

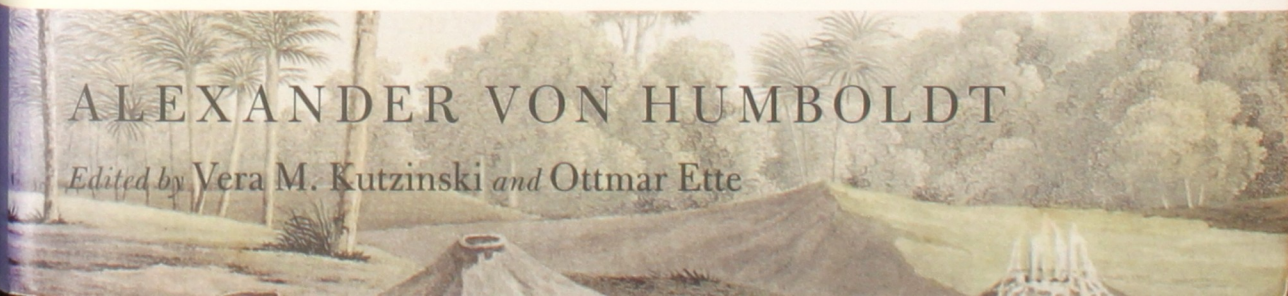


Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of
the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas

A Critical Edition

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

Edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette





ALEXANDER
VON HUMBOLDT
IN ENGLISH

A series edited by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette

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OF THE INDIGENOUS
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by Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette

Translated by J. Ryan Poynter

With Annotations by Giorleny D. Altamirano Rayo
and Tobias Kraft

Vera M. Kutzinski is the Martha Rivers Ingram Professor of English
and professor of comparative literature at Vanderbilt University.
Ottmar Ette is professor of Romance literatures at University of Potsdam, Germany.
J. Ryan Poynter is assistant vice provost for undergraduate academic affairs at New York University.
Giorleny D. Altamirano Rayo is HiE's assistant editor. Tobias Kraft is an instructor in
Romance languages at the University of Potsdam, Germany.

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The Art of Science:
Alexander von Humboldt's Views
of the Cultures of the World

AN INTRODUCTION BY
VERA M. KUTZINSKI AND OTTMAR ETTE

Since the turn of the century, a happy revolution has taken place in our conception of the civilizations of different peoples, and of the factors that either obstruct or encourage progress. We have come to know certain peoples whose customs, institutions, and arts differ as much from those of the Greeks and Romans as the original forms of extinct animals differ from those species that are the focus of descriptive natural history. The Asiatick Society of Calcutta has cast a vivid light on the history of the peoples of Asia. The monuments of Egypt, which are nowadays described with admirable exactitude, have been compared to monuments in the most distant lands, and my study of the indigenous peoples of the Americas appears at a time when we no longer consider as unworthy of our attention anything that diverges from the style that the Greeks bequeathed to us through their inimitable models. (2)

With these remarks in the 1813 introduction to his *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, Alexander von Humboldt took a clear and contentious stand within the centuries-long polemic known as the "Dispute on the New World." This debate began with the so-called discovery and conquest of America and became more pointed during the course of the eighteenth century in the writings of the Comte de Buffon, Cornelius de Pauw, the Abbot Raynal, and many others. Much to Humboldt's chagrin, G. W. F. Hegel's work extended it into the philosophical discussions of the nineteenth century. The New World as portrayed in this dispute was largely a continent without history. It was "new" even in a geological sense, a landmass that had only recently risen from the waters of enormous lowland streams, inhabited by uncultured hordes without a notable past or a real future. Invoking Francisco Javier Clavijero's *History of Mexico* (1780-81), Humboldt advanced in his own *Views of the Cordilleras*, which appeared in seven installments (or *livres*) in Paris between 1810 and 1813, a critical per-

spective on the presumption of inferiority that characterized the discourse on the Americas in the work of authors who advanced seemingly self-evident judgments about the New World without ever having bothered to travel there. The “happy revolution,” as Humboldt called it, changed all that through a pronounced reappraisal of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy in Europe, especially in France. Ironically perhaps, the one who contributed most to this felicitous change in the perception of cultural differences was none other than Alexander von Humboldt himself. In the wake of his and Aimé Bonpland’s five-year travels in the Americas (1799–1804), Humboldt presented to the public his monumental *Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, which appeared between 1805 and 1838 in thirty lavish folio editions and numerous smaller and abridged editions.

Views of the Cordilleras occupies a special place within this immense travel work, which set in motion a vast international machinery of reception and translation (see Editorial Note). The author of many books during the course of his long life (1769–1859), Humboldt chose distinctive forms of writing and presentation for each of his book projects. In *Views of the Cordilleras*, as in his earlier *Views of Nature* (1808), he decided to weave together textual fragments in a way that is best described as a rhizome, a network of roots that we will discuss in some detail later on. But in contrast to *Views of Nature*, which he published in German, Humboldt included in *Views of the Cordilleras*, which he wrote in French, a large number of costly and artistically ambitious *planches* (Plates). *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* became an exceedingly complex ensemble of sixty-nine Plates and sixty-two text fragments.

Before examining the multiple layers of this book, which has never before been printed in English in its entirety, we will show how innovative, indeed revolutionary, Humboldt’s discourse on the Americas really was in projecting both a hemispheric interrelatedness and a new order of the world’s cultures.

A New Discourse on the New World

The title *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* already signals Humboldt’s intent to work against (mis)understanding the New World as a historyless “realm of nature” populated by uncivilized roving hordes. His purpose was to develop an alternative perspective on the interrelations of nature and culture in the Americas, a view, as it were, whose worldwide entanglements would not permit Europeans to define “America” as their Other. *Views of the Cordilleras* opens with an introduction whose arguments take on the eighteenth-century theory of the New World’s

belatedness and inferiority. Adopting a planetary perspective, Humboldt insisted that both the “old” and the “new” world are of the same geological age.

In examining closely the geological makeup of the Americas, in reflecting upon the balance of fluids that are spread across the surface of the earth, one would be hard-pressed to claim that the new continent emerged from the waters at some later point than the old one did. One observes there the same succession of rocky layers as in our hemisphere, and it is likely that the granite, the micaceous schist, or the different gypsum and sandstone formations in the mountains of Peru date from the same periods as their counterparts in the Swiss Alps. The entire globe appears to have experienced the same catastrophes. (5)

To argue that “[t]here is no proof that the existence of humankind is a much more recent phenomenon in the Americas than in other continents,” Humboldt mustered anthropological evidence alongside natural scientific data. On the basis of comparable, albeit different, developments that also included plant and animal life, Humboldt began to foreground his perspective on “the American race” by exploring the first populations, their migrations, and, above all, their cultural traits such as language:

The American race, the least numerous of all races, nevertheless occupies the largest territory on earth. That territory stretches across the two hemispheres, from 68 degrees northern latitude to 55 degrees southern latitude. It is the only one of the races that dwells both on the steaming plains bordering the ocean and on the mountainside, where it reaches heights that exceed that of the Peak of Tenerife [Mount Teide] by 200 toises.

The number of distinct languages among the small indigenous tribes in the new continent appears to be much larger than in Africa, where . . . more than one hundred and forty languages are spoken. . . .

When we consider that several hundred languages exist in a continent with a population smaller than that of France, we must acknowledge the differences between languages that have the same relationships between them as do, if not German and Dutch or Italian and Spanish, then at least Danish and German, Chaldean and Arabic, or Greek and Latin. The further one penetrates into the labyrinth of American languages, the more one senses that although several of them can be grouped into families, a large number remain isolated, like Basque among the European languages and Japanese among the Asiatic ones. . . .

The majority of American languages, including even those belonging to groups as distinctive as the Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic languages, exhibit a certain degree of conformity in their overall structure. . . . The uniform tendency of these languages suggests either a common origin or, at the very

least, an extreme uniformity in the intellectual aptitudes of the American peoples from Greenland to the lands of Magellan. (6-7)

These passages show that Humboldt applied the concept of hemisphere both longitudinally and latitudinally, differentiating the Southern from the Northern Hemisphere and the Old World from the New. In this way, he had the benefit of a dual web of analogies: for one, there is a web of intra-American—what we have come to know as inter-American or “hemispheric”—relations that encompass the entire continent; for another, there is also a web of external relations that enabled Humboldt to connect American phenomena with events and experiences from very different regions of the world without running the risk of homogenizing the wealth of distinct cultural developments. A description of the cultures of the Americas as part of the web of world cultures had to feature fragments and resort to discontinuity, lest it were to end up with nothing more than a universal vision of a great “family of man.” Whenever Humboldt examined local particularities, he always saw them as parts of a network of dual and doubled reference points. In this way, he could address the specific relations within the American hemisphere *and* embed those relations within *transregional* global contexts. In his discussion of possible reasons for the construction of earthen pyramids and hills in the two Americas, for example, he drew on new research by George Macartney in China, since “[a]n established custom in eastern Asia might shed some light on this important question” (388). His comparative analytical design allowed Humboldt to explain the cultural, and especially linguistic, diversity of the Americas as the result of the limiting impact that distinct environmental factors had had on contact among the different cultures. This disconnectedness was still in evidence at the time of Humboldt’s visit. For various geographical and political reasons, the different Spanish viceroalties were barely in touch with each other, being linked mainly through the Spanish metropole. As a result, few actual exchanges occurred among the major cities of the Americas.

While Humboldt’s comparative cultural studies cross regions, his understanding of the cultures themselves still originated in a very specific cultural perspective: the traditions of so-called Western civilization. As our initially cited passage makes clear, Humboldt did cast a net across the cultures of the world, a mesh of maps whose cultural meridian passed through Greek antiquity and its “inimitable models” (2). This occidental orientation—formed by the ideas about Greek antiquity that prevailed in Germany and France at the time—was based on a concept of freedom and of the individual that characterized the universalist ideals of the French Revolution no less

than it did the views of antiquity held during German classicism. But Humboldt saw something different in the great cultures of the early Americas:

By studying on site those Peruvians who have retained their national physiognomy throughout the centuries, one learns to understand the true value of Manco Capac's code of laws and the effects that it produced on customs and public happiness. There was at once general welfare and little private happiness; more resignation to the decrees of the sovereign than love of the fatherland; passive and spineless obedience without courage for daring feats; a sense of order that meticulously regulated even the pettiest actions in one's life; and no reach into the realm of ideas, no elevation in that of character. The most complex political institutions in the history of human society smothered the germ of individual liberty; and the founder of the empire of Cusco, who congratulated himself for his success in forcing people to be happy, reduced the latter to the state of simple machines. Peruvian theocracy was certainly less oppressive than the rule of the Mexica kings. But both contributed to giving to the monuments, worship, and mythology of two mountain peoples the gloomy and somber aspect that so contrasts with the arts and sweet fictions of the peoples of Greece. (11-12)

Ending his introduction on this note put into relief the extent to which Humboldt's new discourse on the New World, its fundamental innovations notwithstanding, remained indebted to the idea of Europe as a cultural and political center. At the same time, however, he quite explicitly thematized this Eurocentrism, always turning it into an occasion for critical self-reflection. As we shall see, doing so was a vital aspect of Humboldt's new way of ordering the cultures of the world.

Provisional Knowledge

The incompleteness of all knowledge and the resulting openness of all processes of knowing characterize Humboldt's concept of science above all else. No other of Humboldt's works demonstrates as memorably and resolutely as *Views of the Cordilleras* does the scientific openness beyond all system thinking and a deep-seated awareness of the provisionality of all knowledge. His European biases notwithstanding, Humboldt understood himself not as a single vanishing point but as representative of a transitional phase within an ever-accelerating historical process that had lost its messianic meanings. Humboldt's new way of ordering scientific discourse was fundamentally based on the observer's ability to perceive patterns of movement among all sorts of different phenomena, be they natural or cultural. This ability, which inevitably extends to his readers, is a function of curiosity, skepticism toward

received ideas, and an inexhaustible willingness to be surprised. When writing about the “Aztec Hieroglyphic Manuscript Preserved in the Vatican Library” (Plate XIII), for instance, Humboldt registers his own astonishment in the form of a series of (rhetorical) questions:

It would be absurd to assume the existence of Egyptian colonies everywhere that we find pyramidal monuments and symbolic paintings; but how can one not be struck by the points of resemblance between the vast tableau of customs, arts, languages, and traditions found today among the most far removed peoples? How can one not draw attention to structural parallels among languages, in style among monuments, and in fiction among cosmogonies, wherever such parallels reveal themselves, even when one is unable to identify the unknown causes of these resemblances, and when no historical phenomenon dates back to the period of contact among the inhabitants of these different climes? (79)

Sentiments of being surprised, intrigued, astounded, and struck in different ways by unexpected parallels and combinations pervade Humboldt’s *Views*. As this passage demonstrates, the parallels he draws do not derive from rash, reductive conclusions based on superficial similarities between cultures, for it is crucial for him to distinguish with care “what is certain from what is merely plausible” (215). Nor was Humboldt so caught up in charting resemblances between the cultures of the world that he lost sight of irreducible differences. His insight into Americans’ participation in planetary history did not tempt him to neglect the different characteristics of the hemisphere and its past inhabitants. “For a European,” Humboldt remarked, “there is nothing more striking about the Aztec, Mexica, or Nahuatl language than the excessive length of the words,” offering as an example “[t]he most astonishing actual compound that I know . . . the word *amatlacuilolitquitcatlaxtlahuilli*” (389). To Humboldt, this marvelous compound word exemplifies “[t]he genius of the American languages,” which is “to convey a large number of ideas in a single word” (244).

Even though the globalization of human history in *Views of the Cordilleras* is inscribed, however ambivalently, with the universalizing gaze of the European traveler, this did not preclude Humboldt from historicizing the position of the observer (his own and that of others before him) by referring to his own temporality (“today,” “nowadays,” etc.) and the limits of his own knowledge. The scientific information he amassed in his wide-ranging interpretation of the Aztec calendar, for example, is not presented as authoritative or finite but, rather, as “everything we know up to now about the division of time among the Mexica” (215). Time and again, Humboldt poses unanswered questions

about “what we so vaguely call the state of civilization” (296), emphasizing that “[w]e cannot presume to be able to resolve these questions with the current state of our knowledge” (209). But he was also clear that an inability as yet to “identify . . . unknown causes” must not translate into an unwillingness to ask and explore questions that are “not unimportant for the philosophical history of humanity” (236).

A Poetics of the Fragment

In aesthetic terms, *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* is Alexander von Humboldt’s most experimental book. Its beauty lies in the very absence of a single ordering principle. The overall arrangement of the plates and the commentaries of unequal length is neither historical nor geographical, neither thematic nor cultural. One might say that the Humboldtian Cosmos as we glimpse it in this book is not a fixed, tidy constellation suffused with an innate order and beauty but a universe that includes vital elements of restlessness and motion—and thus the dimension of chaos—in its own living structure. But chaos does not mean disorder; it refers us to a *different* way of ordering things and mapping the world.

Humboldt variously remarked on the forms of writing that he developed in his books, essays, and letters. His statements show a dual indebtedness to literary and scientific models, both French and German, and an emphasis on writing that is also informed by personal acquaintance with its objects and subject through travel. For Humboldt, “views” were opinions and theories shored up by firsthand experience. Defending the explorer Gemelli Careri against those who did not believe that he had ever left Italy, Humboldt insisted that “Gemelli’s descriptions have that local color that constitutes the main charm of travel narratives, even when they are written by the least enlightened of men, and that only those who have had the advantage of seeing with their own eyes can provide” (257). Significantly, there are also countless references to what one might call the poetics of the Humboldtian fragment. Humboldt’s writing, which aimed at portraying total, or full, impressions, uses fragment in the sense of *modèles réduits* that can be read separately, for each contains all the key components of the work as a whole.

Views of the Cordilleras had initially been intended as a “*Picturesque Atlas*” for the actual travelogue of Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland’s voyage to the Americas, the *Relation historique*, or *Personal Narrative*, which had not yet been published at the time Humboldt crafted *Views*. Unlike the *Relation historique*, which follows the travelers’ itinerary despite countless digressions and detours, *Views* does not have a discernible linear structure. This is ap-

parent even from a cursory glance at the first and last Plates. The book opens with two images of Chalchihutlicue (Nahuatl: she of the jade skirt), the Mexica goddess of flowing waters, and closes with a drawing of the Dragon Tree of Orotava in the Canary Islands, which Humboldt and Bonpland had visited in 1799, at the beginning of their Atlantic crossing. The volume is arranged in such a way that the reader is subjected to a ceaseless jumping back and forth between the individual phases, places, and phenomena of Humboldt and Bonpland's travels, which, in contrast to a traditional travel report, produces an unsteady, erratic, almost nomadic movement. The nonchronological order creates a simultaneity of things observed in different places at different times, and this simultaneity facilitates the links with other observations worldwide. A visual metaphor serves to illustrate this. When describing Cotopaxi (Plate X), "the highest of the volcanoes in the Andes to have erupted in recent memory," Humboldt imaginatively measures its absolute elevation by stacking other volcanoes on top of each other, so that Cotopaxi is "eight hundred meters higher than Vesuvius would be if it were stacked on top of the Peak of Tenerife" (62). Such spatiotemporal overlap and layering, which keeps the discontinuous structure of *Views of the Cordilleras* in the forefront of the reader's mind, does not, however, mean dehistoricization. Perhaps paradoxically, this foregrounded structure leads to a heightened historical (and historiographical) sensibility. By largely freeing himself from the actual time of the voyage, which dominated and still dominates travel literature, Humboldt could make the twin temporalities of human history and planetary history the principal frame for his writing.

Views of the Cordilleras may be read primarily as a geographic engagement with the Mesoamerican objects that Humboldt encountered during his eleven-month stay in New Spain in 1803–4. Humboldt himself concedes at the outset of *Views* that a geographical order would have been "useful"; yet he also claims that "the difficulty of both gathering and finishing a large number of Plates in Italy, Germany, and France made it impossible for me to adhere to his principle," suggesting that "the benefit of variety" (2) would compensate for this seeming lack of order, at least to some extent. Indeed, the incredible material, thematic, geographical, historical, and especially cultural heterogeneity of the images, documents, references, and reflections that Humboldt brought into play in *Views* compels readers to link together in their own minds what at first glance appear to be rather incompatible objects and subjects—incompatible not only because of cultural and generic differences but also because they occupy different geographical and historical spaces. Humboldt himself was well aware of the difficulties this posed to his readers, who were (and still are) very much used to ordering systems that guide the

process of interpretation. As a cue—and a red herring—he offers his readers an inventory of the represented objects, but one from which no single ordering principle can be gleaned, not to mention the fact that seven of the sixty-nine plates are missing from this initial list. That Humboldt himself did not follow this list in assembling his book may turn it into a joke at the expense of readers who expect a reliable roadmap. At the same time, this introductory inventory may also represent a ground zero from which we move to a different order of things.

Art, nature, and science effectively permeate each other in what is no doubt Alexander von Humboldt's formally most daring book project. Instead of settling for either a purely illustrative work—the “Atlas” he had initially planned—or a more conventional travelogue, Humboldt returned in *Views* to the aesthetic principles that had informed his earlier *Geography of Plants* (1807), where he had already begun to explore an *intermedial* approach to science. This method allowed him to mix different media while also interrelating text and image on what might be called a *transmedial* plane. In *Geography of Plants*, Humboldt had used these techniques to make natural phenomena more exciting to the eye. In *Views of the Cordilleras*, he wanted to apply the same method to cultural phenomena. Doing so required an aestheticization of the mountainscapes of the Cordilleras and the cultural artifacts he offered up for contemplation. When describing the “majestic spectacle” of the great Tequendama waterfalls (Plate VI), for example, Humboldt tellingly intertwines sublime awe with scientific precision: “The impression that waterfalls make upon the observer’s soul depends upon the combination of several circumstances: the volume of rushing water must be proportional to the height of the falls, and the surrounding landscape must have a romantic and untamed character” (39). The combination of seemingly unrelated categories of experience is typical of Humboldt’s “tableaux,” a hybrid form of representation, almost like a mixed-genre painting, that seeks to combine scientific information (tables) with visual art (drawings and paintings).

Volcanoes occupy a singular place of interest among the natural spectacles that fascinated Humboldt. His vivid accounts of climbing volcanoes, including some that were (and are) still active, rhythmically punctuate *Views of the Cordilleras*. While this thematic preoccupation gestured toward the passion for mountaineering that swept Europe in the early to mid-nineteenth century, Humboldt also used his mountain-climbing episodes as a formal literary device. Their purpose was to merge the various lines and trajectories of Humboldtian thought, from plant geography (with its different elevations and layers of plant growth) to landscape painting (with its excessively steep cliffs), and from climatology (with its temperature gradients) to the poeticization of

what is now known as Volcano Alley. From where Humboldt and Bonpland were staying in Quito in 1802, “one can observe all at once, and in frightening proximity, the colossal volcano of Cotopaxi, the slender peaks of Iliniza, and the Nevado de Quilindaña. It is one of the most majestic and impressive sites that I have seen in either hemisphere” (66). The presence of Tenerife’s Teide, which Humboldt climbed during his stopover in the Canary Islands, in a work that was ostensibly devoted to the Americas makes good sense. It was, after all, in the Canaries that the young scholar first grasped the complex intersections of nature and culture as he experienced volcanological phenomena in tandem with the aesthetic effects of sublime wonder. The brief description of the Ecuadorian stratovolcano Chimborazo, which occupied a special place in Humboldt’s heart, perhaps because of his failure to reach its summit, encapsulates his aesthetic investment of nature in a suggestive simile: the majestic mountain “appears to the observer like a cloud on the horizon; it stands out from the neighboring peaks; it looms above the entire Andes range just as that majestic dome, Michelangelo’s work of genius, looms above the ancient monuments that surround Capitoline Hill” (127). If Humboldt’s fieldwork inspired scientists such as Charles Darwin and Richard and Robert Schomburgk, his “humble sketches” of the Andean landscape would equally stir the curiosity of “travelers with a passion for art to visit the regions that [he] traversed” (16), notably nineteenth-century painters such as Johann Moritz Rugendas and Frederick Edwin Church.

For Humboldt, volcanoes were at once the epitome of aestheticized nature and key features of a distinct cultural landscape. As the book’s title suggests, natural and cultural phenomena share the same space here. Humboldt’s frequent meditations on the fact that the indigenous peoples had lived and produced different cultural forms at different elevations—on the coast, in the lowlands, and especially in the mountains—weave together aspects of natural and cultural space with natural and cultural scientific knowledge. He notes “a small rock mass on the southwest side [of Cotopaxi], half-hidden under the snow and spiked with points, and which the natives call the *Head of the Inca*,” and comments on its ties to a local legend about an omen of the fall of the Inca Tupac Yupanqui (65). Similarly, he tells us that among the Mexica “a volcano is called a *speaking mountain*,” connecting this metaphor to hieroglyphic images of a bird that, according to a local legend of the great flood, “distributes thirty-three different tongues” to the mute ancestors of humanity. Mexica paintings, Humboldt explains, “depict the latter as a cone with several tongues floating above it because of the underground noise that one sometimes hears in the vicinity of a volcano” (75). The “thin plume of smoke above the crater of Cotopaxi” (66), which Humboldt took the liberty of in-

cluding in his sketch even though he had not actually seen any smoke that day, resonates with both the metaphor and the hieroglyphic image.

The Myth of Western Civilization

Logos and mythos go hand in hand in *Views of the Cordilleras*. Not only was Humboldt aware of the lasting impressions that visual images left; he was also conscious of the enlivening power of narrative. He tested this literary power in examples of indigenous myths as much as in the narrative fragments of a travelogue that did not yet exist at the time; it was slated to appear between November 1814 and April 1831. From his contacts with and research about the American peoples, Humboldt found out about a great number of myths that he liked to recount in his writings. Fiction and imagination thus come to play an essential role in his narratives, ranging from the founding myth of Tenochtitlan, today's Mexico City, to the myth of Bochica in what later became Colombia. Scattered throughout *Views of the Cordilleras*, these narrative fragments supplement philosophical discussions and reports about the individual legs of Humboldt's American journey. They are literary fragments that keep rhythmic time, as it were, in Humboldt's scientific discourse.

As in the myths of the so-called Indians, kinship metaphors play a weighty role in Humboldt's narrative. In his comments on the *Codex Mendoza*, for instance, Humboldt enthusiastically agrees with Nils Gustaf Palin, whose work he had treated more critically elsewhere, "that it is a beautiful and fruitful idea to consider all the peoples of the earth as belonging to the same family, and to identify in the Chinese, Egyptian, Persian, and American symbols examples of a language of signs that is common, as it were, to the entire species, and that is the natural product of the intellectual faculties of humankind" (341). Roland Barthes has shown in his famous *Mythologies* (1957) that such talk about the great "family of man" is but an old Western myth that functions to lay claim to the unity of humankind, even to the very "essence" of what it is to be human, whenever palpable ethnic, social, or cultural differences come into view. Humboldt escapes Barthes's reproach that the whole point of the myth is, in the end, to naturalize complex histories, at least to some extent because Humboldt is concerned precisely with the historicity of cultural differences and with fact-bound analysis. Yet the genealogies in Humboldt's (American) discourse are undeniable traces of Western thought: regardless of his emancipatory goals with respect to the peoples of the Americas, he still placed individual members of this large human family at different points in a developmental spectrum that ranges from barbarism to civilization. In fact, Humboldt used the adjective *barbarous* with quite some frequency in his descriptions of

the peoples of the Americas and of certain cultural practices, notably human sacrifice. Yet he was rather ambivalent about these inherited categories, even as he applied them. From the Dispute on the New World he had certainly learned what terrible effects the West's exclusionary mechanisms could have.

This people, who based their festivals upon the movements of the stars and who engraved their celebrations upon a public monument, had likely reached a higher level of civilization than that accorded to them by [de] Pauw, Raynal, and even Robertson, the most judicious of all the historians of the Americas. These authors regard as barbarous any state of humanity that diverges from the notion of culture that they have established, based on their own systematic ideas. We simply cannot accept such sharp distinctions between barbarous and civilized peoples. (216)

Although Humboldt repeatedly mentions the violence that the Spanish visited upon indigenous populations in the Americas, he did not get caught up in the tradition of the *leyenda negra*, the "black legend" that was replete with sterile condemnations of the atrocities committed during the Spanish conquest. In one of his commentaries on the *Codex Vaticanus anonymous A*, for instance, Humboldt levels characteristically caustic criticisms in a seemingly offhand manner: "[T]his manuscript contains copies of hieroglyphic paintings made after the conquest: here one sees natives hung from trees, holding crosses in their hands; a number of Cortés's soldiers on horseback setting fire to a village; friars who are baptizing unfortunate Indians at the very moment when the latter are put to death by being cast into the water" (237). Humboldt always called attention to the barbarity within civilization itself, notably to the barbaric aspects of so-called Western civilization, in full awareness that presumably gentle and peaceful Christianity got along rather well with colonialism and slavery in his day. He distanced himself from these implications of the civilizational process, adopting a critical attitude toward the myth of Western progress.

An Alternative Library

Thanks to the extensiveness of his American travels, Humboldt can be regarded as one of the few who, at the turn of the nineteenth century, could compare and relate from personal familiarity detailed information about the late-colonial societies in the Americas. The spectrum of his social experience in the Spanish colonial viceroalties of New Spain and New Granada ranged from contacts with native guides and carriers (*cargueros*) in the Andes and

many indigenous groups in the mountains and lowlands of today's Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico to the highest echelons of clergy, scientists, and government administrators. The encounters with colonial leaders, the importance of which he emphasized from the outset and which were facilitated by support from the Spanish crown, gave Humboldt ready access to archives, libraries, and document collections. The roles of educated elites, especially the Indian and Mestizo clerics, intrigued him. The research of the colonies' scientific leaders, who would become major supporters of the independence movements in the Spanish colonies only a few years later, enabled Humboldt to give historical depth to the societal rifts in Spain's former possessions. Always careful not to cover over differences among the very distinct societies and cultures of the Americas, Humboldt did not limit his attention to the genealogies and histories of the rulers but also, significantly, focused on social organization and stratification as reflected in myths and legends. We learn, for instance, that "[t]he Totonac, who had adopted the entire Toltec and Aztec mythology, made a racial distinction between, on the one hand, the deities who demanded bloody worship and, on the other, the goddess of the fields" (117). In this way, a highly nuanced picture of both Mesoamerican and colonial societies emerges in the interstices between narrative and pictorial fragments.

Humboldt's work benefited notably from the advancements in knowledge generated in the colonial capitals and the European metropolises. His tireless travels even after his return from the Americas, which included visits to various archives, museums, and collections across the Old World, gave him an even more extensive knowledge of early American art and culture. "My own travels in the various parts of the Americas and of Europe have given me the advantage of being able to examine a greater number of Mexica manuscripts than could Zoëga, Clavijero, Gama, the Abbé Hervás, Count Rinaldo Carli . . . , and other scholars who, following Boturini, wrote about these monuments of the ancient civilization of the Americas" (88). Throughout his stay in New Spain and New Granada, Humboldt avidly explored vestiges of American cultures in the archives of the viceroyalty, and he published parts of them. As a result, *Views of the Cordilleras* came to include a broad array of sources and documents, among them fragments of different codices. This made Humboldt's book something of an annotated anthology of hieroglyphic paintings, landscape drawings, and other documents, along with often copious citations and references or allusions to the work of others. A stranger to nationalistic urges, Humboldt conceived his writing in dialogue with many other scholars and scientists. He saw himself as part of the international re-

public of letters of his day and participated in the impassioned debates of this (then largely European) community.

With *Views of the Cordilleras*, Humboldt created a complex space that may also be understood as a library. (We have attempted to represent this aspect of his work by including in this edition a detailed bibliography of his sources.) This library placed the protagonists of the Dispute on the New World side by side with references to the latest scientific research about non-European cultures and languages, including work by Johann Christoph Adelung, Jean Joseph-Marie Amiot, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Dominique Denon, Adam Johann von Krusenstern, Charles Marie de La Condamine, Joseph Lafitau, Nils Gustaf Palin, Friedrich Schlegel, Antoine Silvestre de Sacy, Melchisédec Thévenot, Johann Severin Vater, Ennio Quirino Visconti, and William Warburton, among many others. These are joined by copious references to authors from antiquity, such as Apollonius, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Cicero, Eratosthenes, Herodotus, Hesiod, Homer, Origenes, Plato, Pliny, Plutarch, Polybius, Ptolemy, Seneca, Strabo, Suetonius, Virgil, and Vitruvius, not to mention Dante Alighieri, whose writings appear in conjunction with mentions of scientific studies in areas such as anatomy, arithmetic, astronomy, botany, geology, geomorphology, history, linguistics, mineralogy, mathematics, philosophy, and zoology. For the history of the Americas and its conquest by the Spanish, Humboldt resorted to the *relaciones* by conquistadores such as Hernán Cortés, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, and Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada, as well as to the writings of official Spanish chroniclers, missionaries, and travelers, including Father José de Acosta, José Antonio Alzate y Ramírez, Toribio de Benavente, Francisco Clavijero, José Domingo Duquesne, Antonio de León y Gama, Francisco López de Gómara, Andrés de Olmos, Lucas Fernández de Piedrahita, Bernardino de Sahagún, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, and Juan de Torquemada. Of particular importance to Humboldt's own research were the publications and remnants of collections by Lorenzo Boturini Benaducci, an Italian traveler whose gathering of early American materials had been scattered and partly destroyed by the Spanish colonial authorities decades before Humboldt arrived in New Spain.

While Humboldt's new discourse on the New World did not exclude those authors who had traditionally legitimized European views on non-European subjects, *Views of the Cordilleras* specifically, and uniquely, called attention to others whose work either was unknown in Europe at the time or else had been discredited and thus had not entered the debates on the New World. Notable among these are the Mestizos Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca and Cristóbal del Castillo, the Nahua historians Alvarado Tezozomoc and Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, and Alva Ixtlilxochitl and Netzahualcoyotl, a

poet-ruler “as memorable for the culture of his mind as he is for the wisdom of his laws” (393). Humboldt was among the very first to bring to Europeans’ attention a library in which the former historyless objects of Europe’s imperial gaze became subjects whose testimonies and testimonials provided other perspectives on the *conquista* and continue to do so today. Contributing to making the views of the conquered public knowledge was a fundamental part of Humboldt’s intellectual agenda.

A Museum of World Cultures

We have seen that *Views of the Cordilleras* crosses many traditional genres of literary and scientific writing, ranging from travelogue and essay to scientific treatise, (art) historiography, and anthology. Although Humboldtian writing is distinctive, it is, as the recurring vestiges of the travel narrative show, not without precedent. Humboldt’s desired connection of sensual experience with intellectual clarity, of scientific groundwork with aesthetic pleasure, demanded a high degree of artistic shaping.

In addition to being a library, Humboldt’s image-text may be understood as a *collection* composed of many individual pieces at a remove of their original cultural contexts. The Prussian knew about the collection of early American cultural objects that Bernardino de Sahagún had created not long after the conquest in the sixteenth century. He also knew of the work of New Spain’s great collector Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora in the seventeenth century and admired the selfless research and collecting of the already mentioned Boturini during the eighteenth century. He tried to trace these collections in the libraries and archives he visited, and when Antonio de León y Gama’s collection was dissolved, Humboldt was lucky enough to acquire a few pieces that had originally been part of Boturini’s *Museo histórico indiano*, probably the most extensive collection of indigenous art and the foundation for its scientific study. With *Views of the Cordilleras* Humboldt wrote himself into the “American” genealogy of collectors that begins with Sahagún and Sigüenza y Góngora and extends from Boturini to León y Gama and Clavijero. But Humboldt modified this traditional line of descent in that he, unlike Clavijero, who had been expelled from New Spain for being a Jesuit, was concerned not with historical narrative but with the idea of a museum in which each exhibit could be viewed at once from many different angles and independently of the others. Rather than placing the cultures of the world in separate spaces, Humboldt brings them together in the space of a museum, combining European landscape painting of non-European nature scenes with Aztec pictograms.

The exhibits in this imaginary museum are based on the multifaceted

interplay of image-text and text-image in which the actual plates are never merely illustrations that accompany the text. Image and writing come together in a scientific-artistic hybrid. If one tries to separate them, as happened in the first German translation of this book (see Editorial Note), much is lost. *Views of the Cordilleras* demands active readers who are willing to explore all sorts of the corridors and directions. The visitors to Humboldt's virtual museum have many different choices: they may follow the examples of European landscape painting (based largely on Humboldt's own sketches) or sample the Mexica hieroglyphs; alternatively, they may prefer either the research on the different calendars and monuments—what Visconti called “an entirely new branch of archaeology” (372)—or the descriptions of amazing natural phenomena, such as volcanoes. As in the physical space of a museum, there are many possible relations among the individual exhibits, depending on the order in which they are viewed. Even though the number of exhibits is finite, the number of possible relations among them, and with the visitors, is nearly infinite.

The space of Humboldt's multilayered image-text, however, is best imagined not as that of an actual museum, which is static, but as a dynamic hypertext that continuously repositions the user. Humboldt's open arrangement of knowledge in *Views of the Cordilleras* uncannily anticipates today's interactive hypermedia. Nothing is really closed off in such a structure. As in the space we now call the Internet, visitors to Humboldt's virtual space can choose their interpretive pathways as they stroll (or scroll) freely. This virtual museum-in-a-book has the same advantage that we hope the Internet does: it cannot be dismantled and scattered by any colonial power.

Globalization and World-Openness

Terms such as *world trade*, *world communication*, and *world history* were key for Humboldt. In *Cosmos* he would add the neologism *Weltbewußtsein*, world consciousness. Even though Humboldt's cosmopolitanism has a deeply European imprint, it invites and depends on dialogues with non-European cultures. His objective was not what we now know as regional or area studies research but an understanding of global cultural phenomena that would take in the interrelations, homologies, and parallels among far-flung cultures. He regarded the development of the cultures that had first flourished in the Americas as being as much part of the order of the world's cultures as were the advances of the Egyptians, Etruscans, Indians, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans.

An important facet of Humboldt's global vision was also to bring the cultures marginalized as non-Western into conversation with each other. In his