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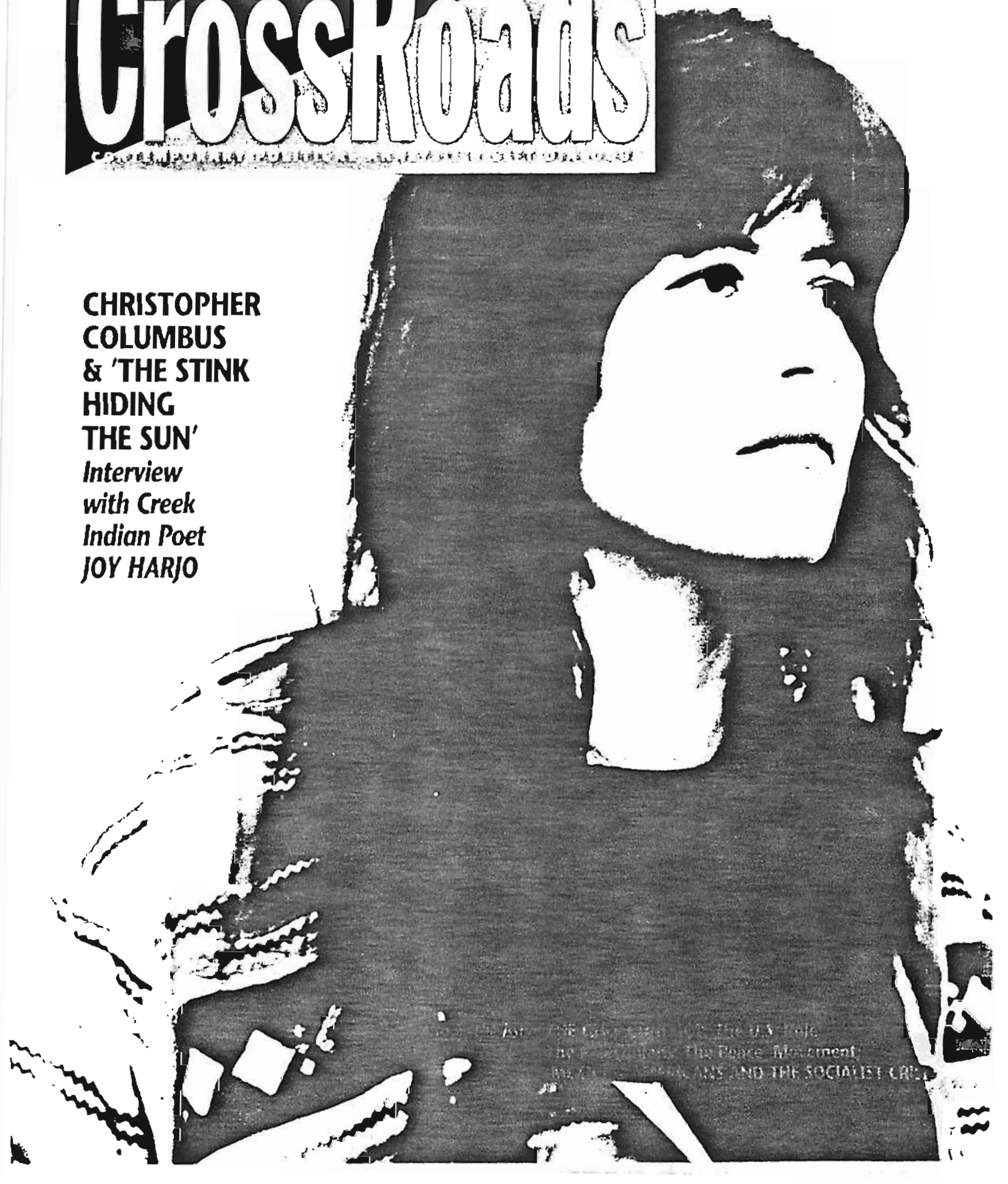

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS & 'THE STINK HIDING THE SUN'
Interview with Creek Indian Poet JOY HARJO

Christopher Columbus and "The Stink Hiding the Sun"

All over this hemisphere, Indian peoples are mobilizing against the upcoming 1992 celebrations of Christopher Columbus' first voyage. Joy Harjo, a Creek Indian and internationally acclaimed poet, interviewed here by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, describes "five centuries of heartbreak" and today's resistance.

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During the 1982 session of the United Nations' General Assembly, Spain proposed that the U.N. celebrate the five hundred year anniversary of the first voyage of Columbus to the Western hemisphere by declaring 1992 an official U.N. year: "The Meeting of Two Worlds." Of course, as always in such diplomatic matters, Spain had lined up co-sponsors — the Latin American and Western bloc countries, including the United States. The Eastern European/USSR group and Asian states had indicated they would not oppose the measure. But, Spain had not bothered to consult the fifty member African group, for what did the matter have to do with Africa? When the proposal came up for debate and a vote, the urbane European diplomats could not resist teasing the Spanish spokesman, with the Scandinavians and Irish pointing out that their ancestors may have preceded Columbus to America. In the midst of friendly laughter, a rare enough and welcome event at the U.N. in those Cold War days, the African delegates walked out. They returned with a statement of outrage that a proposal would be made in the United Nations, a body established for the goals of peace and decolonization, to celebrate the onset of modern colonialism. The proposal was dead, leaving the Spanish delegates astounded and confused, but undaunted.

Yet, throughout the charade and the righteous African response, never once were the Indians of the Americas mentioned — the fact that tens of millions lay dead with ancient civilizations in ruins within thirty years of Columbus first voyage, what delicately has been called by historians "the greatest demographic disaster in human history." Nor was an Indian voice heard during the debate, for as Russell Means, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement, has said, Indians are the only people of the major peoples of the world unrepresented at the U.N.: One might even say, systematically excluded.

By the time of the 1982 debate, Indians had been lobbying the U.N. for five years, proposing for one thing that the U.N. declare October 12 "The Day of Mourning and Solidarity with the Indians of the Americas." By 1982, American Indian lobbyists felt they had made an impact as the U.N. had just established the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in September of that year. However, the General Assembly debate three months later indicated that little had changed in terms

of consciousness.

Presently, after seven annual meetings of the U.N. Working group, which is attended by hundreds of indigenous representatives, an official declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples and a study of indigenous treaties are in the works. However, Indians, to no avail, have lobbied for 1992 to be declared "The Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples." Spain must have spent a large portion of its GNP during the past five years to block such an action. The U.N., in principle, has accepted the declaration of a year for indigenous peoples — **any** *year but 1992. Spain, of course, has had a little help from its Western and Latin American friends, and particularly the U.S.*

And Spain has organized activities, including garnering the Olympics and the consolidation of Europe, for 1992. The U.S. Congress has allocated $79 million to fund an official "Quincentenary Jubilee Commission."

The 1992 celebration of Columbus voyage should outrage human consciousness: In the same year, 1492, the first European pogrom against Jews took place, and in fact, included all Semites: All Moors and Jews who refused to convert to Christianity (Moriscos), were expelled and deported from Spain in that year. The first enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic ocean on that fateful voyage; perhaps the grossest **genocide**, *not "demographic disaster," in human history was initiated; modern colonialism, accompanied by the ideology of racial (biological) superiority and inferiority, were introduced and codified; modern capitalism, with its rape of natural and human resources, was born. We live today in the wreckage of those five hundred years.*

Native peoples from all over the hemisphere are properly outraged and attempting to organize opposition to this obscene and macabre celebration. One such effort was initiated in Quito, Ecuador, in July 1990, with the "First Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples — 500 Years of Indian Resistance."

Among the dozens of Indians from North America and hundreds from Latin America who participated in the meeting was Joy Harjo who has recently completed a film script on Christopher Columbus for public television.

Joy Harjo is a Creek Indian from Oklahoma and a nationally and internationally acclaimed poet. She is author of three books of poetry: "In Mad Love and War," "Secrets from the Center of the World," and "She Had Some Horses." She received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1978, and is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Harjo is poetry editor for **High Plains Literary Review** *and a member of the Board of Directors of the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium. She participated in literary and solidarity activities in Sandinista Nicaragua and was a sponsor of "Project Renewal," a project in solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua. She is presently at work editing an anthology of writing by indigenous women from all parts of the Western hemisphere.*

—Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

How would you characterize the Quito meeting of indigenous peoples and what came out of that meeting?

The first word that comes to mind is historic. As far as I know, and as anyone knew who was there, it was one of the most comprehensive such hemispheric meetings of indigenous peoples. I immediately think of prophecies and how many are being fulfilled at this time of the century. Here was the meeting of the condor and the eagle.

I traveled with Ernesto Quiroga, Yaqui cultural worker, Albert Bender, Cherokee attorney who works in Parker, Arizona, with the Gila River Tribes, and Patricia Blanco, a Chicana poet who is working with me and three other editors (Valeria Martinez, Hispanic poet, Beth Cuthand, Canadian Indian poet, and Gloria Bird, Spokane Indian poet) on the anthology of Native American women's writing. As we walked from the plane into Andean night where we were close to the stars, we were aware of a resonant presence. My experience of it was the awareness of ancient voices, as old as the earth itself, whose knowledge had come from witnessing strife, as well as from creating beauty. We knew we were in a powerful, special place. I wasn't surprised to learn later that the Quechuan people called the place something like "the four quarters of the world," and it was historically a meeting place for tribal peoples. It was as if we were called together — not only topically in response to five hundred years of resistance, but the land herself had called us together to meet regarding this important business which, yes, directly connects the arrival of Columbus in this hemisphere and the mass destruction that followed. We are talking about survival here, of our tribal peoples and of *all* peoples, of all life on this planet. We came charged by that call and left changed, the shield of imagination deepened.

One story I carry with me came from a Bolivian Indian woman as we sat outside in the encampment, writing up a statement on behalf of the women. She expressed surprise at the presence of North American Indians at the conference. She, along with other South American Indians, thought we had all been killed off. She had seen Westerns, had watched John Wayne kill Indians in the movies. She was deeply moved by our presence at the meeting.

My observations of the Quito meeting center on my work with the women's writing group in which we spoke our concerns, our histories, our

The "First Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples — 500 Years of Indian Resistance" in Quito was organized by the Confederation of Indian Nations of Ecuador (CONAIE), the Organization of Indian Nations of Columbia (ONIC) and the South and Meso-American Indian Information Center (SAIIC).

lives, from a deeply personal level. The stories included family separations, torture, near-starvation, massacres, struggles for land rights, sterilization, family abuse, the recent major uprising of Quechuan people in Ecuador. Not only had we from the U.S. not heard of the uprising, but neither had the Central American women or the women from Bolivia who are neighbors.

As to what came out of it — I would say concretely a network for community action, a support system, and a renewed consciousness. When I walk through my day, write, and consider my community, I see the Andes, I see the people from these nations. I carry them with me when I write, speak, teach, play music.

Could you characterize the "Discovery of America" from an Indian point of view?

There are many false assumptions in this misnomer of a logo. "Discovery" implies an assumption that something is lost. Something *was* lost. It was Columbus. But, unfortunately, he did not discover himself in the process of his lostness. He went on to destroy Indian populations, and land, in his search for wealth, riches. The name, "America," too, represents a false face, a revised Italian name, superseding native tongues. Essentially, what we are dealing with here is a problem of perception. The Indian world is many cultures in one world in which human values are honored.

Bobby Draper

Left to right: Andrea Tineda (Peru), Jackie Warledo (Seminole, Oklahoma), Xilnanel Huerta (Chicano-Azteca, South and Meso-American Indian Information Center/SAIIC) and Marta Colmenares, Zapoteca, Mexico) at translation booth at the Quito conference's final press conference in the National Congress Building in Quito.

The major Christian theological question in the 1600s was whether or not Indians had souls. The whole world, which included our relations the sun, moon, stars, mountains, ocean, all creatures, trees, were all taken in the name of commerce: Ownership always implies a moral question.

Discovery assumes we are not present, are without history. It points to the source of the deep psychic wound that is in need of healing in this collective body — a wound of heart separated from mind, the lack of reverence for all life. Perhaps the most violent act in the "process of discovery," i.e. colonization, was disrespect. The repercussions are still being felt throughout the world — in both the colonized and the colonizer. For me, the act of revolution has to do with active, conscious healing of peoples, not the winning of wars, for there are never any winners.

For Indian people, the "discovery of America" has been five centuries of heartbreak.

What, in your view, is the source of the continued lack of consciousness, even among some progressive activists, of the effects of European colonization of Indians of the Americas. Why, for instance, is it not even called colonization?

I believe it has something to do with the inability to see past the "unreal" world into the "real" world. What is the unreal world? It is a three-dimensional world of simple cause and effect, a world governed by linear time factors, a world in which past is a distant long ago with specific boundaries, and future is what you are striving for — some redeemable heaven or realized conclusion of progress. The "real" world includes the self that is active in heart, the dream world, the intuitive web in which the interconnectedness (and interconnectedness) of *all* life — humans, earth, animals — is evident.

For one thing, the Native American population is viewed as inconsequential, invisible. Colonization has been effective that way in the U.S. Five hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, we were one hundred percent of the human population on this continent. Now, in the U.S., we are one-half of one percent —often not named in demographical information and if/when we are it is as "Other."

Even progressive activists have been educated by television, other visual media for the most part. The images there report us as missing, disappeared, or still under the guns of John Wayne. When most Americans think of Indians, those early ingrained images, or stereotypes appear — I like to call them "stereotypos"! I once had a student in a course I was teaching go to a nursery school in Boulder, Colorado, to collect drawings by students who were asked to draw an "Indian." The images, done by three and four year olds, were neatly divided into two kinds of images: one, a general Plains-type man on horse and/or with tomahawk, and

Bobsy Draper

Nilo Cayuqueo (Mapuche, Argentina and Oakland, California, South and Meso-American Indian Information Center coordinator) speaking at the sunrise ceremony in Quito.

Bobsy Draper

Rosa Vacacela (Quechua, Confederation of Indian Nations of Ecuador) smoking ceremonial pipe at sunrise ceremony at the Quito conference. The ceremony was led by Cree Elders from Canada.

the other, misty princess figures. This was at three and four years old! Shocking! And most education in this country reinforces those images.

As to not seeing the effects of the colonization — if you have been brought up in the ruins, then your perception will naturally subconsciously first use the ruins as a reference for vision. It's not without some effort that you can change but it's possible. If you benefit from the destruction, then, of course, there's going to be resistance to changing perception.

To name something denotes recognition. To name colonization is to recognize it, and to recognize it, is a deeply painful thing for *everyone* involved. The psychic wound is deep in the land, in all of us in this land — both the colonized and the colonizer.

Could you enumerate and describe the major issues faced by Indians in the United States today?

That's a rather large task. Sometimes, though, I feel we're still back to the basic question argued by Spain not-so-long-ago regarding the souls of indigenous peoples. For if there were common respect wouldn't it then follow we'd treat each other as relatives despite family differences, race, culture, sexual identification, language and so forth? The source of major problems, issues faced by Indian peoples come simply to the lack of respect. Racist assumptions are destructive. Where do they come from? Consider a ruling society that thought it had something tangible to gain by misnaming people, stealing land, coveting souls, viewed all life as commodities to be bought and sold. This is what I would even venture to call evil. For what happens is separation — we are no longer brother/sister but expendable, for sale.

Major issues as I perceive them: I say this — as I perceive them — because I don't like being in the position to have everything I say represent all Native peoples in the U.S. — I don't, can't. I am not so authorized, no one is, neither am I charged by my Muskogee Creek people to speak on behalf of the tribe, though I am expected to conduct myself with deportment that brings honor to the people. My viewpoint is specifically mine, an enrolled member of the Muskogee Nation, not living at home, educated not totally by traditional elders but by the same system that denies me. I guess what I am trying to add here is a disclaimer: "Opinions expressed here represent me and not the total Indian nations in this country."

Survival issues — health care, jobs, child and family issues. Underlying all would be issues of sovereignty — Indian nations are distinct autonomous nations within the U.S., and historically have been dealt with as such — yet basic questions in U.S.-tribal relations keep coming back to sovereignty. U.S.-tribal nation treaties were transacted between sovereign nations, but when there was money to be gained, whether in land, mineral rights, or some economic venture involving Indians, here comes the Cavalry. Again, over and over again it comes back to "respect," a question of respect. The fight is still taking place — "Cowboys and Indian" is still being played out — in places like the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming where the tribes were affirmed in their priority rights to water, water that has been siphoned off and stolen for farmers with permission from the same government which years before affirmed the tribes' right to use the water. For the first time since the early 1900s, and the first time in many tribal members lifetime, the river is flowing, being restocked with fish. This is renewal, renewal of the people, renewal of the land — which is the same thing.

So water rights is a main issue, it affects Indian country which is the *whole* country. *We* are running out of water, usable water.

Land rights, hunting and fishing rights. Look at the racist wars in Wisconsin over spear fishing; the long, long struggles in Washington state over fishing rights. Talk to Janet McCloud, David Sohappy, who have been an integral part of that struggle. It's ongoing, all over Indian country.

Human rights is what we are dealing with here. The policy of the U.S. in regards to tribal nations has been a policy of genocide and continues to be so.

Are there similarities and parallels between the situation of Indians in the U.S. and in Latin America?

My knowledge of situation of Indians in Latin America is much more limited than what I know of here — but I do know that colonization has been a prime, sharp force for destruction in those Indian communities in the southern Americas. Many communities were destroyed as early as the late 1400s by the colonizers. Others are in the same position today that we in the U.S. were during the 1800s — forced removal, hunting down and killing, massacres misnamed as "battles," the bloodshed made a river larger than the Mississippi.

While in Quito, I talked with women from the Amazon who were struggling for their very lives — for the land. The land developers have descended like locusts and have begun eating up the land. The Amazonian people are concerned for their continued existence. A woman from Guatemala told of the massacres, of the deaths of her family members murdered in front of her — for ownership and rape of the land. The same story but with differing, stunning, terrible detail was told by people from Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, Canada, the Dominican Republic, from all over the Americas.

I am still deeply shocked by a story related to a class I was teaching five years ago by Floyd Westerman — the wonderful Sioux singer who

A poem written after the birth of my daughter Rainy Dawn's daughter, Krista Rae:

PROMISE

The guardians of dusk blow fire from the Rincons as clouds confer over the Catalinas in the fading tracks of humans. I interpret the blur of red as female rain tomorrow, or the child born with the blessings of animals who will always protect her. I am always amazed at the skill of raineloud who outline the weave of human diversity. Crickets memorize the chance event with rainsongs they have practiced for centuries. I am recreated by that language. Their predictions are always true. And as beautiful as saguaro flowers drinking rain. I see the Moon as I have never seen the moon. A half-shell, just large enough for a cradleboard and the child who takes part in the dance of evolution as seen in the procession of tadpoles to humans painting the walls with wishes. From the moon we all look the same.

In two days the girl will be born and nothing will ever look the same. I knew the monsoon clouds were talking about it as they softened the speed of light. Cedar smoke in a prayer house constructed in the last century pervades my memory. Prayer lingers in the ancestral chain. You can manipulate words to turn departure into aperture, but you cannot figure the velocity of love and how it enters every equation. It's related to the calculation of the speed of light, and how light prevails.

And then the evening star nods its head, nearby a lone jet ascending. I understand how light prevails. And when she was born it rained. Everything came true the way it was promised.

Joy Harjo
29 July 90 and later
Tucson

Bobsy Draper

Participants from the Widows of the Disappeared, Guatemala; the Farmworkers Union/CUC, Guatemala; the Confederation of Indian Nations of Ecuador; and from the Mapuche people of Chile listening during the Women's Commission plenary in Quito.

had just returned from a visit with native people in Brazil. He talked of the common language between them which had to do with his Siouxness and their tribal ways, particularly the respect around trees — those great spirits who both peoples accorded great respect. They sang together, laughed together, ate together. But he also told the story of a white Brazilian businessman and a white American businessman who sat together behind him on the plane: The Brazilian said to the American: "Next time you're in Brazil let me know — I can get you completely outfitted, everything you'll need. This is the last place in the world you can still hunt Indians."

This is what we're up against.

I believe though in the basic goodness of humans. I don't believe that most people would think this way, unless they choose to believe and these were settlers — which points to a deep spiritual problem within themselves. And if people are benefiting from a system then they are easily destroyed by it. The denial in the colonial world is vast, so deep, so overwhelming, the stink is hiding the sun.

What is the ideological basis of the indigenous struggle, and what are the major broad goals of the movement?

The ideological basis of the indigenous struggle goes back to original tenets for human moral conduct. I believe you would find these in all original teachings throughout the world. Again — respect is the key word here. Self-respect, respect for others. There is no formal ideological basis in the same manner as, for instance, such ideologies as socialism, Marxism, communism and so forth. My feeling is that even the tenets for those ideologies became exclusionary though they ideally include all. Basic teachings include *everyone*. Even today, in truly traditional praying you'll see that the people pray for all people, include them as one. That's what being a human is about — remembering, knowing what is really true perception, in a world torn by an illusion of separateness.

Columbus was *welcomed* by the Arawaks, feasted by them — there was song and dance.

The broad goal is perhaps one: unity — tribal unity, familial unity, unity of mind and heart, unity of earth, unity of all of us.

You are working on an anthology of indigenous women's writing. Have you reached any conclusions about the particular consciousness of Native women and the specific role they play or will come to play in the indigenous struggle for liberation?

I am still in the process of compiling the anthology, tentatively titled, "Reinventing the Enemy's Language." I'm not satisfied with the working title for the effect might be divisive, and that's not what I'm after. It refers to the act of writing things down, which is not a traditional tribal art, and, of course, the languages and/or devised systems of lexicon are the colonizers' — except for the Cherokee alphabet, which was invented by Sequoyah, a Cherokee himself. And, in a sense, I see what we've had to do, meaning we who now read, write, communicate almost wholly in the "enemy's" language, is to use that language to make something beautiful, powerful, regenerative, something out of the very language that divided us, took away our lands, our children, our homes, our health, our wombs, grandparents...and continues to do so under the same guises, with the same excuses. Our wars are being fought out in the judicial system — in words, the prime weapons. I never believed the childhood taunt: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." They did. They do. Words can also be used for healing — ceremonially, in songs, prayer and in poetry, short stories, novels, testimonials, which is what this anthology includes — from indigenous women from these Americas.

When you speak of indigenous struggle you cannot say it without including the particular consciousness of Native women. There is no indigenous struggle without the women. There is no separation between male being and female being. Of course, there are differences — but not separation when one views through the heart. The particular consciousness of Native women — that's a big one, what an immense and complex field of memory!

Women in an ideal society play many roles. In a liberation struggle we need to believe more than anything else we are liberated. Which means men taking care of the children and the welfare of the children as well as the women. Children are our most precious resource. It means women's voices and presence in all councils, in all decisions regarding the welfare of the people. This is the way it was in the beginning. The return has been prophesied. And I see changes occurring. Sometimes there are only faint glimmers. I saw/heard an all-women's [Native] drum group from British Columbia. I admire my son-in-law's tender caring of his daughter, my grand-daughter — which is something his grandparents taught him. Wilma Mankiller [Elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation] is now a Beloved Woman of the Cherokee people. Verna Williamson [Governor of Isleta Indian Pueblo] fulfills prophecy of there being a woman leader of the Isleta people. The major battles of the liberation struggle are in our own homes, our own hearts.

Your generation of Native Americans has produced an explosion of literature and art. How do you account for this phenomenon and what role does it play in the political movement?

I always come up with two major factors here: The civil rights movement and the force it unleashed across the country, across cultural lines; it brought

forth ethnic people in a system in which we had been demoralized, and the indomitable spirit of Indian people to more than survive to survive beautifully — which means affirmation of our creative selves.

But, it must be remembered in addressing what's often been called a "Native American renaissance" that for centuries, before centuries were called centuries, before the arrival of cultures who introduced written forms of art, there were, and still are, vast, ongoing oral traditions, ongoing civilizations of traditions, which include new songs, new stories, and creative retellings, performances of the oral canon. In tribal communities art is *useful* to the community, it is not a solitary masturbatory act, hence, you have novels by Native American authors meant to *heal* communities, such as Leslie Silko's "Ceremony." I translate this as a political act.

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IS VAST, SO DEEP,
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In an advisory meeting for another project I am working on, Rueben Snake, a Winnebago elder, reminded us that in the original teaching we are *one* people. He also sang. Understanding gained from the songs arrives surely to the heart. Poetry is singing in voice, on paper. ■

For further information on activities protesting the Columbus voyage celebrations, contact the South and Meso-American Indian Information Center (SAIIC), P.O. Box 7550, Berkeley, CA 94707, (415) 834-4263; or the Columbus in Context Coalition/Rethinking the History of the Americas Project, c/o Clergy and Laity Concerned, 198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038, (212) 964-6730.

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