The Legacy of Christopher Columbus in the Americas

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As discussed in detail in the Introduction, in the last decade or so an increasing number of scholars have critiqued the dominance of the nation-state as a unit of analysis. In doing so, they have challenged exceptionalist views of US history, according to which empire and the nation-state are viewed as oppositional, empire being replaced by the nation-state at the moment it is born from the ashes of the colonial experience. Scholarship critical of this view takes its impetus from the so-called “global turn” and is sometimes called post-national American studies or “New Americanist Studies.”

Although this recent scholarship has created a better understanding of the nation as empire, it has yet to consider the significance of Columbus as he was represented in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, our view of Columbus has remained impeded by nation-centric methodologies that exclude the supranational contexts in which the meanings of Columbus were constructed. This book attempts to rectify this situation.

Understanding the figure of Columbus in the Americas requires a comparative approach. The American nationalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who were responsible for appropriating Columbus as a nationalistic symbol of empire did not live in isolated linguistic bubbles. Instead, they were citizens...
of the Atlantic “republic of letters”: they read widely and were familiar with the textual conversations in different languages and through the centuries about Columbus, and indeed about empire and conquest in the Western world, with which he became so closely associated. If we seek to understand the meaning of the word “Colombia” as it appears on the flag of the first Venezuelan republic, we must consider Francisco de Miranda’s own experience with the term. This entails our investigation of how it was employed in the United States during Miranda’s travels there as well as Miranda’s encounters with Columbus and his legacy throughout his diverse readings of the canonical texts, both historiographic and literary, in the various languages used in the Atlantic republic of letters and in the Hispanic tradition.

By opening the field of inquiry and going beyond nation-centered traditions, I have argued that the meaning of Columbus in the Americas is constructed by a transatlantantic discourse that was originally created by Columbus himself, later perpetuated by historiographers and literati, and eventually taken up by writers in the Americas, both North and South. Through this discourse, the figure of Columbus was constructed as an archetype of empire that was uniquely suited to convey not only the imperial designs for real territorial expansion in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also the desire of Spanish Americans for imperial grandeur.

The embracing of Columbus as a figure of empire by New-World republics breaking free from Old-World empires shows the imperial underpinnings of the nation-state. Discourses about Columbus in the Americas reveal the desire of nationalists to set the New World apart from the Old. Yet these discourses simultaneously illustrate an aspiration to these same old imperial ideals via the consistent employment of the classic narrative of the translatio imperii, the westward transfer of empire.

The meaning of the figure of Columbus, however, was not set in stone as soon as Columbus portrayed himself as a
representative of empire. While I do believe that Columbus, as a sign, has generally been interpreted as a figure associated with empire, conquest, and colonization, and although I have focused on this argument, there are clearly other interpretations of him. For Italian Americans in the United States, for example, the figure of Columbus has been a symbol of Catholicism and ethnic and cultural identity. For some commentators in Spanish America, Columbus is a racial link to Europe and *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood), or a cultural link to Spain and Hispanidad. The different meanings of Columbus constructed by various groups that uphold him as their hero or symbol have been thoroughly discussed by various scholars. I seek to add to the scholarship about Columbus by taking the long view of the transatlantic history of Columbus representations, whereby it becomes apparent that a great many of the contexts in which these representations have been produced are thematically related to empire, in a variety of meanings. Indeed, I would argue that it was the West’s obsession with empire, its history and its future, that gave life to the symbol of Columbus in the Americas.

**The Meaning of Empire in Nationalist Discourses of the United States and Spanish America**

A critical study of the articulations of Columbus in the Americas reveals that empire was very much at the heart of the ideolog-ical foundations of the modern nation-states in the New World. It helped supply the language with which the new nations were rhetorically constructed. But what did empire mean in British America and in Spanish America?

In both his 1991 essay and his 2008 book, *The Language of Empire: Rome and the Idea of Empire from the Third Century BC to the Second Century AD*, John Richardson examines the “extension of meaning” of the term *imperium* during the growth of the Roman
Empire, from the third century BCE, when *imperium* referred simply to the power granted to a magistrate, to the early decades of the first century ACE, when the term also came to mean something more: “The earlier significance, the right of command within the Roman state . . . was never lost, but in addition the meaning ‘empire,’ in an increasingly concrete, territorial sense came to be a normal usage, so that, at least from the second half of the first century AD, *imperium Romanum* is used as we would use ‘Roman Empire.’” Richardson encourages us to think of this “extension of meaning” as having created a continuum: “It is apparent that we are not dealing with two alternative and incompatible meanings [of the term *imperium*], but with the co-existence of a pair of meanings, of which in any particular case one is likely to be more dominant than the other.”

The second meaning of the term *imperium* (the territory over which power is exercised) developed as the Roman Empire grew, and it soon subsumed the first meaning of the term (the power of a magistrate).

This notion of a semantic continuum whereby *imperium* is defined is helpful when we consider the meaning of empire in the Americas during the period covered in this book. As discussed in the Introduction, references to empire in nationalist discourses were often nothing more than vague allusions to power or to the grandeur that was popularly associated with Rome. But sometimes they were particular references to the kind of territorial expansion that had become part and parcel of what Rome meant in the Western imagination. In British America and later the United States, then, we can think of empire as meaning both power and territory. There, the term “empire” was employed with territorial expansion in mind much more frequently than in it was in Spanish America. This jibed with the political realities of the day. In the early United States there was consistent pressure to acquire territory and influence abroad that was absent in the early independent republics of Spanish America. Bolívar recognized that his project to create a politically unified state
was impossible, and the issue of territorial expansion was never a dominant theme in nationalist discourses, except perhaps for short periods of time in the cases of border disputes and later in the nineteenth century. But even in these cases, only a limited amount of territory believed to belong to the nation was desired, and the issue at hand was not territorial expansion per se, as it was in many instances in the United States. In Spanish America, therefore, the meaning of the term “empire” tends to remain closer to the first side of the continuum—that is, it refers to power and authority, or the ethos of empire, and only very infrequently does it refer to territory. Even in the case of Iturbide’s Mexican Empire (1821–23), when the language of empire was employed to great effect and the imperial trappings of the royal courts of Europe were imitated, territorial expansion was not an issue.

In considering further the meaning of empire in post-independence Spanish America, I return to Richardson’s essay and, in particular, to his reminder that even in Rome there was a certain obscurity to the term *imperium*, as the authority granted to a consul or praetor in part came from the gods. “Even in the period of the late republic and early empire,” he writes, “at least a certain element of the mysterious is to be expected: in part *imperium* belongs not to the precise complexities of constitutional law but to the proper obscurities of religion.”

This brings to mind the mystical tenor of the Spanish American foundational texts that I analyzed in Chapter 4. In those texts, the language of empire is used to describe the new nations in a highly lyrical mode. That intense lyrical quality is lacking in similar foundational texts of the United States. This is not to say that texts produced in British America and the United States did not wax poetic when they used the language of empire; rather, I wish to point out that the lyricism of the Spanish American texts is more pronounced, more profound, often even venturing on the mystical. Surely part of this aesthetic difference
is explained by the different influences and characteristics of the literary traditions in the North and South.

But I would suggest, too, that another explanation is found in the different natures of the Spanish and English colonial experiences. Spain’s colonial system was more hierarchical and controlled by the metropolis than England’s for multiple reasons: the different timing of the Spanish and the British colonial projects in the Americas (the British beginning theirs roughly a century after the Spanish), the differences in national traditions and previous histories of conquest, and the differences among the American landscapes and peoples the Spanish and the British encountered. The daily lives of British colonists were generally less restricted by colonial government than were the lives of their Spanish counterparts, but this depended on where both sets of colonists lived and how they made their living. The Spanish Empire in the Americas also lasted more than three hundred years, much longer than Britain’s empire. My point is that the long shadow of the colonial experience rendered the possibility of thinking about territorial expansion largely irrelevant for the early Spanish American nationalists of the nineteenth century. Conquering new territory in order to incorporate it into the new nations was simply not on their agenda. How different was the situation in the early United States.

While post-independence Spanish American Creoles conjured up visions of their new nation-states as greater than Rome, and while they used the language of empire to describe them, the manner in which they did so took on a poetic air. It was almost as if telling the story of their becoming an empire, becoming all-powerful, after years of colonial subjugation, required a highly charged lyricism. Again, I do not wish to imply that US texts that deal with empire and Columbus are not lyrical. Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad* and Thomas Brower Peacock’s *Columbian Ode*, for example, are certainly lyrical and surely contain elements of fantasy, but I would not venture to say they are as ethereal as the
passages in Spanish American foundational texts such as “The Oath Taken in Rome” and “My Delirum on Chimborazo,” both of which are discussed in Chapter 4.

Echoing Richardson’s description of the religious authority signified by the Roman word *imperium*, we may effectively characterize the language of empire in Spanish American national discourses as consistently containing “a certain element of the mysterious.”