The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas

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Before Colombia was declared an independent state in 1819, the terms “Colombia” and “Colombiano” were used by many Spanish American patriots to mean “America” and “American,” just as the corresponding terms in English were used in the North. In Spanish America, however, these terms were used less frequently than they were in the United States, where they denoted everything from rivers, mountains, and buildings to books, journals, symphonies, and universities. Although numerous cities in nearly every part of Spanish America adopted Columbus’s name, in the United States there were many more such places.¹ The different roles that Columbus played in the rhetoric of the independence and early national periods in Spanish and British America are explained not only by Columbus’s place in the historiographical traditions of the two regions but also, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, by the different meanings of the term “empire” in the North and the South.

In Spanish American history, Columbus was traditionally seen as the first representative of the Spanish Crown to arrive in the Americas. In the nineteenth century, when Spanish American Creoles sought political independence from Spain, these political actors viewed Columbus primarily as a character very similar to the Columbus portrayed by Bartolomé de las Casas. He was not seen as an evil colonizer who started three centuries of political domination (this characterization would require that Creoles
renounce their own Spanish ancestors and, indeed, many of their own claims to power). Instead, he was viewed as a hero who devoted himself to Spain, brought Christianity to the New World under its aegis, and then was neglected by its kings. There was no need, as in the United States, to construct an elaborate myth in order to incorporate Columbus into the story of the independent nations of Spanish America. He was already present—indeed he was the protagonist—at the crucial, founding moment of Creole Spanish American history (which denies the importance of pre-Columbian history). His role in that moment was well known by Spanish American elites of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most of whom had access to the same histories of Spain’s colonization of the New World that were popular in Spain itself, including those written by Peter Martyr, Bartolomé de las Casas, Ferdinand Columbus, and Antonio de Herrera. In addition, as did their counterparts to the north, Spanish Americans read William Robertson’s *History of America* even though, as David Brading writes, “Robertson’s narrative of the discovery of America and conquest of Mexico and Peru is little more than a paraphrase of Antonio Herrera’s *Décadas*.”

**Francisco de Miranda**

Much of the credit for the employment of the figure of Columbus in Spanish American discourses in favor of political independence goes to one person: the colorful Venezuelan Francisco de Miranda (1750–1816). Known as the “precursor” of the Spanish American independence movements, Miranda was a privileged Venezuelan Creole who fully participated in the transatlantic republic of letters and spent much of his life abroad advocating for Spanish American independence. Through Miranda, we can begin to trace the ways in which Columbus was employed in Spanish American discourse during the late colonial and early national periods.

Like most Creole young men in Spanish America, Miranda was educated in the Greek and Roman classics, as well as in
European history and literature, including the Spanish peninsular tradition. Among the materials Miranda studied at the Universidad Real y Pontificia de Caracas were Antonio de Nebrija’s *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana* (1492) and the rhetoric of Cicero and Virgil. Throughout his life, he was an avid reader of texts in Spanish, French, English, Greek, and Latin. When he traveled he brought with him an extensive collection of books, to which he was always adding. Early in his life, Miranda predicted that his would be “a famous library.” According to his will, he intended to bequeath his collection to the University of Caracas. Some of the most important figures of the Spanish American independence movements, including Simón Bolívar, Andrés Bello, and José de San Martín, consulted the library at his London home. A catalog of its contents lists several books from which Miranda likely learned about Columbus: Peter Martyr’s *De orbe novo* (Miranda owned the English translations of both Eden [published in 1555] and Hakluyt [published in 1598]), Ferdinand Columbus’s biography of his father (*Historie del F. Colombo e de fatti dell’Ammiraglio Colombo*, Venice 1676), William Robertson’s *History of America* (1777), and Antonio de Herrera’s *Historia general de los hechos de los castellanos en las islas y tierra firme del mar océano* (also known as *Historia de las Indias occidentales*) (1728), which incorporates Bartolomé de las Casas’s account of Columbus from the *Historia de las Indias*. It is likely that Miranda also read Las Casas’s biography of Columbus in a manuscript version of the *Historia de las Indias*, which was not published until 1875 but which was commonly circulated in Spanish America during the eighteenth century.

At the age of twenty, Miranda left Caracas to finish his education in Europe. After almost two years, his father purchased the office of Capitan in Spain’s army for him, and Miranda served in North Africa and the peninsula until 1780 when, at the age of thirty, he was transferred to the Caribbean. There, he encountered firsthand the American Revolution. He witnessed the Battle of
Pensacola and acted as translator during negotiations with the British regarding the terms of the Spanish surrender. Miranda was later falsely accused of spying for the British, and he fled into exile, traveling through the United States in 1783 and 1784 before returning to Europe. As Karen Racine notes in her probing biography, Miranda often “managed to be at the center of events when a historic moment occurred.” He became the confidant of Catherine the Great, witnessed the French Revolution, and was commissioned as a general in the French army. All the while he never relented in his attempt to persuade those he met—many of the famous intellectual and political figures of the Age of Revolution—of the righteousness of Spanish American independence.

Miranda lived in the London home of Joel Barlow, author of *The Vision of Columbus* (published in 1787), from June 1789 through September 1791. While the catalog of Miranda’s library does not list *The Vision of Columbus* (the only work of Barlow’s listed is *Advice to Privileged Orders*), it is likely that Miranda read Barlow’s poem during this time. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Barlow’s poem inspired Miranda to use the term “Columbia” and its variants. In fact, as I discuss below, the first appearance of “Columbia” that I could find in Miranda’s writings is dated 1788, before he lived with Barlow. Nevertheless, we note this connection between two men who both considered themselves American revolutionaries and who both invoked the name of Columbus.

Given Miranda’s familiarity with the Atlantic world’s print culture, his cosmopolitan background, and especially his eighteen-month sojourn in the United States, where the figure of Columbus and the term “Columbia” were already popular, it is not surprising that he is probably the first person who used the word “Colombia” in Spanish to refer to an independent Spanish America. He was almost surely familiar with the argument, especially common in sixteenth-century texts, that America had been unjustly named in honor of Amerigo Vespucci and that
some form of Columbus’s name would be more appropriate. That argument is presented, for example, in Juan de Solórzano Pereira’s *Política Indiana* (1647), a copy of which Miranda owned, and in Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), which Miranda read during his travels through the United States in 1784.  

Miranda was undoubtedly exposed to the term “Columbia” during his tour of the United States in 1783–84, when it was commonly used to refer to the newly independent nation. A survey of newspapers published during the time Miranda was in the country confirms the popularity of the word “Columbia.” Eleven days after Miranda arrived in North Carolina on 10 June 1783, for example, the *South Carolina Weekly Gazette* featured a poem, entitled “Peace,” in which “Columbia” figures prominently. This poem opens with the image of Columbia, “tir’d with the labours of an eight years war,” welcoming the goddess of Peace. As was common in the literature of the day, this poem counterposes “Columbia” to “Britannia,” described here as finally foregoing “her haughty claims” to possessing North America. Many similar references to “Columbia” can be found in newspapers published when Miranda was in the country, making it difficult to believe that this traveler, so interested in learning all he could about his surroundings, would not have taken note of the term and what it represented. While Miranda was in New York in 1784, the previously named King’s College, which had closed during the Revolution, reopened with the new name Columbia College. He also may have seen excerpts of William Robertson’s *The History of America* reprinted in two Massachusetts newspapers from January 1784 to June 1785. The second book of Robertson’s *History*, which was serially reprinted in Worcester’s *Massachusetts Spy* and Boston’s *Continental Journal*, beginning in October 1783, is a biography of Columbus. If Miranda did not come across Robertson’s study of Columbus while he was in the United States, he was nevertheless likely familiar with it given that the catalog of his library lists two copies of the *History of America*. 
Not a systematic thinker, Miranda neither explained his use of the term “Colombia” nor recorded at length his impressions of Christopher Columbus. As mentioned earlier, Miranda appears to have first employed the term “Colombia” in 1788, in French, in a letter to the German Prince Charles of Hesse, where Miranda refers to “disgraced Columbia” (la malheureuse Colombia). His next use of the term appears in 1790, when he labeled a map of the American continent that accompanied materials he submitted to English Prime Minister William Pitt and Home Secretary William Wyndham, Lord Grenville in hopes of convincing them to sponsor an invasion to liberate his patria. Although the map is labeled with the term “Columbia,” Miranda’s proposal itself does not refer to “Colombia,” nor does it mention Columbus. The Spanish version of the proposal employs the term “la América” five times and “la América española” twice. The English translation of the document, prepared for Miranda’s British audience, uses the term “South America” seven times.

In 1801, Nicholas Vansittart, the British joint secretary of the treasury and member of Parliament, requested that Miranda submit a new emancipation plan to the government of Prime Minister Henry Addington. Miranda’s proposal, his “Esquisse de Gouvernement Federal” (Draft of [a] Federal Government) dated 2 May 1801, was a revised version of his previous plan of 1790. One of the most notable changes in this new plan is its reference to a much larger territory: whereas before Miranda concentrated especially on Venezuela, in this document he suggests liberating all of Spanish America, advocating that the capital of the newly independent state be located at “the most central point (perhaps on the Isthmus [of Panama]).” This capital was to bear “the august name of Colombo to whom the world owes the discovery of that beautiful part of the earth.” In the margins of his copy of the document, Miranda scrawled: “If one adopts the name Colombia to designate the new republic, the inhabitants ought to be called Colombianos; this name is more sonorous and majestic than Colombinos.” The aesthetic element—and the lack of anything
else of substance—in these references to Columbus is striking. In the first, Miranda gives Columbus credit for discovering “that beautiful part of the earth.” In the second, Miranda illustrates his preference for the term “Colombianos” because of its aesthetic superiority over the term “Colombinos.” Miranda invoked Columbus in an effort to sell his plan; his version of Columbus often did not appeal to reason but to the emotions and the aesthetic sensibilities of his audience.

Angel Rosenblat argues that the moment marking Miranda’s definitive adoption of the term “Colombia” as an integral part of his independence project was when he wrote the first version of his Proclamación a los Pueblos del Continente Colombiano, alias Hispanoamérica (Proclamation to the Peoples of the Colombian Continent, alias Hispano-America). This document is undated, but Arturo Ardao believes it was produced in 1800 or 1801, at the same time or perhaps before Miranda wrote the “Esquisse de Gouvernement Federal” (2 May 1801). On the draft of this document, Miranda purportedly first wrote “to the peoples of the Hispano-American Continent.” However, according to Rosenblat, “he at once crosses it out and corrects it with: ‘To the peoples of the Colombian (a.k.a., Hispano-American) Continent.’” According to Ardao, “This correction offers documentary proof: it records the decisive moment in which Miranda attempts to definitively baptize Hispano-America with the name that had been engendered in his mind by the spirit of Revolution.”

Although Miranda’s references to Columbus and his use of the term “Colombia” (or “Columbia,” as he wrote in French and English, as well as in Spanish) do not conform to any rigorous pattern, they are best understood as part of his greater propagandistic effort to promote Spanish American independence. A skilled rhetorician, Miranda refers to “Colombia” most frequently when he addresses an American, as opposed to a European, audience. In his 1791 letter to William Pitt, Miranda identifies his “own country” not as “Colombia” but as “South-America.”
Fifteen years later, Miranda is still using the term “South America” with his British audience. In a 1804 memorandum about a meeting with British officials, for example, Miranda refers to “that great Continent of South America,” adding in parentheses: “if I may be allowed to call all the Spanish possessions South America, because in a geographical division the line between North and South is drawn I believe across the Isthmus of Darien.” In addition to the terms “South America,” “Spanish America,” and the simpler “America,” Miranda frequently uses the phrase “the Spanish colonies of the American continent.”

Even the 1797 Act of Paris, which defined for European political actors Miranda’s mission to liberate Spanish America, contains no mention of “Columbia” or Columbus.

Miranda’s references to Columbia, and his few references to Columbus, appear when he addresses an American (hemispheric) audience that he senses will be receptive to his revolutionary message. One of the few instances in his writings when Miranda mentions Columbus by name is in his letter dated 10 October 1800 to Manuel Gual, who was working to agitate for independence in Trinidad. Miranda holds up Columbus’s hard work as an example for all supporters of independence to follow: “If we consider Columbus’s great effort in the discovery of the New World, his perseverance, the risks he ran, his generosity of spirit, we will see, my friend, how very little the sons of America have done to grant the New World the glory and happiness that Nature appears to have destined to her. Let us work with determination and upright intentions in this noble enterprise, leaving the rest to Divine Providence, Supreme Arbiter in human affairs!”

In Miranda’s letters to Alexander Hamilton, General Henry Knox, and Thomas Jefferson, all of whom he met during his 1783–84 sojourn in the United States, Miranda consistently refers to “Columbia.” In his 1792 letter to Hamilton, for example, Miranda writes: “The affairs and success of France take a happy turn in our favour . . . I mean in favour of our dear country America, from the
North to the South . . . things are grown ripe and into maturity for the Execution of those grand and beneficial projects we had in Contemplation, when in our Conversation at New York the love of our Country exalted our minds with those Ideas, for the sake of unfortunate Columbia.” Playing to Hamilton’s sympathies, but also appropriating an American tradition that counterposed the New World against the Old, Miranda here—as in another letter he wrote to Hamilton several years later—portrays “America” as one single country (“from the North to the South”) that both he and Hamilton share (“our Country”). The term “unfortunate Columbia” in this excerpt refers only to Spanish America, but Miranda relies on Hamilton’s experience with the term “Columbia” and its implication regarding independence from a colonial regime. The “grand and beneficial projects” that Miranda purports to have previously discussed with Hamilton in New York are designed to benefit this “unfortunate” half of the country that the two men share. In his 1795 letter to Knox, Miranda—although just released from a Parisian prison and now pessimistic about the political situation in France—uses the same kind of inclusive language when he talks about “Colombia”: “I take up the pen only to tell you that I live, and that my sentiments for our dear Colombia as well as for all my friends in that part of the world have not changed in the least in spite of the events which are bound to ruin France.”

In 1806, after years of planning and petitioning the British government for assistance in freeing Spanish America from imperial domination, Miranda finally crossed the threshold into action by leading the *Leander* expedition in an attempt to liberate Venezuela (if not the whole South American continent). Miranda proclaimed himself the “Comandante-General del Exercito colombiano,” a title of his own invention, as there was no such “Columbian army.” While on tierra firme, Miranda appears to have distributed to the local population handkerchiefs manufactured in England that featured a portrait of Columbus. According to Robertson:
On this handkerchief were portraits of Sir Home Popham, General Beresford, Washington, and Miranda, associated, as it were, to obtain the same end, or because of the similarity of their undertakings, with many sketches of naval battles and bordered with these four inscriptions: “It is not commerce but union; Let arts, industry and commerce flourish; Religion and its holy ministers be protected; Persons, conscience and commerce be at liberty.” The apotheosis of Christopher Columbus filled the center and English colors adorned the sides. England was depicted as goddess of the seas, the lion of Spain at her feet. A youth was pictured rolling up the French colors, and poking the lion with the hilt of his sword. On the handkerchief was this inscription: “The dawn of day in South America.”

The design of these handkerchiefs suggests Columbus’s significance in Miranda’s propaganda effort. With little regard for historical fact, Columbus occupies the center of this scene, which depicts the new trade-based empire of England as victorious over Spain’s old-style empire of conquest. Columbus is surrounded by four phrases, three of which contain the word “commerce.” This alludes to Miranda’s argument to entice Britain to support Spanish American emancipation: in exchange for Britain’s military and financial help, it would receive privileged access to Spanish American markets. Free trade was, of course, one of the values of the Enlightenment and one that Spanish American Creoles shared. Columbus’s “apotheosis” suggests, if not his deification, certainly his (re)arrival on the scene—this time of Spanish America’s rebirth as an independent entity. While I have found no corroborating evidence, it is likely that Miranda directed the manufacture and printing of the handkerchiefs. This would have been consistent with Miranda’s general strategy, which was beginning to rely more heavily on propaganda. As Karen Racine argues, this was one of several “carefully constructed images” that Miranda hoped would inspire the populace to support independence.
The “proclamation” dated 2 August 1806 that Miranda issued to the inhabitants of the region where he landed also alludes to Columbus. The adjective “colombiano” appears twice in the proclamation’s heading: “Don Francisco de Miranda, Comandante-General del Exercito colombiano, á los Pueblos habitantes del Continente Americano-Colombino” (Don Francisco de Miranda, Commander-General of the Columbian Army, to the People Inhabiting the Columbian-American Continent.) The unusual phrase that describes the continent, “americano-colombino,” is reminiscent of what we saw much earlier in Miranda’s 1792 letter to Hamilton—that is, the designation of the “Columbian” part of the Americas to be Spanish America. A similar distinction from Anglo-America is suggested by the term “our America” (nuestra América) in the phrase “the day has arrived when, recovering the sovereign independence of our America, its sons will be able to freely show their generous souls to the universe.” Similarly, when Miranda refers to “the recovery of our rights as citizens and our glory as Columbian American,” he designates Hispanic Americans as different from other Americans.27

Miranda’s Columbus rhetoric appears in both the handkerchiefs and his “proclamation,” both of which were designed for the local audience that he sought to revolutionize. It is perhaps significant that there are no references to Columbus in Miranda’s letters to the clergy and the local town council, two groups he may have deemed more resistant to his revolutionary message. In his 3 August 1806 letter to the town council, for example, Miranda merely urges them as “members of the Hispanic American Public” to agree on reasonable measures to protect public order.28 Compare this to the language in Miranda’s second proclamation to the people of Coro, issued on 7 August 1806, upon his leaving, where he states that he wishes “to combat . . . the oppressors of the Columbian people.”29

After returning to London in December 1807, Miranda launched a propaganda blast to promote the independence of Spanish America in both the English- and Spanish-speaking
Atlantic worlds. In 1810, Miranda began directing the publication of a short-lived serial entitled *El Colombiano*, which promoted emancipation and was explicitly addressed to “the Columbian continent.” Nowhere in the five issues of *El Colombiano* does Miranda discuss the figure of Columbus. Although financial problems caused it to cease publication in short order, the newspaper’s reach, and hence the diffusion of the term “Colombiano” in Spanish America, was greater than it might seem. Several of its articles were reprinted in the *Gazeta de Caracas* and the *Gazeta de Buenos Aires*.\(^{30}\)

In the summer of 1810, after working in London on his own for years in an effort to pressure British diplomats to support Spanish American independence, Miranda welcomed three representatives of the junta of the government of Caracas—Luis López Méndez, Simón Bolívar, and the delegation’s secretary, Andrés Bello—, who had been sent to talk to the British government about emancipation. The delegation members stayed in Miranda’s Grafton Street home during the six weeks they spent in London. Miranda was instrumental in introducing them to the elite of London society and the Spanish Americans who supported independence who frequently met at Miranda’s home. The Caracas junta gave explicit instructions to López Méndez and Bolívar, who left England in September, not to bring Miranda back with them, as its members did not trust his political ambition and believed him to be too volatile. Undeterred, Miranda followed on his own a month later. He arrived in Caracas in December 1810, and he quickly began promoting independence and liberal political ideals, publishing the works of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill in the *Gazeta de Caracas* and forming the Patriotic Club, which began to issue its own serial, *El Patriota de Venezuela*. Still distrusting him in April 1811, the younger generation designated Miranda as the representative in the National Congress of the small providence of Pao, a post that Miranda likely viewed as beneath him. Although Miranda did not write the constitution issued on 14 July 1811, its multiple references to
“the Columbian continent,” as well as its provision that the phrase “of the Columbian Era” (“de la Era Colombiana”) be used to distinguish post- from pre-independence time, is likely a sign of Miranda’s influence. According to Ardao, the period during and after independence was declared in Venezuela marked “the apo- gee of . . . the idea of Magna Colombia, by means of the crowning in the official lexicon and in the political press—from the Gaceta de Caracas to El Patriota de Venezuela—of the term Colombia and its derivatives, always as a name for the totality of Hispanic America.”

Miranda’s influence is surely evident in the first Venezuelan republic’s flag, which he and two other members of the congress were assigned to create. The new flag, which bore the same colors as the flag Miranda devised for the Leander expedition, mixed European and American references. It featured an Amerindian sitting on a seaside rock next to a crocodile and holding a staff, on top of which was perched a liberty cap. The words “free Venezuela” (Venezuela libre) appear in the top left corner, and the word “Colombia” is featured on a banner that anchors the bottom center of the scene.

Miranda’s early adoption of the term “Colombia” and its variants should be considered not only in light of his experience in the United States, but also in relation to three other factors. The first is Miranda’s understanding of the special meaning in Spanish America and in the Hispanic tradition of Columbus as the first conquistador in the New World. I discuss this below, in my observations about Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán’s Letter to the Spanish Americans, which Miranda espoused so heartily. Suffice it to say here that Miranda surely understood the figure of Columbus to be the first of the conquistadors whose contract with the king and queen had been broken by the Crown.

The second issue we should consider regarding Miranda’s references to Columbus, while a conjecture, merits consideration: the possibility that Miranda personally identified with Columbus
as the emblematic victim of the Spanish. Miranda perhaps felt a certain affinity with the underappreciated Genoese. Miranda had never felt justly compensated by Spain for his loyal service in the military, just as Columbus felt that he was not fairly compensated by Spain for his discoveries. The Venezuelan often recorded his belief that his talents were not sufficiently valued by others. Since 1783 he had been on the run from the Spanish authorities, who had kept track of his movements in the United States and in Europe. As the years passed, he developed an ever-increasing sense of being persecuted. Karen Racine explains that “in [Miranda’s] mind, he was always the victim, the idealistic hero who had been condemned to lead a wandering, rootless life because of the threat that his greatness posed to nervous authorities.”

Could this sense of being persecuted have drawn Miranda to the figure of Columbus, whom he likely viewed as another man whose greatness was not acknowledged during his time? It is indeed odd that the sad trajectory of the end of Miranda’s professional life is reminiscent of Columbus’s. His 1806 *Leander* expedition was a resounding failure. In 1810 when he returned to Venezuela to aid in the independence effort, the Spanish Americans whom Miranda believed he served attempted to marginalize the elder man. Not only did his younger peers feel that Miranda was out of touch with current realities, but they also did not trust him. Therefore, they first attempted to keep Miranda busy with important but limited responsibilities, like restructuring the financial system. Eventually, in the tumultuous post-independence environment, exacerbated by a devastating earthquake on 26 March 1812, they turned briefly to Miranda to lead them, granting him the title of *generalissimo*. This was the moment Miranda had been waiting for. His short reign, however, ended in disaster. After Miranda failed to provide the reinforcements Bolívar had requested in the fight against royalist forces at Puerto Cabello, Bolívar lost that battle, and the royalists took Caracas, ending the first Venezuelan republic. Before Miranda
could flee, he was arrested by the royalists and shipped off to prison, first in Spain and then in North Africa, where he died in captivity.

The third and most important issue with regard to his allusions to Columbus is Miranda’s affinity for empire. Miranda was likely drawn to Columbus not only because he appeared in similar anticolonial discourses of British America but also because the figure of Columbus had so long been intimately tied to empire via a centuries-long discursive tradition with which Miranda was very familiar. With regard to Miranda’s preference for empire, I refer to two things. First, his inherent distrust of democracy. Miranda wanted independence from Spain, yet he had been daunted by the excesses of the Haitian and French Revolutions. While he styled himself a revolutionary, at heart he was more of an aristocrat, like many Spanish American Creoles. “I confess,” he wrote in 1798, “that much though I desire the independence and liberty of the New World, I fear anarchy and revolution even more.” And like many Spanish Americans, Miranda believed that after three centuries of imperial rule, his fellow citizens were unprepared to govern themselves. In Miranda’s view, a constitutional monarchy like England’s could best allow for a virtuous republic for the politically unprepared Spanish Americans.

Also relevant to Miranda’s imperial leanings is his never quite clarified vision of the grandezza of his future country, both in terms of its territorial expanse (although he makes no reference to the active expansion of borders) and its glory. Hence, the government that he proposed to William Pitt in 1790 covered a huge expanse of territory, from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. At its head was to be a hereditary executive called “the Inca”—a term obviously borrowed from the region’s indigenous imperial history—, who would appoint “caciques” (or local chiefs) for life. As Racine writes, “All told, [Miranda’s proposed government] was a strange hybrid of ideas from Britain, ancient Rome, indigenous America, and the United States.” This was not, as William Spence Robertson observed, “what may be called a pure republic, but an
empire or an imperial republic.” Indeed, Miranda envisioned “rising upon the ruins of the Spanish Empire in the New World a congeries of states or more likely a huge imperial state. That state he evidently intended to designate Colombia: its capital should be on the Isthmus of Panama.” The figure of Columbus, with its historical ties to empire and imperial discourse, was emblematic of the importance of the idea of empire, however indeterminate, in Miranda’s project.

Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán

At the age of nineteen, Juan Pablo Viscardo y Guzmán (1748–98) had come to Cuzco, Peru from his hometown of Pampacolca to study for the priesthood with his older brother. He had only just made his first vows in the priesthood when King Charles III exiled all Jesuits from his American realms in 1767. Viscardo was first removed to Spain and then to Italy, where he lived for years in poverty. The Crown forbade him from returning to his homeland to claim an inheritance left by his uncle in 1776. In 1781 Viscardo sent two letters to the British consul in Livorno, arguing that Spanish America was ripe for political independence and offering to help the British plan an invasion to liberate the region. In 1782 Viscardo moved to London, where he lived supported by a government pension until his death in 1798, his plans and petitions largely having been ignored. Among the documents Viscardo produced during his years in London is the Letter to the Spanish Americans, a document that has been called “the Declaration of Independence of Spanish America” and has often been compared to Thomas Paine’s Common Sense. Viscardo completed the Letter in Spanish in 1791, but it was not printed until 1799, after Viscardo’s death, when Miranda was responsible for translating it into French and publishing it in London. Such was Miranda’s enthusiasm for the Letter’s argument for political independence from Spain that, in Karen Racine’s words, it became his “mission statement.” During his 1806 Leander expedition, after he landed
in Venezuela, Miranda not only distributed copies of the *Letter* to the local population, the majority of whom were illiterate Afro-Venezuelan slaves, but he also mandated that the *Letter* be read aloud once a day to the local inhabitants. Miranda likely never met Viscardo, although they both lived in London at the same time and were separately attempting to persuade William Pitt to support Spanish American independence before the Jesuit’s death.

Viscardo was the first to invoke Columbus in the Creole argument, alluded to above, that the Crown had not met its obligations to the conquistadors and their descendants, who had alleged since the sixteenth century that they had been denied the privileges to which they were entitled by virtue of their families’ service to the Crown. These claims to privileges were based on practices established during the reconquest and the colonization of the Canaries by which those who served the Crown were rewarded *encomiendas*, or grants of land and native laborers.\(^4\) Ovando in Hispaniola, Cortés in Mexico, and Pizarro in Peru all adhered to this tradition, awarding their followers these grants. Seeking to satisfy the demands of the conquistadors, the Crown ratified this practice but became worried about reports of mistreatment of the natives and the rapid decline in their populations. The Crown was also reluctant to duplicate the kind of aristocracy that was the cause of so many political problems at home. These concerns led to the creation of the New Laws of 1542, which, among other things, prohibited the creation of new *encomiendas* and mandated that the title to existing *encomiendas* revert to the Crown upon the death of the current holder. This change was viewed by Spaniards in the Indies as an attack on their well-earned rights. In New Spain, the viceroy reacted to these new provisions in the New Laws by “obeying but not complying,” a strategy that became standard practice in the Indies; in Peru a force of angry conquistadors led by Gonzalo Pizarro killed the viceroy who was sent to Lima to enforce the New Laws. As David Brading has shown, Spanish American “Creole patriotism” developed in part out of the injustice felt by conquistadors and their descendants in
similar circumstances. The sense of umbrage that Creoles felt in the sixteenth century continued throughout the colonial period and erupted in some of the revolts of the late eighteenth century. At that time, Creoles like Viscardo y Guzmán saw Columbus as the first victim of the Crown’s neglect. Just as the Crown failed to meet its contractual obligations to Columbus as set out in the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fe*, it had failed to meet its obligations to the conquistadors and their descendants.

The opening sentence of Viscardo’s *Letter* alludes to Columbus’s famous landing in 1492: “Our proximity to the fourth century since the establishment of our ancestors in the New World is an occurrence too remarkable to not more seriously attract our attention.” Viscardo finished writing his *Letter* in 1791, one year before the tercentennial of Columbus’s first voyage to the New World. In Viscardo’s view, 1492 is important because it marks “the establishment of our ancestors in the New World.” This date serves as the touchstone for Viscardo’s discussion. Its importance is underlined by the *Letter’s* repetition four times of the phrase “three centuries.” The thrice-repeated possessive pronoun in the first sentence (“our near approach,” “our ancestors,” “our attention”) reveals the Creole Viscardo’s self-identification as a descendant of the Spanish. From this subject position, he declares: “The New World is our country; its history is ours,” thereby erasing native peoples, mestizos, and those of African descent who populated Spanish America at the end of the eighteenth century. Viscardo’s continued use of possessive pronouns in the first section of his *Letter* further emphasizes the Spanish descent of American Creoles.

The *Letter’s* allusion to Columbus’s landfall in 1492 and its definition of that event not as the year modern Europeans encountered the New World but when Viscardo’s ancestors arrived there also reveal Viscardo’s genealogical claim to Columbus, whom he viewed as a stand-in for those ancestors. This same claim is seen in newspapers printed later during the fight for independence, when rebels are described as “sons of Columbus.” We note that there is a
genealogical meaning here that was lacking in the phrase’s use in Anglo-American revolutionary rhetoric. In Spanish America, as Viscardo’s Letter illustrates, Columbus’s status as first ancestor in the Americas of the Creoles was woven into the argument about the neglect of the rights of conquistadors and their descendants: Spain’s breach of contract with the first conquistador, Columbus, became metonymic of Spain’s neglect of its obligations to the Creole descendants of the conquistadors.

Viscardo carefully constructs his argument about the unfair treatment of the conquistadors and their descendants. First, in the section most frequently quoted by modern scholars, he condemns the entire history of Spanish colonization since Columbus, saying, “Our history for three centuries . . . might [be] abridge[d] . . . into these four words—ingratitude, injustice, slavery, and desolation” (emphasis in original). The remainder of the letter elaborates on these grievances, laying the groundwork for Viscardo’s justification for political independence. In this manner, the Letter’s framework mirrors that of the US Declaration of Independence with its list of “injuries and usurpations” suffered by the colonists.

The first grievance Viscardo addresses is Spain’s ingratitude regarding the accomplishments of the conquistadors, who served loyally at great personal cost in order to expand the realm. “Our ancestors,” he states, conquered the Indies “by the most excessive exertion, with the greatest dangers, and at their own expense.” Their “natural affection for their native country led them to make her the most generous homage of their immense acquisitions, having no reason to doubt that such an important and freely offered service would be worth a proportionate recompense for them according to the Spanish custom of recompensing those who had contributed to extending the dominion of the nation.” Viscardo laments that although their service “gave them a right . . . to appropriate to themselves the fruit of their valour,” the conquistadors were denied this right: “all that we have lavished upon Spain has been taken, contrary to all reason, from ourselves and from our children.”
Viscardo rhetorically equates the Crown’s refusal to fulfill the “legitimate hopes” (las legítimas esperanzas) of the conquistadors with its subsequent mistreatment of the Creoles.\textsuperscript{51} This linkage is in part achieved by the subtle switch in the narrative voice from the third person plural (used to describe the conquistadors) to the first person plural (used to describe the Creoles):

These legitimate hopes having been frustrated, \textit{their descendants} and those of other Spaniards who continued to arrive in America, and despite that \textit{we} only recognize her as our Patria, and despite that our subsistence and that of \textit{our descendants} is based in her, \textit{we} have respected, preserved, and sincerely venerated the attachment of \textit{our ancestors} to their former country: it is for her that \textit{we} have sacrificed infinite riches of every kind: only for her have \textit{we} resisted until now, and it is for her that \textit{we} have shed our blood with enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{52}

The principal clause above, beginning with “their descendants,” is narrated in the third person. The disinterested narrative voice here focuses on the conquistadors and their descendants. As the sentence progresses, however, the subject position of the narrative voice changes so that it now issues from the position of a Creole who speaks about “our ancestors.” The rest of the sentence lists the sacrifices made by Creoles, thus mirroring the sacrifices of the conquistadors. The analogy established here is that just as the Crown was ungrateful for the sacrifices made by the conquistadors, it has been ungrateful for the sacrifices made by “us,” the Creoles, whose “foolishness (necedad) has been forging chains for us.”\textsuperscript{53} The Creoles portrayed in Viscardo’s \textit{Letter} feel duped by Spain. Viscardo paints an image of the victimized Creole in chains that resembles the image of Columbus in chains after his arrest in 1500, suggesting the aptness of the Creole identification with Columbus.

Viscardo continues with the theme of Spain’s ingratitude while introducing the topic of injustice. This time the narrative voice is
that of an ambiguous first person plural that combines the perspective of the conquistador and the Creole:

An immense empire, treasures greater than could be imagined in other times, glory and power superior to all that was known to antiquity: these are our titles to the gratitude of Spain and her government, and to their most distinguished protection and benevolence. Yet our recompense has been that which the most rigid justice could have dictated if we had been guilty of the opposite crimes: she exiles us from the Old World, and cuts us off from the society to which we are so closely connected.\textsuperscript{54}

It is at this point that Viscardo directly references Columbus in his argument, implying that Spain’s ingratitude began with its dealings with Columbus. Such ingratitude is, in Viscardo’s eyes, despicable, fundamentally unjust, and constitutes treason: “Let us consult our annals for three centuries. After the Spanish Court’s ingratitude, injustice, and its breach of contract, first with the great Columbus and then with the other conquistadors who gave to it the empire of the New World according to conditions solemnly stipulated, we find in its descendants only the effects of the scorn and hatred with which they were slandered, persecuted, and ruined.”\textsuperscript{55}

Viscardo’s rhetoric here pits the Creole descendants of the conquistadors, represented by Columbus, against the Spanish Court. Columbus and “the other conquerors” are portrayed as great men, imperial conquerors, whose actions are summed up in the past tense of the verb “to give” and the phrase “solemnly stipulated.” Columbus and the conquistadors respected the rules and behaved in a righteous manner when they “gave to [Spain] the empire of the New World.” The Spanish Court, on the other hand, broke the rules. Its actions are summed up with the nouns “ingratitude,” “injustice,” and “breach of contract,” and it is the agent that caused the Creoles to be “slandered, persecuted, and ruined.”

An important part of Viscardo’s argument is the portrayal of Spain as once having been just. He points to the creation of the
Cortes after the destruction of the last Gothic kings, when “our ancestors, during the re-establishment of their kingdom and its government, thought of nothing as carefully as they did about guarding against absolute power to which our kings have always aspired.” Viscardo suggests, however, that all of these good intentions turned sour around 1492, when after the consolidation of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, together with their acquisition of so many territories, including the great wealth of the Indies, “the crown acquired such an unforeseen preponderance that in a very short time it overthrew all barriers raised by the prudence of our forefathers who sought to safeguard the liberty of their descendants; the royal authority, like the sea overflowing its boundaries, inundated the whole monarchy, and the will of the king and his ministers became the only universal law.”

This narrative of Spain’s rise and fall is one of the keys to Viscardo’s underlying argument for independence. It also points to the primacy of Columbus in the Creole narrative justifying independence. Viscardo implies that the conquistadors, his ancestors, brought with them to the New World the “noble spirit of liberty” that was embodied in the institution of the Cortes and the Aragonese office of El Justicia. According to Viscardo, that spirit, once at the core of Spanish governance, was snuffed out in Spain in approximately 1492 but lives on in the Creoles of the New World, who value liberty and natural rights by virtue of their Spanish descent, which remains uncorrupted by contemporary developments on the peninsula. It is in this sense that Viscardo speaks of “the prudence of our forefathers” and argues for independence in order to safeguard that prudence. It is this authentic spirit of Spain—embodied in the Creoles’ actions and their genes—that Viscardo’s Columbus represents.

**Simón Bolívar**

As mentioned earlier, Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) spent time with Francisco de Miranda in the summer of 1810 during his visit to London as part of the delegation sent by the Caracas junta to
discuss prospects for emancipation with the British government. Known as the great liberator and the father of Spanish American independence, Bolívar has become a nationalist myth in his own right. He grew up in a wealthy Caracas family and, like most young elite Creole men, he finished his education in Europe. On his way home from Europe in late 1806 and early 1807, he visited New York, Washington, Boston, and Philadelphia. Bolívar was extremely well read, in both the classics and the European and Spanish traditions; he surely would have read most of the same texts about Columbus that Francisco de Miranda read.

Likely influenced by Miranda during his visit to London in 1810, Bolívar also used the term “Colombia” in reference to an independent Spanish America as one political entity. Ardao traces Bolívar’s use of the term, showing that early on, in the Cartagena Manifesto (1812), Bolívar refers to the destroyed First Venezuelan Republic as the “birthplace of Columbian independence,” suggesting that Venezuela was the touchstone for the independence of the rest of Spanish America. Similarly, Bolívar refers in 1814 to Caracas as “that immortal city, the first to give the example of liberty in the hemisphere of Colombia.” After September 1815, Bolívar stops using the term “Colombia” to refer to all of Spanish America as Miranda did. In his Jamaica Letter, he admits that while forming one political entity out of the former Spanish American colonies is desirable, doing so is impossible: “Forming of the New World a single nation with one tie that connects its parts to each other and to the whole is a grandiose idea. Since it has one origin, one language, similar customs, and one religion, it should have one government that would form a confederation of the different states that will be created; but this is not possible, because America is divided by remote climates, diverse situations, opposing interests, and dissimilar characteristics!”

If the formation of one large nation composed of Spain’s former colonies was no longer feasible in Bolívar’s mind, now he suggested in the Jamaica Letter that Venezuela and New Granada should unite and be called “Colombia.” Simon Collier
characterizes Bolívar’s “Columbian experiment” (the unification of New Granada and Venezuela) as the practical application of his more idealistic desire to unify the independent republics of Spanish America in some kind of political relationship. Regarding the name for his practical project, Bolívar states, “This nation would be called Colombia as a tribute of justice and gratitude to the creator of our hemisphere.” It is not surprising that Bolívar viewed Columbus as the “creator of our hemisphere.” This was the typical Creole, Eurocentric perspective that denied the existence of indigenous peoples and their civilizations before 1492.

The only other item in the historical record that enlightens us as to Bolívar’s ideas about Columbus is written by Bolívar’s aide de camp, Daniel Florencio O’Leary, who recorded Bolívar’s belief, purportedly expressed in 1819, that Columbus had been a victim of the Spaniards. According to O’Leary, Bolívar felt that by honoring Columbus as Spain failed to do, Spanish Americans would show themselves to be worthy of independence:

The plan [to create Colombia] in itself is great and magnificent; but, in addition to its utility, I wish to see it realized because it gives us the opportunity to rectify, in part, the injustice that has been done to a great man and to whom in this way we erect a monument that justifies our gratitude. Calling our republic Colombia, naming its capital Las Casas, we will prove to the world that not only do we have the right to be free but also to be considered sufficiently just to know to honor to the friends and benefactors of humanity: Columbus and Las Casas belong to America. Let us honor them by perpetuating their glories.

Bolívar’s language here (in the words of O’Leary) is typical of the way Columbus was appealed to in New-World nationalist discourse. First, he is portrayed as a victim, as a loyal servant, who (as in Viscardo’s Letter to the Spanish Americans) is rebuffed by the imperial mother. Bolívar suggests that this crime can be remedied by adopting Columbus’s name, as Bolívar surely knew
many commentators through the centuries had advocated. We note how Bolívar pairs Columbus with Las Casas, the so-called “Defender of the Indians,” and how both are disassociated from the aggressor’s side of the history of conquest and three hundred years of colonial domination. The strongest part of this passage is the statement that “Columbus and Las Casas belong to America,” purportedly because its inhabitants alone know how to honor them, but also because both, in the typical Creole view, sought to create a peaceful empire for Christendom in the New World. Indeed, the last phrase of the above quote suggests that in honoring them, Spanish Americans will perpetuate “their glories.” I would argue that this refers to their fame, as well as their impulse to build an empire.

**Empire and *Translatio imperii* in Spanish America**

In the collective imagination of the early United States, as I discussed in Chapter 3, the notion of empire building and of constructing the nation in the image of empire was a commonplace. George Washington, for example, characterized his country several times as “a rising empire.” The founders sought to perfect the British attempt to marry empire and republic—to achieve *grandezza* (a great territorial expanse) and to guarantee liberty. From its birth, the republic was set on a path for territorial expansion and was commonly thought of as an empire.

But what about empire and the story of its westward movement (the *translatio imperii*) in the construction of the nation-states in post-independence Spanish America? The pattern of conquest and settlement in Spain’s colonies was characterized by a gradual process of constructing urban settlements throughout the vast region and then filling in the empty spaces between settlements. Therefore, unlike in the early United States, where a “line of settlement” divided the British from the natives, in early independent Spanish America there generally was less of a
concerted push to expand borders and incorporate new territory. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of empire building was an important part of early nationalist discourses in Spanish America. While the *translatio imperii* narrative was employed to help justify political independence and undergird the construction of new nation-states, just as it had been employed in the North, in Spanish America early nationalists did not employ the *translatio imperii* story to justify systematic territorial expansion.

In Spanish America there was, in general, less of an emphasis on empire as a large and continually expanding territory. Although both Miranda and Bolívar were fond of expressions describing the great size of independent Spanish America, their notions of empire were not underwritten and realized by law, as was the case in the United States. There were no policies of continual expansion, no systematic invasion of foreign territories, no policies that as a matter of course sought the destruction of native populations, no filibustering by land-hungry individuals tacitly underwritten by governments, and no multiple attempts to buy other countries from foreign governments, as in the United States. Rather, Spanish American patriots employed the term “empire” to denote a political entity that would outdo the glory of the classical empires of Greece and Rome. This entity was often referred to, both practically and poetically, as “Colombia.”

To recognize the ethereal quality of empire as it was employed in nationalist discourse in Spanish America, I consider a speech given in 1819 by Venezuelan Francisco Antonio Zea. Although Zea does not refer to Columbus or use the term “Colombia” in his address, he compares his country with the empires of antiquity, using the language of ancient empires to incite his compatriots to imagine the future of their new nation. After having been selected as president of the new second national congress, Zea addressed the assembly as follows:

> All nations and all empires were in their infancy feeble and little, like man himself, to whom they owe their origin. Those
great cities which still inflame the imagination, Memphis, Palmyra, Thebes, Alexandria, Tyre, the capital even of Belus and Semiramis, and thou also, proud Rome, mistress of the universe, were nothing more at their commencement than diminutive and miserable hamlets. It was not in the Capitol, nor in the palace of Agrippa nor of Trajan, but it was in a lowly hut, under a thatched roof, that Romulus, rudely clad, traced the capital of the world, and laid the foundations of his mighty empire. . . . It is not by the luster nor by the magnificence of our installation, but by the immense means bestowed on us by nature, and by the immense plans which you will form for availing ourselves of them, that the future grandeur and power of our republic should be measured. The artless splendor of the noble act of patriotism which General Bolivar has just given so illustrious and so memorable an example, stamps on this solemnity a character of antiquity, and is a presage of the lofty destinies of our country. Neither Rome nor Athens, nor even Sparta, in the purest days of heroism and public virtue, ever presented so sublime and so interesting a scene. The imagination rises in contemplating it, ages and distances disappear, and we think ourselves contemporary with the Aristides, the Phocions, the Camillus, and the Epaminondas of other days.  

That Zea compared Venezuela with the empires of antiquity, especially the Roman Empire, on the inauguration of the first congress at Angostura, suggests the seductiveness of this kind of comparison for Creole patriots who believed that it was their turn to develop into the world’s new dominant society. The poetic nature of Zea’s language is illustrative of the utopian and lyrical quality of the discourse of Spanish American nationalists who referred to the greatness of Rome and its Empire, especially in comparison to their counterparts in the United States.

Several texts that are now considered foundational in the Spanish American canon reveal the complicity of empire and nation building in the region. Among these is Juan Pablo
Viscardo y Guzmán’s *Letter to the Spanish Americans*. I have already discussed the *Letter*’s employment of Columbus in the Creole argument for independence. A corollary of this employment is the *Letter*’s vision of the future American empire. Indeed, it is likely that one of the reasons Viscardo’s *Letter* resonated to such an extent with Miranda was its articulation of a new empire that would arise after independence. Viscardo writes that in the future “the national glory [will] be reborn in an immense empire [and] become the secret asylum of all Spaniards.” The pure, uncorrupt spirit of Spain would be at the heart of this “immense empire,” which would abide by Enlightenment values of reason and justice and free trade. Viscardo ends the essay, and his vision of empire, with a marked universalism: “Thus the extremities of the earth would be united by America, and her inhabitants would be united by the common interests of one great family of brothers!” In this essay we see the same pan-American emphasis that Miranda advocates and that Bolívar later attempts to bring into fruition with the 1826 Panama Congress. But there is more to Viscardo’s poetic vision: his America, an independent Spanish America, would not only be “an immense empire,” it “would . . . unite the extremities of the earth,” much like Rome and Columbus himself were credited for doing.

Simón Bolívar penned several foundational texts that reveal how the nation was thought of in terms of empire. Bolívar consistently articulated his vision of a united Spanish America using the language of empire and an intensely lyrical style; however, like Miranda, he was not a systematic thinker, and he never explained precisely how he understood the relationship of empire and the modern nation-state. Rather, in his writings Bolívar describes his envisioned nation using consistent rhetorical flourishes that employ the language and images of empire.

Simon Collier hints at this kind of rhetoric when he parenthetically states, “The reader of Bolívar’s writings can hardly fail to be struck by how often he summoned up images of power, vastness, and grandeur—there is something deep in his
These images that Collier refers to, I would argue, go beyond mere expressions of sovereignty. Rather, they are an appeal to the collective imaginary of empire, which Bolívar employed to great effect in his discourse about Spanish American nation building. Notable characteristics of this discourse include an emphasis on unity, the exercise of power, and the New World outdoing the Old World in terms of greatness and glory.

First, let us look at the importance of unity in Bolívar’s discourse. Despite the pragmatic moment in the Jamaica Letter where he recognizes the impossibility of “forming the entire New World into one single nation with one single tie that connects its parts together and gives them cohesion,” soon after this quote, Bolívar continues to wax poetic about a future united league of Spanish American nations: “How beautiful it would be if the Isthmus of Panama were for us what Corinth was for the Greeks! I hope that one day we have the good fortune to establish there an august congress of representatives of republics, kingdoms and empires in order to address and discuss the lofty themes of peace and war with nations from other parts of the world!”

Not long after he wrote the Jamaica Letter, in 1818 Bolívar invited the inhabitants of the River Plate to form “one single society.” “Americans should have a single patria,” he wrote to Juan Martín de Pueyrredón that same year, referring to an “American pact” to “[form] a single body of all our republics.” Similarly, in 1822 Bolívar wrote to Bernardo O’Higgins about “the social pact which must form, in this hemisphere, a nation of republics.” “Such words,” concludes Collier, “can hardly be taken as implying anything other than some kind of vision of ultimate Spanish American unity.” Historian John Lynch concurs: “Whatever he meant by a ‘nation of republics,’ he advocated supranational unity of some kind.”

Collier believes that Bolívar was “obsessed, certainly by the 1820s, with devising schemes to link the new republics, sundered from the Spanish Empire and from each other, in some kind of collaborative arrangement that might, in the fullness of time,
lead to a united Spanish America.” This obsession led not only to the formation of the new state of Colombia and his plans for an Andean Federation, but also to his design for the Panama Congress of 1826, which grew in part out of Bolívar’s desire to unify the region in the face of threats from the Holy Alliance to help Spain regain its American possessions. In the 1824 invitation to attend the Congress, which he extended to the leaders of Colombia, Mexico, Río de la Plata, Chile, and Guatemala, Bolívar reasoned that “it is time that the interests and relations that unite the American republics, which were previously Spanish colonies, be granted a fundamental base that immortalizes, if possible, the duration of these governments.” The formation of a confederation of states, Bolívar felt, would bind the republics together in this way and allow for their common defense in the face of the continuing European threat.

While the Panama Congress was largely a flop, it reveals the importance of unity for Bolívar as well as his long-lasting desire for a continental-wide political union. Collier’s analysis of Bolívar’s ideals for the Congress and the language he used to describe them are worth quoting here. Bolívar, he says,

clearly envisioned it as something a good deal more substantial than a simple league, as a kind of supranational organization that could (among other things) intervene to restore order in countries in turmoil. As he told Santander, he would like to see the powers of the Panama Congress “amplified almost infinitely, to give it strength and a truly sovereign authority.” The eloquent phrase shows that Bolívar was not really interested in setting up a loose consultative association of states. In his correspondence, in fact, Bolívar gives the game away completely by his evident preference for the term federation as a descriptive scheme.

Bolívar’s own description of the power that such a Spanish American federation would exert is illuminating. It would “form the most vast, or most extraordinary or most strong league that
has appeared to date on the earth.” He clearly desired his united political entity to exercise extensive dominion, very much in the Roman sense of the term *imperium*. Bolívar admired both the Roman and the British Empires. Both, he said in the Angostura Address, “were born to rule and be free.” Their constitutions, he argued, were the most fitting political models for Spanish America, not those of France or the relatively new United States. He particularly admired the imperial stature of Great Britain, which he called “Señora of nations,” before whom the nations of “the Holy Alliance all tremble.” Great Britain, Bolívar stated, “is the Roman Empire at the end of the republic and at the beginning of the empire. England finds herself in an ascendant progression, unhappy all those who oppose her.” In his “Thought on the Congress of Panama” (1826), Bolívar suggested making Great Britain a “Constituent Member” of the Congress, and he alluded to the possibility of “the union of the new states with the British Empire.” Such an alliance, he went so far to suggest, “could, perhaps, find itself, in the fullness of time, one single nation covering the universe.”

In a similar vein, Bolívar finished his speech to the Angostura Congress with a lofty vision in which he saw his Colombia (the newly united New Granada and Venezuela) someday ruling the world:

On contemplating the unification of this immense region, my soul soars to the heights demanded by such a colossal vista, such an astonishing scene. Flying from age to age, my imagination reflects on the centuries to come, and as I look down from such a vantage point, amazed at the prosperity, splendor, and vitality of this vast region, I feel a kind of rapture, as if this land stood at the very heart of the universe, spread out from coast to coast between oceans separated by nature and which it is our task to reunite with long, broad canals. I see her as unifier, center, emporium for the human family, sending out to the entire earth the
treasures of silver and gold hidden in her mountains, extracting health and vitality from her lush vegetation for the suffering men of the old world, communicating her previous secrets to the wise men still unaware of the vast stores of knowledge and wealth so bountifully provided by nature. I see her seated on the throne of liberty, grasping the scepter of justice, crowned by glory, and revealing to the old world the majesty of the modern world.²⁵

Bolívar paints this image of a ruling Colombia using the words of empire: she sits on a throne, holds a scepter, and wears a crown.

Bolívar’s use of the rhetoric of empire to describe the new Spanish American nation-states is also seen in his Jamaica Letter. At the end of this Letter, Bolívar focuses on the translatio studii, the transfer from east to west of the culture of the victorious in the subjugation of foreign others, a transfer which is concomitant with the translatio imperii: “When we are at last strong,” he writes, “. . . then we will cultivate in harmony the virtues and talents that lead to glory; then we will follow the majestic path toward abundant prosperity marked out by destiny for South America; then the arts and sciences that were born in the Orient and that brought enlightenment to Europe will fly to free Colombia, which will [invite them by offering asylum].”²⁶

Here Bolívar uses the term “Colombia” in the continental sense, in the same way that Miranda used it, to refer to Spanish America. His direct reference to the westward flight of “the arts and sciences that were born in the Orient,” then landed in Europe, and now move to America, implicitly suggests that “Colombia” will also be home to Western empire.

Two other foundational texts in the Spanish American tradition are worthy of note. While only the second invokes the figure of Columbus, both are relevant with regard to how Bolívar thought of the nation-state in terms of empire. The first is Bolívar’s “Oath in Rome,” in which he swears to liberate Spanish America from Spain. He supposedly made this oath in 1805 atop
the Mons Sacer, one of Rome’s seven hills. The end of the oath is most often quoted:

The civilization that has blown from the East has shown all its faces here, all its parts. But with regard to resolving the great problem of man in liberty, it seems that the matter has been unknown and that clearing up this mysterious unknown can only be verified in the New World. I swear before you, I swear by the God of my fathers, I swear on their graves, I swear on my Country that I will not rest body or soul until I have broken the chains that bind us by the will of Spanish power.

These words were recorded years later by Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar’s teacher, with whom he traveled through Europe and climbed the Mons Sacer. Rodríguez recalled the event in his memoirs, and some have speculated that they are Rodríguez’s invention or at least the product of his embellishment. (We note, however, that there is likely at least a kernel of truth to the story, as Bolívar himself in a letter to Rodríguez dated 1824 remembers “when we went to the Mons Sacer in Rome to swear to free our country on that holy ground.” Historian Gerhard Masur opined in 1948 that “a reconstruction of what Bolívar actually said is hardly possible. Forty-five years after the event took place S. Rodríguez gave a novelistic description of the famous vow which is quite obviously an imaginative invention; its historical value is nil.” Today, most critics would probably disagree with Masur’s evaluation. Regardless of the authenticity of the “Oath,” it merits our attention because it has become part of the Venezuelan nationalist narrative. Susan Rotker’s judgment is exemplary: “It does not matter how many footnotes refute its content since it has the element of an icon; as such, the category of Truth becomes completely secondary.” Rotker goes further, concluding, “If this did not happen, it does not matter: it should have happened.” Christopher Conway adds, “Indeed,
as an emblem of Bolívar, and of his iconicity as a national and Pan-American symbol, the ‘Oath of Rome’ faithfully represents a foundational scene of Latin American identity.”

Indeed, today the “Oath” is still important in Venezuela’s self-image: it is memorized by Venezuelan school children and quoted by politicians.

O’Leary’s account of the scene of the “Oath” is typical in the historiography of Spanish American independence: “On Monte Sacro the sufferings of his own country overwhelmed his mind, and he knelt down and made that vow whose faithful fulfillment the emancipation of South America is the glorious witness.”

In 1950, Venezuelan painter Tito Salas captured the scene of the “Oath,” with Bolívar overlooking the ruins of the Roman forum, in a painting that hangs in the National Pantheon in Caracas (see Figure 8).

On the surface, the “Oath” appears to be a simple statement against the tyranny of empire. Before modern historiographers clarified the geography of Rome, the Mons Sacer on which Bolívar purportedly stood was often confused with the Aventine; both places were sites to which the plebian lower class seceded in its struggle to end debt-slavery and win official recognition for its representatives, its own assembly, and access to magistracies.

This struggle is recorded in Livy’s History of Rome, which both Bolívar and Rodríguez likely read. Livy’s narrative notes how the plebs of the Republic withdrew to the Aventine in order to pressure the patricians (who resided on the Palatine hill) into political negotiations. And it is at the site of the plebs’ struggle with the perceived tyranny of the patricians that Bolívar declares he will set Spanish America free from the tyranny of the Spanish Empire. Yet, Bolívar’s stance regarding empire is not so clear-cut in the “Oath.” The republican and imperial phases of Roman history are lumped together, and both are declared failures. The first part of the “Oath,” where, in Lynch’s words, “the pen of Rodríguez may well have prevailed,” reads as follows:
So then, this is the nation of Romulus and Numa, of the Gracchi and the Horaces, of Augustus and Nero, of Caesar and Brutus, of Tiberius and Trajan? Here every manner of grandeur has had its type, all miseries their cradle. Octavian masks himself in the cloak of public piety to conceal his untrusting character and his bloody outbursts; Brutus thrusts his dagger into the heart of his
patron so as to replace Caesar’s tyranny with his own; Antony renounces his claim to glory to set sail on the galleys of a whore; with no projects of reform, Sulla beheads his fellow countrymen and Tiberius, dark as night and depraved as crime itself, divides his time between lust and slaughter. For every Cincinnatus there were a hundred Caracallas, a hundred Caligulas for every Trajan, a hundred Claudiiuses for every Vespasian. This nation has examples of everything: severity for former times, austerity for republics, depravity for emperors, catacombs for Christians, courage for conquering the entire world, ambition for turning every nation on earth into a fertile field for tribute; women capable of driving the sacrilegious wheels of their carriages over the decapitated bodies of their parents; orators, like Cicero capable of stirring crowds to action; poets, like Virgil, for seducing with their song; satirists, like Juvenal and Lucretius; weak minded philosophers, like Seneca; complete citizens, like Cato.\textsuperscript{95}

This text collapses the Roman Republic and Empire, a collapse that points to the porous line between the categories of empire and republic in much of the political discourse of the Americas during the Age of Revolution. The “Oath” refers indiscriminately to figures of Roman history, moving from the Roman kings Romulus and Numa to the republican figures of the Gracchi brothers, and then to the emperors Augustus and Nero, among others. Bolívar’s point is that both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire failed in the “emancipation of the spirit” and in the “final perfectibility of reason,” despite their greatness: “This nation has examples for everything, except for the cause of humanity: corrupt Messalinas, gutless Agrippas, great historians, distinguished naturalists, heroic warriors, rapacious consuls, unrestrained sybarites, golden virtues, and foul crimes; but for the emancipation of the spirit, the elimination of cares, the exaltation of man, and the final perfectibility of reason, little or nothing.”\textsuperscript{96} It is only in the New World, Bolívar then posits, that the unfulfilled grandeur of Rome, both Republic and Empire, will be realized.
For Bolívar both the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire were useful models to be superseded. Here Leopoldo Zea’s observation about the meaning of Rome in Bolívar’s thought is helpful:

Before it transformed into Empire, Rome had been the creator of the republican archetype for free men. Bolívar would attempt to do something more than Rome did, not extend dominium, but create other republics, not [engage in] imperial expansion, but in the reproduction of the republic throughout the America that Bolívar would go about liberating. That is, [he sought] to create multiple republics and, with all of them, form a Confederation of Republics. Not an Empire but rather a great community of free republics equally formed by free men. Both the Republic and the Empire of Rome supplied models for attaining what could seem an impossible libertarian dream.97

It is within this context of a murky employment of political typologies reflecting his understanding of Rome that Bolívar suggests that the post-independence nation-state be named after Columbus, a figure associated for centuries with empire.

The second foundational text, also probably apocryphal, which some attribute to Simón Bolívar, is “My Delirium on Chimborazo,” published for the first time in 1833, after Bolívar’s death. Most experts find some reason to doubt the authenticity of this document, the original of which has never been located.98 Lynch writes that “the lack of collaborative evidence and contemporary reference invites an agnostic response.”99 Narrated in first person, the piece relates Bolívar’s supposed trek to the summit of Chimborazo, which at an altitude of 20,565 feet above sea level was thought at the beginning of the nineteenth century to be the highest mountain in the world. After surpassing the tracks of Humboldt, who climbed partway up the mountain in 1802, Bolívar finally reaches the top, when, the text reads, “a feverish delirium suspends my mental faculties. I feel as if I were aflame with a strange, higher fire. It was the God of Colombia taking
He then converses with Time about the past and the future, and he is finally revived by “the tremendous voice of Colombia”: “Absorbed, frozen in time, so to speak, I lay lifeless for a long time, stretched out on that immense diamond serving as my bed. Finally, the tremendous voice of Colombia cries out to me. I come back to life, sit up, open my heavy eyelids with my own hands. I become a man again, and write down my delirium.”

Regardless of this text’s authenticity, its status in the Spanish American cultural tradition merits our consideration. Angel Grisanti, writing in 1964, called it “the most profoundly lyrical of Bolívar’s writings and one of the most beautiful pieces of literature in the Spanish language.” Grisanti contended that Bolívar climbed the mountain on 5 July 1822, inspired by the eleventh anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of Venezuela. According to Grisanti, “The Liberator is euphoric, beside himself, impassioned, burning with the glow of so many glorious memories. Along the route, Venezuela is on the hearts and minds of everyone. . . . And it is Bolívar, as protagonist of the epic, who becomes most delirious.” Given the complicity between epic and empire, the epic being the story of domination told by the dominators, it is apt that Grisanti refers to Bolívar as the protagonist of the epic of Venezuelan (and Spanish American) independence. It is also fitting that the “God of Colombia tak[es] possession” of Bolívar during the spiritual experience described in the “Delirium,” for Columbus has always been an archetype of empire.