**I Won't Be Celebrating Columbus Day**

By Suzan Shown Harjo

(*Newsweek* [Special Issue], Fall/Winter 1991, p. 32)

Columbus Day, never on Native America's list of favorite holidays, became somewhat tolerable as its significance diminished to little more than a good shopping day. But this next long year of Columbus hoopla will be tough to take amid the spending sprees and horn blowing to tout a five-century feeding frenzy that has left Native people and this red quarter of Mother Earth in a state of emergency. For Native people, this half millennium of land grabs and one-cent treaty sales has been no bargain.

An obscene amount of money will be lavished over the next year on parades, statues and festivals. The Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission will spend megabucks to stage what it delicately calls "maritime activities" in Boston, San Francisco and other cities with no connection to the original rub-a-dub-dub lurch across the sea in search of India and gold.

Funny hats will be worn and new myths born. Little kids will be told big lies in the name of education.

The pressure is on for Native people to be window dressing for Quincentennial events, to celebrate the evangelization of the Americas and to denounce the "Columbus-bashers." We will be asked to buy into the thinking that we cannot change history, and that genocide and ecocide are offset by the benefits of horses, cut-glass beads, pickup trucks and microwave ovens.

The participation of some Native people will be its own best evidence of the effectiveness of 500 years of colonization, and should surprise no one. But at the same time, neither should anyone be surprised by Native people who mark the occasion by splashing blood-red paint on a Columbus statue here or there. Columbus will be hanged in effigy as a symbol of the European invasion, and tried in planned tribunals.

It would be great to fast-forward to 1993, which the United Nations has declared the "Year of the Indigenous People." Perhaps then we can begin to tell our own stories outside the context of confrontation—begin to celebrate the miracle of survival of those remaining Native people, religions, cultures, languages, legal systems, medicine and values. In the meantime, it should be understood that, even in polite society, voices will be raised just to be heard at all over the din of the celebrators.

For what's left of 1991, Native people will continue marking the 500th anniversary of 1491, the good old days in our old countries. There was life here before 1492—although that period of our history is called "pre-history" in the European and American educational systems—and there is life after 1992.

We would like to 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 policies of assimilation as the answer to 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 the excesses of Western civilization, especially when those excesses are the root cause of deplorable conditions today. Both church and state would do well to commit come small pots of gold, gained in ways the world knows, to bringing some relief to the suffering and some measure of justice to all.

The United States could start by upholding its treaty promises—as it is bound to do by the Constitution that calls treaties the "Supreme law of the Land." Churches could start by dedicating money to the eradication of those diseases that Native people still die from in such disproportionately high numbers-- hepatitis, influenza, pneumonia, tuberculosis.

Church and state could start defending our religious freedom and stop further destruction of our holy places. The general society could help more of our children grow into healthy adults just by eliminating dehumanizing images of Native people in popular culture. Stereotypes of us as sports mascots or names on leisure vans cannot be worth the low self-esteem they cause.

Native people are few in number—under 2 million in the United States, where there are, even with recent law changes, more dead Indians in museums and educational institutions than there are live ones today. Most of us are in economic survival mode on a daily basis, and many of us are bobbing about in the middle of the mainstream just treading water. This leaves precious few against great odds to do our part to change the world.

It is necessary and well past time for others to amplify our voices and find their own to tell their neighbors and institutions that 500 years of this history is more than enough and must come to an end.

This year, Native people will memorialize those who did not survive the invasion of 1492. It is fitting for others to join us at this time to begin an era of respect and rediscovery, to find a new world beyond 1992.

**Answer the following questions in your notebook. Please create a heading /title, *Suzan Harjo*, and include your name and hour. You will hand this in.**

1. Highlight or underline words or phrases that you consider *loaded language*.
2. How does Harjo employ loaded language in her article? In other words, what reactions or emotions is she trying to provoke? What is she trying to make us feel?
3. For you, is there any part of the article that is particularly thought-provoking? Is there any part that you think is particularly unfair?
4. Which of Harjo’s arguments are new to you?

**About the Author:**

**Suzan Shown Harjo** (born June 2, 1945)] is a well-known [Cheyenne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheyenne_and_Arapaho_Tribes) and Hodulgee [Muscogee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muscogee_(Creek)_Nation) advocate for American Indian rights. She is a poet, writer, lecturer, curator, and policy advocate, who has helped Native peoples recover over a million acres (4,000 km²) of land. She serves as President of the Morning Star Institute, a national Native American rights organization based in Washington, D.C.