

THE CONQUEST  
OF THE NEW WORLD

AMERICAN



HOLOCAUST

STANNARD • AMERICAN HOLOCAUST



DAVID E. STANNARD



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**David E. Stannard** is Professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii. His previous books include *Death in America*, *Shrinking History*, *The Puritan Way of Death*, and *Before the Horror*.

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DAVID E. STANNARD

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*For Florence Evelyn Harwood Stannard*  
*—the poet who gave me life and taught me that in kindness*  
*and charity there is strength*

*and for Haunani-Kay Trask*  
*—the poet who sustains me and is unwavering in the*  
*struggle for justice*

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## PROLOGUE

**I**N THE DARKNESS of an early July morning in 1945, on a desolate spot in the New Mexico desert named after a John Donne sonnet celebrating the Holy Trinity, the first atomic bomb was exploded. J. Robert Oppenheimer later remembered that the immense flash of light, followed by the thunderous roar, caused a few observers to laugh and others to cry. But most, he said, were silent. Oppenheimer himself recalled at that instant a line from the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

I am become death,  
the shatterer of worlds.

There is no reason to think that anyone on board the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, or the *Santa María*, on an equally dark early morning four and a half centuries earlier, thought of those ominous lines from the ancient Sanskrit poem when the crews of the Spanish ships spied a flicker of light on the windward side of the island they would name after the Holy Saviour. But the intuition, had it occurred, would have been as appropriate then as it was when that first nuclear blast rocked the New Mexico desert sands.

In both instances—at the Trinity test site in 1945 and at San Salvador in 1492—those moments of achievement crowned years of intense personal struggle and adventure for their protagonists and were culminating points of ingenious technological achievement for their countries. But both instances also were prelude to orgies of human destructiveness that, each in its own way, attained a scale of devastation not previously witnessed in the entire history of the world.

Just twenty-one days after the first atomic test in the desert, the Japa-



nese industrial city of Hiroshima was leveled by nuclear blast; never before had so many people—at least 130,000, probably many more—died from a single explosion.<sup>1</sup> Just twenty-one years after Columbus's first landing in the Caribbean, the vastly populous island that the explorer had re-named Hispaniola was effectively desolate; nearly 8,000,000 people—those Columbus chose to call Indians—had been killed by violence, disease, and despair.<sup>2</sup> It took a little longer, about the span of a single human generation, but what happened on Hispaniola was the equivalent of more than fifty Hiroshimas. And Hispaniola was only the beginning.

Within no more than a handful of generations following their first encounters with Europeans, the vast majority of the Western Hemisphere's native peoples had been exterminated. The pace and magnitude of their obliteration varied from place to place and from time to time, but for years now historical demographers have been uncovering, in region upon region, post-Columbian depopulation rates of between 90 and 98 percent with such regularity that an overall decline of 95 percent has become a working rule of thumb. What this means is that, on average, for every twenty natives alive at the moment of European contact—when the lands of the Americas teemed with numerous tens of millions of people—only one stood in their place when the bloodbath was over.

To put this in a contemporary context, the ratio of native survivorship in the Americas following European contact was less than half of what the human survivorship ratio would be in the United States today if every single white person and every single black person died. The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. That is why, as one historian aptly has said, far from the heroic and romantic heraldry that customarily is used to symbolize the European settlement of the Americas, the emblem most congruent with reality would be a pyramid of skulls.<sup>3</sup>

Scholarly estimates of the size of the post-Columbian holocaust have climbed sharply in recent decades. Too often, however, academic discussions of this ghastly event have reduced the devastated indigenous peoples and their cultures to statistical calculations in recondite demographic analyses. It is easy for this to happen. From the very beginning, merely taking the account of so mammoth a cataclysm seemed an impossible task. Wrote one Spanish adventurer—who arrived in the New World only two decades after Columbus's first landing, and who himself openly reveled in the torrent of native blood—there was neither "paper nor time enough to tell all that the [conquistadors] did to ruin the Indians and rob them and destroy the land."<sup>4</sup> As a result, the very effort to describe the disaster's overwhelming magnitude has tended to obliterate both the writer's and the reader's sense of its truly horrific human element.

In an apparent effort to counteract this tendency, one writer, Tzvetan Todorov, begins his study of the events of 1492 and immediately there-

after with an epigraph from Diego de Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*:

The captain Alonso López de Avila, brother-in-law of the *adelantado* Montejo, captured, during the war in Bacalán, a young Indian woman of lovely and gracious appearance. She had promised her husband, fearful lest they should kill him in the war, not to have relations with any other man but him, and so no persuasion was sufficient to prevent her from taking her own life to avoid being defiled by another man; and because of this they had her thrown to the dogs.

Todorov then dedicates his book "to the memory of a Mayan woman devoured by dogs."<sup>5</sup>

It is important to try to hold in mind an image of that woman, and her brothers and sisters and the innumerable others who suffered similar fates, as one reads Todorov's book, or this one, or any other work on this subject—just as it is essential, as one reads about the Jewish Holocaust or the horrors of the African slave trade, to keep in mind the treasure of a single life in order to avoid becoming emotionally anesthetized by the sheer force of such overwhelming human evil and destruction. There is, for example, the case of a small Indian boy whose name no one knows today, and whose unmarked skeletal remains are hopelessly intermingled with those of hundreds of anonymous others in a mass grave on the American plains, but a boy who once played on the banks of a quiet creek in eastern Colorado—until the morning, in 1864, when the American soldiers came. Then, as one of the cavalymen later told it, while his compatriots were slaughtering and mutilating the bodies of all the women and all the children they could catch, he spotted the boy trying to flee:

There was one little child, probably three years old, just big enough to walk through the sand. The Indians had gone ahead, and this little child was behind following after them. The little fellow was perfectly naked, travelling on the sand. I saw one man get off his horse, at a distance of about seventy-five yards, and draw up his rifle and fire—he missed the child. Another man came up and said, "Let me try the son of a bitch; I can hit him." He got down off his horse, kneeled down and fired at the little child, but he missed him. A third man came up and made a similar remark, and fired, and the little fellow dropped.<sup>6</sup>

We must do what we can to recapture and to try to understand, in human terms, what it *was* that was crushed, what it *was* that was butchered. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that much was lost. So close to total was the human incineration and carnage in the post-Columbian Americas, however, that of the tens of millions who were killed, few individual lives left sufficient traces for subsequent biographical representation. The first

two chapters to follow are thus necessarily limited in their concerns to the social and cultural worlds that existed in North and South America before Columbus's fateful voyage in 1492. We shall have to rely on our imaginations to fill in the faces and the lives.

The extraordinary outpouring of recent scholarship that has analyzed the deadly impact of the Old World on the New has employed a novel array of research techniques to identify introduced disease as the primary cause of the Indians' great population decline. As one of the pioneers in this research put it twenty years ago, the natives' "most hideous" enemies were not the European invaders themselves, "but the invisible killers which those men brought in their blood and breath."<sup>7</sup> It is true, in a plainly quantitative sense of body counting, that the barrage of disease unleashed by the Europeans among the so-called "virgin soil" populations of the Americas caused more deaths than any other single force of destruction. However, by focusing almost entirely on disease, by displacing responsibility for the mass killing onto an army of invading microbes, contemporary authors increasingly have created the impression that the eradication of those tens of millions of people was inadvertent—a sad, but both inevitable and "unintended consequence" of human migration and progress.<sup>8</sup> This is a modern version of what Alexander Saxton recently has described as the "soft-side of anti-Indian racism" that emerged in America in the nineteenth century and that incorporated "expressions of regret over the fate of Indians into narratives that traced the inevitability of their extinction. Ideologically," Saxton adds, "the effect was to exonerate individuals, parties, nations, of any moral blame for what history had decreed."<sup>9</sup> In fact, however, the near-total destruction of the Western Hemisphere's native people was neither inadvertent nor inevitable.

From almost the instant of first human contact between Europe and the Americas firestorms of microbial pestilence *and* purposeful genocide began laying waste the American natives. Although at times operating independently, for most of the long centuries of devastation that followed 1492, disease and genocide were interdependent forces acting dynamically—whipsawing their victims between plague and violence, each one feeding upon the other, and together driving countless numbers of entire ancient societies to the brink—and often over the brink—of total extermination. In the pages that lie ahead we will examine the causes and the consequences of both these grisly phenomena. But since the genocidal component has so often been neglected in recent scholarly analyses of the great American Indian holocaust, it is the central purpose of this book to survey some of the more virulent examples of this deliberate racist purge, from fifteenth-century Hispaniola to nineteenth-century California, and then to locate and examine the belief systems and the cultural attitudes that underlay such monstrous behavior.

History for its own sake is not an idle task, but studies of this sort are conducted not only for the maintenance of collective memory. In the Foreword to a book of oral history accounts depicting life in Germany during the Jewish Holocaust, Elie Wiesel says something that befits the present context as well: "The danger lies in forgetting. Forgetting, however, will not effect only the dead. Should it triumph, the ashes of yesterday will cover our hopes for tomorrow."<sup>10</sup>

To begin, then, we must try to remember. For at a time when quincennial festivities are in full flower to honor the famed Admiral of the Ocean Sea—when hot disputes are raging, because of the quest for tourist dollars, over whether he first actually landed at Grand Turk Island, Samana Cay, or Watlings Island—the ashes of yesterday, and their implications for all the world's hopes for tomorrow, are too often ignored in the unseemly roar of self-congratulation.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the important question for the future in this case is not "can it happen again?" Rather, it is "can it be stopped?" For the genocide in the Americas, and in other places where the world's indigenous peoples survive, has never really ceased. As recently as 1986, the Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States observed that 40,000 people had simply "disappeared" in Guatemala during the preceding fifteen years. Another 100,000 had been openly murdered. That is the equivalent, in the United States, of more than 4,000,000 people slaughtered or removed under official government decree—a figure that is almost six times the number of American battle deaths in the Civil War, World War One, World War Two, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined.<sup>12</sup>

Almost all those dead and disappeared were Indians, direct descendants—as was that woman who was devoured by dogs—of the Mayas, creators of one of the most splendid civilizations that this earth has ever seen. Today, as five centuries ago, these people are being tortured and slaughtered, their homes and villages bombed and razed—while more than two-thirds of their rain forest homelands have now been intentionally burned and scraped into ruin.<sup>13</sup> The murder and destruction continue, with the aid and assistance of the United States, even as these words are being written and read. And many of the detailed accounts from contemporary observers read much like those recorded by the conquistadors' chroniclers nearly 500 years earlier.

"Children, two years, four years old, they just grabbed them and tore them in two," reports one witness to a military massacre of Indians in Guatemala in 1982. Recalls another victim of an even more recent assault on an Indian encampment:

With tourniquets they killed the children, of two years, of nine months, of six months. They killed and burned them all. . . . What they did [to my



father] was put a machete in here (pointing to his chest) and they cut open his heart, and they left him all burned up. This is the pain we shall never forget. . . . Better to die here with a bullet and not die in that way, like my father did.<sup>14</sup>

Adds still another report, from a list of examples seemingly without end:

At about 1:00 p.m., the soldiers began to fire at the women inside the small church. The majority did not die there, but were separated from their children, taken to their homes in groups, and killed, the majority apparently with machetes. . . . Then they returned to kill the children, whom they had left crying and screaming by themselves, without their mothers. Our informants, who were locked up in the courthouse, could see this through a hole in the window and through the doors carelessly left open by a guard. The soldiers cut open the children's stomachs with knives or they grabbed the children's little legs and smashed their heads with heavy sticks. . . . Then they continued with the men. They took them out, tied their hands, threw them on the ground, and shot them. The authorities of the area were killed inside the courthouse. . . . It was then that the survivors were able to escape, protected by the smoke of the fire which had been set to the building. Seven men, three of whom survived, managed to escape. It was 5:30 p.m.<sup>15</sup>

In all, 352 Indians were killed in this massacre, at a time when 440 towns were being entirely destroyed by government troops, when almost 10,000 unarmed people were being killed or made to "disappear" annually, and when more than 1,000,000 of Guatemala's approximately 4,000,000 natives were being displaced by the deliberate burning and wasting of their ancestral lands. During such episodes of mass butchery, some children escape; only their parents and grandparents are killed. That is why it was reported in Guatemala in 1985 that "116,000 orphans had been tabulated by the judicial branch census throughout the country, the vast majority of them in the Indian townships of the western and central highlands."<sup>16</sup>

Reminders are all around us, if we care to look, that the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century extermination of the indigenous people of Hispaniola, brought on by European military assault and the importation of exotic diseases, was in part only an enormous prelude to human catastrophes that followed on other killing grounds, and continue to occur today—from the forests of Brazil and Paraguay and elsewhere in South and Central America, where direct government violence still slaughters thousands of Indian people year in and year out, to the reservations and urban slums of North America, where more sophisticated indirect government violence has precisely the same effect—all the while that Westerners engage in exultation over the 500th anniversary of the European discovery of America, the time and the place where all the killing began.

Other reminders surround us, as well, however, that there continues

among indigenous peoples today the echo of their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century opposition to annihilation, when, despite the wanton killing by the European invaders and the carnage that followed the introduction of explosive disease epidemics, the natives resisted with an intensity the conquistadors found difficult to believe. "I do not know how to describe it," wrote Bernal Díaz del Castillo of the defiance the Spanish encountered in Mexico, despite the wasting of the native population by bloodbath and torture and disease, "for neither cannon nor muskets nor crossbows availed, nor hand-to-hand fighting, nor killing thirty or forty of them every time we charged, for they still fought on in as close ranks and with more energy than in the beginning."<sup>17</sup>

Five centuries later that resistance remains, in various forms, throughout North and South and Central America, as it does among indigenous peoples in other lands that have suffered from the Westerners' furious wrath. Compared with what they once were, the native peoples in most of these places are only remnants now. But also in each of those places, and in many more, the struggle for physical and cultural survival, and for recovery of a deserved pride and autonomy, continues unabated.

All the ongoing violence against the world's indigenous peoples, in whatever form—as well as the native peoples' various forms of resistance to that violence—will persist beyond our full understanding, however, and beyond our ability to engage and humanely come to grips with it, until we are able to comprehend the magnitude and the causes of the human destruction that virtually consumed the people of the Americas and other people in other subsequently colonized parts of the globe, beginning with Columbus's early morning sighting of landfall on October 12, 1492. That was the start of it all. This book is offered as one contribution to our necessary comprehension.

*He'eia, O'ahu*  
*January 1992*

D.E.S.

The main islands were thickly populated with a peaceful folk when Christ-over found them. But the orgy of blood which followed, no man has written. We are the slaughterers. It is the tortured soul of our world.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS



BEFORE COLUMBUS



**I**T'S GONE NOW, drained and desiccated in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest, but once there was an interconnected complex of lakes high up in the Valley of Mexico that was as long and as wide as the city of London is today. Surrounding these waters, known collectively as the Lake of the Moon, were scores of towns and cities whose population, combined with that of the outlying communities of central Mexico, totaled about 25,000,000 men, women, and children. On any given day as many as 200,000 small boats moved back and forth on the Lake of the Moon, pursuing the interests of commerce, political intrigue, and simple pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

The southern part of the Lake of the Moon was filled with brilliantly clear spring-fed water, but the northern part, in the rainy season, became brackish and sometimes inundated the southern region with an invasion of destructive salty currents. So the people of the area built a ten-mile long stone and clay and masonry dike separating the lower third of the lake from the upper two-thirds, blocking the salt water when it appeared, but—through an ingenious use of sluice gates—allowing the heavy water traffic on the lake to continue its rounds unobstructed by the massive levee wall. This southern part of the great lake thus became, as well as a thoroughfare, an immense fresh-water fish pond.

In the middle of this fresh-water part of the lake there were two reed-covered mud banks that the residents of the area over time had built up and developed into a single huge island as large as Manhattan, and upon that island the people built a metropolis that became one of the largest cities in the world. With a conventionally estimated population of about 350,000 residents by the end of the fifteenth century, this teeming Aztec

capital already had at least five times the population of either London or Seville and was vastly larger than any other European city.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, according to Hernando Cortés, one of the first Europeans to set eyes upon it, it was far and away the most beautiful city on earth.

The name of this magnificent metropolis was Tenochtitlán. It stood, majestic and radiant, in the crisp, clean air, 7200 feet above sea level, connected to the surrounding mainland by three wide causeways that had been built across miles of open water. To view Tenochtitlán from a distance, all who had the opportunity to do so agreed, was breathtaking. Before arriving at the great central city, travelers from afar had to pass through the densely populated, seemingly infinite, surrounding lands—and already, invariably, they were overwhelmed. Wrote Cortés's famous companion and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo of their visit to one of the provincial cities at the confluence of Lake Chalco and Lake Xochimilco:

When we entered the city of Iztapalapa, the appearance of the palaces in which they housed us! How spacious and well built they were, of beautiful stone work and cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet scented trees, with great rooms and courts, wonderful to behold, covered with awnings of cotton cloth. When we had looked well at all of this, we went to the orchard and garden, which was such a wonderful thing to see and walk in, that I was never tired of looking at the diversity of the trees, and noting the scent which each one had, and the paths full of roses and flowers, and the native fruit trees and native roses, and the pond of fresh water. There was another thing to observe, that great canoes were able to pass into the garden from the lake through an opening that had been made so that there was no need for their occupants to land. And all was cemented and very splendid with many kinds of stone [monuments] with pictures on them, which gave much to think about. Then the birds of many kinds and breeds which came into the pond. I say again that I stood looking at it and thought that never in the world would there be discovered lands such as these.<sup>3</sup>

Impressive as Iztapalapa was, the Spanish were seeking the heart of this great empire, so they pressed on. In addition to the cities that surrounded the Lake of the Moon, other towns were, like Tenochtitlán, built on smaller islands within it. As they neared the area that would take them to Tenochtitlán, Bernal Díaz wrote: "When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns built on dry land and that straight and level causeway going towards [Tenochtitlán], we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments they tell of in the legend of Amadis, on account of the great towers and [temples] and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream."

Finally, they reached one of the causeways leading directly to Tenochtitlán. They pushed their way across it, although "it was so crowded with

people that there was hardly room for them all, some of them going to and others returning from [Tenochtitlán]," said Bernal Díaz. Once in the city itself they were greeted by the Aztec ruler Montezuma and taken to the top of one of the temples, and from that vantage point they were afforded an almost aerial view of the surroundings through which they had just marched:

[O]ne could see over everything very well [Bernal Díaz wrote], and we saw the three causeways which led into [Tenochtitlán], that is the causeway of Iztapalapa by which we had entered four days before, and that of Tacuba, and that of Tepeaquilla, and we saw the fresh water that comes from Chapultepec which supplies the city, and we saw the bridges on the three causeways which were built at certain distances apart through which the water of the lake flowed in and out from one side to the other, and we beheld on that great lake a great multitude of canoes, some coming with supplies of food and others returning with cargoes of merchandise; and we saw that from every house of that great city and of all the other cities that were built in the water it was impossible to pass from house to house, except by drawbridges which were made of wood or in canoes; and we saw in those cities [temples] and oratories like towers and fortresses and all gleaming white, and it was a wonderful thing to behold.

About 60,000 pale stucco houses filled the island metropolis, some of them single-story structures, some of them multi-storied, and "all these houses," wrote Cortés, "have very large and very good rooms and also very pleasant gardens of various sorts of flowers both on the upper and lower floors."<sup>4</sup> The many streets and boulevards of the city were so neat and well-swept, despite its multitude of inhabitants, that the first Europeans to visit never tired of remarking on the city's cleanliness and order: "There were even officials in charge of sweeping," recalled one awed observer. In fact, at least 1000 public workers were employed to maintain the city's streets and keep them clean and watered.<sup>5</sup>

Criss-crossed with a complex network of canals, Tenochtitlán in this respect reminded the Spanish of an enormous Venice; but it also had remarkable floating gardens that reminded them of nowhere else on earth.<sup>6</sup> And while European cities then, and for centuries thereafter, took their drinking water from the fetid and polluted rivers nearby, Tenochtitlán's drinking water came from springs deep within the mainland and was piped into the city by a huge aqueduct system that amazed Cortés and his men—just as they were astonished also by the personal cleanliness and hygiene of the colorfully dressed populace, and by their extravagant (to the Spanish) use of soaps, deodorants, and breath sweeteners.<sup>7</sup>

In the distance, across the expanse of shimmering blue water that extended out in every direction, and beyond the pastel-colored suburban towns and cities, both within the lake and encircling its periphery, the horizon

was ringed with forest-covered hills, except to the southeast where there dramatically rose up the slopes of two enormous snow-peaked and smoldering volcanoes, the largest of them, Popocatepetl, reaching 16,000 feet into the sky. At the center of the city, facing the volcanoes, stood two huge and exquisitely ornate ceremonial pyramids, man-made mountains of uniquely Aztec construction and design. But what seems to have impressed the Spanish visitors most about the view of Tenochtitlán from within its precincts were not the temples or the other magnificent public buildings, but rather the marketplaces that dotted the residential neighborhoods and the enormous so-called Great Market that sprawled across the city's northern end. This area, "with arcades all around," according to Cortés, was the central gathering place where "more than sixty thousand people come each day to buy and sell, and where every kind of merchandise produced in these lands is found; provisions, as well as ornaments of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, stones, shells, bones, and feathers." Cortés also describes special merchant areas where timber and tiles and other building supplies were bought and sold, along with "much firewood and charcoal, earthenware braziers and mats of various kinds like mattresses for beds, and other, finer ones, for seats and for covering rooms and hallways."

"Each kind of merchandise is sold in its own street without any mixture whatever," Cortés wrote, "they are very particular in this." (Even entertainers had a residential district of their own, says Bernal Díaz, a place where there lived a great many "people who had no other occupation" than to be "dancers . . . and others who used stilts on their feet, and others who flew when they danced up in the air, and others like Merry-Andrews [clowns].") There were streets where herbalists plied their trade, areas for apothecary shops, and "shops like barbers' where they have their hair washed and shaved, and shops where they sell food and drink," wrote Cortés, as well as green grocer streets where one could buy "every sort of vegetable, especially onions, leeks, garlic, common cress and watercress, borage, sorrel, teasels and artichokes; and there are many sorts of fruit, among which are cherries and plums like those in Spain." There were stores in streets that specialized in "game and birds of every species found in this land: chickens, partridges and quails, wild ducks, fly-catchers, widgeons, turtledoves, pigeons, cane birds, parrots, eagles and eagle owls, falcons, sparrow hawks and kestrels [as well as] rabbits and hares, and stags and small gelded dogs which they breed for eating."

There was so much more in this mercantile center, overseen by officials who enforced laws of fairness regarding weights and measures and the quality of goods purveyed, that Bernal Díaz said "we were astounded at the number of people and the quantity of merchandise that it contained, and at the good order and control that it contained, for we had never seen such a thing before." There were honeys "and honey paste, and other dainties like nut paste," waxes, syrups, chocolate, sugar, wine. In addition, said Cortés:



There are many sorts of spun cotton, in hanks of every color, and it seems like the silk market at Granada, except here there is much greater quantity. They sell as many colors for painters as may be found in Spain and all of excellent hues. They sell deerskins, with and without the hair, and some are dyed white or in various colors. They sell much earthenware, which for the most part is very good; there are both large and small pitchers, jugs, pots, tiles and many other sorts of vessel, all of good clay and most of them glazed and painted. They sell maize both as grain and as bread and it is better both in appearance and in taste than any found in the islands or on the mainland. They sell chicken and fish pies, and much fresh and salted fish, as well as raw and cooked fish. They sell hen and goose eggs, and eggs of all the other birds I have mentioned, in great number, and they sell *tortillas* made from eggs.

At last Cortés surrendered the task of trying to describe it all: "Besides those things which I have already mentioned, they sell in the market everything else to be found in this land, but they are so many and so varied that because of their great number and because I cannot remember many of them nor do I know what they are called I shall not mention them." Added Bernal Díaz: "But why do I waste so many words in recounting what they sell in that great market? For I shall never finish if I tell it in detail. . . . Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that so large a marketplace and so full of people, and so well regulated and arranged, they had never beheld before."

And this was only the market. The rest of Tenochtitlán overflowed with gorgeous gardens, arboretums, and aviaries. Artwork was everywhere, artwork so dazzling in conception and execution that when the German master Albrecht Dürer saw some pieces that Cortés brought back to Europe he exclaimed that he had "never seen in all my days what so rejoiced my heart, as these things. For I saw among them amazing artistic objects, and I marveled over the subtle ingenuity of the men in these distant lands. Indeed, I cannot say enough about the things that were brought before me."<sup>8</sup>

If architectural splendor and floral redolence were among the sights and smells that most commonly greeted a stroller in the city, the most ever-present sounds (apart from "the murmur and hum of voices" from the mercantile district, which Bernal Díaz said "could be heard more than a league off") were the songs of the many multi-colored birds—parrots, hummingbirds, falcons, jays, herons, owls, condors, and dozens and dozens of other exotic species—who lived in public aviaries that the government maintained. As Cortés wrote to his king:

Most Powerful Lord, in order to give an account to Your Royal Excellency of the magnificence, the strange and marvelous things of this great city and of the dominion and wealth of this Mutezuma, its ruler, and of the rites and

customs of the people, and of the order there is in the government of the capital as well as in the other cities of Mutezuma's dominions, I would need much time and many expert narrators. I cannot describe one hundredth part of all the things which could be mentioned, but, as best I can I will describe some of those I have seen which, although badly described, will I well know, be so remarkable as not to be believed, for we who saw them with our own eyes could not grasp them with our understanding.

In attempting to recount for his king the sights of the country surrounding Tenochtitlán, the "many provinces and lands containing very many and very great cities, towns and fortresses," including the vast agricultural lands that Cortés soon would raze and the incredibly rich gold mines that he soon would plunder, the conquistador again was rendered nearly speechless: "They are so many and so wonderful," he simply said, "that they seem almost unbelievable."

Prior to Cortés's entry into this part of the world no one who lived in Europe, Asia, Africa, or anywhere else beyond the Indies and the North and South American continents, had ever heard of this exotic place of such dazzling magnificence. Who were these people? Where had they come from? When had they come? How did they get where they were? Were there others like them elsewhere in this recently stumbled-upon New World?<sup>9</sup> These questions sprang to mind immediately, and many of the puzzlements of the conquistadors are with us still today, more than four and a half centuries later. But while scholarly debates on these questions continue, clear answers regarding some of them at last are finally coming into view. And these answers are essential to an understanding of the magnitude of the holocaust that was visited upon the Western Hemisphere—beginning at Hispaniola, spreading to Tenochtitlán, and then radiating out over millions of square miles in every direction—in the wake of 1492.

## II

Where the first humans in the Americas came from and how they got to their new homes are now probably the least controversial of these age-old questions. Although at one time or another seemingly all the corners of Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa fancifully have been suggested as the sources of early populations in the New World, no one any longer seriously doubts that the first human inhabitants of North and South America were the descendants of much earlier emigrants from ancestral homelands in northeastern Asia.

It conventionally is said that the migration (or migrations) to North America from Asia took place over the land bridge that once connected the two continents across what are now the Bering and Chukchi seas. "Land bridge" is a whopping misnomer, however, unless one imagines a bridge

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immensely wider than it was long, more than a thousand miles wide, in fact—about the distance between New York and Omaha—compared with a lengthwise span across the Bering Strait today of less than sixty miles.

During most, and perhaps all of the time from about 80,000 B.C. to about 10,000 B.C. (the geologic era known as the Wisconsin glaciation), at least part of the shallow floor of the Bering and Chukchi seas, like most of the world's continental shelves, was well above sea level due to the capture of so much of the earth's ocean water by the enormous continent-wide glaciers of this Ice Age epoch. The effect of this was, for all practical purposes, the complete fusion of Asia and North America into a single land mass whose place of connection was a huge chunk of earth—actually a subcontinent—hundreds of thousands of square miles in size, now called by geographers Berengia.<sup>10</sup> What we see today as a scattering of small islands in the ocean separating Alaska and northeast Asia as far south as the Kamchatka Peninsula are merely the tips of low mountains that, during the Wisconsin glaciation, rose from what at that time was an exposed floor of land.

The first humans in North America, then, appear to have been successor populations to groups of hunters from northern Asia who had moved, as part of the normal continuum of their boundary-less lives, into Berengia and then on to Alaska in pursuit of game and perhaps new vegetative sources of sustenance. During these many thousands of years much of Berengia, like most of Alaska at that time, was a grassland-like tundra, meandering through mountain valleys and across open plains that were filled with woolly mammoths, yaks, steppe antelopes, and many other animals and plants more than sufficient to sustain stable communities of late Paleolithic hunters and gatherers.

To say that the first people of the Americas "migrated" to North America from Asia is thus as much a misconception as is the image of the Berengian subcontinent as a "bridge." For although the origins of the earliest Americans can indeed ultimately be traced back to Asia (just as Asian and European origins ultimately can be traced back to Africa), the now-submerged land that we refer to as Berengia was the homeland of innumerable communities of these people for thousands upon thousands of years—for a span of time, for example, many times greater than that separating our world of today from the pre-Egyptian dawn of Near Eastern civilization more than fifty centuries ago. If anything, then, the direct precursors of American Indian civilizations were the Berengians, the ancient peoples of a once huge and bounteous land that now lies beneath the sea.

During most of the time that Berengia was above sea level, virtually the entire northernmost tier of North America was covered by an immensely thick mantle of glacial ice. As the earth's climate warmed, near the end of the geologic era known as the Pleistocene, the Wisconsin glaciation gradually began drawing to a close, a process that itself took thou-

sands of years. It is estimated, for instance, that it took more than 4000 years for the dissolving ice barrier to creep north from what now is Hartford, Connecticut to St. Johnsbury, Vermont—a distance of less than 200 miles. With the partial melting of the great frozen glaciers, some of the water they had imprisoned was unlocked, trickling into the ocean basins and, over a great stretch of time, slowly lifting world-wide sea levels up hundreds of feet. As the water rose it began ebbing over and eventually inundating continental shelves once again, along with other relatively low-lying lands throughout the globe, including most of Berengia.

The natives of Berengia, who probably never noticed any of these gross geologic changes, so gradual were they on the scale of human time perception, naturally followed the climate-dictated changing shape of the land. Finally, at some point, Asia and North America became separate continents again, as they had been many tens of thousands of years earlier. Berengia was no more. And those of her inhabitants then living in the segregated Western Hemisphere became North America's indigenous peoples, isolated from the rest of the world by ocean waters on every side. Apart from the possible exception of a chance encounter with an Asian or Polynesian raft or canoe from time to time (possible in theory only, there is as yet no good evidence that such encounters ever actually occurred), the various native peoples of the Americas lived from those days forward, for thousands upon thousands of years, separate from the human life that was evolving and migrating about on the rest of the islands and continents of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

Much more controversial than the issue of where the first peoples of the Americas came from and how they got to the Western Hemisphere are the questions of when they originally moved from Berengia into North and South America—and how many people were resident in the New World when Columbus arrived in 1492. Both these subjects have been matters of intense scholarly scrutiny during the past several decades, and during that time both of them also have undergone revolutions in terms of scholarly knowledge. Until the 1940s, for example, it commonly was believed that the earliest human inhabitants of the Americas had migrated from the Alaskan portion of Berengia down into North and then South America no more than 6000 years ago. It is now recognized as beyond doubt, however, that numerous complex human communities existed in South America at least 13,000 years ago and in North America at least 6000 years before that. These are absolute minimums. Very recent and compelling archaeological evidence puts the date for earliest human habitation in Chile at 32,000 B.C. or earlier and North American habitation at around 40,000 B.C., while some highly respected scholars contend that the actual first date of human entry into the hemisphere may have been closer to 70,000 B.C.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly dramatic developments have characterized scholarly estimates

of the size of the pre-Columbian population of the Americas. In the 1940s and 1950s conventional wisdom held that the population of the entire hemisphere in 1492 was little more than 8,000,000—with fewer than 1,000,000 people living in the region north of present-day Mexico. Today, few serious students of the subject would put the hemispheric figure at less than 75,000,000 to 100,000,000 (with approximately 8,000,000 to 12,000,000 north of Mexico), while one of the most well-regarded specialists in the field recently has suggested that a more accurate estimate would be around 145,000,000 for the hemisphere as a whole and about 18,000,000 for the area north of Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

### III

In the most fundamental quantitative ways, then, recent scholarship has begun to redirect inquiry and expose falsehoods that have dominated characterizations of the Americas' native peoples for centuries—although very little of this research has yet found its way into textbooks or other non-technical historical overviews. It now appears likely, for example, that the people of the so-called New World were already well-established residents of plains, mountains, forests, foothills, and coasts throughout the Western Hemisphere by the time the people of Europe were scratching their first carvings onto cave walls in the Dordogne region of France and northern Spain. It also is almost certain that the population of the Americas (and probably even Meso- and South America by themselves) exceeded the combined total of Europe and Russia at the time of Columbus's first voyage in 1492. And there is no doubt at all, according to modern linguistic analysis, that the cultural diversity of the Americas' pre-Columbian indigenous peoples was much greater than that of their Old World counterparts.<sup>14</sup> A bit of common sense might suggest that this should not be surprising. After all, North and South America are four times the size of Europe. But common sense rarely succeeds in combating cultural conceit. And cultural conceit has long been the driving force behind the tales most European and white American historians have told of the European invasion of the Americas.

The native peoples of the Americas are far from unique, of course, in traditionally having the basic elements of their historical existence willfully misperceived. In his sweeping and iconoclastic study of modern Africa, for instance, Ali A. Mazrui makes the cogent point that ethnocentrism has so shaped Western perceptions of geography that the very maps of the world found in our homes and offices and classrooms, based on the famous Mercator projection, dramatically misrepresent the true size of Africa by artificially deflating its land area (and that of all equatorial regions of the world) in comparison with the land areas of Europe and North America.<sup>15</sup> Because the Mercator map exaggerates the distance between the lines of

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latitude for those regions that lie closest to the poles, North America is made to appear one and a half times the size of Africa when in fact Africa contains in excess of 2,000,000 more square miles of land. A proportional cartographic distortion also affects the comparative depictions of Africa and Europe. Thus, the literal "picture" of Africa in relation to the rest of the world that schoolchildren have been taught for centuries is in fact an outright fraud.

A parallel ethnocentrism—this time historical, however, not geographic—traditionally has distorted conventional European and American views of the native American past. While texts on the subject routinely acknowledge the high civilizations of the Aztecs and the Incas (although the more sordid aspects of their religious rituals never fail to dominate discussion), the rest of North and South and Central America prior to the arrival of Europeans generally is seen as a barbaric wasteland.

Outside the perimeters of the Aztec and Inca empires, in that portion of the Americas lying south of the Rio Grande, most accounts tend to imply that there was nothing deserving of a modern reader's attention. One historian suggests that this myopia only indicates "that the geographical focus of modern scholarship parallels closely the political and economic realities of colonial times" in Meso- and South America, when the Europeans' hunger for gold caused them to focus their interests and concerns disproportionately on central Mexico and Peru.<sup>16</sup> As for the area north of the Rio Grande, the millions of Indians who lived for many centuries in permanently settled agricultural and sometimes urban communities on this vast continent are most often described as "handfuls of indigenous people" who were "scattered" across a "virgin land," "a vast emptiness," or even a "void," to cite the descriptions of some recently published, well-regarded, and symptomatic historical texts. The Indians themselves, according to these accounts, were simply "a part of the landscape" who lived, like other "lurking beasts," in a "trackless wilderness," where they had "no towns or villages" and either lived in "houses of a sort" or simply "roamed" across the land. The cultures of these "redskins" were, at best, "static and passive" (except when they were indulging in their "strange ceremonies" or taking advantage of their "compliant maidens"), though once encountered by Europeans, these living "environmental hazards" showed themselves to be "treacherous" and "belligerent," "savage foes" and "predators," for whom "massacre and torture were [the] rule," who introduced to Europeans the meaning of "total war," and whose threat of "nightly terror . . . haunted the fringes of settlement through the whole colonial era."<sup>17</sup>

This hostile attitude of stubbornly determined ignorance, it should be noted, is not confined to textbook writers. Recently, three highly praised books of scholarship on early American history by eminent Harvard historians Oscar Handlin and Bernard Bailyn have referred to thoroughly

populated and agriculturally cultivated Indian territories as "empty space," "wilderness," "vast chaos," "unopened lands," and the ubiquitous "virgin land" that blissfully was awaiting European "exploitation." Bailyn, for his part, also refers to forced labor and slavery at the hands of the invading British as "population recruitment," while Handlin makes more references to the Indians' "quickly developed taste for firewater" than to any other single attribute.<sup>18</sup> And Handlin and Bailyn are typical, having been trained by the likes of the distinguished Samuel Eliot Morison who, a decade and a half earlier, had dismissed the indigenous peoples of the Americas as mere "pagans expecting short and brutish lives, void of hope for any future." (Earlier in his career Morison referred to Indians as "Stone Age savages," comparing their resistance to genocide with "the many instances today of backward peoples getting enlarged notions of nationalism and turning ferociously on Europeans who have attempted to civilize them.")<sup>19</sup>

It should come as no surprise to learn that professional eminence is no bar against articulated racist absurdities such as this, but if one example were chosen to stand for all the rest, perhaps the award would go to Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University, who wrote at the start of his book *The Rise of Christian Europe* of "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe," who are nothing less than people without history. "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach," he conceded, "but at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history."<sup>20</sup>

The Eurocentric racial contempt for the indigenous peoples of North and South America, as well as Africa, that is reflected in scholarly writings of this sort is now so complete and second nature to most Americans that it has passed into popular lore and common knowledge of the "every schoolboy knows" variety. No intent to distort the truth is any longer necessary. All that is required, once the model is established, is the recitation of rote learning as it passes from one uncritical generation to the next.

As Mazrui points out with regard to the cartographic distortions that uniformly minimize Africa as a physical presence in the world, the historical distortions that systematically reduce in demographic and cultural and moral significance the native peoples of the Americas are part of a very old and enduring political design. They constitute what the historian of South Africa, Leonard Thompson, calls a "political mythology." In Thompson's words, a political myth is "a tale told about the past to legitimize or discredit a regime," whereas a political mythology is "a cluster of such myths that reinforce one another and jointly constitute the historical element in the ideology of the regime or its rival."<sup>21</sup> The occasion for these observations by Thompson was his book analyzing South Africa's system



of *apartheid*. Two of the basic building blocks of this particular political mythology are the fabricated notions, embedded in Afrikaner imperialist history, that the blacks of South Africa—apart from being barbaric, so-called Hottentot brutes—were themselves fairly recent arrivals in the southern part of the continent, and that they were relatively few in number when the first European colonizers arrived.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the Afrikaners' mythical version of the South African past, European settlers moved into a land that was largely empty, except for a small number of newly arrived savages who in time succumbed to progress and—thanks to the material comforts provided by the modern world, compared with the dark barbarism of their African ancestors—ultimately wound up benefiting from their own conquest.

One of the functions of this particular type of historical myth was described some years ago by the historian Francis Jennings. In addition to the fact that large and ancient populations commonly are associated with civilization and small populations with savagery, Jennings noted that, in cases where an invading population has done great damage to an existing native culture or cultures, small subsequent population estimates regarding the pre-conquest size of the indigenous population nicely serve "to smother retroactive moral scruples" that otherwise might surface.<sup>23</sup> Writing a few years after Jennings, Robert F. Berkhofer made much the same point regarding manufactured historical views of native barbarism: "the image of the savage," he stated flatly, serves "to rationalize European conquest."<sup>24</sup>

Jennings and Berkhofer could well have been writing about South Africa and its morally rationalizing post-conquest historians, but they were not; they were writing about America and *its* morally rationalizing post-conquest chroniclers. For the political mythology that long has served to justify the South African practice of *apartheid* finds a very close parallel in America's political mythology regarding the history of the Western Hemisphere's indigenous peoples. Indeed, this same form of official mendacity commonly underpins the falsified histories, written by the conquerors, of colonial and post-colonial societies throughout the world.

Employing what Edward W. Said has called "the moral epistemology of imperialism," the approved histories of such societies—the United States, Israel, South Africa, and Australia among them—commonly commence with what Said refers to as a "blotting out of knowledge" of the indigenous people. Adds another observer, native peoples in most general histories are treated in the same way that the fauna and flora of the region are: "consigned to the category of miscellaneous information. . . . they inhabit the realm of the 'etc.'"<sup>25</sup> Once the natives have thus been banished from collective memory, at least as people of numerical and cultural consequence, the settler group's moral and intellectual right to conquest is claimed to be established without question. As Frantz Fanon once put it: "The colonialist . . . reaches the point of no longer being able to imagine a time occur-

ring without him. His irruption into the history of the colonized people is deified, transformed into absolute necessity."<sup>26</sup> Then, as Said has cogently observed, the *settler* group adorns itself with the mantle of the victim: the European homeland of the colonists—or the metropolitan European power that politically controls the settlement area—is portrayed as the oppressor, while the European settlers depict themselves as valiant seekers of justice and freedom, struggling to gain their deserved independence on the land that they "discovered" or that is theirs by holy right.

In such post-independence national celebrations of self, it is essential that the dispossessed native people not openly be acknowledged, lest they become embarrassingly unwelcome trespassers whose legacy of past and ongoing persecution by the celebrants might spoil the festivities' moral tone. This particular celebration, however, has gone on long enough. Before turning to an examination of the European invasion of the Americas, then, and the monumental Indian population collapse directly brought on by that genocidal siege, it is necessary that we survey, however briefly, some of the cultures of the Americas, and the people who created them, in the millennia that preceded the European conquest.

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