

## Mary Louise Pratt

### *Imperial Eyes*

#### Chapter 6—

### Alexander von Humboldt and the Reinvention of América

*In the Old World, nations and the distinctions of their civilization form the principal points in the picture; in the New World, man and his productions almost disappear amidst the stupendous display of wild and gigantic nature. The human race in the New World presents only a few remnants of indigenous hordes, slightly advanced in civilization; or it exhibits merely the uniformity of manners and institutions transplanted by European colonists to foreign shores.*

--Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1814)

*You are interested in botany? So is my wife.*

--Napoleon's (only) words to Alexander von Humboldt (1805)

It was an intricate social fabric and a critical historical juncture into which Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland set foot when they arrived in South America in 1799. For the five eventful years that followed, they participated in that moment as they made their way around what they liked to call the New Continent. Their historic journey, and the monument of print it produced, laid down the lines for the ideological reinvention of South America that took place on both sides of the Atlantic during the momentous first decades of the nineteenth century. For thirty years, while popular uprisings, foreign invasions, and wars of independence convulsed Spanish America, Alexander von Humboldt's vast writings on his equinoctial travels flowed in a steady stream from Paris, reaching thirty volumes in as many years. At a time when loosening travel restrictions began sending European travelers to South America by the dozen, Humboldt remained the single most influential interlocutor in the process of reimagining and redefinition that coincided with Spanish America's independence from Spain. Humboldt was, and still is, considered "the most creative explorer of his time"; his American travels were regarded as "a model journey of exploration and a supreme geographical achievement." **1** He was as celebrated in Euroamerica as in Europe, and his writings were the source of new founding visions of America on both sides of the Atlantic. Charles Darwin wrote from on board he *Beagle* that his "whole course of life is due to having read and re-read" Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* as a youth. **2** Simón Bolívar, chief architect of Spanish American independence, paid homage to "Baron Humboldt" as "a great man who with his eyes pulled America out of her ignorance and with his pen painted her as beautiful as her own nature."

This chapter and the two that follow are about the ideological reinvention of South America in the first decades of the last century. They adopt a range of perspectives. Here I examine

Alexander von Humboldt's South American writings in their relation to prior paradigms of travel literature and to European ambitions in the region. Chapter 7 takes up the wave of traveler-writers who followed in the 1810s, 1820s, and 1830s when Spanish America opened fully to North European visitors and above all North European capital. There, I foreground a comparison between women and men writers. Chapter 8 considers how South American intellectuals, facing the new republican era and a European investment boom, selected and adapted European perspectives as they sought to create decolonized values and hegemonies. As throughout this book, a chief concern remains the relations between travel writing and processes of European economic expansion. The end of Spanish colonial rule entailed a full-scale renegotiation of relations between Spanish America and Northern Europe—relations of politics and economics, and with equal necessity, relations of representation and imagination. Europe had to reimagine América, and América, Europe. The reinvention of América, then, was a transatlantic process that engaged the energies and imaginations of intellectuals and broad reading publics in both hemispheres, but not necessarily in the same ways. For the elites of Northern Europe, the reinvention is bound up with prospects of vast expansionist possibilities for European capital, technology, commodities, and systems of knowledge. The newly independent elites of Spanish America, on the other hand, faced the necessity for *self*-invention in relation both to Europe and the non-European masses they sought to govern. One can only be fascinated, then, that the writings of Alexander von Humboldt provided founding visions to both groups.

### **A Most Extraordinary and Complicated Situation**

By the time Humboldt and Bonpland set sail from La Coruña, Spanish America's colonial structure had been in open crisis for at least two decades. In another ten years full-fledged revolutionary transformations would take hold, ending in the independence of all continental Spanish America by 1825. Spanish colonial society was culturally complex, intensely hierarchical, and saturated with conflict. European-born Spaniards occupied the top of the social scale and held a monopoly on the greatest political and economic privilege. Below them stood the criollos (creoles), that is, persons born in America and claiming European (or white) ancestry. Below them stood the vast majority of the American populations, grouped according to various non-European ancestries: *indios*, *negros* (free and slave), *mestizos*, *mulatos*, *zambos*, and others **4**—the categories multiplied, signaling degrees of Indian, European, and African ancestry. (Thus did Spain's obsession with *pureza de sangre*, the legacy of its contact with northern Africa, play itself out in the Americas.) The labor of these subordinated majorities, especially enslaved Amerindians and Africans, had produced the wealth of Spain, and indeed of Europe, in the two and a half centuries since the Spanish conquest. When the indigenous peoples of the Andes rose in revolt in the 1780s, their demands included release from an awesome list of burdens imposed by colonial, religious, and creole elites.**5**

Despite their own subordination to the Spaniards, by the end of three centuries Euroamerican creoles had solidly established themselves as landowning, merchant, mining, and bureaucratic

elites with control over enormous resources, including vast amounts of land, the forced labor of thousands of African slaves and indentured Indians, and the power to extract taxes and tribute from everyone below them in the hierarchy. In 1800, for example, in the province of Caracas, where Humboldt and Bonpland began their South American journey, the population comprised nearly half a million people, of whom 25.5 per cent were classified as whites (mainly creoles), 15 per cent enslaved blacks, 8 per cent free blacks, 38.2 per cent *pardos*, who in contemporary parlance would be "coloreds," and 14 per cent Amerindians.<sup>6</sup> Some 4,000 people, around 0.5 per cent of the population, held *all* the usable land, which was worked by a labor pool made up of African slaves, free blacks, mixed-race peons, and poor whites. Home of revolutionary leaders Francisco Miranda, Simón Bolívar, and Andres Bello, Venezuela was to be the crucible of the creole-led independence movement in South America, and it was there that Humboldt and Bonpland spent their first year.

As they easily learned, creole landholders and merchants had long since grown impatient with Spanish political privilege and economic restrictions. On the other hand, many saw Spain as the only power able to keep the subaltern majorities in check. Their fears were well founded. The unexpected power of maroon rebels in Surinam, the tenacity of the Carib Indians in St. Vincent, the huge but unsuccessful Andean Indian uprising in 1781, and the successful slave revolt in Santo Domingo in 1790 had rightly terrified feudal and slaveholding castes everywhere. All these violent dramas were still unfolding when Humboldt and Bonpland turned up (still are unfolding, for that matter). Such precedents, along with revolutionary ideologies from France, the Caribbean, and the United States, were galvanizing the already rebellious subordinated populations, often around educated leaders prepared to press their demands along institutional lines. In 1795 in Venezuela a group of revolted slaves demanded the formation of a republic under "French law," emancipation of slaves, and abolition of some particularly offensive taxes. Two years later, an even more threatening multiracial alliance of workers and small proprietors produced a radical conspiracy with the same program, plus "abolition of Indian tribute, and distribution of land to the Indians." It also called for "harmony between whites, Indians and Coloreds, 'brothers in Christ and equal before God.'" <sup>7</sup>

Such upheavals coincided with a late eighteenth-century effort on Spain's part to reaffirm its grip on its American colonies. Indeed, Spain's sponsorship of Humboldt and Bonpland's travels was part of this effort. As their local internal economies had expanded, the American colonies had become less dependent and less profitable to Spain. Contrary to what stereotypes might suggest, the Spanish crown sought to reassert control by means of a liberal reform movement. Sparked in part by the reports of Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan, who accompanied the La Condamine expedition, Spain began pushing to modernize what it saw as unenlightened colonial social and political structures built on religious dogmatism, local despotism, slavery, and brutal exploitation of indigenous peoples. To many members of the creole elites, Spain began to look less and less like their protector against the rebellious masses; to members of the subordinated majorities, it

began to look less and less like the enemy oppressor. Conservative creoles were infuriated by legislation to guarantee the rights of the subordinated majorities in the colonies, to open schools to the "free colored" population, to correct abuses of slaves, indentured labor, tribute systems, and so on. The mission system was challenged, too, as Spain sought to bring missions into the normal church hierarchy and replace the independent missionaries with priests and a centralized governance. As the colonial conflicts heated up, around the time Humboldt and Bonpland arrived, it was not uncommon to find the exploited majorities siding with the "enlightened" Spanish crown against the creole "liberators." Likewise, some creoles supported independence mainly as a way to secure their class privilege against the liberal challenge from the mother country. Venezuelan planters in 1794 succeeded in forcing the repeal of a new slave law Spain had imposed five years earlier which had clarified the rights of slaves and responsibilities of slave owners. It was, as Simón Bolívar put it in his famous Jamaica letter of 1815, "a most extraordinary and complicated situation."<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in the 1780s, independence-minded creoles of all persuasions had been trekking to London and Paris seeking support against Spain. The governments of Britain and France had refused official alliances with the independence movements, though they made no attempt to conceal their designs on the region. In the commercial sector, on the other hand, contact between North European and Spanish American commercial interests flourished. Spanish protectionism had been legendary, keeping Spanish American ports officially closed to foreign goods, and nearly all foreign people. Contraband had always been common, but by the 1780s the demand for broader commercial relations had made the whole system unenforceable. Many scholars doubt the Spanish American independence movements would have crystallized at all had it not been for the relentless pressure of North European capital. Many also regard expansionist European interests as one of the reasons the movements did so little to change basic socioeconomic structures.

### **The Thirty Volume Voyage**

In part we have Romantic ideology to thank for the towering scale to which the figure of Alexander von Humboldt is drawn in nineteenth-century historiography. More than any other writer discussed in this book, Humboldt existed and exists not as a traveler or a travel writer, but as a Man and a Life, in a way that became possible only in the era of the Individual. Humboldt produced himself as such. Unlike the disciples of Linnaeus or the employees of the African Association, he did not write or travel as a humble instrument of European knowledge-making apparatuses, but as their creator. He was not sent on missions in the name of a paternal schema embodied in an authority figure back home. A person of extraordinary energy, ability, and education, he produced his own journeys and subject matters and spent a lifetime of energy promoting them. Both his travels and his writings have an epic scale which he devoted his life and his fortune to creating. For Humboldt did have a Life in the way only a Fortune can provide. Unlike the Anders Sparrmans or the Mungo Parks, Humboldt was a member of a national elite

possessed of independent wealth with which he mounted and promoted his geographical and literary endeavors. The epic scale of his achievements is due to both his fortune and the tenor of his times, as well as to his own audacious genius and passionate self-realization. In writing about Humboldt, then, one encounters an imperative to refer everything back to the Life and the Man. What follows both acknowledges and resists that imperative.

In a paradigm most often associated with Victorian women travelers, what set Alexander von Humboldt in motion was inheritance and a long-awaited orphanhood. **9** He was born in 1769, the same year as Napoleon, and was only 8 when his father died in 1777, after serving for many years in the Prussian court as chamberlain to Frederick II. Alexander and his brother Wilhelm, then 10, were left with their mother, a French Huguenot and a stern Calvinist. Their childhoods were spent in an austere environment devoted entirely to booklearning. They benefited a great deal from the curious but fruitful privilege of growing up at court without belonging to the nobility. Bold intellects, they made a strong impression as young men in Berlin, where they frequented the liberal Jewish salons rather than those of the German aristocracy. Wilhelm became fascinated with language and philosophy, Alexander with the natural sciences, which he studied at the University of Göttingen and at Freiburg's School of Mines. As a student, Alexander became a close friend of Georg Förster, the naturalist who had accompanied Cook on his second voyage, and whose writings had made him famous. The two traveled together in 1790 to England and revolutionary Paris.

His studies completed, Alexander secured himself economically by working as a mining consultant and inspector for the Prussian government, a position that failed to exhaust either his talents or his ambitions, but which did permit him to pursue his scientific interests, begin publishing, and travel within Prussia. He had long since developed the habits that would characterize his life, according to a present-day admirer: "He slept only four hours a day, spent little time in female company, and read a vast number of good books." **10** When his mother died in 1797, Humboldt found himself free at 30 to leave the career of which he had tired and act on his passionate desire to leave Europe—for nearly anywhere at all.

It took a while to get going. Plans for the West Indies fell through; then an invitation to join an English party heading up the Nile was thwarted by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. A chance to join a French expedition round the world arose, then evaporated. Partnered with Bonpland, whom he had met in Paris, Humboldt again made plans for Egypt, hoping to join Napoleon's expedition; again war and Franco-Prussian politics intervened. Stranded in Marseilles with no place to go, the two set out for Spain with the ambitious hope of arranging an American journey. In Madrid, with months of lobbying they won the support of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano de Urquijo, who helped them persuade Charles IV to award them an unprecedented *carte blanche* to travel in Spain's American territories, entirely at Humboldt's expense. It was a diplomatic coup of perhaps even greater moment than La Condamine's in 1735, due in large part to Humboldt's combination

of courtly experience, scientific expertise, and sheer tenacity. Undoubtedly he reminded the King how useful the reports of Antonio de Ulloa and Jorge Juan had proven (especially their confidential findings) in reforming Spanish colonial policy. Perhaps Charles IV hoped Humboldt and Bonpland would help him regain control of his restless colonies. Certainly he was eager to make use of Humboldt's mining expertise, and asked him to report back in particular on mineralogical findings.

The two partners sailed (in a vessel called the *Pizarro*, no less) to Venezuela in 1799. They spent over a year there traveling up and down the Orinoco, across the great plains (the *llanos*), up mountains, down rivers, through jungles, from village to village, hacienda to hacienda, mission to mission, measuring, collecting, experimenting, sketching, writing it all down. On the Orinoco they were able to witness and report in detail on the preparation of curare poison, a subject on which there was great curiosity in Europe. By personally traveling the interior waterway that joins the Orinoco and the Amazon, Humboldt and Bonpland definitively confirmed its existence for European doubters. (Non-doubters had been using it for decades as a mail route.) It was here too that local inhabitants demonstrated to them the wonders of the electric eel. Laden with immense collections of specimens and plants, they moved on to Havana early in 1802, but almost immediately heard that a French expedition round the world was expected to stop in Peru. Hoping to join it, they returned to South America. The *System of Nature* continued to unify the planet: Humboldt and Bonpland decided to travel to Peru by land rather than by sea, in order to pass through Bogotá and share notes with the Linnaean naturalist José Celestino Mutis. They spent two months with him and his collections. **11** Crossing the Cordillera, they arrived in Quito, where they spent another six months. Their stay was marked by the feat which more than any other captured the public imagination in Europe when word of it reached the papers a few months later: the attempt to scale the Andean peak Chimborazo, then believed to be the highest mountain in the world. Dressed in a frock coat and button boots and accompanied by a small party, Humboldt came within 400 meters of the 6,300-meter summit before turning back because of cold and want of oxygen. In late 1802 his expedition reached Lima, already aware that the French rendezvous would not materialize. Instead they sailed for Mexico, where they spent another year, mainly researching in a wealth of Mexican archives, libraries, and botanical gardens never before open to non-Spaniards. They made a brief visit to the United States, where Humboldt was befriended by Thomas Jefferson. In August of 1804 they returned to Paris to a hero's welcome from a public which, off and on, had followed their feats through their letters, and in between, had imagined them both dead.

Like La Condamine, and perhaps following his example, Humboldt set out immediately to capitalize on his travels in the interlocking Parisian worlds of high society, science, and officialdom. Within weeks of his return, he set up a botanical exhibition at the Jardin des Plantes. While Bonpland faded into the background, and eventually disappeared back into the contact zone, **12** Humboldt became a continental celebrity. The hunger for firsthand information on South

America was widespread and intense, and Humboldt had made himself a walking encyclopedia. He gave lectures, organized meetings, wrote letters by the hundred, visited dignitaries, held forth tirelessly (and, for some, tiresomely) in salons. Meanwhile, he set teams of annotators and illustrators to work converting his collections and his notes into books.

Books! Humboldt's authorial ambitions were on the same epic scale as his travels. During the course of his American journey, he had often busied himself sketching out plans for the vast monument of print his voyage would produce. Spanish America, in Northern Europe, was a virtual *carte blanche* which Humboldt seemed determined to fill completely with his writings, drawings, and maps. He took to unprecedented lengths the encyclopedic impulse which in the case of the French expedition to Egypt would produce the twenty-four-volume *Description de l'Égypte*. For one present-day admirer, Humboldt's textual ambitions amounted to "an incredible, almost maniacal addiction to papers, registers and annotations . . . a cultural hypochondria." **13** Nothing could be more distant from the mansized aspirations of the sentimental storytellers than the thirty-volume *Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent in 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803, and 1804*, all published in Paris and in French, and much of it attributed jointly to Humboldt and Bonpland. **14** The print epic began a few months after their return to France, with the *Essay on the Geography of Plants* (1805), and ended in 1834 with the final volumes of the *Survey of Grasses*, the *Geographical and Physical Atlas*, and the *History and Geography of the New Continent*. In all the *Travels* includes sixteen volumes of botany and plant geography, two of zoology, two of astronomical and barometric measurements, seven of geographical and geopolitical description (including the famed *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*), and three of travel narrative per se. An experimenter with form, Humboldt specialized not only in print but graphics as well, at great expense to himself. His visual innovations set new standards for the use of charts, graphs, and tables. In his non-specialized works the engravings of archeological and natural phenomena are still breathtaking.

It was through his non-specialized writings rather than his scientific treatises that Humboldt sought, and won, his broadest impact on the public imaginations of Europe and Euroamerica. Those are the works on which I will be focusing here: first, *Ansichten der Natur* (*Views of Nature*, 1808, revised and expanded in 1826 and 1849), one of Humboldt's favorite works on his American travels and the only one he wrote in German; *Vues des cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes d'Amérique* (*Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of America*), which appeared in two luxuriously illustrated volumes in 1810, followed by an abridged popular edition in 1814; and finally the unfinished *Relation historique* or *Personal Narrative* of his travels, whose three volumes appeared in 1814, 1819, and 1825. **15** These above all were the books that continental and Spanish American reading publics were reading, reviewing, excerpting, and discussing in the 1810s and 1820s. Travel writings in the immediate sense, these non-specialized works are also bold discursive experiments in which, as I will argue, Humboldt sought to reinvent popular imaginings of América, and through América, of the planet

itself. Even as he undertook to recreate South America in connection with its new opening to Northern Europe, Humboldt sought simultaneously to reframe bourgeois subjectivity, heading off its sundering of objectivist and subjectivist strategies, science and sentiment, information and experience.

Along with others of his time, he proposed to Europeans a new kind of planetary consciousness.

Commentators often read Humboldt's American writings in relation to the famous *querelle d'Amérique*—the long and arrogant dispute among European intellectuals over the relative size, value, and variety of American flora and fauna, in comparison with those of Europe and the other continents. In the second half of the century, Buffon had championed the view that nature was less developed in the Americas than in the rest of the world because the continent was younger. As Antonello Gerbi has shown in his encyclopedic *Dispute of the New World* (1955, 1983), the issue was hotly debated, and every thinker of the period seems to have found it necessary to take a position. **16** Though he does not discuss the debate itself at any length in his popular works, Humboldt's celebration of American nature is an engagement with it, largely aimed at revindicating the "New Continent." However, Humboldt by no means saw his work as grounded in the debate or subsumed by it. Gerbi sees his position in the dispute as "anomalous" and "somewhat marginal," exercising only a "belated and lateral influence." **17** In the discussion below, I have found it most useful to treat Humboldt's writings and the *querelle d'Amérique* as intersecting phenomena shaped by shared European preoccupations and anxieties with respect to the Americas.

### **Wild and Gigantic Nature**

As the titles of his writings suggest, Alexander von Humboldt reinvented South America first and foremost as nature. Not the accessible, collectible, recognizable, categorizable nature of the Linnaeans, however, but a dramatic, extraordinary nature, a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding. Not a nature that sits waiting to be known and possessed, but a nature in motion, powered by life forces many of which are invisible to the human eye; a nature that dwarfs humans, commands their being, arouses their passions, defies their powers of perception. No wonder portraits so often depict Humboldt engulfed and miniaturized either by nature or by his own library describing it.

So engulfed and miniaturized was the human in Humboldt's cosmic conception that narrative ceased to be a viable mode of representation for him. He deliberately avoided it. His first non-specialized writings on the Americas took the form of descriptive and analytical essays prepared as lectures. *Views of Nature*, which first appeared in 1808 in German as *Ansichten der Natur* and in French as *Tableaux de la nature*, began as a series of widely acclaimed public lectures given in Berlin in 1806. It was followed by the lavishly illustrated *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of America* in 1810. The "view" or tableau was the form

Humboldt chose for his experiments in what he called "the esthetic mode of treating subjects of natural history." His were innovative attempts to correct what he saw as the failings of travel writing in his time: on the one hand, a trivializing preoccupation with what he called "the merely personal," and, on the other, an accumulation of scientific detail that was spiritually and esthetically deadening. Humboldt's solution in his *Views* was to fuse the specificity of science with the esthetics of the sublime. The vividness of esthetic description, he was convinced, would be complemented and intensified by science's revelations of the "occult forces" that made Nature work. The result, in the words of one literary historian, "introduced into German literature an entirely new type of nature discourse." **18**

Humboldt's discursive experimentation is well illustrated by the famous opening essay in *Views of Nature*, titled "On Steppes and Deserts." It departs, as many of the *Views* do, from the perspective of a hypothetical traveler, the vestige of a narrative persona. In this instance, the abstract (yet thoroughly European, and male) persona turns his eyes away from the cultivated coastal zone of Venezuela toward the *llanos* or great plains of the interior. In the following excerpt, notice the interweaving of visual and emotive language with classificatory and technical language, and the deliberate orchestration of the reader's response:

At the foot of the lofty granitic range which, in the early ages of our planet, resisted the irruption of the waters on the formation of the Caribbean Gulf, extends a vast and boundless plain. When the traveller turns from the Alpine valleys of Caracas, and the island-studded lake of Tacarigua, whose waters reflect the forms of the neighboring bananas,—when he leaves the fields verdant with the light and tender green of the Tahitian sugar cane, or the somber shade of the cacao groves,—his eye rests in the south on Steppes, whose seeming elevations disappear in the distant horizon.

From the rich luxuriance of organic life the astonished traveller suddenly finds himself on the drear margin of a treeless waste. **19**

Having produced his reader's desolation, Humboldt sets about alleviating it, filling the wasteland ("stretched before us, like the naked stony crust of some desolate planet") with dense and powerful meaning. Displaying his own brand of planetary consciousness, he compares the Venezuelan *llanos* to the heaths of Northern Europe, the interior plains of Africa, the steppes of central Asia. Pages of analytical, often statistical, description ensue, but in a language that is also filled with drama, struggle, and a certain sensuality. In the following rather lengthy excerpt, for instance, Humboldt undertakes to explain why South America is less hot and dry than lands at similar latitudes elsewhere. The passage is not narrative; not a single animate being appears. Yet the prose is so action-packed as to promote exhaustion. Readers should imagine it being delivered as a lecture (my italics):

The narrowness of this extensively indented continent in the northern part of the tropics, where the fluid basis on which the atmosphere rests, occasions the ascent of a less warm current of air; its *wide* extensions towards both the *icy* poles; a *broad* ocean *swept* by cool tropical winds; the flatness of the eastern shores; currents of cold sea-water from the antarctic region, which, at first following a direction from south-west to north-east, *strike* the coast of Chili below the parallel of 35° south lat., and *advance* as far north on the coasts of Peru as Cape Parina, where they *suddenly diverge* toward the west; the numerous mountains *abounding* in springs, whose snow-crowned summits *soar* above the strata of clouds, and cause the *descent* of currents of air down their declivities; the *abundance* of rivers of *enormous* breadth, which after many windings invariably seek the *most distant* coast; Steppes, *devoid* of sand, and therefore less readily acquiring heat; *impenetrable* forests, which, protecting the earth from the sun's rays, or radiating heat from the surface of their leaves, cover the *richly-watered* plains of the Equator and *exhale* into the interior of the country, *most remote* from mountains and the Ocean, *prodigious* quantities of moisture, partly absorbed and partly generated. . . . On these *alone* depend the *luxuriance* and *exuberant* vegetation and that *richness* of foliage which are so peculiarly characteristic of the New Continent. 20

Here is a prose that fatigues not by flatness or tedium, as the Linnaeans sometimes did, but by a dramatic and arhythmic ebb and flow that would have been intensified by oral delivery. An "ascent" of "less warm" air flashes to "wide extensions" at "icy poles"; a "broad ocean" to a continent's "flat shores"; cold water, like an unwelcome invader of the tropics, strikes, advances, suddenly turns; mountains abound, soar; rivers are enormous, abundant, aggressively seeking coasts; forests are impenetrable, and humming with invisible activity as they protect, radiate, cover, exhale, absorb, generate. One thinks of a camera that is continually both moving and shifting focus—except that the visual actually plays almost no role in the description. Humboldt invokes here not a system of nature anchored in the visible, but an endless expansion and contraction of invisible forces. In this respect his discourse contrasts markedly with that of his Linnaean predecessors. Humboldt drew the contrast himself in a letter written the night before he left on his American journey. While he would be collecting plants and fossils and making astronomical observations, he wrote a friend in Salzburg, "none of that is the main purpose of my expedition. My eyes will always be directed to the combination of forces, to the influence of the inanimate creation on the animate world of animals and plants, to t his harmony." 21 Certainly Humboldt was looking for what he found in the new continent, and found what he was looking for. His goal as a scientist became his goal as a writer. In the preface to *Views of Nature* he declares his aim is to reproduce "the enjoyment which a sensitive mind receives from the immediate contemplation of nature . . . heightened by an insight into the connection of the occult forces." Without such insight, "the wonderful luxuriance of nature" reduces simply to "an accumulation of separate images," lacking "the harmony and effect of a picture." 22

As all his commentators have noted, Humboldt's emphasis on harmonies and occult forces aligns

him with the spiritualist esthetics of Romanticism. It also aligns him with industrialism and the machine age, however, and with the developments in the sciences that were producing and being produced by that age. (Indeed, there was perhaps no clearer intersection of "inanimate creation" and "the animate world of plants and animals" than the mining industry in which Humboldt had worked for many years and which was one of Europe's main objects of interest in the Americas.) Other writers have discussed Humboldt's work in relation to European scientific debates of his time. I am approaching his writings from an entirely different angle, looking at their ideological dimensions and their relations to the literature of travel.

In contrast with the ego-centered sentimental narratives discussed in chapters 4 and 5, many of which he had certainly read, Humboldt sought to pry affect away from autobiography and narcissism and fuse it with science. His goal, he says in the preface to *Views of Nature*, is to reproduce in the reader "Nature's ancient communion with the spiritual life of man." The equatorial world is a privileged site for such an exercise: "Nowhere," says Humboldt, "does she [Nature] more deeply impress us with a sense of her greatness, nowhere does she speak to us more forcibly."<sup>23</sup>

Though sharing the basic structure of the scientific anti-conquest, then, Humboldt's brand of planetary consciousness makes claims for science and for "Man" considerably more grandiose than those of the plant classifiers who preceded him. Compared with the humble, discipular herborizer, Humboldt assumes a godlike, omniscient stance over both the planet and his reader. For of course it is most immediately he rather than Nature who undertakes to "impress," to "speak to us forcibly." Virtuoso-like, he plays on elaborate sensibilities he presupposed in his audience. The main sensory images above, for example, are unpredictable blasts of cold—the last thing a northerner expects or desires in the imagined torrid zone. (How fitting for that frigid current running up the Pacific to bear Humboldt's name.)

In "On Steppes and Deserts," after the long excursus on global and occult forces quoted above, the hypothetical traveler-seer finally returns to the desolate landscape of the opening paragraphs, and transforms it before his readers' eyes into a scene of movement and vitality:

Scarcely is the surface of the earth moistened before the teeming Steppe becomes covered with *Kyllingiae*, with the many-panicled *Paspalum*, and a variety of grasses. Excited by the power of light, the herbaceous *Mimosa* unfolds its dormant, drooping leaves, hailing, as it were, the rising sun in chorus with the matin song of the birds and the opening flowers of aquatics. Horses and oxen, buoyant with life and enjoyment, roam over and crop the plains. The luxuriant grass hides the beautifully spotted Jaguar, who, lurking in safe concealment, and carefully measuring the extent of the leap, darts, like the Asiatic tiger, with a cat-like bound on his passing prey. <sup>24</sup>

In contrast with strictly scientific writing, the authority of the discourse here plainly does not lie

in a totalizing descriptive project that lives outside the text. Here, the totalizing project lives *in* the text, orchestrated by the infinitely expansive mind and soul of the speaker. What is shared with scientific travel writing, however, is the erasure of the human. The description just quoted presents a landscape imbued with social fantasies—of harmony, industry, liberty, unalienated *joie de vivre*—all projected onto the non-human world. Traces of human history, unidentified, are there: the horse and oxen arrived through a force no less occult than the invading Spanish. But the human inhabitants of the *Ilanos* are absent. The only "person" mentioned in these "melancholy and sacred solitudes" is the hypothetical and invisible European traveler himself.

*Views of Nature* was a very popular book, and one that seems to have mattered a great deal to Humboldt. Long after he abandoned his *Personal Narrative*, he revised and expanded *Views of Nature* twice, in 1826 and again in 1849. He was right to care about it. From Humboldt's *Views of Nature* and its sequel *Views of the Cordilleras*, European and South American reading publics selected the basic repertoire of images that came to signify "South America" during the momentous transition period of 1810–50. Three images in particular, all canonized by Humboldt's *Views*, combined to form the standard metonymic representation of the "new continent": superabundant tropical forests (the Amazon and the Orinoco), snow-capped mountains (the Andean Cordillera and the volcanos of Mexico), and vast interior plains (the Venezuelan *llanos* and the Argentine pampas).<sup>25</sup> Humboldt singled out this canonical triad himself in the last edition of *Views of Nature*, which he introduced as "a series of papers which originated in the presence of the noblest objects of nature—on the Ocean,—in the forests of the Orinoco,—in the savannahs of Venezuela,—and in the solitudes of the Peruvian and Mexican mountains."<sup>26</sup>

In point of fact, it took a highly selective reception of Humboldt's writings to reduce South America to pure nature and the iconic triad of mountain, plain, and jungle. I will be referring below to some of the other ways in which Humboldt wrote and thought about South America, notably archeological and demographic ones. But it was unquestionably the image of primal nature elaborated in his scientific works and his *Views* that became codified in the European imaginary as the new ideology of the "new continent." Why? For one thing, the ideology, like the continent, was precisely not new. Nineteenth-century Europeans *reinvented* America as Nature in part because that is how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans had invented America for themselves in the first place, and for many of the same reasons. Though deeply rooted in eighteenth-century constructions of Nature and Man, Humboldt's seeing-man is also a self-conscious double of the first European inventors of America, Columbus, Vespucci, Raleigh, and the others. They, too, wrote America as a primal world of nature, an unclaimed and timeless space occupied by plants and creatures (some of them human), but not organized by societies and economies; a world whose only history was the one about to begin. Their writings too portrayed American in a discourse of accumulation, abundance, and innocence. Humboldt's rhapsodic invocation of a flourishing primal world echoes such writings as Columbus' famous letter to the

## Spanish monarchs in 1493:

All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by a diversity of scenery; they are filled with a great variety of trees of immense height, and which I believe to retain their foliage in all seasons; for when I saw them they were as verdant and luxuriant, as they usually are in Spain in the month of May. . . . There are besides in the same island of Juana seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which, like all the other trees, herbs, and fruits, considerably surpass ours in height and beauty. The pines also are very handsome, and there are very extensive fields and meadows, a variety of birds, different kinds of honey, and many sorts of metals, but no iron. [27](#)

In Humboldt's writings, Columbus turns up from time to time in person. In *Views of Nature*, for example, the essay on the Cataracts of the Orinoco replays Columbus' famous encounter with the Orinoco River on his third voyage to America. [28](#)

ronically, the edenic edifice of the sixteenth-century chroniclers was erected on the disappointment of what Columbus failed to find: China, the Great Khan, the massive cities, and endless roadways Marco Polo had described. Humboldt always admired Columbus for responding to disillusion by assigning the place an intrinsic esthetic value. While the strategy failed to impress the King and Queen of Spain, it took deep root in the imaginations of their subjects. Three hundred years later that edenic fantasy resurges in Humboldt's renewed first contact. Even the label "New Continent" is revived, as if three centuries of European colonization had never happened or made no difference. What held for Columbus held again for Humboldt: the state of primal nature is brought into being as a state in relation to the prospect of transformative intervention from Europe. Columbus' 1493 letter to the Spanish monarchs (quoted above) was followed by a second proposing not his integration into the edenic world he had found, but a vast project of colonization and enslavement to be presided over by himself. Humboldt had no such aspirations. Yet on the eve of Spanish American independence, and the eve of a capitalist "scramble for America" not unlike the scramble for Africa still to come, Humboldt's *Views* and his viewing stake out a new beginning of history in South America, a new (Northern European) point of origin for a future that starts now, and will rework that "savage terrain." Humboldt's *Views* formulates an aboriginal starting point for a future many of his contemporaries saw as foregone, and in which they passionately believed. The formulation is a peace-loving, utopian one: none of the obstacles to occidental progress appear in the landscape.

The point is not to argue that Humboldt's representations were somehow implausible or lacking in verisimilitude. I do want to argue, however, that they were not inevitable, that their contours were conditioned by a particular historical and ideological juncture, and by particular relations of power and privilege. South America didn't *have* to be invented or reinvented as primal nature. Despite the emphasis on primal nature, in all their explorations, Humboldt and Bonpland never once stepped beyond the boundaries of the Spanish colonial infrastructure—they couldn't, for

they relied entirely on the networks of villages, missions, outposts, haciendas, roadways, and colonial labor systems to sustain themselves and their project, for food, shelter, and the labor pool to guide them and transport their immense equipage. Even the canonical images of interior plains, snow-capped mountains, and dense jungles did not lie outside the history of humankind, or even the history of Euroimperialism. The inhabitants of the Venezuelan *llanos* and the Argentine pampas, however removed from colonial centers, were about to be recruited as soldiers in the wars of independence. The jungle had been penetrated by the colonial mission system, whose influence extended far beyond the microcosmic social orders of its outposts. The Andean Cordillera (Humboldt's "mountain solitudes") was also the living place for most of the inhabitants of Peru, among whom pre-Columbian lifeways and colonial resistance continued to be powerful everyday realities. Historically, it was also the great mother lode of colonial mineral wealth. Humboldt's ecological depiction of Mount Chimborazo (see plate 20) contrasts intriguingly with indigenous Andean representations of another famous peak, the Cerro de Potosi, where the Virgin of Copacabana presided over the biggest silver mine in the world.

### **Humboldt's Personal Narrative**

In the three volumes of Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (1814–25), narrativity itself brings European aspirations to the surface, along with the infrastructure of Spanish American society as Humboldt encountered it. Under public pressure to produce a narrative account of his travels, Humboldt began this work reluctantly, a decade after his return. "Over-coming his repugnance" to personal narrative, he completed three volumes in five years before abandoning the project and destroying the manuscript of the fourth. **29** Initially, at least, the project was well received. "What sympathy does the traveller excite," exults the English translator of the *Personal Narrative*, "while he imprints the first step that leads to civilization and all its boundless blessings, along the trackless desert." Euroexpansionist teleology constitutes the "charm" of the narrative. **30** The following excerpt from the account of a jungle excursion to a reputed gold mine in Venezuela illustrates how the *Personal Narrative* weaves human agency and temporality into the spectacle of nature:

The farmers, with the aid of their slaves, opened a path across the woods to the first fall of the Rio Juagua. . . . When the cornice was so narrow, that we could find no place for our feet, we descended into the torrent, crossed it by fording or on the shoulders of a slave, and climbed to the opposite wall. . . . The farther we advanced, the thicker the vegetation became. In several places the roots of the trees had burst the calcareous rock, by inserting themselves into the clefts that separate the beds. We [*sic*] had some trouble to carry the plants we gathered at every step. The cannas, the heliconias with fine purple flowers, the costuses, and other plants of the family of the amomyms . . . form a striking contrast with the brown colour of the arborescent ferns, the foliage of which is so delicately shaped. The Indians made incisions with their large knives in the trunks of the trees, and fixed our attention on those beautiful red and golden yellow woods, which will one day be sought for by our turners and cabinet makers.**31**

The subject matter remains rapturous nature; the Americans, both masters and slaves, come alive, but only in the immediate service of the Europeans. The one action they are seen to initiate is to point out exploitable resources to the visitors. Indeed the Indians' inviting gesture seems to trigger the relatively rare allusion to a future seen securely in the hands of European ("our") capital and industry. The presence of Americans as instrumental subjects is typical of the *Personal Narrative*. Around the edges of the nature spectacle, one can learn a lot about Spanish American society from this work, but what one learns comes transmitted from within the structure of colonial relations. Americans, be they Spanish missionaries, colonial officials, creole settlers, African slaves, Amerindian servants, or *llanero* peons, appear overwhelmingly in instrumental capacities. Often, as in the passage above, they get subsumed altogether into that ambiguous "we" by which masters include themselves as agents of their servants' work. Humboldt's liberalism, his support for the French and American Revolutions, his vehement, lifelong opposition to slavery are well known. Nevertheless, the *Personal Narrative* naturalizes colonial relations and racial hierarchy, representing Americans, above all, in terms of the quintessential colonial relationship of *disponibilité*.

In the liminal space of the preface to the *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt alludes directly to the Euroexpansionist process which motivates his writing. "If some pages of my book are snatched from oblivion," we read, then

the inhabitant of the banks of the Oroonoko will behold with extasy, that 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. [32](#)

Ecstasy and adornment, cities and fields: the entwined civic and esthetic fantasies are given meaning by corresponding negative visions of "impenetrable forests" and "inundated lands." But who will be this future seer? Will the future cultivators themselves behold with ecstasy (if they are allowed to stop work to behold at all)? Will the forest inhabitants, if they survive, see the fields as adornments? Between Humboldt and his ecstatic future counterpart there lies a chain of events from which Humboldt excludes himself, yet in whose name he writes.

### **Humboldt as Transculturator**

"The Indians," reads the passage from the *Personal Narrative* quoted above, "fixed our attention on those beautiful red and golden yellow woods." On the Orinoco a *corregidor* who "gave us three Indians to go in front and open up a path" proves in conversation to be "a likeable man, cultivated in spirit."[41](#) A few lines later on that very path, a missionary bores Humboldt with anxious monologues on recent slave unrest. Such traces of the everyday interaction between American inhabitants and European visitors suggest the heterogeneous and heteroglossic relationships that produced the Europeans' seeing and knowing. Brought to the surface by

narrativity, the "merely personal," as Humboldt called it, raises a challenging question: What hand did Humboldt's American interlocutors have directly and otherwise, in the European reinvention of their continent? To what extent was Humboldt a transculturator, transporting to Europe knowledges American in origin; producing European knowledges infiltrated by non-European ones? To what extent, within relations of colonial subordination, did Americans inscribe themselves on him, as well as he on América?

Such questions are difficult to answer from within bourgeois, author-centered ways of knowing texts—which is why it is important to ask them, not just of Humboldt but of all travel writing. Every travel account has this heteroglossic dimension; its knowledge comes not just out of a traveler's sensibility and powers of observation, but out of interaction and experience usually directed and managed by "travelees," [42](#) who are working from their own understandings of their world and of what the Europeans are and ought to be doing. For instance, Humboldt prided himself on being the first person to bring guano to Europe as a fertilizer, a "discovery" that eventually led to the guano boom which by the end of the century caused a war between Peru and Chile and brought the latter's economy into total dependence on British bankers. Of course, Humboldt's discovery consisted of coastal Peruvians telling him of the substance and its fertilizing properties. Who knows what their assumptions and expectations were? The conventions of travel and exploration writing (production and reception) constitute the European subject as a self-sufficient, monadic source of knowledge. That configuration virtually guarantees that the interactional history of the representation will turn up only as traces,[43](#) or through the "travelee's" own forms of representation, such as autoethnographic materials of the sort mentioned at points throughout this book.

What have been documented are Humboldt and Bonpland's encounters with Spanish American intellectuals, whom they actively sought out. In sealing off its empire from outsiders, Spain had left the rest of Europe in profound ignorance of American indigenous history, culture, and language, as well as American botany, zoology, and mineralogy. These matters had continued to be studied within the Americas, however. (Is it necessary to repeat that universities in Peru and Mexico date from the sixteenth century?) Humboldt and Bonpland, we are told, went far out of their way to meet American naturalists like Mutis in Bogota; it was Spanish American intellectuals who put them in touch with Inca and Aztec antiquity. To a great extent in his archeological essays, Humboldt was transporting to Europe an American scholarly tradition dating back to the first Spanish missionaries, and sustained by Spanish, mestizo, and indigenous intellectuals. Humboldt's year in Mexico (1803–4) was spent almost entirely in the intellectual and scientific communities of Mexico City, where he studied existing corpuses on natural history, linguistics, and archeology. On his return to Europe, he followed up assiduously on what he had learned, tracking down forgotten Amerindian manuscripts, such as Maya codicils, that since the Habsburgs had been gathering dust in libraries in Paris, Dresden, the Vatican, Vienna, and Berlin.[44](#)

In some sectors of creole culture, then, a glorified American nature and a glorified American antiquity already existed as ideological constructs, sources of Americanist identification and pride fueling the growing sense of separateness from Europe. In a perfect example of the mirror dance of colonial meaning-making, Humboldt transcultured to Europe knowledges produced by Americans in a process of defining themselves as separate from Europe. Following independence, Euroamerican elites would reimport that knowledge *as European knowledge* whose authority would legitimate Euroamerican rule.