

Book Review

500 Years of Indigenous Resistance

by Gord Hill. Oakland, California: PM Press, 2009. \$10.00 US, paper. ISBN: 978-1-60486-106-8. Pages: 1- 72.

Reviewed by Kevin Partridge¹

Gord Hill originally published this work as part of a revolutionary Indigenous newspaper in 1992 in order to provide a brief history of the colonization of the Americas from 1492. It is aimed at a broad audience of people who are interested in reading a historical narrative that is often suppressed and excluded from many discussions of the colonization of the Americas. It is well crafted for this purpose with its clear writing, brief length and interesting graphics by the author as well as the inclusion of some archival photographs. The arguments in the book are supported by a variety of citations and references that provide the reader with a good grasp of the field of research in which the author is locating his research. However, he does not reference many written sources and the book does not contain the sort of voluminous bibliographic information that is common to books aimed at a more academic audience.

The author claims that this book is just a plain historical chronology, yet it is clearly guided by a theoretical understanding of colonization and historical development that is well developed and considerably at odds with much of history that is written from a Eurocentric perspective. Hill seems apologetic when he writes about his own lack of knowledge of “authentic Indigenous philosophy” (p.5) but he provides a reflexive awareness of his own position as a member of the Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka’wakw) nation on the west coast, as well as his position as a political activist within a globalized system that continues to encroach upon indigenous lands. This is a book with a political purpose and it is useful for its qualities as a polemic and also for its straightforward explanation of the beliefs and motivations that lie behind the strong commitment shown by many people in Indigenous activist communities around the globe.

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This book should not be seen as a corrective to the current mainstream construction of the history of the Americas - a sort of liberal attempt to provide a *balance* of viewpoints - but is instead an outline of a historical narrative that is created from the experiences of people who have often been eliminated from the historical record. The author is particularly interested in challenging the argument that colonization in the Americas is a process that will eventually be of benefit to the colonized as well as the colonizer. He bluntly states that the colonization process has been an "American Indian Holocaust" (p.6) that resulted in the deaths of millions of people and the destruction of entire nations and their respective cultures and histories. He then goes on to provide some of the stories and evidence both of this destruction and the resistance that has accompanied it from the time of the first contact with Europeans to current conflicts involving indigenous peoples. Since the book was originally written in the early 1990s, the conflicts he describes include the Oka confrontation in Quebec, the Lil'wat blockade in BC and an assault on logging operations on Lubicon Cree land in Alberta.

The book is composed of fifteen very short chapters that are organized in a broadly chronological order. They begin with a brief description of the multitude of peoples, nations and languages that were spread over the Americas before Columbus's ship, the Santa Maria, landed somewhere in the Caribbean region in 1492. The four pages allotted to this era is nowhere near enough space to do justice to the variety of histories that Hill is trying to cover but he does convey a sense of the cultural richness of the Americas. Unfortunately, as he points out, there was little understanding of this cultural wealth on the part of the Europeans who quickly grasped the material opportunities to finance their voyages by seizing goods and people using both deceit and superior weapons. This exploitation was rapidly formalized by the creation of colonial administrative structures guided by the expanding economic needs of European imperial countries.

Hill describes almost constant warfare and exploitation of labour, land and resources since European settlers first arrived. These struggles completely alter the social landscape of North America by bringing in people from many other places in the world as well as contributing to the deaths of many millions of Indigenous people, the profound alteration of social structures that survived, and the export of a huge amount and variety of resources. Hill provides a number of examples such as the brutal campaign to seize gold from the Americas for shipment to Spain (p.14). He also argues that there is a parallel history of resistance to these

changes. He shifts his focus in the last two chapters to more specific struggles as he cites examples of confrontations at Oka, Oldman River and in the Lil'wat nation in British Columbia to show that Indigenous resistance is still an active and viable force within the political landscape of Canada in particular.

This book was originally written as a response to the 500th anniversary of the landing of the Santa Maria. Hill is presenting a history of resistance to this silencing of voices that is both still present and still relevant within our current political environment. He is successful in putting forward a narrative that illustrates both continuity and complexity. There is no attempt here to create a comprehensive story of the many nations that have been involved in this process and the focus of this book is primarily on Canadian history. Nor is he trying to argue the 'truth' behind the narratives. The length of the book does not allow for a great deal of discussion of the history that he presents. It appears that the point of the book, however, is not just to talk about history but to help change it. This book is successful in contributing to both the political dialogues and the struggles in which it is located. Despite Hill's own doubts about his place amongst an 'authentic' Indigenous philosophical tradition, this book shows that he has a definite and unique contribution to make to that history and this book is useful for those who are looking for alternative historical narratives and for people who may be trying to understand the motivations and understandings that lie behind apparently widely separated expressions of Indigenous resistance that repeatedly crop up in the mainstream news with little explanation. This work is a valuable contribution that could be very useful for teachers, activists and others who are interested in challenging the often complacent acceptance of the colonization of the Americas.