



HiN

International Review for Humboldtian Studies
Internationale Zeitschrift für Humboldt-Studien
Revista Internacional de Estudios Humboldtianos

HiN

V, 9 (2004)

► pdf

Druckversion

HUMBOLDT *im* NETZ

ISSN 1617-5239

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“Under the influence of an exotic nature...national remembrances are insensibly effaced”: Threats to the European Subject in Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*

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Impressum

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Threats to the European Subject in Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of
Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*

Jason H. Lindquist, Indiana University

Abstract

My essay attends to a number of passages in Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* in which the Prussian explorer expresses anxiety about the apparent dangers posed by the overwhelmingly productive tropical landscapes he observes. In these passages, the excesses of an „exotic nature“ threaten European identity and modes of civilization—and they trouble the accuracy of Humboldt's own observational project. I also explore Humboldt's related worry that South American vegetable (and visual) overload will exert a destabilizing effect on his aesthetic sensibility, disrupting his ability to represent the „New Continent“ accurately in writing. Finally, I sketch the influence of Humboldt's representations of tropical excess on nineteenth-century British cultural thought and literary practice. Studying the instabilities experienced by *Personal Narrative*'s expatriates and colonists promises to draw out important tensions latent in Humboldt's treatment of tropical landscape and to illuminate broader epistemological and aesthetic shifts being worked out during the period.

Concerning the Author

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Jason H. Lindquist is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of English at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. The recipient of a Fulbright Graduate Fellowship, Jason spent the 2003–2004 academic year in Berlin beginning research on a dissertation that uses Humboldt's writing—and early nineteenth-century travel narrative more generally—to examine the development of a Victorian aesthetics of complexity.

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I. Introduction

While traveling near the town of Anoch in Scotland's Western Isles, Samuel Johnson described the plant life in the area in the following manner: „The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.“¹ In the midst of this untended profusion, Johnson allows himself to experience a crisis of psychic overload: although he knows there is no real danger, the writer voluntarily entertains a series of „imaginings“ that have as their focus the dissolution of the physical and mental self. For Johnson, the region around Anoch evokes the possibility of „want, and misery, and danger.“²

Samuel Johnson's dark imaginative response to the vegetative overgrowth of the Western Isles may at first seem irrelevant to a study of Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1818–1827).³ After all, Humboldt's descriptions of South America's highly fecund spaces are often positive. His enthusiasm for tropical profusion leads him, for instance, to revise upward Malthus's pessimistic carrying capacity estimates for the „New Continent“; such appreciation also prompted him to pioneer new methods for measuring and cataloguing the productivity of the Americas and to call for political and economic development in the region.⁴ At its most teleological, *Personal Narrative* sketches an optimistic—if distinctively European—future for South and Central America: Humboldt imagines a time when „populous cities enriched by commerce, and fertile fields cultivated by the hands of freemen, adorn those very spots, where, at the time of my travels, I found only impenetrable forests, and inundated lands“ (I.ii). Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, although he ventures no further than the geographic periphery of the British Isles, sees only „matter incapable of form or usefulness“ heaping itself up around him at a frightful pace. In fact, when Johnson's imaginings do turn to the „New Continent,“ he becomes positively terrified, admitting to himself that Scottish „spots of wildness“ cannot evoke anything like the terror encountered in the vast and threatening „deserts of America.“⁵ Where Johnson sees want and lack in natural spaces peripheral to European centers of commerce, Humboldt mostly sees immense potential.

And yet, a study of *Personal Narrative* that stresses only „commerce, and fertile fields“ would be incomplete. After all, the overwhelming power of „impenetrable forests and inundated lands“ is just as crucial to the portrait Humboldt paints of tropical America. In a number of memorable passages, *Personal Narrative* foregrounds the capacity of vegetable excess to resist colonization, impede productive enterprise, and overwhelm European modes of psychic and social life. Thus, while he might never have characterized South American vegetation as „sullen“ or „useless,“ Humboldt's teeming New World spaces do evoke a kind of Johnsonian anxiety. Like the Western Isles, but to an even greater degree, tropical nature threatens to degrade or fully overwhelm the coherence of the European subject. My analysis calls attention to passages in *Personal Narrative* that stress the dangers tropical fecundity posed to European identity and modes of civilization; I go on to explore Humboldt's related worry that South American vegetable (and visual) overload will exert a destabilizing effect on his own aesthetic sensibility and on his ability to create a coherent textual representation of the New Continent. Finally, as my discussion of Samuel Johnson may serve to foreshadow, I sketch some of the most important ways that Humboldtian themes of tropical excess influenced nineteenth-century British cultural thought and literary practice. Investigating the instabilities experienced by the expatriates and colonists that populate *Personal Narrative* promises to draw out important tensions

latent in Humboldt's own treatment of tropical landscape and to illuminate significant epistemological shifts often precipitated by and worked out within travel narratives during the period. These transformations in the way the world outside Europe was viewed would, in turn, help lay the groundwork for both expressions of faith in and doubts about the colonial enterprise.

II. „Man no longer appears as the center of the creation“: Excess Verdure and the Traveling Observer

Early in *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt suggests that the „moment of leaving Europe“ is transformational: the traveler passes into a fundamentally different realm, „entering in some sort on a new state of existence“ (I.31).⁶ One of the most distinctive features of this „new state“ is the „luxuriousness of the vegetation“ (V.441). As Humboldt's lengthy work progresses, a complex and often contradictory relationship between vegetable (hyper)fecundity and the traveling observer emerges. On the one hand, tropical excess is viewed positively: it is powerful, moving, and unprecedented in Humboldt's experience. On the other hand, such vigorous plant life is a serious impediment both to the observer's ability to perceive nature accurately and to the efforts of colonists to preserve a coherent European identity.

For instance, Humboldt worries that even his trained vision may not be a reliable servant in South America. In spite of his prodigious capacities as a careful observer, record-keeper, and statistician, spaces that are „overloaded with plants“ impede observational accuracy. Humboldt's description of the banks of the Río Cedeño suggests the irony inherent in observing and describing South American verdure—that is, plant life itself presents the single greatest hindrance to the study of plant geography in the tropics. In a place where tree trunks are concealed „under a thick carpet of verdure“ and „lianas“ climb from the ground to the tree tops in a „continual interlacing of parasite plants, the botanist is often led to confound the flowers, the fruits, and leaves, which belong to different species“ (III.36–37). That an experienced botanist cannot see the tree trunks for the forest, so to speak, suggests the power of tropical fecundity to disrupt even an expert's sense of nature's deep structure.

Humboldt faces similar problems as a human demographer attempting to quantify the extent of agriculture—and thus the size of the population—in the tropics. Although in Europe the extent of cultivation corresponds in a predictable way to population size, even the „most populous regions in equinoctial America still [retain] a savage aspect“ (III.15–16). This insight becomes clear to Humboldt while passing a small, half-hidden settlement near Cumaná. Realizing that he might easily have missed the settlement altogether and finding that he cannot easily determine the area's population, Humboldt reflects on the power of vegetation to conceal the extent of civilization in South America, „even in the neighbourhood of the most populous cities.“ In a climate where agriculture requires only small parcels of ground, „[s]pontaneous plants...predominate by their quantity over cultivated plants, and determine alone the appearance of the landscape.“ Here man does not inhabit the landscape as „an absolute master, who changes at his will the surface of the soil, but as a transient guest“ (III.15–16).

One senses two competing value systems at play in such passages, where Humboldt praises the verdant fecundity of tropical nature even as he signals that such fertility can seriously impede accurate interpretation. On one hand—as Engelhard Weigl has noted—Humboldt stood in the tradition of Buffon and the Forsters in favoring the beauty of a tamed and civilized nature. For instance, in his account of travels with Cook in the South Seas, Johann Reinhold Forster described untended nature as an offensive aggregation of „broken, decaying, and rotting“ undergrowth, „petrification and noxious effluvia,“ and „dead, motionless, stagnating water.“ Cultivation by humans, however, brings beauty and productivity to the confusion: „How beautiful, how improved, how useful does nature become by the industry of man! And what happy changes are produced, by the moderate care of rational beings.“⁷ Such a value system—which, incidentally, calls to mind Johnson's condemnation of Scotland's „sullen“ vegetation—privileges order, visibility and productivity.

The civilizing tradition that informs Forster's comment clearly influenced Humboldt; however, the Prussian naturalist also subscribed to an emerging counter-discourse about nature—one associated, but not co-

extensive, with the discourse of Romanticism. This discourse asserted the value of wild untamed spaces, sublime scenes, and unsymmetrical or obscure natural landscapes. Kristian Köchy and others have sketched Humboldt's complex relationship to German Romanticism.⁸ For the nineteenth-century British reader, the key entries in this genealogy would have included Edmund Burke's influential differentiation of the sublime („whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects“) from the beautiful; Samuel Johnson's analogous opposition between the „awefully vast“ and the „elegantly little“; and Kant's more internally oriented categories (the sublime results from a thing's „limitlessness, yet with a superadded thought of its totality,“ while the beautiful is primarily a „question of the form of the object“).⁹ This delineation of the „sublime“ gave aesthetic value to scenes that were complex, threatening, or difficult to interpret. Barbara Marie Stafford has suggested that scientific travelers played an important role in the development of these two categories by extending the definition of the sublime to include objects that held clues to their own complex history embedded within them.¹⁰ For his part, Humboldt saw value in sublime scenes and also clearly expressed interest in the relationship between form and history.¹¹

It is clear that these two philosophical inclinations—one valorizing order, productivity, and visibility and the other favoring complexity, vastness, danger, and historical density—come into tension in *Personal Narrative*. The conflict manifests itself in Humboldt's simultaneous attraction to (on aesthetic grounds) and rejection of (on pragmatic grounds) the visually provocative, but dense, messy, and seemingly uninhabited South American landscape. As we have already seen, these contradictory impulses crystallize around the (apparent) absence of human activity in spaces where plants „determine alone the appearance of the landscape.“ Humboldt finds himself deeply moved by places where „[m]an no longer appears as the center of the creation,“ thrilling at views in which it is only „the conflict of the elements, which characterizes...the aspect of Nature.“ Yet in the very same paragraph, Humboldt also laments the melancholy impression conveyed by „[a] country without population.“ Unpopulated but obviously arable terrain „appears to the people of cultivated Europe like a city abandoned by it's [sic] inhabitants“ (III.512). Humboldt feels that while it is normal and even desirable to respond with deliciously „strange and sad“ feelings to places where humans could never thrive anyway (the ocean or desert, for instance), it is distressing and profoundly disorienting to „seek in vain the traces of the power of man“ in a place that is „adorned with eternal verdure“ and should therefore be habitable and productive (V.290-91). As we have seen, this problem is only exacerbated when the traveler cannot tell whether an area is, in fact, heavily populated. In this sense, it is the failure of tropical landscape to be easily legible that disturbs Humboldt the most. The result is that the reader is left with a text that seems caught between lamenting and romanticizing the absence of human civilization in the tropics.

III. „[N]ational remembrances are insensibly effaced“: Tropical Threats to the European Subject

If vegetable profusion could obscure the presence of civilization in Central and South America, it also had the power to transform its character. In addition to attributing the culture and personality of indigenous South Americans to the influence of climate, Humboldt repeatedly implies that European colonists—even those who have only recently emigrated—are in danger of losing their distinctive culture if they remain in the tropics. Living in the presence of so much vegetation seems to mark colonists with a „wild and uncultivated“ character „which belongs to nature, the primitive type of which has not been altered by art“ (III.15–16), overwhelming even settlers with strong European traditions. In fact, cultural continuity seems only to be retained in parts of South America where the climate is temperate (II.290). Those colonists „settled in a zone, where the climate, the productions, the aspect of the sky, and the scenery of the landscape, differ altogether from those of Europe,“ repeatedly fail to preserve familiar modes of life.

Even when these settlers make conscious efforts to retain familiar habits, they don't succeed for long. For instance, Humboldt is particularly affected by abortive attempts to build community through acts of naming:

„The colonist vainly bestows on mountains, rivers, and vallies [sic], those names, which call to his remembrance the sites of the mother country; these names soon lose their attraction, and have no meaning with the generations that succeed. Under the influence of an exotic nature, habits are generated, that are

adapted to new wants; national remembrances are insensibly effaced; and those that remain, like phantoms of the imagination, have neither ‘a local habitation, nor a name.’“ (II.287)

For subsequent generations of settlers, place names fail to index European experiences and attitudes; rather, they serve only as a vague and melancholy reminder of loss. The anxiety registered in this passage about the health and sustainability of temperate cultures in tropical climates should be placed in the broader context of the discourse of „seasoning“ and acclimatization that characterized European writing about the tropics in general and the Americas in particular. To name just one instance, Karen Ordahl Kupperman has documented long-running apprehension about the detrimental physical effects of hot climates—and the cultural price to be paid for acclimatizing—in the writings of English colonists in Virginia and the West Indies.¹²

For Humboldt, a series of encounters dramatize the power of tropical verdure to denationalize European settlers. While traveling on the Río Apure, for instance, the Prussian scientist encounters a man who claims recent Spanish heritage. Although the man has pretensions to culture, Humboldt suggests that he has lost all ability to think outside the moment, failing even to „[construct] an *ajoupa* of palm-leaves“ to prepare for the inevitable tropical rains. Humboldt’s penchant for sarcasm shows through as he chides this man who presumes to „[call] his wife and his daughter, who were as naked as himself, donna Isabella, and donna Manuela“ (IV.430). That night, as Humboldt had feared, a heavy rainstorm soaks the party. He records that as it „rained in torrents on our hammocks, and the instruments we had landed, don Ignacio congratulated us on our good fortune in not sleeping on the strand, but finding ourselves in his domain, among Whites and persons of rank“ (IV.432). Clearly annoyed and bemused, Humboldt concludes that it is a „singular...spectacle, to find in that vast solitude a man, who believes himself of European race“ but who „knows no other shelter than the shade of a tree“ (IV.432–33). The account suggests that for Humboldt, even in circumstances where the *idea* of European heritage has been preserved, its constitutive characteristics seemed to have been lost.

Some of Humboldt’s criticism of South American colonial culture may certainly be attributed to a generally unsympathetic climate of opinion regarding Spain and Portugal: Kristine Jones has noted, for instance, the frequent appearance of anti-Papal „Black Legend“ propaganda in many South American travel accounts during the period.¹³ Yet Humboldt’s encounters with expatriates from *northern* Europe make it clear that Spanish colonists are not the only ones who become subject to an erasure of identity in the tropics. Language retention and loss figure prominently in these examples: for instance, near the towns of Caycara and Cabruta, Humboldt meets a Frenchman who had „forgotten his native language“ (V.677). Later, Humboldt meets a fellow Prussian and is surprised to find that he has no interest in „the sight of a man who could talk to him of his country“; in fact, this man can neither remember how to speak German nor „explain himself clearly in Spanish.“ Of the encounter, Humboldt drolly notes that „our conversation was not very animated“ (VII.441).

To these portraits of stateless expatriates, we can add Humboldt’s own experiences as a European exposed to the torrid zone. Passages in *Personal Narrative* frequently note the power of the tropics to affect a traveler’s memory and state of mind. For instance, Humboldt writes that the „climate of the Indies“ made an impression „so great, so powerful...that after an abode of a few months we seemed to have lived there during a long succession of years“ (III.354). This distortion of time is tied to the erasure of familiar memories in the face of excessive stimuli: tropical verdure, acting „upon our imagination by it’s [sic] mass, the contrast of it’s [sic] forms, and the glow of it’s [sic] colours,“ has the power to „weaken antecedent impressions“ in the mind of the traveler (III.355). Europe is easily forgotten and even a return to Paris or Berlin may not fully renationalize the traveler: Humboldt’s impressions left him with a melancholy longing for the tropics—and a „vague desire to revisit that spot“ (III.255)—years after he had returned to Europe.¹⁴

The power of South American nature to efface or transform European identity extends beyond the individual to the larger communities of (mostly Spanish) expatriates and immigrants Humboldt encountered there. The Prussian traveler expresses the connection between plant geography and human civilizations with the following syllogism: „The forms of plants determine the physiognomy of nature; and this physiognomy

influences the moral dispositions of nations“ (V.52). In the tropics, nature’s „physiognomy“ is defined by forms of sensory excess that place national coherence and continuity at risk. And yet, on this point Humboldt’s ideas about the effect of vegetation on civilization embed a paradox—a contradictory position that nevertheless accords with his tendency to both praise and fear tropical wildness more generally. On one hand, highly productive tropical environments allow the high population densities essential to the development of complex societies: civilizations can „[advance] only in proportion as society becomes more numerous, and it’s [sic] connections more intimate and multiplied“ (III.15-16). Living in close proximity on small farms with high yields, inhabitants of the tropics should be able to develop the networks of trade and social relations on which a complex society can be built. On the other hand, the very fecundity that enables connectedness also seems to isolate communities and individuals by discouraging contact and travel. For example, in descriptions of settlements encountered between the „Cuesta of Caneyes and the Rio Guriental,“ Humboldt stresses the dispersion of the population (III.13–14). For one thing, „dense forests and inundated lands“ impede travel and civil association. However, Humboldt also feels that the easy subsistence available in these regions tends to remove those survival pressures that do so much to encourage trade, social organization, and the development of individual intellectual faculties in northern Europe.¹⁵ So while South America appears capable of elaborating complex societies, Humboldt observes that „the force of vegetation, the heat of the climate, and the too lavish gifts of nature, have [in fact] opposed...the progress of human civilization“ (V.601).

Thus, *Personal Narrative* encodes a fundamental tension between the advantages presented by thriving, productive plant life and the challenges this fecundity can pose for European modes of life. These competing impulses come into sharp focus when Humboldt describes what is, for him, one of the most compelling South American plants: the milk tree or *palo de vaca*. When pierced, this tree pours forth „a sweet and nourishing milk“; Humboldt thus yokes tropical vegetation with maternal fecundity: the „impressions we have received in our earliest infancy“ are of „that nourishing juice, which the breast of the mother contains“ (IV.217). Although little else has „so powerfully affected [Humboldt’s] imagination as the aspect of the cow-tree“ (IV.217), he follows his praise for the *palo de vaca* with an enumeration of the psychic dangers posed by the plant:

„If the *palo de vaca* display to us the immense fecundity and the bounty of nature under the torrid zone, it reminds us also of the numerous causes, which favour in those fine climates the careless indolence of man....In the midst of this lavish vegetation, so varied in it’s [sic] productions, it requires very powerful motives, to excite men to labour, to awaken him from his lethargy, and unfold his intellectual faculties.“ (IV.225–26)

In Humboldt’s view, „immense fecundity“ has the power to disrupt a teleological progression towards civilization and economic development. In keeping with Humboldt’s maternal trope, strikingly productive plants like the *palo de vaca* almost miraculously feed the population even as they infantilize it by rendering exertion and cultural „progress“ unnecessary. According to *Personal Narrative*, tropical excess can even reverse the process of cultural progression in places where it has already begun. As an example, Humboldt cites the Chaymas of New Andalusia, whose current scattered and feeble state he considers to be „perhaps less owing to a primitive absence of all kind of civilization, than to the effects of a long degradation.“ At some point in their history, the Chaymas may have migrated away from the more temperate regions of the continent—Humboldt believed that, originally, South American „natives were collected into large societies only on the ridge of the Cordilleras.“ Migration from the temperate zone to the burning plains, „covered with forests, and intersected by rivers,“ is figured as a descent into isolation and fragmentation. Humboldt writes that tropical tribes like the Chaymas appear to have been „scattered like the remains of a vast shipwreck“ (III.208–9).

But it is in relation to recent attempts at European settlement that the torrid zone threatens its most forceful—and worrisome—disruptions. Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* suggests that, like the Prussian who could speak neither German nor Spanish, European colonists quickly lose their way between two worlds. Comparing South American settlements unfavorably to Greek and Phoenician colonies in antiquity, Humboldt suggests that these ancient settlers managed to combine the old and the new so as to create a vibrant

„intellectual culture“ that even „excited the envy of the mother countries“ (II.292). This is not the case in the New World, where European colonists fail to forge a unique and superior alloy; instead, they forget what is European and fail to embrace what is American, foolishly „[disdaining] whatever relates to the conquered people.“ Humboldt describes the stateless and cultureless colonist in this way:

„Placed between the remembrances of the mother country, and those of the country where he first drew his breath, he considers both with equal indifference; and in a climate where the equality of seasons renders the succession of years almost imperceptible, he abandons himself to the enjoyments of the present moments, and scarcely casts back a look on the times that are past.“ (II.291-292)

National disidentification brings with it temporal dislocation and stasis, effectively removing tropical colonies from the teleological regime of progress that would dominate nineteenth-century views of history.

Humboldt's report on the psychic state of South and Central American colonials couldn't have been comforting to anyone planning a venture in the tropics. Indeed, such a potentially pessimistic view of tropical settlement introduces a tension into any coherent colonial policy, since progress itself—for the colonizing nation, for the settler, and even for the colony's land and its people—was often the justification for imperial and mercantile enterprises. Because *Personal Narrative* was so well received in Britain (and was influential for so long), it is a key text for understanding the complex and often contradictory ideological tangle that came to underlie nineteenth-century colonialism. The question of how foreign climates might affect European expatriates would only grow in importance as the volume of settlers moving from temperate metropole to tropical periphery increased. Recent scholarship has demonstrated, for instance, the importance of the idea of „acclimatization“ for Humboldt's own students¹⁶ and in the nineteenth-century discourse of colonial development more broadly.¹⁷ Travel narratives like *Personal Narrative* were often the primary source of information about colonial spaces. Therefore, ideas about living and working in the tropics had as much to do with discourse about climate as it was received in European capitals as it did with the physical actualities of weather, disease, or climate-specific farming styles. Scientific travel narratives like Humboldt's, then, must be considered as textual interventions in a broader nineteenth-century discourse of geographic determinism and acclimatization. With this in mind, I turn to an analysis of *Personal Narrative* that considers the work as an aesthetic and textual production: Humboldt had much to say about the effect tropical excess had on his aesthetic response to the tropics, on the process of composition, and on the relation of his book to other texts in the genre of travel narrative.

IV. „[The traveler]...can scarcely distinguish what most excites his admiration“: Aesthetic Overload and Textual Excess in *Personal Narrative*

Late in his travel account, Humboldt pauses to consider the difficulty of preserving written records in Central and South America. In the torrid zone, teeming insects

„devour paper, pasteboard, parchment, with frightful rapidity, destroying records and libraries. Whole provinces of Spanish America do not afford one written document, that dates a hundred years back. What improvement can the civilization of nations acquire, if nothing link the present with the past, if the depositaries of human knowledge must be repeatedly renewed, if the records of genius and reason cannot be transmitted to posterity?“ (V.116)

In this passage, the tropics are again a place where the past is quickly lost and future improvement is therefore unachievable. It is striking, though, that Humboldt's statement about the impermanence of writing appears only after the reader has waded through nearly three thousand pages of text (in the English edition). Although in several dramatic moments Humboldt and Bonpland's records and collections are in danger of decay or loss, the text of *Personal Narrative* is its own proof that writing about the tropics can survive. However, Humboldt's emphasis here on the power of the torrid zone to destroy writing—to literally

consume the traces of human discourse—calls attention to the risks inherent in committing representations of the region to paper.

In fact, it is the psychic, rather than the physical, act of writing that seems to be most under siege in South America. *Personal Narrative* repeatedly registers anxieties about all stages of writing—observation, cognition, and inscription—on a continent where instability and overwhelming fecundity combine to resist representation. Oliver Lubrich, pursuing a different end, has noted the ways in which *Personal Narrative* foregrounds its own generic instability. Lubrich argues that the text „[undermines] the conventional format of the travelogue“ because all the categories which normally „lend the text coherence and make it readable for the recipient“—including the subject, the object, the addressee, and the text itself—“are charged with multiple meanings and become thus destabilized.“ By refusing to operate on familiar generic terrain, *Personal Narrative* resists established interpretive schemas and „de-authorizes imperial forms of colonial writing“ in the process.¹⁸ Building on Lubrich’s provocative analysis, I wish to suggest that excessive inputs precipitate a crisis of representation in *Personal Narrative*; I then discuss how Humboldt’s various strategies for managing this looming incoherence anticipate and prefigure important epistemological shifts in the perception, regulation, and representation of masses of information during the nineteenth century.

Before doing so, however, it is important to review the characteristics of Humboldt’s distinctive philosophical method. Because the development and intricacies of Humboldt’s approach have been dealt with expertly and extensively elsewhere,¹⁹ I cite here only the preface to the English translation of *Personal Narrative*. Working with Humboldt’s detailed input,²⁰ Helen Maria Williams states the Prussian observer’s philosophy in terms that would have been familiar to an English readership: „[t]he appropriate character of [Humboldt’s] writing is the faculty he possesses of raising the mind to general ideas, without neglecting individual facts“ (I.ix). Operating, as it does, within the binary of the general and the particular, Williams’s statement may have reminded her readers of Samuel Johnson’s assertion that „[s]ublimity is produced by aggregation, and littleness by dispersion. Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness.“²¹ Yet in supplementing Williams’s description with Johnson’s statement, the possible tensions between part and whole inherent in such an epistemology already begin to show themselves. For while Johnson’s „sublime“ can only be achieved through the „aggregation“ of information and effects, this very act of amassing data risks pushing the whole system towards incoherency and „dispersion.“

Humboldt is acutely aware of this tension between the general and particular in his own work. While he wants to fuse „individual facts“ into „general ideas“ in his writing, he also recognizes that the huge volume of information his writings must present to achieve this end may threaten his goal; in fact, Humboldt commented on the struggle for balance between generality and minuteness in the work of other scientific travelers. At a time when scientists had more and more analytical tools at their disposal, traveling naturalists were producing increasingly cumbersome and difficult texts:

„itineraries have partly lost that unity of composition, and that simplicity, which characterized those former ages. It is now become scarcely possible to connect so many different materials with the narration of events; and that part which we may call dramatic gives way to dissertations merely descriptive.“ (I.xli-xlii)

These epistemological and aesthetic tensions between dispersion and aggregation are brought into particularly stark relief in narratives about the tropics, where the traveler is faced with an unprecedented variety and volume of potentially sublime sensory input.

Travel narratives about the old world could maintain coherence by focusing on sites that evoke „great remembrances,“ since nations, not nature „[form] the principal figures on the canvas.“ Texts that describe the new world are necessarily different, since human civilization cannot play the major role in a place where „man and his productions almost disappear amid the stupendous display of wild and gigantic nature.“ The „vast solitudes“ of the region do not lend themselves to the traditional, nation-based forms of the travel narrative—or to the other modes of cultural display increasingly popular during the nineteenth century, for that matter. Instead they seem „destined only for the display of vegetable life“ (I.xliv). Because overwhelming

plant life is the predominant visual fact in South America, *Personal Narrative* cannot be organized according to the anthropocentric principles that had traditionally defined the genre.

Humboldt recognizes that he cannot follow generic convention and it makes him uncomfortable. For instance, he fears he cannot help but violate a crucial convention of travel narrative: a writer-centered text. Because „the unity of composition can be strictly observed only when the traveler describes what has passed under his own eye....It is the man himself that we continually desire to see in contact with the objects that surround him“ (I.xli). One thinks here, perhaps, of Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa*—cited at several points in *Personal Narrative*—in which Park's adventures drive the episodic and often sentimental narrative forward. Humboldt is aware of this expectation to keep the narrative centered on himself, but he also recognizes the power of the tropics to disrupt first-person, narrator-based accounts.

For instance, Humboldt addresses this question of narrative focus and linearity while writing about how the view from the summit of Teneriffe might best be represented. He argues that, paradoxically, if he were to place himself and his responses to nature at the center of his travel account, the result would not be a clear narrative trajectory, but rather an incoherent series of expressions of wonder in the face of too many varied sensory inputs:

„It is a difficult task, to describe those sensations, which act with so much the more force as they have something undefined, produced by the immensity of the space as well as by the greatness, the novelty, and the multitude of the objects, amidst which we find ourselves transported. When a traveler attempts to furnish descriptions of the loftiest summits of the globe, the cataracts of the great rivers, the tortuous vallies [sic] of the Andes, he is exposed to the danger of fatiguing his readers by the monotonous expression of his admiration.“ (I.180-181)²²

Faced with a „multitude of objects“ and aware that he couldn't make his experiences in the Americas into a coherent linear narrative even if he wanted to, Humboldt opts instead for the massive comparative and analytical project that we now recognize as „Humboldtian science.“ In practical terms, this decision allows Humboldt to organize certain portions of *Personal Narrative* according to scientific theme or the availability of comparative data—a strategy that permits the lengthy digressions and labyrinthine footnotes characteristic of his writing. Although this kind of heterogeneous and comparative approach makes sense in light of Humboldt's emerging philosophical system, it does seem at odds with his previous aesthetic privileging of the „man himself...in contact with the objects that surround him“ as the proper subject of the travel narrative (I.xli). Humboldt does often manage to remain—by sheer force of personality—at the center of a more-or-less linear text. But this apparent contradiction is perhaps the point: *Personal Narrative* travels uncomfortably between the poles of vivid, first-person incident and comparative, descriptive analysis of „the peculiar character that distinguishes each zone“ (I.181). The „multitude of objects“ presented by tropical nature precipitates this tension and helps generate *Personal Narrative*'s often contradictory form.

There is another way in which Humboldt's text fails to fulfill the expectations of the metropolitan reader. After all, not all late-eighteenth-century travel narratives possessed a dynamic narrator who engaged in a series of exciting incidents: a journey might, instead, be expected to produce a series of aesthetic impressions in the picturesque style. To name just one example from a thriving genre, Ann Radcliffe's *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794*...presents a series of discrete, carefully framed picturesque scenes calibrated to produce a specific aesthetic effect. This effect—what one critic has referred to as the „subject-centered picturesque“—stresses the use of mediating devices like a coach window or a „Claude glass“ in order to establish distance between the „single and unique beholder“ of the scene and the landscape itself. Mediation and distance allow the writer to describe the scenery even while carefully managing its effect on the written text.²³ Humboldt is clearly familiar with this scene-based picturesque style, producing it admirably on several occasions—as when he skillfully uses the drifting clouds on Teneriffe (I.82–83) or the mouth of the Cueva del Guacharo (III.127–28) to frame those two picturesque scenes.

But this analytical and aesthetic tool is also strained to the breaking point „on a vast continent, where everything is gigantic.“ Humboldt quickly encounters difficulty containing nature within the well-marked

borders of the picturesque scene. Instead, multiple worthy scenes present themselves at every turn. Humboldt addresses this threat to picturesque description directly, noting that if a traveler in the tropics „feel strongly the beauty of picturesque scenery, he can scarcely define the various emotions, which crowd upon his mind; he can scarcely distinguish what most excites his admiration“ (III.36). Humboldt is left with an unsolvable selection problem: if he describes every interesting scene to his readers, the written text will break under its own weight, descending into incoherence. On the other hand, if he fails to fully describe all the worthy scenes he encounters, his depiction of the aesthetic character of South America will be incomplete and therefore inaccurate. Because tropical excess affects the way Humboldt „pictures“ South America, it also influences the final written form of *Personal Narrative*. Indeed, the naturalist's *full*, thirty-volume travel record signals the degree to which only heterogeneity and supplementarity seem appropriate for representing the masses of sensory input to which Humboldt has been sensitized in his aesthetic and scientific training.

In some interesting cases, the representational practices of the societies Humboldt encounters in Central and South America reflect and inform his own difficulties in creating coherent and manageable representations. For instance, Humboldt criticizes the failure of Spanish and Portuguese colonists to construct „memorials“ to help them preserve their cultural identity against an onslaught of tropical impressions. This „absence of memorials...[has] something painful to the traveler, who finds himself deprived of the most delightful enjoyments of the imagination“; more importantly, a lack of remembrances makes it extremely difficult to „bind the colonist to the soil on which he dwells“ (II.287).

Yet while European settlers fail to retain memorializing traditions, cultures native to South America seem to recognize and even embrace the futility of creating lasting monuments in the „torrid zone.“ In fact, according to Humboldt, some tribes incorporate the annihilation of individual subjectivity and cultural memory—the very idea that so terrorizes Johnson and Humboldt—into their cultural practices. The Tamanacs, for instance, practice a set of death rituals that center on *erasing* „remembrances“: when a tribe member dies, the families „lay waste the fields of the deceased, and cut down the trees which he has planted. They say, ‘that the sight of objects, which belonged to their relations, makes them melancholy.’ They like better to efface than to preserve remembrances“ (V.626). Given Humboldt's repeated observations that tropical plant life has the power to conceal or destroy civilization and rupture links between past and present, his interest in Tamanac practice makes a kind of sense: the tribe seems to feel that the only reasonable and sustainable representational strategy available to them in the face of tropical excess is not the preservation of human culture, but rather the preemptive erasure of the traces that add up to a human life.

Humboldt ultimately retreats from the radical implications of Tamanac ritual, returning the reader to a quantitative and mercantilist frame by noting that such burial practices „are very detrimental to agriculture“ and that the monks therefore oppose them (V.626). However, his interest in the scene calls attention to questions of representational coherence and textual permanence and must be read against the power of the tropics to disrupt or even „devour“ representation „with frightful rapidity.“ This incident, taken together with the other passages I have examined in this section, suggests that Humboldt himself hadn't solved the problem of how best to process and represent tropical nature. Hyper-fecundity and aesthetic overload present themselves as serious obstacles both to the progress of civilization in the „torrid zone“ and to the production of coherent textual representations of the region.

V. An „excess of complexity“: The Nineteenth-Century After-lives of Overload

In *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt implies that tropical profusion (in terms of information and sense impressions) makes it difficult to deploy Western descriptive modes in writing about that region. Although his dedication to a liberal, mercantilist economic system—and to the productive potential of Central and South America—remains clearly in place,²⁴ Humboldt's recognition that tropical profusion has power to destabilize his text often threatens this rationalistic and progressive vision. Sensory overload precipitates moments of doubt that manifest themselves as uncertainty about the ability of the European subject to preserve identity and the capacity of the European writer to reconcile the generic conventions of travel narrative with the actuality

of the tropics. Having explored these thematic concerns as they appear in *Personal Narrative*, I would like to discuss the nineteenth-century after-life of these anxieties, particularly as they played out in Britain. I argue that Humboldt's ideas about geographical determinism and acclimatization—and his tendency to approach nature as both scientist and aesthetician—set the stage for important epistemological developments during and after Humboldt's own lifetime.

As studies in a number of disciplines have shown, the nineteenth century found Europeans confronting—with equal parts fascination and dread—an ever-increasing volume of information across a wide range of fields. From the increasing data flows returning from exploration and conquest, to the burgeoning size of European cities, to the growing complexity of industrial production processes and economic relations, thinkers in the nineteenth century faced what John Tyndall called an „excess of complexity.“²⁵ Susan Faye Cannon suggests that in the sciences, increased complexity was paired with a „fascination,“ partly inspired by Humboldt, „with the beauty of accumulating more and more detailed information.“²⁶ Michel Foucault notes an analogous movement towards making more and more data visible, concluding that this tendency exerted its most profound effects in the increasingly sophisticated regimes of surveillance seen in the human sciences and the public sphere.²⁷ Scholarly attention to developments in nineteenth-century epistemology helps us better understand the aesthetic assumptions at work in attempts to collect, catalogue, and manage proliferating information and commodities during the century. Work in Victorian studies, for instance, has suggested that a diverse set of phenomena—from detective novels,²⁸ to discussions of Edison's phonograph,²⁹ to late-century imperial discourse³⁰—become loci for anxiety about uncontrolled proliferation, even as they provide occasions for representational innovation that promises to bring such excess back under control.

Furthermore, Victorian efforts to represent an „excess of complexity“ in writing only seem to implicate such texts themselves in a dangerous spiral of proliferation. Christopher Herbert makes this case in relation to nineteenth-century ethnographic texts like Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*. Although Mayhew sets out to bring the „mind-boggling profusion and density of ethnographic detail“ visible on the streets of London under control, the task quickly proves to be impossible. Yet like Humboldt's attempts to write South America, Mayhew's efforts to be comprehensive only lead him to generate more text; in Herbert's view, Mayhew's text just „become[s] more problematical and incoherent the more fully it elaborates itself.“ It is this tendency of data-gathering practices to spiral out of control that gives „the text its gigantic power and at the same time, paradoxically, render[s] it next to unreadable.“³¹ Like Humboldt, Mayhew tends to inscribe his own recognition of these dangers within the pages of the text itself, expressing a desire to be more „systematic“ even while lamenting his inability to ever be truly comprehensive: „I am unable to generalize, not being acquainted with the particulars; for each day's investigation brings me incidentally into contact with a means of living utterly unknown among the well-fed portions of society.“³² Mayhew's task is Sisyphean, since each attempt to describe opens a whole new field of particulars which demands to be recorded and reported. In a way, this proliferation of complex, localized systems calls to mind the fate of Humboldt's scientific reputation during the second half of the nineteenth century—a period during which a host of highly specialized subdisciplines that were being practiced with increasing degrees of particularity rapidly made the Prussian's efforts in those areas irrelevant or simply outdated.³³

A similar „excess of complexity“ could be found at the peripheries of Empire during the nineteenth century. In the years after the publication of *Personal Narrative*, missionaries in the Pacific attempted to describe and catalogue Polynesian culture. Although they set out with the explicit purpose of destroying the modes of life they were studying, the missionaries rapidly lost themselves in the complexities of „a project of richly detailed scientific ethnography.“³⁴ Missionary attempts to represent the complex pageantry of the Cava ceremony and the intricacies of Polynesian language led not to clarity, but to incomprehensible „masses of unrationalized empirical data.“³⁵ To frame the problem in terms that Samuel Johnson might have used, such a proliferation of sensory impressions made it increasingly difficult to separate sublime „aggregation“ from mere „dispersion.“

The specific kind of overload generated by a proliferation of „spontaneous plants“ also had an important nineteenth-century afterlife. For instance, after the Great Exhibition of 1851, in which an unprecedented

collection of consumer goods was gathered for display,³⁶ the „Crystal Palace“ was moved to the South London suburbs. In its new location, the exhibition's collection of plants was greatly increased: this effort to bring the tropical luxuriance of the colonial world before the British public in a controlled and organized manner rapidly grew in popularity.³⁷ As Rebecca Preston has shown, this standing exhibition was „significant in rendering exotic gardening accessible to the public“ during the rest of the century.³⁸ As one writer for the *National Magazine* noted in 1851, the exhibition inspired amateur gardeners to create their own „crystal palaces on a domestic scale.“³⁹ Such developments indicate that the British public did not just consume travel narratives from the tropics; they also wanted to participate in the project of managing the fecund vegetation that was so often a central topic of such narratives.

Yet just as the verdure of the tropics had power to overflow the bounds of the artfully created travel text, so too could British attempts to domesticate such vegetation present their own threat to European identity. Gardeners became aware, for instance, that foreign plants could disrupt the „Englishness“ of the garden space. As Barbara Campbell would write in her book *Garden of a Commuter's Wife*, while the „thrill of oriental suggestion that the lily and iris tribes always bring with them“ was much appreciated, these bright and potent foreigners could also overwhelm a garden if not kept under control. „In an old-fashioned garden such as mine,“ she writes, such an exotic accent „must be by suggestion only; for if it is allowed to dominate, it becomes incongruous, and would wholly denationalize the garden.“⁴⁰

In a sense, the fears expressed in Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* come full circle in this suburban gardener's concern. If travelers and colonists needed to fear the loss of their distinctive European identity while traveling or settling in the tropics, by the end of the century, even „commuter's wives“ had to worry about the power of foreign plants to „denationalize“ their spaces. That such a small thing as an iris might symbolically challenge notions of Britishness can perhaps explain the fictive power narratives of foreign invasion (as in *fin de siècle* horror novels⁴¹) or denationalization in tropical spaces (as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Ebb Tide* or Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) even at the end of the century. In many ways, these fictions are the literary offspring of textual encounters with the tropics such as Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*, which suggested, much earlier in the century, that a wild, hyper-fecund, untameable „other“ might pose a threat to European subjectivity. In fact, the relationship between Humboldt's travel writing, which was a major influence on British impressions of South America for much of the first half of the century,⁴² and the development of British fiction from Charles Kingsley (*Westward Ho* lifts many of its locations directly from *Personal Narrative*) to Joseph Conrad (whose interest in South American political and developmental issues can be seen in *Nostromo*) has yet to be fully investigated.

VI. Conclusion

By looking closely at Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, I have hoped to sketch some of the potential anxieties that a potent and rapidly proliferating tropical geography had the power to generate. Humboldt's text suggests that even the most optimistic European travelers wondered if efforts to make American spaces profitable—while retaining a distinctive European identity and culture—were sustainable. Furthermore, the rich supply of aesthetic impressions presented by the region also challenged attempts to represent or „write“ the tropics using the generic conventions of the travel narrative. I have attempted to sketch these difficulties as expressed by Humboldt in his work and to connect them to broader epistemological shifts occurring in response to similar instances of information overload in other areas of nineteenth-century life. *Personal Narrative* serves a particularly important function in British intellectual culture because it calls early attention to the challenges inherent in representing a nature that is unstable, mutable, and resists efforts to control its excesses or to make them productive. And because narratives like Humboldt's were returning from the colonial tropics, fears about overload were often yoked to a whole complex of ideological positions about civilization, progress, and race that would only gather more strength as the century progressed. I have also suggested that proliferation (vegetable and otherwise) is a fundamental issue in nineteenth-century aesthetics. As Harriet Martineau observed in 1838, the knowledgeable traveler was inevitably put under strain by the volume of information he or she was required to process: she laments that „[t]he wearied mind soon finds itself overwhelmed by the

multitude of unconnected or contradictory particulars.⁴³ As the reading public grew, and as the quantity of published travel narratives increased, the epistemological stresses and strains affecting the informed traveler rapidly became the stresses and strains of the informed reader. Humboldt's struggle to represent the tropics while working within the generic boundaries of the travel narrative may therefore serve more broadly as a guide to analyzing other literary and social efforts to deal with complexity during the nineteenth century.

* * *

Endnotes:

- ¹ Samuel Johnson and James Boswell: *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*. Ed. Peter Levi. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1984, pp. 24–27.
- ² Johnson, op. cit., pp. 24–27.
- ³ I cite here Helen Maria Williams's translation of Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland: *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent, During the Years 1799-1804, by Alexander De Humboldt, and Aimé Bonpland; With Maps, Plans, &c.* Trans. Helen Maria Williams. 7 Vols. 1818–29. New York: AMS Press, 1966. For ease of reference, I cite Williams's Personal Narrative parenthetically by volume and page. Although Humboldt approved of and was actively involved in Helen Maria Williams's edition, later translators have argued that her version often varies, particularly in tone, from the French original. They argue that as a significant figure in British Romanticism, Williams brought a distinctive voice to the translation. For instance, Thomasina Ross deemed her own 1851 re-translation necessary because she felt that Williams's version „abounds in foreign terms of expression“; Jason Wilson, who completed a new translation in 1995, finds that Williams „interpreted and exaggerated“ Humboldt's original French prose (which Wilson characterizes as „curiously flat, scientific, and modern“), particularly in passages where Humboldt waxes enthusiastic. For instance, in Williams's translation, „wild nature“ becomes „wild and stupendous nature,“ „dark curtain of mountains“ becomes „vast and gloomy curtain of mountains,“ etc. See Jason Wilson: Introduction. In: Alexander von Humboldt: *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*. Trans. Jason Wilson. New York: Penguin Books, 1995: xxxv–lxiv, pp. lix–lx. On Humboldt's active involvement in Williams's translation, see Kurt R. Biermann: Zur Vervollständigung des unvollendeten Berichts Alexander von Humboldts über seine amerikanische Forschungsreise. In: Alexander von Humboldt: *Reise auf dem Rio Magdalena, durch die Anden und Mexico, Teil I: Texte*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1986: 9–26, pp. 11–12.
- ⁴ Humboldt's innovation in gathering demographic and economic information can be seen most clearly in his monographs on Mexico and Cuba. See, for instance, Alexander von Humboldt: *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. Trans. John Black. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811.
- ⁵ Johnson, op. cit., pp. 24–27.
- ⁶ Ann McClintock sees psychologically significant boundary crossings as a common feature of European travel narratives. Furthermore, explorers regularly code the „dangerous thresholds of their known worlds“ in gendered terms: the „threshold“ is an erotically charged space that generates a set of ritual and fetishistic practices on the part of the traveler (and travel writer) which „[betray] acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss.“ Although I do not address the role gender plays in Humboldt's text (and significant work remains to be done in this regard), my analysis of *Personal Narrative* substantiates McClintock's suggestion that passing into the tropics generates acute anxiety at the possibility of „boundary loss“ —in this case national and cultural boundaries are at stake. Ann McClintock: *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 24.
- ⁷ Engelhard Weigl: Alexander von Humboldt and the Beginning of the Environmental Movement. In: *Alexander von Humboldt im Netz. International Review for Humboldtian Studies* (2001), II.2: no pagination. <http://www.hin-online.de/>, accessed April 10, 2004; see also Johann Reinhold Forster: *Observations Made during a Voyage 'round the World*. Ed. Nicholas Thomas, Harriet Guest, and Michael Dettelbach. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996, pp. 99–100.
- ⁸ Kristian Köchy: *Ganzheit und Wissenschaft. Das historische Fallbeispiel der romantischen Naturforschung*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1997; see also Kristian Köchy: Das Ganze der Natur. Alexander von Humboldt und das romantische Forschungsprogramm. In: *Alexander von Humboldt im Netz. International Review for Humboldtian Studies* (2002), III.5: no pagination. <http://www.hin-online.de/>, accessed October 15, 2003. Helen Maria Williams's translation of *Personal Narrative* can also be said to engage with the epistemology and language choices associated with a certain strand of British Romanticism (see note 3).

- ⁹ Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998 [1757], p. 36; Samuel Johnson: *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*. Ed. D. J. Enright. Penguin Classics, 1977 [1759], p. 61; Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978 [1790], p. 90 (SS 23).
- ¹⁰ Working at the junction of the history of visual culture and the history of science, Stafford suggests that versions of the sublime did important intellectual work beyond the realm of the purely literary. For instance, the emergence of a category she names „singularity“ provided naturalists an aesthetic justification for the increasingly complex „views“ that travelers (like Humboldt) were attempting to record. That is, the scientifically informed observer was prepared to see layers of meaning in the formal complexity of the observed object —whether geological formation or complex plant system. The natural object comes to fully captivate the observer, not because it threatens him or her with „terror“ in the face of a literal loss of self as in Burke’s sublime, but because the naturalist may lose him- or herself while confronting and attempting to parse the density of an object’s „history, that is, how it came to have certain of its properties.“ Barbara Marie Stafford: *Toward Romantic Landscape Perception. Illustrated Travels and the Rise of ‘Singularity’ as an Aesthetic Category*. In: *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* (1981), 10: 17–75, pp. 20, 60.
- ¹¹ Later, in *Cosmos*, Humboldt explains why he is interested in geological features: such formations „animate the scenery by the associations of the past which they awaken, acting upon the imagination of the enlightened observer like traditional records of an earlier world. Their form is their history.“ Alexander von Humboldt: *Cosmos. A Sketch of A Physical Description of the Universe*. Trans. E. C. Otte. 5 Vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1848], pp. 72.
- ¹² Karen Ordahl Kupperman: *Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience*. In: *The William and Mary Quarterly* (April 1984), 41.2: 213–40.
- ¹³ While Humboldt was not always kind in his judgments about Spanish rule, neither does he seem interested in the Black Legend practice of simply „[ascribing] all evils of the colonial order to an idea of a pernicious Spanish national character.“ Kristine L. Jones: *Nineteenth-Century British Travel Accounts of Argentina*. In: *Ethnohistory* (1986), 33.2: 195–211, pp. 197.
- ¹⁴ Of course, Aimé Bonpland’s eventual return to South America is a significant subtext in such a discussion of Humboldt’s statements about the pull of the torrid zone.
- ¹⁵ Humboldt states: „Under so mild and uniform a climate, the only urgent want of man is that of food....and we may easily conceive, why in the midst of abundance, beneath the shade of the plantain and breadfruit tree, the intellectual faculties unfold themselves less rapidly than under a rigorous sky, in the region of corn, where our race is in a perpetual struggle with the elements“ (III.15-6).
- ¹⁶ Engelhard Weigl: *Acclimatization. The Schomburgk brothers in South Australia*. In: *Alexander von Humboldt im Netz. International Review for Humboldtian Studies* (2003), IV.7: no pagination. <http://www.hin-online.de/>, accessed February 10, 2004.
- ¹⁷ Warwick Anderson: *Climates of Opinion: Acclimatization in Nineteenth-Century France and England*. In: *Victorian Studies* (Winter 1992), 35.2: 135–57.
- ¹⁸ Lubrich views the destabilizing character of Humboldt’s text positively, suggesting that it creates a discourse in which „there are no ‘identities’ and ‘differences’ which can be defined unequivocally from a privileged perspective.“ In: Oliver Lubrich: „[M]on extrême répugnance à écrire la relation de mon voyage“: Alejandro de Humboldt deconstruye la relación de viaje. In: *Alexander von Humboldt im Netz. International Review for Humboldtian Studies* (2003), IV.7: no pagination. <http://www.hin-online.de/>, accessed April 28, 2004.
- ¹⁹ In the rich scholarship on the subject, Humboldt’s philosophical method has been given a variety of names: on Humboldt’s „rational empiricism,“ see Laura Dassow Walls: *Seeing New Worlds. Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, pp. 69–70; on „Humboldtian science,“ see Susan Faye Cannon: *Science in Culture. The Early Victorian Period*. New York: Dawson and Science History Publications, 1978, pp 82; on „planetary consciousness“ and „transculturation“ in Humboldt’s work, see Mary Louise Pratt: *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992; on Humboldt and the idea of „Weltbewusstsein,“ see Ottmar Ette: *Weltbewusstsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne*. Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2002.
- ²⁰ See Biermann, op. cit., pp. 11–12.
- ²¹ Samuel Johnson: *The Lives of the Poets*. Cowley. In: *The College Survey of English Literature*. Ed. A. M. Witherspoon. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1951 [1779–1781], p. 594.

- ²² For a similar case, see Vol. 5, where Humboldt compares the melancholy effect of a place lacking the visible signs of human culture to the effect his own work may be having on the reader: „I paint the impression produced by the monotonous aspect of those solitary regions. May this monotony not be found to extend itself to the journal of our navigation, and tire the reader accustomed to the description of the scenes and historical memorials of the ancient continent!“ (V.290–91)
- ²³ Ingrid Kuczynski: Reading a Landscape. Ann Radcliffe's A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794, Through Holland and the Western Frontier of Germany, With a Return Down the Rhine. In: *British Romantics as Readers. Intertextualities, Maps of Misreading, Reinterpretations*. Eds. Michael Gassenmeier, Petra Bridzun, Jens martin Gurr, Frank Erik Pointner. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1998: 241–57, pp. 247
- ²⁴ Humboldt's belief in the achievement of progress through economic development can be seen clearly late in *Personal Narrative*. Humboldt expresses hope for a future relationship between Europe and the Americas in terms that sound familiar even today: he anticipates that a „noble rivalry in civilization, and the arts of industry and commerce, far from impoverishing the ancient continent, which has been so often prognosticated, at the expense of the new, will augment the wants of the consumer, the mass of productive labor, and the activity of exchange.“ (VI.116).
- ²⁵ Tyndall states that he was „struck dumb by an astonishment“ when considering the „excess of complexity“ evident when looking through the microscope. In: John Tyndall: *Essays on the Use and Limits of the Imagination in Science*. London: Longman, Green and Col, 1870, p. 41.
- ²⁶ Cannon, op. cit., pp. 225–26.
- ²⁷ In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that the turn of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic shift from an epistemic order based on the static classificatory grid („in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible, grouped according to their common features, and thus already virtually analyzed“) to an *episteme* that attempted to account for internal as well as external „architecture.“ In: Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 131, 231. See also Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1977].
- ²⁸ Allan Pritchard argues that Charles Dickens responded to the complexity of the Victorian city by turning to the conventions of the Gothic novel. In *Bleak House*, published in 1852, the „confusing intricacy“ of the Gothic labyrinth is represented „not so much by any single building as by the vast complex structure of the city as a whole.“ In: Allan Pritchard: The Urban Gothic of Bleak House. In: *Nineteenth Century Literature* (March 1991), 45.4: 432–52, p. 439.
- ²⁹ Writing about the phonograph in *The [London] Spectator* in 1888, an anonymous reviewer fears „an immense storing up of sounds that it might be better not to store up....Men are becoming so vastly ingenious in finding the means of magnifying and embalming every little ripple of human energy, that we tremble for the consequences. The earth will soon be made a museum of odds and ends of form and speech; and...we may have future generations drowned beneath the accumulated scraps of ancestral voices and expressions.“ Echoing Humboldt's account of the Tamanac attitude toward memorializing, the reviewer speculates that society may „come to regard it as a singular virtue when men obliterate voluntarily traces of themselves which, instead of being useful to posterity, would only serve the purposes of the dust in which useful things are so often smothered[.]“ Cited in Ivan Kreilkamp: A Voice Without a Body. The Phonographic Logic of *Heart of Darkness*. In: *Victorian Studies* (Winter 1997), 40.2: 211–44, p. 222.
- ³⁰ Thomas Richards traces the rise and decline of the fantasy of the ideal archive associated with late-century imperial and museum practice. By the end of the century, „[t]he possibility of positive knowledge“ had begun to give way in the face of „an explosion of too much positive knowledge.“ In: Thomas Richards: *The Imperial Archive. Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*. New York: Verso, 1996, p. 76.
- ³¹ Christopher Herbert: *Culture and Anomie. Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 205.
- ³² Mayhew quoted in Herbert, op. cit., p. 206.
- ³³ Cannon, op. cit., pp. 158–59.
- ³⁴ Herbert, op. cit., p. 162.
- ³⁵ Herbert, op. cit., p. 185.
- ³⁶ See Andrew Miller on the relationship between writing, Victorian subjectivity, and the culture of display

as exemplified by the Great Exhibition of 1851. Andrew Miller: *Novels Behind Glass. Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

- ³⁷ Tony Bennett deals doubly with the question of ordering excess—first by organizing the objects for display flowing into the new museums, and second by finding strategies to manage an often unsophisticated public that came in large numbers to the new institutions. See Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Richard Thomas advances a similar argument about late-Victorian efforts to parse the massive and „heterogenous local knowledge of metropolis and empire“ gathered by colonial agents abroad and agents of order at home. He suggests that in the face of a kind of imperial data overload, Britons increasingly relied on the *idea* of total knowledge about that empire. He names this imaginary construct the „Imperial archive“ and describes it as „a fantastical representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogenous local knowledge of metropolis and empire“ (11). The fantasy of total knowledge provided a crucial „ideological...means for representing the vast and various Empire as a closely organized whole“ (13). In Richards, op. cit. (n. 30), pp. 11, 13.
- ³⁸ Rebecca Preston: The scenery of the torrid zone. Imagined travels and the culture of exotics in nineteenth-century British gardens. In: *Imperial Cities. Landscape, Display and Identity*. New York: Manchester UP, 1999: 194–211, p. 201.
- ³⁹ Quoted in Preston, op. cit. (n. 38), p. 201.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Preston, op. cit. (n. 38), p. 208.
- ⁴¹ Stephen Arata argues that Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* generates terror by unleashing a hyper-fecund, racially marked replicant on the populace of London. Stephen Arata: The Occidental Tourist. *Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization*. In: *Victorian Studies* (Summer 1990), 33.4: 622–45.
- ⁴² Jason Wilson notes that „Between 1823 and 1840 no foreigner could travel in Brazil. It meant that Humboldt was the sole source of information over a long period, and he conditioned“ the way that the British saw that country and the rest of South America. In Wilson, op. cit. (n. 3), p. liii. Similarly, Nicolaas Rupke has used reviews of Humboldt’s work to document several distinct periods of intense British interest in Humboldt’s work, most notably during the periods 1810–1822 and 1845–1855 (this second wave of interest, while sparked by the publication of *Cosmos*, also saw new translations and successful republication of Humboldt’s South American works). In: Nicolaas A. Rupke: Die kritische Rezeption des Mexiko-Werks von Alexander von Humboldt. In *Alexander von Humboldt. Aufbruch in die Moderne*. Eds. Ottmar Ette, Ute Hermanns, Bernd M. Scherer, and Christian Suckow. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2001: 265–273.
- ⁴³ Harriet Martineau: *How to Observe Morals and Manners*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1995 [1838], p. 16.