

Thinking about Columbus in Bethlehem (5)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 11, 2020

🌀 *Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument* 🌀

What right had the first discoverers of America to land, and take possession of a country, without asking the consent of its inhabitants, or yielding them an adequate compensation for their territory?"
Washington Irving's "gigantic question"



John Vanderlyn, Landing of Columbus (1847), United States Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D.C.

*The setting of the painting is a narrow beach at the edge of a wooded bay or inlet. Columbus, newly landed from his flagship Santa Maria, looks upward as if in reverent gratitude for the safe conclusion of his long voyage. With his left hand he raises the royal banner of Aragon and Castile, claiming the land for his Spanish patrons, and with his right he points his sword at the earth. He stands bareheaded, with his feathered hat at his feet, in an expression of humility. **(Artist of the Capitol)***

Gadfly believes that all people want to better themselves.

Gadfly believes that it is hard to keep people down.

Gadfly believes that it takes real systematic work to keep people down.

Gadfly believes that forces in the nation have done that hard work to keep people of color down.

Gadfly believes that people of color are surrounded by walls of systemic oppression.

Gadfly is happy to hear that on June 22, 2020, our president admitted that systemic racism exists.

Gadfly hopes that those white people who doubt the existence of systemic racism are paying attention.

Let's look to our Capitol Rotunda for an example of the cultural machinery, the hard work, that supports systemic racism.

You know the Rotunda, it's where our dignitaries lie in state.

You saw it most recently when John Lewis lay in state there.

You also know it from your trips to Washington with your kids and grandkids.

You walk through the Rotunda at the beginning of your tour. Or you may have queued up there waiting for your tour to start.

The U.S. Capitol Rotunda is a holy place, a sacred place, a revered place. Gadfly calls it our "Holy of Holies."

On the walls of the Rotunda are **8 large paintings** of historical scenes. Large paintings. Huge paintings. 20 x 20. They dwarf you.

One of those paintings is John Vanderlyn's *Landing of Columbus* (1847).

There is our official recognition of how we should feel about Columbus and how we should feel about the origin of our country.

There is our hero taking possession of the “New World” humbly, with gratitude, patriotic and religious symbols abounding.

But where are the owners of that land, people whom he described in the First Letter we just looked at as “innumerable”?

Imagine people of color in our Holy of Holies wondering about their place in our nation.

Every day the Vanderlyn painting quietly joins in the hard, pervasive work of keeping people of color down.

*And don't get Gadfly started on the **Pocahontas** painting there.*