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Christopher Columbus and the Problem of History

JOHNNY P. FLYNN

I believe that if I pass below the Equator . . . I shall find a much cooler climate and a greater difference in the stars and waters . . . for I believe that the earthly Paradise lies here.

—Christopher Columbus, 1498

During his third voyage, Christopher Columbus became convinced that the river Orinoco, located in what is now Venezuela, was the northernmost point of the Garden of Eden as described in the second chapter of the Bible's book of Genesis. Columbus was in error, and an assumption he made plagues Native Americans to this day: that Judeo-Christian history as understood by Christians is also the history of the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. Simply stated, the Christian nations of the world had to fit Native Americans into European notions of the history of the world, and that meant fitting them into biblical history. It was obvious to Columbus that the people he encountered had no knowledge of the Christian New Testament teachings of Jesus and therefore must be Old Testament people.

Later writers would echo Columbus's conclusion that Native Americans shared Christian history. However, they quickly dismissed the notion that Columbus's "Indians" were residents of the Garden of Eden and therefore were "without sin," as Adam

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and Eve were before the temptation and "fall of man." Instead, Indians were described as relatives of the east "Indians" (hence the name), the Chinese, the Jewish tribes, and, in the modern era, the "mongoloid" racial group. Each has been an attempt to place the "New World" inhabitants into "Old World" religious and scientific creation stories. Such an effort deprives Native Americans of their own history. It also deprives Native Americans of their own cosmologies, their own worldviews, and their own creation stories.

Throughout the western United States and south into the central valleys of Mexico lived an animal now known as Coyote. Coyote appears in the mythology of Native Americans as the quintessential human: intelligent but foolish, wise but impetuous; the epitome of what is both wrong and right with the way humans act in this world. Coyote stories were used to establish the boundaries of good behavior, to point out the ultimate foolishness of human institutions, and to serve as legendary examples of human wrong-headedness. These stories were told wherever coyotes appeared in the ecosystem; indeed the coyote is one of the few animals that has flourished in the face of Euro-American destruction of the worlds and worldviews of the aboriginal peoples of the Americas.

As Native Americans disengage from Eurocentric versions of their cosmologies and histories, it is only fitting and fair that we address Eurocentrism in Native American versions of history, including Coyote stories. Non-Indian fictional accounts of Native American origins proved to be very powerful tools in the development of Euro-American genocidal policies. So native scholars know the power of those stories. In the spirit of sharing histories, the following version of the history of the Columbus voyage is offered. It is, of course, fiction, as many of the European and Euro-American religious and scientific versions of Native American "prehistories" have proved to be. To paraphrase that great American political commentator Pogo, "We have met Columbus and he is Coyote."

CHRISTOPHER COYOTE AND THE SEEDS OF THE SUN

Coyote was walking along one day looking for something to eat. He was walking and walking and walking. Pretty soon, just at dawn, he came over a hill and he saw, down in the valley, a village.

Now this was a big village with many houses and much prosperity. Beyond the village lay a river, wide and cool, with its banks lined with trees and bushes heavy with fruit and berries. Along the river were herds of elk and deer fat from the rich grass that grew thick on the green plains of the river bottom. Coyote sat and watched, and soon he realized that he knew this place. He had been here before, many lifetimes ago. You see, Coyotes can die or be killed, but they always come back to life.

As he was sitting there watching, he saw that many people were taking tobacco and pollen offerings to a house located at the center of the village. As he watched, he saw that the people were taking baskets from the house and going to fields by the river and putting their contents in the ground. When the people stepped away from what they had buried, the ground burst forth with green, and in a short time the people filled those baskets in more abundance than they had given.

After a while, Coyote noticed that the people were gathering around the house at the center of the village, and he realized that in a few moments it would be sunrise. At the moment before the sun sent its whiskers over the horizon, out stepped a beautiful woman, the most beautiful woman Coyote had ever seen. She lifted her hands to the east, to the first rays of the sun, and captured those bolts of light in her hands. She walked back into the house and the people dispersed to eat their morning meal.

Coyote knew that the bolts of light captured by the woman had something to do with the baskets that people used to make the earth fertile and responsive to their touch. He decided to steal the woman and the powers she possessed.

Coyote remembered that the people here knew him; they had thrown him out before. So he decided to change the way he looked, to disguise himself. He was able to pare his long, wide snout down to a pointed nose, stretch his paws to look like hands and feet, and put on clothes to cover his hairy fur. But when he tucked his tail into a wrap around his chest, the tip of his tail stuck out the neck of his shirt and made him have a beard. Of course, the people could not know that behind every beard there is a Coyote.

Coyote put on his best airs, like one who is important and full of gifts, and hailed the people as he came near. "Hey, you there, I am Mister Coyote. I have powers and abilities and am acquainted with the sun. He is my father, he is the one who greets you each day. What do you think of that?"

The villagers were not impressed. They had seen ones like Coyote before, but they welcomed him into their homes as they would for any other tired traveler.

Coyote could see that the bluster would not work. So as he sat and ate the food they offered, he schemed. He wanted the girl and the gifts she had, and he knew the villagers would never let him harm her. Maybe he could steal her and her secrets, he thought, even as he sat at her table.

The next morning, at dawn, the people rose, and Coyote asked, "Do you think I could take an offering to the wife of the sun today?" The people gave Coyote tobacco and pollen, because of course he pleaded that his own pockets were empty.

As they gathered for the sunrise ceremony, Coyote wormed his way to the front of the crowd. At the moment of sunrise, the beautiful woman stepped out to greet the sun. She captured its first rays, turned, and stepped into her house. Coyote was the first in line; soon the door opened and he stepped inside.

Coyote saw that the house was filled with hundreds of baskets tightly closed. But the tiny hole left at the top of each basket by the weaver (for these were sacred baskets) allowed the light from the seeds of the sun to escape. Coyote was determined to have the secrets of the woman and the woman, too. Coyote tried to talk to her, but she only sat with her head down as the people filed in and out, leaving offerings and taking baskets of the seeds of the sun out the door.

Coyote must have the secret of the seeds of the sun.

As the day wore on, Coyote just sat and watched the comings and goings of the people. When the day was done, the baskets were all gone. Coyote made as if to sleep, and the woman pointed to a bed at one end of the house. She made a fire and handed Coyote some food and sat to weave. Coyote saw that she made the baskets in a single move. As the house filled again with baskets, the woman got older, until, at the rise of the moon, she was full of years and gray. At first, Coyote had wanted to steal the secret of the seeds of the sun and the woman, too, but now he was not so sure.

When she was finished, the woman sat by the fire, and when it was the full of the night and the moon was overhead, she began to speak.

"Coyote," she said, "I know your mind, and you must listen if you don't want to die in this land. You are in a sacred place, and if you stay here, you must live as we do. To learn the secret of the

seeds of the sun, you must first understand that they cannot be stolen. They will lead you to no good. They will poison your mind and corrupt your heart. They will make you choke on your own breath."

Coyote seemed to listen, but his mind was already made up. When the woman was asleep, he would steal her and force her to reveal the secret of the seeds.

In the night, when Morning Star was ready to climb into the sky, Coyote threw his blankets over the old woman and took her away.

By the first light to the east, Coyote and his bundle were up on the side of the hill above the village. He sat on the hill and unwrapped the old woman, intending to force her to show him her secret. She was dying.

In a shuddering breath she said, "Coyote, take me home. The power of the seeds of the sun is mine only when I am at the center of the world. If you keep me here, I will die."

"Tell me now then," said Coyote. "Tell me the secret quickly."

The old woman said, "You are a man, Coyote; you believe only in yourself. You believe that because you can come back to life, you have the power of life. But that power is only a thousand deaths without me. The secret of the seeds of the sun is not yours to share, but mine, and all those like me who have bellies that swell with the promise of tomorrow. Take me back to the center of the world, and you can stay and live as we do. Steal me and you will have nothing in the end but my bones."

Coyote hesitated but then accused the old woman of lying, trickery, and false alarms.

"You belong to me," he said. "You are mine because I know the sun; he is my father. He said you were mine. You are like me because I have seen it. You are young and vital in the daytime, and you only grow old at night when you make the baskets for the people. If you give the seeds of the sun to me, you will not need to make baskets and you will not grow old. Give me the secret now, or I will kill you before you die."

"No, Coyote," she said. "The seeds of the sun must be put into the baskets to hide their power from greedy people. Then they must be put into the ground to warm the earth. They are put there to remind the earth that we love her and thank her for the food that she grows. You cannot eat the seeds; they will not keep you warm, they are not for use as they are. The seeds must be made sacred by keeping them at the center of the world where they were caught. The secret of the seeds is revealed only when they are put in the

ground in the place where they were made. They give power to the earth to grow the food that people eat. Let me go. For even if you find every one of the seeds that are in the ground, you will never possess the secret and you will destroy the ground where the seeds must grow. You will have all the seeds and no place for them to grow."

But Coyote did not believe her, and it did not matter if he knew the secret, for he knew where the seeds were buried.

At the moment of sunrise, the old woman died. When there was no one to catch the seeds, the sun began to weep tears of fire that fell to the earth as great smoking rocks, fire, burning rain, and great whirls of wind. As the fires raged, Coyote ran and dug the seeds up from places he had seen them being planted. He found more than he could carry, so he heaped them on the hill and made many more trips to fill his greedy arms.

When the sun was finishing his journey to the West, the earth was a smoking mass of cinders. Coyote survived. He died a thousand deaths that day in his quest for the seeds of the sun, but he found all the seeds, as the old woman had said. As the sun took its final step below the western horizon, the seeds stopped shining and turned to yellow rocks, and there was no one except Coyote to see it. He had no food, no place to plant, the waters of the river were boiling mud, and the herds of animals lay dead on the plains. And there was no one left alive who knew the secret of the seeds of the sun.

Coyote took stones and built great, reaching fingers to the sky and put the seeds in there, beseeching the sun to wake up and tell him the secret of the seeds. But the sun did not listen. Coyote rubbed the seeds and tried to make them shine as before, but the spirits in them no longer breathed. Coyote put them back into the ground, but they no longer warmed the earth, and they did not grow. Coyote went to the bones of the old woman and searched them for the secret, but bones cannot speak. Coyote was stuck in a land he had destroyed, with seeds he could not use. Coyote died, and he died, and he died, and he died.