

## Geographical Discourse and Alexander Von Humboldt

In his Translator's Preface to Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011), Robert Tally confirms that *geocriticism* has no definitive definition. Westphal's essay, says Tally, "surveys a territory, speculates about others, suggests possible paths to take, and argues in favor of certain practices and against others, all while peregrinating around multiple discourses of space, place, and literature" (xi). Such a riverine approach is quite amenable to the comparative literary analysis I undertake in this book, which covers multiple centuries, nation-states, and languages, all while pointing to a common denominator: Baron Alexander von Humboldt. The German geographer, naturalist, and quintessential Renaissance man is the pivot point of this study and the subject of this chapter.

Ottmar Ette (2002)—editor and translator of numerous new German and English editions of Humboldt's works—has shown that Humboldt's observations on fluvial networks point to a new paradigm for modernity, wherein river structures anchor theories of science and taxonomy, of organizing disciplinary knowledge in ways that prefigure Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome and non-hierarchical networks (*Weltbewußtsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne* by Ottmar Ette). In something of a meta-act prompted by the immediate similarities between the geocritical impulse and Humboldt's all-encompassing, holistic entry into knowledge production, I would like to repurpose this organizational method for my analysis of Humboldt, which functions better as a non-linear narrative with

tributaries that feed into this chapter's primary goal: to identify the key Humboldtian literary and geographical underpinnings that reappear again and again in Latin America's national narratives. I focus on how Humboldt's understanding of geography is informed by a more humanistic, yet decidedly political, variant of the discipline that hearkens back to late antiquity, to Strabo and the Greeks. To account for the ambiguities inherent in any palimpsestic knowledge formation that relies on layers of information updated with new technologies and epistemologies—as are the geographical sciences, in particular cartography—Humboldt looks to aesthetics, and especially to Goethe and the Romantics. Despite his most vehement belief in empirical data, Humboldt's corpus reveals a sort of philosophical speculation that nourishes the alignment between geography, literature, and politics; this marriage finds expression in what I call *geographical discourse*, the aestheticized practice of writing the earth that appears on both sides of the Atlantic.

Drawing on Strabo, Humboldt maintains throughout his writings that narrating the earth's contours cannot but be a political act. After all, only through a series of discursive acts in service of discovery, division, and dispossession does empire create spaces of exception. Cogently capturing the ways in which geography and empire coalesce as Portugal and Spain vie for negligible bits and pieces of New World territory, Humboldt sheds light on the ripple effect of their strife. Bureaucratic infighting for all parties (*peninsulares*, *criollos*, and their indigenous subjects alike) is, of course, one consequence, but their rivalry reflects—and, simultaneously, shapes—increased investment in geographical practices. History and geography thus blend in his works, tying together a conceptual space with a narrated place that makes Latin America materialize out of the land and into universal history. Yet what leads Humboldt to such an imaginary, to a methodology where, borrowing from Westphal, “[s]pace and the world in which it unfolds are the fruits of a symbolic system, of a speculative movement, which is also a glimmer of the beyond, and (let us venture the word) of the *imaginary*” (1)? “This imaginary,” Westphal continues, “is not entirely cut off from reality” (1).

In this chapter, I unpack Alexander von Humboldt's symbolic system to better understand the ways in which it signals “a glimmer of [Latin America's] beyond,” to expose how his geographical imaginary forecasts and shapes a singular reality of land, letters, and politics. To tackle this task, I have divided this chapter into four central sections that have their own tributaries and tangents, never linear and always cosmic.

In Part I, “Connections,” I consider Humboldt’s bridging of art and science, of letters and land, and attribute these dyads to his philosophy of interconnectedness in *Cosmos*; they feed into both his interdisciplinarity as well as his unfaltering belief in a spiritual—nearly karmic—and, at the same time, Newtonian ripple effect. All actions, he believes, have an equal and opposite reaction. Part II, “Contradictions,” anchors on the premise that all discourse is, at the end, contradictory (Alonso 1998), but focuses on the ways in which Humboldt’s aesthetics normalizes an inherently contradictory discursive practice for Latin America. I read Humboldt’s geographical discourse both alongside and against environmentalism and imperialism, two arenas in which he has been both regaled and indicted, as a way of understanding his writings’ relationship with Latin American modernity and, more specifically, capitalism. Rather than defend Humboldt, I complicate his complicity in Part III, “Consolidations,” which examines his prescient forecasting of geography’s value as a political tool at all points of the colonial spectrum (inter-imperial, anti-imperial, and intra-imperial). This analysis allows me to triangulate Humboldt’s alignment between literature, geography, and politics back to Strabo and the ancient Greeks. Finally, Part IV, “Conclusions,” lays the groundwork for the ways in which Latin America’s writer-statesmen appropriate and amplify Humboldt’s appeal to primitivity by coalescing form and content in what I call a *transculturated geographical discourse*. When read through Giambattista Vico’s theory of primitive necessity—wherein poetry was the first operation of the barbarian mind and, accordingly, the central condition for philosophy and civilization—the language of these statesmen contradictorily elevates the premodern and the barbaric. I propose that herein we have a fresh entry into Latin America’s most famous dialectic.

## CONNECTIONS

If we trace back to the origins of Humboldt’s bridging of science and art—his merging of geography and poetry—we discover that in *Aspects of Nature* (1849) he firsts demands a new kind of artistic writing to depict the nuances, complexities, and connections of the natural world, which in his works emerges as nearly synonymous with *land* and *place*. Yet as Vera Kutzinski (2012) contends, not until the turn of the twenty-first century did critics begin seriously and systematically to examine the literary dimension at work in Humboldt’s writing, “in the

process addressing the at times vexed relationship between the natural sciences and Romanticism” (“Introduction” 5).<sup>1</sup> Of late, Humboldt’s aesthetic impact is felt even in more traditionally empirical spheres, for example Brian J. Hudson’s recent article in the *Journal of Cultural Geography* (2013), which argues that Humboldt was on to something quite novel with his contention that waterfalls ought to be understood for both their scientific and aesthetic properties. Within Latin American studies in the wake of Mary Louise Pratt’s canonical analysis, Humboldtian analyses have encountered newfound traction that rereads Humboldt’s notion of *Naturgemälde*—“poetry of nature”—as emancipatory (e.g., Castillo 2009; Millán 2014).

Humboldt’s poetic impulse evolves over the many years of his literal and literary adventure, taking twists and turns but always flowing back to aesthetics as a way to account for ambiguities, to undergird a didactic mission, or to promise longevity. Whereas *Personal Narrative (Relation historique aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent)* appeared between 1814 and 1825, his capstone and culminating study *Cosmos* appeared in the twilight of his life, between 1845 and 1862. It proposes what amounts to a new science, one whose name, as Laura Dassow Walls (2009) notes, consumes Humboldt to no end: what to name it? Natural history of the world? Theory of the earth? Physical geography? Physical Description of the Earth? The Book of Nature? Physical Geography? Gaia (217)? Humboldt resists pigeonholing his work into any one discipline. Anne Godlewka (1999) explains that while *Cosmos* “captures the nature of all universal geographies: historical, descriptive, integrative, and fundamentally spatial” (121), Humboldt insisted upon a sharp distinction between *geography* and the new science he proposed in *Cosmos*, that of *physical geography*. If the former focused on naming and enumerating physical features in a deliberate empiricism, then he wanted the latter to do that and more: to connect, to compare, to interrelate in what we now call, thanks to Carl Ritter, *cultural geography*, a comparative approach focused on understanding the relationship between human conceptualizations of nature and nature itself (123).

The name of the discipline ultimately matters less than the content it organizes and the common threads tying together its approach.<sup>2</sup> One thread that stands out in *Cosmos* is Humboldt’s attention to the matter of accuracy and error within the scientific enterprise. If Humboldt’s younger self admonishes scientific inaccuracies as nothing more than farce, by 1858 when he at last completes the final volume of the series

on his 89th birthday, he defends errors as a stop along the path of knowledge creation, an unavoidable but necessary consequence of a task that relies on iterations to build upon, one that evolves and becomes outdated and shelved because of improved instruments and technological advances. Appended as a disclaimer, his contention is that incremental—if erroneous and contradictory—“delineating of nature” provides the scaffolding for knowledge to come. Though he matter-of-factly acknowledges that his findings will soon be obsolete, Humboldt longs for his work to transcend time and space. He dreams to “not be wholly disregarded in a future age” (*Cosmos* Vol. I, xii).

Humboldt’s dream has come true. He is making a sesquicentennial comeback in the USA, what with the University of Chicago’s Humboldt in Translation Series, which is sure to increase general English-language readership of his writings. This second coming is after what Laura Dassow Walls calls his “cult status” in the 1850s USA, “the decade of Humboldt,” as *Cosmos*, *Ansichten*, *Personal Narrative*, and *Island of Cuba* began to appear in numerous translations and reviews, together with a handful of new biographies (215). In Latin America and Europe his legacy has consistently withstood the test of time. Scholarships, institutes of higher education, towns, children—his name has been bequeathed to all. In Andrea Wulf’s *Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World* (2015)—hailed as one of the most exciting intellectual biographies of contemporary times—we in fact learn that “[m]ore places are named after Humboldt than anyone else” (xx).

Why does Humboldt endure? Why do we continue to be drawn to his multifaceted contemplations? Why did Alfred A. Knopf publish Wulf’s hagiography of Humboldt in 2015, ostensibly signaling his reentry into non-academic English-speaking audiences?<sup>3</sup> Despite “‘high authority’” attempts to posthumously strip Humboldt’s science of “all its human connections” and, with that, its social and aesthetic dimensions (Dassow Walls 215), Humboldt has survived because of his aesthetics. He endures because of the literary force driving his narratives from mere geographical observation to poetic description.

In the chapters that follow I bring Humboldt’s Latin American heirs into this lucrative conversation, for their projects found more than just legitimacy in Humboldt: they found a philosophy and a call from Humboldt himself to make his approach their own, to transculture and naturalize a form of aestheticized earth-writing that he refined over the course of half a century. To understand their reproduction, we must first

make sense of Humboldt's philosophy within the specific trifecta of land, language, and nation.

For Humboldt, the land demands unfettered language to liberate it. It demands lengthy and grandiose description to account for its greatness:

Undue conciseness often checks the flow of expression, while diffuseness is alike detrimental to a clear and precise exposition of our ideas. Nature is a free domain, and the profound conceptions and enjoyments she awakes within us can only be vividly delineated by thought clothed in exalted forms of speech, worthy of bearing witness to the majesty and greatness of the creation. (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 23)

Whereas Humboldt concedes to the possibility of multiple answers in most realms of inquiry, here he stands firm: nature "can *only* be vividly delineated by thought clothed in exalted forms of speech," and any other approach will "check[] the flow of expression" and be "detrimental" to clarity and precision (emphasis added, *Cosmos* Vol. 1, 23). By juxtaposing "purely literary products of intellectual activity [that are] interwoven with the creative force of imagination" with their opposite—"works treating of empirical knowledge"—Humboldt bemoans that empirical works necessarily require updates based on the newest research; preliminary editions thus become antiquated and "consigned to oblivion as unreadable" (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, xii). The only way to ensure geography's sustained readability and longevity is to undergird the empirical with the literary. He closes the Preface to *Cosmos* with a sentence that reveals his ultimate faith in attaining intellectual immortality through the literary, the single avenue by which he can "hope that an attempt to delineate nature in all its vivid animation and exalted grandeur, and to trace the *stable* amid the vacillating, ever-recurring alternation of physical metamorphoses, will not be wholly disregarded even at a future age" (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, xii).

In the geographical battle between the humanistic and the statistic, between philosophical speculation and empirical data, Humboldt's writings reveal esteem for the original, Strabonic tenets of geography. The geographical sciences amount to more than an avenue to administrative practices, to rationalizing and gridding territories to be controlled. Rather, geography is a means of making sense of the human subject's minuteness within and connectivity throughout the vast, holistic relationship of the Cosmos. And this relationship has ebbs and flows, contradictions and evolutions.

Humboldt's admitted commitment to aesthetics on behalf of posterity must be understood even more primarily as the preoccupation of a writer who must "delineate the present condition of knowledge and opinions," all the while aware of "fundamental changes in pre-existing views" (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, xii). In other words, aesthetics accounts for the ambiguity of such an evolution. When done right—"when based upon science"—then the philosophical "doubts because it seeks to investigate, distinguishes between that which is certain and that which is merely probable, and strives incessantly to perfect theory by extending the circle of observation" (38). For Humboldt, there exists a way to achieve balance, to overcome the either/or dichotomy of modernity and return to the both/and of primitivism, and thereby to embrace a geographical political philosophy that goes beyond statistics, all the while grounding its meaning-making in science. His measured approach acknowledges the errors that abound from "vicious empiricism" as well as from "imperfect inductions" that feed into and are nourished by "popular prejudices" (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 38). To rely exclusively on empiricism—a "melancholy heritage transmitted to us from former times"—is to find hubristic (and false) truth in "the arrogance of a narrow-minded spirit" (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 38).

Humboldt presents a spatially inflected way of interpreting two modes of knowledge, one as archaic as it is "narrow" and rigid, a straight line that leads from question to answer, a linear vestige of an empirical past. The other spirals in its investigative path; it seeks truth in a holistic description of the physical world that is all-encompassing and even tangential, a "circle of observation" (38). By integrating numerous spokes of knowledge onto one wheel, we see a complete vision within the spirit of the *Cosmos*, an infinitely connected universe in which each element precariously ties to and relies on the next; indeed, the opposite of a linear series.

For Humboldt there is no right or wrong in any course of study, only an attempt to synthesize numerous experiences into an approximation, rather than a realization, of truth. Aesthetics leads to this approximate truth vis-à-vis a dialectical relationship between the empirical and the philosophical, the one relying on the other to produce an aesthetically pleasing but always already utilitarian description. His aesthetics signal an underlying appreciation for the fact that the natural world cannot be dominated solely by mastering its laws. No stranger to the historical trajectory of what we might anachronistically call his *interdisciplinary* work, Humboldt clarifies that "the Philosophy of Nature" had originally been cast in "vague and poetic garb" that "she" cast away in favor

of a “severer aspect,” which requires weighing the “value of observations, and substitutes induction and reasoning for conjecture and assumption” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 2). He notes that he is “devoid of the profoundness of a purely speculative philosophy,” that he is committed to a rational empiricism based “upon the results of the fact registered by science, and tested by the operations of the intellect” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 30).

For Humboldt, the truest value lies in knowledge production that is neither vague nor severe, neither vapid speculations nor dry numbers: it lies in a pleasant and instructive contemplation of nature that is both philosophical and empirical, that appeals to and warms the senses with its literary inflections while tying together disparate ideas. “The mere accumulation of unconnected observations of details, devoid of generalizations of ideas,” he conjectures, “may doubtlessly have tended to create and foster the deeply-rooted prejudice, that the study of the exact sciences must necessarily chill the feelings, and diminish the nobler enjoyments attendant upon a contemplation of nature” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 20). Humboldt’s task is to surmount this “deeply-rooted prejudice” by creating a narrative that is replete with the “nobler enjoyments” and that warms the soul, thereby ensuring legibility, digestibility, and longevity in both his times and ours. And this geography must be, above all, didactic.

### CONTRADICTIONS

Teaching was at the core of Humboldt’s mission. In fact, Andrea Wulf explains that Humboldt, despite having no political role in the inner court circle of Friedrich Wilhelm III, was determined to use his clout and position to infuse Berlin with a will to learn and develop the intellect, this by making his works and higher education accessible to all walks of life, be they women or impoverished souls otherwise excluded from the ivory towers. To this end he charged no entry fee for his popular Berlin lectures. In Wulf’s words, “Humboldt democratized science” (193).

Beyond eliminating extraneous details—the first step of democratic inclusivity—how might the writer convert the “physical history of the globe into the physical history of the universe” (*Cosmos*, Vol. 1, 55)? Humboldt contends that to achieve such a monumental task with such a high “point of view,” where partial facts are “considered only in relation to the whole,” then “the greater is the necessity for a systematic mode of treating the subject in language at once *animated* and *picturesque*”



(emphasis added, 56). This language, according to Humboldt, appears in concrete relation to the land from which it emerges, where local thought is animated by local language (*Cosmos*, Vol. 1, 56). At its heart, then, Humboldt's philological theory is that of a language that imbues life into thought, language that gives form to content, animating it in ways most palpable when emerging from both native tongue and native soil. This sort of language is, he explains, an outgrowth of the land and, in turn, of the people. Yet Humboldt contradicts himself, for his language has painted the objects not of his native German soil, but rather of lands across the seas. To a degree his contradiction is defensible, for he does not believe himself to be writing exclusively of one solitary, demarcated territory. Instead, he finds in "his native language" a way to "give a lucid exposition of the great phenomena of the universe," delighting in "the advantages he has enjoyed in being permitted to express his thoughts" in German (*Cosmos*, Vol. 1, 56).

The contradictory impulse in Humboldt's theory supports the central thesis of the present study. If we mine deep into the theories presented over the 78-page span of the Introduction to *Cosmos*, Humboldt reveals a two-pronged approach to the "spirit of the method in which the exposition of the *physical description of the universe* should be conducted": firstly, that terrestrial description relies on layers, sometimes inaccurate, sometimes not, but always offering another strata to the earth-writing to follow; and, secondly, that geographical discourse emerges best from the local language. For the Latin American context, Humboldt proposes his work as the first (but absolutely not the last) layer, a framework to be built upon and altered by future generations. Such is geographical knowledge creation, he affirms: iterations and reiterations, accuracies and inaccuracies.<sup>4</sup>

This belief buttresses even Humboldt's earliest work. In the Introduction to *Alexander von Humboldt's Transatlantic Personae*, Vera M. Kutzinski signals that, for Humboldt, innovation "is fundamentally a function of intellectual exchange and collaboration, and [...] of ferreting out errors in productive ways" (7). Humboldt's biggest self-proclaimed error—his botched summit of Chimborazo, that magnificent volcano representative of the maximum sublime—serves as a metaphor for his scientific mindset, for "rather than filtering out his failed attempt at getting to the top of the word, he explores its scientific and aesthetic potential for generating future knowledge" (8). "He turns a crisis of knowledge," Kutzinski continues, "into a welcome occasion for updating

and correcting the results of his earlier field work while [...] creating an often sensual narrative that consists of as many layers as the high plateaus stacked up against the imposing peak” (8). The failed climb is thus a key episode of error, illustrative of an approach that becomes standardized across the canonical writings of Latin American statesmen.

Humboldt doubles down on his method to physically describe the universe, secondly, by positioning the native tongue as the most apt for this merging of language and thought, since “the beneficent influence of a language is most strikingly manifested on its native soil, where it has sprung spontaneously from the minds of the people, whose character it embodies” (56). In his formulation, land and language *must* merge with human subject for the most striking representation. Humboldt proves cognizant that subsequent physical descriptions of Latin America will necessarily reflect the land’s character in ways that he cannot because of his limited skills in Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>5</sup> In short, he signals that his geographical work informs that to come, which will be more authentic, more spontaneous, springing from the soil and character of local people.

If we meld these two Humboldtian elements of *writing the earth*—(1) layers and justifiable errors, and (2) native tongue as superior—then Humboldt foretells and even demands future narratives that revise, review, and rectify his geographical discourse. He hands the reins to the next generation of local writers and naturalists. He expects not to depict any final truth, but rather to put forth one more stratum of geographical discourse into Universal History, a Geist-like iteration on the path of knowledge that is ever in the process of becoming. We might argue that such an epistemological stance inoculates Humboldt against any lapses or incongruences; conversely, we might argue that his is an innocuous and even realistic view of what might be at stake when *writing the nation* of a sovereign state. Whether benign or not, in the end Humboldt’s aesthetic approach accounts for any contradictions and ambiguities within his writing.

The two ambiguities that have prompted most polemic in Humboldtian studies regard his complicity in imperialism and, as its corollary, in ecological devastation of the Americas. Having become something of a hot button in recent environmentalist conversations, Humboldt is the topic of Alice Jenkins’s article “Alexander von Humboldt’s *Cosmos* and the Beginnings of Ecocriticism” (2007), Aaron Sach’s *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (2007), and two chapters of Sabine

Wilke's *German Culture and the Modern Environmental Imagination: Narrating and Depicting Nature* (2015), to name just a few.

In his 2013 essay on Humboldt and environmental humanities, Jorge Marcone takes a stance that embraces the Humboldtian both/and logic by defying scholarly controversies indicting (Pratt 1992) or acquitting (Dassow Walls 2011; Sachs 2007) Humboldt for his involvement in European capitalist expansion. Marcone refuses to pigeonhole the Baron in the either/or dichotomy, asking instead, “[c]ould he have been both an ecological thinker and a facilitator of ecological imperialism?” (78). Given that *Cosmos*—Humboldt’s seminal end-of-life, capstone work—self-consciously embodies this contradiction, in what follows I focus on the ecological posture in its “Introduction” to argue in line with Marcone, whose essay focuses on two texts from the earlier 1808 *Views of Nature*. My sense is that the Latin American geographical project has long been fraught with contradictions on how best to negotiate and leverage a discipline essential to development, but equally complicit in destruction. The development/destruction dyad begins in Humboldt and appears in Sarmiento, Zeballos, and da Cunha, finding its pinnacle in millennial aesthetic production that recaptures Latin America’s volatile nineteenth century and exposes its consequences.

Humboldt does not deny “the influence exercised by physical discoveries,” which, beyond the “enlargement of the sphere of intellect,” can “be made conducive to national prosperity” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 52). Within this delicate framing of the knowledge/conquest dialectic, he cements the alignment between extractivism and wealth, signaling that “the material wealth and the growing prosperity of nations are principally based upon a more enlightened employment of the products and forces of nature” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 53).<sup>6</sup> Humboldt synthesizes and exemplifies the notion of creative destruction insofar as nature’s use-value determines national wealth and, in turn, success. He has thus been accused of ecological devastation vis-à-vis geographical practices—and even his own words seem to support such an accusation.

Yet, we might wonder, is Humboldt speaking about modern notions of extractivism, wherein the difference between colonized and colonizer is, as posed by Alberto Acosta, that “[t]he former export Nature, the latter import it” (62)? If we read on, we see that his assertion specifically addresses Europe: the states that are struggling the most “shrink with slothful indifference from the great struggle of rival nations in the career of the industrial arts” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 53). Referencing his muse again,

Humboldt affirms, “it is with nations as with nature, which, according to a happy expression of Goethe, ‘knows no pause in progress and development, and attaches her curse on all inaction’” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, xx). The didactic message—act now or perish—prefigures Foucault: “Bacon has said that, in human societies, knowledge is power. Both must rise and sink together” (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 53). From Humboldt’s vantage point, “the general industrial movement”—writ large and inclusive of geographical practices—commands the next stage of nation-state development; the kinetic energy drives all movement forward with “activity” for the countries that desire wealth (53). Those who do not know their land “will infallibly see their prosperity diminish in proportion as neighboring countries become strengthened and invigorated under the genial influence of arts and sciences” (53).

Given that he is nourished by the Occidental epistemologies espoused by Goethe and Bacon, his preeminent contemporaries, it is easy to indict Humboldt as the primordial Eurocentric, he who put forth a geographical theory and practice to best employ “the products and forces of nature” and thereby grow national economies on both sides of the Atlantic (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 53). Knowing more about the land, in this equation, means the ability to take more from it.

Yet what if we consider Humboldt’s intellectual formation as experiential and as emerging from his on-the-ground interactions in South America? We would then have to think of him less as an extractivist and more as an experientialist. In an essay that refutes Eurocentric analyses arguing for Humboldt’s indebtedness to Occidental epistemology, historian of science Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2006) argues that Humboldt learned a great deal from local intellectuals in South America (e.g., Francisco José de Caldas, José Celestino Mutis, Hipólito Unanué), figures who ultimately nourish his ecological mindset. In an earlier work, Cañizares-Esguerra (2001) further expands on the derivative nature of Humboldt’s writings, particularly his reliance on indigenous sources. “In seeking to write a philosophical history of America,” Humboldt, he demonstrates, “used Amerindian sources to shed light on the natural history of the human mind through a conjectural history of writing not much different from those of Vico, Fréret, and Warburton” (127).

Using Cañizares-Esguerra’s observations as a springboard, I propose that we consider Humboldt’s ecological thinking as grounded in, and drawing from, Amerindian epistemologies. For Humboldt, the essence of *Cosmos* is spiritual and even omniscient, that “all-powerful unity

of natural forces” in which everything is connected and, as previously mentioned, based on a “circle of observation,” as opposed to a linear trajectory of knowledge formation. Couched in the argot of his times wherein *indigenous* and *savage* are synonymous, he notes:

We find even among the most savage nations [...] a certain vague, terror-stricken sense of the all-powerful unity of natural forces, and of the existence of an invisible, spiritual essence manifested in these forces, whether in unfolding the flower and maturing the fruit of the nutrient tree, in upheaving the soil of the forest, or in rending the clouds with the might of the storm. (*Cosmos* Vol. 1, 37)

Humboldt’s appeal to a circular, holistic philosophy resonates more strongly with indigenous rather than Occidental epistemologies, and perhaps even foretells ecofeminist indigenous scholarship such as Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* (1986), which suggests that the sacred—“the spiritual essence,” if we are to use Humboldt’s words—is based on the unitary nature of reality, in which all creatures are relatives, space is spherical, and time is cyclical. Humboldt respects indigenous spirituality far more than anything from Europe, where believers locked themselves in churches instead of the cathedral of nature: “‘Your God,’ said they to me, ‘keeps himself shut up in a house, as if he were old and infirm; ours is in the forests, in the fields, and on the mountains of Sipapu, whence the rains come’” (*Personal Narrative* Vol. II, 362). In the indigenous cosmovision, God is in everything and everyone. Destroying the forests and the fields is tantamount to destroying Him.

Humboldt’s indigenously inflected belief in this web of interconnectedness puts him into conversation with recent inquiry into the new era of the Anthropocene, which theorizes humans as geological agents with the power to extinguish ourselves and other species. In some ways, he takes the Anthropocene a step forward into the realm of Jason W. Moore’s “Capitalocene,” for he never loses sight of what Marx would later propose as a historical notion of humanity, one internally differentiated and in a constant state of becoming through internal contradictions. Creative destruction, Humboldt understands, might destroy the all-too-creative *Homo sapiens*.

As early as 1801, Humboldt underscores this peripatetic relationship upon solving the mystery behind the gradually sinking Lago de Valencia. Known as Tacarigua by Venezuela’s Amerindians, the lake had

once been rimmed by lush forest canopy. In an effort to clear space for the lucrative indigo crop, however, the trees had been all but eliminated. Until Humboldt, no one realized an essential fact: the trees' root systems predicated the soil's capacity to retain water. Without the forests, flooding and erosion proved antithetical problems alongside the evaporating lake. Humboldt thus blamed deforestation for the desiccated basin and eroded landscape. Contrary to locals' assumptions—that an underground rivulet leading to the sea was to blame—the parched earth, he darkly noted, was manmade: “By felling the trees that cover the tops and sides of mountains, men in every climate prepare at once two calamities for future generations; the want of fuel, and a scarcity of water” (*Personal Narrative* 4:143).

Humboldt was no soothsayer. Yet his words describe precisely the calamity depicted, and overcome, in *Salt of the Earth* (Wim Wenders and Julian Ribeiro Salgado 2015). In this documentary about Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado's photopoetic writing and rewriting of history, we learn that the Salgado cattle ranch in Minas Gerais had, over the course of Sebastião's life, become a dry, dusty swatch of land. Why? For the very reasons Humboldt had articulated in the nineteenth century. Renaming the ranch the Instituto Terra in the late 1990s, Salgado and his wife Leila replanted the land with over 4 million seedlings indigenous to Brazil's Atlantic Forest. The subsequent revival, according to the Instituto Terra, benefited both the human and the non-human inhabitants of the land: “with the return of vegetation, water again flows from natural springs and Brazilian animal species at risk of extinction have again found a safe refuge” (The Instituto Terra: Who are we?). The Institute strives to prevent and undo ecological calamity for both the human and the non-human.

This impetus is also Humboldtian. Throughout his works, Humboldt reveals something beyond an anthropocentric commitment. Like Salgado—who says he is as much a part of nature as a tree, a pebble, or a turtle—Humboldt reveals an indigenously inflected social ecology that hearkens to what Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998) has most famously deemed *Amerindian perspectivism*—“the ideas in Amazonian cosmologies concerning the way in which humans, animals and spirits see both themselves and one another” (469). According to Viveiros de Castro, this worldview tilts Occidental relations between nature and culture on their axis by positing the earth as inhabited by *only* humans, for *all* beings are human. Such a formulation turns *Homo*

*sapiens*' exclusivity on its head, for all creatures are perceived as sentient and as worthy bearers of rights.

Humboldt dedicated a great deal of time to conceptualizing the kindred spirit unifying the land's sentient and non-sentient beings. David Kenosian observes that both Alexander and his brother Wilhelm von Humboldt perceived nature in Kantian terms, "not so much a passive object but as if it were a speaking subject" (501). By coalescing Alexander's notion of translation with Wilhelm's language-based theory of consciousness, Kenosian further establishes that, for Humboldt, nature becomes absolutely capable of communicating. So convinced is the Baron of this possibility that, despite limited zoological research in South America, he takes upon himself an anatomical study examining the respiratory and vocal organs of animals. In Kenosian's estimation, he was "trying to understand how nature literally develops a voice" (505). Similarly, Dassow Walls notes that in *Personal Narrative* Humboldt "reveals in the voices of nature," and she documents the occasions on which Humboldt uses "metaphors of permeation" to unify human subject and nature rather than place humans separate to or above, underscoring words like *reflected*, *communion*, *reaction*, *correspond*, and *mingle*, for example (230–231).

Ushering us outside of the anthropocentric paradigm, Humboldt suggests that the land's voices are multiple and multifaceted, sentient and even sensuous, illustrative of what the ecologist and philosopher David Abram has deemed the "more-than-human world" (1996). If we superimpose Abram's theory onto Neil Safier's observation regarding Humboldt's differentiation between permanence and transience, then we see a paradigm shift: while Humboldt despaired over the absence of human culture during his 36 days navigating the Amazon's tributary streams, he believed that the numerous non-human beings inhabiting the region were indication enough that "human beings were merely transitory inhabitants in this place, passersby in a land where nonhuman denizens, large and small, possessed more permanent claims" (134).

I would like to pause on these dual notions of transience and permanence, for Safier's reading smartly engages Humboldt in the discourse of enclosure: who is settled and gets to stay, and who moves on. No amount of iconographic or instrumental signaling of a "permanent claim" on a map changes Humboldt's sense that human beings are transitory in this terrain, not there to make of *settlement* a settling into modernity. In fact, he assumes a position quite opposite to the traditional

map-maker, for whom Cartesian gridlines equal order and progress. Humboldt the geographer reveals, instead, a need to revive orality, to write a literary cartography in a way that is premodern, that hearkens back to late Antiquity—in particular to Strabo (as I will show momentarily) and, at the same time, to Amerindian epistemology. Drawing on North American indigenous beliefs, the literary writings of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, and the phenomenological works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Abram argues that “the rejuvenation of oral culture is an ecological imperative,” for

When stories are no longer being told in the woods or along the banks of rivers—when the land is no longer being honored, ALOUD!, as an animate, expressive power—then the human senses lose their attunement to the surrounding terrain. We no longer feel the particular pulse of our place—we no longer hear, or respond to, the many-voiced eloquence of the land. Increasingly blind and deaf, increasingly impervious to the sensuous world, the technological mind begins to lay waste to the earth. (“Storytelling and Wonder”)

Within Humboldt’s melding of the human and non-human—within his attempt to listen to “the many-voiced eloquence of the land” while also encouraging monetary gains through its exploitation—we can situate a contradictory social ecology that is out of place in zones not (yet) colonized or creatively destroyed, but that is wholly fitting for the Global South. Caught between a twofold task that entailed charting the territory at the behest of his imperial sponsor all the while governed by an indigenously inflected regard for the terrain, Humboldt is complicit in ecological devastation but, at the same time, committed to using his eyes and ears to surmount an “increasingly blind and deaf” hegemonic power less interested in the ways in which “the technological mind begins to lay waste to the earth” and more in how it generates revenue from such waste. And thus, the environmentalism that defines Europe and the sort of extractivism that Acosta describes within the European context cannot be superimposed upon Latin America without running into a wall of confusion, without seeming like a misplaced idea.

Within Humboldt’s contradictory yet harmony-seeking stance we find the origins of a geographical practice fitted to the specificities of the Latin American context, thereby making him a forefather of Latin American geography in more ways than one. Like his Latin American



successors, he is conflicted by “the contrast between the virtue of a savage and the barbarism of civilized man” (*Personal Narrative* Vol. II, 346). Presaging Sarmiento’s explicit praise of the *baqueano*—the indigenous trackers who read the land—he admires the ways in which the Amerindians can navigate terrain that has no landmarks: “The Indians, I repeat, are excellent geographers” (*Personal Narrative* Vol. II, 377). Their knowledge is irreplaceable.

In his essay questioning the local value of David Harvey’s critique of capitalism, Eduardo Gudynas (2015) suggests that we break free of the colonial trappings of Harvey’s “accumulation by dispossession,” which addresses processes like the commodification of land, expulsion of peasants, transformation of work into a product, and financialization of economies. Attractive and applicable though these ideas may be, Gudynas identifies four ways in which they fall short of fitting Latin America’s reality. First, he contends, Latin Americans themselves ought to produce a local critique of capitalism that accounts for the contradictory internal colonialism imposed upon the region’s indigenous peoples, a matter entirely omitted from Harvey’s arguments. Second, this critique segues to his call to acknowledge, incorporate, and dialogue with the region’s autochthonous peoples. Essential yet dispossessed labor in Harvey’s critique, they live in a way that should be modeled—as transient stewards of the earth within Amerindian notions of *sumak kawsay*, or Buen Vivir, which demands a collective, harmonious development instead of capitalist modes of owning, selling, keeping, and having land and property. Within indigenous epistemologies we humans begin life “dispossessed,” for we do not possess the earth. We take care of it while we are here, leading us to Gudynas’s third point: any local critique of capitalism must necessarily incorporate an ecological dimension (Gudynas 2015). Rather than an abstract allusion to the environment, he calls for a concrete consideration of the ways in which Latin American modernity can only be understood vis-à-vis its history of extractivism. And, fourth, Gudynas insists that any critique must recuperate local epistemologies to illuminate alternatives to development in a paradigmatic rethinking that is post-Eurocentric.

Humboldt’s approach to geographical thinking aligns almost seamlessly with Gudynas’s localized critique of capitalism, for it adheres to all four insufficiencies: it is ecological while cognizant of (and even complicit in) both external and internal imperialism prompted by delineation; it is undergirded by indigenous thought in its acknowledgment

of human transience vis-à-vis the permanent more-than-human world; it acknowledges the need for the local theorist—indeed, the native tongue—to produce the next stratum of geographical discourse; and, finally, its alternative to modernity is Cosmos, a formulation that in some ways articulates, albeit in Eurocentric terms, the ideas behind the social philosophy of *sumak kawsay*, which has branched across Latin America from its origins in the Quechua cosmovision. Grounded in an inherent harmony between human beings and nature, Buen Vivir decries market-driven knowledge production while urging that the rights of individuals be subsumed under the rights of communities, the rights of nature. Humboldt, similarly, holds to a didactic impulse driven by knowledge for humanity's sake, rather than as an investment in human capital. This knowledge rises out of layers and lapses, not a final truth but an evolutionary one, gleaned from a profound understanding of the earth and its inhabitants. To study and to demarcate the earth's contours is a human task, which, like most human tasks, becomes contaminated by politics. And therein we might situate the aesthetics of Humboldtian geographical discourse: to teach future generations of our mortality, of our temporality relative to the land we live on, land that we claim as territory but that is ultimately outside of the realm of ownership.

### CONSOLIDATIONS

In Volume II of his *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, Humboldt laments the 300 years of “pointless territorial disputes” that plagued the Americas as the Courts of Madrid and Lisbon duked it out over tracts of land that had originally been established, though incompletely so, by the 1521 Treaty of Tordesillas and “unreliable” maps (234).<sup>7</sup> Minor rivers like the Río Negro quickly took on great importance to Spanish authorities, since they offered the Portuguese easy access to territories in Caracas, while “uncultivated” lands prompted, in Humboldt's estimation, unnecessary and surprising “litigations over who owns a few square leagues”—*uti possidetis* at its best (234). Heavier matters regarding Paraguay and possession of Colonia del Sacramento further troubled waters between the rivals, who “have generally been keener to prolong this dispute rather than solve it” (234). Humboldt emphasizes that the conflict nonetheless leads to a clear—if unintentional—winner: the disciplines of “nautical science and geography” (234).

While papal authorities and astronomical points initially had the last word in territorial feuds, the states soon looked to the discipline of geography for conclusive answers. They sent “a few educated engineers and some naval officers acquainted with the position of a place” to chart the land and thereby settle the disputes once and for all (234). Humboldt credits these “hard-working men” with gathering “the little we knew up to the end of the last century about the geography of the interior of the New Continent,” but he underscores that such knowledge was more accidental than purposeful, more litigation than science—“the sciences gained accidentally from these border commissions, often forgotten by the states that sent them out” (234). Geographical sciences developed not for knowledge’s sake but rather for capital, as “abstract social nature,” Jason Moore’s term to describe that “family of processes through which capitalists and state-machineries map, identify, quantify, measure, and code human and extra-human natures in service to capital accumulation” (“The Capitalocene II” 12). Writing almost incredulously about the sheer extent of Spanish–Portuguese conflicts—which in turn complicated his passing to and from colonies—Humboldt recounts that “[i]n these deserted jungles the only instruments ever seen had been carried by boundary commissioners. The Portuguese Government agents could not conceive how a sensible man could exhaust himself ‘measuring lands that did not belong to him’” (239–240). Though he knows and openly states that charting the land is essential to national sovereignty, here Humboldt again safely nestles into the space of contradiction, where the lands belong not to human nor state, being rather a space of human transience.

I would like to delve further into this happenstance, the rise of the discipline of geography in colonial Latin America, as illustrative of Humboldt’s acumen for identifying causation and correlation—for seeing, in short, the interconnectedness of life. Ette (2012) captures well the Humboldtian ability to unpack cause and effect, to grasp both change and exchange of ideas, noting that “Humboldt’s pen replaced spatial history with a history of movement whose major concern is no longer the territorial but the relational, the dynamic and the mobile” (trans. in Kutzinski “Introduction” 2). Vera Kutzinski describes this movement further as “multidirectional flows of large-scale civilizational analysis,” something we see across Humboldt’s corpus and through his own fieldwork and vast intellectual network (“Introduction” 2).

Based on the above observations, what interests me about the territorial disputes and their unintended advances for geographical knowledge is the longevity and ripple effect of such a colonial pattern, which replicates itself among the colonized subjects as well as their Creole masters: Spain and Portugal's territorial strife becomes, as we shall see in Chap. 4 of this study, Argentina and Brazil's. Humboldt notes as much in *Personal Narrative*, wherein "the conflict between the Courts of Lisbon and Madrid—even in peaceful times—had heightened the mistrust of the commanders of petty neighboring forts," while

On the banks of the Río Negro the Indians in the neighbouring Portuguese and Spanish villages hate each other. These poor people speak only their Indian languages and have no idea what happens "on the other bank of the ocean, beyond the great salt pod", but the gowns of the missionaries are of different colours and that enrages them. (235)

From the highest courts to the ground-level commanders and on down to the subjugated indigenous populations, each tier of the colonial hierarchy feeds upon and further nourishes the Iberian rivalry begun with the initial line drawn with the Treaty of Tordesillas. Yet while the strife initially benefits the discipline of geography (if aggravating personal tensions), in short order we see that the benefits are not without epistemological consequence. As Neil Safier puts it, "imperial rivalries made for bad maps" (134). Put plainly, as Spain and Portugal acquire more knowledge about the interior, they choose to conceal what they know, such that the most reliable cartographic information is unwritten and unshared or, even worse for the colonial project, contained within indigenous minds. "The rivalry between Spain and Portugal," Humboldt reports, "has contributed to the poor geographical knowledge about the tributary rivers of the Amazon. The Indians are excellent geographers and can outflank the enemy despite the limits on the maps and the forts" (235). In an ironic twist, the maps thus prove more a hindrance than an asset, for the very place-names that demonstrate colonial domination are based on indigenous synonyms that all translate to some variation of "river." Settlement and territorial knowledge, here, amount to little more than a farce for the sake of seeming in the know. The map thus ceases to be instrumental. "Our maps are full of arbitrary names," Humboldt writes matter-of-factly, for "[t]he desire to leave no void in maps in order to give them an appearance of accuracy has caused

rivers to be created whose names are not synonymous” (236). Language skills—or their lack thereof—also hindered Brazilian geographers: “Ignorance of the Spanish language,” notes Humboldt, “drove geographers to locate erroneously on the famous La Crus Olmedilla map the 400-league route made by Joseph Solano to the sources of the Orinoco” (242).

Humboldt’s relationship with error is worth unpacking, if only for the paradoxes it conjures. According to Ette, Humboldt finds more value in the process of mistake-making than in arriving at a neatly packaged scientific product; his style, in turn, proves more rhizomatic than teleological, for the network of knowledge created by the imagination ultimately surpasses that of the data. “Geographic maps,” Humboldt contends in *Examen Critique* (1836),

express the more or less limited views and knowledge of those who produce them, but they do not reflect the truthful state of discoveries. What we find depicted on maps (and particularly on the maps of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries) is usually an assembly of well-known facts and arbitrary claims presented as facts. [...] [W]e must not forget the influence that opinions, conjectures, and desires produced by greater political and economic interests have had on the representation of geographic facts and general formation of continents. (trans. in Wilke 77)

The German studies scholar Sabine Wilke observes that Humboldt enacts such imaginative strategies in his own visual representations, an observation she buttresses by analyzing his *Physical Tableau of the Canary Islands*. However, if we extend the arc of Wilke’s observation, we see that Humboldt differentiates between the innocuous (and necessary) task of what we might call *cartographic conjecture* and the less benign *cartographic fiction*—the “arbitrary claims presented as facts” in the service of “political and economic interests.” To be sure, Humboldt presciently prefigures the conclusions of contemporary historians of cartography, chief among them J.B. Harley (2001), who observes that we must always take into question the map-maker’s ideological commitments, since the “power of a map” is an “act of control over the image of the world” (49). Harley declares that “[s]ince the age of Columbus, maps have helped to create some of the most pervasive stereotypes of our world” (49).

I would like to pause for a moment on this curious and ideologically motivated colonial truth-stretching, of which there are two distinct but interrelated parts—on the one hand, the notion of completeness, and on the other, the appearance of accuracy.<sup>8</sup> What does the colonial project garner by projecting a certain image of cartographic completeness and accuracy? Humboldt points to the ways in which the colonial project is sustained by a simulacrum of the real: by representing the territory as though it is known, the colonial authorities enact an imagistic conquest that allows for easier appropriation and regulation—*knowledge* and *conquest* again go hand in hand. As Neil Safier has observed, “[m]aps produced by early modern empires were as much a product of the dissimulation of their sources as they were a mechanism for displacing the cultural (as opposed to physical) features of colonial geographies” (183). We see this relation continue in the next layer of intra-colonial geography, that of the nation-building liberals actively seeking territorial knowledge so as to develop sovereign nations. As Raymond Craib has shown in the context of Mexican independence, designating place-names is just one element in the battle between what he deems *fugitive landscapes* and *state fixations*. The former identifies “lands characterized by multiple political jurisdictions and use rights, indeterminate borders and inconsistent place-names, and highly contextualized systems of tenure and property” (Craib 12); the latter is what we see in Humboldt’s depiction, a “state fixation” committed to permanence through “the inscription of lines, points, plots, and place-names” that “would give space a stable signification, permitting it to be more effectively appropriated, transformed, and regulated” (Craib 8). For the newly emergent nation-states, onomastic consistency preserves history by inscribing a genealogy upon the land, preserving tradition in places where “history has completely disappeared” (qtd. in Craib 44). What we see in the case of colonial Latin America, however, is a place portrayed as prehistorical; indeed, a continent where, to Eurocentric eyes, history has not even begun and thus becomes invented in ways arbitrary yet always strategic. Humboldt condemns such arbitrary strategy as but one more insertion of the mimetic regime wherein knowing the land—however falsely—is tantamount to having power.<sup>9</sup> “The appearance of accuracy” to which Humboldt refers is just that: a false image that fakes modernity until science advances enough to reveal some sort of legitimizing truth.

If the literary element of geographical discourse accounts for ambiguities and contradictions, then cartography offers just the opposite by

embracing accuracy in place of aesthetic representation. By underscoring “the influence that opinions, conjectures, and desires produced by greater political and economic interests have had on the representation of geographic facts and general formation of continents,” Humboldt points to cartography’s ideological underpinnings well before such arguments were in vogue, over a century before Harley notes, in the late 1980s, that “the map has attempted to purge itself of ambiguity and alternative possibility. Accuracy and austerity of design are now the new talismans of authority culminating in our own age with computer mapping” (“Deconstructing the Map” 13). Elsewhere, Harley neatly summarizes that “an accurate outline map of a nation, such as Cassini provided for Louis XIV, was no less a patriotic allegory than an inaccurate one” (“Maps, Knowledge, and Power” 300).

Perhaps, then, this conundrum somewhat explains Humboldt’s penchant for the discursive over and above the imagistic, for painting a rambling, sometimes messy, but always beautiful—and even violent—image of the land with florid lines of text rather than precise lines of latitude. After all, the truly “accurate” representation of a hapless, ill-defined, and colonized South America is not a neat “patriotic allegory,” as it might have been in the map “Cassini provided for Louis XIV” (Harley 300), but rather an untamed parcel of land recently and haphazardly demarcated as territory. Rather than reaffirming a sense of moral or ethical neutrality from viewers observing precise—and silent—gridlines, Humboldt awakens them to the social and political inanity taking place in this otherwise unknown region, this with his literary acumen and attention to both human subject and physical land. In a sense, his writing gives form to chaos, to murky borders and far-removed notions of oppression; only metaphor suffices to make sense of colonialism’s ravages.

In her chapter on Simón Bolívar’s indebtedness to Humboldt, Andrea Wulf notes that the order of nature also provided comfort to the Gran Libertador, who sought liberty in the midst of extreme uncertainty. “In untamed nature,” she writes, “he found parallels to the brutality of humankind—and though this fact didn’t change anything about the conditions of war, it could still be strangely comforting. As Bolívar fought to free the colonies from Spanish shackles, these images, nature metaphors and allegories became his language of freedom” (146). Of course, the emancipatory potential of aesthetics complements the empirical data that gives meaning to Spain’s colonial enterprise. Bolívar sees value in

Humboldt's philosophical speculation *and* his empirical data, both of which allow him unfettered access into territories otherwise unknown to him. As Wulf notes, Bolívar intently studied Humboldt's volumes, particularly *Political Essay on New Spain*, which not only synthesized geographical observations with both racial and environmental consequences of colonial rule, but also included "table upon table of data ranging from silver production in mines to agricultural yields, as well as total amounts of imports and exports to and from the different colonies" (152). This melding of information made clear that imperial rule had plundered the colonies for their *materia prima* and had decimated relations, both people to people and people to environment, in the process. By incorporating statistical and demographic archival data into his first-hand accounts, Humboldt further nourished and buttressed Bolívar's stance: his land and peoples needed to be freed. As Wulf put it, for Bolívar "the written word had the power to change the world" (149).<sup>10</sup>

Ahead of contemporary emphases on big data, Humboldt's emphasis on indexicality belies what David Turnbull (1993) would later describe as "various maps as having different modes of transcending indexicality" (41). For Humboldt, the map does not transcend indexicality but rather precludes it. Geographical discourse, as such, is best coupled with numbers, which offer the empirical accuracy and precision presumed by the unadorned map. We thus see here a clear merging of the mutually informative relationship between the arts and the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Humboldt goes a step further to insist that *institutions* house the progress brought about by the relations between arts and sciences, thereby forecasting the rise of geographical institutions and commercial museums, both of which emerge throughout the long nineteenth century on either sides of the Atlantic. As a necessary corollary of industrialization's spoils, all growth must be documented, catalogued, and tracked in order to determine that it is, in fact, growth. In kind, all destruction must be tracked to determine that it is, in fact, wreaking havoc upon the environment. Institutions house such empirical data. To that end, Humboldt notes in *Cosmos* that "the increased impetus imparted to commerce by the multiplied means of contact of nations with each other, are all brilliant results of the intellectual progress of mankind, and of the amelioration of political institutions, in which this progress is reflected" (Vol. I, 54).

Humboldt's insistence on the value of national institutions vis-à-vis geographical practices proves to be prescient. Geography flourished



in nineteenth-century Latin America despite having entered a period of stagnation (and even dormancy) in Europe until approximately the 1870s. Though military-affiliated geographical institutions came into existence as early as 1791 (Great Britain's Ordnance Survey), geographical societies in the private sector emerged more slowly, the tentative model rising in 1788 (Britain's Royal Geographical Society, which solidified in 1830), and the actual predecessor to all modern societies sprouting in 1821 (Paris's Société de Géographie). Not until the Napoleonic campaigns, however, was there a reawakening and renewed interest in the latent field. With the impending threat of invasion by French forces, European states became obliged to recognize the necessity of cartography and specialized geographical knowledge as the requisite basis for military planning (Godlewska 4; Risco 1).<sup>12</sup>

As an institutionalized discipline fundamentally aligned with the prospects of nation-building, geography's crucial thrust occurred in the Americas. Between 1833 and 1935 approximately 50 societies were founded, the first in Mexico (1833, Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística) and later ones in Brazil (1838, Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro) and Argentina (1854, Instituto Geográfico Argentino). As Luz Fernanda Azuela Bernal (2003) explains in her essay on the the role of geography for Mexico's modernization:

the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística was founded with the double objective of creating a Map of the Republic and establishing national statistics. These were strategic and fundamental tasks to consolidate the country as an independent nation, and their difficulty required the intervention of men of science. (153–154)

Cartographic ambition coalesced with statistics and strategy to create the image of a consolidated, independent nation. Bernal's conclusion thus aligns with Raymond Craib's contention that "[s]tatistics and geography were sciences of statecraft" designed to project progress (22).

With designs toward nation-building, Latin America's emergent geographical institutions confirmed the discipline's original tenets as intrinsically tied to politics. If we turn to the Greek origins of geography—Strabo's *Geographica* (c. 17–23 AD), perhaps the earliest surviving example of a universal geography and the most complete account of the world yet portrayed—we discover that the subject inheres in any political venture:

It seems to me excellent encouragement for the project at hand to say that geography is essentially oriented to the needs of politics. [...] The greatest captains of war are thus those who can exercise their power over earth and sea, collecting people and cities together under a single empire, *controlled* by the same political structures. In these conditions it is clear that all of geography is oriented toward the practice of government: [...] It would be easier to take control of a country if we knew its dimensions, its relative location, and the original particularities of its climate and its nature. (qtd. in Godlewska 93; emphasis in Strabo's original)<sup>13</sup>

This political agenda of power and control directly aligns with language. For Strabo, whom Anne-Marie Godlewska describes as “fundamentally conservative and backward-looking to the glory of the Greek empire” in her *Geography Unbound* (1999), the Greek intellectual tradition far surpassed that of the Romans, a people he perceived to be lacking cultural depth (92).<sup>14</sup> But, more importantly, Strabo linked geography to the immediately *aesthetic* project embraced by the Greeks. He viewed geography as a sort of poetry among the most supreme of endeavors, an act of the creative, subjective mind far removed from the mechanics of, say, engineering. In fact, Strabo abided by the beliefs of the ancients, who held an unabashed respect for poetry's ability to teach “the social and the political and also historical”; the genre sat in stark contrast to prose, that form fashioned to convey philosophy and history, but one ultimately weakened by its own exclusivity—isolating knowledge from the masses, from women and children, to cater narrowly to elite men (qtd. in Godlewska 94).

Geography, argued Strabo, stemmed from Homer, the greatest of the poets. Those who attempted to extract poetry and fable from geography (like Eratosthenes and Hipparchus, who pushed to include mathematics and measurements) thus endangered the absolute core of geography. Poetry's value and, with that, geography's value resided in the realm of the abstract as opposed to the concrete tangibility of, for instance, metallurgy. This abstraction resulted from their subjective creation. Both the poetic and the geographical relied upon the subjective tendencies and truthful willingness of their architects, thereby suggesting room for interpretation. Geography thus shared more in common with poetry in “spirit, purpose, and form of thought than to ‘geometry’” (Godlewska 94–95).

What we have here is an alignment with orality and narrative: geography in its Strabonic origins is, in the end, a story—a “fable” that

is necessarily accessible to the masses. Lest we forget, Humboldt, too, appeals to aesthetics as a mode of increasing accessibility and, with that, instruction: geographical discourse is a *didactic geography* that is political, yes, but also instructive. Knowing the land allows conquest, but also bequeaths the land and its denizens a history to anchor to. Dassow Walls notes that for Humboldt, the “language of nature” was “that most ancient of storytellers,” for “[t]he face of the land told its own story,” its features connecting known and unknown, familiar and foreign, building upon previous knowledge, wherein geography becomes history and tells the tale of the past (227–228). “Their form is their history,” Humboldt concludes (qtd. in Dassow Walls 228).

We are privy to Humboldt’s many contradictions throughout *Cosmos*, but in the Introduction we are made to understand *why*: for Humboldt, the “history of nations” and the “physical description of the world” may be different in degree, but are of the same kind given their shared contradictions and oscillation (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 42). In his formulation, *history* and *geography* nourish one another. Telling the tale of the physical world becomes tantamount to narrating the national story. The two narratives are one and the same in Humboldt’s formula, an alliance that reflects his intellectual indebtedness to Strabo, as does his ebbing approach to the polemic between empirical data and philosophical speculation. As Godlewska has observed, Humboldt’s stance was “[p]erhaps in response to the influence of the early positivists,” a response that made him see “less opposition between description and theory than between pure empiricism and theoretical science. It was pure empiricism that was antithetical to the aims of his *Cosmos*; its unreflective and uncritical approach to nature would mislead” (123). In fact, Humboldt reiterates on multiple occasions throughout *Cosmos* his commitment to the domain of empirical ideas and rational thought, always placing them in juxtaposition to meandering ideas and reflection with little basis in science. Admitting to valuing numbers above all, he insists that all study “depend[s] upon *mean numerical values*, which show us the constant amid change, and the stable amid apparent fluctuations of phenomena” (*Cosmos* Vol. I, 81; emphasis in original). Humboldt, in sum, praises numbers as necessary to modern physical science because they can be corrected and are “the only remaining and widely-diffused characters still in our writing” (Vol. I, 81). However, the numbers and the letters are not in service of a purely utilitarian political agenda, focusing also on, as Godlewska notes, the more holistic “study of cause, the examination

of the unknown, and the focus on detail typical of the empirical sciences” (125–126). Thus, in his quest for knowledge for knowledge’s sake, Humboldt breaks from Strabo.

Nevertheless, Humboldt praises Strabo’s work for its very grounding in letters rather than numbers. Strabo, he insists, “does not possess the numerical accuracy of Hipparchus, or the mathematical and geographical information of Ptolemy,” yet he became the most gifted geographer of antiquity because of his vast knowledge and his style of writing; Strabo’s work, Humboldt insists, “surpasses all other geographical labors of antiquity by the diversity of the subjects and the grandeur of the composition” (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 187–188). Such “grandeur” and what we might today call “interdisciplinarity”—something of a *mélange* between the arts and the sciences—contributes to Humboldt’s regard for Strabo and, at the same time, his reasoning for Strabo’s lack of impact upon coeval knowledge production. Contradicting his firm declarations of support for “fact registered by science” over and above “the profoundness of a purely speculative philosophy,” Humboldt in fact laments that Strabo remained “almost wholly unknown in Roman antiquity until the fifth century,” attributing that lack of comparative fame and influence to a lack of math and concision (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 49; 190). He recounts:

It was not until the close of the Middle Ages that Strabo exercised any essential influence on the direction of ideas, and even then in a less marked degree than that of the more mathematical and more tabularly concise geography of Claudius Ptolemaeus, which was almost wholly wanting in views of a truly physical character. (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 190)

What Humboldt wants for geography, then, is a physical, textual description that, in Strabo’s time, would have been more accurate since, he explains, Ptolemy relied on itinerary measurements by land and sea rather than astronomical results, all the while lacking a magnetic needle and compass (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 191).

Humboldt emphasizes Strabo’s synthesizing capacity as well as his dedication to the sum of the parts rather than the individual parts themselves. That Humboldt is drawn to such a holistic impulse does not surprise given the explicit objective, and even title, of *Cosmos*, which strives to make the physical description of the earth digestible to the masses and durable for the years. Without explicitly stating as much, Humboldt suggests that he emulates Strabo, whose mission maps onto such objectives:

“to direct attention to the form of the whole,” thereby achieving “a generalization of ideas [that] did not prevent [Strabo], at the same time, from prosecuting researches which led to the establishment of a large number of admirable physical results,” all of which contributes to his being “an attentive observer of the descent of nations, and of the diversities of the different races of men” (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 189–190).

By coalescing earth study with human observation, Strabo, Humboldt contends, contributed revolutionary knowledge to the annals of history and broke ground in a number of fields. Such high esteem thus explains his incredulity that the Spanish were unaware of Strabo, this despite the fact that Strabo had long

conjectured the existence of *another continent* between the west of Europe and Asia. “It is very possible,” [Strabo] writes, “that in the same temperate zone, near the parallel of Thinae or Athens, which passes through the Atlantic Ocean, besides the world we inhabit, there may be one or more other worlds peopled by beings different from ourselves.” (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 189; emphasis in original)

Thrice more (*Cosmos* Vol. II 152, 189, 268) Humboldt expresses utter disbelief that the Spanish had not caught wind of such a promising declaration for their conquest of the New World, remarking most conclusively that “[i]t is astonishing that this expression did not attract the attention of Spanish writers, who, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, believed that they every where, in classical authors, found the traces of a knowledge of the New World” (*Cosmos* Vol. II, 189).

Humboldt’s incisive commentary on Strabo points us to three fundamental conclusions: first, that Spanish commitment to the discipline and discourse of geography was relatively scant even (and maybe especially) during colonial times, at least in comparison to other nations; second, that Strabo, like Humboldt himself, tackled many topics and did so with a florid style, leading to praise from some and dismissal from others; and third, that Strabo focused on the whole rather than the individual parts, and that such a general focus did not, in Humboldt’s view, diminish but rather strengthen his work.

The merging of these three qualities leads us to the entanglement of geography, imperialism, and, from there, independence—in other words, to *knowledge* and *conquest*. Although the relations between *knowledge* and *conquest* are ancient and stem back, at the very least, to a Babylonian

world map of 600 BC that confirms humanity's innate propensity toward egocentricity—we have always seen our territories and ourselves as the center of the world and therefore superior—the purposeful use of maps for imperial expansion did not unfold until the solidification of the modern nation-state. James R. Akerman, director of Newberry Library's Center for the History of Cartography, suggests that Portugal and Spain's exploratory chart-making "could be characterized as the first ongoing state efforts to regulate mapping on a global imperial scale" (2). Akerman poses the question of "whether practical and ideological distinctions can be made between the mapping of nation-states and the mapping of empire" (2). However, he underscores that the task of knowing domestic territory differed greatly from knowing foreign territories in terms of ideology, of course, but also the more practical elements including "skills, resources, and institutions" (2).<sup>15</sup>

Following Akerman's logic, the sort of institute that Spain developed to master its own domain should have been different than the one it spearheaded in the service of knowing its New World territories. If we borrow from Laura Benton (2009), three main geographical enterprises scaffold the construction of imperial power: "periodic advances in techniques of navigation and mapping, a persistent focus on geographic boundaries as elements of treaty making between imperial rivals, and the accumulation of geographic knowledge of conquered and colonized territories by the colonizers" (10). Yet such work was not happening in Spain until Humboldt's arrival over two centuries after the initial encounter.

Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2001) has recounted the trials and tribulations of Spanish historiography of the Indies and its numerous moments of criticism, most of which—if we are to synthesize—are grounded in matters of territorial knowledge. He locates the origins of the criticism in the early 1600s with the work of Andrés González de Barcia, an erudite and influential member of the Royal Council, the Royal Treasury, and magistrate of the Council of Castile and the Council of War, who believed that negligence and ineptitude "might [...] contribute to the loss of Spain's colonies to rival European powers, some of which had published misleading histories claiming historical precedence over Spanish discoveries and assigning foreign nomenclature to places Spaniards had first named" (158). Place-names prove a constant leitmotiv in the narrative of imperial, inter-imperial, and intra-imperial

geography, coming to a head in the nineteenth-century taxonomical publications that I address in Chap. 4.

Barcia documents the initial clues pointing to territorial loss and Spanish attempts to reconcile it by reconstructing the original place-names they had assigned in Florida—as opposed to those designated by the Dutch, French, Swedes, English, and Danes—and by compiling historiographical bibliographies of Europe’s colonization of the New World. Within a century the symbolic territorial loss became a tried-and-true reality: imperial Spain was becoming smaller, and that was a fact. Cañizares-Esguerra explains that the fact came to the fore in 1751 with the work of Spain’s Royal Chronicler of the Indies, the Benedictine Martín Sarmiento. In his proposal to launch a massive geographical survey of imperial Spain, Martín Sarmiento confirmed that Spain was indeed losing its colonial possessions and needed, therefore, to resurrect Spanish cartography, botany, and historiography, so as to be a viable competitor in the “international battle over naming” (159). According to Martín Sarmiento, it was because of Spanish negligence that “the names of places, plants, and discoverers of territories were being altered every day by rival European powers in new maps, taxonomies, and histories” (159). Cañizares-Esguerra suggests that Spanish ignorance of its New World territories was common knowledge across Europe and particularly in France, whose leading eighteenth-century intelligentsia mocked Spain’s backwards decision to exploit rather than explore, to plunder rather than pursue knowledge.

Such is the (non-)role of colonial-era geography. But what happens as we enter the independence period?

Humboldt explicitly declared to King Charles and Queen Isabella that sovereign power and geographical knowledge walk hand in hand and must be taken into consideration. “I have already indicated in the analysis of my maps,” he writes in the *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, “the advantage which might be drawn by the government from this extraordinary aptitude in constructing a map of the country” (218). The Spanish Empire, consequently, came to realize that objective knowledge of the land was absolutely vital to control it or to transform it. After all, Humboldt’s own motivation for the discursive naming and taming of American lands emerged from the conscious belief that only science might allow the mind to observe and to comprehend the real world. Studying the land “brings you closer to reality,” closer to shaping a desired reality by means of representing the image (qtd. in Wilson lxii).

The geographical approaches thus developed at the eighteenth century's end continued to serve as the paradigmatic model throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, so that in certain territories—particularly in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines—Spain launched new surveys and geographical reconnaissance projects intended to undergird a new administration. Upon first realizing the necessity for science and scientists in effective exploitation of the colonies and then, subsequently, the necessity of geography in the Enlightenment program of scientific research, Spain sought not only cartographic advances, but also regional descriptions, geographical statistics, studies of the natural environment, and analyses of political economy. Political reforms were invested less in law-making and more in geographical, statistical, and political research. By the 1870s exploration had become the norm for European imperialism, and it manifested itself in the expansion of geographical knowledge and the ideological manipulation of spatial concepts (Capel 58–64).<sup>16</sup>

Following the contemporary arguments of Edward Said, imperialism amounted to an act of geographical violence whereby space was explored, reconstructed, renamed, and controlled. However, as he declares in *Orientalism* (1978), “if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical” (77). The requirement for geography, accordingly, extends to the realm of both imperialist *and* anti-imperialist designs.<sup>17</sup>

Latin American independence fighters were well aware of this necessity and appropriated Humboldt's geographical findings and philosophical underpinnings for their revolutionary advantage; from Bolívar onward this advantage was consistently announced from a literary locus of enunciation. As a latecomer to the geographical game, however, Spain responded to the colonial threat with the frantic and haphazard 1876 founding of the Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid, an organization to which was bequeathed the responsibility of advancing and dispersing geographical knowledge of the Spanish territory and its overseas provinces. Spanish geographers and geographical societies fomented public opinion and public policy while actively participating in exploratory expeditions and appropriating territory. Yet as late as 1889 the secretary of the Sociedad Geográfica, Ricardo Bertrán y Rózpide, continued to bemoan the consequences of Spain's limited engagement with geography:



The earth, we repeat, will belong to whoever knows it best. It is not possible to use the wealth that a country contains, nor to govern its inhabitants in a manner keeping with the innate, historical condition of their race, without a profound knowledge of the people and the land. If we lack this knowledge, we will continually face economic and political questions with false or incomplete information, we will commit errors, we will persevere with it, and there will come a time when people will protest, the land will be lost, and the various national groups divided. (trans. in Capel 71, from *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica* 17, 1889)

Despite this explicit and (since proved) prophetic warning, few paid heed to the complex relationship between “the people and the land” in the colonies, and the land was indeed lost. This loss was cemented on the eve of colonial defeat in 1897, when Spain’s lead geographer, Rafael Torres Campos, ruefully declared in his annual report to the Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid that “[w]e lost the colonies because we didn’t know any geography” (trans. in Capel 73, from *Boletín de la Sociedad Geográfica* 121, 1897). Despite having, together with Portugal, the longest colonial record of all the modern European powers, Spain fell short with its geographical practices, which were far less systematic than what was happening in, for example, India (Edney 1997) and Egypt (Godlewska 1995), where bureaucratically organized topographic mapping played practical and symbolic roles in expanding European power over newly acquired colonies (Akerman 3).

By detailing this brief chronology of geography’s rise to prominence, I hope to have demonstrated that three distinct yet coeval political branches of the discipline come to the fore following Humboldt’s delineation of Latin America. There exists, foremost, the anti- or postcolonial geography of the revolutionary liberals who appropriate his geographical advances in order to escape the yoke of colonialism. Nearly in tandem is the intra-colonial geography of the nation-building liberals, who actively seek territorial knowledge so as to legitimize their power and eliminate any vestiges of the continent’s indigenous past while, contradictorily, promoting natural conservation. And finally, in what can only be described as a last gasp, we arrive at the colonial, and exploitative, geography of Spain, the empire clenching its territories with whitened knuckles, to no avail. Geographical awareness thus presents itself as a key factor across the gamut of imperial success or failure.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Bolívar's praise for Humboldt lays bare an indubitable fact: though the empire sponsored the Baron's travels through South America, its mission backfired. In Bolívar's words, Humboldt changed the face of the continent and, as such, "for the rest of América's days, he will appear in the hearts of his true believers as a great man, who with his eyes has wrenched it from ignorance and with his pen has painted it as beautiful as its own nature" (in Humboldt, *Cartas Americanas*, 266). This resounding praise stems from the political and military utility of Humboldt's cartographic knowledge. As Ángela Pérez-Mejía (2002) has demonstrated, the Baron's mappings allowed Bolívar's proposed conquests to become a reality, for they were the most complete vision of the hitherto unmapped territories. Humboldt's original documentation thus facilitated the pro-independence armies' successful negotiation of the terrain, allowing them to defeat the colonies. Yet in an 1815 letter, Bolívar observed that despite vast stores of theoretical and practical knowledge, even Humboldt could not unearth *all* the relevant territorial, statistical, and revolutionary intelligence: "the majority is covered in the shadow of darkness" (*Cartas del Libertador*, I, 182).

Beyond the utilitarian, then, Bolívar's respect for and emulation of Humboldt extended beyond any sort of Cartesian order. Rather, it was about a certain spirit of poetry prompted by the land's authentic vistas. "I came yesterday to the classic land of the sun, of the Incas, of fable and history," Bolívar writes in an 1825 letter to his friend José Joaquín de Olmedo, one-time President of Ecuador and author of "La victoria de Junín," a poem in praise of the independence battles and of Bolívar's role in them—the poem with which I began this book, in fact (*El Libertador* 210). By drawing on Olmedo's depiction as well as his own understanding of the Incan capital, Bolívar locates the city's history in its autochthonous elements, in its pre-Colombian past; he grants it a history in which the powers-that-be are Incan and the poetry is local—not "foreign," not "alien":

Here the true sun is gold; the Incas are the viceroys of prefects; the fable is Garcilaso's history; history is the relation by Las Casas of the destruction of the Indies. An abstraction made of pure poetry, it calls to mind noble ideas, profound reflections; my soul is dazzled by the presence of primitive nature, evolved on its own, forming creations from its own elements based

on the model of its intimate inspirations, without any admixture of foreign works, or alien counsel, or the whims of the human spirit, or the contagion of the history of crime and the absurdities of our species. (*El Libertador* 210).

Bolívar appeals to an indigenous past prior to any intrusion or “the contagion of the history of crime and the absurdities of our species”—before human and environmental devastation (*El Libertador* 210). This past is Incan, poetic, primitive, and anchored in a premodern order of nature. His fiery will was ignited, Bolívar insists, by Humboldt’s writings on South America, which opened his eyes to the possibility of unification: “I feel a kind of rapture,” he writes in his Angostura address, “as if this land stood at the very heart of the universe, spread out from coast to coast between oceans separated by nature and which it is our task to reunite with long, broad canals” (*El Libertador* 53).

The “task to reunite” prompted by Humboldt and appreciated by Bolívar becomes, in the texts of subsequent writer-statesmen, instantiated as a sort of geographical discourse grounded in, but departing from, Humboldt. Yet what constitutes that departure?

To begin, each incarnation varies ever so slightly from the previous. Humboldt looks to a Strabonic form of geography because its aesthetics appeals to the masses and promises his works longevity. Yet his discursive practice—unlike Strabo’s—does not align with a political project from the outset. Rather, Humboldt first seeks knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which then becomes politicized after its creation. On the other hand, Bolívar, wholly indebted to Humboldt, sees in “pure poetry” a language of liberation. With his revolutionary ideas, he writes from the perspective of an independence-seeker, a fighter “contemplating the unification of this immense region” with an “imagination reflect[ing] on the centuries to come” (53). Consolidation is but a dream.

For Sarmiento, Zeballos, and da Cunha, consolidation is a reality, but an incomplete one—still a rough draft. Their writings represent an attempt to make of consolidation a national bestseller, literally and literally manifested in canonical texts that define the parameters of both a national territory and a national literature. They shake off the chains of colonialism as their nation-states gel into unified capitalist havens, zones of production and settlement that defy Eurocentric impositions at the expense of the very marginalized populations that nourish their notions of authenticity.

This paradox is one of many that signal their Humboldtian vestiges—to honor their autochthonous populations through an appeal to the primitive while, simultaneously, setting out to eliminate them piecemeal. This contradiction is embodied in *transculturated geographical discourse*, a style that—when read through the language theories of Strabo and Vico—reveals a return to the premodern, to concrete expression wherein form and content unite to give shape to the land. The national territory thus emerges as an outgrowth of literary language. This departure is liberating for the emergent nation-states in two ways.

First, to reproduce Humboldt's discursive practice wholesale would imply nothing more than imitating and bestowing unquestioned authority upon the Old World. Borrowing from Ángel Rama (1982), who applies Fernando Ortiz's anthropological use of *transculturation* to literature, we see a discursive practice that finds legitimacy in Humboldt, but breaks free from his European legacy. In so doing, the writer-statesmen I study produce the first non-indigenous geographies of the continent.<sup>19</sup> Second, their style mimetically consolidates, giving shape to a land unified in theory, not practice; through aesthetics, they represent what is to come and prefigure a harmonious nation-state.

In preparation for the chapters to come, let us take a moment to unpack the precise strategies that the figures of this study employ to break free of their European predecessors, including not just Humboldt but the Italian Agustín Codazzi, the German Hermann Burmeister, and the Englishman Henry Thomas Buckle, each of whom follow in Humboldt's footsteps traversing, charting, and depicting Latin American territories. The departure occurs in the realm of the poetic, used in the Greek sense of *poiesis* as creation, production, "imaginative making." I use the term *poetry* or *poetics* to describe the literary language that the figures of this study employ, for they themselves—together with Humboldt and Bolívar—often portray their aestheticized language as such. Whereas Humboldt's poetry serves a didactic project and ensures that he enters posterity, Latin America's statesmen realize similar objectives as their letters give shape to the land, consolidating it along the way. Their "poetry" is nearly synonymous with "spontaneity" and therefore the Jamesonian sense of style, which can be read as a socially symbolic act (*Political Unconscious* 225). Within Vico's rationalist perspective on the evolution of language, poetry is the foundation of writing, for barbarians lacked the ability to analyze and comprehend abstraction. Poetry is thus a necessity to understand the world, a result of our most germane,

innate, archaic curiosity to learn and access our surroundings. Under the rubric of style, we can consider Sarmiento's, Zeballos's, and da Cunha's unification of form and content—the Vichean conceptualization of poetry—outside of the parameters of proper verse.

If geographical discourse is an aestheticized means of describing the earth's contours, then transculturated geographical discourse takes that one step forward by shaping the earth with the tools of literature. By interrogating Latin American writer-statesmen's stylistic devices—alliteration, diction, anaphora, syntax, metaphor, and so forth—I highlight the ways in which they write the land as well as break down the component parts of two otherwise incongruent registers. Literature and geography align here under the umbrella of national consolidation. In thinking them together, I strive for a better political understanding of the specific form–content relations in these writers' monumental texts. Following Roberto Schwarz (2001), I put the poetic into conversation with the political. I abide by Schwarz's call to arms to conscientiously avoid the “current habit of dividing the aesthetic from the social” (19). The aesthetic must always, according to Schwarz, dialogue with the social. He maintains that provocative literary exploration best stems from “the close study of spheres distant from one another, together with an intuition into the totality that then emerges” (22). Through analysis of the geographical in conjunction with the literary—in other words, “materials and formations engendered (in the final analysis) outside of its own literary domain”—this book seeks to reveal the “substance” and “dynamism” driving the selected national narratives (Schwarz 22).

What subtext underlies these figures' invoking of land to literarily write the nation? How do they unite poetry and geography in the political act of giving form to content? To shed light on these questions, I rigorously analyze the language, especially the uses of metaphor, in the selected works. As is the case for Humboldt, metaphor reigns supreme in these narratives where, for example, the Argentine *pampa* and the Brazilian *sertão* both acquire the explicit and implicit qualities of the sea, chief among them its limitless expanse and unreachable horizon. Land, here, *is* water; Facundo Quiroga *is* tiger; the Republican army *is* barbarism. These metaphors suggest the recurrent unification of disparate elements; they create alignments between the known and the unknown, thereby demystifying and familiarizing both human subject and land. Metaphor imbues the texts with the rhetorical authority to map the Latin American road to progress by allowing language to mimic as well as

to construct the contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions rampant in each national landscape. These figures' writing strives to demonstrate the parallels between human life and the natural world, and if, as Ludmilla Jordanova (1986) indicates, "[i]deas like division of labour, progress and hierarchy appeared to have equal explanatory power in both realms," then "[t]his raises the question of metaphor—was it that society and nature were *like* each other, that is, linked through metaphorical language, or was it rather that they were different aspects of the *same* thing for which only one language was needed, social phenomena being merely more complex than organic ones?" (39, emphases in original). Like Humboldt, Latin America's writer-statesmen might argue for the former, for only through metaphor might we appropriate—or, should we say, civilize—the force of the land, of the primitive, of the barbaric. These writers strive to outline the parameters of a national literature by looking to its land. Only through the land might readers understand the national subject. For the figures of this study, this national subject—the Argentine gaucho or the Brazilian *jagunço*—exudes barbarity at its highest form: they and the ground they live on are monstrous. Every time that Sarmiento speaks of "barbarians" or da Cunha of "fanatics," they simultaneously speak of a land that breeds, precisely, barbarians and fanatics. Reformulating this relationship was their task, one they completely failed at, but in a spectacular way: emerging from this monstrous context, the textual form itself becomes a monster. To read these narratives is to tame the monster, and to draw on its wisdom mirrors the poetic process of making articulate a national geography. I thus end this chapter—and scaffold what is to come—with Vico's notion of poetic logic to hypothesize that their poetic process begins, incidentally, with metaphor.

In his essay on Vico's *New Science*, Hayden White asks, "What is the nature of the creative power of language?" (203). He contends that the answer can be found not in Vico's concept of poetic imagination, but rather in his theory of *metaphor*, which is developed in the context of, and as the key to, his discussion of poetic logic.

For Vico, poetic logic refers to the manner in which forms, as comprehended by primitive people, are signified. Because barbarians lacked the ability to analyze and to apprehend abstraction, they had to resort to their fantasy to understand the world. Vico contends that "poetic wisdom must have begun with a metaphysics which, unlike the *rational* and *abstract* metaphysics of today's scholars, sprang from the senses and imagination of the first people" (144, emphasis added). Therefore, Vico

asserts that the first people's knowledge of things was not "rational and abstract," but rather felt and imagined, and, in this vein, he denounces the metaphysics—the focus on the rational and the abstract—of his contemporaries. He states:

The countless abstract expressions which permeate our languages today have divorced our civilized thought from the senses, even among the common people. The art of writing has greatly refined the nature of our thought; and the use of numbers had intellectualized it, so to speak, even among the masses, who know how to count and reckon. [...] We are likewise incapable of entering into the vast imaginative powers of the earliest people. Their minds were in no way abstract, refined, or intellectualized; rather, they were completely sunk in their senses, numbed by their passions, and buried in their bodies. (147)

Denouncing both his precursors Aristotle and Plato as well as his contemporaries Patrizi, Caesar, and Castelvetro, Vico claims that "unlike them, we have discovered that poetry was born sublime precisely because it lacked rationality" (149). Poetry is a primitive necessity, a result of curiosity that "sprang naturally from their ignorance of causes" (144). Vico describes the giants' reaction to the first thunderclaps and lightning bolts, recounting that, in their ignorance, they imagined the skies to be a massive living being named Jupiter, who was thus "born naturally in poetry as divine archetype or imaginative universal" (146). The concept of "imaginative universal" appears to be the predecessor of the metaphor: Jupiter is sky; Achilles is bravery—form and content are indistinguishable. In Greek, Vico explains, "poet" means "creator," and in order to create, the first *Homo sapiens* perceived all of nature "as a vast living body that feels passions and emotions" (145–146).

Connecting known and unknown is essential for Strabo as well. Skeptic of math and the measurements and cartographic projections made by Eratosthenes, he believed that geographical description could not *but* be metaphorical. "He described the world in the most literal of ways," Simon Garfield (2013) tells us, wherein

Taken as a whole, the inhabited world resembled a *chlamys*, a short tapering cloak worn by Greek soldiers and hunters. Britain and Sicily were triangular, while India was a rhomboid. He compared the northern part of Asia to a kitchen knife; Iberia to an ox-hide; the Peloponnese to a leaf

on a plane tree; while Mesopotamia had the profile of a boat with the Euphrates as its keel and the Tigris the deck. (33)

In a move that hearkens back to Strabo and Humboldt, then, Latin America's writer-statesmen travel from the particular to the universal, from the part to the whole, allowing the modern-day "imaginative universal" to animate their narratives. With their stylized writing, they succeed in applauding the barbaric through what appears, at least on the surface, to be a civilized mode of representation. In reality, however, their language appeals to the rivals of civilization, to the poetics of the gaucho and the *jagunço*. With this appeal, they again uphold their original tendency to flit back and forth between deprecation and elevation. But as they poetically give form to the Latin American landscape, their linguistic admiration informs their political project, one in which the barbaric remains, in Luiz Costa Lima's words, "indispensable to national literary expression" (*The Dark Side of Reason* 169). Yet if, as Frederic Jameson contends, mediation allows us to read a given style as a projected solution, then we cannot but see its limits in what follows: despite their textual appeal to the land's barbarity, each author endorses (Sarmiento and Zeballos) or recounts with horror (da Cunha) what can most concisely be deemed genocide. By aspiring to geographically consolidate territory with the tools of literary language, Latin America's writer-statesmen reduce their nation-states to a totality, to a model of everydayness for a homogenous citizenry. In reality, however, land only becomes territory for a narrow, hegemonic segment of the population, while the subaltern is banished into unproductive terrain or, worse, slaughtered. This act is deleted from the national memory as contingency transforms into inevitability, and the social process becomes obscured by a technical procedure. Alexander von Humboldt, we might conclude, would have been none too pleased with this turn of events.

## NOTES

1. Kutzinski points to Ottmar Ette's *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung* (*Alexander von Humboldt and Globalization* 2009), a book-length study that anchors on transdisciplinarity and on the art of Humboldtian narrative, as well as Ette's early 2000s analyses, together with Nigel Leask's *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770–1840* (2002), as examples of such a turn. Within German-language criticism,



two of the most recent analyses of Humboldt's work center on his literary impulse. Johannes Görbert focuses on Georg Foster's influence on Humboldt in *Die Vertextung der Welt: Forschungsreisen als Literatur bei Georg Forster* (2014), while Annette Graczyk centers on the Humboldtian intersection of art and science in *Das literarische Tableau zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft* (2004). Adriana Méndez Rodenas traces Humboldt's influence in shaping women's traveling personae and their approaches to representing New World nature in *Transatlantic Travels to Nineteenth-Century Latin America: European Women Pilgrims* (2014).

2. Humboldt's approach has also been analyzed and unpacked under various names, chief among them "Humboldtian science," coined in 1959 by the famous historian of US Western exploration, William Goetzmann (1986, 53–54). Meant to signal the sort of methodology embraced by Humboldt's followers, the term speaks to Humboldt's search for patterns and unities that linked the cosmos on numerous levels, whether practical, philosophical, aesthetical, or spiritual. The term effectively became one and the same as "Romantic science." Big and unwieldy, "Humboldtian science" is, even for Humboldt, "extravagant" in its scope, for it describes "in one and the same work the whole material world—all that we know to-day of celestial bodies and of life upon the earth—from the nebular stars to the mosses on the granite rocks" (Humboldt, *Letters to Varnhagen* 35–39). My term, "geographical discourse," is meant to be a subset of "Humboldtian science." Its narrower focus allows us to tackle his ample interdisciplinary paradigm for the ways in which it nourishes Latin America's foundational narratives.
3. The new millennium has seen several other general-audience biographies of Humboldt, including Nicolaas Rupke's *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (U of Chicago P 2008) and Gerard Helferich's *Humboldt's Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Latin American Journey that Changed the Way We See the World* (Gotham Books 2004). Knopf actually bookends the English-language biographies of Humboldt with Helmut de Terra's *The Life and Times of Alexander von Humboldt* (Alfred A. Knopf 1955), which appeared a couple of decades before the other twentieth-century standout, Douglas Botting's *Humboldt and the Cosmos* (Harper and Row 1973).
4. In her forthcoming essay on Humboldt and the Orinoco river, Adriana Méndez Rodenas convincingly traces the ways in which Humboldt in fact sought to overwrite the accumulated European cartographic rendering of the Orinoco region by creating a definitive Master Map, thereby ensuring his own authorship and authority. Perhaps, then, Humboldt aims to be the final European voice, he who sets the stage for local interventions and revisions.

5. Like his brother Wilhelm, Alexander von Humboldt was also interested in indigenous languages, specifically their linguistic terms for and understandings of natural phenomena. I will return to this matter more explicitly in Chap. 4, where I examine writings from both Zeballos and Humboldt to unpack the indigenous roots of geographical discourse.
6. I use the word “extractivism” in Alberto Acosta’s sense, which refers to a mode of accumulation that began to be established on a massive scale over 500 years ago with the conquest and colonization of the periphery. He explains: “This extractivist mode of accumulation has been determined ever since by the demands of the metropolitan centres of nascent capitalism. Some regions specialized in the extraction and production of raw materials—primary commodities—while others took on the role of producing manufactured goods. The former export Nature, the latter import it” (62).
7. Unless otherwise signaled, the citations in this section come from the Abridged Edition of *Personal Narrative*, edited and translated by Jason Wilson (1996).
8. For a valuable discussion on the notion of cartographic accuracy, see David Turnbull’s *Maps Are Territories: Science Is an Atlas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1993), where he takes up the question in the context of indexicality (19; 41).
9. Contrary to much-cited criticism jumpstarted by Mary Louise Pratt’s indictment, Humboldt takes a polemical stance, regarding the New World as a land without history—a contention initiated by the French naturalist Comte de Buffon in the 1760s and 1770s and advanced into the nineteenth century by Hegel—arguing against its cultural and even geological “newness.” His writings bear testimony to societies with culture, with palaces and aqueducts and statues and temples, together with knowledge about astronomy and mathematics as well as more abstract concepts like “future” and “eternity.” Referring to the “happy revolution” in conceptualizations of non-European civilizations—an epistemological change that he himself ironically prompted with his capacious corpus—Humboldt begins the 1813 introduction of *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* with the satisfaction that his “study of the indigenous peoples of the Americas begins 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). See Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette’s 2012 edition of this text, which until now has never before been wholly translated into English, for an expansion on these ideas in their introduction, “The Art of Science: Alexander von Humboldt’s View of the Cultures of the World” (xv–xxv). Though their central thesis is that

Humboldt put pressure on the commonly held “(mis)understanding of the New World as a historyless ‘realm of nature’ populated by uncivilized roving hordes,” they do not lose sight of his fundamental Eurocentrism, albeit one that he, they say, “thematicized [...], always turning it into an occasion for critical self-reflection” (xvi–xix).

10. To be sure, Humboldt’s esteem for Bolívar inversely decreases as Bolívar’s authoritarian ways increase to the point of him being something like a tyrannical dictator; Humboldt recognizes that South America owed its liberation to Bolívar, but he found his authoritarian ways “illegal, unconstitutional and somewhat like that of Napoleon” (qtd. in Wulf 192).
11. Godlewska notes that Humboldt’s stance was “[p]erhaps in response to the influence of the early positivists,” a response that made him see “less opposition between description and theory than between pure empiricism and theoretical science. It was pure empiricism that was antithetical to the aims of his *Cosmos*; its unreflective and uncritical approach to nature would mislead” (123).
12. For a country-by-country chronology of international geographical societies and Spanish colonial acquisitions, see Eduardo Barredo Risco, “La Cartoteca de la Real Sociedad Geográfica,” <http://www.realsociedadgeografica.com/en/pdf/cartotecacsic.pdf>.
13. Simon Garfield explains in *On the Map* (2013) that Strabo himself attributed his success to the fact that he, unlike many of his contemporaries, had indeed traveled and personally viewed the locales he described with such detail. These travels of course were a life’s work, perhaps explaining why Strabo was nearly 60 before his first volume appeared in 7 BC, while the last made its way to the world a year before his death at the age of 85. All but 1 of the 17 volumes of *Geographica* survive to the present day.
14. This lack of cultural depth does not mean a lack of smarts, however. Strabo compliments the Roman tenacity, noting that “this people, beginning from the single city of Rome, obtained possession of the whole of Italy, by warfare and prudent administration; and how, afterwards, following the same wise course, they added the countries all around it to their dominion” (Strabo 296). For Strabo, acquiring territory is tantamount to success.
15. Ackerman notes that, even now, we are much more inclined to approve the use of mapping drones to gather intelligence abroad, but once those same technologies are used on us, we consider them an infringement upon our privacy and our rights.
16. This relationship between the ideological and the practical, between the iconic and the instrumental, is of primary essence to my work. For, as J.B. Harley notes, cartography and then its offshoot of geography served to authenticate and manifest territorial claims of empires and of their

subsequent nation-states. So while on the one hand maps practically served the planning of military operations, the creation of trade routes, and the fortification of territories—and, in Latin America, even the proselytization of indigenous peoples—they also naturalized territories and confirmed their existence and grandeur. See Harley (2001, 51–60) for an overarching understanding of these ideas, and Craib (2004) and Padrón (2004) for analyses grounded in the specificities of the Latin American context.

17. Harvey (1989) notes that “the mapping of the world opened up a way to look upon space as open to appropriation for private uses” (228), while Woodward (1991) insists that the rationalization of abstract space facilitated the notion of a world “over which systematic dominance was possible” (87). Such statements suggest that the geographical imaginary came to exist prior to the colonial encounter and even predicated it. Yet what is essential to remember—and here I am indebted to Ricardo Padrón—is that “[f]ar from fueling the origins of colonialism, the culture of abstraction begins to look a rationalization after the fact, an attempt to grapple with the challenges posed by a wider world, a world built by the travels of a culture who thought about space primarily in terms of distance” (235–236). In this sense, then, imperial and anti-imperial geography perhaps differ in order: after all, the independence projects relied heavily on Humboldtian maps to defeat the Spanish and Portuguese as well as the internal threat of the unsettled indigenous populations.
18. I’m indebted to Harley’s ideas in “New England Cartography and the Native Americans,” in which he notes a similar trend in North American geographical practices, as well as to his “Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter.”
19. My use of *transculturation* implies a fusion between genres as well as between Occidental and indigenous geographies. I thus call attention to a multidirectional process of cultural transformation, precisely the corrective that Ortiz offered to Bronislaw Malinowski’s term *acculturation*, which signaled cultural changes only in one direction. I offer that the Janus-faced figures of this study look both forward to their European models, and also backward to indigenous roots. Beyond Rama, I build upon the work of a long lineage of Latin Americanists who appropriate Ortiz’s term *transculturation*, chief among them Mary Louise Pratt, who also applies it in relation to Spanish American writers’ “Humboldtian page-snatching,” what she describes as “a study in the dynamics of creole self-fashioning” (181, 5). Pratt examines the works of Bello, Bolívar, Heredia, and Sarmiento, focusing less on *Facundo* and more on *Viajes*. I extend and complicate her work by embracing the ways in which Latin America fits into emancipatory acts of transculturation that were happening across the world. In this sense, my study contributes to a

transnational and interdisciplinary conversation already begun by the likes of Barbara Mundy (*The Mapping of New Spain* 1996), Thongchai Winichakul (*Siam Mapped* 1994), and Sumathi Ramaswamy ("Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India," 2001), each of whom explores the ways in which colonized peoples crafted cartographic and geographical responses to imperialism that coalesced autochthonous mapping traditions with Occidental ones.

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