

ENCUENTROS



Amerigo and America?

Lecture by

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AMERIGO AND AMERICA?

Felipe Fernández-Armesto

It is not just a treat, an honor, a privilege, a pleasure to be here. It is also a relief. At last I have found an audience who are interested in the subject of Amerigo Vespucci. To me, it seems extraordinary that in the American hemisphere today, and in the United States in particular, there is almost no discernible interest in commemorating the 500th anniversary of the naming of America. Most people in this country do not even know that this centenary is imminent.

Yet next Tuesday, April 25, 2007, will be literally the 500th anniversary of the baptism of this hemisphere. It was on that day, five hundred years ago, that printers finished typesetting the book which first proposed naming this part of world after the Florentine adventurer who is my subject for today. That is extraordinary in itself. It was also remarkable as the only time

in history that a continent or hemisphere was named after a real, live—indeed, living, flesh-and-blood individual. More remarkable still, Amerigo, who was morally shabby, intellectually feeble, seems utterly unworthy of the honor. So I want to know how and why it happened.

Normally, these great centenaries are opportunities for scholarly inquiry to be ignited and inspired by the celebrations, but this time there aren't any. The IDB is one of only four organizations that I know of in the United States that is taking any notice of this centenary. One is the Library of Congress, the second is a society of academics, the third is dedicated to propagating the belief that the Templars discovered America, and you are the fourth. Curiously, the rest of the U.S. is obsessed with two other centenaries which happen to be going on this year. One is, of course, the

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200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of the slave trade, and another is the 400th anniversary the founding of Jamestown, Virginia.

I hope you will forgive me if I say that I did not view either of these events as particularly worthy of commemoration. Britain's abolition of the slave trade was a very great and noble enterprise which, of course, I applaud, but it followed the example of Denmark. And I have not noticed the priority of the Danish abolition of the slave trade being celebrated, or even much remarked, anywhere outside Denmark. Moreover, when Britain did get around to abolishing the slave trade, the results were disastrous. The initial effect was to make the trade more profitable and therefore more intense. Abolition involved the extermination of communities of slave traders, who may have been engaged in an activity which the world came to see as iniquitous, but who did not know that.

The commemoration of Jamestown, I confess, really annoys me. And happily, because we are in the Inter-American Development Bank, and this is a genuinely hemispheric organization that brings all Americans together, I can tell you a story which might otherwise seem invidious. In my university in Boston, Massachusetts, last year we had a vacancy for a historian of the colonial period of what is now the United States. And of course, candidates who presented themselves included some of the most promising young scholars in the world. I asked them all the same question. I said, "You are a historian of the colonial period of the United States, so tell

me: What part of the present territory of the United States of America experienced the first enduring European colonial presence?" And here, at the Inter-American Development Bank, of course you all know that the correct answer is Puerto Rico. It was first colonized in 1509. After that came St. Augustine in Florida in 1567 and the beginnings of colonization of New Mexico in 1598. Only after all that, in 1607, was Jamestown founded.

I think the origins of the United States are in significant part Hispanic. And it upsets me that in a piece in the *New York Review of Books* I read the other day, Edmund Morgan, a most impressive historian, called Jamestown the first permanent settlement in what is now the United States. The myth of the exclusively Anglo origins of this country, and along with it the myths that the essential culture of the United States is rooted in the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant tradition, and that the country developed by means of a process of formation from east to west across the continent—that myth was, I think, dispelled by H. E. Bolton a hundred years ago. But it is still an amazingly tenacious part of the American historical tradition, alive and well in young Americans and apparently ineradicable from the curriculum in which they are educated. But I am not here to traduce rival centenaries—rather to turn to what seems to me to be an event far more arresting and curious and also more worthy of commemoration.

There are two reasons why the anniversary of the naming of America is being ignored. The first, I suspect, is the embar-

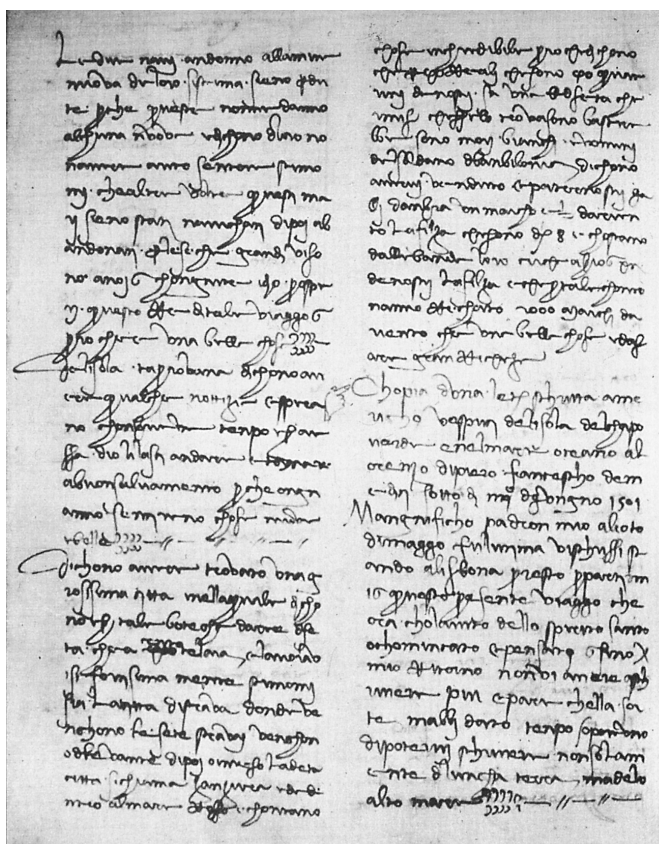
rassment aroused in the United States by the very name of America. Now, we all get embarrassed by names, and my first slide shows a very good example of what goes wrong with naming processes. This is the frontispiece of a book published in 1507, the very year in which America was named. The book includes the first Italian version of an account, under Vespucci's name, of what he called *Mundus Novus* or "New World," or *Novo Mondo*, as it says here. But notice, the printer has actually got the name of the author wrong: *Alberico* Vespucci.

If you have a name like Felipe Fernández-Armesto, you get very used to people garbling it. And I guess Vespucci had to put up with this, too. But it seems to me striking that in the very moment when the world began to name the continent after Amerigo, the printer of one of the key works got the namesake's name wrong.

Our embarrassment at our names can be visceral. My wife, who is called Lesley, hates her name, and reproaches her parents for having given it to her at baptism, because she has always longed to be called something more suitably exotic, romantic, and extravagant. Now this kind of unease about the inappropriateness of what we are called is a very common experience. And I think in part it is because we just cannot get out of our heads the obvious error that names should be descriptive, that they should convey a sense of what we are like and who we are. Of course names are not descriptive, they are purely designators. Otherwise, a black woman could never be called Bianca, or a tall, fair man could

never be called Nigel, because that means "small and dark." Or an ugly person could never be called Linda or Belle or something like that. I am called Felipe which means "lover of horses." I have nothing against horses but I can tell you that whenever I try to ride one they show unmistakable hatred for me. Intellectually, we can understand that names are purely designators, but we still want them to describe us. We want them to have the right connotations. In terms of connotations, America today has become one of the worst names that a hemisphere, and a particular country, can have. This is the only country in the hemisphere that actually calls itself "America." Clearly, that alone is enough to conjure up all sorts of embarrassment at arrogating this name to a single country, and all sorts of resentment among other communities in the New World. Then there is the fact that the name is loud with imperial resonance which has been imposed on this hemisphere from outside. Amerigo Vespucci, finally, is a rather embarrassing namesake, who, though a hero to some, is a villain to many, denounced as a charlatan or a fraud, a cuckoo who nested in Columbus's rightful glory.

This brings me to the second reason for the neglect of this centenary. We know so little about Vespucci. For someone so important as to have a vast hemisphere and the world's only superpower named after him, it is amazing how little historians have unearthed. We have been inhibited from writing about him until now, because of the commonest of historians' complaints: the problems of the sources.



Biblioteca Riccardina, Florence/The Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 1. Pietro Vaglienti, who collected news of commercially exploitable discoveries for one of the merchant houses of Florence, compiled materials concerning Vespucci within two or three years of the explorer's death, including this copy of Amerigo's letter written off the Cape Verde Islands while on his way back from Brazil, in June 1501.

The sources historians have traditionally used to study Vespucci are of two kinds. First, there is a handful of surviving manuscript letters by Vespucci. None of those which concern his voyages is in his own hand but all are roughly contemporaneous.

My next slide, for instance, shows the so-called Vaglienti letter in which Vespucci describes an encounter he had off of the African coast during one of his voyages in 1500 (Figure 1). We can be very confident that these are authentic writings of

Vespucci. Alberto Magnaghi proved this in the 1920s and there is no rational argument for doubting the veracity of his findings.

Secondly, there are two printed works attributed to Vespucci in his lifetime. There is the famous *Mundus Novus*, which is credited with conferring the name “New World” on this part of the planet (although Vespucci, though he popularized the name, probably borrowed it from an earlier, similar usage of Columbus). The other letter is the so-called letter to Soderini—here in my next slide is one of the earlier editions of it—which also illustrates a further point: the extraordinary interdependence between the careers of Vespucci and Columbus’s, because the design on this frontispiece is actually copied from one of the earlier editions of Columbus’s first report of his own discoveries, and echoes the title of one of Columbus’s other works (Figure 2).

A problem which has hobbled Vespuccian historiography is that no one has been able to establish a consensus about whether these letters or any parts of them are genuine. In my book on the subject, I claim to have solved this problem by what I believe is a very simple expedient, going back to the manuscripts. There is not enough material to do a full statistical analysis of imagery, but there is enough to identify what I call Vespucci’s intellectual tics: the obsessions that concerned him, the authors he quotes, the kinds of material he deals with over and over again. In my opinion, for example, if there isn’t a lot of egotistical rhetoric in the text, it’s not by Vespucci; or if there isn’t a lot of bombast about the superiority of celestial over prac-

tical navigation, it isn’t by Vespucci; or if there are no quotations from Petrarch or Dante, it probably isn’t by Vespucci. So if we use the unquestionably genuine letters as a template, collating them with the contested sources, I think that we can be absolutely certain of what is genuinely Vespucci’s own work, and reasonably confident about what is intercalation or forgery.

In addition, I draw on two bodies of source material that previous scholars have neglected or ignored. First, there is a group of letters written to Vespucci when he was a young man in Florence. These letters have been known for over two hundred years, and they have been in print for over a century. But historians have not used them with the freedom that I think they deserve and demand, because they reveal to us an uncongenial Vespucci, mired in the shabby, dirty Florentine demimonde of his day. The Vespucci we find in these letters was intimate with criminals and lowlifes.

The second new source that I draw on is an exercise book compiled by Vespucci as a young man under the guidance of his uncle, who was his tutor. Again the existence of this source has long been known, but it has always remained in manuscript. All Vespucci’s previous biographers have dismissed it as useless on the ground that because it consists of formal exercises, it does not tell you anything about the man. Indeed, the source did not even appear in the otherwise magisterial compilation of sources about Vespucci which was recently published by one of the leading scholars in the field, Ilaria Caraci. But of course, it *does* tell you a lot about Vespucci, because it tells



Amerigo Vespucci, *Lettera delle isole nuouamente trouate in quattro suoi viaggi* (Firenze, G. Stefano di Carlo da Pavia per B. Pacini, 1505–1506), Firenze, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Banco Rari 192, front. By concession of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali della Repubblica Italiana/Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze.

Figure 2. The printer of the *Soderini Letter* recycled the title and title-page picture from a 1493 edition of the first printed report of Columbus.

you how he was educated. It tells you, for example, the religion which he was taught as a young man, which turns out to be very surprising. It was a very advanced form of late medieval pietism, a kind of mendicant religion, which headlined the grace of God and relegated works to the néant. It

was a kind of religion of which Savonarola would have approved. That is not surprising, because Vespucci's tutor later became one of Savonarola's henchmen. It was even the kind of religion of which Luther would have approved, although equally interestingly, it did not seem to make much impres-

sion on Vespucci. One of the extraordinary things about Vespucci's writings is that he hardly ever mentions God in other than a purely conventional way. I think he was a radically secular kind of guy.

So the exercise book tells you about his religion. It tells you about his family, his relationship with his father, and with his brothers. A psycho-historian would find irresistible material here about his envy of his elder brother. Above all, this source gives us the values with which Vespucci grew up. There are endless references to his father's injunctions to him to achieve fame and honor, those great Renaissance virtues. Echoes of fame, of honor, recur in his writings throughout the rest of Vespucci's life. In a sense, his whole life was a frustrated quest for fame and honor. One of the exercises in the book, for instance, concerns Florentines who had left their city and gone adventuring in the world. And the exercise says, if I may paraphrase, "We don't know what has become of them, but we can be sure that they are somewhere, seeking fame and honor." It does not take a lot of imagination to see the memory of that exercise echoing in Amerigo's mind, when in middle age he did exactly the same thing—adventuring in the world—with exactly the same objective.

Now, when I put all these sources together, the picture that I get of Vespucci is what we would now call a makeover artist, a person who undergoes a series of extraordinary self-reinventions, each of which is an escape from failure. My wife—I know why I am thinking so much of my wife this morning, I have been on a very long lecture

tour and I suppose I must be missing her—I was going to say that my wife is extremely fussy about her reading matter. If she is not impressed by the first sentence of a book, it is discarded. Therefore I spend a lot of time trying to craft first sentences in the vain hope that my wife might approve of the book. I am very proud of the first sentence of my book about Vespucci, which goes like this: "Amerigo Vespucci, who gave his name to America, was a pimp in his youth and a magus in his maturity." This extraordinary trajectory of his life, this chameleon-like story of self-adaptation, seems to me to be worthy of being narrated and investigated. Indeed, it adds a further layer of surprise to the fact that this hemisphere ultimately came to be named after him.

I don't have a great amount of time this evening, and I'm not going to take you through all the peripeteia of his life, but let me just show you two or three of the more astonishing makeovers. To understand the first you have to go back to that grand and emulous world of late quattrocento Florence, where Vespucci's family were clients of the Medici. In the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent's grandfather, the Vespucci had, thanks to the patronage of the Medici, been raised to the highest rank of citizenship. They were not a particularly rich family. At least, Amerigo's branch was not particularly rich, but they did achieve social eminence as a result of being attached to the coattails of the leading dynasty in the city. The young Amerigo seemed destined for a career in the service of Lorenzo the Magnificent himself. Indeed, he got a really big opportunity shortly after the

Pazzi conspiracy in 1478—the great crisis that changed so much in Florence—when he was attached to the embassy that his uncle led to France.

Almost in this moment of triumph things started to go wrong for Amerigo. The embassy was a disaster. You won't find this in conventional accounts of the subject, but I am sure the embassy was regarded in Florence as an abject failure because it elicited a lot of fine words from the king of France but no material help in the war to which Florence was then committed. Previous works on Vespucci have said, in effect, "Well, Vespucci must have done something terribly important on this embassy, he must have been his uncle's secretary." But I have searched the Archivio di Stato and there is no reference to Amerigo in any of the documents generated by this embassy. He seems to have gone along for the ride, led the life of a sort of flâneur in the Paris of Louis XI, and returned home with nothing to his credit.

There is strong evidence that he was still in the household of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1480, but at some point around that time, very early in the 1480s, the Magnificent One withdrew his patronage from the Vespucci family. This was a culmination of a long series of Lorenzo's disappointments in useless or unreliable members of the clan. We do not know what actually triggered the rupture because the only direct evidence is a remark in a letter of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's in which he simply says that Vespucci's uncle has been seen complaining and grieving over the loss of Lorenzo the Magnificent's favor.

From then on, the family transferred allegiance to the other branch of the Medici, the family of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, who was locked in a relationship of hatred and rivalry with Lorenzo the Magnificent. Again, biographers conventionally suppose that Amerigo must have played some important role in the house of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. But apart from one occasion on which he bought a very large quantity of wine for the household, which does not to me suggest a job more significant than that of butler, there is not any evidence that Amerigo had any permanent office in Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's household. I think he was a hanger-on who had his meals at the palace, but not much more.

The overwhelming evidence from letters addressed to Amerigo in this period of his life is that he was a freelancer. He was extraordinarily resourceful. I call him a "Figaro of Florence," who became a sort of *factotum de la città*. If you had something that needed fixing, especially if you had something dodgy or slimy or shifty, you went to Amerigo. We find him, for example, being blackmailed by the warden of the jail. We do not know what for, but you do not get into that kind of relationship if you have stuck resolutely to the pursuit of fame and honor. We find him pimping. There is a whole series of letters which are very manifestly communications from clients who are employing Vespucci's services, at the very least as a sort of procurer or go-between in relationships with evidently meretricious women. Above all, the main business that he transacted was that of a buyer and seller of jewels on commission,

especially pearls. That is how he made his living until the first great makeover of his life occurred in about 1490, when Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco asked him to check out a potential new business partner in Seville, the Florentine banker Gianetto Berardi. Vespucci took the chance to escape—the chance, perhaps, to retrieve fame and honor in a new job in a new city. He threw in his own lot with Berardi, became his agent, and moved to Seville.

It was a great time to be in Seville. The New World had not yet been discovered, but Seville was already booming, becoming a gold-rich, almost a bonanza town. Italians were responding to that age-old advice, “Go west, young man,” and finding business opportunities in Seville. Columbus was among them. The moment Vespucci arrived and threw in his lot with Berardi, Berardi became one of Columbus’s chief backers. This was the relationship that put Vespucci and Columbus in direct contact. And from this time on, their lives were inextricably interwoven. For the firm that Vespucci joined, the results of the deal with Columbus were fatal. After the euphoria of Columbus’s initial success, the return on investment in the early years of his enterprise was zero. For the first couple of years after the discovery of the New World, Berardi pumped more and more investment into Columbus’s enterprise. He got nothing back and died ruined. He left a heart-breaking will, in which he commended his orphaned daughter to the keeping of the Lord Admiral, as he called Columbus, in the hope that at some point some profit would accrue from the venture in which they had

been engaged together. I do not know what happened to the daughter, but the guy who was left holding the proverbial baby was Vespucci. I think he had staked everything in a bid for fame and honor, and failed.

So he began a new self-reinvention; he followed the model that Columbus had laid before him and took to sea himself. In 1499, when the monarchs of Spain opened the Atlantic to more or less free competition, Vespucci sailed in the company of one of Columbus’s former crew, Alonso de Ojeda, to the coast of what is now Venezuela. It has always been a puzzle for historians—how did this happen? How did Vespucci go on this journey? In what capacity did he travel? He himself claimed to be a captain and a pilot. It is inconceivable that he could have been a captain or a pilot. The only voyage that he had ever made up to this time in his life was from Florence to Barcelona when he was on his way to Seville. He had absolutely no experience of the sea and it is perfectly obvious from the accounts that he has left that he knew little more about navigation than most other landlubbers.

Vespucci knew little about navigation, but he knew a lot about pearls. Columbus had discovered the pearl fisheries of Margarita on his voyage in 1498. The whole purpose of Ojeda’s journey, in my opinion, was to follow up on that discovery and try to garner some pearls. When we read Vespucci’s own account, I think we get to what really took him on this voyage. He refers to the huge treasure of pearls the expedition gathered for the queen, and adds that he stashed aside 1,000 ducats’ worth for himself.



Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Figure 3. The most influential sixteenth-century image of Vespucci shows him as a magus, equipped with cosmographical instruments, his eyes fixed, Christ-like, on the heavens while his crew slumbers, like the disciples at Gethsemane.

But Vespucci remained desperate for a new career. He tried to return briefly to the work of a sutler or merchant working in the New World trade, and was profoundly unsuccessful. So he projected himself in a new light as a cosmographer in an effort to create a demand for his services as a conner

of the seas and of geography. Here in my next slide (Figure 3) we see a brilliant embodiment of the image that he presented—this is almost like Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, isn't it? Everybody else had fallen asleep, but there is Vespucci communing with the heavens. Notice the way

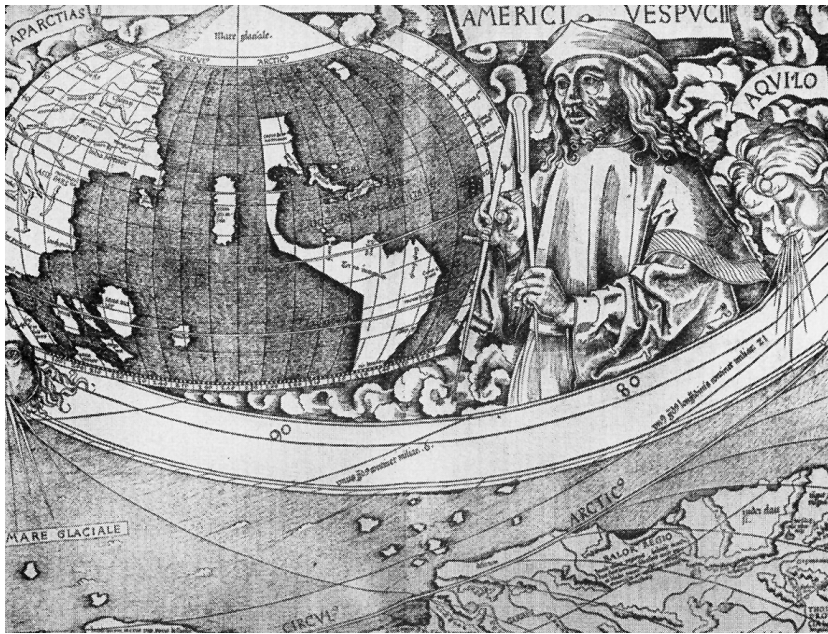
he is manipulating all the latest technology—the astrolabe, the quadrant, all the tools of the cosmographer’s trade. It was all phony—complete flummery. Vespucci used these props the way a stage conjurer uses his wand. It is perfectly obvious from the details of his account, which are mutually contradictory, and riven with absurdities and follies, that he did not know what he was doing. He certainly had some theoretical knowledge of the celestial bodies because his uncle, like so many other members of the Florentine Academy in the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent—like Lorenzo himself—was committed to astrology. If you go to the parish church of the Vespucci family’s parish in Florence today you can see the painting that Vespucci’s uncle commissioned from Ghirlandaio. There, hanging on the wall above his head, is his own astrolabe.

It is one thing to have a theoretical knowledge of these things, it is quite another to use instruments like this to navigate on the open sea as Vespucci claimed to do. For example, he claimed to take readings of longitude by observing lunar distances. You can do that if you have a stable platform, and if you have telescopes which are very finely calibrated (of course, telescopes of any sort were not invented for a hundred years after Vespucci), or if you have very accurate timekeeping devices (and of course, nothing like that existed). So it is literally impossible that Amerigo could have determined longitude by this method. The only longitude reading he gave was, in its apparently wild inaccuracy, suspiciously close to one Columbus obtained by timing

an eclipse. Vespucci’s readings of latitude were not much better. As so often, he copied Columbus’s methods. He used an hourglass to time the progress of the guard stars around the Pole Star, subtracted the number of the night hours from twenty-four, and turned to the standard printed tables that listed latitudes according to the hours of daylight. So he was not really a great cosmographer. But he managed to convince people that he was, and that is one of the great mysteries of his career.

In particular, he convinced two key individuals, humanists in Saint-Dié in Lorraine, Mathias Ringmann and Martin Waldseemüller. They knew of him, by 1505, when they read *Mundus Novus*. And they hailed him as the new Ptolemy, the greatest cosmographer of the age, and the equal of the greatest of antiquity. In the Renaissance, there was no greater honor than to be regarded as the equal of the ancients. On the map they published to accompany the work in which they named America, they depicted him surveying the world from a privileged eminence, alongside Ptolemy himself. But why? Why did these learned individuals adopt Vespucci so readily?

You have to understand that Saint-Dié at the time was struggling—as we might now say—to make it big, rather like a small college trying to get up the *US News and World Report* rankings. It was a place that other scholars despised. Pico della Mirandola said that he was surprised to hear that there were any scholars in Saint-Dié. Its reputation was for weavers and bricklayers. But it had a printing press. The small, erudite



Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Figure 4. The 1507 world map of Saint Dié displays an image of Vesputi at the top, in a position equivalent to that of Ptolemy, reputedly the greatest geographer of antiquity. The image Amerigo displays shows a continuous American land mass—contrasting with the main map, in which the New World is punctuated by a trait leading toward Asia.

group that gathered around the press had a great project in mind—the ambition to draw to themselves the admiration of the world by publishing a new edition of the great cosmographical work of antiquity, Ptolemy's *Geographia*. It was a competitive market and there were many other texts already in the field. They needed to make their product special. So they were looking for someone to be the new Ptolemy. And Vesputi seemed to fit the bill, not only because of his claim to have revealed a New

World to the old world, but also because of his professed skill in reading longitude and latitude—the basis Ptolemy had recommended for constructing a map of the world (Figure 4).

Thanks to Waldseemüller's originality and skill as a mapmaker, the name of America spread around the learned world. Waldseemüller's most radical innovations were paper maps of the world, a small version designed to be pasted onto a globe—the first-ever printed globe—and a huge one

for covering a study wall. Waldseemüller realized in the course of time that he had made a mistake, because in his next big cartographical venture a few years later, in 1513, he withdrew the name of America, and added an annotation attributing the discovery of the New World to Columbus. But it was too late. “America” as a name had begun to catch on, irreversibly.

Even beyond learned circles, Vespucci’s work and renown became popular for the same reason that we read trash media: because of the appeal of the sensational. The writings that appeared under Vespucci’s name were full of sensations. My next slide, for instance, shows the first map to exhibit the influence of Vespucci’s writings, with a rather faint depiction of the cannibalism Vespucci described. Some of Vespucci’s sensationalism was sexually titillating; most of it involved cannibalism. A well-known engraving from 1505 is not explicitly linked by the engraver to the writings of Vespucci, but it clearly depicts cannibals as Amerigo described them. As time went by, the sensationalism of the engravers—who mirror for us the responses of readers—grew more acute. In an engraving of 1525 we see the cannibals have been transformed into dog-headed monsters, literally butchering their victims. So a kind of cosmographical con trick worked on an exceptionally receptive scholarly audience, while sensationalism lured a popular readership to endorse the choice of Amerigo as America’s name-sake.

Vespucci’s last transformation was posthumous. He was a contested figure, because many of Columbus’s admirers felt

that the ascription of his name to the New World was an injustice to its real discoverer. Amerigo therefore became the hero of one party, the villain of another. But that is unsurprising because heroism and villainy always shade into each other, and one man’s hero is always another man’s villain. That could almost be the conclusion of the story. After all of these mercurial self-reinventions, Vespucci ended up after death in a suitably unresolved state, which is probably going to last forever.

But I want to draw attention to two further conclusions that I would like to leave you with tonight. Otherwise, some people might leave the lecture hall tonight thinking, “Well, you know, America is not a very good name for this hemisphere.” Nowadays, corporations and even countries seem always to be changing their names in pursuit of an enhanced image. If rebranding consultants were to look at America, they would say, “You’ve got to change the name. The United States of America (apart from all the disappointments that one encounters when one traces its origins back to Vespucci) presses the wrong button, sets up the wrong vibes. Call it something politically correct. Change it to the United States of Turtle Island.” But I want to argue that, in spite of all the problems the name has, in spite of all the negative connotations, in spite of Vespucci’s moral unsuitability for this dignity, America is actually a great name.

Vespucci, whatever else is said, is to me a representative figure of the processes which led to the European discovery of America. Like Columbus, he was an Italian

adventurer who sought his fortune in the Iberian Peninsula, and helped to make Spain and Portugal the springboard for the investigation of the Atlantic. Throughout the history of the late medieval European out-thrust to the west, the initiatives came from deep inside the Mediterranean. In generation after generation from the 13th century onward, Italians (with some Majorcans) provided Spain and Portugal with the spirit of adventure, the technical *savoir-faire*, and the finance which launched Atlantic enterprise. But we know very little about the Italian pioneers until we get to the time of Columbus and Vespucci. And we have to look to the examples of Columbus and Vespucci in order to learn why people left prosperous Italy for marginal Iberia, why they abandoned a land of obvious opportunity in the central Mediterranean to venture their lives on an uncharted, storm-tossed ocean. I detect a pattern that matches the trajectory of Vespucci's life: a history of escape from failure, of pursuit of social

ambition. Vespucci set out on a quest for fame and honor. So, I believe, did most of his predecessors.

My second reason for favoring the name is that the makeover artist—this self-reinventor whom I have described to you—should have prefigured, so long ago, a typical story of modern America: of life, at least, in the United States, which has become the land of self-reinvention, of makeover, of celebrity rehab, of flexi-careers and flexi-lives. A country that is actually ruled by a president who seems himself to be a projection of a sort of fictional self-image is very suitably named after the greatest self-reinventor of them all. In a curious way, the man after whom America is named has become a model for America, or at least for this part of the hemisphere that is named after him.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Felipe Fernández-Armesto' in a cursive script.

Dr. Felipe Fernández-Armesto (London, 1950) (M.A., D. Phil., Hon. DLitt.), one of the world's most distinguished scholars of global environmental history, comparative colonial history, topics in Spanish and maritime history and the history of cartography, is a British historian of Spanish heritage, and author of many popular works of history. He is Professor of Global Environmental History at Queen Mary, University of London and, since September 2005, he has been Principe de Asturias Chair in Spanish Culture and Civilization at Tufts University. He has nineteen books of sole authorship, including most recently *Pathfinders: A Global History of Exploration* (2006) and *Amerigo: The Man Who Gave His Name to America* (2007); ten further books as editor or joint author; about forty-five major papers or chapters; and editorships of various collaborative projects and journals. He is the author of *The Spanish Armada* (1990), *Millennium: A History of Our Last Thousand Years* (1995), *Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed* (1997), *Civilizations* (2000), *Food: A History* (published as *Near a Thousand Tables* in US/Canada) (2001), *The Americas* (2003), *Ideas That Changed the World* (2003), and *The World: A Global History* (2007). His awards include the FSA 1994, Caird Medal 1997, John Carter Brown Medal 1999, Professorial Fellow of Queen Mary, University of London 2000, the National Award for Research (Spanish Geographical Society) 2003, and International Association of Culinary Professionals Prize 2003.

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Germán Arciniegas (1900-1999), distinguished Colombian essayist and historian, author of over fifty books, and many columns in the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*.
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- *The International Year of Indigenous Peoples*
Rigoberta Menchú (1959-), Guatemalan indigenous leader, Nobel Peace Prize (1992), Prince of Asturias Award (1998), and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador.
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Renée Ferrer de Arréllaga (1944-), Paraguayan poet and novelist, Spain's Pola de Lena Prize (1986), included in anthologies of Paraguayan poetry and narrative.
No. 4, March 1994.
- *Paraguay and Its Plastic Arts*
Annick Sanjurjo Casciero (1934-), Paraguayan art historian, writer and editor of OAS magazine and art exhibition catalogues, specialist in 20th century Latin American art.
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- *The Future of Drama*
Alfonso Sastre (1926-), Spanish existentialist playwright, essayist, and critic, member of the New Art literary movement, outspoken critic of censorship in Franco's Spain.
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- *Dance: From Folk to Classical*
Edward Villella (1936-), North American Principal Dancer in George Balanchine's New York City Ballet (1960), later founder and Artistic Director of the Miami City Ballet.
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- *Belize: A Literary Perspective*
Zee Edgell (1940-), Belizean journalist, activist and author of four novels including *Beka Lamb*, Associate Professor of English at Kent State University in Ohio.
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Magdalena Gallegos de Donoso, Ecuadorian anthropologist and art historian, author of over fifty exhibition catalogues, Director of the Central Bank of Ecuador Museums.
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- *Art in Context: Aesthetics, Environment, and Function in the Arts of Japan*
Ann Yonemura (1947-), North American Senior Associate Curator of Japanese Art at the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.
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Homero Aridjis (1940-), Mexican poet, diplomat and author of over 25 books of poetry, founder of the environmental Group of 100, awarded by the United Nations.
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Edwidge Danticat (1969-), Haitian author of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Pushcart Award (1995), and *The Farming of the Bones* (1999), American Book Award (1999).
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Bernard McGinn, North American theologian from University of Chicago's Divinity School, leading scholar in apocalyptic thought, editor of *Classics of Western Spirituality*.
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David Carrasco (1944-), North American Professor of Religions at Princeton, later at Harvard Divinity School, editor of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*.
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Juan E. Corradi (1943-), Argentine sociologist from New York University, advisor to the United Nations Development Program, VP of South/North Development Initiative.
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Raúl Pérez Torres (1941-), Ecuadorian poet, Director of Abrapalabra Editors, National Short Story Award (1976), Casa de las Americas Award (1980), Juan Rulfo Award (1990).
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Patricia Ginton Meicholas, Bahamian writer, founding president of the Bahamas Association for Cultural Studies, Silver Jubilee of Independence Medal for Literature.
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Eliot Weinberger (1949-), North American essayist and primary translator of Octavio Paz, PEN/Kolovakos Award (1992), National Book Critics Circle Award (1999).
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Roch Carrier (1937-), decorated Canadian novelist and playwright, Director of the Canada Council for the Arts (1994-97), and National Librarian of Canada (1999-2004).
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Wade Davis (1953-), Canadian ethnobotanist and writer, National Geographic Society Explorer, author of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1986) and *One River* (1996).
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Brenda F. Berrian, North American Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, author of *Awakening Spaces: French Caribbean Popular Songs, Music and Culture* (2000).
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Camilo Herrera (1975-), Colombian sociologist and economist, founding director of the Center for Cultural Studies for Political, Economic and Social Development in Bogotá.
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Ronald Inglehart (1934-), North American political scientist, Director of Institute for Social Research at University of Michigan; and Wayne E. Baker, Faculty Associate.
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Néstor García Canclini (1939-), distinguished Argentine philosopher and anthropologist, Casa de las Americas Prize (1981), and Director of Urban Culture Studies at UNAM.
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Julio Escoto (1944-), Honduran novelist, National Literary Prize (1974), Spain's Gabriel Miró Prize (1983), José Cecilio del Valle Prize in Honduras (1990).
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Maria Grazia Mattei (1950-), Italian expert in new communications technology, founder of MGM Digital Communication, with remarks by artist Fabrizio Plessi.
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Rafael Viñoly (1944-), Uruguayan architect, finalist in the new World Trade Center design competition; designer of expansion of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.
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Michael Chibnik (1946-), Professor of Anthropology at the University of Iowa, based on his 2003 book *Crafting Tradition: The Making and Marketing of Oaxacan Wood Carvings*.
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Fernando Savater (1947-), distinguished Spanish philosopher and novelist, Professor of Philosophy at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Sakharov Prize (2002).
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Cristián Samper (1967-), Costa Rican/Colombian biologist, Director of Smithsonian's Natural History Museum, former chief science adviser to Colombian government.
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Marcos Aguinis (1935-), Argentine physician, former Minister of Culture in Argentina, Planeta Prize (Spain), Grand Prize of Honor by the Argentine Society of Writers.
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Darío Ruiz Gómez (1935-), Colombian art and literary critic, former Professor of Architecture in Medellín, published four books of poetry and five books of short stories.
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William Ospina (1954-), Colombian essayist, journalist, poet, and translator, National Literature Award (1992), Casa de las Americas Award (2002).
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- *Translating Cervantes*
Edith Grossman (1936-), preeminent North American translator of Spanish language works, including García Marquez, Vargas Llosa, and her new version of *Don Quixote*.
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- *Panel on Culture and Development—Inauguration of Enrique V. Iglesias Conference Center*
Enrique V. Iglesias (1930-), distinguished Uruguayan economist and statesman, third President of the IDB (1988-2005), founder of the IDB Cultural Center (1992); Néstor García Canclini (see Encuentros No. 43c); and Gilberto Gil (1942-), Minister of Culture of Brazil, acclaimed musical composer, performer, and pioneer of *Tropicalia*.
No. 53, February 2005.
- *Cervantes and the Art of Storytelling*
Antonio Muñoz Molina (1956-), Spanish journalist, essayist and novelist, National Prize for Criticism (1988), National Award for Literature (1988, 1991), Planeta Award (1991).
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- *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers and Copycats Are Hijacking the Global Economy*
Moisés Naím (1952-), Venezuelan Editor-in-Chief of *Foreign Policy* magazine, National Magazine Award for General Excellence (2003, 2007), author or editor of eight books.
No. 55, December 2005.
- *Roundtable: The State of Contemporary Spanish and Latin American Literature*
Participating Spanish writers: Camilo José Cela Conde (1946-, philosopher and anthropologist); José Corredor Matheos (1929-, National Literature Award for Poetry); Eugenio Fuentes (1958-, Berenguer and Extremadura Awards); Andrés Ibáñez (1961-, Ojo Crítico Award); Carlos Marzal (1961-, poet and novelist); Rosa Montero (1951-, National Journalism Award); José Ovejero Lafarga (1958-, Primavera Award); and Horacio Vázquez-Rial (Argentina, 1947-, novelist). Moderator: Professor José María Naharro-Calderón, University of Maryland.
No. 56, May 2006.
- *Amerigo and America?*
Felipe Fernández-Armesto (1950-), distinguished British scholar of global environmental history, comparative colonial history, topics in Spanish and maritime history and the history of cartography; Príncipe de Asturias Chair at Tufts University.
No. 57, April 2007.

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