

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Columbus, Juana and the Politics of the Plaza: Battles over Monuments, Memory and Identity in Buenos Aires

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## Abstract

In 2013, Argentina's then-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner sparked controversy for her decision to replace a monument of Christopher Columbus in Buenos Aires with one of nineteenth-century mestiza revolutionary Juana Azurduy. This article examines the history and iconography of these monuments, exploring the intersections between public space, art, politics and memory. It argues that these monuments — one representing Argentina's previously maligned Italian immigrant heritage, the other its forgotten indigenous culture — demonstrate how fundamental struggles over national identity have been embedded and contested in the capital's urban landscape, in ways that remain influential. It highlights Argentina's 1910 centennial and 2010 bicentennial as key to these efforts, and examines the power/politics of place in the central plaza where various actors have fought for public commemorative representation.

**Keywords:** monuments; Argentina; memory; identity; place; commemorations; Juana Azurduy; Columbus

## Introduction

As the story goes, it was during a 2011 visit to Buenos Aires that Hugo Chávez paused in the middle of his meeting with Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (then presidents of Venezuela and Argentina, respectively) to point out of a window of the Casa Rosada and ask: 'What is that mass murderer doing there?'<sup>1</sup> He gestured towards an 85-foot-tall marble pedestal crowned by a statue of Christopher Columbus, a monument that had stood in the plaza behind Argentina's government house for nearly a century. Completed in 1921, it was a gift from Buenos Aires' Italian immigrant community, to celebrate the nation's 1910 centennial of independence. Looking down towards the plaza, Chávez reportedly told Kirchner, 'Columbus was the head of an invasion that produced not a massacre, but a genocide. You should put an Indian there.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Juan Ignacio Irigaray, 'Cristina Kirchner consigue "desahuciar" a Colón', *El Mundo*, 19 Sept. 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Ricardo Roa, 'Azurduy nueva por Colón usado', *Clarín*, 14 July 2015.

Two years later, Kirchner announced the monument would be replaced with a statue of Juana Azurduy de Padilla, a mestiza guerrilla leader born in 1780 in a region that is now Bolivia. Azurduy commanded armies during Argentina's early nineteenth-century independence wars, but was largely forgotten in the nation's official historical canon. Bolivian President Evo Morales donated US\$1 million in state funds for the new statue (presented as a symbol of the bond between the two nations), and Azurduy quickly surged into public historical consciousness in the debates that followed.

Many Argentines welcomed the decision to remove Columbus from his central pedestal in the capital. In a joint statement, organisations representing the nation's diverse indigenous groups lauded it as 'historical reparation', reflecting debates over historical memory that have intensified since 1992's quinquennial celebrations of Columbus' 'discovery' sparked protests across the Americas.<sup>3</sup> Activists argued Columbus should be recognised as initiating the violent colonial exploitation of indigenous peoples, setting off centuries of genocide, repression and racism. Demonstrations left Columbus statues in several Latin American cities marred with red paint, a metaphor for the brutality of colonialism and its lasting legacies.<sup>4</sup> In the years since, public commemorations of Columbus have become increasingly contested. In Buenos Aires, many denounced the monument by the Casa Rosada as symbolic of an erasure of indigenous history and identity – particularly significant in a nation where nineteenth-century military campaigns sought to eliminate indigenous communities. However, views on its removal were far from unanimous. Preservationists protested, and one municipal legislator proclaimed, 'in view of all, they [the government] were stealing a historic monument'.<sup>5</sup> For the significant population of *porteños* (residents of Buenos Aires) of Italian descent, the move was disrespectful to their ancestors and the place of Italian heritage in national identity. The issue became a political flashpoint between Buenos Aires' conservative Mayor Mauricio Macri (later elected president, in November 2015) and the leftist President Kirchner. After a two-year legal battle – during which the Columbus monument remained in pieces in the plaza, and public debates flared over historical memory and public space – the monument of Azurduy officially replaced Columbus in July 2015.

At the inaugural ceremony, Morales proclaimed the new monument 'a form of decolonization', declaring, 'we are in times of liberation'.<sup>6</sup> For its sculptor, Andrés Zerner, the Azurduy monument provided Argentines with 'a way of seeing our identity', articulating 'not just a representation of our shared past, but also a call for future action'.<sup>7</sup> These aspirations raise questions about the function and relevance of monuments in modern urban landscapes, and in Buenos Aires in

<sup>3</sup>'Sacarlo es una reparación histórica', *Página 12*, 7 June 2013.

<sup>4</sup>Fabienne Viala, *The Post-Columbus Syndrome: Identities, Cultural Nationalism, and Commemorations in the Caribbean* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Cristian Ritondo, 'A la vista de todos estaban robando un monumento histórico', *La Nación*, 1 June 2013.

<sup>6</sup>Cristina Kirchner y Evo Morales inauguraron el monumento a Juana Azurduy', Ministerio de Cultura, Presidencia de la Nación, 16 July 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Silvia Gómez, 'Andrés Zerner: "Este monumento tiene que trascender a los gobiernos"', *Clarín*, 15 July 2015; author interview with Andrés Zerner, Buenos Aires, 29 July 2015.

particular. In 1927, Austrian intellectual Robert Musil anticipated an end to public monuments, writing, ‘the remarkable thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in the world so invisible as a monument.’<sup>8</sup> For Musil, anything intended to permanently inhabit ‘the backdrop of our consciousness ... forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness’.<sup>9</sup> In 1996, art historian Hellmut Wohl argued this has intensified in the modern age, with media like photography and film rendering monuments’ static memory production ineffective. In essence, he wrote, ‘contemporary monuments can no longer plausibly celebrate national heroes, patriotic or personal virtue, or great historical events’, leaving them far from ‘believable’ to the public.<sup>10</sup> In part, these criticisms reflect changes in the design and meanings of monuments throughout the twentieth century. By the 1930s, artists and critics grew weary of neoclassical columns, figurative sculptures and heroic statues on pedestals, pushing towards more architectural, spatial monuments, followed by modernist expressions by mid-century.<sup>11</sup> More recently, a need to remember and reconcile difficult pasts has given rise to what historian Kirk Savage has aptly termed ‘therapeutic monuments’. Moving the visitor experience from simply viewing to *engaging*, these monuments represent a distinct shift, aiming to facilitate healing, address demands for justice and impart a historical lesson of ‘never again’.<sup>12</sup> A large portion of scholarly attention to monuments and memory in Latin America has centred on these types of commemorations, created to remember the tens of thousands of victims of state-sponsored terrorism and disappearance committed under dictatorships that held power in areas across the region from the 1960s to the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

In the monument of Azurduy, imperatives behind classical statuary and modern works collide, with the artist elevating a new national heroine to address historical injustice and decolonise memory. But can it provide the restorative justice supporters hoped for? How did monuments perform specific didactic functions in the past, and do they continue to do so in the present? Similar questions have emerged in

<sup>8</sup>Robert Musil, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author* (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos, 1987), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup>Hellmut Wohl, ‘Memory, Oblivion, and the “Invisibility” of Monuments’, in A. W. Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel (eds.), *Memory and Oblivion*, vol. 1: *Proceedings of the International Congress of the History of Art, Amsterdam, 1–7 Sept. 1996* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1996), pp. 925–6.

<sup>11</sup>Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Monumento conmemorativo y espacio público en Iberoamérica* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004), pp. 31–50.

<sup>12</sup>Kirk Savage, ‘Trauma, Healing, and the Therapeutic Monument’, *Public Art Review*, 18:1 (2006), pp. 41–5; Quentin Stevens and Karen Franck, *Memorials as Spaces of Engagement: Design, Use and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>13</sup>See Cara Levey, *Fragile Memory, Shifting Impunity: Commemoration and Contestation in Post-Dictatorship Argentina and Uruguay* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016); Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland, *Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno de España, 2003); Brigitte Sion, *Memorials in Berlin and Buenos Aires: Balancing Memory, Architecture, and Tourism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015); Max Page, *Memories of Buenos Aires: Signs of State Terrorism in Argentina* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013); Catherine Hite and Kath Collins, ‘Memorial Fragments, Monumental Silences and Re-Awakenings in 21st-Century Chile’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 38: 2 (2009), pp. 379–400; Carolina Aguilera, ‘Memories and Silences of a Segregated City: Monuments and Political Violence in Santiago, Chile, 1970–1991’, *Memory Studies*, 8: 1 (2015), pp. 102–14; Paulo Drinot, ‘For Whom the Eye Cries: Memory, Monumentality, and the Ontologies of Violence in Peru’, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 18: 1 (2009), pp. 15–32.

modern conflicts over monuments all over the world. In Buenos Aires, debates culminated with municipal legislators voting to relocate the Azurduy statue – just two years after its inauguration – from the central plaza.<sup>14</sup> This only intensified questions on the politics of public memory and the power of place.

The monuments of Columbus and Azurduy provide a window to examine these issues, and the intersections between identity and memory in Buenos Aires' urban landscape. By analysing the history, iconography and controversies behind these monuments, this article demonstrates how official and public actors have utilised monuments to embed and contest the capital city's identity politics in public space, in ways that remain influential in the present. Specifically, it highlights Argentina's 1910 centennial and 2010 bicentennial of independence as key points in these efforts, and places the nation's persistent struggle with an indigenous identity as a central issue. This illustrates a principal argument that the monuments of Columbus and Azurduy – one representing Argentina's previously maligned Italian immigrant heritage, the other its forgotten indigenous one – encapsulate fundamental battles over national identity, performed in a charged central space. Overall, this also expands discussions of public memory in Argentina by examining classically styled 'hero' monuments (typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and their relevance in modern political discourse and memory.

### Classical Monuments and 'Monument Mania'

The Latin root of the word monument – *monere*, meaning to advise, warn or recall – is intrinsically linked to memory. Moreover, argues Françoise Choay, the 'affective nature' of a monument's purpose 'is essential; it is not simply a question of informing, of calling to mind a neutral bit of information, but rather of stirring up, through the emotions, a living memory'.<sup>15</sup> Monuments are generally categorised as two types: unintentional monuments, which only *became* monuments due to their artistic and historical value; and intentional monuments, explicitly created to keep past events and figures 'alive and present in the consciousness of future generations'.<sup>16</sup> While observers define the value of the former, intentional monuments contain specifically chosen and embedded meanings, intended to permanently 'conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest'.<sup>17</sup> In occupying (and often dominating) public spaces, monuments widely convey authority and intangible ideals such as liberty, identity or virtue, understood as part of a society's collective values. But the stories a monument tells generally express more about the moment it was created than the past it aims to preserve. As historian Michael Kammen observed, societies 'reconstruct their pasts rather than

<sup>14</sup>Aprobaron el traslado del monumento de Juana Azurduy', *La Nación*, 4 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup>Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>Alois Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development', in Nicholas Stanley-Price, Mansfield Kirby Talley and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), p. 69.

<sup>17</sup>Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 17.

faithfully record them, and they do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present'.<sup>18</sup> Pierre Nora argued the impulse to create these and other *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) reveals the truth about the memories they privilege: 'without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away'.<sup>19</sup> For Nora, these sites signalled a need to recapture a ruptured past. '[W]e buttress our identities upon such bastions', he wrote, 'but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them'.<sup>20</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, a period of 'monument mania' reflected this push to shape and reinforce national ideologies.<sup>21</sup> For France, it began after the 1875 establishment of the Third Republic: seeking unity under a national mythology, patriots commissioned statues of Marianne, an allegory of revolution and liberty. After the US Civil War (1861–5), monuments worked to promote unity, but also dissent, with Confederate statues aiming to validate competing historical narratives and re-establish authority along racial lines.<sup>22</sup> Monuments quickly became fixtures in cities in Europe, the United States and Latin America, emerging in central squares and thoroughfares, where large sectors of the public could gather and absorb intended messages.<sup>23</sup> They proved to be both powerful and popular, with inaugurations highlighted in newspapers' gossip and social columns.<sup>24</sup> Neoclassical styles dominated, seen as a link between new nations and the ideals of culture, order and democracy in classical antiquity. As statues became less expensive, subjects shifted from generals to common soldiers, and demand for civic art increased, alongside the argument that the public must encounter examples of patriotism and virtue every day in order to emulate these qualities.<sup>25</sup>

This fixation on perpetuating memory through monuments was soon viewed as an irrational mania, a crisis of excess: in 1850, British newspapers declared the nation gripped by 'monument mania', and in Glasgow journalists expressed concern over statues 'rising in every quarter of our metropolis'.<sup>26</sup> By 1919, US art critics lamented 'the plague of war memorials now sweeping over the land', writing, 'must

<sup>18</sup>Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, No. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989), pp. 7, 12.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup>Maurice Agulhon, 'La "statueomanie" et l'histoire', *Ethnologie française*, 8: 1 (1978), pp. 145–72; Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Patricia Pérez Walters, 'Manía de estatuas: la escultura en el siglo XIX', *Nuestra Historia*, 55–6 (2003), pp. 12–24.

<sup>22</sup>See 'Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy', Southern Poverty Law Center, 21 April 2016.

<sup>23</sup>Jérôme Monnet, 'The Symbolism of Place: A Geography of Relationships between Space, Power and Identity', *European Journal of Geography*, 562 (2011), paras. 13, 18, available at <https://journals.openedition.org/cybergeo/24747#quotation> (last access 28 Sept. 2018).

<sup>24</sup>Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage 1870–1997* (London: Reaktion, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>25</sup>Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011), p. 195.

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Paul A. Pickering and Robyn Westcott, 'Monuments and Commemorations: A Consideration', *Humanities Research*, 10: 2 (2003), p. 1.

we suffer not only war but also the commemoration of war?<sup>27</sup> Weariness with neo-classical styles bolstered a backlash, exemplified in Musil's 1927 critique. But in many Latin American capitals, neoclassicism and a monumental fervour surged in the early twentieth century, as newly consolidated nations looked to forge an identity separate from indigenous and Spanish colonial pasts.

### Identity and the Centennial Moment in Argentina

Like most of Latin America, Argentina faced turmoil in the post-independence period. The 1810 May Revolution was followed by decades of civil strife, with conservative Federalists arguing to maintain elements of the colonial order and provincial autonomy, while Unitarians envisioned a liberal republic with a centralised government in Buenos Aires. By the 1840s, as Federalist caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas consolidated power in a dictatorship, liberals argued a unified nation-state required new national narratives, remaking Argentina under a European model. Most influential was the dichotomy of 'civilisation and barbarism' proposed by intellectual (and future president, 1868–74) Domingo F. Sarmiento. He argued that a struggle between forces of civilisation (defined by liberalism, and European and urban culture) and barbarism (viewed in indigenous peoples, gauchos and rural life) caused civil unrest, and that immigration provided a large part of the solution.<sup>28</sup> This belief underscored policies that liberals put into place after Rosas was ousted in 1852; however, liberals were clear about *which* immigrants they preferred. In the text that formed the basis of Argentina's 1853 Constitution, Juan Bautista Alberdi asserted, 'all that is civilised is European ... but not all that is European is civilised'.<sup>29</sup> He argued Catholicism corrupted governance in southern Europe, and Argentina must 'promote the Anglo-Saxon population ... they are identified with steampower, commerce, and liberty, and it will be impossible to establish these within ourselves without the active cooperation of this progressive and civilised race'.<sup>30</sup> Northern Europeans, Alberdi declared, would bring 'English liberty, French culture, [and] the industriousness of the men of Europe and the United States'.<sup>31</sup> From 1871 to 1914, nearly six million immigrants arrived in Argentina, the majority settling in Buenos Aires. But liberals' hopes for waves of northern Europeans did not manifest: 80 per cent of immigrants came from Mediterranean countries, with the largest numbers from Italy, followed by Spain.<sup>32</sup>

As Buenos Aires expanded, liberal politicians turned to the rural provinces, seen as the heart of Sarmiento's 'barbarism'. In 1879, General Julio A. Roca led the 'Conquest of the Desert', a military campaign that violently subdued indigenous peoples in the Pampas, Patagonia and Gran Chaco regions, killing or expelling

<sup>27</sup>Quoted in Doss, *Memorial Mania*, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup>Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo: or, Civilisation and Barbarism*, trans. Mary Mann (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

<sup>29</sup>Juan Bautista Alberdi, *Las bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República de Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1969), p. 6.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>32</sup>David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 141.

thousands to claim vast expanses for the state. After additional campaigns, large sectors of Argentina's indigenous communities had been killed, enslaved or pressed into military service.<sup>33</sup> It was declared a victory over barbarism, applauded by Argentine intellectuals and foreign diplomats interested in expanding markets. As president, Roca (1880–6, 1898–1904) oversaw periods of sustained economic growth, as ranching and agriculture expanded into formerly indigenous-held lands. He also brought political consolidation, declaring Buenos Aires the capital city in 1880.

The city's landscape shifted dramatically from 1880 to 1910, as a break from the colonial past was manifested in removing its symbols from the capital's built environment. Renovations began with Buenos Aires' first mayor, Torcuato de Alvear (1883–7), nicknamed the 'Argentine Haussmann' for his admiration of George-Eugène Haussmann's modernisation of Paris.<sup>34</sup> Alvear's demolition of the Recova – a colonnade bisecting the central plaza, and a structure considered an 'odious relic' of the colonial era – created the modern Plaza de Mayo, still a central stage for political life.<sup>35</sup> Parisian Beaux-Arts and Italian Revival architecture (including a new government house, completed in 1898) replaced colonial buildings, while Paris' director of public works created wide boulevards and landscape designer Charles Thays envisioned new parks and plazas. French styles dominated, though with exceptions, particularly in ventures funded by British investment – links to British rail companies influenced the Constitución and Retiro rail terminals, modelled after London's Euston and Liverpool's Lime Street stations. This overall European revival was bolstered by liberals' idyllic visions of modernity and the immigrants re-establishing themselves in Buenos Aires: in many ways, embedding European styles in the urban landscape created a physical embodiment of their nostalgia for home.

As the seat of political power, the capital city was viewed as an extension of the nation. It also became home to millions of immigrants bringing diverse histories, cultures and customs. Amidst this plurality, the built environment proposed a means of assimilation, a powerful venue to impose a single hegemonic national identity. In 1909, Argentine historian and intellectual Ricardo Rojas underscored the power of public space – and monuments in particular – to achieve this:

History is not only taught in classrooms: the historical sense, without which lessons are sterile, is formed in the spectacle of everyday life, in the traditional names of places, in the sites that are associated with heroic memories, in the remains and pieces preserved in museums, and through commemorative monuments, whose influence on the imagination I have called 'the pedagogy of the statues'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Skidmore, Aline Helg and Alan Knight, *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870–1940* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 44.

<sup>34</sup>Adrián Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque: Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887–1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998), p. 101.

<sup>35</sup>Olga M. García D'Agostino, *Imagen de Buenos Aires a través de los viajeros, 1870–1910* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>36</sup>Ricardo Rojas, *La restauración nacionalista: Informe sobre educación* (La Plata: UNIPE, 2010), p. 221.



Rojas praised European cities for ‘cultivate[ing] their own statues as if they were the pedigree of the nation’, but pushed against liberals’ embrace of urbanism and European culture, believing this brought social decay.<sup>37</sup> He argued the ‘true’ Argentine is in the countryside, and the state must ‘Argentinise’ immigrants through schools and public works stressing a nationalistic *argentinidad*, embracing Creole ideals and the gaucho as a national symbol.<sup>38</sup>

Rojas’ preoccupation with identity and public space coincided with preparations for the 1910 centennial of Argentina’s independence, and reflected similar discussions within a larger ‘centennial moment’ in Latin America. Following a trend in Western Europe and its former colonies that became a veritable ‘cult of the centenary’, government officials planned elaborate celebrations that effectively worked to promote political agendas while constructing historical memory and identity.<sup>39</sup> By this point, when many Latin American nations were moving from post-independence unrest towards agendas promising order and progress, centennials provided a stage to promote national consolidation and project a unified identity. In 1910, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela celebrated centennials of independence movements; subsequent festivals included those in Paraguay (1911), Peru (1921) and Bolivia (1925), as well as Mexico’s second *centenario* in 1921. The celebrations also helped political elites accelerate development of their ideal cities: contemporary to urban transformations in Buenos Aires were the Haussmann-inspired renovations in Mexico City during the Porfiriato (1876–1911), and similar reforms occurred in Lima under Augusto B. Leguía’s second administration (the ‘Patria Nueva’, 1919–30). In each location, centennials asserted a triumph of progress and modernity, though Argentina proved distinct in key aspects.

In Mexico, the 1910 centennial conflated national identity with the Porfiriato and revolutionary heroes Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, tying liberal leaders to state formation and elevating a mestizo identity. Reflecting arguments that mestizaje was ‘the solution to Mexico’s so-called Indian problem’, organisers portrayed Morelos and other mestizos as icons of identity and integration, and commemorated Benito Juárez, ‘Mexico’s most famous acculturated Indian’, in a massive marble monument.<sup>40</sup> Pre-Colombian cultures were celebrated as a distant, honourable past, as attempts to conceal a contemporary indigenous presence reflected views bolstered by scientific racism.<sup>41</sup> This shifted in post-revolutionary Mexico, where *indigenismo* inspired a 1921 centennial that promoted ‘contemporary indigenous culture as authentic Mexican culture’, and mestizaje as a source of

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>38</sup>Richard W. Slatta, ‘The Gaucho in Argentina’s Quest for National Identity’, in David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch (eds.), *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History* (Wilmington, DE: SR, 1994), p. 155.

<sup>39</sup>Roland Quinault, ‘The Cult of the Centenary, c.1784–1914’, *Historical Research*, 71: 176 (1998), p. 303.

<sup>40</sup>Michael J. Gonzales, ‘Modernity and the Indigenous in Centennial Celebrations of Independence in Mexico City, 1910 and 1921’, in Helen Gilbert and Charlotte Gleghorn (eds.), *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2014), pp. 43, 52.

<sup>41</sup>Michael J. Gonzales, ‘Imagining Mexico in 1910: Visions of the “Patria” in the Centennial Celebration in Mexico City’, *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 39: 3 (2007), pp. 495–533.



national pride and identity.<sup>42</sup> Similar threads appeared in Peru, where nineteenth-century historiography repeated tropes of a glorious Inca empire (intended to prove an imperial pedigree), all while intellectuals overwhelmingly imagined Peru as white and European. These notions of cultural hegemony were reflected in mid-nineteenth-century urban renovations, although the public rejected this imported ideology and monuments that proved 'exclusive and exclusionary spaces'.<sup>43</sup> By the 1920s, Leguía consolidated *indigenista* and *hispanista* ideologies into a new identity in his *Patria Nueva*, directly associating this with urban modernisations and the centennial.<sup>44</sup> Leguía's *peruanidad* recast indigenous history in the banner of order and progress, depicting imperial Incas as a ruling class who organised society to save their people 'from decrepitude and ruin', effectively merging *indigenista* discourses with a liberal, paternalistic one 'that aimed to civilize the indigenous "race" and integrate it into the national body'.<sup>45</sup>

Centennials in both Mexico and Peru contributed to a larger project of integration, creating a regulatory urban environment to educate citizens in official culture and history. Indigenous histories were framed paternalistically or as a mythical, distant past, but their very inclusion – and that of *mestizaje* – marked their place in national ideologies. This was manifested in the monuments of Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City (1887) and Manco Cápac in Lima (1921), and *indigenismo*-inspired architecture. Beyond referencing an indigenous past, other statues, such as Mexico's centennial monument to Benito Juárez, honoured an indigenous present: elevating Juárez as 'an Indian who responded to contemporary universal values: republicanism, liberty, and justice'.<sup>46</sup>

While Argentina's centennial shared similar goals of integration, this was aimed at European immigrants. Any indication of an indigenous presence was absent, in a centennial that largely projected a European identity. This cannot be attributed solely to the historically smaller and more dispersed indigenous populations in Argentina; the influence of nineteenth-century attempts to erase indigenous bodies and histories is undeniable. As Mexican and Peruvian politicians and intellectuals argued integration would alleviate the 'Indian problem', in Argentina the prevailing notion was that this had been resolved with Roca's Conquest of the Desert. Dominant narratives portrayed the indigenous as 'a wild and destructive force ... that had to be wiped out to give birth to the nation', linking the creation of the Republic with indigenous extermination and European immigration.<sup>47</sup> This is reflected in the only monument of an indigenous subject coinciding with the centennial in Buenos Aires: *El Aborigen* (1910), by Argentine artist Hernán Cullen Ayerza (see [Figure 1](#)). It depicts a semi-nude indigenous man on horseback,

<sup>42</sup>Gonzales, 'Modernity and the Indigenous', p. 52.

<sup>43</sup>Natalia Majluf, *Escultura y espacio público, Lima, 1850–1879* (Lima: IEP Ediciones, 1994), p. 39.

<sup>44</sup>See Johanna Hamann, *Leguía, el Centenario y sus monumentos. Lima: 1919–1930* (Lima: Fondo Editorial, 2015).

<sup>45</sup>Juan Carlos Calligos, 'Reinventing the City of the Kings: Postcolonial Modernizations of Lima, 1845–1930', PhD diss., University of Florida, 2007, pp. 265–8, 271.

<sup>46</sup>Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, '1910 Mexico City: Space and Nation in the City of the Centenario', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 28: 1 (1996), p. 97.

<sup>47</sup>Gastón Gordillo and Silvia María Hirsch, 'Indigenous Struggles and Contested Identities in Argentina: Histories of Invisibilization and Reemergence', *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 8: 3 (2003), p. 5.



**Figure 1.** 'El Aborigen' (1910) by Hernán Cullen Ayerza

*Source:* Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento de Documentos Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

screaming while extending a long spear. His horse rears into the air, indicating a violent forward charge; an overall depiction intended to provoke fear in the viewer below. Similar lines of tension in the man's muscles and those of his horse blur the line between animal and man, creating a figure that embodies the barbarism Sarmiento imagined, a wild force whose removal allowed the modern nation of the centennial to emerge.

Despite narratives of extinction, indigenous populations remained, largely integrated into regional political economies as wage labourers, farmers or sheepherders.

This presence remained in conflict with an identity emphasising Argentina's whiteness, resulting in an 'invisibilisation of the indigenous question in national imaginings' taking hold so forcefully that 'even the notion of *mestizaje*, so central in other Latin American national discourses, was absent in Argentina'.<sup>48</sup> In the capital city, this was bolstered by the explicit *visibility* of millions of European immigrants. The implied connexion between Buenos Aires and Paris deepened as French politicians and artists 'insisted that Argentina had strong historical, cultural, and even racial ties to France' and Argentine elites welcomed projects that made Buenos Aires appear 'far more "French" than most of France's colonial possessions'.<sup>49</sup> This all combined to project a narrative of European cultural hegemony at the centennial: after attending the celebrations, French statesman Georges Clemenceau proudly declared Buenos Aires 'a grand city of Europe' and 'the capital of the continent'.<sup>50</sup>

Monuments played a central role in this, as a centennial commission authorised dozens of new works, marking the peak of Argentina's monument mania. Akin to criticisms elsewhere, some saw the fervour to commemorate a heroic national past as problematic. One cartoonist mocked the efforts as haphazard, depicting a member of the centennial commission approaching a sculptor to ask:

- What is it that you have done there, in that statue of a hero?
- The Israelites crossing the Red Sea.
- The truth is that this has little to do with our history, but anyway, the Centennial Commission congratulates you ardently.<sup>51</sup>

Others saw projects as a point of pride, boasting 'Buenos Aires will soon be a city rich in commemorative monuments. Almost every plaza already has its statue and there are some that have many, in addition to other statues ... in the works'.<sup>52</sup> New monuments commemorated national heroes and independence, as well as Argentina's diverse immigrant communities, with associations representing immigrants from France, Britain, Italy, Spain, Syria, Germany, Sweden, the United States and the Austro-Hungarian Empire donating a monument. Each was tasked with symbolising immigrants' contributions to Argentina's success, a merger of strengths to forge a modern, progressive nation. It was clear the goal was not to cultivate distinct ethnic identifications – instead, projects were intended to reflect an identity with European heritage, but that was *uniquely Argentine*.

This coincided with a new cultural nationalism, encapsulated in Rojas' appeal for a distinct *argentinidad*. Rojas argued for a 'nationalist restoration' based primarily on indigenous and Hispanic heritage, and assimilated immigrants via schools and

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 11, 5.

<sup>49</sup>J. P. Daughton, 'When Argentina Was "French": Rethinking Cultural Politics and European Imperialism in Belle-Époque Buenos Aires', *Journal of Modern History*, 80: 4 (2008), pp. 835, 837.

<sup>50</sup>Patricia S. Méndez and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, 'Buenos Aires en el Centenario: edificación de la nación y la nación edificada', *Apuntes*, 19: 2 (2007), pp. 216–27.

<sup>51</sup>'Sinfonía', *Caras y Caretas*, 23 April 1910.

<sup>52</sup>*La Prensa*, 28 Sept. 1924, quoted in María del Carmen Magaz, *Escultura y poder en el espacio público* (Buenos Aires: Acervo Editora, 2007), p. 87.

public space.<sup>53</sup> His ideas of vindicating indigenous heritage did not materialise, though this marked the beginning of the gaucho's rehabilitation as a national symbol. Suddenly, derogatory characteristics once applied to gauchos (vagrancy, criminality, disorder) were transferred to immigrants, as the sheer number of immigrants spurred xenophobic rhetoric about a disappearing 'Argentine people (*raza*)'.<sup>54</sup> Liberals who had encouraged the 'whitening' of Argentina now expressed alarm about integration as immigrants continued to maintain separate communities, banks and schools. Most terrifying for elites was the growing issue of labour: economic growth, industrialisation and immigration spurred a large working class, increasingly expressing demands through trade unions, socialist, and anarchist movements. Immigrants were maligned as bringing dangerous ideologies, sparking legislation aimed at expelling foreign 'agitators'.<sup>55</sup> As the centennial approached, the situation worsened, inciting violent repression and xenophobia. By 1910, unions had threatened a general strike across Buenos Aires. To quash demonstrations and maintain pretences for the centennial, the government declared a state of siege.

By the twentieth century's first decade, Argentina had moved from a perceived 'Indian problem' to a 'social question'. Liberal politicians viewed the centennial as a means to address this, integrating the immigrant masses by promoting national identity through public space. For immigrants increasingly viewed with suspicion, the centennial monuments held a larger promise – not only to define identity, but also to demonstrate their contributions and loyalty to their adopted homeland.

### The Italian Community's Columbus Monument

The call for immigrant community monuments generated 'a kind of international struggle – whose principal actors were France, Spain, Italy and Germany' – all interested in claiming a prominent location in the city, and within national identity.<sup>56</sup> Tasked with representing the largest immigrant community, the Italian monument was particularly significant. The efforts were headed by Italian-born businessman Antonio Devoto, who had established substantial wealth in shipping, trade and banking.<sup>57</sup> In 1873, he founded the Italian Society of Buenos Aires, through which he later oversaw the Italian community monument. Devoto personally chose Columbus as the subject, initiating the Columbus Monument Committee in 1906 and contacting the minister of the interior with an offer to partially fund the statue. Describing Columbus as 'the immortal writer of America' of whom 'Italy has the right to be proud', he requested the monument be placed 'in one of the city's public squares, daring to hope that, as the most suitable, it is

<sup>53</sup>Earl T. Glaubert, 'Ricardo Rojas and the Emergence of Argentine Cultural Nationalism', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 43: 1 (1963), pp. 1–13.

<sup>54</sup>Arturo Reynal O'Connor, *Los poetas argentinos* (Buenos Aires: J. Tragant, 1904), p. 27.

<sup>55</sup>The Residence Law of 1902 and the Social Defence Law of 1910.

<sup>56</sup>Marina Aguerre, 'Lazos de bronce y mármol: España y la Argentina en los monumentos de la ciudad de Buenos Aires', in Yayo Aznar and Diana Wechsler (eds.), *La memoria compartida: España y la Argentina en la construcción de un imaginario cultural 1898–1950* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2005), p. 51.

<sup>57</sup>Fernando Devoto, *Historia de los italianos en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2006), pp. 129, 214.

worthy to designate the one bearing the name of Columbus'.<sup>58</sup> Devoto was clearly referring to Parque Colón, completed in 1904. Located directly behind the government house, it was a powerful commemorative space in the capital.

The minister quickly accepted Devoto's 'magnificent gift', assuring him Congress would sanction 'with equally patriotic feelings, the permission needed to erect [the monument] in the plaza already consecrated to Columbus'.<sup>59</sup> Devoto arranged a design competition, open only to Italian artists working in Italy, and in 1907 the Italian Society exhibited models from five finalists. President Figueroa Alcorta, who was close friends with Devoto, helped examine the entries, all depicting Columbus standing atop a tall pedestal. The following week, Congress officially accepted the Italian donation, offering it a place in Parque Colón.<sup>60</sup> The exact location was already occupied by the Fuente Monumental, a forty-foot fountain with sculptures of mythical figures, created in France and installed in 1894, but government officials ordered its removal.

For the monument's final design, a jury chose a model titled *Roma*, by Florentine sculptor Arnaldo Zocchi (see Figure 2). A statue of Columbus holding a map and looking towards the horizon capped its towering central pillar, inspired by Roman columns. On the pillar's north side, Zocchi engraved a passage from *Medea*, by Roman dramatist Seneca:

In future years an age shall come  
When Ocean shall release the bonds of things  
The wide earth opens up  
And Tiphys shall unveil new worlds  
So Thule shall no longer bound the earth.<sup>61</sup>

Its inclusion references an interpretation of *Medea* as an ancient prophecy of the New World's 'discovery'. This began with Columbus himself conflating *Medea* with Christian philosophy: Columbus believed he was both Tiphys and an emissary of God, fulfilling several pre-ordained destinies. In his *History of the Indies* (1535), Spanish Friar Bartolomé de las Casas reinforced this, reading *Medea* through the lens of Christian prophecy to conclude that 'Columbus's discovery had come as the fulfilment of divine providence'.<sup>62</sup> For Italian intellectuals, this also helped argue that antiquity possessed knowledge of the Americas, and Seneca had predicted an expansion/rebirth of the Roman Empire, to be realised through

<sup>58</sup>Antonio Devoto, on behalf of the Columbus Monument Committee, to Dr. Joaquín V. González, 9 Oct 1906, in *Il monumento a Cristoforo Colombo, donato dagli italiani nell'Argentina alla nazione ospite* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Compañía General de Fósforos, 1921), p. 26.

<sup>59</sup>J. V. González to Antonio Devoto, 11 Oct. 1906, Comisión Nacional del Centenario, Comisión II, Estatuas y Monumentos, 1908–1912, 18-2-3, General Archive of the Nation (AGN), Buenos Aires.

<sup>60</sup>'El monumento a Colón', *Caras y Caretas*, 17 Aug. 1907; La Cámara de Diputados, Ley núm. 5105, 23 Aug. 1907, AGN, Buenos Aires.

<sup>61</sup>Seneca, *Medea*, vv. 378–382 (375–79), translation in Sabine MacCormack, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain, and Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 248.

<sup>62</sup>Wolfgang Haase and Meyer Reinhold, *The Classical Tradition and the Americas* (Berlin: Gruyter, 1994), p. 85.



**Figure 2.** The Monument of Columbus in Buenos Aires, with the Casa Rosada Visible behind it  
*Source:* Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento de Documentos Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Columbus. At the Columbus monument's base, allegorical sculptures directly allude to this interpretation. On the east side (the monument's front), several figures lead the bowsprit of a ship, shattering chains beneath to represent the opening of new worlds. Above them, allegories of science, civilisation, genius and the ocean symbolically guide the vessel, while Columbus oversees it all as Tiphys.

On the base's west side, a sculptural group titled *Faith and Justice* includes figures that the Monument Committee described as representing 'the first arrivals supported by the faith' planting a large cross 'as a symbol of civilization ... on American soil' (see [Figure 3](#)).<sup>63</sup> In front, a seated and blindfolded Lady Justice does not hold the traditional attributes of a sword and scales; instead, she balances

<sup>63</sup>Columbus Monument Committee, 'Il monumento', in *Il monumento a Cristoforo Colombo*, p. 38.





**Figure 3.** Sculptural Group Titled 'Faith and Justice', on the Columbus Monument's Base  
*Source:* Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento de Documentos Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

a large anchor representing Christian hope and steadfastness, the proverbial 'anchor for the soul'. In her right hand is a palm frond, a symbol of victory and triumph in ancient Rome, though also associated with Christian iconography. Linked to the palms Jesus' followers laid down as he entered Jerusalem, the branches symbolised the victory of the martyrs in Western Christian art. As an allegorical figure, she represented ideals of republicanism, egalitarianism and justice, all while holding firmly to Christian symbols, weighing them in equal measure. Reflecting larger artistic trends, the monument's neoclassical elements link to ideas of order and



rationalism, shunning the excesses of baroque styles associated with colonialism and the Catholic Church. At the same time, Zocchi significantly incorporates Christian iconography, directly referencing the religion that nineteenth-century liberals saw as detrimental to modern governance. In all, Zocchi's monument made a bold statement: declaring Columbus (and by extension, Italians) had brought democracy and civilisation to Argentina, and done so through divine, prophesied intervention.

Zocchi originally planned to focus entirely on Columbus' Italian heritage, though the jury requested he reference Spain's role in Columbus' journey.<sup>64</sup> In response, he added reliefs to the base's north and south sides: one depicts Columbus proposing his voyage to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the other his meeting with them upon his return (see [Figure 4](#)). In the latter, Columbus approaches the monarchs with his arms outstretched, gesturing to semi-nude figures at his feet – 'exotic' gifts from the Americas. In large headdresses and jewellery, they represent the Indigenous American slaves Columbus brought to Spain. They appear childlike, diminished in scale beneath Columbus. Two of the figures reflect fear, watching while the others crawl towards the monarchs, hands clasped in supplication.

Devoto provided the largest contribution to what Zocchi envisioned as the largest and most expensive marble monument in the world, funding the rest through donations from fellow Italian immigrants.<sup>65</sup> He was not able to raise enough to allow the monument's completion by the centennial, when only the foundational stone was laid.<sup>66</sup> The First World War further delayed the work, but in 1920 the monument – divided into 19 sections and weighing more than 600 tons – sailed on a vessel from Genoa to Buenos Aires. A year later, on 15 June 1921, a grand celebration marked its inauguration. The government gave 'special prominence' to the elaborate ceremony, declaring the day of the inauguration a national holiday.<sup>67</sup> Attendees received postcards and stamps picturing the monument, and a commemorative medal engraved with an image of the monument's allegorical figures leading Columbus' ship. On the opposite side, the verse from *Medea* reinforced the notion of Columbus' mission as the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy. Plans for a museum inside a vault in the monument's base were never completed, but the Italian Society placed a brick from Columbus' childhood home in the room, and for subsequent decades held Columbus Day commemorations at the monument's base.

Zocchi constructed the monument entirely in Italy, using Carrara marble from Italian quarries. Compositionally and symbolically, it was a pure reflection of Italy, saying nothing of Argentina. This proved a peculiar choice: of all of the centennial's immigrant monuments, the Italian contribution was one of only two that did not

<sup>64</sup>Adriana Van Deurs and Marcelo Renard, 'El Monumento a Cristóbal Colón de Arnaldo Zocchi', *Estudios e Investigaciones*, Instituto de Teoría e Historia del Arte Julio Payró, 5 (1994), p. 89.

<sup>65</sup>El monumento a Colón a Buenos Aires', *La Nación*, 12 Feb. 1917.

<sup>66</sup>El monumento a Colón', *La Nación*, 2 Feb. 1910.

<sup>67</sup>El monumento a Colón será inaugurado el 15', *La Nación*, 9 June 1921; 'Con motivo de la inauguración del monumento a Cristóbal Colón fue declarado feriado el día de hoy', *La Nación*, 15 June 1921.



**Figure 4.** A Relief from the Monument's Base, Illustrating Columbus Returning to the Spanish Monarchs  
*Source:* Archivo General de la Nación, Departamento de Documentos Fotográficos, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

incorporate symbols of Argentina.<sup>68</sup> Its strict focus, linking Italians with Western democracy and divine providence, was a reaction to social and racial discourses of the time. Perceptions generally placed Italians on the bottom of a scale of European 'whiteness', rooted in ideas associating southern Europeans with vice, inefficiency and religious fanaticism. As the largest immigrant community in Argentina, Italians faced particular discrimination. As immigration peaked in the 1880s, intellectuals began to sympathetically portray the gaucho as disappearing amidst waves of immigrants, pointing specifically to Italians as detrimental.<sup>69</sup> Long a proponent of immigration, Sarmiento suddenly lamented sluggish assimilation, particularly in Italian communities. He criticised Italian mutual aid societies, schools and the Italian government for granting citizenship to children born in Argentina to Italian parents, which he viewed as fostering conflicted loyalty. He warned Buenos Aires was becoming 'a city without citizens', where 'the most industrious and progressive of its 400,000 inhabitants are strangers'.<sup>70</sup> In response, legislation like the 1887 Law of Subsidised Passage attempted to attract other nationalities.

The overt 'Italianness' of Zocchi's Columbus defied these nativist criticisms, as well as previous controversies over statues viewed as *too* Italian: monuments of Giuseppe Mazzini (1878) and Giuseppe Garibaldi (1904). Funded by Italian immigrants, the statues were heavily criticised for celebrating Italians when Buenos Aires lacked monuments to Argentina's national heroes.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Zocchi's monument – and its location – ostensibly claimed victory in a long-standing rivalry between the Italians and Spaniards who comprised Argentina's two largest immigrant communities. This 'endemic competition' manifested in Spanish immigrants' claims as the 'rightful and genuine Argentines' and true inheritors of Columbus' legacy, arguing Columbus was Galician and that crown funding facilitated the 'hispanisation' of the Americas.<sup>72</sup> In Europe and the Americas, Columbus monuments became a particular source of this tension; in fact, Buenos Aires' Spanish immigrant community had initially proposed Columbus as the subject of *their* centennial monument. Upon hearing this, Devoto hurriedly gathered donations and secured congressional approval for his statue.<sup>73</sup> He explicitly requested it occupy the park by the government house, already named for Columbus – and already occupied by another monument, the Fuente Monumental. This underscores how important the placement was for Devoto, and how his status likely influenced the government's decision to grant him the plaza. Prejudices against Italian immigrants stopped at powerful entrepreneurs and industrialists of Italian heritage, and this small group of elites

<sup>68</sup>The other was the US immigrant contribution, a statue of George Washington. In this case, a US revolutionary hero was intended as a link to Argentina's own revolution and the unity of American democracy.

<sup>69</sup>Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 78.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque*, pp. 209–10. Rodrigo Gutiérrez Viñuales, *Monumento conmemorativo y espacio público en Iberoamérica* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2004), p. 241.

<sup>72</sup>José Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 403.

<sup>73</sup>J. J. Soiza Reilly, 'Un regalo de los Italianos a la República Argentina', *Caras y Caretas*, 9 Jan. 1909.

utilised 'ethnic and national institutions inside the *Colectividad Italiana*' (such as the Italian Society, founded by Devoto) as 'powerful instrument[s] to attain social respectability and legitimacy'.<sup>74</sup> With its placement by the government house, Devoto's monument became the most centrally located of the centennial's immigrant monuments – a potent symbol for Italians' place in national identity.

This was highlighted at the inauguration, where speakers linked Argentina and Italy through a shared *latinidad*. At the ceremony, President of the Columbus Monument Committee Vittorio Valdani (Devoto had died in 1916, never seeing the monument completed) declared Columbus 'a genuine and complete symbol of our Latin people (*razza*)'. 'Nothing better than this monument', he extolled, 'can symbolise the unbreakable bonds that bind Argentines and Italians, here where we find a second homeland ... where we create new families, and our children are children of your land, and your land becomes flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood'.<sup>75</sup> Other speakers marked the monument as a turning point for the xenophobia Italians faced. Directly referencing the monument's symbols and seemingly addressing Columbus himself, Leónidas Anastasi, labour activist and son of Genoese immigrants, announced, 'at your feet, the ship – you break the chains of prejudice'.<sup>76</sup>

Through its iconography and placement, the Italian monument defied cultural rivalries and popular conceptions of Italians as separate from an Argentine identity, reflecting the beginnings of an important social integration already underway. At the same time, it reinforced ideas of a backward and ignorant indigenous America, saved only through European contact. Underscoring this was the monument's orientation. Because members of the Italian Society requested Columbus look to Europe and the waters he navigated in life, the statue faced *away* from the capital and government house. Nearly a century later, this became one of many points of contention.

### Contesting Columbus

In 1992, celebrations for the 500th anniversary of Columbus' landfall sparked protest across the Americas. Postcolonial discourses raised powerful questions about honouring a conquest that brought violence and centuries of oppression upon Indigenous Americans. Protesters argued it was tantamount to commemorating genocide, and dismissive of the inequality that still oppresses those of indigenous origins. In response, Columbus monuments in several cities were vandalised; afterwards, the anniversary (12 October) became an annual call to defend indigenous rights and question public commemorations of Columbus. By 1998, Venezuela's election of Hugo Chávez began a political sweep to the Left in Latin America, manifested in Argentina with the 2003 election of Peronist Néstor Kirchner, followed by the two-term election of his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–15). Fernández de Kirchner shared similar anti-imperialist stances to those of Chávez,

<sup>74</sup>Mario Sznajder, Luis Roniger and Carlos Forment, *Shifting Frontiers of Citizenship: The Latin American Experience* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), p. 389.

<sup>75</sup>Vittorio Valdani, inauguration speech, 15 June 1921, in *Il monumento a Cristoforo Colombo*, pp. 46–7.

<sup>76</sup>Leónidas Anastasi, inauguration speech, 15 June 1921, *ibid.*, p. 48.

who, in 2002, declared 12 October the Day of Indigenous Resistance; two years later, demonstrators celebrated by toppling a Columbus monument in Caracas. In 2011, Chávez' suggestion that Kirchner replace the monument in Buenos Aires only echoed activists' calls, criticising it as a colonialist symbol looming over the capital.

In March 2013, Kirchner announced the monument would be replaced with one of Juana Azurduy de Padilla, a female revolutionary fighter largely forgotten in official histories. Born in 1780 to an indigenous mother and Spanish father in the village of Chuquisaca (today Sucre, Bolivia), Azurduy became a guerrilla fighter in the wars for independence. After the 1810 May Revolution in Buenos Aires, she served under the Army of the North, fighting (alongside her husband and sons) to liberate areas of modern-day Argentina and Bolivia. In 1816, Azurduy was honoured by General Manuel Belgrano and promoted to lieutenant colonel. But while Belgrano became a national hero, Azurduy died, forgotten and impoverished, on 25 May 1862 – ironically, the anniversary of the revolution for which she fought. In 2009, Kirchner posthumously promoted Azurduy to general, and in 2010, she and Bolivian President Evo Morales declared Azurduy's date of birth (12 July) the Day of Argentine–Bolivian Fellowship.

Shortly thereafter, Azurduy became the new national heroine who would dethrone Columbus. The decision sparked both praise and protest, particularly when cranes began to dismantle the Columbus monument. Outraged demonstrators circled the plaza, though federal officials assured them the statue was being restored, not removed.<sup>77</sup> In reality, Kirchner had already commissioned Argentine sculptor Andrés Zeneri to design its replacement. Morales donated US\$1 million in state funds for the project, reflecting Azurduy's Bolivian heritage and Morales' ardent defence of indigenous rights. The removal prompted heated debates and further polarised Argentina's far-left political party Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory, FPV) and the conservative Propuesta Republicana (Republican Proposal, PRO), founded by then-mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri. PRO legislators appealed for national historic protection for the Columbus monument, bringing the move to a standstill (see [Figure 5](#)). At issue was the right to the property where the monument stood: Macri argued the plaza belonged to the city; Kirchner maintained it was federal. The legal battle extended over two years, while members of the public and the press expressed support for both arguments.

For many critics, the plaza itself played the largest role. Placing Columbus there, Kirchner argued, was 'a symbol of the foreign-leaning gaze' that had so shaped the country's past.<sup>78</sup> One indigenous activist asserted 'what is symbolic is not the monument, but its proximity to the Casa Rosada. To keep the image of Columbus there is to say we did not reject oppression. But to put Juana Azurduy there ... is emancipation, to cut the chains.'<sup>79</sup> In a statement seemingly invoking Rojas' 'pedagogy of the statues', historian Osvaldo Bayer argued, 'we have to

<sup>77</sup>'Abrazo al monumento a Colón para evitar que lo trasladen', *Clarín*, 23 April 2013; 'La estatua de Colón fue bajada para su restauración', *Página 12*, 2 July 2013.

<sup>78</sup>'Llegan Evo y Juana', *Página 12*, 10 July 2015.

<sup>79</sup>'Sacarlo es una reparación histórica', *Página 12*, 7 June 2013.





**Figure 5.** The Dismantled Monument of Columbus in the Plaza behind the Casa Rosada, June 2013  
 Source: Photograph by Hanni Jalil-Paier.

learn history from a base of ethics, to ... lift up to a pedestal those who fought for equality, life, and liberty'.<sup>80</sup> Others disagreed, including novelist Mempo Giardinelli, who opined:

This is not the way to defend the trampled rights of the indigenous – there is no point in judging the atrocities of an empire five hundred years later ... far less are historic reparations made this way. Those of us who defend ... the monument ... all we citizens ask (and we are many, not just in this city) is that urban history be respected.<sup>81</sup>

Giardinelli, himself of Italian descent, denounced the conflict as a 'petty war' between opportunistic political factions, bringing out 'the worst of Argentine politics' at the expense of the city's cultural heritage.<sup>82</sup> The Italian Society denounced it as an 'affront to a work of art and the Italian community', meriting 'criminal conviction for those responsible', while preservationist groups ('Stop the Demolition', 'Save the Statues' and 'Columbus in his Place') led protests around the plaza.<sup>83</sup> Over a century after Devoto vied to secure this same space, a new battle over history and identity had emerged, this time with far more voices in the mix.

Kirchner originally intended to exile the monument from the capital, relocating it 400 kilometres south, to Mar del Plata. Legislators eventually reached a

<sup>80</sup>Bayer: "Estoy contento con que saquen a Colón", *La Política*, 12 June 2013.

<sup>81</sup>Mempo Giardinelli, 'The Last, Lost Christopher Columbus Battle', *Buenos Aires Herald*, 9 June 2013.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup>'Dejá de reescribirnos la historia Cristina!' *Informador Público*, 22 July 2015.

compromise to keep it within the city, agreeing on a park near the Jorge Newbery Airport. The legislation references the Italian Society's objectives in its original placement, announcing that the new site 'brings together symbolic characteristics, such as the proximity to the Río de la Plata and the orientation towards the old continent'.<sup>84</sup> Preservationists and Italian Society members declared the move unconstitutional, though a federal judge rejected several appeals.<sup>85</sup> In June 2015, as the Columbus monument (separated into 250 sections) was moved to its new location, Zernerer began to assemble the Azurduy statue in the plaza.

### Revitalising Juana

With her final presidential term coming to a close, Kirchner rushed the new monument's inauguration. For the 15 July 2015 celebration, Parque Colón – fenced off since 2008 due to security concerns – was opened to the public for the first time in seven years.<sup>86</sup> Thousands attended the ceremony, opening with the Argentine and Bolivian national anthems and performances by Bolivian folklore groups. After acrobats dramatically unveiled the monument, Kirchner and Morales delivered inaugural speeches. The celebration began a three-day festival of cultural diversity, with plays, songs and folklore shows performed on a stage at the monument's base – reminiscent of a spectacle typical of the era of 'monument mania' (see [Figure 6](#)). The statue and its revitalised image of Azurduy were reinforced in popular culture, with the state's educational television station airing children's programmes and a documentary series summarising the sculpture as 'bronze and freedom'.<sup>87</sup>

The monument depicts Azurduy in motion, raising a sword high in the air with her left foot forward, while her right hand turns to shield figures behind her (see [Figure 7](#) and [Figure 8](#)). Of the 12 figures, several represent different indigenous groups, their identity conveyed through elements of traditional clothing. Another depicts famous gaucho Martín Miguel de Güemes, whom Azurduy fought alongside; above him, Azurduy carries a baby on her back. This, along with Azurduy's outstretched sword and implied movement, portrays her as both a mother and a warrior charging into battle. With fearless expressions and raised arms, the indigenous figures bravely accompany her – a marked departure from the powerless, supplicant depictions on the Columbus monument and the animalistic interpretation in *El Aborigen*. Shunning tropes of violent barbarism or the childlike 'noble savage', they appear as strong defenders, both male and female. They also push the monument beyond the traditional, shifting past the heroine to elevate the anonymous participants excluded by official histories. In an interesting parallel, Azurduy stands on shattered chains. For Italian-Argentines at the 1921 inauguration, chains depicted beneath Columbus' ship represented a break from prejudice. Nearly a century later, the Azurduy monument included the same symbol for an identical hope.

<sup>84</sup>'Buenos Aires Approves Relocation of Columbus Monument', *Argentina Independent*, 19 Sept. 2014.

<sup>85</sup>'Colón se va a la Costanera, pero la mudanza tardará un año', *La Nación*, 19 Sept. 2014.

<sup>86</sup>'La fiesta por Azurduy, en una plaza apropiada por la Rosada hace 7 años', *Clarín*, 15 July 2015.

<sup>87</sup>'Juana, bronce y libertad', *Canal Encuentro*, 15 July 2015.





**Figure 6.** Folk Dancers Perform at the Base of the Azurduy Monument during the Festival that Followed its Inauguration on 15 July 2015

Source: Photograph by author.

Throughout the work, the sculptor overtly responded to the centennial's Eurocentric focus. Columbus had faced Europe, so Zernerer consciously placed his monument facing Buenos Aires: 'instead of a European figure looking towards Europe', he said, 'I liked the idea that it is a woman facing our land'.<sup>88</sup> He described Azurduy's out-of-proportion features (see Figure 7) as another rejection, contradicting classical archetypes of the idealised human form. 'I did not want to look back to Europe, to the classical language and ideals of beauty of the past', he explained. Seeking inspiration in the style of Diego Rivera and other Mexican muralists, Zernerer moulded Azurduy's features with 'a Latin-American art historical language' in mind.<sup>89</sup> The monument's stone base also alludes to Latin American art and innovation, with a design inspired by ancient Meso-American pyramids. Moreover, when viewed from the back (see Figure 8), the statue traces a shape referencing a classic work of Latin American art, *Inverted America* (1943) by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García (see Figure 9). By simply overturning a map, placing South America's southern cone in the 'north', Torres García questioned the power of maps to construct world views, subverting standard perspectives. His reorientation was intended to defy notions of North American dominance or Latin American dependence, and to shift Latin American identity away from Europe to local cultures. Trained in Europe, Torres García developed a 'self-consciously Latin American orientation' towards traditional and avant-garde

<sup>88</sup>'La escultura de Azurduy le dará la espalda al río y mirará a la Rosada', *Clarín*, 15 May 2015.

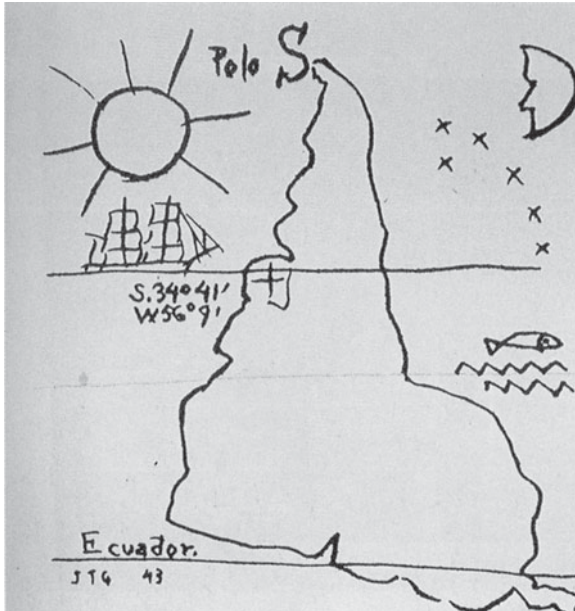
<sup>89</sup>Interview with Andrés Zernerer, Buenos Aires, 29 July 2015.



**Figure 7.** Detail of the Monument of Juana Azurduy by Andrés Zerner  
*Source:* Photograph by author.



**Figure 8.** Zerner's Incorporation of Figures Representing Argentina's Diverse Indigenous Groups  
*Source:* Photograph by author.



**Figure 9.** 'América Invertida' (1943) by Joaquín Torres García  
 Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

art, arguing indigenous roots provided foundations for a distinct movement.<sup>90</sup> He returned to Montevideo and sparked a Latin American abstract art movement from his newly founded 'School of the South', which took on *Inverted America* as its emblem. Incorporating this iconic image in the Azurduy monument, Zernerer echoed Torres García's motives: envisioning his work as a reorientation, celebrating Latin American art, mestizaje and breaking away from a European identity.

Mirroring Devoto's insistence that an Italian sculptor create his monument, Kirchner's choice in Zernerer was symbolic. Zernerer is an Argentine artist, and well known for his indigenous rights activism. He has also headed the movement to replace another controversial monument in Buenos Aires, depicting former President Julio A. Roca, whose 1879 Conquest of the Desert marked a campaign of genocide against indigenous peoples. Zernerer founded the organisation La Mujer Originaria, proposing to replace Roca with a statue of an indigenous woman, created entirely from donated metal items.<sup>91</sup> Though he has gathered most of the materials needed, Zernerer admitted finding support is difficult, 'because many people believe they do not know any indigenous peoples, so they no longer exist. There is a denial they are still a part of the nation'.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>90</sup>Jordana Dym and Karl Offen, *Mapping Latin America: a Cartographic Reader* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 200.

<sup>91</sup>See Cheryl Jiménez Frei, 'Shaping and Contesting the Past: Monuments, Memory, and Identity in Argentina, 1811–present', PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2018.

<sup>92</sup>Interview with Andrés Zernerer, Buenos Aires, 31 Aug. 2013.

For many – particularly in the capital – identity remains rooted in narratives of indigenous extinction and immigrant arrival. But Argentines of indigenous heritage do not view themselves as mythical, historical figures: in a 2010 census, nearly one million claimed to be direct descendants of one of the country's 35 indigenous groups.<sup>93</sup> And while most Argentines self-identify as being of European descent, recent genetic studies have revealed a more complex picture. In a 2012 study, populations in north-western provinces reflected more Amerindian ancestry than European, while north-eastern and southern provinces averaged comparable percentages of European and indigenous ancestry. Predictably, only in regions where levels of European immigration were historically the highest (Buenos Aires and surrounding provinces) does European heritage account for an overwhelming portion of the population.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, bureaucratic structures and policies created throughout the twentieth century demonstrate how myths of extinction hardly reflected reality; from efforts in the 1920s by the Comisión Honoraria de Reducciones de Indios (Honorary Commission for the Reduction of Indians) to 'transform indigenous peoples into civilized subjects', to programmes by the 1960s-era Dirección Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas (National Directorate of Indigenous Affairs) providing labour training in indigenous communities.<sup>95</sup> By the 1960s, indigenous activists were increasingly 'visible', mobilising to demand labour rights, land titles and legal recognition of indigenous language, identity and culture. Protests over the 1992 celebrations of Columbus increased their national visibility, galvanising indigenous mobilisation in the following decades.

Today, indigenous groups continue to fight significant battles over human rights, land, memory and political representation. Despite this, myths of extinction remain powerful in the national imaginary. The historical erasure of indigenous and mestizo identities is reflected in their representational absence in the capital's monumental landscape, something Zernerer hoped to amend. He argued the Azurduy statue 'was not a political work to remove Columbus, but something to help us discover our own *latinoamericanidad*', beginning 'a process of transformation ... to celebrate our native roots ... [and] recognise a multi-ethnic and multicultural national identity'.<sup>96</sup> Like the questions of identity that emerged in 1910, these debates also reflected a new centennial moment: the 2010 bicentennial.

### Kirchnerismo and the Bicentennial Moment

On the 200th anniversary of the May Revolution, Fernández de Kirchner acknowledged that after her 2007 election, the 'commemoration of this

<sup>93</sup>Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INDEC), *Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2010: Censo del Bicentenario, resultados definitivos, Serie B Núm. 2, Tomo 1* (Buenos Aires: INDEC, 2012), p. 281.

<sup>94</sup>Sergio Avena, Marc Via, Elad Ziv, *et al.*, 'Heterogeneity in Genetic Admixture across Different Regions of Argentina', *PLoS One*, 7: 4 (April 2012), pp. 4–7.

<sup>95</sup>Gordillo and Hirsch, 'Indigenous Struggles and Contested Identities in Argentina', pp. 12–15.

<sup>96</sup>Zernerer: "Esta no es una obra política", *La Radio Pública*, 15 July 2015; Andrés Zernerer, 'Biografía mínima: arte y compromiso', in Luis Padín (ed.), *El vuelco latinoamericano: de Cristóbal Colón a Juana Azurduy* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Lanús, 2015), pp. 60–61.

Bicentennial became ... almost an obsession'.<sup>97</sup> She criticised the centennial's Eurocentrism, and, referring to the social issues hidden behind its celebratory veneer, denounced the festival as accomplished 'by virtue of the persecution ... of a new unionism, incipient in the Argentine Republic'. The masses, she argued, had been silenced, their culture subdued and working-class demands repressed. In a characteristically populist appeal, Kirchner made the case for a distinction: 'to give ourselves, the Argentines, a different Bicentennial; a popular Bicentennial, with the people in the streets'.<sup>98</sup>

The bicentennial became the centennial's contradiction, questioning elite historical constructions to reclaim official narratives in public space. Its crowning moment: Azurduy's triumph over Columbus. Both monuments were gifts of confraternity, though the symbolism was clear, with a monument bequeathed by a South American nation unseating one representing a European nation. By elevating a mestiza revolutionary and indigenous fighters into a contested, central space, the Azurduy monument aimed to reinterpret identity, connecting patriotic pride to a marginalised heritage. It was also the culmination of efforts to establish memory and justice as central components of *kirchnerismo*, and its representations in public space. Néstor Kirchner's administration (2003–7) marked the end of nearly two decades of official impunity towards the human rights abuses committed under Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976–83), under which 30,000 civilians were violently tortured and 'disappeared'. After Kirchner's election, trials were re-opened, and Kirchner offered a formal apology for the dictatorship's atrocities. In 2004, he designated the former Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy School of Mechanics, ESMA), used during the dictatorship as a torture centre, as the Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos (Space for Memory and Human Rights). Memory and justice became fundamental components of *kirchnerismo* and the bicentennial moment, with public space playing a key role in projecting these redefinitions.

This new focus on human rights and the recent past stirred questions about other sources of historical shame – in particular, the genocide of indigenous peoples. Discussing the monument of Azurduy, Zeneri drew a parallel between the struggles to reclaim a lost identity that children of the disappeared (taken from prisoners and illegally adopted during the dictatorship) and indigenous communities have faced. Both, he argued, endured trauma and a loss of identity, but today their search for justice is in the public sphere – with the Azurduy monument being a part of this.<sup>99</sup> The monument, which Zeneri constructed inside a workshop in the ex-ESMA, was one of various projects (many tied directly to the bicentennial) that drew a link between *kirchnerismo* and restorative justice in public space. These included rooms in the government house redesignated in honour of women and indigenous peoples, sculptural murals of activist priest Padre Carlos Mugica and former First Lady Eva Perón, the Bicentennial Museum and the

<sup>97</sup>Cristina Kirchner, President's Inaugural Speech for the Gallery of Latin American Patriots, 25 May 2010, available at [www.casarsada.gov.ar/informacion/archivo/22233-blank-31757128](http://www.casarsada.gov.ar/informacion/archivo/22233-blank-31757128) (last access 11 Sep. 2018).

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup>Zeneri, 'Biografía mínima,' p. 60.

Gallery of Latin American Patriots. These projects reflected Kirchner's ideological alignment, as well as her self-construction as a symbolic link to Eva Perón, a controversial figure in her own right. In the visual language of *kirchnerismo*, Eva Perón is positioned at the centre of social and political justice – a reflection of where Kirchner places herself.

The Kirchners proved to be polarising figures, and some critics argued both used the issue of human rights for political gain.<sup>100</sup> Similar criticisms loomed over the monument of Azurduy, particularly in light of the lack of official policies addressing the struggles indigenous communities continue to face. Before the monument's inauguration, the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén released a statement denouncing it as one of the 'numerous symbolic and rhetorical acts, loaded with demagoguery and resignation', which indigenous communities were expected to 'uncritically applaud ... [while] dispossession and expulsion of communitarian territories continues'.<sup>101</sup> For those affected, attempting to apologise for past injustices without addressing those in the present appeared hollow.

Supporters viewed the monument as a bold statement, with a female president proclaiming the historical contributions of women and indigenous peoples in a prominent public space. But for critics, it was a gimmick succeeding only in destroying cultural heritage, or a political pander obscuring a lack of federal protections for indigenous communities. In a nation where nineteenth-century military campaigns attempted to exterminate indigenous peoples, and national narratives have largely reflected a European past, Azurduy's presence in the monumental landscape is not insignificant. At the same time, it is difficult to ignore political entanglements in the debates over the Azurduy monument and the overall unresolved issues of indigenous rights in Argentina. But in the end, the battle over the plaza did not end, as it might have seemed, with Azurduy's triumph.

### Shifting Politics, Public Memory and the Plaza

Shortly after the monument's inauguration, conservative Mauricio Macri (Kirchner's principal political rival in the controversy) won the 2015 presidential election in a close run-off. The shift reignited debate, as the Italian Society implored Macri to undo what they saw as 'an arbitrary procedure of the outgoing president'.<sup>102</sup> The Azurduy monument also began to show unexpected signs of wear, bolstering arguments that structural deficiencies resulted from Kirchner's rush to finish it before leaving office.<sup>103</sup> Experts reported the statue had fissures allowing humidity and rainwater to accumulate, and the various metals used (iron, brass, bronze and steel) could 'cause corrosion and degradation, compromising the

<sup>100</sup>Francesca Lessa, *Memory and Transnational Justice in Argentina and Uruguay: Against Impunity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 71–72.

<sup>101</sup>Mariana Gómez and Florencia Trentini, 'Polémica indígena por la inauguración del monumento a Juana Azurduy', *Resumen Latinoamericano*, 16 July 2015.

<sup>102</sup>'Quieren que el monumento a Colón vuelva detrás de la Casa Rosada', *Clarín*, 11 Dec. 2015; 'Monumento a Colón: reparar la ofensa', *La Nación*, 14 Nov. 2016.

<sup>103</sup>'Polémica por el deterioro del monumento a Azurduy', *Clarín*, 14 Dec. 2015.



mechanical strength'.<sup>104</sup> Zerner argued the work was unfinished, which complicated an already difficult challenge the monument faced: vindicating a mestizo identity in a capital (and nation) historically defined by European heritage. Moreover, after the inauguration, the plaza was again cordoned off, paradoxically centring the monument's egalitarian message in an exclusionary space. Visible only through an iron fence, the monument ended up separated from the very people it was intended to reach. Beyond this, its meanings became clouded in politics, as historical memory proved a useful issue in a heated election year.

In a final coda, in May 2017 Buenos Aires' legislature approved a plan to relocate the Azurduy monument and reconfigure the plaza.<sup>105</sup> Changes were linked to a larger urban renovation, combining several areas into a central park (Parque del Bajo) and connecting three major highways. The plans reduce the contested Plaza Colón, rerouting the avenue alongside it and transferring the Azurduy monument nearby to a site in front of the Kirchner Cultural Centre. Municipal legislators dismissed politics as a factor, attributing the move to a long-overdue urban renovation. Addressing the conflict over the monuments was a bonus, remarked one lawmaker: 'we have the perfect opportunity to resolve differences we have been dragging along for years'.<sup>106</sup> Zerner conceded the change 'is not so misguided', referencing the fact that it will allow public access to the monument in an open plaza. 'People will be able to appreciate it more', he resolved, and 'better utilise the sculpture's intended message'.<sup>107</sup> In September 2017, only two years after it was inaugurated amidst controversy, the monument of Azurduy was moved to this new location.<sup>108</sup> For many, this new placement, directly in front of the Kirchner Cultural Centre and still within sight of the Casa Rosada, seemed a fitting compromise.

Shortly thereafter, the Columbus monument was finally reconstructed near the Jorge Newbery Airport. Originally dismantled in 2013, the monument remained in pieces in the Plaza Colón for two years, until it was moved to its new location on the coast. There, another two years elapsed before the monument was rebuilt. Not only did the marble sections require restoration (specialists argued even the Kirchner administration's measures to restore the work were harmful), but the area's topography delayed reassembly, requiring reinforcement to support the statues' several hundred tons of marble.<sup>109</sup> During this period, preservationists continued to file legal appeals to return it to the central plaza. But when a crane reinstalled the statue of Columbus atop the monument's tall pedestal in late 2017, the controversy seemed to come to a decisive close.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>104</sup>Mauricio Giambartolomei, 'Humedad y óxido ponen en riesgo el monumento a Juana Azurduy', *La Nación*, 21 June 2016.

<sup>105</sup>Mauricio Giambartolomei, 'Vuelve la polémica: se trasladará la estatua de Juana Azurduy', *La Nación*, 5 May 2017.

<sup>106</sup>'A menos de dos años de su instalación, mudarán el monumento de Juana Azurduy', *Infobae*, 5 May 2017.

<sup>107</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup>'El monumento de Juana Azurduy ya está frente al Centro Cultural Kirchner', *La Nación*, 16 Sept. 2017.

<sup>109</sup>Mauro Sbarbati, 'Denuncian que la estatua de Colón tiene daños irreparables', *Basta de Demoler*, 14 July 2015.

<sup>110</sup>Mauricio Giambartolomei, 'La estatua de Cristóbal Colón ya fue colocada frente a Aeroparque', *La Nación*, 7 Nov. 2017.



## Conclusion

By the early twentieth century, liberal politicians had dramatically redefined Argentina. This was flaunted at the centennial, where monuments played an important role in transmitting liberal constructions of history, national culture and identity. Like most monuments, the Columbus statue reveals more about the era when it was created than the past it purportedly enshrined. Condensing the discourses of progress that buoyed the centennial, it simultaneously validated a maligned Italian community and a conquest viewed as divine. It encapsulated the quest for civilisation over barbarism – beginning with Columbus and, for Argentina, culminating in the Conquest of the Desert. Beyond its iconography, the monument's location signalled a key shift in Italian immigrants' integration and place in national identity, allowing them to defy xenophobia and link themselves with the ideals upon which the centennial centred. Yet this same monument, intended to address the persecution of one group, openly celebrated the oppression of another, with sculptures praising religious conversion, conquest and indigenous servitude. The dearth of an indigenous presence in Buenos Aires' monumental landscape only intensifies this, echoing past policies to remove indigenous communities from Argentina's social fabric.

The modern conflict over this monument echoes similar debates in areas all over the world, though no clear, universal answer applies. One argument holds that removing controversial monuments sanitises the past, eliminating opportunities to confront painful histories. However, it seems idealistic to assume difficult historical truths would be apparent without interpretation, particularly in classical monuments elevating figures and ideals on a pedestal. Moreover – as the Columbus monument demonstrates – it is not just the statue that is important, but the space it occupies. Accordingly, other options propose contextualising contested sites with a counter-monument, or moving controversial monuments to museums or statue parks, where historical interpretation is possible.<sup>111</sup> Amid these debates, what remains clear is monuments' continued influence, advising us who to venerate and who to forget. Seemingly ubiquitous and invisible at the same time, monuments, as Kirk Savage notes, remain important 'precisely because they do in some measure work to impose a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives'.<sup>112</sup>

Nearly a century before Azurduy dethroned Columbus, Columbus banished the Fuente Monumental from the very same plaza. In both cases, federal officials sanctioned a particular narrative of identity by elevating these monuments in a prominent public space. The iconography of each monument reflects what that entailed for these distinct eras: from an embrace of Italian immigrant heritage to a vindication of a forgotten indigenous one. These monuments illustrate how politics entwine with official memory and its public manifestations, while the centennial-

<sup>111</sup>See Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer, (eds.), *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>112</sup>Kirk Savage, 'The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Movement', in John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 143.

and bicentennial-era debates over the central plaza highlight the symbolic dimension of space, with a recognised public space representing a ‘vehicle for power in the spatial order’.<sup>113</sup> The plaza, and the city’s central landscape overall, has become a palimpsest, where history and memory have been inscribed, expanded and rewritten, while traces of previous interpretations remain. In the end, neither Columbus nor Azurduy will occupy the former Plaza Colón, and we are left to consider how the identities entangled in this debate – both Italian and indigenous – have weathered persecution and are significant and deserving of a place in the commemorative landscape. Multiple, converging forces have shaped Argentina, and national narratives (and by extension, the capital’s public spaces) should reflect this. Moreover, as the debates over the Columbus monument illustrate, the figures and symbols used to publicly convey these stories matter, carrying lasting and substantial impact.

Although the Azurduy monument’s artistic composition challenges classical sculptural styles, its overall goals are in line with traditional hero monuments: shaping historical memory into a particular pattern by elevating a new national heroine. But it also places a larger collective on the pedestal, in the anonymous indigenous fighters behind Azurduy – simultaneously expressing characteristics of modern monuments designed to facilitate restorative justice. Zeneri envisioned it as ‘a call for future action’, introducing a new reading of the past and a vision for the future, a mobilisation signified in Azurduy’s forward movement. After the monument’s relocation, the artist was able to complete the work, arguing that damages surfaced due a lack of state funding for materials, and a rush to inaugurate it before the end of Kirchner’s term.<sup>114</sup> Finally completed, the sculpture remains in a central location in the capital; additionally, it is now accessible to the public. Perhaps here it can serve as a reminder of the need to engage multiple pasts, and the discussions it sparked on indigenous rights and identity could find new strength. Despite the controversy that surrounded the monument, it maintains significant promise: silently undermining a dominant narrative of European heritage, working towards a larger recognition of past repressions and their modern-day implications. But its design and placement alone cannot overcome the collected memories of an entire culture, or their influence on how the monument is understood. Ultimately, whether or not its intended ‘lesson’ takes hold rests on the public’s willingness to embrace the nation’s forgotten indigenous past – and present.

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X18001086>

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<sup>113</sup>Monnet, ‘The Symbolism of Place’, para. 9.

<sup>114</sup>Silvia Gómez, ‘Después de 5 años, terminan el monumento a Juana Azurduy que el gobierno K no pagó’, *Clarín*, 8 March 2018.

**Spanish abstract**

En 2013, la entonces presidenta Cristina Fernández de Kirchner despertó la polémica por su decisión de reemplazar un monumento a Cristóbal Colón en Buenos Aires por uno de la revolucionaria mestiza del siglo XIX Juana Azurduy. Este artículo examina la historia y la iconografía de estos monumentos, explorando la intersección entre el espacio público, el arte, la política y la memoria. Se señala que estas conmemoraciones –que representan la antes maldecida herencia inmigrante italiana y la herencia indígena olvidada– demuestran cómo luchas fundamentales sobre la identidad nacional han estado enraizadas y han sido disputadas en el paisaje urbano capitalino, en formas que siguen siendo influyentes en el presente. Además, el artículo subraya que el centenario de 1910 y el bicentenario de 2010 fueron claves para estos esfuerzos, y examina el poder/política del espacio en la plaza central donde varios actores lucharon por representaciones conmemorativas.

**Spanish keywords:** monumentos; Argentina; memoria; identidad; lugar; conmemoraciones; Juana Azurduy; Colón

**Portuguese abstract**

Em 2013, a então presidente da Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, suscitou controvérsia por sua decisão de substituir um monumento de Cristóvão Colombo em Buenos Aires por um de Juana Azurduy, revolucionária de origem indígena do século 19. Este artigo examina a história e a iconografia desses monumentos, explorando as relações entre espaços públicos, política e memória. Ele argumenta que essas homenagens – representando heranças da imigração italiana, outrora difamadas, e indígenas, esquecidas – demonstram como batalhas fundamentais sobre identidade nacional têm sido inseridas e contestadas na paisagem urbana da capital, de maneiras que continuam influentes no presente. O autor destaca o centenário de 1910 e o bicentenário de 2010 como sendo essenciais para esses esforços, e examina o poder e a política do espaço na praça central onde diversos atores lutaram por representação memorial.

**Portuguese keywords:** monumentos; Argentina; memória; identidade; espaço; comemorações; Juana Azurduy; Colombo

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