

By Bill Bigelow

**S**HORTLY AFTER THE CHRISTOPHER Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission formed several years ago, its first chairman, John Goudie, urged Americans to join the "uncontroversial and universally appealing" 500th anniversary celebration.

Well, John, life doesn't always turn out as we plan, does it? Today, Goudie is no longer commission chairman, having resigned in disgrace amid accusations of cronyism and corruption. More significantly, the Columbus myth itself is beginning to crumble. But a new myth of "encounter" and "exchange" is rising to take its place.


The old myth was an explicit tribute to imperialism. Christopher Columbus — determined, brave, skillful, reverent—leads a mission of discovery and conquest to the uncharted West. While en route to the Indies, he makes a much more important find: America. He claims the land for Spain and Christianity, brings a few natives back to show off and plans future trips to the "New World."

**Silenced majority:** In storybooks and texts, children are led to cheer these acts of imperial arrogance and aggression. The native American people have no consciousness, no feelings, no voice. When acknowledged, "Indian" resistance to the Spaniards is labeled as "unfriendly" acts by "ferocious Caribs." The whole adventure of "discovery" is cause for unquestioned celebration.

Books such as Hans Koning's *Columbus: His Enterprise*, Kirkpatrick Sale's *Conquest of Paradise* and the organized critical response of indigenous groups throughout the Americas have put Columbus boosters on the defensive. The cheerleaders are still around, of course, but they've taken a back seat to the new "academic" Columbus mythmakers. OK, they promise, we won't say Columbus "discovered" America anymore. We'll say he "encountered" it; and, yes, Columbus did take slaves; and, yes, he did mistreat the Indians and many of them died; and, all right, the whole enterprise led to the African slave trade, which was a bad thing. But...

The elaboration of this "but" dominates today's mainstream response. Suddenly it's everywhere: The Smithsonian's "Seeds of Change" exhibit and book, *Newsweek's* "When Worlds Collide" special fall/winter Columbus issue, Berkeley's Lawrence Hall of Science 1492-1992 exhibit, the National Council for the Social Studies' guidelines for teaching about the quincentenary, official and editorial pronouncements—they all play off the same themes.

The ideological terrain is shifting, and we need to be aware lest we continue to attack a largely defeated myth. The new Columbus line, sum-



By His EXCELLENCY  
**WILLIAM SHIRLEY, Esq;**  
Captain-General and Governor in Chief, in and over His Majesty's Province of the Massachusetts-Bay, in New-England, and Vice-Admiral of the same, and Major-General in His Majesty's Army.

## A PROCLAMATION.

WHEREAS the Indians of Norridgewock, Arrisagun a'ook, Waweenock and St. John's Tribes, and the Indians of the other Tribes inhabiting in the Eastern and Northern Parts of His Majesty's Territories of New-England, the Penobscot Tribe only excepted, have, contrary to their solemn Submission unto His Majesty long since made and frequently renewed, been guilty of the most perfidious, barbarous and inhuman Murders of divers of His Majesty's English Subjects; and have obtained from all Commerce and Correspondence with His Majesty's said Subjects for many Months past; and the said Indians have fully discovered an inimical, traitorous and rebellious Intention and Disposition;

I have therefore thought fit to issue this Proclamation, and to Declare the Indians of the Norridgewock, Arrisagun a'ook, Waweenock and St. John's Tribes, and the Indians of the other Tribes of New-England, and late inhabiting in the Eastern and Northern Parts of His Majesty's Territories of New-England, and late in Alliance and Confederacy with the above-mentioned Tribes, to be Enemies, Rebels and Traitors to His Most Sacred Majesty: And I do hereby require His Majesty's Officers and Soldiers to embrace all Opportunities of pursuing, capturing, killing and destroying all and any of the aforesaid Indians, the Penobscots excepted.

AND WHEREAS the General Court of this Province have voted, That a Bounty or Encouragement be granted and allowed to be paid out of the Publick Treasury to the marching Army that shall be employed for the Defence of the Eastern and Western Frontiers from the Twenty-fifth of this Month of June until the Twenty-fifth of November next;

I have thought fit to publish the same; and I do hereby promise, That there shall be paid out of the Publick Treasury to all and any of the said Forces, over and above their Bounty upon Enlistment, their Wages and Subsistence, the Premiums or Bounties following, viz.

- For every Male Indian Prisoner above the Age of Twelve Years, that shall be taken and brought to Boston, Fifty Pounds.
- For every Male Indian Scalp, brought in as Evidence of their being killed, Forty Pounds.
- For every Female Indian Prisoner, taken and brought in as aforesaid, and for every Male Indian Prisoner under the Age of Twelve Years, taken and brought in as aforesaid, Twenty-five Pounds.
- For every Scalp of such Female Indian or Male Indian under Twelve Years of Age, brought as Evidence of their being killed, as aforesaid, Twenty Pounds.

GIVEN under my Hand at Boston, in the Province aforesaid, this Twelfth Day of June, 1755, and in the Twenty-eighth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord GEORGE the Second, by the Grace of GOD, of Great-Britain, France, and Ireland, KING, Defender of the Faith, &c.

By His Excellency's Command,  
J. WILLARD, Sec'y.

W. Shirley.

**GOD Save the KING.**

the Honourable His Majesty's COUNCIL. 1755.

BOSTON: Printed by John Draper, Printer to His

## New Indian trade rout myth

med up nicely in *Newsweek's* special issue, warns us not to look for "heroes and villains," but to "look at the vast changes that were wrought." This "Columbian Exchange" is even-handed. "They" gave "us" the potato, corn and a great deal of gold. "We" gave "them" the horse, sugar and—regrettably—germs. The new discourse centers on "exchanges" of technology, food, disease, people and even wealth—and how these exchanges revolutionized the world.

**Drawing the line:** A fear of politics underpins the new mythmaking. It's permissible to mention African slavery as a consequence of 1492, but not permissible to suggest that social inequalities in today's world have anything to do with events 500 years ago. It's all right to hint that today's degradation of the Earth is connected to the legacy of 1492, but only so long as "we" are all held equally responsible.

It's fine to point out that the chocolate milkshake is a by-product of the Columbian exchange, but not the imperial premises of the International Monetary Fund. It is acceptable, however, to speak of "biological imperialism," an expression that's become quite fashionable. Death and destruction? Blame it on the germs.

The Columbus of the new myth is "complex"—religious but cruel, a

skillful sailor but an inept administrator. Critics are chided for evaluating Columbus with "contemporary glasses" rather than seeing him as a complicated man of his time. The

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new myth, like the old myth, ignores or is contemptuous of other "men of their time" such as Antonio de Montesinos, Pedro de Cordoba or Bartolomé de las Casas, priests who denounced the inhumanity of the Spanish conquest. Also silenced are the Taino Indians, "men—and women—of their time," who resisted the early European invasion with determination and subtlety. This suppression of the voices of protest and defiance in the revised myth teaches people to ignore today's movements for justice.

**A fear of politics underpins the new mythmaking. It is fashionable to speak of "biological imperialism." Hey, blame it on the germs.**

Implied in the new myth and stated explicitly in the *Newsweek* piece is that the "encounter" and its aftermath was inevitable. Why get so upset if, like an earthquake or tornado, the mass extermination of Indians, the African slave trade and all the inequities that followed were bound to happen? If, as the mythmakers hope, the argument succeeds in stifling condemnations of the past, then they can go back to talking about changes in the world's diet and 15th-century navigation techniques.

It's a trap we should avoid, for if we fail to analyze and criticize 500-year-old Spanish imperialism because it was "inevitable," then we disable ourselves from recognizing and denouncing these same tendencies in our own society—we run the risk of seeing these as inevitable as well. Which may, in fact, be a major subtext of the revised Columbus myth: Criticizing a long-ago social system built on controlling other people's land and resources, accompanied at home by vast inequalities of wealth and power, could spawn a similar critique of contemporary U.S. society.

**Unseen underhanded:** There is a nasty teleology lurking beneath the historical inevitability claim: the implication that our society as it is currently structured was meant to be.

It's a page out of the Manifest Destiny credo: This society is what history has led up to; indeed, it is what history was for. The U.S.—militarily supreme, decision-maker for the world—was the intended conclusion of an unseen hand of fate.

The old Columbus myth held that discovery was primarily motivated by curiosity, wanting to prove the world was round, and a desire to spread Christianity. The new myth acknowledges that a quest for profit was more central but links this profit motive with qualities that allegedly make our society great—as *Newsweek* puts it, "a fascination with new ideas, a knack for scientific discovery, an ability to adapt and change." The revised Columbus tale implies that an economic system based on greed is vital for any social improvement.

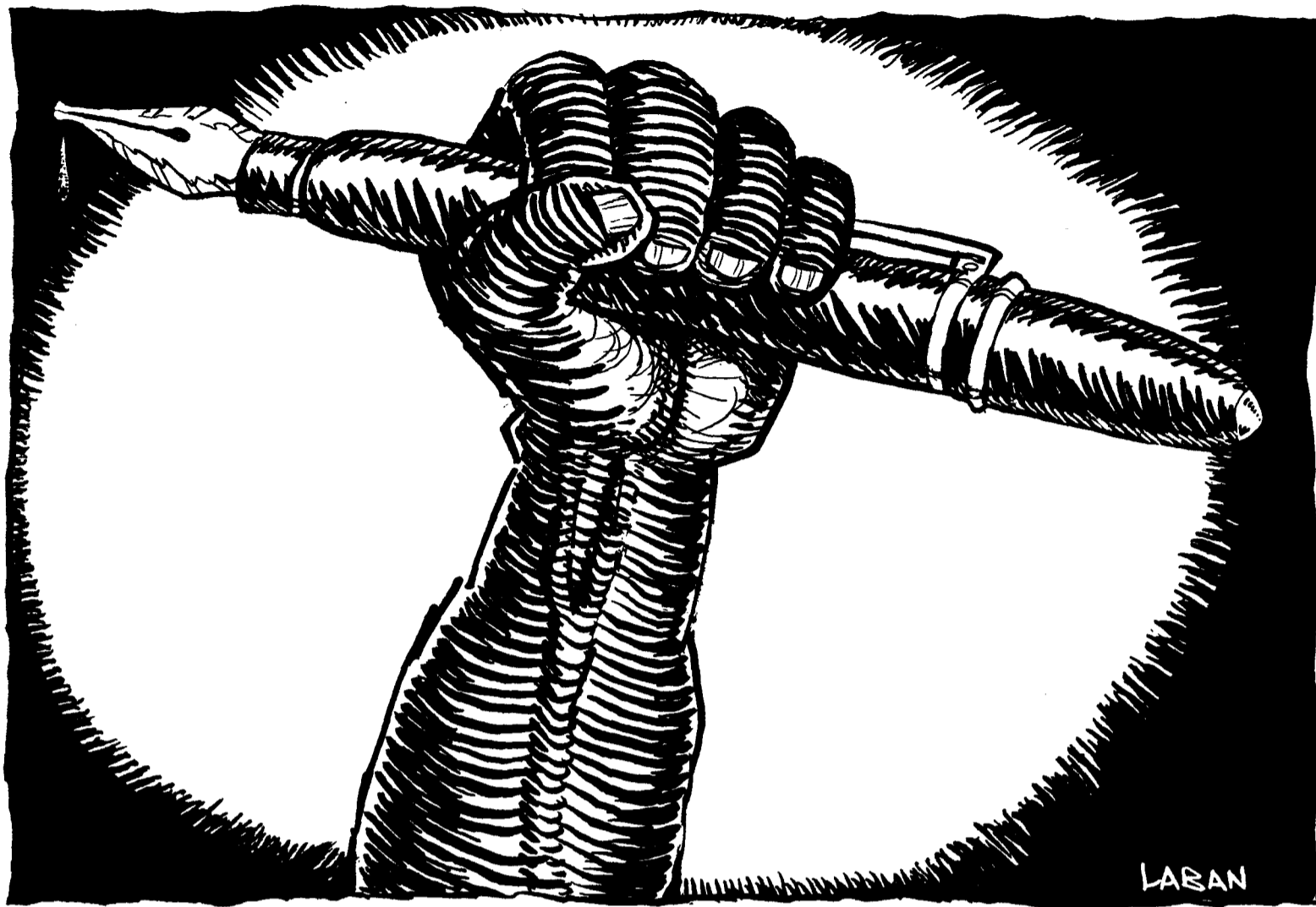
The new mythmakers have discovered native American cultures. I first noticed this tendency in a long article, "America Before Columbus," in the July 8, 1991 *U.S. News and World Report*—pages and pages on ancient Indian civilizations. This approach offers some political advantages to the Columbian exchange people. Native demands for recognition can be undercut: "We are acknowledging the rich contributions of the first Americans," they can claim.

This ersatz multiculturalism also popularizes grizzly descriptions of aspects of cultures such as the Aztec and Maya, which then can "balance" the atrocities of Columbus, Cortes, Pizarro, et al. At dinner the other evening, a friend said, "I can't feel bad about what happened. The Indians would have done the same thing if they'd had the chance." He'd been reading about Aztec human sacrifices.

But the new mythmaking is more than some cynical capitalist plot. Cynical they may be, but the recent apologetics and scholarship derive from a world view that understands this as the only, if not the best, society possible. Like the conquistadors of old, these folks believe in what they're doing.

And, I suppose, we should be thankful for the more sophisticated arguments. The "Columbus was good/Columbus was bad" debate was awfully limited. A narrow focus on Columbus, proving that he took slaves and massacred untold numbers of Tainos is no longer enough for us—if it ever was. The Columbian exchange crowd may have done the left a favor. If the measured, dispassionate "balance" of the new mythmakers still hides a reactionary agenda, then it's up to us to offer an alternative.

Bill Bigelow is co-editor of *Rethinking Columbus* and wrote the afterword for teachers in the new edition of Hans Koning's *Columbus: His Enterprise*. *Rethinking Columbus* is available for \$6 from Rethinking Schools, 1001 E. Keefe Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212.



benefits from a network of "various traditions"—religious and secular, black and white, African-American and European—and that seeks to unite race, class and gender. In this way, hooks and West not only are "breaking bread" together as they engage in their lively dialogues, but they are also breaking boundaries

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and moving against and beyond the categories that define (and simplify) people, disciplines and types of intellectual labor.

*Breaking Bread* made me eager to hear more from hooks and West. As I finished reading, I wished especially that they had spoken in greater detail about their activity as college teachers. Somewhat surprisingly, they say little about their actual jobs and their notion of what they are aiming to achieve in the classroom. Hooks refers at one point to "liberatory pedagogy," but neither she nor West fleshes out this term. How do they interact with students? What innovations have they brought to their teaching? Can they tell of exemplary changes in consciousness they have seen among students and the process by which these conversions and transformations came about? In sum, what's it like to believe what hooks and West believe and yet to teach day to day at such wealthy, renowned institutions? Can they really practice there the tenets they fervently preach?

In part, I raise these questions because as an academic myself I am curious and want to learn about "liberating" styles of teaching. But I also raise them because almost everybody today is interested in building bridges between the workplace and the community, and connecting the fragmented pieces of their lives. This is an issue hooks and West engage in *Breaking Bread*, but I think they can say a good deal more about it, offering us fuller testimony, description, guidance. Their stimulating book beckons for a sequel. ■

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## Black intellectuals talk the talk, walk the walk

### Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life

By bell hooks and Cornel West  
South End Press, 175 pp., \$12.00

By William E. Cain

**T**HIS SENSITIVE, INSIGHTFUL AND often moving book consists of interviews and dialogues between bell hooks and Cornel West, and separate essays by each of them on black intellectual life. The commentaries hooks and West offer on the conditions facing black Americans are grim and disturbing in many respects, and West in particular speaks severely about the failures of entrenched black leadership and "the old line civil rights organizations."

Yet hooks and West emphasize that, while this is "the worst of times in Black America," it is also "the best of times"—a moment of renewal and revitalization in the black church, and in music, literature, film, popular culture. By celebrating and partaking of this spirit of new discovery, progressive inquiry and "joy in struggle," *Breaking Bread* takes its stand as a powerfully affirmative and optimistic book. It shows the possibilities for growth and development that lie in respectful, serious, sustained collaboration between black men and women, and it bears witness to exciting prospects ahead for black radicals and intellectuals.

West teaches at Princeton and hooks at Oberlin, but both are committed to resisting the academic and professional conventions that threaten to enclose them—and cut them off from the black community as a whole. The very form of *Breaking Bread*—a sequence of animated, open, exploratory conversations—marks their effort to combat the jargon and specialization that many academics favor: They insist on conducting intellectual debate in a manner that non-academics can appreciate and share.

**A rich diversity:** No doubt, a sizable number of hooks' and West's professional colleagues will be suspicious of this book and will judge it as unscholarly and hence as marginal and unserious. But this response, I think, simply reveals the dismaying limitations of current academic work, and it serves as a backhanded tribute to the courageous originality hooks and West display.

The range of topics and figures that hooks and West consider is richly diverse. Their book contains keen analyses of major voices in the black intellectual, political and religious traditions, from Marcus Garvey to James Baldwin, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. It also includes sharp observations about Spike Lee, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and other important contributors to contemporary black American literature and culture. And, perhaps most important of all, *Breaking Bread* pro-

vides eloquent, sometimes painful reflections on the nature of black male/female relationships and "gender politics"—an area in which hooks herself has done much valuable

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work, in many essays and in a series of books that began with *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984).

The central lessons conveyed in *Breaking Bread* are that black people must be adamantly proud of their race, cherishing and fighting for one another, even as they must also recognize the crucial role that gender and class play in determining who they are—and how much or how little they can become. *Breaking Bread* is, West states, a book that has "principally Black points of reference."

**Break bread and boundaries:** Yet, hooks adds, it is also a book that resourcefully draws upon and

