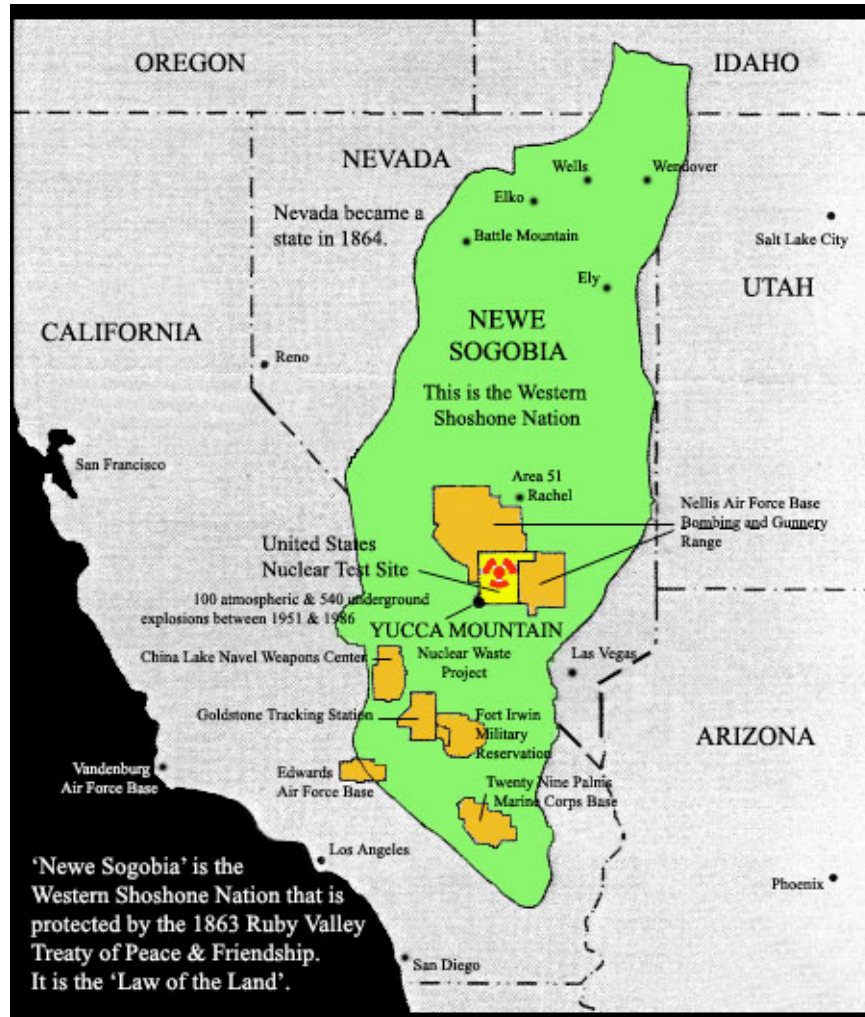
Ratified June 26, 1866

Proclaimed Oct. 21, 1869

A copy of the Treaty, with commentary, may also be found here: “The Ruby Valley Treaty of 1863,” Wells Band Colony, Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, web, 17 November 2009 <<http://www.angelfire.com/nv2/wells/treaty.html>>.

Appendix C

Map of areas of *Newe Sogobia* utilized for past nuclear testing and proposed nuclear waste storage or disposal.



Map taken from: "Newe Sogobia: The Western Shoshone Nation," Wells Band Colony, Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, web, 17 November 2009 <<http://www.angelfire.com/nv2/wells/shoshone-nuclearmap.html>>.