

# Chapter I

## Christopher Columbus and the Myth of 'Discovery'

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### 1. WHY COLUMBUS?

Let us begin at the most famous of beginnings.

STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *MARVELOUS POSSESSIONS*

Imagine the scene: it is an autumn day in the late fifteenth century. On a beach with rose-colored sand, somewhere in the Caribbean, two groups of people, the hosts and their visitors, are about to meet for the first time. The world will never again be the same.

MICHAEL DORRIS, "MISTAKEN IDENTITIES"

The mythology of the 'new world' begins with the discourse of discovery and with powerful European projections that envision a new kind of paradise, a utopia somewhere across the Atlantic that alleviates the grievances of the 'old world' and that promises boundless earthly riches. In its traditional European version, this discourse is not so much about the 'hosts' whom the part Native American novelist and poet Michael Dorris envisions as sharing in the primal scene of encounter as it is about their 'visitors,' i.e. those Europeans who arrive and 'discover.' Although this primal scene precedes the formation of the USA as a nation-state by several hundred years, it has developed into one of its core foundational myths, and, for all its historical remoteness, has profoundly shaped the national imaginary. The story of Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) and his arrival in the Americas holds a pivotal place in an American foundational mythology that stages the 'discovery' and the subsequent settlement and colonization of the 'new world' in prophetic ways as an inevitable step forward in the course of human progress that eventually would lead to the founding of the USA and to US-American westward expansion, its 'manifest destiny.' One may wonder why, when, and "how an Italian explorer became an American

hero” (cf. Bushman, *America*), or, to tease out the paradox further: why Columbus, who never set foot on the land that would later become the United States and who never knew in his lifetime that in 1492 he had not landed in Asia has been considered one of the founding figures of the US-American nation. In fact, he may be the single most important and best-known figure in the context of the ‘discovery’ of the ‘new world’ even though his place in history has for a long time been contested. I will show how the myth of ‘discovery’ is firmly tied to the figure of Columbus and how ideological investments determine the uses that this historical figure has been put to: Columbus “is nothing but a collection of multiple disguises assembled around a set of historical facts” (Stavans, *Imagining* xvii) with an image oscillating between “the arch-villain of the modern era for bringing genocide and pollution to an unsullied earthly paradise” and “someone worthy of sainthood” (Shreve, “Christopher Columbus” 703).

This chapter will sketch four phases in the making and unmaking of the American myth of ‘discovery’ and of Christopher Columbus; it will historicize the myth and its modifications and point to its various functions. My genealogy starts with the historical moment of Columbus’s original ‘fame’ in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and its reverberations in the context of Spanish colonialism; second, I will turn to the inauguration and consolidation of the Columbus myth in North America during the revolutionary period in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and look at the processes of translation (also in the sense of *translatio imperii*) involved; third, I will trace the myth through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to point to its enlistment in immigrant discourses that made Columbus into an ethnic hero following the Irish, Jewish, and Italian ‘waves’ of immigration to the United States; fourth, I will summarily discuss the recent revisionism in Native American scholarship in the context of the watershed year of 1992 (which marked the quincentennial of ‘discovery’) as indicative of a new take on Columbus (the man as well as the myth).

Of course, these four phases cannot be said to start or end in one year or another; instead they indicate tendencies, trends, and shifting perspectives. Throughout US-American history and for hundreds of years Columbus has served as a national icon – Columbus Day today is still a national holiday despite persistent objections to his idealization and glorification. His profile, however, disappeared from the five-dollar bill in 1923 (the last US-American bill on which he was depicted); and whereas US-American elementary school students still learn of Columbus’s heroism in unequivocal terms, the city of Berkeley since 1992 has been celebrating Indigenous People’s Day instead of celebrating Columbus (cf. Martin, “Literature” 16): the meaning of Columbus and the legacy

of his 'discovery' thus have been and still are contested and continually negotiated anew.

## 2. THE FIRST LETTER FROM THE 'NEW WORLD'

Let us not make the mistake, now that we are about to accompany Columbus on his great adventure, of assuming, as is commonly done, that although he was not aware of it, he "really" crossed the Atlantic in quest of America and that the shores at which he arrived were "really" those of the American continent.

EDMUNDO O'GORMAN, *THE INVENTION OF AMERICA*

When reviewing the historical evidence about Columbus's journeys and about his landing in the Americas on October 12, 1492, in a first step it is to Columbus's own writings that we turn, as he is commonly referred to as "the first European to write the new world" (Loewenberg, *American History* 31). The original manuscript of Columbus's log has been lost, so scholars rely on the summary of his *Diario* composed by Bartolomé de las Casas (which is excerpted in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*; cf. Lauter et al.). Yet, Columbus's so-called first letter is generally considered to be the more authentic document; he supposedly wrote the first version under the impression of an impending shipwreck on his return from his first voyage (three more were to follow) in order to leave a record for posterity of what he had seen and found, waxed and sealed it, and tossed it into the sea. He made a second version of it to be deposited on board of his ship, the *Niña*; both of these letters also were lost. However, the almost-shipwreck seems to have made Columbus aware of the importance of leaving a record of his explorations to document the 'new world' as well as his role in 'discovering' and claiming it. Thus, he wrote his letter for a third time – this time in a more sober mood and in a more calculated style, we may assume – addressing it to Luis de Santángel, treasurer of the Spanish Crown, and, by implication, to the Spanish monarchs themselves, who sponsored his enterprise and whom he obviously wanted to impress with what he found in order to legitimize and extend his venture (cf. Wallisch, *Kolumbus* 6). We should therefore not make the mistake of naively looking at this letter as simply a faithful rendering of Columbus's travels and encounters; this would mean underestimating his rhetorical skill in crafting a scene that is fully intended to convey the importance and foreboding of the historical moment, i.e. to describe it as and thus make it a historical moment, even though he actually was rather clueless

about where he was and what he was about to initiate. Above all, Columbus's letter relies on conscious self-fashioning in its careful construction of his role as explorer and conqueror of new worlds.

*Illustration 1: Columbus Takes Possession*



Theodor de Bry, *Discovery of America, 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 1492* (1590).

To begin with, in his letter Columbus describes the Americas in a *language of wonder and awe*, conjuring up biblical images of the Garden of Eden. “Hispaniola is a marvel,” he writes, “[i]t has [...] fine, large flowing rivers,” “mountains and peaks [...] most beautiful,” “trees of endless varieties, so high that they seem to touch the sky [...] covered with blossoms, some with fruits,” “honey, many kinds of birds, and a great variety of fruits;” the earth is “rich and fertile” (“Letter”). Columbus has found, his letter seems to suggest, an earthly paradise, a place of beauty and abundance that he describes in superlative after superlative. His expressions of amazement are not entirely genuine and sincere but are framed, in a second step, by a *language of profit and gain*. The abundance of the ‘new world’ promises economic profit for the Spanish Crown: not only will the Spanish be able to settle in this paradise by “planting” and “pasturage” and by

“building towns and villages” but also to gain a fortune by extracting from it the resources that it holds: the Spanish monarchs will find “as much gold as they desire” as well as “spices, cotton, as much as their Highnesses may command to be shipped” (ibid.). Columbus is trying to impress the Spanish Crown in order to fulfill his original promise of return on capital at least in words and to secure further financial support for his next expeditions across the Atlantic, an investment for the monarchs, he seems to suggest, with manifold and exorbitant returns. Thus, Columbus advertises his ‘discovery’ as a success by all standards.

Yet, this paradise that Columbus describes is not ‘empty:’ it is inhabited by an indigenous population that somehow seems to stand between him and the riches he covets. The Natives figure as *inhabitants* of the islands he takes to be located east of India. These ‘Indians,’ however, are not portrayed as *owners* of the place they inhabit. In the very beginning of his letter Columbus describes how he *takes possession* of the ‘new world’ by bringing the Native population under Spanish colonial rule: “I discovered a great many islands, inhabited by numberless people; and of all I have taken possession for their Highnesses by proclamation and display of the Royal Standard without opposition” (ibid.). Stephen Greenblatt has drawn our attention to the theatricality of the event described in Columbus’s letter, which is a staging that may seem strangely inappropriate, almost absurd, and quite literally somewhat ‘out of place’ when we keep in mind that the circumstances of the encounter between the Natives and Columbus were “drastically different” from anything that went before (*Marvelous Possessions* 55). Who among the addressees of Columbus’s speech act present at the scene could have understood what was going on, let alone voiced opposition to Columbus’s proclamation? How could the Native population have opposed his claim when for them it was not clear what his pompous gesturing implied or what his ritualized language meant? Columbus ostensibly plays a trick on them – with a simple formality he claims the land, and their reserve is read as forever forfeiting the right to the territory (cf. ibid. 60). Columbus constructs his subject position as an extension and an expression of the Spanish royal authority that he simply assumes in a series of speech acts: “For Columbus taking possession is principally the performance of a set of linguistic acts: declaring, witnessing, recording” (ibid. 56-57). He is obsessed with naming. Prior to any closer descriptions of the islands, Columbus details the new names he has given to them not because they were nameless – he even registers their ‘Indian’ names at times – but because he disregards and discards their previous names in favor of new, Spanish ones and makes their renaming part of the process of his ‘discovery’ and conquest (cf. Sale, *Conquest of Paradise*; Todorov, *Conquest of America* 38). In addition, his choice of names is intended to flatter the monarchs

in Spain: Isabella, Fernandina, Santa María de Concepción, Juana. Translating, naming, and classifying are operations that are part of the process of colonization (cf. Hartog, *Mirror*) and intricate parts of the process of ‘othering,’ i.e. of turning the Native population into ‘the other’ and the object of European rule. In Columbus’s description of the ‘new world’ inhabitants, there is a clear dichotomy of us (the Europeans) vs. them (the Native population) at work – both groups are portrayed as fundamentally and irreconcilably different from each other. This extreme polarization – what Hartog describes as the “excluded middle” (ibid. 258) – is another ingredient in the rhetoric of otherness that produces unbridgeable difference, introduces a steep hierarchy between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and thus legitimizes asymmetrical power relations. Thus, the Natives are described as ‘children of nature’ by Columbus, as “extraordinarily timid” (in fact, they are “the most timid people in the world”), naked, instinctive, trusting, generous, gullible, and ignorant; and they have no weapons apart from “sticks of cane” (“Letter”). By inference, Columbus and his men are superior in every way. They represent culture (not nature) – and thus refinement and progress against the backdrop of the Natives’ ‘natural state’ – in terms of their clothes, their religion (Christianity), and their technology; and they violently demonstrate their assumed superiority: Columbus takes possession of the islands and of the Natives, implying that he is authorized to do so at his will. He fleshes out the culture-nature divide between Europeans and the indigenous population, who by definition are closely related to the soil of their ‘native’ land. In the entire letter, there is no sense of the kind of encounter conjured up by Michael Dorris in the epigraph to this chapter, no meeting at eye level between the inhabitants of the Americas and their European visitors: the Europeans are landing and invading; the Natives are fleeing and have to be taken “by force.” Overall, the latter are not portrayed as individuals but as a generalized group of “Indians” (“numberless people”). In his assessment of Columbus’s hermeneutical skills, Tzvetan Todorov even contends that Columbus “was more perspicacious when he was observing nature than when he was trying to understand the Natives. His hermeneutic behaviour is not precisely the same in the one case as in the other” (*Conquest of America* 17), thereby ranking, according to Todorov, the Natives, human beings inhabiting the ‘new world,’ below the level of the inanimate world of nature and landscape. The cherished assumption of his own superiority registers at every level of Columbus’s letter and is part of his “finalist” view – “the latter [view] no longer consists in seeking the truth but in finding confirmations of a truth known in advance (or, as we say, in wishful thinking)” (ibid. 19). All this is to the effect that Columbus offers us a narrative of first contact in which he tries to convince us of his rightful conquest of the Americas. This strategy locates the Native pop-

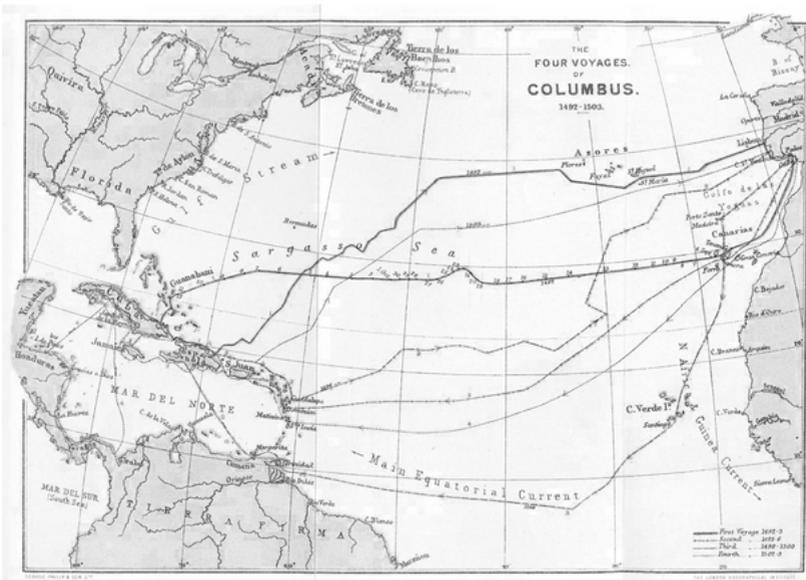
ulation clearly on the side of nature, lumped together with the wildlife and the vegetation – “Columbus speaks about the men he sees only because they too, after all, constitute a part of the landscape” (ibid. 34). We know that Columbus took several Natives from the Americas back to Spain with him – just like he took along plants, animals, and gold – and paraded them at court in front of the Spanish king and queen like animals.

Another defining aspect of Columbus’s colonial hermeneutics and his ‘rhetoric of otherness’ is his religiosity. The letter opens and closes with references to God, and the ‘discovery’ is celebrated as a God-willed “glorious event, at which all Christendom should rejoice” (“Letter”). The Natives, of course, are not Christians, and in Columbus’s view this is another manifestation of their primordial state of nature and their inferiority. That they supposedly take the Europeans for gods from heaven only adds to the argument that they lack a proper understanding of Christian religiosity and a comparable concept of God. Columbus’s skills at reading and translating the gestures and exclamations of the Natives are certainly poor and symptomatic of his wishful thinking, yet his judgments are brought forward with utter self-confidence and with no attempt at self-reflection. Frauke Gewecke ponders the question whether he could have possibly freed himself more rigorously from his Eurocentric categories and norms in order to perceive and describe what he actually *saw* (cf. *Wie die neue Welt* 12). Clearly, in his letter it is by claiming the right to represent, define, categorize, and rule that Columbus grounds his authority over the Americas. From the perspective of postcolonial criticism, we find that Columbus’s representational strategy in his letter renders the Natives mute and turns them into objects of hegemonic discourse; they have no voice in his text, and as they do not speak Spanish, they cannot participate in his discourse. Regarding Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, “can the subaltern speak?” (cf. her article of the same title), in the case of the Native encounter with Columbus we would have to answer in the negative: no, they cannot.

Beyond the reception and circulation of this first letter – which laid the basis for Columbus’s reputation and has been the object of much interpretation – Columbus’s standing in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries did not go unchallenged. In fact, power struggles between various interest groups in the newly conquered territories began the minute Columbus set foot on the Americas, proliferated after he had left to return to Spain, and continued to characterize the fate of the Spanish ‘new world’ colonies. His subsequent journeys to the Americas (1493-1496; 1498-1500; 1502-1504) did not consolidate his status as the ‘discoverer’ of new worlds. Even though Columbus quickly rose to fame in his time and day

(and has remained the object of public adoration and commemoration), he fell out of grace with the monarchs toward the end of his life and was even shortly imprisoned on charges of mismanaging the colony. As Kirkpatrick Sale and others remind us, “the Admiral” died in relative obscurity; Sale describes him as somewhat disoriented and alienated, and he certainly had not yet gained the mythic status he attained later on (cf. *Conquest of Paradise*). His role as explorer and his legacy of ‘discovery’ seem to have been contested already during his lifetime, and have remained so after his death.

*Illustration 2: Map of Columbus's Voyages*



Filson Young, *Christopher Columbus and the New World of His Discoveries* (1906).

Next to Columbus’s letter and Bartolomé de las Casas’s summary of Columbus’s logbook, it was the first biography of Columbus (written by his son, Ferdinand) that reached a wider circulation and promoted the image of Columbus as hero and ‘discoverer’ internationally. The narrative, titled *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*, was published posthumously in 1571 in Spanish, Italian, English, and Latin, and underwent many editions in the following decades and centuries (cf. *Colón, Life*). Ferdinand had his own agenda in promoting the unequivocal exoneration of his father’s achievement. The bookish Ferdinand, as a member of the “Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean” (cf. Troy Floyd’s book of the same title), lived comfortably off his father’s ‘new

world' discovery as a landowner as well as an (entirely unscrupulous) slaveholder, and thus had a strong interest in securing his inheritance and the legal titles granted to his father, which in the meantime had been revoked by the Spanish Crown. It appears that many passages in the book had originally been written for a litigation procedure against the Spanish courts. Ferdinand claims that Columbus and nobody else before and after him had discovered the Americas and that he deserved unqualified praise for that; like many others, Ferdinand never questioned this 'discovery' by taking into account the fact that his father never knew or fully realized where he had been. Texts like Ferdinand's continued to shape the image of Columbus as the agent of 'discovery,' and furthered the perpetuation of the idea of a 'discovery' of the Americas in general.

Even as the horrors of Spanish colonialism in the Americas – such as the brutal mistreatment of the indigenous population – became known in Spain and Europe at large, the reputation of Christopher Columbus as 'discoverer' did not diminish, and seems to have been largely immune to revision in the long run. In his famous *History of the Indies*, the foremost critic of Spanish colonialism, Bartolomé de las Casas, judges Columbus mildly; first of all he sees Columbus, whom he accompanies on his second journey, as chosen by God for "the fulfillment of a divine plan" (O'Gorman, *Invention* 19), and his 'discovery' as providence (cf. Roa-de-la-Carrera, *Histories* 138); and even as he indicts the horribly cruel treatment of the population by the Spanish and acknowledges Columbus's role in the establishment of the *encomienda* system of slave labor, he largely exempts Columbus from criticism and does not blame him directly for the enslavement and torture of the indigenous population in the Americas. According to de las Casas, Columbus's good intentions turned into an evil practice in the hands of the greedy and ruthless Spanish colonizers: "Columbus discovered America; others explored and colonized it" (Loewenberg, *American History* 44). De las Casas is not alone in separating Columbus's 'discovery' and his journeys from what followed in the course of the Spanish colonization of the Americas, thus setting him apart from other figures of colonization such as the notorious Hernán Cortés or the even more infamous Francisco Pizarro. This strategy has clearly helped to preserve and to affirm time and again an image of Columbus as a figure of light and salvation (representing the possibility to convert the 'new world' natives) rather than as a figure of doom and destruction (representing genocide and slavery). Whereas Columbus symbolizes new possibilities, a new world, a new time, and the re-discovery of paradise, it is the successive Spanish colonists who supposedly destroyed this paradise and perverted Columbus's vision. His journey to the 'new world' thus encapsulated "a brief moment of

wonder followed by a long series of disasters and disenchantments” (Baym et al., “Christopher Columbus” 25).

Whether for reasons of personal gain (as in Ferdinand’s case) or to critique Spanish colonialism (as in de las Casas’s case), many writers have been preserving Columbus as a heroic figure, and a steady trickle of publications through the centuries ensured Columbus’s continued prominence and popularity; the myth of Christopher Columbus and his ‘discovery’ of the ‘new world’ was, and is, firmly in place.

### 3. COLUMBUS AS AN AMERICAN HERO

But if an historical past and an historical memory are indeed essential ingredients for a viable nationalism, what was the new United States to do in 1776, or in 1789, or for that matter at almost any time before the Civil War? How does a country without a past of her own acquire one, or how does she provide a substitute for it? Where could such a nation find the stuff for patriotism, for sentiment, for pride, for memory, for collective character?

HENRY STEELE COMMAGER, “THE SEARCH FOR A USABLE PAST”

Christopher Columbus, it seems, was the historical figure most useful in the “search for a usable past” (cf. Commager) which had 18<sup>th</sup>-century Americans – colonial subjects of the British Crown seeking independence – look for meaningful beginnings. It is in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the specifically North American myth of Columbus comes into existence and in a very brief time span is firmly consolidated and embroidered. In the process of transmission from Spanish-language to English-language sources, William Robertson’s 1778 *History of America* is highly influential – this book “was available to more American colonists than was any earlier source” (Bushman, *America* 40) and devoted hundreds of pages to Columbus, who, according to Robertson, in his endeavors combined “the superiority of genius” with “ardent enthusiasm” (*History* Vol. II 104). Robertson follows de las Casas in elevating Columbus and in crediting him with the ‘discovery’ of a new world. Overall, the author blames the Spanish colonizers (aside from Columbus) for their violent excesses in Latin America, but unsurprisingly exempts the British colonial power exercising control in North America from any criticism.

In the context of the American anti-colonial movement directed against the British Crown shortly before, during, and particularly after the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the cultural work of American public intellectuals,

writers and poets was to colonize the past in order to invent a meaningful beginning, and they did so by making the figure of Columbus part of their own colonial and postcolonial legacy. Many public figures and writers gathered around Columbus as a historical persona to affirm North American independence, and they represented him as a figure of national consensus exemplifying American national virtues and an American national character *avant la lettre* (cf. Herget, "Whitewashing" 3). In political culture, in public discussions of memorial practices and naming, in poetry, non-fiction, and the visual arts, Columbus figures as a patron and ancestor of those Americans who were demanding their independence from England and who later became citizens of the new republic.

On October 12, 1792, Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798), founder of the recently established Massachusetts Historical Society, delivered the Columbus Day address to a rapt audience in Boston. He lauds the "Admiral's bold powers of mind" (Martin, "Literature" 21), suggesting that Columbus 'knew' about land masses to the West – "from the necessity of a counterpoise in the west, for the immense quantity of land which was known to be in the east" (Belknap, *American Biography* 19). According to this somewhat curious reasoning, Belknap holds that Columbus was fully aware of his 'discovery' and credits him with intelligence, skill, and vision, for which Americans owed him thanks and admiration. Therefore, Belknap suggests, America should have rightfully been named "Columbia." He was not alone with this view. Many of his contemporaries lamented the 'misnaming' – of the hemisphere as well as the nation – as they considered Amerigo Vespucci's role minor in comparison to Columbus's achievements. The geographer and mathematician Martin Waldseemüller had introduced the name "America" for the new continent he mapped in his "Cosmographiae Introductio" in 1507 after the wide circulation of Amerigo Vespucci's *mundus novus* letter about his third journey to South America in 1501 and 1502, which had been published immediately in various languages. And the name stuck. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, most accepted this 'misnaming' as a *fait accompli* (cf. Martin, "Literature" 23). Yet, the historian Samuel Whelpley was among those who took a somewhat extreme position when he complained that naming the continent and the nation 'America' rather than 'Columbia' was "the greatest act of folly, caprice, cruelty, and injustice [...] that ever mankind were guilty of" (qtd. in *ibid.*). According to him, the new nation also should be strictly distinguished in name from the continent, and thus he concludes: "There are serious and urgent reasons why the United States should have a name [of its own]" (*ibid.*).

Amidst these discussions of naming the new nation, “Columbia” had been informally “adopted as an alternative to America on the eve of the American Revolution” (Bushman, *America* 41). It became a lyrical term for America envisioned as a female allegorical figure in revolutionary poetry. The African American poet Phillis Wheatley is supposedly the first to use it in her poem “To His Excellency General Washington” (1776):

Celestial Choir! entron’d in realms of light,  
**Columbia’s scenes** of glorious toils I write.  
While freedom’s cause her anxious breast alarms,  
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.  
See mother earth her offspring’s fate bemoan,  
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown! (577; my emphasis)

Wheatley follows her male contemporaries in pairing Columbus and George Washington – commander-in-chief of the revolutionary troops and first President of the United States (and another emergent national hero for more obvious reasons) – for patriotic purposes (cf. Bushman, *America* 54; Groseclose, “American Genesis” 14). This tandem of two foundational figures is forcefully evident in highly symbolic practices of naming in the early republic: the US capital is named “Washington,” whereas the government district, ceded by Virginia and Maryland in 1791, is named “District of Columbia.” George Washington’s farewell address is published in 1796 as *Columbia’s Legacy* (cf. Bushman, *America* 55). Many place names (cities, towns, and streets) as well as a rich memorial culture remind us of the heroism credited to Columbus (and Washington, of course) in the foundational phase of the USA.

Wheatley’s lyrical reference is far from singular. Philip Freneau (1752–1832), who bore the title of the “poet of the American revolution” and who is perhaps the most remarkable 18<sup>th</sup>-century American writer, refers to Columbus in many of his patriotic verses, e.g. in “Discovery,” “The Rising Glory of America” (with Henry Brackenridge), and “The Pictures of Columbus.” Freneau, who belongs to the new American elite, champions Columbus as an unrecognized genius, as a brilliant navigator ahead of his time, as an individualist and an idealist, and as a figure of dissent who found “new worlds for thankless kings” (Freneau, “Pictures” 122). But Freneau also addresses the dark side of Spanish conquest. In his early poem “Discovery,” which he wrote in 1772, he criticizes the brutality of Spanish colonialism, which under the cloak of missionary work usurped the continent by using physical and epistemic violence:

How few have sailed on virtue's nobler plan,  
How few with motives worthy of a man! –  
While through the deep-sea waves we saw them go  
Where'er they found a man they made a foe [...]. (86)

Whereas Freneau singles out Pizarro as the villain of Spanish colonialism (cf. *ibid.*), Columbus is not explicitly mentioned in his critique of the Spanish empire. Like many others, the poet disconnects Columbus's 'discovery' from Cortés's and Pizarro's conquests (cf. Bushman, *America* 48) and thinks Columbus is deserving mostly of praise, as his famous poem "The Rising Glory of America" evidences:

The Period famed when first Columbus touched  
These shores so long unknown – through various toils,  
Famine, and death, the hero forced his way,  
Through oceans pregnant with perpetual storms,  
And climates hostile to adventurous man. (49)

In "The Pictures of Columbus," Freneau finds Columbus imprisoned on false charges and disowned from his rightful claims. Freneau anticipates a compensation for this lack of recognition in the distant future:

My toils rewarded, and my woes repaid;  
When empires rise where lonely forests grew,  
Where Freedom shall her generous plans pursue. (122)

The newly formed US republic – we can infer – is a late recompense for Columbus's suffering as a tragic hero in his own time.

Next to the poems of Freneau, Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad* (1807), which is an expanded version of his *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), is another key text for tracing how Columbus and the narrative of 'discovery' were represented in North American poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its author was a statesman, political writer, and poet whose epic introduces a new word to the English language: *Columbiad* – echoing the *Iliad*, which recounts the fall of Troy. Barlow calls his work a "patriotic poem" (*Columbiad* 375); it celebrates Columbus as "one of the wisest and best among the benefactors of mankind," whereas it condemns Cortés as "the perfidious butcher of its [America's] ancient race" (*ibid.*). Its preface as well as its first lines echo the Greek source text:

I sing the Mariner who first unfurl'd  
An eastern banner o'er the western world  
And taught mankind where future empires lay  
In these fair confines of descending day  
Who swa'd a moment, with vicarious power  
Iberia's sceptre on the new found shore  
Then saw the paths his virtuous steps had trod  
Pursued by avarice and defiled with blood  
The tribes he foster'd with paternal toil  
Snatcht from his hand, and slaughter'd for their spoil  
Slaves, kings, adventurers, envious of his name  
Enjoy'd his labors and purloin'd his fame  
And gave the Viceroy, from his high seat hurl'd  
Chains for a crown, a prison for a world. (413-14)

Barlow acknowledges, as does Freneau, that things have gone awry after the 'discovery' because of the greed of the Spanish colonizers. Yet, with the republican future secured by US-American independence, Columbus's legacy will be honored and cherished, Barlow writes. This perspective is offered to Columbus as a consolation (*consolatio*); in Barlow's epic, as in Freneau's "Pictures," Columbus is imprisoned and awaiting his death when Hesper, the angel of the West, shows him in a dream the subsequent history of the Americas. Columbus is desperate when he sees the destruction of Mexico by Cortés, curses his 'discovery,' and begs God for forgiveness. Only at the end of his dream does the angel make him see North America, a hopeful vision, to brighten his mood:

A happier hemisphere invites thy view [...]  
there Europe's better sons their seats shall trace  
and change of government improve the race. (427)

Columbus then looks with paternal contentment on his North American descendants. He can now rest assured that in spite of the years of agony and suffering (both of the peoples of the Americas and his own), his 'discovery' has been meaningful and a blessing for humanity. The United States of America are to prove this and are an embodiment of Barlow's "idea of progress" (Pearce, *Continuity* 65). Barlow turns to classical antiquity in order to integrate Columbus and the history of the USA into the master narrative of Western civilization; Barlow's *translatio imperii* anticipates the greatness of the new US nation with its republican ideals. He, like Freneau, writes in the neoclassical mode of his

literary period, often “forc[ing] his new world into archaic literary dress” (Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers* 124), yet his coinage of terms such as ‘Columbiad’ shows how he wrestles with the limitations of conventional language to adequately describe the history of America: we note “the strange and awkward neologisms by which the language of the poem is disfigured,” writes scholar Samuel Kettell in 1829 (“Joel Barlow” 11). As Helmbrecht Breinig and Susanne Opfermann suggest, the neologisms in Barlow’s work indicate how early American literature is creating an artistic language for a new political entity and national culture (cf. “Die Literatur” 43; cf. also Pearce, *Continuity* 67).

The historians Belknap and Whelpley and the poets Freneau, Barlow, and Wheatley are only a few examples of the larger phenomenon of Columbus worship. Why him? And what are the reasons and rhetorical strategies used to appropriate Columbus as an American hero?

First of all, Columbus was a convenient historical figure for the simple reason that he was *not British* and thus not implicated in British colonialism; the notion of Columbus as a Founding Father establishes a non-English patrimony for the United States (cf. Groseclose, “American Genesis” 12) at the height of the conflict between the colonial power and its colonies. Second, the writers of the American revolutionary era sympathized with Columbus’s dependency on monarchical good will and clearly cast him as an anti-monarchical, almost revolutionary figure; they established a somewhat skewed analogy between Columbus’s suffering under the yoke of greedy monarchs who did not appreciate his genius and the fate of North American colonists under the rule of George III. The events of the age of ‘discovery’ are cast in a typological manner and become symbolic of the revolutionary period (cf. Herget, “Whitewashing” 3-5). Third, Columbus’s quest for a “passage to India” (Smith, *Virgin Land* 20) can be seen as prefiguring American westward expansion – with the aim to found “a mighty nation reaching from coast to coast” (Bushman, *America* 49). Columbus is a “symbol of ongoing expansion” and “of expansive destiny” (Martin, “Literature” 20). From the turn of the century onward, Columbus’s “daring, perseverance, and intrepidity were championed as necessary ingredients to the transcontinental endeavour” and he “became the very embodiment of an American pathfinder” (Groseclose, “American Genesis” 14). Fourth, it is argued that Columbus’s willpower and stamina in the face of sheer insurmountable obstacles embodied the highest degree of individualism – a core American virtue in early discourses of the republic – which “makes Columbus an American by temperament” (Martin, “Literature” 22). Fifth, the sense of providence that surrounds Columbus in historical sources can be attributed to both religious as well as secular designs. In

the North American invention of tradition, he becomes part of “the negotiation of an uncharted intellectual and artistic path from a dominant religious vision of America to a new nationalist ideology” (Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers* 17) in the age of enlightenment, in which American writers could envision Columbus “[w]ith all the moral fervor of eighteenth-century American Calvinism behind them and the expanse of an open cultural horizon before them” (ibid. 11). Thus, the glorification of Columbus concurs with the first phase of the formation of an American civil religion.

The ‘Americanization’ of Columbus in the revolutionary period continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Washington Irving’s comprehensive biography of Columbus as well as George Bancroft’s *History of the United States* are two of the most prominent examples signifying this trend. Washington Irving, one of America’s first writers of short stories and its first canonized as well as internationally popular writer, is considered by Shreve still to be “one of the first true Columbus scholars” (“Christopher Columbus” 704). His voluminous *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, written in the Alhambra in Granada, Spain on the basis of archival manuscripts, embraces the historical figure as a bridge-builder between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ world:

It is the object of the following work, to relate the deeds and fortunes of the mariner who first had the judgment to divine, and the intrepidity to brave the mysteries of this perilous deep; and who, by his hardy genius, his inflexible constancy, and his heroic courage, brought the ends of the earth into communication with each other. The narrative of his troubled life is the link which connects the history of the old world with that of the new. (Irving, *Life* 10)

The historian George Bancroft indicates with his choice of title – *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the American Continent* – that he includes the narrative of Columbus’s ‘discovery’ in US-American national history and, beyond that, dwells on this first period because “it contains the germ of our institutions” (6):

Imagination had conceived the idea, that vast inhabited regions lay unexplored in the west; and poets had declared, that empires beyond the ocean would one day be revealed to the daring navigator. But Columbus deserves the undivided glory of having realized that belief. During his lifetime he met with no adequate recompense. The self-love of the Spanish monarch was offended at receiving from a foreigner in his employ benefits too vast for requital; and the contemporaries of the great navigator persecuted that merit which they

could not adequately reward. Nor had posterity been mindful to gather into a finished picture the memorials of his career, till the genius of Irving, with candor, liberality, and original research, made a record of his eventful life, and in mild but enduring colors sketched his sombre inflexibility of purpose, his deep religious enthusiasm, and the disinterested magnanimity of his character. (6-7)

A portrayal could hardly be more laudatory, and Irving and Bancroft are only two among many praising voices. As Matthew Dennis points out in his overview, “[w]ithin fifty years of the American Revolution, versions of Columbus’s name graced the titles of some sixteen periodicals, eighteen books, and a half dozen scholarly societies” (“Reinventing” 128).

*Illustration 3: Neo-Classical Depiction of Columbus’s Landing*



John Vanderlyn, *Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies* (1846).

Columbus also quickly advanced to become an American icon in visual culture, and his landing in the Americas became a powerful “image of American genesis” (cf. Groseclose). The two most representative examples of early American paintings that depict Columbus’s arrival in the Americas are David Edwin’s depiction of Columbus in *The Landing of Christopher Columbus* (1800), which is uncannily similar to Charles Willson Peale’s 1779 portrayal of George Washington in his *George Washington at Princeton* (cf. *ibid.* 14), and John Vanderlyn’s painting *The Landing of Columbus at the Island of Guanahani, West Indies*

(1846), displayed in the rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C.; Vanderlyn hierarchizes the ‘discoverer’ and his objects of ‘discovery’ (dressed versus naked, proud and upright versus timid and huddled, Christians versus non-Christians) and culturally translates the Caribbean setting into a more unspecified, possibly North American one in a transposition that we are already familiar with: the lone tree in the painting “is not a palm but instead looks very much like a specimen that might grow in a temperate climate such as one finds in the United States” (ibid. 16).

In sum, the public discourse commemorating Columbus’s ‘discovery’ – the poetry by Philip Freneau and Joel Barlow, Washington Irving’s biography, early historiography, as well as early American visual culture representing the landing of Columbus – evidences the elevation of Christopher Columbus and his ‘discovery’ to a national myth. The 1792 celebrations of the ‘discovery’s’ Tercentennial constituted a first climax in the glorification of this figure, after 1592 and 1692 had come and gone without much notice in either the ‘old’ or the ‘new’ world. Disregarding historical evidence, Christopher Columbus was elevated to a *homo americanus*; he was depicted as a good colonist (if a colonist at all), a scientist, scholar, and humanist, as a profoundly religious man, as an Enlightenment figure ahead of Enlightenment, and thus as a tragic figure. It may not always be easy or even feasible to distinguish the ‘historical Columbus’ from the ‘heroic Columbus,’ as Sale suggests we must (cf. *Conquest of Paradise*), yet in the case of US-American mythmaking in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the extreme divergence between historical evidence and narrative embellishment is quite apparent in the way that Columbus serves as a figure of empowerment regardless of the specificity of his historical, cultural, and religious context. The far-reaching consequences of this foundational narrative for all of the Americas and its treatment in historiography have been pointed out by historian James Loewen: “Columbus was so pivotal that, like Jesus, historians use him to divide history: the Americas before 1492 are called ‘pre-Columbian’” (Loewen, *Lies* 1).

#### 4. WHOSE COLUMBUS? THE MAKING OF AN ETHNIC HERO

[T]he age created him and the age left him. There is no more conspicuous example in history of a man showing the path and losing it.

JUSTIN WINSOR, *CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS*

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we witness the first phase of revisionism regarding the mythical status of Christopher Columbus in the United States. For

one thing, other more genuinely 'American' foundational narratives had by then developed, and were continuing to take shape (for example the myth of the Founding Fathers, the myth of the West, and the myth of the self-made man), which made Columbus's 'discovery' as a story of American beginnings less singular and less important. At the same time, the Columbus myth as such was more closely scrutinized in light of ongoing discussions about changes and developments in American society and its demographic composition. The adoption of Columbus as a foundational figure in American national discourses of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had reflected little on a number of aspects that now surfaced: that he was an Italian sailing for the Spanish Crown, that he did not actually land in North America but in the Caribbean, and that he was Catholic. Why did Americans become aware of these facts regarding Columbus's 'discovery' now, one hundred years after they had made him their national hero?

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the USA was receiving millions of immigrants from Europe – the so-called first wave of immigrants from Northern and Western Europe in the 1840s and 1850s, and the so-called second wave of immigrants mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe in the 1870s and the following decades: "From 1880 to 1924, some four million immigrants from southern Italy came to America, joining an earlier group of Italian immigrants, mainly from the northern peninsula" (Dennis, "Reinventing" 140). In response to the large numbers of newly arriving immigrants, the American-born population often reacted with anxiety and hostility. The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have often been characterized as a period of extreme xenophobia, racism, and nativism, a specifically American term to describe the phenomenon of "intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign (i.e. 'un-American') connections" (Higham, *Strangers* 4). Many social and political groups formed to protect what they considered to be a distinctively American way of life. John Higham discerned three major themes in American nativism: anti-Catholicism, anti-radicalism, and racial nativism based on an Anglo-Saxon tradition and the assumption of Anglo-Saxon superiority in the United States (ibid. 5-11). Historian Matthew Jacobson has traced the heated debates around the racial composition of the USA in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when 'race' was not merely used to distinguish 'blacks' from 'whites' but 'Anglo-Saxons' from 'Celtic,' 'Slavic,' 'Teutonic,' 'Nordic,' 'Iberic,' 'Latin,' and other supposedly 'foreign' elements and lineages (cf. *Whiteness* 7). In this logic, immigrants from different parts of Europe – particularly those from Catholic countries – were viewed with distrust and skepticism, a reaction that often caused massive discrimination and sometimes even physical violence. The heated debate around the dangers of 'foreign infiltration'

culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, which put a stop to mass immigration to the United States.

This nativist intellectual climate affected the attitude toward Christopher Columbus as a national hero. Lawyer and diplomat Aaron Goodrich, author of *A History of the Character and Achievements of the So-Called Christopher Columbus* (1874), and historian Justin Winsor, founding member of the American Historical Association and author of *Christopher Columbus and How He Received and Imparted the Spirit of Discovery* (1890), were among those who contested the ‘truthfulness’ and merit of the narrative of ‘discovery,’ which, they argued, derived mostly from Columbus’s own writings. According to Goodrich, Columbus in fact was “his own historian and eulogist” (*History* 128) and thus left out a great many aspects that would cast him in a less positive light. Goodrich radically revised the Columbus myth and pointed to previously neglected sources and archival records; one has to add that since American independence, many new sources had become available for the study of early transatlantic mobility and were then used by scholars to different ends (cf. Henige, *In Search*). Based on his research, Goodrich portrays Columbus as a “pirate” and a “slave trader” who already had “a history of piracy and crime” before entering Spain for dubious reasons in 1485, and journeyed out of the basest motives, intending merely to raid any place he might find (*History* 129); Columbus did neither deserve commemoration as an individual nor did he deserve credit for any kind of ‘discovery.’ Goodrich claims that the arrival of Leif Erikson in North America was the actual moment of ‘discovery’ of the Americas 600 years prior to Columbus’s arrival, and that it was the “heroic character of the Northmen” – rather than the “shabby grandeur” of a slave trader from Southern Europe (ibid. 336) – that lastingly shaped the American character. In that, Goodrich concludes, “the American might well feel relief and pride” (ibid. 87). Justin Winsor, the leading historian of his day, similarly denounces the Italians, who may produce capable individuals such as Christopher Columbus or Amerigo Vespucci every once in a while, but as a nation are incapable of holding their own:

You and I have not followed the maritime peoples of western Europe in planting and defending their flags on the American shores without observing the strange fortunes of the Italians, in that they have provided pioneers for those Atlantic nations without having once secured in the New World a foothold for themselves. (*Christopher Columbus*)

Although Columbus may have been a somewhat exceptional figure, his enterprise lacked sustainability, and his ‘discovery’ was a “blunder” (ibid. 512) – shortcomings that are also attributed to the ‘nature’ of Italians. 19<sup>th</sup>-century

American stereotypes concerning Italian immigrants cast them as innately criminal, lazy, unfit for democracy, and, as one Secret Service report has it, “a menace to the country” (Jacobson, *Whiteness* 61). Although Winsor’s text is less explicit than Goodrich’s, it still breathes the common racist sentiments of the time; both Goodrich and Winsor use stereotypes in profiling Columbus individually and Italians as a ‘race’ collectively. From a New Historicist perspective, we see the 19<sup>th</sup>-century discourses on ‘race’ and Anglo-Saxon superiority reflected in the historiography and mythmaking of American ‘origins.’ What had made Christopher Columbus attractive in the founding phase of the US – that he was not British – now made him suspect.

Of course, these new voices in American historical scholarship did not completely debunk the Columbus myth – far from it; it continues to have a firm place in popular discourses of commemoration and other forms of public and popular culture. The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 (originally scheduled for 1892) in Chicago was a grandiose event, described as “a spectacle of surpassing significance” (Sale, *Conquest of Paradise* 350) that celebrated the historical figure in more abstract terms: the long water pool – the centerpiece of the “White City” exhibition grounds – symbolized the long voyage Columbus took to the ‘new world;’ the statue placed next to it, however, was not one of Columbus but of the republic. Rather than merely as a patriotic figure, Columbus is cast here as a symbol of progress and civilization par excellence. As such, it seems that his journey only makes sense in the context of the newly emergent US empire and its self-proclaimed exceptionalism. Yet, we can also observe that the meaning of Columbus as a foundational figure and national icon is becoming contested, even controversial. Dennis refers to the 1892 celebrations as a “confused Columbian discourse” (“Reinventing” 145). The celebration of Columbus as hero and of America as Columbia (cf. John Gast’s 1872 painting *American Progress*) was accompanied by some white American intellectuals’ disenchantment with Columbus on the one hand, and identification with Columbus on the part of newly arrived immigrants (particularly those who were stigmatized as foreigners in the United States) on the other. Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the myth of Columbus and the ‘discovery’ of America thus no longer functions as an unequivocal universal national myth but is enlisted in new minority discourses by Jewish, Italian, and Irish immigrants to America who claim him as their foundational figure. He thus remains a figure of dissent, of heroism and of, at times, unrecognized achievement, albeit in a modified ideological configuration – he becomes an ethnic hero. This new turn in the troping of Columbus as hero is manifested in the cultural and memorial practices of the immigrants, in their poetry and literature, as well as their politics.

*Illustration 4: Columbia Moves West*

John Gast, *American Progress* (1872).

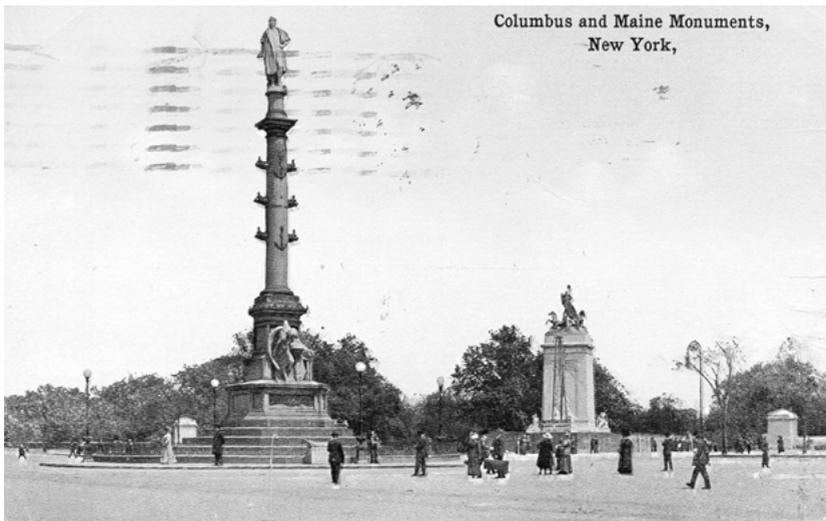
It comes as no surprise in this context that the 1892 commemoration of Columbus's 'discovery' is clearly accentuated by Italian Americans, who celebrate Christopher Columbus as their ancestral figure. After all, he was a native of Genoa and sailed for the Genoese fleet before he went to Portugal, and later to Spain. On the occasion, the Italian Americans of New York City erected a 75-foot high marble statue by Gaetano Russo with an inscription that is supposed to remind all Americans of Columbus's achievements:

TO

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS  
THE ITALIANS RESIDENT IN AMERICA,  
SCOFFED AT BEFORE,  
DURING THE VOYAGE, MENACED,  
AFTER IT, CHAINED,  
AS GENEROUS AS OPPRESSED,

TO THE WORLD, HE GAVE A WORLD.  
JOY AND GLORY  
NEVER UTTERED A MORE THRILLING CALL  
THAN THAT WHICH RESOUNDED  
FROM THE CONQUERED OCEAN  
IN SIGHT OF THE FIRST AMERICAN ISLAND  
LAND! LAND!

*Illustration 5: Columbus Monument in New York (Historical Postcard)*



Brooklyn Postcard Co. Inc., *Columbus and Maine Monuments* (1914).

This memorial is an indication of the trend to transform Cristóbal Colón into Cristoforo Colombo,

a specifically Italian hero embraced both by native Italians hungry for progenitors of their new nation (united in 1861) and by the growing numbers of Italian immigrants in the United States eager to claim an authentic “American” figure as their own. (Sale, *Conquest of Paradise* 351)

Today, in New York City alone there are eleven memorials to Christopher Columbus, ranging from the marble statue in Central Park to less extravagant pieces in Brooklyn and the Bronx, many of which are part of Italian American institutions and/or were commissioned by Italian American organizations. The enlistment of Columbus in Italian American cultural practices continues into the present: Columbus Day parades in major American cities are organized by Italian American communities; Italian American author Mario Puzo (of *The Godfather* fame) wrote a screenplay for *Christopher Columbus – The Discovery* (1992); and the HBO television drama series *The Sopranos* dedicated an episode titled “Christopher” to a controversial celebration of Columbus Day in New York (cf. Bondanella, *Hollywood Italians* 303-4).

Yet, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century not only Italian Americans took recourse to Columbus in their search for a ‘usable past.’ Emma Lazarus, the Jewish American poet famous for her sonnet “The New Colossus” (which is inscribed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty), titles one of her poems “1492,” which is here quoted in full:

Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,  
Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,  
The children of the prophets of the Lord,  
Prince, priest, and people, spurred by zealot hate.  
Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,  
The West refused them, and the East abhorred.  
No anchorage the known world could afford  
Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.  
Then smiling, thou unveil’dst, O two-faced year,  
A virgin world where doors of sunset part,  
Saying, “Ho, all who weary, enter here!  
There falls each ancient barrier that the art  
Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear  
Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart!”

Lazarus’s poem acknowledges two momentous historical events that occurred in 1492: the Jewish expulsion from Spain under King Ferdinand and Queen

Isabella, and their support for Columbus's journey across the Atlantic. In 1888, Lazarus's poem depicts the USA as a haven for refugees who are in need of a new home. The poet may have been aware of the rumors indicating that Columbus himself was partly Jewish. Although there is still little evidence to corroborate this long-standing speculation, we may yet reflect on the 'timing' of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and his journey, and agree with Morison and Vignaud that even if Columbus himself was not Jewish it is likely that Jews who hoped to find a new home somewhere in the West were among his crewmembers (cf. Morison, *Admiral*; Vignaud, *Letter* and "Christopher Columbus"). More recently, Steve Bery's *The Columbus Affair* (2012) picks up on this possibility and makes it the center of a contemporary conspiracy-thriller plot.

Apart from Lazarus's patriotic Columbus poem, Jewish American literature and popular culture – from Mary Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) to the Marx Brothers' comedies – often took issue with the glorification of Columbus. "A curse on Columbus!" became a frequent pun "in ironic response to the nation's official narrative" (Weber, "Accents" 136; cf. Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 33; Goldsmith, "Curse"). In the novel *Jews without Money* (1930) by the socialist Jewish American writer, journalist, and activist Michael Gold one character exclaims in a somewhat typical fashion: "It is all useless. A curse on Columbus! A curse on America, the thief! It is a land where the lice make fortunes, and the good men starve!" (79). Jewish American author Philip Roth declares "Goodbye Columbus" in his 1959 novella of the same title in commenting on the story of initiation of a young Jewish American man into the complex system of Jewish American class distinctions and on the subsequent failure of a love relationship.

Columbus became not only an ancestral figure for different ethnic groups but was also considered a patron by Catholics in Protestant America. Catholic (mostly Irish and Italian) immigrants to America strongly felt the anti-Catholic and anti-papal sentiments in American nativist attitudes, and reacted by forming their own institutions. In 1882, the Knights of Columbus are founded by an Irish American Catholic priest in New Haven, Connecticut; this organization was intended as a "fortress" against discrimination, dedicated itself to "Columbianism," and tried to "demonstrate the compatibility of Roman catholicism and American democracy" (Kauffman, *Faith* 276). According to historian Christopher Kauffman, who was commissioned by the order to write numerous histories and documentations, the organization's ideology is shaped by "a blend of popular fraternalism, American Catholic patriotism and traditional Catholicism" (*Columbianism* 29).

[The Knights of Columbus] viewed the discovery of America as a Catholic event, just as Anglo-Saxon Protestants viewed the landing at Plymouth Rock as a Puritan event. The Knights of Columbus were implicitly celebrating the landing of the *Santa Maria*, the Catholic counterpart to the Protestants' *Mayflower* and a ship which had arrived 128 years earlier. (Kauffman, *Faith* 276)

The Catholic order quickly expands across the country: 6.000 knights participate in the 1892 Columbus parade (cf. Kauffman, *Faith* 91); by 1893, the order has 550.000 members in the Boston area and by 1905, it has spread to all American states as well as to Mexico and Canada. Kauffman's *Faith and Fraternalism* is published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Knights in 1982, and reprinted for the Quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas in 1992. The order today prides itself on more than 125 years of history, during which it has also seen internal debates, phases of historical revisionism, discussions of racism and gender discrimination, as well as criticism from the Catholic Church because of its name – amidst revisionists, suggestions have been made to rename the order the “Knights of Christ,” or any other less controversial, i.e. political name (cf. Dennis, “Reinventing” 157).

Overall, Columbus ceased to be a symbol of national unity and cohesion by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as different groups staked their claim to ‘America’ by placing themselves in the tradition of Columbus and his ‘discovery,’ and this trend continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, around 1992, the second and most forceful phase of revisionism set in. As the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas approached, the question of what and who was to be celebrated seemed ever more pressing.

## 5. 1992 AND THE COLUMBUS CONTROVERSY

For many Native Americans, to be asked to celebrate Columbus is the equivalent of asking Jews to celebrate Hitler.

ELLA SHOHAT AND ROBERT STAM, *UNTHINKING EUROCENTRISM*

Der Amerikaner, der den Kolumbus zuerst entdeckte, machte eine böse Entdeckung.

GEORG CHRISTOPH LICHTENBERG

Lichtenberg's aphorism points to the fact that until the period of the American Revolutionary War, the term ‘American’ referred to the native inhabitants of the

American continent, not to the English settlers. Lichtenberg's unusual perspective on who was being discovered in the Americas (Columbus, not the Natives) is used in many discussions and new publications of the early 1990s to reconfigure the Eurocentric view on the 'new world.' The quincentennial of 'discovery' in 1992 has been a watershed for questioning the status of Columbus as hero, adventurer, opportunist, slave trader, and slaveholder in revisionisms that come in many different shapes and manifestations.

Literature and film are two prime media in which the claim to Columbus's legacy has not only been contested but in which the very idea of 'discovery' has also been outright refuted. For many Native Americans, Columbus's arrival in the Americas marks the beginning of colonialism, genocide, rape, slavery, expropriation and displacement, as well as cultural death. Columbus stands at the beginning of a new and for many inhabitants of the Americas deadly era.

Authors of multicultural American literature and Native American writers in particular have published essays, novels, poetry, and histories on these issues. In 1992, the *Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology*, established in 1976 by the writers Ishmael Reed, Victor Hernández Cruz, Shawn Wong, and Rudolfo Anaya, put out *The Before Columbus Foundation Fiction Anthology* with the agenda of going before and "beyond" Columbus (Strads et al., "Introduction" xi). Going 'beyond' Columbus and his 'discovery' is also at the core of Native American rewritings of 'discovery.' Many of these texts are exploring the dark areas of history, often with a postmodern fantastic twist (cf. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*), as do Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris in *The Crown of Columbus* (1991) or, even more radically, Gerald Vizenor in *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). The first use a present-day campus romance to revisit the historical evidence and site of 'discovery,' the latter invents a trickster figure who revises the historical legacy by rendering Columbus a part-Native "crossblood."

Humor and re-invention are also part of several other re-envisionings: Osage writer and poet Carter Revard presents a parodic reversal of the discovery scene, this time set in Europe:

It may be impossible to civilize the Europeans. When I claimed England for the Osage Nation, last month, some of the English chiefs objected. [...] So I said the hell with England for this trip and went to France and rented a little Renault in Paris and drove past the chateaux to Biarritz, stopping only to proclaim that everything the Loire and Seine flowed past was ours. [...] The people there talk differently from those in London, but their signs are much the same – they use a lingua franca so to speak – so they recognized my visa card and gave the Renault gasoline much like that in Oklahoma, globalized enough so they are not completely benighted. Whether they understood that France now belongs to us was

not clear, but they were friendly and they fed me well, accepting in return some pieces of beautifully painted paper and metal discs with allegorical figures on them, with which they seemed almost childishly pleased [...]. (“Report” 333-34)

Revard’s travel account about a journey to Europe intertextually engages with Columbus’s first letter from the ‘new world’ and inverts the European perspective of ‘discovering’ and ‘civilizing’ the Americas. Columbus’s proclamation about taking possession of the Americas on behalf of the Spanish Crown is re-configured in the voice of the Native discoverer signifying on the ignorance and ‘childishness’ of the Europeans, i.e. the French, in an anachronistic postmodern fashion that allows the Native American protagonist who is ‘colonizing’ Europe – and who in the European imagination has of course been linked predominantly to a state of nature – to drive around by car and to use money and credit cards. The comparison “much like that in Oklahoma” echoes the comparison in Columbus’s writing between the ‘new world’ nature and climate to that of particular Spanish regions: Columbus’s Andalusia is Revard’s Oklahoma. Revard’s irony is matched in the self-reflexive reimagining of first contact by African American comedian Flip Wilson. When his Columbus, conversing with Queen Isabella in African American Vernacular English, sets out for America in order to discover Ray Charles, he meets Natives celebrating among themselves:

It’s a big holiday in America that day, a big holiday called “Not-Having-Been Discovered-Yet-Day.” All the Indians on the beach, they are celebrating. They got sandwiches, six-packs, three or four bags of whatever it is they putting in the pipe. Chris leans over the rail of the ship, he says, “Hey y’all. Y’all. Where is this? [...] My name is Christopher Columbus. I’m a discoverer. I’m gonna discover America. I’m going to discover y’all.” (“Christopher Columbus”)

It is only when “the Indians are throwing rocks, spears, flaming arrows, tree trunks [...] yelling out a bunch of profanities about Chris’s mother and everything” (ibid.) that Wilson’s Columbus, unsuccessful at colonization, decides to turn the boat around and to leave any further ‘discoveries’ in the ‘new world’ to the Puritans. Wilson’s Columbus provides us with a metafictional commentary on the narrative of discovery and the precarious claims to truth it has held, and counters long-cherished notions of European superiority as well as indigenous naiveté.

In Native American poetry, Jimmie Durham in his poem “Columbus Day” (1983) addresses the Native American experience in the American school system almost ten years prior to the culmination of the Columbus controversy:

In school I was taught the names  
 Columbus, Cortez, and Pizarro and  
 A dozen filthy murderers.  
 A bloodline all the way to General Miles,  
 Daniel Boone and General Eisenhower. (10)

Durham's speaker makes no distinction between Columbus on the one hand and Cortés and Pizarro on the other, as did the poets of the American Revolution: here, all of them are part of the same criminal history of exploitation. And this history is extended to US-American historical figures who are placed in a continuum with the Spanish conquerors and who figure as agents of westward expansion, Manifest Destiny, and war.

Further critical, historiographical, fictional, and lyrical perspectives are collected in numerous anthologies. To name only two: *America in 1492* is an alternative history in which Alvin Josephy has gathered together renowned writers and scholars, among them N. Scott Momaday and Francis Jennings, in order to describe and promote an understanding of "America and its traditions on the eve of the Columbus voyages. Its point of reference is America, not Europe" (Josephy, "Introduction" 7); editor Joseph Bruchac's *Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers' Festival* is the result of a gathering of more than 300 Native writers held in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1992. Festival historian Geary Hobson calls it a "showcase of Native American literature" ("On a Festival" xxvii). In addition, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña have produced "Radio Pirata: Colón Go Home!," which aired on National Public Radio and was printed in Fusco's *English Is Broken Here* (179-95).

The most prestigious Hollywood project in the context of the quincentennial is Ridley Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992), which is "erratically revisionist but fundamentally protective of Columbus's good name. Here the scintillating beauty of the cinematography enfolds the violence of conquest into the ideology of the aesthetic" (Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking* 64). Whereas we may be hesitant to identify an "ideology of the aesthetic," the film in no uncertain terms takes over the perspective of the 'discoverers' and thus coheres with an overall pattern: "Most discovery narratives place the reader on a European ship, the land is sighted (usually through an anachronistic telescope), and the 'Indians' are glimpsed on the beach or behind the trees" (ibid. 71).

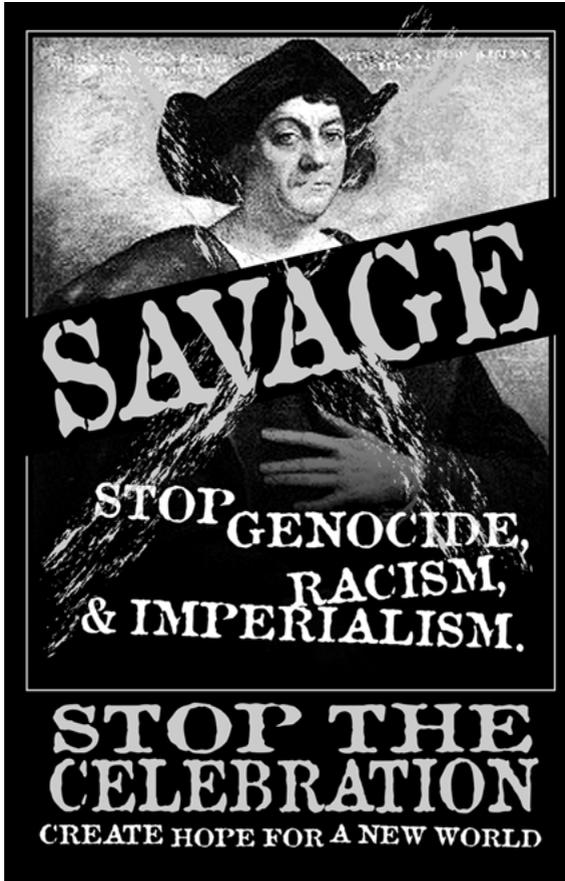
More clearly revisionist films produced around the 1992 debates range from *Surviving Columbus* (1992) and *Columbus on Trial* (1992) to Robbie Leppzer's

*Columbus Didn't Discover Us* (1992). These films privilege the perspective of the indigenous inhabitants over that of the European invaders; they reconstruct tribal traditions, the history of Native tribes in various North American regions, and the suffering of Native Americans due to white aggression, missionary politics, and cultural and physical displacement.

In addition to revisionist literature and film, we find another kind of historical 'rescue' attempt, namely an archaeological project that seeks to go 'before' Columbus rather than 'beyond.' Charles C. Mann has investigated the pre-contact Americas in *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* and, most recently, in *Before Columbus: The Americas of 1491*. Drawing on findings by anthropologists, archaeologists, and paleolinguists, Mann refutes many stereotypes about pre-contact Native life. For one thing, the Americas, he suggests,

were a far more urban, more populated, and more technologically advanced region than generally assumed; and the Indians, rather than living in static harmony with nature, radically engineered the landscape across the continents, to the point that even "timeless" natural features like the Amazon rainforest can be seen as products of human intervention. (*1491*, book cover)

This perspective refuses to subscribe to the view that the history of the Americas only begins with European knowledge of the continent and thus constitutes another critique of Eurocentric historiography and the doctrine of discovery. With all these revisionist publications drawing attention to the fact that Columbus was complicit in introducing a discourse of violent ethnocentricity to the Americas, it comes as no surprise that the public festivities to commemorate the Quincentenary were controversial, to say the least. *Sinking Columbus* (2000) documents how the original plan of the organizing commission appointed by the US government to 'celebrate the discovery of America' in 1992 failed. However, the authors, Stephen Summerhill and John Alexander Williams, who were both involved in these preparations, paradoxically see this failure as a success: as the official Quincentenary "struggled unsuccessfully to escape being an anachronism" (*Sinking* 181), it was superseded by "an unofficial, *other* Quincentenary that gave voice to the subaltern" (*ibid.* 126). Rather than affirming the Columbian legacy of the United States in a patriotic spirit, as had been done in both the 1792 and 1892 celebrations, the 1992 commemorations clearly also belonged to those who were victimized by this legacy; thus, the event introduced a new kind of national memorial culture and a new kind of critical patriotism.

*Illustration 6: Columbus: Savage*

Poster created for AIM Denver, Colorado by Walt Pourier,  
Oglala Lakota (Creative Director, Nakota Designs).

On the occasion of the Columbus Day festivities, October 12, 1992, poster art, cartoons, buttons, and pamphlets reinforced the Native American perspective and protest with epigrams such as “Discover Columbus’s Legacy: 500 Years of Racism, Oppression & Stolen Land,” “Wanted for Genocide: Christopher Columbus,” and “Columbus: Savage.” A more recent, post 9/11 image indicates that fighting terrorism – more or less successfully – has been a Native American activity since the arrival of Columbus and thus provocatively parallels the destruction of Native American culture with the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City.

In 1992, Native American organizations also were joined by other oppositional voices. Dennis speaks of an “anti-Columbus coalition – American Indians, some religious groups, environmentalists, peace activists, political protesters, and others” (“Reinventing” 156). Yet the main Columbus Day parade in 1992 engaged in by Italian Americans in New York City (many others had been cancelled) to the great relief of the authorities went smoothly: Columbus may have been contested but he still was a figure of consensus for many Americans – and as good as any other reason to have a day off from work, or school.

*Illustration 7: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492*



“Homeland Security (Geronimo’s Band),” *Azusa Publishing* (Web, 5 March 2014).

Apropos school: despite recent shifts in perspective, in American elementary schools the teaching of Columbus’s heroism is a mandatory part of the curriculum – a situation that will not change any time soon. And thus, Shohat and Stam remind us of the larger ramifications of the Columbus myth:

[T]he Columbus story is crucial to Eurocentrism, not only because Columbus was a seminal figure within the history of colonialism, but also because idealized versions of this story have served to initiate generation after generation into the colonial paradigm. For many children in North America and elsewhere, the tale of Columbus is totemic; it

introduces them not only to the concepts of “discovery” and the “New World,” but also to the idea of history itself. (*Unthinking* 62)

James W. Loewen has devoted an entire booklet to how the myth of Columbus’s ‘discovery’ is taught in American schools. His revisionist publication is titled provocatively *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus* (1992) and surveys, among other things, fifteen widely used high school and middle school textbooks of American history to see what they have to say about Christopher Columbus. His findings show that “almost everything [written about Columbus] is either wrong or unknowable. The textbooks have taken us on a trip of their own, away from the facts of history, into the realm of myth” (*Lies* 1).

Still, since 1992 “a distinct American Indian version of the holiday” (Kubal, *Cultural Movements* 75) has been established in various states and locales (mostly college campuses): an “American Indian memory of national origins” (*ibid.*) is no longer completely ignored by official discourses on 1492. Timothy Kubal has recently used political process theory in order to show how ethnic and political minorities have used the occasion of Columbus Day over time in order to empower themselves and their political visions and to mobilize through social movements and activism connected to the festivities of one particular holiday. The counter-festivities of groups such as AIM (American Indian Movement) or the Indians of All Tribes have effectively changed the meaning and perception of Columbus Day within the national imaginary, a change that is also beginning to trickle down through the different levels of educational institutions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

One day in 1474, when Amerigo Vespucci was only ten, his mother woke him up and said to him: “Amerigo, I had a beautiful dream last night. I dreamt that you will become a great explorer and that one day a whole new continent will be named after you. It will be called North Vespuccia.”

ITALIAN JOKE

It saddens Norwegians that America still honors this Italian, who arrived late in the New World and by accident, who wasn't even interested in New Worlds but only in spices. Out on a spin in search of curry powder and hot peppers – a man on a voyage to the grocery – he stumbled onto the land of heroic Vikings and proceeded to get the credit for it. And then to name it *America* after Amerigo Vespucci, an Italian who never saw the New World but only sat in Italy and drew incredibly inaccurate maps of it. *By rights, it should be called Erica, after Eric the Red, who did the work five hundred years earlier. The United States of Erica. Erica the Beautiful. The Erican League.*”

GARRISON KEILLOR, *LAKE WOEBEGONE DAYS*

It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it.

MARK TWAIN

To reconstruct the genesis – the making and unmaking – of the Columbus myth is also to acknowledge that, after all, the narrative of past events can only be told in many different versions. There is a sense of inscrutability and a certain amount of contingency to processes of cultural mobility like those that fashioned Columbus – him, and not others – first into an American icon, and then re-fashioned him into a villain.

Today, we are left with a somewhat uneasy coexistence of multiple ‘Columbuses’ both heroic and shameful and alternatively American, Spanish, Jewish, Italian American, part-Native, Catholic, etc. The myth of Columbus and the controversy surrounding it reveal ideological conflicts at the heart of American scholarly and popular historiography. Whether this shows that the project ‘America’ is still evolving and unfinished (cf. Campbell and Kean, *American Cultural Studies* 20) or whether it indicates that it has been thwarted from the beginning is a question still widely debated. In any case, we have to pay attention to the “emplotment” (cf. White, *Metahistory*) of history to find out just

how narrative, causality, and a 'good' story are constructed and produced: a story that can appeal to and sway many people over a long stretch of time, a story both of 'newness' and of 'discovery.'

I would like to end this chapter with a transnational perspective. Columbus is not only a foundational myth of the US – of course, he is at the center of much 'old world' mythmaking about the 'new' – but also a European myth, perhaps even a global one; and in the age of globalization he may take on new symbolic meanings. In the Spanish film *También la lluvia* (*Even the Rain*, 2010) by Icíar Bollaín, a Mexican film team travels to Bolivia in order to shoot a film about Christopher Columbus and his 'discovery' at seemingly authentic (and yet cheap) sites, even as the film early on acknowledges the problematic conflation of the natives of Bolivia with the natives of the Caribbean, a conflation which the producer justifies by commenting on the ostensible 'sameness' of all indigenous peoples. In the process of shooting the film, the film team is caught up in the 2000 Cochabamba protests directed against the privatization of the city's water supply company. The main Native actor in the film project is also crucially involved in the water war. The film indicates the various levels of historical-colonial and present-day neo-colonial exploitation by cutting back and forth between film scenes and protests, and the various levels of narration often become entangled in powerful visual images that disorient us in time. The shooting of the film, it is suggested, exploits the historical conquest as the (only) cultural capital of the indigenous population of the Americas while it uses them as cheap extras. We recognize in the brutal police force that uses dogs to go after the water activists in the city the Spanish colonizers and their bloodhounds who hunted fugitive Natives in order to re-enslave or kill them. Both the present-day protestors and the captives of colonialism are bound and beaten when caught. In a remarkable scene in the film, the film director asks a group of indigenous women with babies to pretend to drown their children as an act of anti-colonial resistance: the translator tells them that they are to walk into the water, quickly exchange the babies for dolls, and then hold those dolls underwater for filmic effect. Whereas the director tries to insist on this scene as part of his artistic vision and the camera tantalizingly cuts back and forth between him and the faces of the (crying) babies, the women simply refuse to comply. The translator explains to the exasperated director that they could not even imagine what it is that he is asking of them. As they resist the director's instruction, the women refuse to enact his version of their historical suffering. *Even the Rain* conjures up the myth of 'discovery' in the context of a continuous and/or renewed and global exploitation of the Americas. By simultaneously returning us to the primal scene of encounter in a make-believe filmic scenario and addressing present-day economic asymme-

tries, the film can be read as a powerful critique of a globalization that follows a neoliberal logic. Such representations point to a hemispheric, even global perspective on the Columbus myth, and continue the cultural work surrounding one of America's key foundational narratives.

## 7. STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the semantic implications of 'discovery,' 'exploration,' and 'landing.' Which other terms might be used to describe Columbus's geographic mobility?
2. What are the rhetorical strategies Bartolomé de las Casas, Ferdinand Columbus, and others employ to depict Columbus in a positive light?
3. Give the various aspects that made Columbus seem an appropriate and usable national hero around the time of the founding of the US.
4. Describe the process by which Columbus became appropriated as an Italian American ancestor figure.
5. Discuss Walt Whitman's poems "A Prayer of Columbus" and "A Thought of Columbus," and explicate their representational strategies.
6. Discuss the implications of Native American revisionist critiques of the Columbus myth as both subnational and transnational interventions. What does, in this context, the neologism 'Columbusing' refer to?
7. Compare the representation of Columbus in different history and/or school books. How do they reflect on various versions of the myth?
8. Check out Tatzu Nishi's 2012 installation "Discovering Columbus" at Columbus Circle, New York City ([www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/5495\\_discovering\\_columbus](http://www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/5495_discovering_columbus)). How does this art project reflect on the mythic quality of the historical figure?
9. Can you think of other (American) stories of 'discovery' and/or 'landing' that perpetuate, reproduce, or converge with that of Columbus?
10. In a comparative hemispheric framework, you can study the ways in which Columbus is represented in Latin American literature, e.g. in Rubén Darío's poem "A Colón" (1892), in Alejo Carpentiers *El arpa y la sombra* (1979), and/or in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Vigilia del almirante* (1992). What are differences and similarities to the US-American Columbus discourse?

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