



POLITICAL ESSAY  
ON THE ISLAND OF CUBA

*A Critical Edition*

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

*Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette*



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VON HUMBOLDT  
IN ENGLISH

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*A series edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette*

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*Translated by J. Bradford Anderson,*  
*Vera M. Kutzinski, and Anja Becker*

*With Annotations by Tobias Kraft, Anja Becker,*  
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# Inventories and Inventions: Alexander von Humboldt's Cuban Landscapes.

AN INTRODUCTION BY

VERA M. KUTZINSKI AND OTTMAR ETTÉ

The popular images of Alexander von Humboldt are those of a traveling adventurer and a collector of all sorts of scientific data, ranging from a bewildering array of physical measurements to boxes of plant specimens. Humboldt was both a hardened traveler and an enthusiastic collector, but he was also so much more than that: in addition to being a meticulous empirical scientist who pioneered fieldwork as we know it, he was also an imaginative thinker of the first order, and of global proportions. It is for good reason that the venerated Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, in his introduction to the 1930 *Libros Cubanos* edition of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, emphasized that Humboldt's various honorary epithets—Simón Bolívar called him the “re-discoverer of America,” José de la Luz y Caballero the “second discoverer of Cuba”—hardly do him justice. According to Ortiz, Alexander von Humboldt was a “bold inventor” of the island of Cuba and of the Spanish Americas as a whole, someone who recognized both the uniqueness of the western hemisphere and its growing importance to the rest of the world. Scores of natural and social scientists, from ecologists, mineralogists, and geographers to anthropologists, economists, and political scientists, followed in Humboldt's footsteps. Along with not a few politicians, notably Charles IV of Spain, Simón Bolívar, and Thomas Jefferson, they mined Humboldt's writing for his data and built on his scientific insights.

While Humboldt's *opus americanum* has long been an indispensable compendium for historians of science, many aspects of his *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*—which included the initial versions of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*—have long remained underappreciated. It is to these features of Humboldtian writing that we would like to draw special attention here. There are of course Humboldt's unshakable democratic convictions, inspired by the French Revolution, and his incisive, impassioned criticisms of slavery and other forms of colonial exploitation. No less important is his comparative global perspective on politics, economics, and science, along with a discourse on the tropics that revolutionized the ways in which

Europeans thought about the New World. This discourse is as characteristic a part of Humboldt's unorthodox, fragmented travelogues as are his metaphoric combinations of natural and cultural imagery and his use of different media and languages. All these come together in a distinctive narrative voice that has been obscured, either unwittingly or deliberately, in earlier English translations of his writing.

Most remarkably, there is an alertness in Humboldt's writing, an intellectual and emotional energy that springs from the desire for "full impressions" [Gesamteindrücke]. Such impressions, for Humboldt, are the result of assembling myriad minute details into larger pictures—he typically calls them *tableaux*—that would show how everything, absolutely everything, is interrelated. Rendering intelligible the forms and shapes of these interrelations was as important to Humboldt as was his beloved work in the field. Showing how differing and seemingly incompatible relations come together in patterns and networks on both a hemispheric and a global scale lends his work the imaginative dimensions that make him truly an inventor. This imaginative dimension is perhaps the most significant and lasting part of his intellectual legacy.

Invention in this sense pervades Humboldt's writing at all levels, from the thematic to the aesthetic. Humboldt's works are not mere scientific reports; they are also works of art that range across many different genres, notably those of the essay and the travelogue. And because they are works of art, they do what academic science writing typically does not: incorporate multiple perspectives and integrate information from diverse fields of knowledge in sometimes surprising ways to keep readers' minds open, receptive, and attentive to new inputs and ideas. To create such an openness of understanding, which some have erroneously taken as evidence that Humboldt did not know how to write books, is what the Prussian cared about above all else in his work. This aspect of his thinking and writing makes Alexander von Humboldt's influence not just the stuff of history but something that extends well into the future.

### Traveling to the Americas

Alexander von Humboldt's writings on the Americas form a vast corpus. His *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions to the New Continent* encompasses no less than thirty volumes. The *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* is a fairly small but central part of this oeuvre. It occupies a prominent place in Humboldt's writings, because Cuba held a special position in his scientific imagination. Since Cuba was the first major island on which Christopher Columbus had set foot in 1492, Humboldt, the "Columbus of Science," decided to follow the



same route to the Indies. (His mother's maiden name being Colomb, Humboldt's name in Spanish would actually have been Alejandro de Humboldt y Colón.) When Humboldt set sail for the Americas from the Spanish port of La Coruña on June 5, 1799, he intended to go to Cuba first. But his travels rarely unfolded according to his plans. Prior to undertaking the voyage to the New World, for instance, Humboldt and the French botanist and physician Aimé Bonpland, who accompanied him, had hoped to join Nicolas Thomas Baudin's expedition to Australia, which ran into financial difficulties and had to be aborted. Being also unable to visit North Africa because of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, Humboldt decided to go to Spain and organize an expedition to the Americas instead. With the help of Phillip von Forell, Saxony's Ambassador in Madrid, Humboldt achieved the nearly unthinkable for a non-Catholic foreigner at the time. Not only did Charles IV grant the Prussian explorer unrestricted access to Spain's American colonies; he also issued him a Spanish passport, ensuring the full cooperation of the colonial authorities. It probably helped that Humboldt did not need any money from the king. Unlike most other scientific explorers before and even after him, he could finance his own expeditions from a considerable personal inheritance from his mother, freeing him from allegiance to a country's commercial and political interests.

After months of intense preparations and further delays because of the British blockade of La Coruña, Humboldt and Bonpland were finally aboard the frigate *Pizarro*, beginning a journey that would make Humboldt one of the most famous men of his times. Some of his contemporaries regarded him as second in importance only to Napoleon Bonaparte, while others, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, even compared him to Aristotle. Following Columbus's route, Humboldt's transatlantic voyage stopped first in the Canary Islands (June 19–25, 1799). Tenerife, the largest island of the Canaries, was the first non-European island that Humboldt had ever visited. It was there that he learned to describe a place in all its different dimensions: anthropological, botanical, economical, geographical, geological, historical, political, and socio-cultural. The island of Tenerife, where he climbed the first of many volcanoes, became both the theoretical and the practical model that Humboldt would apply elsewhere in his travels. Humboldt had hoped to cross from the Canaries directly to Cuba, the major island of the Caribbean. But an outbreak of "fever" on his ship foiled these plans, and the captain of the *Pizarro* decided instead to divert to Cumaná in today's Venezuela. In Cumaná, Humboldt first became acquainted with the "equinoctial regions," the tropics of which he had dreamed ever since he had developed an interest in plants as a boy. Explorations on the mosquito-infested Orinoco and Casiquiare rivers followed

in short order. The Casiquiare is a natural link between the Amazon and the Orinoco, whose disputed existence Humboldt confirmed. These adventurous sojourns would become the best-known part of his American voyage.

After his return to the Venezuelan coast, Humboldt could at last proceed to the island of Cuba. His first visit to the island lasted from December 19, 1800 to March 15, 1801; though brief, it was very productive. In Havana, Humboldt met many eminent politicians, local scientists, and scholars, who became not only friends but crucial parts of his growing network of informants and collaborators. After a nearly three-month stay on the island of Cuba, Humboldt traveled on to the regions of South America that later became Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. These visits became the basis for his *Tableau physique des Andes*, sketches in which he brought together information about the material and cultural worlds of the Cordilleras. There, Humboldt climbed (or attempted to climb) some of the world's loftiest volcanoes, reaching the highest point anyone had measured up to that time on Chimborazo. From Lima, Peru, Humboldt sailed north to the Ecuadorian port of Guayaquil on the waters that would later be named after him: the Humboldt Current. He continued on to Acapulco in New Spain (now Mexico), where he remained for a year. From Mexico City, he made excursions to many of the colony's different regions and climbed more volcanoes, this time the Jorullo and the Nevado de Toluca. On these excursions, Humboldt also spent much time studying the working conditions of miners, most of whom were descended from the same pre-Columbian peoples whose languages and cultures he researched in the archives of New Spain. This research became the foundation for his *Vues des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* [Views of the Cordilleras and of the monuments of the indigenous peoples of America] and his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*.

Departing New Spain via the port of Veracruz, Humboldt returned to Cuba to retrieve the portion of the botanical collection that he had stored in Havana. During this second stay in Cuba (March 19 to April 29, 1804), he completed his Cuban data gathering, a task for which the social network he had built up during his initial visit proved indispensable. He would maintain this network for years to come, drawing from it valuable information up to and during the time when he was writing the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* in the 1820s.

### Thinking Globally: *Weltbewusstsein*

Alexander von Humboldt prepared for and carried out his scientific voyages—both to the Americas and, later, to Central Asia—in times of world-

wide military and political conflicts. The Seven Years' War had barely ended by the time he was born in 1769, and the U.S. Revolution was not far off. The revolutions in Europe and in the Americas were not just background noise to Humboldt's scientific pursuits; they became a vital part of his political consciousness. His first visit to Paris in 1790, a year after the French Constituent Assembly had adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man, left an indelible impression on the twenty-one-year-old student. Humboldt enthusiastically embraced the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution and would remain true to them for the rest of his life. When the March Revolution broke out in Berlin in 1848, the seventy-eight-year-old Humboldt, wearing the garb of the French *Directoire*, joined the workers, who hailed him as one of them. Humboldt had worn these clothes as a sign of his deeply held democratic convictions ever since his somewhat grudging return to the Prussian court, and to the city of birth, in 1827. At the same time that his political ideas were profoundly influenced by the French Revolution, Humboldt abhorred the violence with which revolutions were fraught. One year after his visit to Paris, the first large-scale slave uprisings erupted on the island of Saint-Domingue. The Haitian Revolution, which would produce the world's first independent black republic in 1804, was one of the most important historical events to reach its final stage while the Prussian explorer was visiting the New World. Humboldt's local contacts apprised him of these events, and he mentions what he calls "the troubles in Saint-Domingue" repeatedly in the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. Even in the mid-1820s, he still warned that the colonial practice of slavery might unleash similar outbreaks of violence elsewhere in the Caribbean and in the United States, appealing to the "restorative forces in any intelligently lead social body . . . with [which] one can eradicate even the most ingrained of evils" (69). Some historians credit him with having foreseen the U.S. Civil War.

Independence revolutions throughout the Spanish colonies followed in the wake of the successful Haitian Revolution. By the time that Humboldt sat down to write about his travels in 1807, the Spanish empire was coming apart at the seams. By the mid-1820s, when he published the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, both New Granada and New Spain had gained their sovereignty, with only Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines remaining under Spanish rule. Given his preference for gradual institutional reform and his dislike for violence, Humboldt would be an unlikely candidate for the position of "father of independence movements" in Spanish America, which some historians have awarded him. He was no more that than he was the figure of the lone heroic scientist. But these political revolutions had a dramatic impact on Humboldt in that they made him rethink political developments on

a global scale. Rather than as isolated events, he saw them as part of a larger fabric of international politics and economics.

Another, more practical, effect of the tumultuous times during which Humboldt lived was that not all of the expeditions he had planned came to fruition. For one, Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign frustrated his plans to travel to North Africa. For another, once Humboldt became known for his critical stances toward colonialism, the British Empire closed its doors, preventing him from visiting India, Tibet, and other British colonies in Asia. But Humboldt's studies of Egyptian and Near Eastern cultures, and of Arabic, Persian, and other languages, still enabled him to develop comparative concepts and approaches in his work, highlighting an area's distinctive characteristics by embedding it within a worldwide network of information, dependencies, exchanges, and correspondences. Humboldt's transareal ideas come into view with particular clarity in his comparisons of ideas of time in the radically different cultures of the pre-Columbian Americas, China, Japan, Tartary, India, Greek and Roman Antiquity, Judaism, and of the Catholic Middle Ages in *Views of the Cordilleras*. Always at the core of Humboldt's studies was a profound sense of cultural relativity and relatedness. Acutely aware of processes of globalization in his own time, Humboldt understood those processes in relation to what one might call the first period of accelerated globalization, during which Iberian imperial expansion reached its first peak with the expeditions by Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Ferdinand Magellan. In his *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent* [Critical examination of the historical development of the geographical knowledge of the New World], he singled out the period between 1492 and 1498 as decisive for world history, arguing that these six years determined how political and economic power was to be distributed across the surface of the globe.

For Humboldt, slavery and the slave trade were undeniable consequences of the two different stages of globalization. In the process of invigorating commerce between Europe and the American territories, Spain and Portugal's early overseas exploits spawned the transatlantic slave trade. Humboldt saw both the positive and the negative effects of the trade triangle between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, which, before long, came to involve Britain and other European countries. Whereas in New Spain Humboldt had focused on indigenous miners, in Cuba his keen critical eye was trained on the deplorable conditions of rural and urban slaves and of the island's growing free population of color. He criticized the slave trade as "barbaric" and "unreasonable" and slavery as "possibly the greatest evil ever to have afflicted humanity" (118 and 144). That he thought slavery wrong both in moral and in economic terms is a clear sign of what he called *Weltbewusstsein* [world

consciousness]—a combination of humanistic principles and scientific insight. In the same way that he tied the “happiness” of New Spain’s white population to that of the marginalized and exploited natives, the “indios,” Humboldt saw the fate and fortunes of Cuba’s Spanish and Creole elites as inextricably bound to that of the enslaved Africans and their progeny. Humboldt recognized that, in the end, all larger geopolitical developments in the Americas would depend crucially on how, and how equitably, these diverse populations would be able to live together in the future.

### Revolutionizing Discourses

While Humboldt’s political philosophy was no doubt a product of Enlightenment thought, his views of the Americas as a natural and cultural space radically diverged from the dominant discourse about the New World as inferior to Europe. Similarly, Humboldt’s view of the Americas reflects an early understanding of science not as an exclusively European project but as a globalized practice. His awareness not just of the work of other scientists but of scientists in the Americas, on whose research he relied heavily, is in evidence throughout his writing, in which the tropics occupy center stage.

The tropics, which Humboldt called his “real element,” were at the core of all of his scientific investigations and emotional investments. His person and his image would remain forever connected with what he also calls the “Torrid Zone” or the “equinoctial region,” which was, for him, the very heart of America. As a young man, Humboldt was very conscious of the fact that, shortly before his birth, the so-called Berlin Debate on the New World had reached its first culmination point after the publication of the initial volume of Cornelius de Pauw’s *Réflexions philosophiques sur les Américains* [Philosophical reflections about the Americans] in 1768. Taking the work of the Count of Buffon a step further, De Pauw categorically separated the Old World from the New, characterizing America as weak, immature, and incapable of independent progress. In this schema, the Europeans were humanity’s true, and indeed only, representatives. Other thinkers, notably Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and, later, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel sided with de Pauw, setting off a heated worldwide controversy. Humboldt was vehemently opposed to De Pauw’s ideas and launched a bitter polemic against all those “schematic thinkers” who had never even set foot in the Americas.

Around 1800, Humboldt proposed a paradigm shift in the empirical foundations of knowledge: “the happy revolution,” as he called it in his introduction to *Views of the Cordilleras*. In keeping with this “happy revolution,” Humboldt himself began to articulate a new discourse on the New World.

Only five weeks after his departure from Spain, in a letter dated July 16, 1799, he wrote to his brother Wilhelm von Humboldt about his first impressions of the tropics.

What trees! Coco palms, 50 to 60 feet high! Poinciana pulcherrima, with foot-tall bushes of the most magnificent bright-red blossoms; Pisange, and a cluster of trees with huge leaves and aromatic blossoms the size of a hand, of which we know nothing. Just think that the land is so little known that a new genus (s. *Cavanilles iconus*, tom. 4) which Mutis publicized only two years ago, is a 60-feet tall tree with a broad canopy. We were so happy that we already found this splendid plant (with its inch-long stamens) yesterday. How numerous may be the smaller plants, which are not visible to the observer's eye? And what colors the birds have, and the fish, even the crabs (sky-blue and yellow)! We run around like fools; in the first three days, we could not categorize anything because we would always toss aside one object in order to pick up another. Bonpland assures me that he will lose his mind if the wonders do not soon cease. But even more beautiful than these individual marvels is the impression of the entirety of the potent, profuse, and yet also so light, uplifting, mild nature of the plants. I feel that I will be very happy here and that the impressions around me will continue to lift my spirits frequently. (Humboldt, *Briefe aus Amerika 1799–1804*, ed. Ulrike Moheit [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993, 42])

No other passage from Humboldt's letters from the Americas renders his discourse on the tropics quite so explicit. From the very start of his visit to the New World, Humboldt combines his representations of directly experienced knowledge with scientific discourses, especially in the areas of botany and zoology. At the same time, his lines express both *motion* and *emotion*, the aesthetic equivalent of his elation at the deeply pleasurable flood of sensual impressions. Even decades later, in the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, Humboldt had lost none of his enthusiasm for the "organic vigor typical of the Torrid Zone" (26).

The discourses of Buffon, de Pauw, and Raynal emphasized America's weakness and decay. Humboldt's own writing revolutionized these images of the New World by offering depictions of the tropics that focused on the size and abundance of the plant life, its striking colors, and the multitude of mysteries that the landscape still held. Everything in the tropics seemed to await discovery and study. In his letter, botanical classifications and detailed measurement alternate with expressions of sheer rapture. Language can barely express the intensity and profusion of sensual impressions. Even the brief references to the scientific publications by José Celestino Mutis and Anto-

nio José Cavanilles are pulled into a veritable maelstrom of colors, forms, and smells, which draws everything into the realm of the marvelous. Here, Humboldt writes himself into the tradition of *lo maravilloso*, in which nature impresses and stirs humans through its marvels. In the Americas, this tradition began in the late fifteenth century with the accounts of the first Spanish conquerors and chroniclers. One can still sense in Humboldt's writing the adventure of discovery, much as one can, a century and a half later, in Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* and, in fictionalized form, in Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Lost Steps*.

Humboldt's letter from the American tropics is like a letter from paradise. Its pervasive language of excitement and "happiness" leaves no doubt that the tropics are as much a mixture of Eden and El Dorado for Alexander von Humboldt as they once were for Sir Walter Raleigh. It is no coincidence that the *Atlas physique et géographique des régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* [Geographical and physical Atlas of the equinoctial regions of the New Continent] from 1814 includes many cartographic representations of El Dorado, the legendary city of gold that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explorers believed to be situated near the Lago Manoa (or Lago Parime) in parts of the Amazon jungle that today are part of Brazil.

### Moving Parts: Humboldt's Travelogue

During the early years of European conquest and colonialism, Cuba, as part of the Spanish Caribbean, quickly emerged as a global space because of its geostrategic value. Already Juan de la Cosa, in his beautiful world map—*Mapamundi*—from 1500, which is the centerpiece of Humboldt *Atlas*, had recognized Cuba's importance on this count. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Humboldt saw Cuba as even more of a global island. By then, the destruction of most of Saint-Domingue's sugar mills during the Haitian Revolution had propelled Cuba onto the international economic stage as the world's foremost sugar producer and thus as a major trade partner both of Europe and of other countries in the hemisphere, notably the United States. Humboldt recalls these aspects of Cuba in the metaphors that frame his account of sailing into the harbor of Havana.

Havana's appearance from the entrance of the port is one of the most pleasing and picturesque on the coastline of tropical America north of the equator. Celebrated by travelers of all nations, this site has neither the luxurious vegetation that lines the banks of the Guayaquil, nor the wild majesty of Rio de Janeiro's rocky shoreline, two ports in the southern hemisphere. But it has

the grace that, in our climates, adorns scenes of cultivated nature, blending the majesty of vegetal forms with an organic vigor typical of the Torrid Zone. In this mixture of gentle impressions, the European forgets the dangers that threaten him at the heart of the Antilles' populous cities. He tries to take in the diverse elements of a vast landscape: the fortified castles that crown the rocks to the left of the port, which is an interior basin surrounded by villages and farms; the palm trees that grow to a prodigious height; and the city half-hidden behind a forest of masts and sails. (26)

In this picture of giant palm trees and a "forest" of ships' masts, Humboldt intertwines nature and culture, weaving both into the meshes of the net of global political and economic relations that he will spread out before the reader in the pages of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. In the same way that Havana harbor is a microcosm of the whole island, this passage is a microcosm of the entire text.

Where the texture of Humboldt's travel narrative is most condensed, as is the case in this passage, different discourses interrupt and transect each other. Among these discourses are those associated with different academic disciplines, such as nautical astronomy, climatology, cultural history, demography, economics, geology, philology, philosophy, plant geography, statistics, and zoology, to name but a few. In the above lines from the opening of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, these discourses cross each other's paths much like the ships entering and leaving Havana's harbor do. Whenever the travel narrative pauses, the island of Cuba itself comes into view as a dense and dynamic conceptual space. In this space, as in the image of Havana itself, the "diverse elements of a vast landscape" mix and mingle. As Humboldt moves on to describe both the port and the city in more detail, he combines precise scientific observations about the harbor's dimensions with accounts of the deplorable condition of the city streets. More than simply surprising evidence of earlier, ill-fated paving projects (the "beautiful logs of *Cahoba*" that he finds buried in Havana's knee-deep mud) tie the narrative back to the metaphoric "forest of masts"—until sensual impressions intrude. The rancid smell of poorly cured meat interrupts suddenly to introduce another discourse: that of slavery. This meat, called *tasajo*, was a staple in the diet of the African slaves, who are as much part of the city as are its graceful plants and picturesque promenades. Shortly after, we encounter what the smell has already announced: next to the beautiful botanical garden, there is "something else altogether, whose appearance at once aggrieves and appalls: the barracks [barracones] in front of which the pitiable slaves are exposed for sale" (27). The effects of the transatlantic slave trade, which the "forest of masts" also represents, become unexpectedly visible here. The references to Columbus



and Fernando Cortés, which follow in the very next sentence as a seeming non sequitur, add to these impressions and observations the discourse of discovery and conquest. From this far-flung context of global history, the narrative shifts just as abruptly to a detailed botanical *excursus* on palm trees to draw us back to the importance of the tropics.

Unlike traditional travel narratives, then, Humboldt's text does not have a unilinear structure; no simple chronology builds in his long descriptive passages. Instead, Humboldtian writing generates an interplay of scientific details, sensual impressions, and historical accounts. Humboldt's sentences take us back and forth between stasis—the moments when the traveler pauses to reflect—and movement. In this way, spatial history (geography) becomes vectorial history (travel and migration).

Because Humboldt's preferred mode of writing is impersonal, something to which French lends itself much more readily than does English, even the figure of the traveler, which is the centerpiece of typical travelogues, gradually fades away, leaving behind little more than a scanty trail of personal pronouns. This effacement across long stretches of the narrative makes the traveler's reappearance all the more startling. One such reappearance occurs right after Humboldt marks the provisional "end" of his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, when the traveler steps out of the narrative to expound on the explorer's social and political responsibilities. A first-person singular pronoun promptly follows. Humboldt rarely uses the "I," reserving it for utterances that he attributes directly to himself and setting it off from the "we" that also includes Bonpland: "It befits the traveler who witnessed up close the torment and degradation of humanity to bring the laments of the wretched to the ears of those who have the power to allay them. I have observed the conditions and circumstances of blacks in countries where the laws, religion, and national customs tend to soften their lot. Nevertheless, when leaving America, still I harbored the same hatred for slavery with which I had left Europe" (143).

The art of writing, for Humboldt, is always a form of time travel. As this last citation shows, he combines at least three temporal levels in the narrative of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*: first, the times of his two visits to Cuba, in 1801 and 1804; second, the time of the writing itself, the mid-1820s; and third, the level between the two, that is, between 1804 and the 1820s, when he collected additional information through his worldwide network of correspondents and updated earlier versions of his publications. A fourth level would be the time prior to his voyage. "The relationships that I have kept up with America since my return to Europe," Humboldt points out, "have moved me to complete the materials that I had gathered on the region"

(1.8). Writing, for Humboldt, is a process of never-ending adjustments and revisions, in which diverse pasts and presents permeate each other. His writing is restless, projecting events backward into the past and forward into the future; like his mind, his prose is always in motion.

Unlike the classical travelogue, which recounts past events in more or less orderly chronological succession, Humboldt's narrative is both retrospective and prospective at the same time. In this way, the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* can point toward the future horizons of Cuba and of the Americas more broadly. The prospective dimension of his writing is already implicit, in his above statement on slavery, in the notion that slavery is a hateful condition that can and must be remedied. It is quite explicit in his pointed remarks about political nomenclature in the "two Americas":

To avoid fastidious circumlocutions, I continue in this study to designate the countries inhabited by *Spanish-Americans* by the name *Spanish-America*, despite the political changes that the colonies have undergone. I call the *United States*—without adding *north America*—the country of *Anglo-Americans*, although other *United States* have formed in south America. It is awkward to speak of peoples who play such an important role on the world scene, but who lack collective names. The word *American* may no longer be applied exclusively to the citizens of the United States of North America, and it would be desirable if this nomenclature for the independent nations of the New Continent could be fixed in a way that would be at once convenient, consistent, and precise. (209)

Tellingly, Humboldt bases his case for why different names are needed on the fact that, by the 1820s, the United States was no longer the only sovereign nation state in the New World. His own inclusive use of "America" anticipated later disputes, in academia and elsewhere, about the appropriation of the term "America" by the United States of America. Humboldt points to linguistic imprecisions and inconsistencies that have momentous cultural and political consequences for the citizens of the Americas.

That Humboldt calls himself "a historian of America" (142) in no way keeps him from speculating and hypothesizing. His many "reasoned" forecasts throughout the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* are as integral a part of his hemispheric historiography as are his export and population statistics. The note on which he ends the essay suggests that one is, in fact, already contained in the other: "The language of numbers, the only hieroglyphics maintained amidst the signs of thought, does not require interpretation. There is something gravely prophetic in these inventories of the human species: the New World's entire future seems inscribed within them" (323).

Humboldt's somewhat overstated emphasis here on the purported objectivity of statistics—"inventories"—does not, however, detract from the highly subjective and political nature of his vision in this long essay. The many echoes of this prophetic note throughout the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* serve as constant reminders of the openness of the form of the essay, which Humboldt's title already announces. An essay is, after all, an attempted, or provisional, articulation, not a conclusive or even final inscription.

Fragmentation is another key aspect of Humboldtian writing. The *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* is a part of Humboldt's actual travel narrative, the so-called *Relation historique*, or *Personal Narrative*, which began to appear in Paris in 1814 and would not be complete until 1831. This three-volume travelogue covers merely one-third of Humboldt's entire voyage to and in the New World. It goes up to April 1801, that is, just after Humboldt had departed Cuba for the Andes region. Although Humboldt had contemplated a final volume for years, he never actually wrote it, and many of the *Voyage's* missing portions have been reconstructed from his travel diaries. The *Personal Narrative*, then, is effectively a fragment, in which the movement of travel ceases with the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* in volume three. The *Personal Narrative*, in its turn, is a fragment of the thirty volumes of the *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*. The *Voyage*, which itself remains incomplete, was published over the course of more than thirty years (1805 to 1839) by a number of different publishers. Several of them went bankrupt in the process; Humboldt himself almost did as well. In fact, Humboldt rarely ever completed a book. Like the *Relation historique*, the *Examen critique* (1834–38), *Asie Centrale* [Central Asia] (1843), and *Kosmos* (1845–58 and 1862) all remained incomplete, and quite intentionally so. Their incompleteness reflects Humboldt's aversion to narrative closure and his insistence that knowledge and scientific understanding always remain open. He regarded the individual volumes of his writing as parts of a larger work-in-progress—his own work and that of the many scientists with whom he collaborated during his lifetime and others, who would read his work after his death.

### Mapping Cuba

Since Cuba is geographically located at the center of the American hemisphere, it is not surprising that the island was correspondingly central to Alexander von Humboldt's interests and that he would refer back to it throughout his later writings. Cuba occupies a prominent place in the *Examen critique*; it appears in *Kosmos* and even, rather unexpectedly, in *Asie Centrale*. Cuba is no less present in many of the letters Humboldt wrote and received from

the Americas, especially in the continued exchanges with his Cuban hosts, notably with the landholder and statesman Francisco Arango y Parreño and the philosopher Luz y Caballero. Their correspondence continued well after Humboldt's departure and is part of an astonishingly vast corpus of almost one hundred thousand letters, which he wrote and received during his lifetime. Only about eight thousand of these letters have been preserved. This continuing flood of information made Humboldt's portrait of Cuba not just a record of the actual experiences he had had during his visits; nor are his observations and projections in the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* limited to research he himself had conducted in relatively few of the island's locales. While scientific inventories supplied the empirical underpinnings of Humboldt's multifaceted vision of Cuba, his research went far beyond his actual fieldwork, extending to various archives in the Americas, especially in Mexico, and in Europe. From the foundations of this extensive research, a modern image of Cuba emerges in the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*—both from Humboldt's narrative and from his two maps.

Alexander von Humboldt reinvented the island of Cuba through cartography, determining, for the first time, the exact geographical positions of Cuba's towns and cities and charting its coastline with unprecedented precision. By updating and correcting earlier maps, he gave Cuba the shape that it still has on maps today. Although only one map was included with the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* in 1826, Humboldt actually drew two maps of Cuba: the first is dated 1820; the second is a corrected version from 1826. That he printed both in his *Atlas*, a version of which would be reissued in connection with the *Examen critique*, emphasizes once again the importance of ongoing research and revisions to Humboldt's writing and thinking. (We include both maps for the same reason.) Humboldt's cartographic images of Cuba constitute a radical break with earlier maps, such as the atlas that was part of Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and the Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Better known as *The History of the Two Indies*, this colonial encyclopedia from 1772 was a bestseller in its time. Notably, both of Humboldt's maps feature the same close-up inset of the Havana harbor, a visual representation of the very scene with which he opens the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, establishing an immediate dialogue between image and text. The entwinement of two different media recalls the juxtapositions of word and image that Humboldt had used to such striking effect in *Vues des Cordillères*. Now, he employs it to reframe the island of Cuba. The scale and the visual border he selected for these two maps show Cuba as separate from the rest of the Antilles, underscoring the island's importance and distinctiveness. The narrative discursively enhances this effect and projects it into the future.

That Humboldt, in the 1820s, chose for his essay on Cuba a title that parallels the one of his earlier writings on Mexico suggests that he already envisioned Cuba as a future independent nation. At the time that Humboldt drew his maps and published his work on Cuba, Mexico had already gained its political independence. In the decades leading up to and including the Mexican War, Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* came to play a fundamental role in shaping U.S.-Mexican relations. Likewise, for Cuban intellectuals, such as Fernando Ortiz and Vidal Morales y Morales, both Humboldt's maps and the text of his *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* would be key components in the ongoing nation-building process that led up to the Spanish-Cuban-Philippine-American War in 1898 and the Cuban revolution in 1959.

For Humboldt, Cuba was a true microcosm of the New World, a place in which the most diverse peoples had been thrown together into an uneasy coexistence. Most precarious of all were Cuba's race relations, which slavery and racial mixing continued to exacerbate. Many thought an escalation of racial conflict on this "sugar island" virtually inevitable after the Haitian Revolution, and indeed, there were two major slave insurrections in Cuba by the mid-1840s. Both were violently put down. Humboldt's characteristic dislike for such violence shows in the daring projection of an "African Confederation of the Free States of the Antilles," which he posts as a warning to Cuba's all-too-complacent slaveholders:

If the laws in the Antilles and the legal status of people of color do not change for the better soon and if we continue to talk without acting, political supremacy will pass into the hands of those who have the power of labor, the will to emancipate themselves, and the courage to endure long privations. This bloody catastrophe will occur as a necessary result of circumstances without any involvement on the part of Haiti's free blacks, who will not have to abandon the isolation that they have practiced up to this day. Who would dare predict the impact that an *African Confederation of the Free States of the Antilles*, situated between Colombia, North America, and Guatemala, would have on the politics of the New World? (68)

No such confederation came about either in the nineteenth or in the twentieth century, and the Caribbean has continued to be linguistically and politically balkanized even after European colonialism had ended on most islands, on some as late as the 1960s. But attempts at unifying the region, such as the short-lived West Indies Federation (1958–62) and especially the more broadly based Caribbean Community (CARICOM) that succeeded it in 1973, do lend some credence to Humboldt's vision.

The explicit stand against slavery and the slave trade in the *Political Essay*

on the *Island of Cuba* made it arguably the most controversial of Humboldt's publications—arguably because *The Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* had not been received warmly in Spain due to Humboldt's pointed criticisms of colonial abuses and the exploitation of the native populations. But slavery was a far more volatile political topic in Humboldt's day, for the European colonial powers as much as for America's Creole elites, and his arguments and adamant pleas fell largely on deaf ears, at least in Spanish America. The colonial authorities in Havana promptly banned the Spanish translation of Humboldt's text, José de Bustamante's *Ensayo político sobre la Isla de Cuba* from 1827, because of its "dangerous" sentiments, paying little attention to statistically supported analyses that showed how neither slavery nor the slave trade, which continued illegally after 1820, could be justified even on economic grounds.

Barely three decades later, these same sentiments and arguments propelled Humboldt to instant fame in U.S. abolitionist circles. The catalyst for this recognition was a public letter, in which Humboldt complained that one John Sidney Thrasher, in his English translation of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* from 1856, had suppressed "the very portion of my work to which I attach far greater importance than to the arduous labors of determining locations through astronomical observations, experiments with magnetic intensity, or statistical statements."

### Translating Humboldt

Although John Thrasher's *The Island of Cuba* was not the first but, in fact, the third English translation of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*, it has had a disproportionate impact on how Humboldt's writings on Cuba have been received in the English-speaking world since the mid-nineteenth century. The first English version of Humboldt's text had appeared in 1829 as part of Helen Maria Williams's seven-volume *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (her version of the *Relation historique*). The poet Williams lived in Paris at the time and was in close contact with Humboldt, who spoke quite highly of her translation—to the diplomatic and, at times, ironic Humboldt, it was "très jolie" [very nice]. Thomasina Ross's abridged three-volume version of the *Personal Narrative*, which saw print in London in 1852–53, proved far more marketable than Williams's idiosyncratic rendition, but it included only portions of the work on Cuba. Ironically, what has been deemed the most readable English translation of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* was Thrasher's. It was also by far the most unreliable. For one, Thrasher did not know any French and based his

translation on the Spanish edition of Humboldt's text (the one that had been banned in Cuba). For another, he deliberately and systematically distorted the Spanish text to create the impression that Humboldt, like Thrasher himself, supported slavery.

Thrasher, who had spent considerable time in Cuba, favored the island's annexation to the United States as another slave state and would stop at little to promote his cause. Thrasher's attempt at turning public sentiment in the United States in favor of annexationism, a political scheme that would collapse with the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, backfired when Humboldt himself issued a letter of protest only a few months after Thrasher's book had appeared in New York. In this letter, which was first published in the *Berlinische Nachrichten von Staats-und gelehrten Sachen* in Germany and reprinted widely in abolitionist journals from its English version in the *New York Daily Times* (August 12, 1856), Humboldt called Thrasher on his "politically motivated" cannibalization of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. What particularly provoked Humboldt's ire was that Thrasher had excised an entire section, which the Spanish version titled "Esclavos" (slaves) (it has no title in Humboldt's French text). "As an unrelenting advocate for the most unfettered expression of opinion in speech and in writing," Humboldt wrote, "I should never have thought of complaining, even if I were to be harshly attacked on account of my statements; I do, however, think I am entitled to demand that in the Free States of the continent of America, people should be allowed to read what has been permitted to circulate in the Spanish translation from the first year of its appearance." With this remonstrance, Humboldt decisively distanced himself from Thrasher's fraudulent fabrication.

No English translation of the *Political Essay on the Island of Cuba* since 1856 has endeavored to restore Humboldt's full text. In this vacuum, Thrasher's version, which was reprinted in 1966 and in 2001, has continued to supply a gravely skewed image of Alexander von Humboldt for English-speaking readers, especially in the United States. It is of little surprise, then, and highly ironic given Humboldt's recorded feelings and writings on the subject, that postcolonial critics from the English-speaking world have targeted Humboldt as an apologist for European colonialism and even for slavery in the Americas.

The unabridged retranslation in this edition turns over a new leaf. It is a fundamental departure from the image of Humboldt that Thrasher's *The Island of Cuba* created, and that has gone unchallenged for more than 150 years. *Ad fontes*—it is time to read what Alexander von Humboldt really wrote.

## Note on the Text

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The translation in this edition is based upon the full text of the freestanding French edition of Alexander von Humboldt's two-volume *Essai politique sur l'île de Cuba* from 1826, including all footnotes and tables. The numbers in the outer margins of each page refer back to that edition. Prior English and Spanish translations of this text have used its earlier, significantly shorter versions from 1825/26 and have often included others' materials in both the text and the footnotes, making it difficult at times to distinguish between Humboldt's own words and the writings of his translators and commentators. To avoid such confusion, we have placed our own additions and corrections in [square brackets], reserving the use of parentheses entirely for Humboldt himself.

We firmly believe that maintaining the original structure of this intensely nonlinear text keeps the reader engaged more directly and more fully with Humboldt's conceptual and narrative process. Throughout our work, we have retained his paragraphing and have also respected his decision neither to break his narrative into chapters nor to provide a table of contents. In place of a more conventional table of contents, we offer the following inventory of Humboldt's subsections to give readers a preliminary sense of how his narrative moves and what larger topics it covers. We have added several bracketed sections here to identify sections that other translations erroneously turned into chapters.

Surface Area, Territorial Division, Climate 37

Population 66

Agriculture (Sugar, Coffee, Wax, Trade) 95

[Unmarked Section on Slavery] 142

[Unmarked Section on Travels to Trinidad, the Jardines y Jardinillos, etc.]

154

On the Consumption of Sugar in Europe 177

On the Temperature in Different Parts of the Torrid Zone at Sea Level 197



## Supplement 201

## Population and Area

A. Population (Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba and Puerto Rico, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Buenos Aires, United States, Brazil) 211

B. Area (New Spain, Guatemala, Cuba and Puerto Rico, Colombia, Peru, Buenos Aires, Chile, Brazil, United States) 220

## Products 253

## Trade and Public Revenue 263

## Population Overview Considered under the Rubrics of Race, Language, and Religion 309

Because Humboldt typically supplied indexes for his work, even though he did not do so in this case, we felt quite at liberty to create a detailed index of our own to provide readers with additional navigational assistance to a text that has an often baffling amount of very specific information on many topics. Our inventory only suggests them in the broadest of strokes.

Throughout, we have also kept intact Humboldt's seemingly capricious use of capitalization and italics and all words, phrases, and quotations originally written in Spanish and other languages (such as Latin and Italian). We have not corrected occasional math errors in the tables. Only where meanings are not evident from context do we add our own translations of foreign words and phrases in [square brackets]. Humboldt himself rarely converts currencies and other units of measure, illustrating their variety across different parts of the world. We have followed his practice, offering explanations at the beginning of our annotations of currencies and units of measure no longer in use. To avoid encumbering this already densely textured work with endnote numbers, we have used ▼ to signal the presence of one or more annotations, which follow the text of the translation. The annotations are ordered in accordance with the pagination of the original text. To help readers trace at least part of the vast and intricate scientific network that Humboldt created, we provide a briefly annotated bibliography of the sources he acknowledges in this work.

Fold-outs of Humboldt's two Cuba maps accompany this edition to assist the interested reader in locating the many places on that island to which Humboldt refers in this work. The editorial note affords more information about the thinking behind this translation and about the historical and scholarly contexts for *The Political Essay on the Island of Cuba*. Select materials from these contexts can be found at [www.press.uchicago.edu/books/humboldt/](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/humboldt/).

REASONED ANALYSIS OF THE MAP  
OF THE ISLAND OF CUBA

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POLITICAL ESSAY  
ON THE  
ISLAND OF CUBA

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## REASONED ANALYSIS OF THE MAP OF THE ISLAND OF CUBA

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The map that accompanies the Political Essay on the Island of Cuba is part of the *Atlas géographique et physique des régions équinoxiales du Nouveau-Continent* [Geographical and physical Atlas of the equinoctial regions of the New Continent], of which twenty-two plates have already appeared. In this Atlas, as in my *Mexican atlas* [*Atlas géographique et physique sur la Nouvelle-Espagne*], I endeavored to correct our knowledge of America's interior on the basis of results from the astronomical observations I made and largely analyzed<sup>1</sup> during my voyages to the north of Lima and on the Amazon River. I sketched some maps partly in the field and partly after my return to Europe. Others were drawn—based either on my own sketches or on the [geographical] measurements I took—by expert geographers who were kind enough to aid in the publication of my works. In both cases, any errors in the Atlas of equinoctial America are mine alone. I trust that readers, in passing judgment on these attempts at gradually perfecting our knowledge of the Geography of Spanish America, will take into account exactly when each map was published. People will determine whether the author used all materials available to him at the time and of whose existence he was aware, whether he combined them with skill, and whether he enriched them with his own observations.

I.VIII

It is very easy to draw and revise maps in countries that have already been sites of important geodesic work: When the relations between distance and location have been determined precisely through triangulation, there are no longer any variations. The study of America's Geography, however, is far from such a state of perfection that rules out trial and error and careful choices

I.IX

1. See the results of these initial analyses, many copies of which circulate in America. I compared my data to Mr. Oltmanns's conclusive results in the *Recueil d'observations astronomiques et de mesures barométriques* [Collection of astronomical observations and barometric measurements], Vol. I, p. XX, on which I collaborated with this meticulous, humble scholar between 1807 and 1811.

between quite variable data. Most of the coastline (in the north of Cuba, in Chocó, in Guatemala and Mexico from Tehuantepec to San Blas) has not been surveyed with care. Inland, only a few scattered astronomical observations can guide the Geographer. Accuracy increases when these points are sufficiently close together, grouped systematically, and linked by *chronometric lines*. But to avoid the danger of altering mutually dependent coordinates over time, it is indispensable to outline the nature of the data that form the basis for each map. That is how, in my work in south America, the steppes of Venezuela (llanos), the Orinoco, the Casiquiare, and the Río Negro came to form a single *system of coordinates* that is linked by time lines to Cumaná and Caracas, whose positions are based on conclusive astronomical observations.<sup>1</sup> Farther to the west, I connected the Río Magdalena, the Bogotá plateau, Popayán, Pasto, Quito, the Amazon, and Lower Peru in a second *system* from 10° 25' northern latitude to 12° 2' southern latitude. This latter group of coordinates, with Cartagena de Indias on one side and Callao de Lima on the other, has recently been connected to the former grouping by way of a *chronometric line* from west to east. In March of 1824, Mr. Roulin, Mr. Rivero, and Mr. Boussingault extended Bogotá's time zone to the mouth of the Meta River which is situated about 6' to the east of the Indian village Cariben. They discovered the difference between the meridian of the mouth of this river and Bogotá's meridian—0<sup>h</sup> 26' 7"—, while my own observations<sup>2</sup> from April 1800, made on a rock (*Piedra de la Paciencia*) that rises in the midst of the *Boca del Meta* and in Santa Fé de Bogotá from July and September 1801, show a difference in longitude of 0<sup>h</sup> 25' 58". A series of measurements conducted inland connect Cumaná or the Orinoco Delta to the shores of the South Sea near Callao in Peru.

I offer this example, which has a *chronometric line* of 640 leagues and contains many intermediate coordinates determined during conclusive observations, to illustrate how the free governments of America might procure maps of their vast territories quickly and at little cost through astronomical methods. I also mention this example to emphasize the need for carefully analyzing existing work. Without apprising other Geographers of the level of accuracy that one believes one has attained, there is no way to know either how to perfect, through the correction of intermediate points, what has already been mapped or how to draw attention to places that are as yet insufficiently charted. The dissemination of these analyses is indispensable for the advancement of astronomical geography, particularly at a time when dramatic changes

1. Solar eclipses, Jupiter's moons, and lunar distances.

2. *Recueil d'observations astronomiques*, Vol. I, pp. 222[f]; Vol. II, pp. 23[5f].

in our knowledge of coordinates and configurations are resulting in new maps being drawn. If the relationship or the relative dependence of certain numbers of positions were to remain inadequately known, then future changes in knowledge would expose serious errors.

I.XII

For my map of the island of Cuba, I used the astronomical observations of the most experienced Spanish seafarers and observations that I myself had occasion to make to the west of the port of Trinidad, on Cape San Antonio, in Havana, between that city and Batabanó, and in the *Jardines y Jardinitillos* from Punta Matahambre to the Mouth of the Río Guaurabo. My collected data were published in great detail in the *Recueil d'observations astronomiques*, Vol. II, pp. 13-147, 567. On the map of the island of Cuba, first drawn up in 1819 and published in 1820, the port of Batabanó, the Flamenco, Piedras, and Diego Pérez Keys, the port of Trinidad, and Cabo Cruz are situated toward the south, in their true positions. But on this early map, the latitude of the northern coast<sup>1</sup> of the Isle of Pines and the entire configuration of Cuba's southern coast, from Cape San Antonio to the eastern edge of the Cayos [Laberinto] de las Doce Leguas were as erroneous as they were in the otherwise generally praiseworthy maps that the *Depósito hidrográfico de Madrid* had published up to that point. The important corrections of Cuba's southern coastline that the naval Lieutenant *Don Ventura de Barcaiztegui* and the frigate Captain *Don José del Río* made in 1795 and 1804, respectively, were not published until 1821. I adopted their corrections of the coastline between Punta de la Llana and Cape San Antonio, and between the Cabeza del Este de los Jardinitillos and Cabo Cruz (excepting Trinidad's coordinates), in the second edition of my map of the island of Cuba (1826). The middle part—from long. 83° 30' to 86° 20'—between the Cortés Lagoon, the Isle of Pines, and the Bay of Pigs, is copied from a sketch that my learned friend, *Don Felipe Bauzá*, former director of the *Depósito Hidrográfico* in Madrid, kindly drew for me during my stay in London in May of 1825. When he entrusted me with this draft, this tireless member of the *Malaspina* expedition told me that he had merged my determinations with Mr. del Río's plottings, and that he was busy completing a large map of the island of Cuba, on four sheets, for which purpose he was subjecting his materials to renewed scrutiny. Mr. Bauzá's name is enough to ensure the excellent quality of this map.

I.XIII

I.XIV

The history of Cuba's Geography has gone through the same phases as did that of the other Antillean islands and the east coasts of the New Continent. Initially, all points were placed too far to the west. Following what he called *las reglas de la Astronomía* [the rules of Astronomy], Christopher Co-

1. Compare Purdy, *Columbian Navigator*, p. 175.