The problem begins at the outset. What's in a name may not be the essence of things but a name conveys a great deal about perceptions. If we called a rose a nettle, our mental image would alter. And in Latin America, instead of talking of a glass half-full (or empty), there is talk of celebrating the fact that rose-bushes have blooms rather than lamenting that they have thorns. Here we have it: to mention writing in ‘Latin’ America states the problem in a word. Not one of the indigenous peoples spoke a Latin-based language and up to fifty million of them were exterminated following the arrival of the first native-Italian speaker. Yet for more than 500 years the region has been dominated by two languages of Latin origin, Spanish and Portuguese. Other exterminations followed on that of genocide. Books, codices, astrological and navigational charts, numerate and literate imagery in a variety of representations that had been engraved on stone stelae, woven into fabrics or knotted into lengths of cord, were destroyed wholesale. Oral renditions in indigenous languages were outlawed and regarded as ungrammatical, inferior, and irreligious. Just as in the twentieth century during the Irish Rebellion, speaking in your mother tongue was prohibited, along with the telling of tales, singing of songs, and recounting of ancient histories and legends.

The age of European imperial expansion in ‘Latin’ America gave way to trade expanding into the other vast continents of Africa, Asia, and Australia. Whether or not it actually began in ‘1492 when Columbus sailed the ocean blue’

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1 The Genoan ‘Cristoforo Colombo’ we call ‘Christopher Columbus’. And, of course, the name for all the Americas comes from the great Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci. Those not native to the USA use ‘America’ to refer indifferently to the continent, north or south.
or some considerable time earlier, when a variety of Scandinavians landed on the coasts of the Americas and the Caribbean islands, is debatable. Less contentious is that the end of Western domination was heralded by Toussaint Louverture’s successful ‘slave revolt’, abolishing slavery in Hispaniola, the island where Columbus first landed. From that – non-European – ocean shore, other semantics prevail. For Haitians, this was no ‘revolt’ but a revolution, directly inspired by the French Revolution, a paradox, in that it led directly to the emancipation of the slaves and so to Haitian independence from France in 1804. It also encouraged revolution on the mainland, where in 1821 and against the loud ringing of church bells, \textit{el grito de Hidalgo} became a call to unite against European domination. Portuguese and Spanish regimes were routed across the region over the ensuing decades. It bears remembering, however, that slavery in Brazil was only abolished in 1888: liberty was ever selective in its applications.2

European history claimed that writing arrived in Latin America with the Roman alphabet. All other forms of literacy (or alphabets) were ignored. Interestingly, letters home from early explorers to the King and Queen of Spain vary significantly in their descriptions of the ‘New’ World and read like history read backwards, proving a theory determined a priori. Columbus, for example, had no concept of the Americas and insisted that he had encountered islands off Cathay (Japan) inhabited by “Indians.” Rather than considering at the outset that it could be incumbent on him to learn native languages, he had thought to cover all bases by engaging a Franciscan learned in Latin, and a rabbi fluent in Hebrew, in the eventuality that they pitched up at ‘the gates of Heaven’ (i.e. Jerusalem) instead. As the Europeans had no intention of acquiring regional languages, it was assumed that preparation in the godly tongues of the Bible was sufficient provision. A sense of lost geography gave an initial impetus of incredulity to the earliest accounts. Columbus wrote to his Spanish patron:

\begin{quote}
Since I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days I passed from the Canary Islands to the Indies, with the fleet which the most illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, gave to me. There I found very many islands, filled with innumerable people, and I have taken possession of them all for their Highnesses, done by proclamation and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me. To the first island which I found I gave the name “San Salvador,” in remembrance of the
\end{quote}

\footnote{Slavery commenced in Brazil in 1532, even before the first Portuguese settlement there. Mainly forced to work in gold and diamond mines, or on coffee and sugar plantations, an estimated four million African slaves were transported there, forty percent of all those in the Americas.}