

Unraveling the Myths

500 Years of Oppression, 500 Years of Resistance

speech by José E. López, First Secretary,
Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueño (MLN)

THERE ARE TWO OBVIOUS LEGACIES that come out of 1492. The legacy that most of the governments of Europe and the established order around the world will celebrate is the legacy of Columbus as the heroic figure exemplifying the best of the European spirit of adventure and rugged individualism, who set out to diffuse Western Civilization to the “lesser breeds of mankind” as Rudyard Kipling would say at the end of the 19th Century — that civilization about which Mahatma Gandhi, when asked by a reporter, “What do you think about Western Civilization?” responded by saying, “It would be a good idea.” That it *would be* a good idea is because its lofty vision has never been actualized, or more so because almost all the great books or great thoughts attributed to Western Civilization are not uniquely or exclusively western.

For example, we are led to believe that all the great philosophical, religious and civic ideas that have characterized Western Civilization were inherited from the “great Greco-Judeo-Christian tradition” and that they originated in Europe and Asia Minor.

A synopsis of the great epochs of the western world would clearly demonstrate that this is not so.

- There probably would not have been a Classical or Roman Civilization had there not been an African Egypt. It was literally the invasion of Egypt by Alexander the Great that permitted the Greeks to appropriate the knowledge and mysteries in the tombs of Egypt.
- There probably would have not been the High Middle Ages nor Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologicum* without an African by the name of St.

Augustine of Hippo.

- There probably would have been no Renaissance without the great University of Timbuktu where European scholars went to study the latest findings and scientific discoveries, and from there went on to found the Universities of Salamanca, Bologna and Oxford.
- There probably would have not been an Age of Discovery had it not been for the maritime knowledge the Europeans acquired from the Chinese, the Hindus and the Muslims.
- There probably would have not been an Enlightenment or Age of Science without the scientific knowledge including astronomy, medicine and engineering science appropriated from the native peoples after the so-called discovery of America, scientific discoveries such as those made by Incas regarding medicine and brain surgery, including the use of quinine and other drugs; the Mayan knowledge of the universe; the harmonious relationship to the ecosystem developed by many native peoples, that met people’s needs without destroying the environment, and many others.
- There probably would not have been an Industrial Revolution without the gold and silver stolen from the Americas that allowed the nascent European merchant class to wage war on its nobility and consolidate its political power and, at the same time, increase its buying power and promote commerce with other areas of the world — particularly in the Indian Ocean Basin which in 1492 was the First

World, in terms of development. And soon, they laid false claim to the land of the Americas and initiated the enslavement of African peoples; without the stolen gold and silver, and land seizures, and slavery there would have been no Industrial Age.

- There probably would not have been a Romantic Period had the Europeans not studied the myths and ideas of the people of this continent; the libertarian and egalitarian notions which characterized this period had their genesis in the Native American view of the world, most notably the return to nature and the belief in the goodness of human beings.
- There probably would not have been a Darwin, an Engels, utopian socialists, or even a Marx without the body of knowledge and the thoughts on society which flowed from the study of the native peoples of the Americas and from the aborigines of Australia.
- There probably would not have been a Picasso, or cubism, and perhaps no modern art without the intricate African art and masks.
- There would have been no rock and roll and the music revolution of the 50s, 60s and 80s without the music of resistance of Africans in America.
- There probably would be no fashion of the 90s in which men wear oversized colorful shirts and pants without the style of Africans in the ghettos — as bell hooks stated, “My style ain’t no fashion.”

So there is nothing exclusively and uniquely Western about Western Civilization. And so, that civilization, that they claim to have diffused, is nothing more than a civilization that the Europeans appropriated from other peoples — a real stolen legacy. It was that stolen civilization on the border of its own demise in 1492 (Europe was backward, and the emerging European merchants were a desperate class) that Columbus represented. Columbus was a desperate man, representing a desperate class. He made four voyages to the Americas and never knew he had “discovered” the Americas. Four voyages! It was the native people who discovered him lost en route to the Indies!

Five centuries ago, Columbus brought forth on these continents a vicious legacy: a legacy of colonialism, racism, slavery and genocide. But, Columbus’s legacy has found a depositor, a sacred depositor. Frantz Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* points to it: Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.

These United States are defined by two “great” documents — perhaps wickedly great documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

It is clear that the Declaration of Independence,

which some have praised as the greatest anti-colonial statement ever written, represents for the native peoples a Declaration of Genocide, a call for their extinction — a call for the seizure of their lands. One of the key grievances against King George III is,

He has excited domestic insurrection among us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

Thus, the “Founding Fathers” did not have the best of intentions when constructing the Declaration of Independence. This charge was in clear reference to the Proclamation Act of 1763 and the Quebec Act of 1773 by which the British tried to reserve for themselves the land west of the Alleghenies and exclude the American Colonist, who, due to soil erosion, needed more land to plant tobacco and cotton.

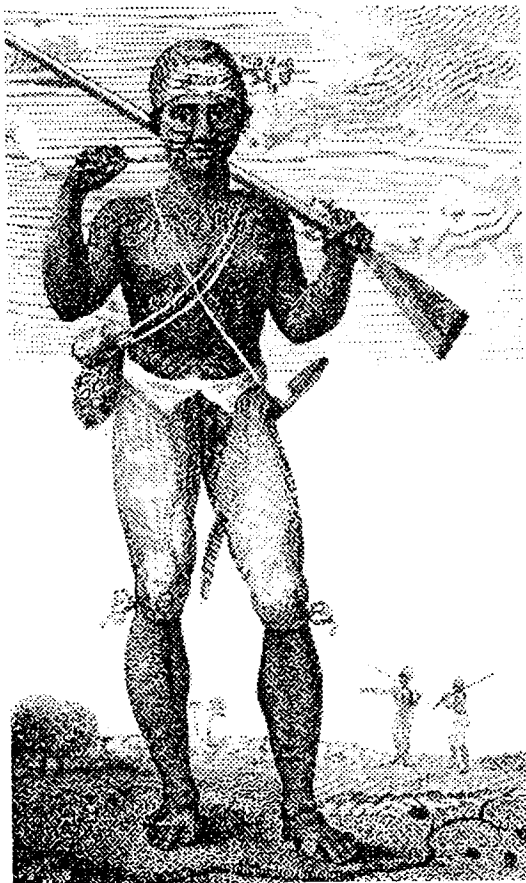
And then, the so-called “Founding Fathers,” taking a page out of the Iroquois Confederacy, formulated a constitution to create a country that has no name — *United States* is not a name — the only country in the world without a name. It is defined by a structure, the federalist system. And that Constitution, again considered one of the greatest political documents of all times, as far as people of color are concerned, constitutes one of the most sophisticated, perhaps the most sophisticated colonialist manifesto of all times. For it calls upon the incorporation of territories and the exclusion of the native inhabitants, and this has been so from the days when the states of the Ohio Territory were incorporated to the incorporation of Alaska and Hawaii in 1959. By the time any state has been incorporated, its native people have been either placed in reservations or decimated. Only the settlers petitioned for incorporation.

More so, this Constitution immediately reveals its racist nature, when, according to Article I, Section II, on the question of representation it reads:

Representation shall be apportioned among the several states...according to their respective members, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons...excluding Indians...three fifths of all other persons.

In other words, Black people were to constitute three-fifths of a human being, and Indians were to be totally excluded; perhaps they were to be exterminated. Read it in the Constitution! But one can go further in relationship to the Constitution’s racist nature. The great event following the Civil War in 1865 was the so-called adoption of the 13th Amendment. Most of us celebrate the adoption of the 13th Amendment as the Declaration of the Abolition of Slavery. What most people don’t know is that the 13th Amendment puts an end to chattel slavery and codifies civil slavery, for it says: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been

duly convicted shall exist within the United States.” This latter part of the Amendment is key to understanding the reconstruction of the South after the Civil War, race relations in the US to this day and perhaps, the development of America’s prisons into America’s future concentration camps.



Maroon warrior.

Most of us have never really studied Reconstruction in a critical way. Reconstruction meant the reconstruction of the white South. It had nothing to do with reconstructing the lives of Black people in America. After 1876, the prison population of the South multiplied by leaps and bounds; but it was the jailed Black people who filled the jails and prisons. It was they, the Black people, who rebuilt and reconstructed the South. It was they who rebuilt that South which had been destroyed — its mines, its railroads, its entire infrastructure. The prison population of Louisiana, Mississippi, etc., multiplied to such an extent that instead of building jails, they formed chain gangs. That is how the South was reconstructed. And today, over three million

people are under the aegis and control of the penal system — they are actually wards of the state — slaves — and the overwhelming numbers of them are people of color. If the devastated South was rebuilt by Black slaves in America’s dungeons, then, perhaps, George Bush and his successor hope to do the same thing in the next period: to rebuild this country’s declining economy by turning today’s prisons into concentration camps.

There is no doubt that today America’s ghettos are increasingly playing the role that old Africa played yesterday — a place for hunting Black slaves. One look at the so-called war on drugs, and its “weed and seed” campaign, which is nothing more than a war on Third World people in this country, suffices to prove this. Another example could be a close study of the state’s response to the Los Angeles rebellion recently, how it militarily occupied that ghetto. An interesting incident concerning this occupation, that few people may know, is that thirteen men — FCI Pleasanton’s best Riot Squad — were militarized and sent to Los Angeles. They militarized these people — guards at Pleasanton — and send them to Los Angeles. Can you believe that? And, most of us think that it was the Army that was sent to L.A. Obviously, the participation of this elite corps of jail guards is a prelude to what prisons are becoming. They are planning the militarization of prisons. So, as

you privatize the prisons, and turn them into centers of production (read, concentration camps), you also have to militarize them. And you have to get the experience, for it has to be learned and acquired. The Los Angeles occupation provided them with that experience.

So, as we look at this infamous Columbian legacy, this legacy of racism, of genocide, of all that is rotten about the Western world, when you look at this, you also have to understand that the very moment that the Europeans arrived on these shores, people resisted, and developed another legacy — a legacy of a rich history of cultures of resistance. When Columbus arrived, he established a settlement on the island of Española named Navidad. Upon his return during his second voyage he finds that it had been totally wiped out. One of the lies that was been repeatedly told is that the Indians were stupid and dumb. Well, these people were pretty bright — they told Columbus when he asked what happened, “Oh, some horrible people from down there — pointing to the islands east and south of Española — came and raided this place and these people are so evil they will eat your heart out.” They were trying to scare the Europeans. Columbus was bent upon finding these ferocious peoples. Also, the natives, knowing Columbus’s greed for gold, told him that the land of El Dorado was also in that direction. And so, hopping from island to island, Columbus went in search of these ferocious people and in search of El Dorado. He was still trying to find Cinpango, India and Indonesia, as he traversed the Caribbean. But, to his bewilderment, Columbus encountered the ferocious people, an army unlike any he had ever met — an army composed of fighting women. An incident is recounted, in which these women confronted and drove the Columbus expedition out of the island of Martinique. Dumb-founded, Columbus referred to them as “the Amazons.” His male chauvinist European mind could not conceive that women could fight and defend themselves, and also defend the dignity of a people.

A revelation that there was something wrong here comes to Columbus — the people on the island of Española had received the Spaniards with open arms, but these people in the Lesser Antilles fought and drove them away. Columbus and his men immediately made a distinction between the “good Indians” and the “bad Indians.” By “good Indians,” they meant the Taíno-Arawak speaking people. The “bad Indians” were to be the Caribs, a derogatory reference to the people that resisted. The word Carib has its origin in the Spanish word *carne*, a reference to denote these people as flesh eaters. A whole myth has evolved around the Caribs as ferocious cannibals. For your historical and anthropological knowledge, there are no Carib Indians. There never were and there have never been. There were Taíno and Arawak-speaking people throughout the Caribbean. They were the same people from the island of Trinidad-Tobago to Cuba. Only in Cuba did you have a small grouping of people who were related to the

Seminoles. Now, why did Columbus name these people the Caribs and refer to them as a separate ethnic entity? Obviously, it was due to the fact that as the Taíno learned about the true objectives of the Spaniards, they rebelled, and those who rebel are always ostracized and marginalized and transformed into objects.

That is why freedom fighters today are called “terrorists.” And just as you can wage war against “terrorists,” according to Catholic teaching you can wage Holy War on cannibals. Despite the Church’s consent, in fact, the Spaniards were not able to penetrate the Caribbean further than the island of Vieques in Puerto Rico. And it took the European over 200 years to establish settlements on the island of Martinique and the islands of Dominica and the rest of the Caribbean.

As the native population was decimated, Africans were brought to the Americas to work on the plantations. The Africans resisted at every turn. As a matter of fact, all Africans brought to America were Prisoners of War and political prisoners. An interesting sidelight is the fact that as we talk about the quincentennial, we also have to talk about the existence of 500 years of political prisoners. It would be as if history was repeating itself, and we often hear this idea that history repeats itself, and those of us who do not understand history believe this; but history never repeats itself. Historical problems, as individual problems, insist on being resolved. And so, one of the interesting things is that when Columbus took back with him to Europe native peoples, he took them in chains. Thus, he initiated the first chapter of anti-colonial political prisoners and POWs in the Americas — both men and women. By the way, many Indian Caciques were women, because the Taíno society was matrilineal and women were leaders of the Yucajeques. And, so he took men and women back with him to Europe to show them off, but he took them in chains as political prisoners. We are talking right now about 500 years of the existence of political prisoners on this continent. The Africans who were brought here were all POWs; they were captured in war.

An incredible episode of the African experience in the Americas is that the Europeans brought Africans from various nationalities, and ethnic groups — the Yorubas, the Asante, the Ibos, etc. — and mixed them in the plantations. This was done in order to prevent people from the same ethnic group from organizing and conspiring, because they knew that people, unified by the same language and the same way of life, would rebel. The incredible thing was that the slaves found ways and means to organize, conspire and rebel.

Joining their oppressed Taíno brothers and sisters on the Islands of the Lesser Antilles and in the mountainous regions of the islands of the Caribbean, the Africans created the “Cimarrón” Societies or the Maroon Societies. Far away from the eyes of the plantation owners, far away from the colonial governments, these societies flourished from the southern part of the United States, throughout the Caribbean, to the northeast of Brazil.

There they created centers of praxis (action and reflection) — what the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire refers to as centers of cultural actions. If one studies the language patterns, the musical rhythms, the artistic expressions and the literary traditions throughout the plantation societies, one finds a great deal of similarities — thus, perhaps, proving that a New African civilization evolved during that period.

You can listen to a samba, you can listen to reggae, you can listen to Black music in the south, you can listen to a *bomba* or *plena* in Puerto Rico, and the rhythms are the same. In Puerto Rico there is a wonderful *plena* that says: “*Se fugó el Cimarrón y nació la Plena.*” (“The slave ran away and the *plena* was born.”) What is the *plena*? The national dance, the national composition, the national music of Puerto Rico. The slave ran away and created the *plena*.

In other words, in the Cimarrón societies the seeds of our national identity were planted, but a national identity forged out of a process of resistance, and a unity based on a commonality of struggle among the marginalized sectors of these societies, including the Indians, the Africans and the outcasts of European societies. They built these societies; for example, you have the marvelous experience of the Quilombo — the Republic of Palmares — in Brazil. And they built these centers far away from the eyes of the plantation owners. They built incredible civil and religious structures, yet on the economic plane these societies that were egalitarian, everything was shared. They never forgot where they came from.

Study the Underground Railroad in America and see who built it. It was not white folks; they merely helped. It was Black folks who escaped, Black people all over this continent created Maroon societies and created cultures of resistance which in many ways were the genesis of the national liberation struggles in the Americas.

A very interesting episode was the episode of the Haitian Revolution. In 1788, a man by the name of

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Makandal, who was a Muslim, was captured. He had been leading one of these Maroon societies. Makandal was tried by the French and burned at the stake. But for the Haitian people, Makandal lived on. According to the legend, as the French attempted to burn Makandal, he serenely walked out of the fire and fled to the mountains. It is an incredible myth — the myth of Makandal. But that myth lived to reaffirm that the struggle continues.

And thus, in 1758 the Haitians initiated a process that ended in 1804 with the declaration of their independence. It should be noted that Napoleon's first defeat was not in Waterloo, his first major defeat was at the hands of Black Haitians. Haiti became the first significant and true national liberation struggle in the Americas, and in 1804 Napoleon had to recognize their independence. Even though we have been led to believe that the roots of the Haitian Revolution were to be found in the French Revolution — that is the theory of the Black Jacobins — in actual fact the Haitian Revolution is a truly indigenous movement that rose out of the contradictions of the slave system. Something that most people do not know is that the Haitians were among the most internationalist people who have ever lived. When Simón Bolívar was exiled by the Spaniards, he fled to Port Au Prince. The Haitians provided him with moral and material aid. All they asked of him was to liberate all the slaves upon his arrival on the South American mainland.

The Haitian Revolution had such reverberations that the use of drums was prohibited in the southern part of the United States following the Haitian Revolution. Drums were one of the most important forms of communication of the Maroon societies, a form of communication which the white man did not understand. Maroon societies constituted one the most incredible and heroic episodes of human history — out of almost nothing, these people built a new civilization. And I believe that today from the southern part of the United States — wherever Black people lived on this continent — all the way to the northeast of Brazil, there developed a new African civilization in the Americas, a civilization that was molded by Black hands, mulatto hands, mestizo hands, hands that molded cultures of resistance that to this day still exist, and continue to develop new dimensions.

Today, in the midst of despair, in the midst of poverty, in the midst of powerlessness in America's ghettos, new forms of the culture of resistance manifest themselves. That is where what Black writer-activist bell hooks refers to as "homeplace." In her words:

The task of making homeplace...was about the construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside,

in that 'homeplace'...that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.

It is that ghetto or reservation (homeplace) — East L.A., Río Arriba County in New Mexico, the Mississippi Delta, Harlem, Pine Ridge Reservation, the South Bronx — that is truly what Eugene Perkins in his classical work on the so-called underclass, *Home is a Dirty Street*, calls "a ghetcolony." And it is also true that any social index will show that the human conditions and the quality of life in these areas are similar to that of the third world and not the first world. As a matter of fact, the per capita income of all these regions is \$5,500 per year...the same as that of the colony of Puerto Rico. But, despite this reality, these peoples have built and constructed — and the Los Angeles rebellion is a clear manifestation — a history and culture of resistance. Thus, Africans in America, Native peoples, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Black people, people of color, create in their ghettos, (while confronting all sorts of depravities), cultures of resistance and continue carrying on the tradition established yesterday by the Maroon societies. For example, what many of you call fashion is obviously Black styles appropriated by the fashion industry. The rap music that comes out of the ghetto has been appropriated and mainstreamed. Every form of Black cultural experience, Mexican cultural experience, Puerto Rican cultural experience, indigenous peoples' cultural experience, has been appropriated by Western Civilization, as it has done for the past three thousand years.

So I call upon you to reflect upon this situation — to reflect upon what the next 500 years of human civilization will be about. We are called upon to unravel the myths and the lies, and we call upon you to deconstruct our notion of Western Civilization. If the etymological origin of analysis springs from the word "smash," maybe we are all called upon to smash Western Civilization and then reconstruct something better in its place. As the Native American activist Susan Harjo wrote last year, we must:

turn our attention to making the next 500 years different from the past ones; to enter into a time of grace and healing. In order to do so, we must first involve ourselves in educating the colonizing nations, which are investing a lot, not only in silly plans but in serious efforts to further revise history, to justify the bloodshed and destruction, to deny that genocide was committed here and to revive failed politics of assimilation as to the answer of progress. These societies must come to grips with the past, acknowledge responsibility for the present and do something about the future. It does no good to gloss over the history of excesses of Western Civilization, especially when the excesses are the cause of deplorable conditions today.

Maybe in the process of facing reality, and doing something about transforming that reality — beginning by unraveling the myths — we can challenge ourselves to envision a different future. □