Good Day, Columbus

I walked past Vasco da Gama’s body with premonitions of typhoons. I was in Portugal, at the Mosteiro dos Jéronimos, right where Europe started to redefine the world. Here Lisbon becomes Belém, in honor of Bethlehem, to absorb in the memory of the West the Orient where Christ was born. Here Da Gama knelt for his last blessing before facing the seven seas. Here he was brought back to be buried as if to engrave on this soil the history of uncharted oceans.

There were too many facts for that story to be simple—too many names crowding my thoughts, too many relics for a single image. This monastery was named after one Saint Jerome whose Hieronymite followers ran plantations in Santo Domingo. Its monstrance was made with gold that Da Gama, en route to Calicut, extorted from the Muslim sultan of Kilwa. Its main entrance faced an avenue called India. Everything here evoked an elsewhere and the hidden face of Europe: Christendom had not left a single continent untouched. The world started and ended here with a confusion of tongues and cultures.

The babel of Belém intruded on my memories: Jerome, Jéronimos, Hieronymites. Had not that name become a symbol of native resistance in the United States after an Indian born Goyahkla, in what used to be Mexico, was renamed Geronimo? My feelings as jumbled
as the lands of Arizona, I kept wondering why so many Europeans deny that they created the United States. Didn’t the line go straight from Afonso de Albuquerque to Albuquerque, New Mexico? Had not Da Gama died in Cochin less than five hundred years before Vietnam?

Outside the monastery, the sun over Belém spoke of pasts unknown and uncertain waters. I turned away from the Jéronimos. On the Avenue of Brazil, Lisbon flaunted further its long encounter with the seas. Yet the surfeit of names continued to defy the established story. There were too many signs here for history to remain official. Images of India, of Indians north, south, and west—from Calicut to Brazil, from Brazil to Arizona, persistent flavors of continents conquered in the name of spices and gold filled up the empty space between the monuments.

Moving among these ghosts, I savored the irony of this human landscape caught in the wheels of time. A clutter of colonial paraphernalia displayed itself on and off an avenue called Brazil—after the colony that for a brief moment was Portugal’s metropolis. On my right, overlooking the Tagus, the Tower of Belém reminded me of piracy, of the time when Europe had to defend itself against its own. On my left, a few hundred yards from the Tower, the Monument to the Discoveries repackaged Portugal’s past in a grandiose display of adventurous innocence.

A tribute to Prince Henry the Navigator, whose quincentennial it honored in 1960, the huge structure shows the Prince leading the Portuguese to the Discoveries. But the memorial was just too big to convince me of its chastity: its arched mass spoke of conquest, of Henry’s desire to bend the onlooker under his will. Here Bethlehem met Brazil. Here Europe was confused about where it came from and where it had taken the world. Here anyone was at home and yet no one could rest in peace—not even Da Gama, whose remains were bought by the Portuguese in exchange for their weight in gold.

In the few square miles of Belém, the managers of history had tried
repeatedly to impose a narrative. Perhaps they had tried too much. For in the monumental efforts of the Portuguese state to catch up with a history now eclipsed by nostalgia, I saw the nostalgia of the entire West for a history that it never lived, its constant longing for a place that exists only in its mind. The West was Calicut, Brazil, Cochin and Kilwa. The West was America, a dream of conquest and rapture. In the confusion of Belém, I could almost hear this line from Mon Oncle d’Amérique: “America does not exist. I know. I’ve been there.”

Except that I was in Belém whence Europe’s face looked no clearer than that of the Americas, no truer than that of Prince Henry, of whom there is no surviving picture. The Monument to the Discoveries had to invent a face for the Prince, just as Europe had to invent a face for the West. Belém’s steady effort to patch up its own silences did not reflect on Portugal alone. It spoke of the entire West—of Spain, France, and the Netherlands, of Britain, Italy, and the United States—of all those who, like Columbus, had come from behind to displace Portugal in the reshaping of the world. And as much as I did not like it, as much as Prince Henry might disagree, it spoke also of me, of all the lands disturbed by their cacophony. Jerónimos, Hieronymites—was anyone left untouched?

In 1549, soon after the Hieronymites started their plantations on Haitian soil, the Franciscans began their mission in Japan. I went back to my hotel, thinking of Columbus who once thought also that he had reached Japan. I could now glimpse the truth of my own history: The West does not exist. I know. I’ve been there.

October 12, 1492

History is messy for the people who must live it. For those within the shaky boundaries of Roman Christendom, the most important event of the year 1492 nearly happened in 1491. Late at night on November 25, 1491, Abu l-Qasim al-Muhli signed the treaties by which the Muslim kingdom of Granada surrendered
to the Catholic kingdom of Castile, ending a war the issue of which had become clear a few months earlier. The transfer of power was scheduled for May, but some of the Muslim leaders decided not to wait for the Christian takeover and left town unexpectedly. Granada’s Nasrid ruler, Muhammad XII Boabdil, rushed the capitulation. Thus, it was almost by accident that the flag of Castile and the cross of Christendom were raised over the tower of the Alhambra on January 2, 1492, rather than during the previous fall, as first expected, or the following spring, as scheduled.¹

For actors and witnesses alike, the end of the *reconquista* was a disorderly series of occurrences, neither a single event, nor a single date. The end of the war and the signing of the treaties—both of which occurred in year 1491 of the Christian calendar—were as significant as the flight of the Muslim leaders, the raising of the Christian flag, or the glorious entry of the Catholic monarchs into the conquered city on January 6, 1492. The capitulation of Granada was, however, as close to a milestone as history in the making can get. Milestones are always set in regard to a past, and the past that Western Christendom had fashioned for itself projected the moving Spanish frontier as the southernmost rampart of the cross.

Since the Council of Clermont (1095), in part as an unexpected effect of three centuries of Islamic influence and control, Christian militants from both sides of the Pyrenees had heralded the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula as a sort of Christian *jihad*, the *via Hispania* to the Holy Land, a necessary stage on the road to the Holy Sepulchre. Popes, bishops, and kings had enlisted the limited—but highly symbolic—participation of Catholics from France to Scotland in various campaigns with such incentives as the partial remission of penance.

To be sure, cultural interpenetration between Christians, Moslems, and Jews went on in the peninsula and even north of the
Pyrenees long after Alfonso Henriques took Lisbon from the Arabs and placed Portugal under the tutelage of the church early in the twelfth century. But the rhetoric of the popes and the merger of church and state power in the Iberian dominions, which went back to the Visigoths, created an ideological space where religions and cultures that mingled in daily life were seen as officially incompatible. Within that space, the defense of a Christendom, projected as pure and besieged, became a dominant idiom for the military campaigns.

Both religious and military ardor declined in the second half of the fourteenth century, yet religion remained by default the closest thing to a “public arena” until the end of the Middle Ages, and religious figures the most able crowd leaders. Thus when religious and military enthusiasm, still intertwined, climbed together once more during Isabella’s reign, the ultimate significance of the war for Christendom resurfaced unquestioned. Even then, though, if many of those who lived the fall of Granada saw in it an occurrence of exceptional relevance, it was a milestone only for the peculiar individuals who paid attention to such things in the first place.

It mattered little then, in comparison, that a few months after entering Granada, the Catholic monarchs gave their blessing to a Genoese adventurer eager to reach India via a short-cut through the western seas. It would matter little that the Genoese was wrong, having grossly underestimated the distance to be traveled. It probably mattered less, at the time, that the Genoese and his Castilian companions reached not the Indies but a tiny islet in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. The landing in the Bahamas was certainly not the event of the year 1492, if only because the few who cared, on the other side of the Atlantic, did not learn about it until 1493.

How interesting, then, that 1492 has become Columbus’s year,
and October 12 the day of “The Discovery.” Columbus himself has become a quintessential “Spaniard” or a representative of “Italy”—two rather vague entities during his lifetime. The landing has become a clear-cut event much more fixed in time than the prolonged fall of Muslim Granada, the seemingly interminable expulsion of European Jews, or the tortuous consolidation of royal power in the early Renaissance. Whereas these latter issues still appear as convoluted processes—thus the favored turf of academic specialists who break them down into an infinite list of themes for doctoral dissertations—The Discovery has lost its processual character. It has become a single and simple moment.

The creation of that historical moment facilitates the narrativization of history, the transformation of what happened into that which is said to have happened. First, chronology replaces process. All events are placed in a single line leading to the landfall. The years Columbus spent in Portugal, the knowledge he accumulated from Portuguese and North African sailors, his efforts to peddle his project to various monarchs are subsumed among the “antecedents” to The Discovery. Other occurrences, such as the participation of the Pinzon brothers, are included under “the preparations,” although in the time lived by the actors, that participation preceded, overlapped, and outlived the landfall. Second, as intermingled processes fade into a linear continuity, context also fades out. For instance, the making of Europe, the rise of the absolutist state, the reconquista, and Christian religious intransigence all spread over centuries and paralleled the invention of the Americas. These Old World transformations were not without consequences. Most notably, they created in Castile and elsewhere a number of rejects. Indeed, the first Europeans who made it to the New World were in great majority the rejects of Europe, individuals of modest means who had nothing to lose in a desperate adventure. But in the narrative of The Discovery, Eu-
rope becomes a neutral and ageless essence able to function, in turn, as stage for “the preparations,” as background for “the voyage,” and as supportive cast in a noble epic.

The isolation of a single moment thus creates a historical “fact”: on this day, in 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the Bahamas. As a set event, void of context and marked by a fixed date, this chunk of history becomes much more manageable outside of the academic guild. It returns inevitably: one can await its millenial and prepare its commemoration. It accommodates travel agents, airlines, politicians, the media, or the states who sell it in the prepackaged forms by which the public has come to expect history to present itself for immediate consumption. It is a product of power whose label has been cleansed of traces of power.

The naming of the “fact” is itself a narrative of power disguised as innocence. Would anyone care to celebrate the “Castilian invasion of the Bahamas”? Yet this phrasing is somewhat closer to what happened on October 12, 1492, than “the discovery of America.” Naming the fact thus already imposes a reading and many historical controversies boil down to who has the power to name what. To call “discovery” the first invasions of inhabited lands by Europeans is an exercise in Eurocentric power that already frames future narratives of the event so described. Contact with the West is seen as the foundation of historicity of different cultures. Once discovered by Europeans, the Other finally enters the human world.

In the 1990s, quite a few observers, historians, and activists worldwide denounced the arrogance implied by this terminology during the quincentennial celebrations of Columbus’s Bahamian landing. Some spoke of a Columbian Holocaust. Some proposed “conquest” instead of discovery; others preferred “encounter,” which suddenly gained an immense popularity—one more testimony, if needed, of the capacity of liberal discourse to compromise between its premises and its practice. “Encounter” sweet-
ens the horror, polishes the rough edges that do not fit neatly either side of the controversy. Everyone seems to gain.

Not everyone was convinced. Portuguese historian Vitorino Magalhaes Godinho, a former minister of education, reiterated that “discovery” was an appropriate term for the European ventures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which he compares to Herschel’s discovery of Uranus, and Sédillot’s discovery of microbes.10 The problem is, of course, that Uranus did not know that it existed before Herschel, and that Sédillot did not go after the microbes with a sword and a gun.

Yet more than blind arrogance is at issue here. Terminologies demarcate a field, politically and epistemologically. Names set up a field of power.11 “Discovery” and analogous terms ensure that by just mentioning the event one enters a predetermined lexical field of clichés and predictable categories that foreclose a redefinition of the political and intellectual stakes. Europe becomes the center of “what happened.” Whatever else may have happened to other peoples in that process is already reduced to a natural fact: they were discovered. The similarity to planets and microbes precedes their explicit mention by future historians and cabinet ministers.

For this reason, I prefer to say that Columbus “stumbled on the Bahamas,” or “discovered the Antilles,” and I prefer “conquest” over “discovery” to describe what happened after the landing. Such phrasings are awkward and may raise some eyebrows. They may even annoy some readers. But both the awkwardness and the fact that the entire issue can be dismissed as trivial quibbling suggests that it is not easy to subvert the very language describing the facts of the matter. For the power to decide what is trivial—and annoying—is also part of the power to decide how “what happened” becomes “that which is said to have happened.”

Here again, power enters into the interface between historicity 1 and historicity 2. The triviality clause—for it is a clause, not an
argument—forbids describing what happened from the point of view of some of the people who saw it happen or to whom it happened. It is a form of archival power. With the exercise of that power, “facts” become clear, sanitized.¹²

Commemorations sanitize further the messy history lived by the actors. They contribute to the continuous myth-making process that gives history its more definite shapes: they help to create, modify, or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration. As rituals that package history for public consumption, commemorations play the numbers game to create a past that seems both more real and more elementary.

Numbers matter at the end point, the consumption side of the game: the greater the number of participants in a celebration, the stronger the allusion to the multitude of witnesses for whom the mythicized event is supposed to have meant something from day one. In 1992, when millions of people celebrated a quincentennial staged by states, advertisers, and travel agents, their very mass reinforced the illusion that Columbus’s contemporaries must have known—how could they not?—that October 12, 1492, was indeed a momentous event. As we have seen, it was not; and many of our contemporaries, for various reasons, said as much. But few of the 1992 celebrants could accentuate publicly the banality of that date, five hundred years before, without having to admit also that power had intervened between the event and its celebration.

The more varied the participants, the easier also the claim to world historical significance.¹³ Numbers matter also as items in the calendar. Years, months, and dates present history as part of the natural cycles of the world. By packaging events within temporal sequences, commemorations adorn the past with certainty: the proof of the happening is in the cyclical inevitability of its celebration.

Cycles may vary, of course, but annual cycles provide a basic ele-
ment of modern commemorations: an exact date. As a tool of historical production, that date anchors the event in the present. It does so through the simultaneous production of mentions and silences. The recurrence of a predictable date severs Columbus’s landfall from the context of emerging Europe on and around 1492. It obliterates the rest of the year now subsumed within a twenty-four hour segment. It imposes a silence upon all events surrounding the one being marked. A potentially endless void now encompasses everything that could be said and is not being said about 1492 and about the years immediately preceding or following.

The void, however, is not left unfilled. The fixed date alone places the event within a new frame with linkages of its own. As a fixed date, October 12 is the fetishized repository for a potentially endless list of disparate events, such as the birth of U.S. activist Dick Gregory or that of Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti; the independence of Equatorial Guinea; the Broadway opening of the musical Jesus Christ Superstar; or the refusal of a Catholic monk, one Martin Luther, to repudiate assertions posted months before on the door of a church in Germany. All these events happened on October 12 of the Christian calendar, in various years from 1518 to 1971. All are likely to be acknowledged publicly by varying numbers of milestone worshippers. Each of them, in turn, can be replaced by another event judged to be equally—or more—noteworthy: Paraguay’s break from Argentina in 1811, the 1976 arrest of the Chinese Gang of Four, the beginning of the German occupation of France in 1914, or the approval of the Magna Carta by Edward I of England in 1297.

The roster is theoretically expandable in any direction. If the Magna Carta is the most ancient icon mentioned here, that is because these examples have come from the institutionalized memory of what is now the West and were all indexed through Dionysius Exiguus’s system. With other modes of counting and another
pool of events, October 12 of the Christian calendar could overlap in any given year a number of anniversaries next to which the landing in the Bahamas would look quite recent. As arbitrary markers of time, dates link a number of dissimilar events, all equally decontextualized and equally susceptible to mythicization. The longer the list of events celebrated on the same date, the more that list looks like an answer in a trivia game. But this is precisely because celebrations trivialize the historical process (historicity 1) at the same time that they mythicize history (historicity 2).

The myth-making process does not operate evenly, however, and the preceding list suggests as much. For if—in theory—all events can be decontextualized to the same point of emptiness, in practice not all are reshaped by the same power plays and not all mean the same to new actors entering the stage and busily reformulating and appropriating the past. In short, celebrations are created, and this creation is part and parcel of the process of historical production. Celebrations straddle the two sides of historicity. They impose a silence upon the events that they ignore, and they fill that silence with narratives of power about the event they celebrate.

The reasons to celebrate Columbus Day and to do so on October 12 are now obvious to most Americans, just as the rationale behind the quincentennial was obvious to many in the West. Most advocates of these celebrations will evoke the obvious significance of “what happened” in 1492 and the no less obvious consequences of that event. But the road between then and now is no more straightforward than the relation between what happened and what is said to have happened. October 12 was certainly not a historical landmark in Columbus’s day. It took centuries of battles—both petty and grandiose—and quite a bit of luck to turn it into a significant date. Further, not all those who agree now that the date and the event it indexes are important
agree on the significance of its celebration. The images and debates that surround the appropriation of Columbus vary from Spain to the United States and from both Spain and the United States to Latin America, to mention only three areas treated in this chapter. Constructions of Columbus and of Columbus Day vary within these areas according to time and also according to factors such as class and ethnic identification. In short, the road between then and now is itself a history of power.

An Anniversary in the Making

Columbus was not treated as a favorite hero by nascent Spain, nor was October 12 marked as a special day during his lifetime. To be sure, the landing in the Bahamas, the verified existence of an American landmass, the integration of the Caribbean in the European orbit, and the imperial reorganizations that paralleled these events imposed a symbolic reordering of the world which, in turn, contributed to the wealth of myths that now define the West—Utopia, the noble savage, the white man’s burden, among others. Still, it took quite a few years of intense struggles over political and economic power in Europe and the Americas for the narrative to unfold in ways that acknowledged the discovery as event and the discoverer as hero. Indeed it took a living hero, Charles V, and his pretensions to a Catholic empire stretching from Tunis to Lima and from Vienna to Vera Cruz for Columbus, then dead, to become a hero. In 1552, Francisco López de Gómara suggested to Charles that the most important event in history—after the divine Creation of the world and the Coming of Christ—was the conquest of the Americas.

Even then, there was no “public” celebration. When López de Gómara wrote these lines, the Castilians who lived on American soil had already measured the gaps between the dream of a New World and the realities of their daily life under an increasingly
heavy colonial bureaucracy. Columbus’s first group of admirers was restricted, at best, to a few Spanish intellectuals and bureaucrats. Further, even as Spanish arts and themes gained international attention during the reign of Philip II, the sinking of the armada in 1588 had already suggested other times and priorities. By the early seventeenth century, the conquest of the Americas was as much a miscellany of efforts by French, Dutch, and British adventurers as a competition between the Iberian states. The northern Europeans who benefited most from the rise of Caribbean plantations and trans-Atlantic trade during the two centuries following Philip’s reign tended to commission paintings of themselves and their families rather than writings about conquistadores. Meanwhile, among the intellectual elites of Europe, the mythicized faces of America overshadowed that of Columbus. 18

Thus it was in the New World itself that Columbus could first emerge most strongly as myth, in the former colonies of Spain and in the United States. The United States was one of the few places where the growth of a modern public in the midst of the Enlightenment was not encumbered by images of a feudal past. There, as elsewhere, the constitution of a public domain reflected the organization of power and the development of the national state, but power was constituted differently from the way it took shape in most European countries. Citizens with a weakness for marching bands promoted celebrations and holidays more openly and often more successfully than in Europe. 19

The Tammany Society, or Columbian Order, an otherwise clannish group of gentlemen incorporated in New York in 1789, had such a taste for public attention, parades and lavish banquets. Their list of celebrations included Washington’s birthday and the Fourth of July, but also Bastille Day and other international milestones they deemed worthy of recognition. Columbus’s landfall figured on their first calendar, published in 1790. More impor-
tant, by what seems to be a historical accident (the joint effect of fixed dates, fund-raising opportunities, and political fortunes), their most lavish ceremony occurred on October 12, 1792. On that day, members organized a memorable banquet and erected a fourteen-foot-high monument to Columbus that they promised to illuminate annually on the anniversary of the landfall. They did not keep that promise. Still, their banquet was remembered almost a hundred years later, when new groups of worshipers searched for a North American precedent for Columbus Day.20

Latin America, meanwhile, kept Columbus’s image alive but treated it with ambivalence until the late 1880s. Some territories fought Europe repeatedly over Columbus’s remains, both literally and figuratively. Two Caribbean colonies competed with Spain for Columbus’s long-dead body.21 The independent state that emerged from Bolivar’s armed struggle on the mainland claimed Columbus’s name both before and after the secession of Venezuela and Ecuador from Gran Colombia. Still, even though the Latin American rejection of Spanish political tutelage did not entail a rejection of hispanismo, early ideologies of independence and, later, Spain’s Ten Years War against Cuba (1868–1878) hampered the complete integration of Columbus into the pantheon of South American heroes.

Ethnicity—or rather, ideologies of ethnicity—added to Latin America’s ambivalence toward Columbus. Latin American ideologies attribute to the New World situation an active role in the making of socio-racial categories. It is not simply that categories require new names (criollos, zambos, mestizos) or new ingredients under old names (mamelucos, morenos, ladinos); the rules by which they are devised are different from those of Europe and acknowledged as such.22 Discourses intertwined with these rules and reproducing the Creole categories give a central role, implicit or explicit, to metaphors of “blending” in spite of the age-old
denigration of certain cultural traditions and in spite of systems of stratification that manipulate the perception of phenotypes. Skewed as it was, a blending did occur.\textsuperscript{23}

Brutal as it was also, Spanish colonization did not nearly wipe out pre-Conquest Americans in the southern landmass as the Anglos did in the north or as Spaniards themselves did in the Caribbean islands, if only because the aboriginal populations of both Mexico and the Andes were enormous. Early cultural practices often interwove European and native elements. Early manifestations of a distinct local identity included some sense of “Indianness.” Historian Stuart Schwartz draws on Fernando de Azevedo to observe that in certain regions of Brazil, “Tupí, the predominant Indian language, was more widely spoken than Portuguese . . . even by the colonists.”\textsuperscript{24} Later, political doctrines of the nineteenth century incorporated both the metaphors of a blend and the acknowledgment of the Indian, even while the organization of power kept Indians and Afro-Latins outside the decision-making process. Hence, Bolívar could declare in 1815: “We are . . . neither Indian nor European, but a species midway between the legitimate proprietors of this country and the Spanish usurpers.”\textsuperscript{25} A few decades later, nineteenth-century scientific racism did influence Latin American opinions and practices, albeit without always negating the stress on mixes rather than pure sets, on differences of degree rather than differences of kind.\textsuperscript{26}

In short, for many reasons too complex to detail here, Latin Americans did not alienate native cultures from their myths of origin, even before the twentieth-century rise of various forms of indigenismo. They view themselves as criollos and mestizos of different kinds, peoples of the New World; perhaps Columbus was too much a man of the Old.\textsuperscript{27}

In the United States, in contrast, in spite of inflated references to a melting pot, ideologies of ethnicity emphasize continuities with the Old World. The real natives are mainly dead or on res-
ervations. New natives (recognizable by their hyphenated group names) are numbered by generation, and their descendants fight each other for pieces of a mythical Europe. The peculiar politics of ethnicity has proved to be a boon for Columbus’s image in the United States.

Ethnicity gave Columbus a lobby, a prerequisite to public success in U.S. culture. The 1850 census reported only 3,679 individuals of Italian birth. Yet by 1866, Italian-Americans, organized by the Sharpshooters’ Association of New York, celebrated the landfall and, within three years, annual festivities were being held in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Boston, Cincinnati, New Orleans, and San Francisco on or around October 12. Italians and Spaniards were just not enough, however, to turn this celebration into a national practice. Fortunately, ethnicity gave Columbus a second—and more numerous—group of lobbyists, Irish-Americans.

By 1850, there were already 962,000 Americans claiming Irish descent. Many of them regrouped in organizations like the Knights of Columbus, a fraternal society for Catholic males founded in 1881. In less than ten years, community support and the institutional patronage of the Catholic church swelled the Knights’ membership. As the association spread in the northeast with the backing of prominent Irish-Americans, it increasingly emphasized the shaping of “citizen culture.” Columbus played a leading role in making citizens out of these immigrants. He provided them with a public example of Catholic devotion and civic virtue, and thus a powerful rejoinder to the cliché that allegiance to Rome preempted the Catholics’ attachment to the United States. In New Haven, the 1892 celebration of the landing attracted some forty thousand people—including six thousand Knights and a thousand-piece band conducted by the musical director of West Point—in a joint celebration of holiness and patriotism.
The success of these festivities was not due solely to Catholic-Americans’ desire for acceptance, nor was the cult of Columbus limited to Catholics. The introduction of history into the school curriculum as a required subject in the early nineteenth century and its slow growth before the Civil War also contributed to familiarizing a larger audience with Columbus. So did the few biographical sketches published in the first half of the century. Nevertheless, the Catholic connection was crucial in that Catholics provided the bodies that made possible the mass celebrations of Columbus Day before the 1890s. By the 1890s, Italian and Irish efforts to promote Columbus Day in the United States coincided with—and ultimately were subsumed within—the production of two mass media events, the international celebrations of the quadricentennial of the Bahamas landfall respectively sponsored by Spain and the United States.

**The Castilian and the Yankee**

The second half of the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented attention to the systematic management of public discourse in countries that combined substantial working classes and wide electoral franchises. With the realization that “the public”—this rather vague presumption of the first bourgeois revolutions—indeed existed, government officials, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals joined in the planned production of traditions that cut across class identities and reinforced the national state. Nationalist parades multiplied in Europe, while government imposed a daily homage to the flag in public schools in the United States. International fairs that attracted millions of visitors to London, Paris, and Philadelphia; academic conferences (such as the first congress of Orientalists in 1873), and official commemorations (such as the 1880 invention of Bastille Day, in France) taught the new masses who they were, in part by telling them who they were not.
Socialists, anarchists, and working-class political activists replied in kind by publicizing their own heroes and promoting celebrations such as May Day. Public history was in the air. This fast-moving fin-de-siècle era caught Spain in a state of decline. Torn by factional feuds, outflanked in Europe by nearly all the Atlantic states, threatened in the Americas by the economic incursions of Britain, the influence of the United States, and the constant fear of losing Cuba, Spain was in dire need of a moral and political uplift. Conservative leader Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, architect of the Bourbon Restoration and a historian in his own right, made of Columbus and The Discovery the consummate metaphors for this anticipated revitalization.

Interest in Columbus had grown in the 1800s. The number of biographical sketches published in Europe and the Americas increased significantly after the 1830s. So did various suggestions of a quadricecentennial in the 1880s. Cánovas turned this growing interest into an extravaganza: a political and diplomatic crusade, an economic venture, a spectacle to be consumed by Spain and the world for the sheer sake of its pageantry. The commemoration became a powerful tool with which the politician-historian and his quadricecentennial junta of academics and bureaucrats wrote a narrative of The Discovery with Spain as the main character. In the words of its most thorough chronicler, the Spanish quadricecentennial was “the apex of the Restoration.”

Spain spent more than two and a half million pesetas and four years of preparation on the celebration. Various cities were refurbished, monuments erected, and pavilions built on the model of recent international exhibitions. A yearlong series of events led to grandiose ceremonies in October and November of 1892 that involved the Spanish royal family and many foreign dignitaries. On October 9, Cánovas, his wife, and members of the royal family took part in a mock exploration off the Andalusian coast with escort ships from twelve foreign countries. At least twenty-four
countries participated officially in the Spanish quadricentennial. Replicas of Columbus’s boats sailed across the Atlantic. For a few weeks, Spain was at the center of the world. Parades in Madrid and Seville were echoed in Havana and Manila, and officials from the most powerful western countries paid homage to Spain.

The huge international participation was due, in a large part, to Cánovas’s careful packaging of both the celebration and its object, the discovery itself. He sold the quadricentennial not only as pageantry but as a challenge to the most enlightened minds, a yearlong symposium on past and present policy, on the role of Spain in the world, on Western civilization, and on the relevance of history. In a series of moves that anticipated the 1992 quincentennial, the quadricentennial junta set up a series of intellectual activities that legitimized the celebration.

The junta created at least one serious academic journal, influenced others, dealt with learned societies, and commissioned research that still inspires European and American studies. From February 1891 to May 1892, more than fifty public lectures were delivered in the Ateneo de Madrid alone. Many titles show the role of the quadricentennial in shaping the categories and themes under which the conquest of the Americas is still discussed: the differential impact of various colonial systems on conquered populations, the accuracy of the Black Legend, the cultural legacies of pre-Conquest Americans, Spain’s treatment of Columbus, Columbus’s role as compared to that of other European explorers, his exact landing place, his exact burial place, etc. These activities not only influenced participating academics, they also shaped the general public’s perception of what was at stake. First, they made the discovery and Columbus worthy of increased public attention by making them objects of learned discourse. Second, they gave anyone who granted that attention—individuals, par-
ties, or states—an apparently neutral ground to celebrate in spite of conflicting connotations and purposes.

Connotations and purposes varied widely. Spanish urban crowds took the quadricentennial as the homage to Spain it was in part meant to be, the symbol of an impending revitalization. Journalist Angel Stor spoke in the name of many when he wrote: “There is in the discovery of America a character much greater than Isabella and Ferdinand the Catholic... much greater than Columbus himself, for never was an individual able to do what a people can. This character is Spain, the true protagonist of this wonderful epic.”

Cánovas’s narrative was not too different from that of Stor. He saw in the celebration a unique occasion to reinforce Spain’s presence west of the Atlantic and—to a lesser extent—in Europe. But he also used the commemoration to consolidate his personal power. The quadricentennial made him a supporting character of Spain’s story, the necessary shadow of the protagonist. In a political context marked by Spain’s first experiment with “universal” (male) suffrage and nearly obsessionable fears of losing face in Europe and elsewhere, Cánovas came out of the celebrations as a bona fide representative of the nation and a guarantor of her honor.

Honor was not the only stake. To a large extent, Spain’s quadricentennial also aimed to create a space for a new conquest of the Americas. Although token gifts—such as schools and dispensaries—were made to the Philippines, the celebrants’ eyes were on the other side of the Atlantic. Many Spanish leaders felt the need to reinforce commercial and cultural ties with Latin America in the face of U.S. gains. At the same time, those who wanted Spanish olives or wine to enter the United States saw in the celebrations an occasion to establish contact with North American firms and agencies.
U.S. brokers, in turn, wanted contact but only on their own terms. Theirs was the only country whose name contained a continent (South Africa came much later), and whose imperial destiny was unfolding along manifest tracks. Thus if for Spain, the quadricentennial was an occasion to authenticate past splendors and imagine future glories, for many in the United States it was an opportunity to verify and celebrate their present course. Accordingly, U.S. officials paid lip service to Cánovas’s festivities, but invested their energy in their quadricentennial, the World’s Columbian Exposition of Chicago.

The Chicago Exposition actually opened in 1893, but by then, historical accuracy and even Columbus himself had become quite secondary. The intellectual aspect of the event barely mattered in spite of contributions from Harvard’s Peabody Museum and the Smithsonian Institution and the presence of then-rising star Franz Boas. Henry Adams later wrote in his *Education*: “The Exposition denied philosophy . . . Since Noah’s Ark, no such Babel of loose and ill-jointed, such vague and ill-defined and unrelated thoughts and half-thoughts and experimental outcries . . . had ruffled the surface of the Lakes.”40

Compared to Madrid 1892, Chicago 1893 was no intellectual event. The main point was money: to be spent and to be made. United States appropriations for the 1892 celebration in Madrid were a mere $25,000, thus one-tenth of U.S. appropriations for the 1889 fair in Paris and a trifle compared to the $5.8 million for the Chicago Exposition.41 Paris 1889 and, closer to home, the 1876 centennial of U.S. independence in Philadelphia had proved to North American entrepreneurs that international fairs generated profits. By the late 1870s, consensus was reached among the likes of W. Rockefeller, C. Vanderbilt, J. P. Morgan, and W. Waldorf Astor that the United States needed one more of these money-making events. That it occurred in Chicago one year too late was the combined result of accidents and false starts
among bureaucrats and investors. That it bore Columbus’s name and included a Spanish Infanta as the guest of honor were merely additional attractions.

Circumstantial as he was to his own occasion, Columbus gained a lot from Chicago. Commemorations feed on numbers and the 1893 quadricentennial was a display of the U.S. appetite for size: more participating countries, more acreage, more exhibits, more money than any fair the world had known. Chicago won the numbers game—second only to Paris for attendance—and provided Columbus his most successful celebration to date: $28.3 million in expenses; $28.8 million in receipts; 21.5 million people in attendance—and no protest in the local records. Some Spanish journalists ridiculed what they saw as a vulgar carnival, but the Chicago numbers spoke for themselves. Columbus was the wrapping for an extravagant Yankee bazaar; but in the end, the bazaar was so big that the wrapping was noticed.

Latin America certainly noticed. To be sure, Columbus’s metamorphosis into a Yankee hero, the lone ranger of the western seas, looked somewhat banal outside Chicago. Still, viewed from the far south, the fair belonged to a political and economic series from which it drew its symbolism. The Columbus story written in Chicago overlapped with the ongoing narrative of conquest that U.S. power was busily writing in the lands of this hemisphere. What was said to have happened in 1492 legitimized what was actually happening in the early 1890s. In 1889, Secretary of State James Gillepsie Blaine, one of the promoters of the celebration, had convened the first meeting of American states in Washington. In 1890, Minor C. Keith acquired eight hundred thousand acres of public land in Costa Rica, the U.S. Congress passed the McKinley Tariff, and U.S. entrepreneurs controlled 80 percent of Cuban sugar exports. In 1891 U.S. admiral Bancroft Gherardi threatened to seize part of Haiti and the U.S. Navy prepared for war against Chile. In 1892, the postmaster of the
United States, acting as a private citizen-broker, bought the entire foreign debt of the Dominican Republic. Four centuries after Spain, the United States was taking over. The path was the same: first the Caribbean, then the continental landmass. Columbus as Yankee looked somewhat more real, if not necessarily less foolish, in light of that ongoing expansion.\textsuperscript{43}

Europe also noticed. The Pan-American strategy was designed in part to block European incursions in the hemisphere. In the 1880s, British investments in South America exceeded those of the United States. The French also were perceived as a threat until the 1889 collapse of their canal project. Even German and Italian ventures, relatively small, were watched with suspicion from North America. Thus, from 1890 to the end of the fair, Europeans were told repeatedly how to read Columbus and what this new reading meant for the hemisphere.

The imposition of this new reading required the production of a number of silences. Since some traces could not be erased, their historical significance had to be reduced. They became inconsequential or significant only in light of the new interpretation. Thus, the official guide to the fair dismissed as meaningless the first 280 years of Euro-American history: the history of this hemisphere prior to 1776 was a mere “preparatory period” to the rise of the United States. The meaning of the discovery could be measured by the number of bushels of wheat that the United States now produced and the length of its railways. Shunning Europe and Latin America in the same stroke, the guide added: “Most fitting it is, therefore, that the people of the greatest nation on the continent discovered by Christopher Columbus, should lead in the celebration of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of that event.”\textsuperscript{44}

Even U.S. citizens were told in unmistakable terms what Columbus was not about, lest working-class Irish and, especially, Italian families use him as a shield to hide their own highly sus-
pect invasion. The number of immigrants from Europe had doubled between 1860 and 1893. At the same time, the countries of origins were increasingly non-English speaking areas of what passed then for “Southern Europe”: Italy, Russia, Poland, Bohemia, and other lands of doubtful whiteness. By 1890, the number of Italian immigrants was over three hundred thousand.

In the context of that migration, ideas suggesting the biological inferiority of the “southern” immigrants and the threat they constituted to the “future race” of the United States became widespread. Progressive journals taking the new immigrants’ side published articles with titles such as “Are the Italians a Dangerous Class?” Two years after the number of Italians passed the three hundred thousand mark, railroad magnate Chauncey M. Depew, having conceded in a speech that Columbus Day belonged “not to America, but to the world,” went on to warn against “unhealthy immigration,” urging U.S. citizens to “quarantine against disease, pauperism and crime.” It took only a centennial for similar propositions to reappear in California and Florida in the 1990s. But by then, the diatribes were directed at Mexican and Caribbean immigrants; the Italians and the Russians had been integrated in the white melting pot.

Vanity notwithstanding, those who wrote the script for Chicago could not control all the possible readings of that script. Their triumph was due, in part, to their taking Columbus further out of context than did their predecessors. Once that was done, however, Columbus was not theirs alone. Successful celebrations decontextualize successfully the events they celebrate, but in so doing they open the door to competitive readings of these events. The richer the ritual, the easier it is for subsequent performers to change parts of the script or to impose new interpretations. The recent controversies about the quincentennial celebrations of the Bahamas landing were possible in part because of the extravagant investments—both material and symbolic—of the celebrants.
But the reach of these controversies was also increased by the significance of past celebrations. As rituals of a special kind, commemorations build upon each other, and each celebration raises the stake for the next one. Cánovas’s fiesta and the earlier parades of Italian- and Irish-Americans had unwittingly promoted the Chicago fair. The Chicago fair, in turn, was read by some immigrants as an acknowledgment of their presence in the melting pot—clearly an unexpected effect from the point of view of the magnates. From then on, Catholic Americans felt partly vindicated by their hero’s national recognition.

By the 1890s, the appropriation of Columbus in the United States truly became a national phenomenon. Narratives were produced that rewrote a past meant to certify the inevitability of a Columbian connection. Ethnic and religious leaders, counties and municipalities started to look for traces of Columbus in their origins, silencing prior narratives, busily creating others. By the end of the decade, for instance, it had become public knowledge that the Ohio town of Columbus was named after the Discoverer. Yet the major documents that record the establishment of Columbus as seat of the state government of Ohio do not make any reference to the Genoese navigator. Columbus the man was not mentioned in the original bill, or in the Journal of the House when the bill was signed and sent to the Senate. Nor was he mentioned when the bill was amended a few years later. In 1816, Governor Worthington, addressing the Ohio legislature, simply stated that Columbus had become the permanent seat of local government without mention of Columbus the man. In that same year, The Ohio Gazetteer did make an allusion to the United States as a “Columbian Republic,” but its descriptions of Columbus the town do not evoke the Genoese sailor. Nor do successive editions. Further descriptions or histories of both the town and the state from the 1830s to the 1850s are equally silent about a connection between Columbus, Ohio, and Columbus, the Genoese. Even a
comprehensive history of the town published in 1873 does not mention such a connection. In short, as late as 1873, the connection between Columbus, Ohio, and Christopher Columbus was historically irrelevant.

Yet by 1892, in the euphoria that surrounded the Chicago fair, historians were listing Columbus, Ohio, as an obvious proof of Columbus’s wide recognition in the United States. A century later, for the launching of AmeriFlora '92, a quincentennial event set in Columbus, President Bush reaffirmed the inevitability of a connection by then firmly established:

It is most fitting that this special event has been designated an official Quincentennial Project by the Jubilee Commission. To be held in Columbus, Ohio—the largest city in the world named after this great explorer—AmeriFlora '92 will celebrate the rich cultural heritage of not only the lands he discovered but also the continent from which he travelled.

The final measure of Chicago’s success is the extent to which it naturalized Columbus. A century after the fair, fourteen states other than Ohio had towns named Columbus, and a number of Columbias filled the U.S. landscape. Yet President Bush’s reference to the cultural heritage of American Indians aside, this more American Columbus was also a whiter Columbus. All hyphens are not equal in the pot that does not melt. The second part of the compound—Irish-American, Jewish-American, Anglo-American—always emphasizes whiteness. The first part only measures compatibility with the second at a given historical moment. Thus, as he became more American, Columbus had to become whiter, in spite of the anti-Italian racism prevailing at the time of the Chicago fair. As Columbus became whiter he also contributed to the whitening of the people who claimed him as
part of their past, further opening to multiple interpretations the narrative officialized at Chicago. The very success of the fair created an ideological breach in the vision of the United States proposed by some of its promoters.

Three years after the fair, determined to muddle the script broadcast in Chicago, Italians in New York founded the Sons of Columbus Legion, which celebrated Columbus Day the following year. Their efforts mingled with those of the Irish, though not always by way of formal collaboration. The Knights, in particular, worked hard for their chosen ancestor. As Irish-Americans spread through the country with the full benefits of white status, the Knights petitioned successive state legislatures to make October 12 a legal holiday. By 1912, they were victorious. Columbus himself, further out of the context of 1492 Europe, became more Irish than ever—until Italian-Americans made new gains in the continuing contest for racial and historical legitimacy with the mass migrations that followed each of two world wars.

Latin Americans also appropriated Columbus in unexpected ways, skewing plans made in both Madrid and Washington. The Spanish government had promoted emigration to South America in the late nineteenth century, as part of a larger movement to promote hispanismo in the region. From Madrid’s viewpoint, attachment to Spanish culture and veneration of a Spanish heritage would counteract the growing political and economic influence of the United States. Madrid’s promotion of Columbus Day as the day of Hispanity in the colonies and former colonies fitted well into this scheme, which was in obvious conflict with the dominant image of Columbus promoted in the United States. Latin Americans, who participated in both quadricentennials, resolved these conflicts in their own favor.

The image of Columbus with a cowboy hat escorting Wells Fargo wagons was simply not convincing south of Texas, but it
Columbus’s landing in Haiti viewed by Haitian painter J. Chéry

did challenge the Columbus as Renaissance monk favored by Canovas’s Spain. In trying to make of Columbus a North American, the Chicago fair made of him a man of the Americas. That was due to a confusion of tongues, deliberate only in part. From the U.S. viewpoint, turning the discoverer into an “American” was equivalent to putting on him a “made in USA” label, for the United States is America. Latin Americans, for their part, could not appropriate Columbus from Spain. Their cultural heritage, their views on blending, their semiperipheral position in the world economy simply did not lead to this take-over: they had neither the means nor the will. Thus, they had watched from the sidelines the Americanization of Columbus. But that Americanization had different implications for the Latin Americans. For them, the hemisphere is not the exclusive property of norteamericanos. “American” means neither “gringo” nor “Yankee”—at least not necessarily. An “American” Columbus belonged to the

Good Day, Columbus
hemisphere. Adding their own line to two different scripts, Latin Americans forced both the Spanish and the U.S. figures into their “blending” discourse. Throughout Latin America, October 12 became either the day to honor Spanish influence or to honor its opposite or, more often, to celebrate a blending of the two: Discovery Day, the Day of the Americas, or simply El Día de la Raza, the Day of the Race, the day of the people—a day for ourselves, however defined, for ethnicity however constructed.\textsuperscript{55} 

La Raza has in Merida or Cartagena accents unknown in San Juan or in Santiago de Chile, and Columbus wears a different hat in each of these places.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{October 12, Revisited}

Would the real Columbus please stand up? The problem is, of course, in the injunction itself, as we should have learned from the flurry of activities, pro and con, that surrounded the quincentennial of the Bahamas landing.

The 1992 quincentennial benefited from a material and ideological apparatus that was simply unthinkable at the time of the Chicago fair. With worldwide changes in the nature of “the public,” with the sophistication of communication techniques, public history is often now a tale of sheer power clothed in electronic innocence and lexical clarity. Image makers can produce on the screen, on the page, or on the streets, shows, slogans, or rituals that seem more authentic to the masses than the original events they mimic or celebrate. The speed at which commodities, information, and individuals travel and, conversely, the decreasing significance of face-to-face interaction influence both the kinds of communities people wish to be part of and the kinds of communities to which they think they belong.

Professional manipulators with all sorts of good intentions use this tension—and its historical components—as a springboard.
A flag, a memorial, a museum exhibit, or an anniversary can become the center of a living theater with historical pretensions and worldwide audiences. The production of history for mass consumption in the form of commercial and political rituals has thus become increasingly manipulative in spite of the participation of professional historians as consultants to these various ventures. Not surprisingly, as 1992 neared, commercial, intellectual, and political brokers prepared to turn the quincentennial into a global extravaganza.

To some extent, they were successful. The Spanish government did its best to duplicate Cánovas’s quadricentennial extravaganza with an updated technology. The U.S. government set up a Jubilee Commission and the Library of Congress a Quincentenary Series. Parisian intellectuals activated their ghost writers to produce as many books as possible with Columbus or 1492 in their titles. Columbus movies, both European and American, were probably more successful in reaching a larger audience from Winnipeg to Calcutta than the Parisian titles or the plethora of articles published in U.S. academic journals. Televised dramatizations of the Bahamas landing were seen at least on three continents.

Yet in spite of these extraordinary means of historical production, the quincentennial was a flop compared to the celebrations of the 1890s. Transformations in the nature of the public, in the ties that bind collectivities, and in the speed and weight of electronic communications produced contradictory results. While masses everywhere are increasingly accessible targets, the retorts produced by dissenting minorities also reach a wider audience. While the public today is increasingly international, it is also increasingly fragmented.

This fragmentation cuts both ways. In 1991–92, many U.S. advertisers were ready to reap a quincentennial bonus from the new Hispanic market. They planned to adorn with Columbian images
an arsenal of products from coffee and potato chips to sport shirts and cigarettes. They designed campaigns to make Columbus sell cars and furniture, on the model of the mattress sales that honor Washington’s birthday. But it took a few weeks for the loud campaign of a few Hispanic activists protesting the commemoration to burst open the Hispanic market. With Columbus persona non grata among Spanish speakers and The Discovery redefined as conquest, many advertisers dropped their Hispanic quincentennial campaigns.

In retrospect, the most striking feature of the quincentennial was the loudness of dissenting voices worldwide. For varying reasons and in various degrees, native and black Americans, Latino-Americans, African, Caribbean, and Asian leaders denounced the celebration of the conquest or tried to redirect the narrative of The Discovery. The impact of such protests and addenda varied, but celebrants everywhere had to take them into account. In a bold move, Spain’s economic and political magnates apologized for the first time for the 1492 persecution of the Jews and called on Sephardics to join in the extravaganza. Some Jewish-American lobbies happily jumped on the Columbus’s quincentennial bandwagon, but the quiet dissent of many more constituencies in the United States and elsewhere defied claims that what happened in 1492 was as clear as the promoters suggested.

This multiplication of voices and perspectives made it impossible for the promoters of 1992 to even approximate the relative smoothness of Madrid 1892 and Chicago 1893. Both Madrid and Chicago were, as we have seen, about their own present. But both Madrid and Chicago could effectively talk about that present by packaging a past that seemed fixed and given: on October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. That past was not so clear by 1992. Reenactments notwithstanding, what actually happened on October 12, 1492, was largely irrelevant to the quincentennial debates, certainly not at the core.
of either research or contention. Most contestants and observers—and quite a few celebrants—agreed that the significance of that day arose from what happened after it.

But what happened after is no longer a simple story. Between us and Columbus stand the millions of men and women who succeeded him in crossing the Atlantic by choice or by force, and the millions of others who witnessed these crossings from either side of the ocean. They, in turn, provided their own visions of what happened and their successors continue to modify the script, with both their words and their deeds. Narratives that straddle eras and continents continuously replace the Bahamas landfall in the present of its own aftermath. Thus while Columbus’s landfall made possible world history as we know it, post-Columbian history continues to define the very terms under which to describe that landfall. Post-Columbian history up to the 1890s made possible the Chicago narrative, but the history of our times makes it impossible to repeat Chicago. What happened and what is said to have happened mix inextricably the two sides of historicity.

Does the label “Native American,” unclaimed in the 1800s, redress a historical mistake? It does, to the extent that it avoids a confusion with South Asians and restores their chronological priority to the only peoples who can claim to be indigenous of this hemisphere. Native activists now, rather than anthropologists, speak in the name of the former “Indians.” But exchanging the name imposed by the Castilians for that bequeathed by Vespucci can surely not mean starting with a clean slate. While self-naming may indicate a willingness to enter history as subjects, the concrete pool from which to choose both names and subjectivities is not immeasurable. The collective identity in the name of which Native Americans from Arizona to the Amazon defied the quincentennial is itself a late post-Columbian development.

But so is the collective identity of the Euro-Americans who claim Columbus as an ancestor. And so, for that matter, is the na-
tional consciousness that colored the quincentennial in Spain or in Italy. The inability to step out of history in order to write or rewrite it applies to all actors and narrators. That some ambiguities are more obvious in Arizona and in Belém than in Chicago, Madrid, or Paris has much more to do with unequal control over the means of historical production than with the inherent objectivity of a particular group of narrators. This does not suggest that history is never honest but rather that it is always confusing because of its constituting mixxes.

If history is as messy as I think it is for its subjects, the “real” Columbus would have no final reading of the events he generated—certainly not at the time of their occurrence. Genoese by birth, Mediterranean by training, Castilian by necessity, Cristóbal Colón had no final word on things much more trivial than his landfall. He contradicted himself many times—much like other historical actors, sometimes more than most. He left some blanks on purpose; he left others because he did not know better; and yet others because he could not do otherwise. In Columbus’s travel journal, there is a description of the first sighting of land on Thursday October 11, 1492. In his log entry for the day Columbus hints about the tense evening, the long night that followed, the first views of land at two in the morning. “At two hours after midnight, land appeared, from which they were about two leagues distant. They hauled down the sails . . . passing time until daylight Friday,” when they reached an islet and descended.57

There is no clear-cut milestone in the log.58 It was a messy night—not Thursday any more, but not yet Friday. At any rate, there is no separate entry in Columbus’s journal for Friday, October 12, 1492.