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Charting Columbus' Place in the Literary Canon

It has become commonplace for cities across the United States to pass initiatives to replace the federal holiday celebrating Columbus' discovery of the Americas with "Indigenous Peoples' Day." As a result, Columbus' legacy has gradually diminished over time and his supposed achievements scorned. This certainly begs the question: Does Columbus deserve a seat in the pantheon of great American historical and even literary figures? To forget the contributions of Columbus, despite any of his misdoings, is to forget one's origins and identity. Furthermore, Columbus' literary contributions are foundational to American literature but largely misunderstood. Hence, an adequate defense must be made of Columbus' legacy by first placing his literary work, especially his *Journal of the First Voyage*, in context; and second, a defense must mitigate any possible blame on Columbus for the misdeeds later committed by Spanish conquistadors and colonists.

Columbus wrote his *Journal of the First Voyage* faithfully throughout his travels, his landings on multiple Caribbean islands, and his eventual return to Spain. Sir Clements R. Markham, a renowned geographer and historian, remarks, "The *Journal* is the most important document in the whole range of the history of geographical discovery, because it is a record of the enterprise which changed the whole face, not only of that history, but of the history of mankind" (viii). To understand the *Journal*, however, requires some context: namely, the

motivations of Columbus' voyage and the influence of and correspondence with the largely forgotten Florentine astronomer and cartographer Paolo Toscanelli.

Columbus writes in his first entry of the *Journal* an invocation to Ferdinand and Isabella and the motivations behind the voyage. Columbus states, “[Ferdinand and Isabella] resolved to send me, Cristóbal Colon, to the said parts of India to see the said princes, and the cities and lands, and their disposition, with a view that they might be converted to our holy faith” (90).

While there are many reasons why Spain funded Columbus' voyage, the idea of converting people from other continents to the Christian faith remains the most consistently mentioned reason throughout Columbus' primary sources. The interest of Columbus, as well as his contemporaries, in converting others from faraway lands derives from the accounts of Marco Polo's voyage across the globe and his interaction with the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan.

Columbus writes in his *Majorat*, a type of will written by civil officials, that the intention of the Spanish rulers was to find “revenue” in the Indies “to spend in the conquest of Jerusalem” (qtd. in Davidson 276). Considering the Spanish Reconquista, Columbus' contemporaries were keen on not only driving Islam from Spain, but also the Holy Land. Furthermore, Columbus' reading of Polo's interactions with Khan, the Mongol ruler of China, informed him of a possible conversion of the “Indies” or China. Essentially, Columbus believed that the combined forces of Europe and a Christian China would “drive the Muslims from the Holy Land” (Byas 41).

Columbus' first entry in the *Journal* mentions the initial failure of converting the Khan and the Indies:

Touching the lands of India, and respecting a Prince who is called Gran Can, which means in our language King of Kings, how he and his ancestors had sent to Rome many times to ask for learned men of our holy faith to teach him, and how the Holy Father had never

complied, insomuch that many people believing in your idolatries were lost by receiving doctrine of perdition. (89-90)

Interestingly enough, Columbus copied this passage almost word for word from a letter he received from Paolo Toscanelli, who “was looked upon as the highest authority of cosmography and navigation in that age” (Markham ii). While understanding Columbus’ motivations helps readers better understand the *Journal*, Columbus’ correspondence with Toscanelli informs many of his actions. In other words, Toscanelli’s beliefs and directions dictated how Columbus acted on his monumental voyage. In context, King Affonso V of Portugal commissioned Toscanelli to provide information regarding a possible voyage westward over the sea to India. Toscanelli, in turn, produced sea charts. Shortly thereafter, Columbus contacted Toscanelli for further information regarding such a voyage, which begat a correspondence of letters between the two men. In his first letter to Columbus, Toscanelli writes, “I perceive your magnificent and great desire to find a way to where the spices grow” (3). Toscanelli writes further on the Indies and its descriptions: “The country is very populous and very rich, with a multitude of provinces and kingdoms, and with cities without number under one prince who is called Great Khan,” and “For that island is most fertile in gold, pearls, and precious stones, and they cover the temples and palaces with solid gold” (6, 9). Throughout his voyage as written in the *Journal*, Columbus constantly refers to the letters and maps of Toscanelli to inform his sailing directions, and once on land the landmarks necessary to guide Columbus to the Khan. In essence, Toscanelli’s sea charts, or *carta de marear*, never left the sight of Columbus on his voyage (Olvera 38).

Much has been made of Columbus’ preoccupation with finding gold, silver, and gems on his first voyage. Critics of Columbus may feel validated when he writes, “Gold is most excellent;

gold constitutes treasure; and he who has it does all he wants in the world, and can even lift souls up to Paradise” (Major 196). Yet Columbus sought gold not for greed but as markers of the Indies and ultimately as a way to fund a possible Holy Crusade. To say that Columbus’ sole motivation to travel to the Indies was the acquisition of gold does not account for the whole picture. Markham writes, “It must be remembered that the letter of Toscanelli was his [Columbus] guide; and that the gold, pearls, and spices were the marks by which he was to know the provinces of the great Kaan; so that he was bound to make constant inquiries for these commodities” (vii). In other words, Columbus did not necessarily travel to the Indies to find a new spice route and thereby gain profits. On the contrary, a more nuanced view is required: Columbus sought to find profits to fund a Holy Crusade on behalf of the Spanish monarchs and to convert the inhabitants of the Indies to Christianity. Columbus’ fixation with gold on his voyage does not point to greediness; rather, he follows the guidance of Toscanelli, who writes that following gold and riches would lead him eventually to the Khan, who expressed interest in Christianity to Marco Polo. Some may contend with these assertions, yet these are the assertions found within the actual primary sources of Columbus and his contemporaries. These assertions help place Columbus and his *Journal* in context so that readers may better understand his writings and motivations. Perhaps Columbus does not become a more sympathetic figure for such motivations, but he is not an avaricious, murderous charlatan, a perception that remains popular at the moment.

Although misunderstandings of Columbus’ *Journal* and his other texts have damaged his legacy and place in the literary canon, the blame that is placed upon him for the maltreatment of the Native Americans is far more damaging. John Yewell writes, “Columbus has become a symbol for anyone’s political inclinations. He is either a slave-trading, bloodthirsty colonial

pirate, or the personification of the virtues of capitalism and an inspiration for generations of entrepreneurs” (167). Either Columbus is responsible for the displacement, enslavement, and genocide of the Native Americans, or he is a benevolent figure that furthered Western civilization and globalization—quite the dichotomy. Hence, to be more willing to admit Columbus as a literary figure, it is necessary to understand a broader context of the general effects of European colonization upon the Native American populace.

When Columbus sailed to the New World in 1492, he was accompanied by his brother Bartholomew. Columbus’ *Journal* indicates that after sailing throughout the Caribbean, coasting along the shores of many islands and naming several of them, Columbus and his crew settled on the island of Hispaniola, known today as the island that contains both Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Once the settlement had been established, Columbus returned to Spain to report on his findings, including the discovery of gold mines and the inhabitants of the New World, or what he thought was the Indies. His brother Bartholomew remained behind to govern the new settlement on Hispaniola, and a valuable piece of data would be gathered during this time. Bartholomew put together a census of adult Indians on Hispaniola—although it is unknown how this census was put together and conducted. Nonetheless, Bartholomew calculated that approximately 1.1 million adult Indians lived on Hispaniola, discounting anyone under the age of fourteen (Loewen 57). It is worth emphasizing that this is on the island of Hispaniola alone—consider how many Native Americans inhabited all of the islands of the Caribbean, or even North and South America combined. Hispaniola, in general, is a microcosm of what occurred to the Native Americans, at large. The historian Benjamin Keen estimated that in 1516, approximately twenty years after Bartholomew’s census, there were only twelve thousand adult Indians left on Hispaniola. Keen blames such outrageous death on “a sinister Indian slave trade and labor policies initiated by

Columbus” (Loewen 57). In the 1540s, Bartolomé de las Casas, the famed Dominican friar, declared that there were fewer than two hundred full-blooded adult Indians left on Hispaniola. By 1555, there were most likely no living adult Indians on Hispaniola. However, contrary to the assertion by Keen, the overwhelming majority of Native Americans succumbed to disease such as smallpox rather than to slavery or labor policies (Loewen 57). Anthropologist Jared Diamond further argues that approximately ninety-five percent of Native American deaths during the Age of Discovery were caused by disease (78). That is not to say that many Indians succumbed to the slave trade and cruel labor policies, however. That said, fifteenth-century Spaniards simply did not have the technology in order to carry out such an effective genocide in such little time. These numbers are certainly shocking, and critics of Columbus have every right to feel validated in their contempt for European colonization. Yet, Columbus is not directly responsible for the deaths of millions of Native Americans, especially considering that most died of disease.

However, the slave trade and cruel labor policies still occurred during Columbus’ life. While Columbus’ discovery of the New World caused European colonization, historians such as George Grant argue that it is unfair to pin Columbus for the slave trade. In reference to Columbus, Grant states, “Far from being a racist, he proved time after time to be overly enamored with the native populations he encountered on his travels. And the charge of slave-trading is merely a malicious falsehood” (127). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Columbus’ *Journal* is its many detailed accounts of dealings with Native Americans. Columbus writes of the Native Americans: “They are a loving people, without covetousness, and fit for anything ... there is no better land nor people. They love their neighbors as themselves, and their speech is the sweetest and gentlest in the world, and always with a smile ... they have very good customs among themselves ... they have good memories, wish to see everything, and ask to use of what

they see” (201). Columbus, despite modern perceptions, held a very favorable view of Native Americans, and his main motive was to convert them to Christianity—it may seem unfashionable in contemporary times to think that converting others to Christianity is a noble act, but for Columbus, it was. In addition, Columbus’ men captured approximately five hundred Native Americans after a brief skirmish on Hispaniola, the tensest episode between Native Americans and Spanish explorers during Columbus’ voyage. Columbus promptly had all five hundred Native Americans released and restored peace between the two factions (Grant 127). Las Casas, noted for his uncovering of the abuse Native Americans had faced, said that Columbus was a “gentle man of great forces and spirit,” and that the maltreatment of the Indians did not originate from Columbus (qtd. in Byas 42).

Columbus, too, had other notable contributions besides discovering the New World. Besides his other motivations previously outlined, Columbus wrote in his *Journals*, “I propose to construct a new chart for navigating, on which I shall delineate all the sea and lands of the Ocean in their proper positions under their bearings; and further, I propose to prepare a book, and to put down all as it were in a picture, by latitude from the equator, and western longitude” (91). In other words, Columbus’ *Journal* acted as a shipping log of his journey that catalogued his every move. The *Journal* was more valuable than a mine of gold during the Age of Discovery as it provided nations and navigators ways to retrace the steps to the New World. While Columbus was not the first white man to reach the Americas, a distinction that belongs to the Vikings under Leif Ericson, his *Journal*, in effect, helped spark the colonization and trade between the Americas and Europe. Nor did the Vikings establish a prolonged settlement as Columbus did. Of equal importance were “his discoveries of truths about the ocean seas and winds.” Columbus provided useful knowledge on the trade-winds of the Atlantic Ocean: The winds of the north

Atlantic blew east towards Europe while the winds of the south Atlantic blew west towards the New World (Yewell 26-27).

Last, in considering a defense of Columbus and his legacy, it is important to point out that Native Americans were not entirely innocent in their own dealings, either. Europeans were not perfectly noble; neither were Native Americans. The historian Victor Davis Hansen estimated that the Aztecs, for example, murdered twenty thousand people a year “in ritual sacrifices” in the years prior to Columbus’ arrival. Aztec records even indicate that eighty thousand people were murdered over the course of just four days in one case of cannibalistic rituals (Byas 42). Of course, this does not account for Native Americans that inhabited Hispaniola, but it does reveal that the noble savage view espoused by the likes of Rousseau was not always apparent. The only assertion to glean from this is that both Europeans and Native Americans had flaws. The Age of Discovery should not be defined by a binary moral system of black and white. One should not elevate either group of people into a supposed superiority—both groups were guilty of major atrocities.

While some may choose to celebrate “Indigenous People’s Day,” Columbus Day is a reminder that the actions of one man helped launch a new age, leading to a more globalized world. His actions have been too consequential to ignore considering that he sowed the seeds of globalization. He is too important to ignore as a literary figure. Even though his writings are not largely popular, his image and beliefs pervade the artistic landscape and its themes and figures: Manifest Destiny, Columbia, and progress. Furthermore, Columbus is one of the foundational figures of Western civilization, stretching it across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. Without Columbus, the world would look very different, and thus, literature, too. This is reason enough to study Columbus as a literary figure.

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