

2. For historical, anthropological, fiction, and nonfiction writing on the subject, see Kurlansky (2008), McKibben (2006), Norkunas (1993), Orlando (2004), St. Peter's Fiesta Committee (2001), Swiderski (1987), and Testaverde (2004).

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### *Columbus Day Legacy.*

By Bennie Klain (Navajo).

A TricksterFilms, LLC Production, 2011.

27 minutes. DVD format, color.

*Columbus Day Legacy*, by Navajo director Bennie Klain, offers insight into this federal holiday as it is observed in Denver, Colorado—Colorado being the state where it was first proclaimed an official celebration. The documentary opens with a series of remarks by Native-American activists, scholars, artists, and Italian-American cultural activists about the meaning of the holiday. The common denominator for both groups is the idea that Columbus Day—and, for that matter, its street parades—bears a highly symbolic and ideological value, yet it also contributes to furthering the historical oppositional narrative of oppressed versus oppressor. The documentary draws a definite line between Native-American and Italian-American perspectives on the issue: First, we are presented with a radio interview of American Indian Movement leader Russell Means and political science professor Glenn Morris. Then we are introduced to the testimonials of Italian-American activist Micki Lava Clayton and to the archival reconstruction of Italian immigration and mining history in Colorado. The documentary culminates in the 2007 parade (also marking the 100th anniversary of the Colorado holiday), which in some sense is a metaphor for indigenous peoples' history on this continent: Resistance to and peaceful demonstration against the celebration by the Transform Columbus Day Alliance are met with utmost contempt and violence by the local law enforcement. Once the protesters are out of the way (quite predictably, the movement leaders undergo temporary detention), the parade continues unhindered. The photographic images, the soundtrack, and the editing of these last sequences in

particular make *Columbus Day Legacy* a highly accomplished documentary that, thanks to its immediacy and clarity of language, drives the general audience to ponder the ideological implications of what is often conceived of as a harmless, ethnic celebration or just a day off of work.

The film participates in ongoing public and scholarly discourse about the representation of U.S. history, especially in schoolbooks and community-centered performances of ethnic identity. More specifically, the documentary situates itself within ongoing discussions about indigenous peoples' misrepresentation, mainstream definitions of American identity, and the position of white ethnicity. The contrast between Native-American and Italian-American standpoints compels us to question common knowledge and opinions about Columbus Day celebrations. We are reminded that what is widely considered a national day of pride for Italian Americans has become, especially in this regionally specific study, a day of contestation between two different ethnic groups. In fact, one of the documentary's strongest points is that it brings to our attention the controversial issues of assimilation into U.S. mainstream culture and the politics around reclaiming one's own unique, original identity, especially in a public, community-centered way.

Interestingly, the power relations examined here involve two groups that have both been discriminated against for centuries: One identifies itself as the original peoples of this land, and the other considers itself the proud children of immigrants who contributed to the growth of the nation. In this sense, the subtext of *Columbus Day Legacy* sheds significant light not only on how racial discrimination works against different groups but also on the ways in which such groups strategically use their sense of belonging to the land as a tool for claiming identity.

Unfortunately, the documentary does not expand on the epistemological and spiritual depth of indigenous notions of territorial identity and the sense of place, nor does it dwell on traditional views—except for a few statements by Troy Lynn Yellow Wood and artist Alistair Bane—about the strong spiritual significance of indigenous ways of life. In so doing, it emphasizes contemporary Native-American activism and civil organizing against centuries of stereotyping and social injustices and thus takes for granted viewers' knowledge of indigenous peoples' "land-based" cultural identity and sense of time. Albeit concisely, *Columbus Day Legacy* seems to do a better job with Italian-American history (both archival and oral): In fact, besides presenting a rich gallery of black-and-white photographs of Ellis Island landings and Colorado mine history—including the 1914 Ludlow massacre of striking coal miners—it offers a few testimonials of second- and third-generation immigrants now actively involved in Denver's Italian-American community. In this sense, *Columbus Day Legacy* is a political documentary project that invites us to consider the long-term, social, cultural, and ethical consequences of the European first invasion.

The visual design of the first part of the documentary summarizes quite eloquently the story of Columbus's arrival as it is typically portrayed in U.S. elementary-school books. The children's song accompanying these images ironically hints at the oversimplified terms in which the educational system depicts the events of 1492. For what did Columbus's arrival bring about if not the geopolitical, ideological remapping of a continent and, as Native-American activists claim, a whole set of ideas of supremacy and power? Racial discrimination and new notions of American identity forced the

country's legitimate inhabitants and those who came after them to partake in the imagination and forging of a community where one's own past would not be as important as the history of the nation that came to be.

As the documentary clearly shows, the ensuing ideology of Manifest Destiny justified killing, seizing of lands, and the eradication of indigenous belief systems and cultural values in the same way as ideas of ethnic and racial supremacy contributed to sketch out hegemonic tensions among groups who shared a history of oppression. The Denver parade encloses this history by constructing a space where Italian Americans take pride in their own heritage, yet do so at the expense of native people. For example, during the radio show, Russell Means, Glenn Morris, and Italian-American organizer George Vendegna tackle debates around the parade's reenactment of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's cavalry. For the indigenous leaders the reenactment of this historical moment emphasizes a quintessential expression of desire for power and conquest over Native Americans that cannot but put the Italian-American community in a bad light, even though they were not historically part of it. In short, the indigenous perspective suggests that in addition to its racist implications, Columbus Day (and its celebrations) legitimates and perpetuates the history of a misnomer, whose *fons et origo* is to be found in a geographical error that not even Columbus acknowledged. Or, as Russell Means argues otherwise, the name *Indian* comes directly from the Spanish *En Dios* (in God), which further highlights the colonial connotation of the word itself.

Although in different terms, both the indigenous and the Italian-American communities presented in the film argue for a revisitation of U.S. history whereby they can rescue their own sense of identity (that is, what it means to be indigenous or Italian American today) and become visible on their own terms. In this regard, according to the Native-American community, Columbus Day should become Native-American Day. Conversely, Italian Americans look at the celebration of this holiday as a key moment in the American calendar to acquire and reiterate their own visibility and, as Micki Lava Clayton maintains, to reinstate their assimilation into U.S. society. Interestingly, this continued celebration (yet not its original early twentieth-century version) is still informed by the spirit of the white ethnic revival of the 1970s. Hence, in order to understand those Italian Americans who publically embrace their identity today, viewers should take into account earlier ways in which this ethnic group—and, for that matter, its movement toward a dominant white ethnic status in America—was seen as nonwhite. The film, to some extent, skirts over these ambiguities—asking viewers to gloss this trajectory through the comments of a few informants.

The release documents appearing on the documentary's website ([www.nativetelecom.org/columbus\\_day\\_legacy](http://www.nativetelecom.org/columbus_day_legacy)) report that Klain's challenge was "to begin with an equal representation from both sides of the conflict." It is worth noting that the documentary is the result of a communal effort between two different film crews (the concluding credits bear the names of cinematographers Marko Slavic and Nancy Schiesari, both from the University of Texas at Austin): one working with the Native-American and one with the Italian-American community, respectively. Overall, Klain succeeds in his endeavor: In fact, the documentary offers quite a balanced representation of the ways in which such a symbolic moment in the month of October generates animated discussions about colonial relations on both sides, especially at the grass-roots level.

As the production website explains, each group presents its own side of the story in the first person; both Native-American and Italian-American testimonials are so moving and genuine that, as an audience, we may feel at a loss for words. But the film also voices the concerns of those who actually question the binary terms in which this issue is usually framed. In fact, according to Troy Lynn Yellow Wood, "It is not an Italian-Indian difference: It's about the truth." Italian-American activist Glenn Spagnuolo and other leaders of the Transform Columbus Day Alliance—an international coalition based in Denver—are adamantly against the celebration of Christopher Columbus himself, yet they acknowledge the importance of this historical figure among Italian-Americans. So, one viable solution to the problem may be the transformation of this national holiday into a day of reconciliation and collective reflection, which, Russell Means reminds us, already happens in other parts of the country.

Spagnuolo's disavowal of the current Denver style of celebrating Columbus may seem out of place in this film, but it is particularly relevant to note in this context. Further, his work is part of larger movements across the country whereby Italian-American activists, scholars, and artists are reclaiming Columbus Day to support progressive politics. For instance, although not mentioned in this documentary, there has been a movement of Italian Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area who for years have been advocating against the celebration of Columbus Day and its legacy of racism. On Columbus Day in 1999, at Josie's Cabaret and Juice Joint in San Francisco, a group of gay and lesbian activists and artists met to "Dump Columbus" in the name of Italian-American radical politics. The first event featured, among others, writer Tommi Aviccoli Mecca and future California State Assembly member Tom Ammiano. A few years later, in 2002, the second such event was organized by Aviccoli Mecca, James Tracy, and others of what became known as the Italian-American Political Solidarity Club. The event was held at St. Boniface Church in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. The Dump Columbus, Embrace Humanity event has been held annually ever since. In 2008 Manic D Press published an anthology, *Avanti Popolo: Italian-American Writers Sail Beyond Columbus*, edited by the Italian-American Political Solidarity Club and stemming directly from the annual October event. Such actions resonate with the efforts and principles of the Transform Columbus Day Alliance, a group whose ultimate pursuit is to revolutionize the holiday from the inside out, that is, to reveal and undo the colonial, genocidal, and historical misconceptions behind it. Even if viewers may come away from the documentary with the image of two groups struggling for and against this national holiday, the more moderate positions exemplified by the Italian-American Political Solidarity Club and the Transform Columbus Day Alliance help unpack the fundamental complexity of the holiday and underscore the need for a dialog among Native Americans, Italian Americans, and the state structure that sanctions the holiday.

*Columbus Day Legacy* is straightforward, provocative, highly informative, and at the same time carefully crafted and edited. Although the film succeeds in great part in offering balanced perspectives, at times a stronger feeling of empathy for the Native Americans emerges: Besides being explained by the director's own ethnic identity, such a point of view is reinforced by Bane's powerful paintings and reflections on the genocide, as well as by the concluding shots of police violence against the protesters. But it is also true that *Columbus Day Legacy* sheds light on the understudied

history of Italian Americans in Colorado, including a massacre that official history hardly remembers, as is the case with most memories and stories of organized labor in this country.

Furthermore, the documentary touches upon the idea of blending opposing points of view on Columbus's legacy and finding a compromise that will allow indigenous peoples and Italian Americans to retell American history outside the grammar of the invasion. In this sense, the film may be viewed as a resourceful pedagogical tool in the classroom: Besides illuminating for us the history of this national holiday within the context of Denver's indigenous and Italian-American communities, it prompts reflections and debates about the political meanings of ceremonial functions among multiethnic communities. In fact, it ignites questions about the legitimacy of freedom of speech and of protest, especially in a situation where the symbolic power of a name, "Columbus," does nothing but revive the scars of colonial history as well as reinforce long-standing power relations. Yet, far from giving way to an anti-Italian sentiment, *Columbus Day Legacy* reflects upon and acknowledges the validity of each side of the story. As such, it teaches viewers that it is time to look at this holiday as an opportunity for dialog and, as Glenn Morris puts it, for "mutual respect with one another." Fighting off the oppositional binary of "us against them," this film highlights the need to forge interethnic dialog among minority groups that propose new paradigms of cultural and political coexistence.

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*The Tree of Life.*

By Hava Volterra.

Ruth Diskin Films, 2008.

76 minutes, DVD format, color.

A father dies. A daughter grieves and in so doing realizes her father had never spoken of his family's past. She decides to search for his and, by extension, her own roots in Italy, a journey resulting in the documentary *The Tree of Life*. The film begins with a home movie of the director, Hava Volterra, as a child with her father, while Hava, as an adult, narrates. Throughout the film we see her on camera—in Los Angeles, Israel, and Italy—as she searches for her family's past. Her voice-over narration continues through the entire film, with her occasional reappearance serving as a visual unifying link in the story.

The historical part of the documentary is particularly beautifully presented. Volterra describes how her family can be traced back to Renaissance Italy, when an ancestor finds an economic niche for himself as a loan-banker. The use of animation and puppets—paired with superb musical choices and juxtaposed with the more conventional use of interviews with scholars—is well balanced and visually interesting. Scholars—such as Roberto Bonfil, Sergio Della Pergola, Alessandra Veronese, Anna Foa,