

The Columbus Monument: A Hermeneutical Analysis

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Abstract

Christopher Columbus, a historically revered European hero to whom the dominant European narrative attributes the discovery of America, but whose image and legacy symbolize silenced genocide of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean, has become a controversial figure. This paper explores the symbolic representation of the statue of Christopher Columbus for both sides of the conflict – the Italian Americans who erected it at the Columbus Circle in New York City and in other places on the one hand, and the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean whose ancestors were slaughtered by the European invaders, on the other. Through the lenses of historical memory and conflict resolution theories, the paper is guided by the hermeneutics – critical interpretation and understanding – of the statue of Christopher Columbus as I experienced it during my research at this site of memory. In addition, the controversies and current debates that its public presence in the heart of Manhattan evokes are critically analyzed. In doing this hermeneutical *cum* critical analysis, three main questions are explored. 1) How could the statue of Christopher Columbus as a controversial historical monument be interpreted and understood? 2) What do the theories of historical memory tell us about the monument of Christopher Columbus? 3) What lessons can we learn from this controversial historical memory to better prevent or resolve similar conflicts in the future and build a more inclusive, equitable and tolerant New York City and America? The paper concludes with a gaze into the future of New York City as an example of a multicultural, diverse city in America.

Keywords: Columbus monument, Columbus Day, Native Americans, Italian Americans, historical memory

Introduction

On September 1, 2018, I left our house in White Plains, New York, for Columbus Circle in New York City. Columbus Circle is one of the most important sites in New York City. It is an important site not only because it is located at the intersection of four main streets in Manhattan – West and South Central Park, Broadway, and Eighth Avenue – but most importantly, in the middle of Columbus Circle is the home to the statue of Christopher Columbus, a historically revered European hero to whom the dominant European narrative attributes the discovery of America, but whose image and legacy symbolize the silenced genocide of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean.

As a site of historical memory in America and the Caribbean, I chose to conduct an observational research at the monument of Christopher Columbus at the Columbus Circle in New York City with the hope to deepen my understanding of Christopher Columbus and why he has become a controversial figure in America and the Caribbean. My goal therefore was to understand the symbolic representation of the statue of Christopher Columbus for both sides of the conflict – the Italian Americans who erected it at the Columbus Circle and in other places on the one hand, and the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean whose ancestors were slaughtered by the European invaders, on the other.

Through the lenses of historical memory and conflict resolution theories, my reflection is guided by the hermeneutics – critical interpretation and understanding - of the statue of Christopher Columbus as I experienced it during my site visit, while explaining the controversies and current debates that its public presence in the heart of Manhattan evokes. In doing this hermeneutical *cum* critical analysis, three main questions are explored. 1) How could the statue of Christopher Columbus as a controversial historical monument be interpreted and understood?

2) What do the theories of historical memory tell us about the monument of Christopher Columbus? 3) What lessons can we learn from this controversial historical memory to better prevent or resolve similar conflicts in the future and build a more inclusive, equitable and tolerant New York City and America?

The paper concludes with a gaze into the future of New York City as an example of a multicultural, diverse city in America.

Discovery at Columbus Circle

New York City is the melting pot of the world due to its cultural diversity and diverse populations. In addition, it is a home to important artistic works, monuments and markers that embody collective historical memory which in turn shape who we are as Americans and a people. While some of the sites of historical memory in New York City are old, some are constructed in the 21st century to memorialize important historical events that have left an indelible mark on our people and nation. While some are popular and highly frequented by both Americans and international tourists, others are no longer as popular as they used to be when they were first erected.

The 9/11 Memorial is an example of a highly visited site of collective memory in New York City. Because the memory of 9/11 is still fresh in our minds, I had planned on devoting my reflection to it. But as I researched other sites of historical memory in New York City, I discovered that the events in Charlottesville in August 2017 have given rise to a “difficult conversation” (Stone et al., 2010) on historically revered but controversial monuments in America. Since the 2015 deadly mass shooting inside the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dylann Roof, a young adherent of White Supremacist

group and staunch proponent of Confederate emblems and monuments, many cities have voted to remove statues and other monuments that symbolize hatred and oppression.

While our national public conversation has focused largely on the Confederate monuments and flag such as the case in Charlottesville where the city voted to remove Robert E. Lee's statue from the Emancipation Park, in New York City the focus is mainly on the statue of Christopher Columbus and what it symbolizes for the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean. As a New Yorker, I witnessed many protests in 2017 against the statue of Christopher Columbus. Protesters and Indigenous Peoples demanded that the Columbus statue be removed from Columbus Circle and that a special statue or monument representing the Indigenous Peoples of America be commissioned to replace Columbus.

As the protests were going on, I remember asking myself these two questions: how has the experience of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean led them to openly and fiercely demand the removal of a historically known legend, Christopher Columbus, who was said to have discovered America? On what grounds will their demand be justified in the 21st century New York City? To explore answers to these questions, I decided to reflect on the statue of Christopher Columbus as it is presented to the world from Columbus Circle in New York City and to explore what its presence in the City public space means for all New Yorkers.

As I stood near the statue of Christopher Columbus in the middle of Columbus Circle, I was really surprised by how the Italian Sculptor, Gaetano Russo, captured and represented the life and voyages of Christopher Columbus in a 76-foot-tall monument. Carved in Italy, the Columbus monument was installed at the Columbus Circle on October 13, 1892 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in America. Although I am not an artist or a sailor, I could discover the detailed representation of Columbus' voyage to the

Americas. For example, Columbus is portrayed on this monument as a heroic sailor standing in his ship in amazement of his adventures and wonder of his new discoveries. In addition, the monument has a bronze-like representation of three ships positioned underneath Christopher Columbus. As I researched to know what these ships are on the website of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, I found that they are called the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* - the three ships Columbus used during his first voyage from Spain to the Bahamas that departed on August 3, 1492 and arrived on October 12, 1492. At the bottom of the Columbus monument is a winged-like creature that looks like a guardian angel.

To my surprise, though, and in reinforcement and confirmation of the dominant narrative that Christopher Columbus was the first person to discover America, there is nothing on this monument that represents the Natives or Indians who were already living in America before the arrival of Columbus and his group. Everything on this monument is about Christopher Columbus. Everything depicts the narrative of his heroic discovery of America.

As discussed in the section that follows, Columbus monument is a memory site not only for those who paid for and erected it – the Italian Americans – but also it is a site of history and memory for the Native Americans, for they too remember the painful and traumatic encounter of their ancestors with Columbus and his followers each time they see Christopher Columbus elevated in the heart of New York City. Also, the statue of Christopher Columbus at Columbus Circle in New York City has become the *terminus ad quo* and *terminus ad quem* (starting and ending point) of the Columbus Day Parade every October. Many New Yorkers gather at the Columbus Circle to relive and re-experience with Christopher Columbus and his group their discovery and invasion of the Americas. However, as the Italian Americans - who paid for and installed this monument - and the Spanish Americans whose ancestors sponsored Columbus’

multiple voyages to the Americas and as a result participated in and benefited from the invasion, as well as other European Americans celebrate joyfully on Columbus Day, one section of the American population – the Native or Indian Americans, the real owners of the new but old land called America – are constantly reminded of their human and cultural genocide in the hands of the European invaders, a hidden/silenced genocide that occurred during and after the days of Christopher Columbus. This paradox that the Columbus monument embodies has recently ignited a serious conflict and controversy about the historical relevance and symbolism of the statue of Christopher Columbus in New York City.

The Statue of Christopher Columbus: A Controversial Monument in New York City

As I was glaring at the magnificent and elegant monument of Christopher Columbus at Columbus Circle in New York City, I was also thinking of the controversial discussions this monument has engendered in recent times. In 2017, I remember seeing many protesters at the Columbus Circle who were demanding that the statue of Christopher Columbus be removed. The New York City radio and television stations were all talking about the controversies surrounding the Columbus monument. As usual, New York State and City politicians were divided on whether the Columbus monument should be removed or stay. Since Columbus Circle and the Columbus statue are within the New York City public space and park, it then behooves the New York City elected officials led by the Mayor to decide and act.

On September 8, 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio established the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers (Office of the Mayor, 2017). This commission held hearings, received petitions from the parties and the public, and gathered polarized arguments on why the Columbus monument should stay or be removed. Survey was also used to collect additional data and public opinion on this controversial issue. According to

the report of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers (2018), “there are entrenched disagreements about all four moments in time considered in the assessment of this monument: the life of Christopher Columbus, the intention at the time of the commissioning of the monument, its present impact and meaning, and its future legacy” (p. 28).

First, there are so many controversies surrounding the life of Christopher Columbus. Some of the major issues associated with him include whether or not Columbus actually discovered America or America discovered him; whether or not he treated the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean who welcomed him and his entourage and offered them hospitality, well or mistreated them; whether or not he and those that came after him slaughtered the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean; whether or not Columbus’ actions in America were in compliance with the ethical norms of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean; and whether or not Columbus and those that came after him coercively dispossessed the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean of their land, traditions, culture, religion, systems of governance, and resources.

Second, the controversial arguments on whether the Columbus monument should stay or be removed has a historical connection to the time of, and intention for, mounting / commissioning the monument. To better understand the statue of Christopher Columbus and Columbus Circle in New York City, it is imperative that we decipher what it meant to be an Italian American not only in New York but also in all other parts of the United States in 1892 when the Columbus monument was installed and commissioned. Why was the Columbus monument installed in New York City? What does the monument represent for the Italian Americans who paid for it and installed it? Why are the Columbus monument and Columbus Day vehemently and passionately defended by the Italian Americans? Without seeking countless

and voluminous explanations to these questions, a response from John Viola (2017), president of the National Italian American Foundation, is worth reflecting on:

For many people, including some Italian-Americans, the celebration of Columbus is viewed as belittling the suffering of indigenous peoples at the hands of Europeans. But for countless people in my community, Columbus, and Columbus Day, represent an opportunity to celebrate our contributions to this country. Even before the arrival of large numbers of Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Columbus was a figure to rally around against the prevailing anti-Italianism of the time. (para. 3-4)

Writings on the Columbus monument in New York City suggest that the installation and commissioning of the statue of Christopher Columbus stem from a conscious strategy by the Italian Americans to reinforce their identity within the main-stream America as a way to end the tragedies, hostilities and discrimination they were experiencing at a time. The Italian Americans felt targeted and persecuted, and so yearned for inclusion in the American story. They found a symbol of what they consider American story, inclusion and unity in the person of Christopher Columbus, who happens to be an Italian. As Viola (2017) further explains:

It was in reaction to these tragic killings that the early Italian-American community in New York scraped together private donations to give the monument at Columbus Circle to their new city. So this statue now denigrated as a symbol of European conquest was from the beginning a testament to love of country from a community of immigrants struggling to find acceptance in their new, and sometimes hostile, home... We believe Christopher Columbus represents the values of discovery and risk that are at the heart of the American dream, and that it is our job as the community most closely associated with his legacy to be at the forefront of a sensitive and engaging path forward. (para. 8 and 10)

The strong attachment to and pride for the Columbus monument that the Italian Americans have demonstrated were also revealed to the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City

Art, Monuments, and Markers during their public hearings in 2017. According to the Commission's report (2018), "Columbus monument was erected in 1892, the year after one of the most egregious acts of anti-Italian violence in American history: the extra-judicial public killing of eleven Italian Americans who had been acquitted of a crime in New Orleans" (p. 29). For this reason, the Italian Americans led by the National Italian American Foundation strongly and vehemently oppose the removal/relocation of Columbus monument from Columbus Circle. In the words of the president of this organization, Viola (2017), "The 'tearing down of history' does not change that history" (para 7). In addition, Viola (2017) and his National Italian American Foundation argue that:

There are many monuments to Franklin Roosevelt, and although he allowed Japanese-Americans and Italian-Americans to be interned during World War II, we as an ethnic group are not demanding that his statues be destroyed. Nor are we tearing down tributes to Theodore Roosevelt, who, in 1891, after 11 falsely accused Sicilian-Americans were murdered in the largest mass lynching in American history, wrote that he thought the event "a rather good thing. (para. 8)

Third, and considering the foregoing discussion, what does the Columbus monument mean today for many New Yorkers who are not members of the Italian American community? Who is Christopher Columbus to the Native New Yorkers and American Indians? What impact does the presence of the Columbus monument at Columbus Circle in New York City have on the original owners of New York City and other minorities, for example, Native/Indian Americans and African Americans? The report of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers (2018) reveals that "Columbus serves as a reminder of genocide of Native peoples across the Americas and the onset of the transatlantic slave trade" (p. 28).

As the waves of change and revelation of previously hidden, suppressed truths and silenced narratives have begun to blow across the Americas, millions of people in North America

and the Caribbean have started to question the dominant narrative about, and learned history of, Christopher Columbus. For these activists, it is time to unlearn what was previously taught in schools and public discourse to favor one section of the American population in order to relearn and make public previously hidden, covered, and suppressed truths. Many groups of activists have been engaged in different strategies to reveal what they consider to be the truth about the symbolism of Christopher Columbus. Some cities in North America, for example, Los Angeles, have “officially replaced its celebrations of Columbus Day with Indigenous People’s Day” (Viola, 2017, para. 2), and the same demand has been made in New York City. The statue of Christopher Columbus in New York City has been recently marked (or colored) red symbolizing blood in the hands of Columbus and his fellow explorers. The one in Baltimore was said to have been vandalized. And the one in Yonkers, New York, was said to have been violently and “unceremoniously decapitated” (Viola, 2017, para. 2). All these tactics utilized by different activists across the Americas have the same goal: to break the silence; uncover the hidden narrative; tell the story about what happened from the victims’ point of view, and demand that restorative justice - which includes acknowledgement of what happened, reparations or restitutions, and healing - be done now and not later.

Fourth, how the New York City deals with these controversies surrounding the person and statue of Christopher Columbus will determine and define the legacy that the City is leaving behind for the people of New York City. At a time when the Native Americans, including the Lenape and Algonquian peoples, are trying to recreate, reconstruct and reclaim their cultural identity and historical land, it becomes very important that New York City devotes sufficient resources to the study of this controversial monument, what it represents to the different parties, and the conflict it festers. This will help the City develop proactive and unbiased conflict

resolution systems and processes to deal with the issues of land, discrimination and the legacies of slavery in order to create a pathway for justice, reconciliation, dialogue, collective healing, equity, and equality.

The question that comes to mind here is: can New York City keep the monument of Christopher Columbus at Columbus Circle without continuing to revere “a historic figure whose actions in relation to Native peoples represent the beginnings of dispossession, enslavement, and genocide?” (Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, 2018, p. 30). It is argued by some members of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers (2018) that the Columbus monument symbolizes:

an act of erasure of indigeneity and enslavement. Those so affected carry within themselves the deep archives of memory and lived experience that are encountered at the monument... the statue’s prominent location confirms the notion that those who control space have power, and the only way to adequately reckon with that power is to remove or relocate the statue. In order to move toward justice, these Commission members recognize that equity means that the same people do not always experience distress, but that this is instead a shared state. Justice means that distress is redistributed. (p. 30)

The relationship between the Columbus monument and the traumatic historical memory of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean as well as the African Americans will be better explained and understood through the theoretical lenses of historical memory.

What do Historical Memory Theories Tell Us about this Controversial Monument?

Dispossessing people of their land or property and colonization are never an act of peace but can only be achieved through aggression and coercion. For the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean who showed a lot of resistance to guard and keep what nature bestowed on them, and who were killed in the process, dispossessing them of their land is an act

of war. In his book, *War is a force that gives us meaning*, Hedges (2014) opines that war “dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it ... War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us. And this is why for many, war is so hard to discuss once it is over” (p. 3). This means that the historical memory and traumatic experiences of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean were hijacked, suppressed, and sent into oblivion until recently because the perpetrators did not want such traumatic historical memory to be transmitted.

The Indigenous Peoples movement to replace the Columbus monument with a monument representing Indigenous Peoples, and their demand to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day, are indicative that the oral history of the victims is gradually becoming articulated to shed light on the traumatic and painful experiences they endured for hundreds of years. But for the perpetrators who control the narrative, Hedges (2014) affirms: “while we venerate and mourn our own dead we are curiously indifferent about those we kill” (p. 14). As noted above, the Italian Americans built and installed the Columbus monument as well as lobbied for Columbus Day in order to celebrate their heritage and contributions to the American history. However, since the atrocities committed against the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean during and after the arrival of Columbus in the Americas have not yet been publicly addressed and acknowledged, does the celebration of Columbus with his elevated monument in the most diverse city of the world not perpetuate indifference to and denial of the painful memory of the Indigenous Peoples of this land? Also, has there been a public reparation or restitution for slavery which is associated with the arrival of Columbus to the Americas? A one-sided celebration or education of historical memory is very suspicious.

For centuries, our educators have simply regurgitated a one-sided narrative about the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas - that is, the narrative of those in power. This Eurocentric narrative about Columbus and his adventures in the Americas has been taught in schools, written in books, discussed in the public spheres, and utilized for public policy making decisions without a critical examination and questioning of its validity and truthfulness. It became part of our national history and was not contested. Ask a first-grade elementary school student who was the first person to discover America, and s/he will tell you it is Christopher Columbus. The question is: did Christopher Columbus discover America or America discovered him? In "Context is Everything: The Nature of Memory," Engel (1999) discusses the concept of contested memory. The challenge associated with memory is not just how to remember and transmit that which is remembered, but in large measure, it is whether that which is transmitted or shared with others – that is, whether one's story or narrative – is contested or not; whether it is accepted as true or rejected as false. Can we still hold on to the narrative that Christopher Columbus was the first person to discover America even in the 21st century? What about those natives who were already living in America? Does it mean they did not know they were living in America? Did they not know where they were? Or are they not considered to be human enough to know they were in America?

A detailed and in-depth study of the oral and written history of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean confirms that these indigenes had a well-developed culture and ways of living and communicating. Their traumatic experiences of Columbus and post-Columbus invaders are transmitted from generation to generation. This means that within the Indigenous Peoples' groups as well as other minorities, much is remembered and transmitted. As Engel (1999) affirms, "each memory rests, in some way or another, on the internal experience of

recollection. Much of the time these internal representations are surprisingly accurate and provide us with rich sources of information” (p. 3). The challenge is to know whose “internal representation” or recollection is accurate. Should we continue to accept the status quo – the old, dominant narrative about Columbus and his heroism? Or should we now turn the page and see the reality through the eyes of those whose lands were coercively taken and whose ancestors suffered both human and cultural genocide in the hands of Columbus and his likes? To my own assessment, the presence of the Columbus monument in the heart of Manhattan in New York City has woken the sleeping dog up to bark. We can now listen to a different narrative or story about Christopher Columbus from the perspective of those whose ancestors experienced him and his successors - the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean.

To understand why the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean are advocating for the removal of the Columbus monument and Columbus Day and their replacement with the Indigenous Peoples Monument and Indigenous Peoples Day, one has to reexamine the concepts of collective trauma and mourning. In his book, *Bloodlines. From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*, Volkan, (1997) proposes the theory of chosen trauma which is linked to unresolved mourning. Chosen trauma according to Volkan (1997) describes “the collective memory of a calamity that once befell a group’s ancestors. It is ... more than a simple recollection; it is a shared mental representation of the events, which includes realistic information, fantasized expectations, intense feelings, and defenses against unacceptable thoughts” (p. 48). Merely discerning the term, *chosen trauma*, suggests that group members like the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean or African Americans willingly chose the traumatic experiences they suffered in the hands of European explorers like Christopher Columbus. If this were the case, then I would have disagreed with the author since we do not choose for ourselves those traumatic

experiences directed at us either through natural disaster or man-made disaster. But the concept of *chosen trauma* as explained by the author “reflects a large group’s unconsciously defining its identity by the transgenerational transmission of injured selves infused with the memory of the ancestor’s trauma” (p. 48).

Our response to traumatic experiences is spontaneous and for the most part, unconscious. Often, we respond by mourning, and Volkan (1997) identifies two types of mourning – *crisis grief* which is the sadness or pain we feel, and *work of mourning* which is a deeper process of making sense of what happened to us - our historical memory. Mourning time is a healing time, and the healing process takes time. However, complications during this time may reopen the wound. The presence of the Columbus monument in the heart of Manhattan, New York City and in other cities across the United States as well as the annual celebration of Columbus Day reopen the wounds and injuries, painful and traumatic experiences inflicted on the Natives/Indians and African slaves by the European invaders in the Americas led by Christopher Columbus. To facilitate the collective healing process of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean, it is demanded that the Columbus monument be removed and replaced with the Indigenous Peoples Monument; and that Columbus Day be replaced with Indigenous Peoples Day.

As Volkan (1997) notes, the initial collective mourning involves some rituals – cultural or religious – in order to make sense of what has happened to the group. One way to positively mourn collectively is by memorialization through what Volkan (1997) calls linking objects. Linking objects help in relieving the memories. Volkan (1997) holds that “building monuments after drastic collective losses has its own special place in societal mourning; such actions are almost a psychological necessity” (p. 40). Either through these memorials or oral history, the memory of what happened is transmitted to future generation. “Because the traumatized self-

images passed down by members of the group all refer to the same calamity, they become part of the group identity, an ethnic marker on the canvas of the ethnic tent” (Volkan, 1997, p. 45). In Volkan’s (1997) view, “the memory of the past trauma remains dormant for several generations, kept within the psychological DNA of the members of the group and silently acknowledged within the culture – in literature and art, for example – but it reemerges powerfully only under certain conditions” (p. 47). The American Indians/Native Americans for example will not forget the destruction of their ancestors, cultures, and forceful seizure of their lands. Any linking object such as the monument or statue of Christopher Columbus will trigger their collective memory of both human and cultural genocide in the hands of the European invaders. This may cause intergenerational trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Replacing the Columbus monument with the Indigenous Peoples Monument on the one hand and replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day on the other, will not only help in telling the true story about what happened; most importantly, such sincere and symbolic gestures will serve as the beginning of reparation, collective mourning and healing, forgiveness, and constructive public dialogue.

If the group members with a shared memory of calamity are unable to overcome their sense of powerlessness and build self-esteem, then they will remain within the state of victimhood and powerlessness. To deal with collective trauma, therefore, there is need for a process and practice of what Volkan (1997) calls enveloping and externalizing. Traumatized groups need to “envelop their traumatized (imprisoned) self-representations (images) and externalize and control them outside of themselves” (p. 42). The best way to do this is through public memorials, monuments, other sites of historical memory and engaging in public conversations about them without being timid. Commissioning Indigenous Peoples Monument and celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day annually will help the Indigenous Peoples of America

and the Caribbean externalize their collective trauma instead of internalizing them each time they see the Columbus monument standing tall in the heart of the American cities.

If the demand of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean could be explained by an appeal to Volkan's (1997) theory of chosen trauma, how could the European explorers represented by Christopher Columbus whose monument and legacy are passionately guarded by the Italian American community be understood? In chapter five of his book, *Bloodlines. From ethnic pride to ethnic terrorism*, Volkan, (1997) explores the theory of "chosen glory - we-ness: identification and shared reservoirs." The theory of "chosen glory" as opined by Volkan (1997) explains "the mental representation of a historical event that induces feelings of success and triumph" [and that] "can bring members of a large group together" (p. 81). For the Italian Americans, the voyages of Christopher Columbus to the Americas with all that came with it is a heroic act for which the Italian Americans should be proud of. At the time of Christopher Columbus just as it was when the Columbus monument was commissioned at Columbus Circle in New York City, Christopher Columbus was a symbol of honor, heroism, triumph, and success as well as an epitome of the American story. But the revelations of his actions in the Americas by the descendants of those who experienced him have portrayed Columbus as a symbol of genocide and dehumanization. According to Volkan (1997), "Some events that may at first seem triumphs are later seen as humiliating. Nazi Germany's 'triumphs,' for instance, were perceived as criminal by most of the succeeding generations of Germans" (p. 82).

But, has there been a collective condemnation within the Italian American community – the custodians of the Columbus Day and monument - for the ways Columbus and his successors treated the Natives/Indians in the Americas? It appears that the Italian Americans created the Columbus monument not just to preserve the legacy of Columbus but most importantly to

elevate their own identity status within the larger American society as well as to use it as a way to fully integrate themselves and claim their place within the American story. Volkan (1997) explains it well by saying that “chosen glories are reactivated as a way to bolster a group’s self-esteem. Like chosen traumas, they become heavily mythologized over time” (p. 82). This is exactly the case with the Columbus monument and Columbus Day.

Conclusion

My reflection on the Columbus monument, although detailed, is limited for a number of reasons. Understanding the historical issues surrounding Columbus’ arrival to the Americas and the lived experiences of the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean at that time requires a lot of time and research resources. These I could have if I plan to expatiate on this research in the future. With these limitations in mind, this essay is intended to leverage on my visit to the Columbus monument at Columbus Circle in New York City to initiate a critical reflection on this controversial monument and topic.

The protests, petitions, and calls for the removal of the Columbus monument and the abolishment of Columbus Day in recent times highlight the need for a critical reflection on this topic. As this reflective essay has shown, the Italian American community – the custodian of the Columbus monument and Columbus Day – wishes that the legacy of Columbus as articulated in the dominant narrative be kept as is. However, the pro-Indigenous Peoples Movements are demanding that the Columbus monument be replaced with the Indigenous Peoples Monument and Columbus Day be replaced with Indigenous Peoples Day. This disagreement, according to the report of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers (2018), is anchored in “all four moments in time considered in the assessment of this monument: the life

of Christopher Columbus, the intention at the time of the commissioning of the monument, its present impact and meaning, and its future legacy” (p. 28).

Contrary to the dominant narrative which is now being contested (Engel, 1999), it has been revealed that Christopher Columbus is a symbol of both human and cultural genocide of the Natives/Indians in the Americas. Dispossessing the Indigenous Peoples of America and the Caribbean of their lands and culture was not an act of peace; it was an act of aggression and war. By this war, their culture, memory, language and everything they had were dominated, distorted, corrupted, and infected (Hedges, 2014). It is therefore important that those with “unresolved mourning,” - what Volkan (1997) calls “chosen trauma” - be given a place to grief, mourn, externalize their transgenerational trauma, and be healed. This is because “building monuments after drastic collective losses has its own special place in societal mourning; such actions are almost a psychological necessity” (Volkan (1997, p. 40).

The 21st century is not a time to glory in the past inhumane, atrocious accomplishments of the powerful. It is a time for reparation, healing, honest and open dialogue, acknowledgement, empowerment and making things right. I believe these are possible in New York City and in the other cities across the Americas.

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