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## In connection with all things : the memory of Alexander Humboldt and his works in the context of 19th century thought in Europe and America

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IN CONNECTION WITH ALL THINGS: THE MEMORY OF ALEXANDER  
HUMBOLDT AND HIS WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY  
THOUGHT IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Ray Joseph Werner  
University of Northern Iowa  
July 2015

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the memory of Alexander von Humboldt, the explorer and philosopher who was known for his travels throughout Europe, Asia, South America, and North America. This paper will examine primary and secondary sources throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that mark a change in just how Humboldt was remembered, once as a great thinker, philosopher, and romanticist, then eventually as little more than an empirical scientist. This thesis will contribute to modern understandings of this man by looking at popular publications and writings that track this change over time. It will contribute to the modern understanding and revisiting of who exactly Humboldt was and how he helped form the understanding of the American West, but also the likes of Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Darwin. There was much more to this man than what has been assumed over the course of the last century.

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts

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## FOREWORD

German academia has had a strong influence on the American intellectual tradition, and the works of Alexander Humboldt are an exemplary demonstration of this. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, German universities operated by attracting many of the world's leading intellectuals, who passed their knowledge on to their pupils in a very top-down, authoritarian, lecture setting. Their research was heavily critiqued and stringent peer review became a standard that the rest of the world would also imitate. Beyond this level of pontification from master to pupil, the students were encouraged to take what they had learned and build upon it with their own ideas and their own experiences. The students who were successful often became professors themselves, and with the same model of education, would instruct their pupils to do the same. This produced a wealth of unique ideas. The works of Marx, Engels, and Feuerbach, for instance, built upon the work of Hegel, who built upon the work of Kant, who in turn was building upon the work of other scholars who studied even others before. This tradition yielded some of the best thinkers the world had seen to date, many of whose ideas are still studied today and taught in college classrooms.

This tradition effected American intellectualism and informed the development of academic research, teaching, and philosophical thought in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Universities and other institutions in the U.S. were still young and looked to their well-established European counterparts as models.

The work of Alexander Humboldt has long been an overlooked piece of this pattern, but modern historiography and historic research can demonstrate the role he played in the formation of thought in 19<sup>th</sup> century United States.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea can be explored in: Eric Wilson, *Romantic Turbulence: Chaos, Ecology, and American Space* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), and is touched upon in other texts cited throughout this paper. Christoph Strupp and Birgit Zischke's *German Americana, 1800-1955: A Comprehensive Bibliography of German, Austrian, and Swiss Books and Dissertations on the United States* also highlights this theme.



## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1804, Alexander Humboldt and his company of navigators and scientists visited Philadelphia and Washington, DC. This came as the final leg of their American journey, which did not fail to satisfy their desires for Romantic adventure, biological and geological data collection, and ethnographic encounters. They navigated the waters of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers, climbed the summit of Mt. Chizembaro to a height above sea level that no European had previously been, and found themselves interacting with indigenous cultures and colonial settlers. This trip was nothing short of difficult. It was also deeply rewarding for them, and a chance to visit with the most renowned minds of the United States served as an excellent cap for the entire adventure.

While in the US, Humboldt and company met with landscape painters to share details on floral, faunal, and geological depictions; some met with scholars, professors, and members of the American Philosophical Society to initiate a dialogue on the various findings of their travels; and some also met with prominent American politicians, well known to Europeans for their development

of a representative democracy and other varying honors. Perhaps the most notable of these interactions came between Humboldt and President Thomas Jefferson. The two knew much about each other long before the encounter even occurred: their intellectual interests were not all that different and each had read some of the other's writings. In fact, reports indicate that the two spent much of their time together in constant dialogue about science, the environment, and politics. They covered these topics almost always in a comparative fashion, finding commonalities and differences between Europe, North America, and South America. These two men found much they agreed upon, until the conversation turned to the issue of slavery in the United States. Humboldt ardently opposed slavery of any kind in any place and on the spot he charged the president with the abolition of slavery in the American South. Jefferson acknowledged Humboldt's sentiment, but also recognized that he could not oblige the charge.

Humboldt and Jefferson remained in regular correspondence for many years following this encounter. Although this disagreement recurred throughout their many letters, it did not end the friendship. This relationship - and the dialogue it triggered- serves as evidence for a

broader discussion on the impact of Humboldt on the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, it evinces how Humboldt worked to overcome racism and cultural biases everywhere he went. He covered these themes in his *Kosmos* and in fuller detail with both *Political Essays on the Kingdom of New Spain* and *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America*. He also worked to demonstrate this paradigm in his actions, as in one case he wrote the legislation banning the possession of slaves in Prussia. Through these efforts, Humboldt demonstrably worked to encourage a liberal, inclusive worldview on both sides of the Atlantic.

Not all historians agree on this issue. By the 1980s a well-developed historiography depicted a Humboldt that was far from liberal or inclusive. Historians of the post-colonial generation described him as a stereotypical white, elite, protestant male from Europe, whose efforts strove to support imperialist expansionism. Their narrative of his life focused on his education as a geologist and mine inspector, close connections within Europe's well-to-do circles, and his duty to report locations of various minerals to whichever monarchy was appropriate at the time (For example: he reported to the Spanish crown while he was

in South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean; he reported to the Russian royal family while he was in Siberia and the Kazakh steppe). This was not a narrative of liberalism, inclusiveness, or even romantic escapism.

One such historian is Mary Louise Pratt, who offers this sort of interpretation in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.<sup>1</sup> In addition to depicting his personal life this way, she maintains an interpretation of how his works influenced the European paradigms of race and culture. In the book's first section, Pratt describes Humboldt's works as "transculturing". By using this term, she means that the European readership found in his works an encompassing and extensive introduction to various cultures with which they had not previously been familiarized. In the second section of the text, she attempts to demonstrate how the "transculturation" of the European paradigm led to a new understanding or "re-invention" of the Americas as "young and full of potential". She believes that the "transcultured" perceptions of America as "young and full of potential" led to a quantification of resources—both human and non-human—

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

for European manipulation in the western hemisphere. So, not only does she believe that Humboldt directly felt a sense of dominance against the lands and indigenous people of America, but also that his writings indirectly created a confident trend towards further colonization and expansion of capitalism in the new world, with this supposedly comfortable understanding of the things and people there. Pratt published several articles that similarly justify this interpretation, including her notable piece, "Alexander von Humboldt and the Reinvention of America".

Anthony Pagden takes a similar approach in *European Encounters With the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism*.<sup>2</sup> Again, he portrays Humboldt as an elitist, Prussian scholar, working for the advancement of Berlin and other European metropolises. But rather than focusing on the social and cultural aspects, as Pratt does, his evidence relies mainly in the field of scientific history. He believes that before Humboldt became popular, scientific discovery progressed very slowly, especially when foreign travel was required. Pagden then details the trends in post-Humboldt scientific discovery; he shows how scientific

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

travel and scientific advancement took off in a furious fervor and how later European imperialists later used these trends to further manipulate lands, resources, and people abroad. This is then connected to the ideas and methods sparked by the works of Humboldt's supposedly imperialist works. He fulfills this conclusion by carefully selecting episodic bits of Humboldt's life and matching them to those of people who acted much more imperialistically.

The message of these historians should not go unnoticed; they introduce important themes and patterns. The post-colonial narrative, though important for an overall understanding of global society, misses the mark regarding Humboldt. Perhaps their interpretations came to be informed by an era of ever-changing Humboldt historiography that focused too much on his scientific advancements rather than on his romantic ideals. Beginning early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century historians turned away from his romantic, liberal persona, and focused specifically on his scientific advancements. These historians wrote such accounts in conformity to their gilded age, progressive culture. They focused on his concrete "exploits" rather than the more abstract big picture. This trend continued well into the 1980s and 1990s, as demonstrated by the works

of Pratt and Pagden. In fact, most people today function with the understanding of Humboldt as an empiricist and scientist working for European monarchs. Few people see more to him than this, simply because that is all that they have been taught.

A newly observable trend in the historiography combats this perception, and it comes primarily from the discipline of Environmental History. Aaron Sachs' book *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* and article "The Ultimate 'Other': Post-Colonialism and Alexander Von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship with Nature" create a vivid narrative of Humboldt's life and adventures while also supporting a strong claim against Pratt's interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Sachs demonstrates quite expertly just how ecologically and environmentally minded Humboldt should be seen from both his writings and his actions. Using the lens of Environmental History, Sachs takes a firm stance against an imperialist vision of Humboldt and creates a narrative that

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism*. New York: Viking Publishing, 2006.

depicts him as kind, gentle, widely inclusive, and concerned about the lands he visited.

Likewise, Laura Dassaw-Walls' "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America" details just how popular Humboldt was in the United States, first as a traveler and scientist, then once his magnum opus, *Kosmos*, was published in English, as a literary and philosophical figure as well.<sup>4</sup> She details the litany of prominent American thinkers who referenced him in their daily musings and how many various publications cited his works. By detailing his influence on the transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as environmentalist John Muir, Dassaw-Walls shows that Humboldt's worldview of ecological inclusiveness and beliefs about the preservation of the natural world actually encouraged a culture of good stewardship and self-determination with other lands and likewise other cultures.

In this, the first section of my project, I intend to expand upon the works of historians such as Sachs and

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001).



Dassaw-Walls by focusing not only on Humboldt's environmentalism (as they have done quite thoroughly), but by focusing more specifically on the racial and cultural commentaries within his writings. This to me is an obvious avenue for further dialogue on the impact of Humboldt, as few historians give it more than a paragraph or so within their writings.

The second section of this project will explore other popular German authors, contemporary to Humboldt who visited the western hemisphere and subsequently addressed issues race, culture, preservation, and romantic connectedness in their writings. The historiography on this topic is broader and scarcer than that previously discussed about Humboldt.

"'Through a Glass, Darkly': Changing German Ideas of American Freedom, 1776-1806" and "Weary of Germany - Weary of America: Perceptions of the United States in Nineteenth Century Germany" edited by David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, offer initial insights to the German understanding of racial and cultural issues in the Western

Hemisphere, specifically in the United States.<sup>5</sup> "Through a Glass, Darkly" demonstrates how Germans were initially confused about the direction of American constitutionalism within the first half century of its independence. It showed that Germans projected their own fear of Germany's own future (caught between conservative monarchism and a growing belief in liberal nationalism) onto the burgeoning USA. It demonstrates those that feared traditional, religious indoctrination of conservatism in Germany likewise feared a religious doctrine in the United States, while on the other hand, those that feared a totally secular Europe also feared that a totally secular US would emerge. This disparity came from the many inconsistent and often confusing reports from family, friends, and missionaries in the New World and along the American Frontier.

The other Article, "Weary of Germany - Weary of America" deals with German publications, both popular and academic, about the United States; this article makes a special point to contrast the Romantic thinkers with the

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<sup>5</sup> David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, eds. *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: German and America since 1776* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1997).

more empirical materialists at the time.<sup>6</sup> The Romantics primarily cared about the new frontiers as long as they could "convince themselves that they should believe in the country's oneness with nature" and the transcendental human experience. It also hints at the anxieties of American and European politics, as detailed in "Through a Glass Darkly".

Most histories tend to corroborate these findings. In Greg C. Stein's "And the Strife Never Ends: Indian-White Hostility as seen by European Travelers in America, 1800-1860", there is an analysis of personal correspondences and private journals published across Europe, in regards to this subject. Stein's title describes his piece perfectly; he examines various ethnographic observations made by various Europeans during their visits to the American West in the early nineteenth century. Most of the travelers examined in this piece come from England, France, Russia, or Germany and were primarily traveling with engineering corps or militia groups. Specifically, the German perceptions of the White-Indian conflict were mixed, but overall, were generally more homogeneous and sympathetic towards the Indians than travelers of other origins. The

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<sup>6</sup> David E. Barclay and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt, eds. *Transatlantic Images and Perceptions: German and America since 1776* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1997).

article concludes that the Germans offered more sympathies than the other groups. For instance, it references how Balduin Moellhausen was "the most vehement in his denunciations of the provocations" of the whites against the Indians in his writings of 1858, describing how Indians merely fought to protect themselves against the white aggressors; how Francis Grund took a moderate approach; and how Friedrich von Raumer's stance proved quite different altogether, when he noted how important it was to act early against the Indians, so that later conflicts against them could be won more easily. Although varied, most of the German travelers found sympathy for the native people: the cartographer Charles Preuss lamented most sorrowfully that the only US stance towards them was "to kill them all - kill, kill, nothing less . . . with a hundred good riflemen he would exterminate all the Indians in the world". These sources may have been variant, but offered the German public much desired insights to their questions about the very enticing subjects of race and culture in the new world.

In *Publishing Culture and the "Reading nation": German Book History in the Nineteenth Century*, Lynn Tatlock details the broader scope of Teutopshere literature, which

co-opts the general historiographical agreement on this topic.<sup>7</sup> Siegfried Mews, with "German Reception of American Writers in the Late Nineteenth Century"<sup>8</sup>, and Robert Darnton's "History of Reading" indicate the same.

Paul Wilhelm's *Travels in North America, 1822-1824*, Duden Gottfried's *Report on a Journey to the Western States of North America and a Stay of Several Years Along the Missouri (During the Years of 1824, '25, '26, and 1827)* can be treated as a primary source.<sup>9</sup> Upon initial review, these two pieces seem quite different: Duden visited the Lower Mississippi Valley with the intentions of finding a suitable area for German immigration (the early German settlers in Missouri called themselves the followers of Duden), while Wilhelm's tour served primarily for his own enjoyment, satisfaction, and personal research interests. Despite these differences, they both make a point to reference the works of Humboldt as informative guides to

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<sup>7</sup> Lynn Tatlock ed. *Publishing Culture and the "Reading Nation": German Book, History in the Nineteenth Century* (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Mews, "German Reception of American Writers in the Late Nineteenth Century." *Atlantic Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (March 1969): 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Wilhelm Württemberg, *Travels in North America, 1822-1824*. Edited by Savoie Lottinville. W. Translated by Robert Nitske (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973).

both overseas travel and scientific methodologies. In addition to their shared interest in Humboldt's writings, they both create a commentary on race relations in the United States, including Euro-Americans, Native Americans, and African-Americans. Both of these men's works were published and distributed across the German-speaking lands.

Friedrich Gerstäcker spent six years in the United States. He was just 21 when he left his Saxon home in 1837, having nothing more than a bit of wealth from his opera-singing father, a desire for adventure found while reading the works of Alexander Humboldt and fictional tales such as *Robinson Crusoe*, and a bit of training from his farming apprenticeship. During this time in the United States, in between his extensive tours around the country, he worked as a steamboat deck hand, a trapper in the Indian Territories (now Oklahoma), a hotel manager in Louisiana, and several other odd jobs. This temporarily quelled his taste for adventure and in 1849 set out for an adventure of global proportions. This tour included visits to German communes across the South American continent, participation in the California Gold Rush, whaling in the Pacific isles, participating in the Australian Gold Rush, and then settling back down in Saxony in 1852. In 1860 he visited

South American German colonies again, and explored the Northern Nile region on his way back to Europe via North Africa. Gerstäcker intended to not only see and explore the world, but share it as well. He did so by writing novels, and by 1850 these novels topped the best-selling lists among the German-speaking readership. The most common themes on these novels honed in on social issues of the American West, where he had spent six years—a majority of his time abroad. Through them, he constructed stories relating to racial-ethnic relations in the United States (Euro-American, African-American, and Native-American) and issues of social justice that fascinated his German readership.<sup>10</sup>

By this time in the German-speaking lands, the United States found itself as a hot topic in literature, tourism spheres, academia, and various scientific circles. Universities across Europe began to build American Studies programs and the Germans, especially at Goettingen and Berlin, were leading the way. This fascination with American lifestyle was built upon by the explorers like

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Gerstäcker, *Wild Sport in the American West: The Narrative of a German Wanderer beyond the Mississippi, 1837-1843*, English edition. 1854. (Leipzig: 1845).

Humboldt whose travels were widely-known and whose writings on both science and socio-cultural issues gained widespread recognition. The motif of open lands and expanding civilization captivated the German minds in both fiction and non-fiction. The concept of a strong democracy was also capturing the minds and hearts of the Germans, as a reflection of their own struggles between conservative monarchical reign and democratic reforms. This is strongly supported by a collection of German books and dissertations from this time period. Christoph Strupp and Birgit Zischke's *German Americana, 1800-1955: A Comprehensive Bibliography of German, Austrian, and Swiss Books and Dissertations on the United States* highlights this theme.

Humboldt built into his writings an idea that all people—regardless of race, culture, creed, or education—were equally important. He believed that whatever the Europeans could teach to the indigenous people of other continents, there was just as much that they could teach the Europeans. He believed in equality and fair treatment; he was a major opponent to American slavery, which he made very clear to President Jefferson on his short visit in 1804; he even authored legislation in Prussia banning the possession of slaves. Humboldt's travels, writings, and



liberal ideas on equality and justice greatly influenced men like Gerstäcker. A relationship exists between the growing romantic ideals of the German-speaking people around this time, and their ideas on race, identity, and justice. By exploring the life and works of Frederick Gerstäcker (as well as Duden, Wilhelm, et al.) in relation to those of Humboldt and related German authors who visited the Western Hemisphere in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The significance of this project can be seen with the large number of German immigrants that moved to the new world during the nineteenth century, especially to the United States. German immigration to the United States peaked in 1854, when over 215,000 people of German heritage and culture walked through American ports. And although each person had their own reason for immigrating, this is an important analysis in understanding their preconceived understandings of the United States and expectations upon arrival. This common body of German language literature helped to inform these worldviews and can help in understanding this migration, apart from the superficial, usual analysis of reasons why they left their homelands. This project will eventually find in itself a fuller

understanding of what brought so many German speaking people across the Atlantic Ocean.

## CHAPTER 2

## HUMBOLDT BACKGROUND

Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt, more commonly known as Alexander von Humboldt or Baron von Humboldt, was born into a wealthy Prussian family on 14 September 1769. At the age of twenty, he and his older brother Wilhelm, acquired the family's large inheritance, and both would practically live off of this wealth for the rest of their lives. Wilhelm became an expert pedagogue, professor of linguistics and philosophy, and master of statecraft in Berlin. He used his wealth to endow the University of Berlin which he founded in 1810. Alexander however, did not spend his inheritance on many domestic or publically-minded projects. Alexander, having always held a sense of inferiority to his affluent and socially-graceful older brother, used his inheritance to leave the world of high European society in Berlin, to study his wide-ranging interests, and to do what he longed to do more than anything else—escape. By the age of thirty, he was given an opportunity to do just that.

Alexander studied at numerous universities across Germany, many of them considered to be the most prestigious universities of the age: Jena, Gottingen, Freiberg,

Frankfurt am Main, among others. And at these schools, he studied a wide range of disciplines: International Finance, Foreign Languages, Mineralogy, Botany, Anatomy, Astronomy, and Philosophy. By the time he was at the age of thirty he had been working as a mine inspector for the state of Prussia and had several publications on topics such as the movement of various minerals underneath the Earth's surface, the dangers of over-mining and over-foresteing, and the interrelation of plant species across latitudinal zones. It was in these formative years that Alexander went to Paris and met Aime Bonpland, a well-known botanist, with whom he would remain life-long friends. At some point in late 1788 or early 1789, the two went on a freelance expedition around the Mediterranean to study the interrelation of plant species and to get some space from the metropolises of Northern Europe. Alexander's inheritance financially backed this trip—just as it did for almost every trip that Alexander would ever take.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For access to the most complete details on Humboldt's early life, please see the first two chapters of: Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking Publishing 2006). There he details how the life and times of Alexander von Humboldt influenced him and gave him his very multifaceted convictions/philosophies. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 detail his personal influences, to whom he was a strong influence, as well as his visit to the United States.

The two men travelled around parts of Mediterranean Europe, and while in Spain, were serendipitously granted an audience with King Charles IV. Alexander was able to persuade the Spanish king to allow the two men safe and free passage through all parts of Spain's possessions in the Western hemisphere. The king agreed, with one stipulation: that any valuable information, scientific findings, and locations of any sorts of minerals be reported back to him. The two men agreed, and with a small entourage of fellow geographers and scientists, landed in what is now Venezuela on 16 July 1799.

While on this expedition, Alexander led this group of men through the South American landscape, charting the Orinoco and Amazon Rivers, scaling most of the way up Mount Chimbaro (thought to be the world's highest mountain at the time), visiting cities like Lima, Caracas, Bogotá, and others, and making contact with indigenous people as well. Parts of Mexico and Cuba were also visited on this excursion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For Humboldt's personal account of this trip, please see his: *Personal Narratives on the Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America, During the Year 1799-1804*, and *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*. Together, these two pieces give a detailed account of Humboldt's trip. The *Personal Narratives* reads more like a travelogue, giving detailed information regarding his methodology, itinerary, and scientific findings. The *Political Essays* is his critique on the

It was reported by several men of his team that Humboldt would often times stare at any given plant or natural formation for twenty or thirty minutes before examining it scientifically, just to give it a chance to impress him. By examining his works, one can see how deeply these Romantic experiences forged his personal beliefs and philosophy. From this point forward, Alexander von Humboldt expressed a strong conviction in the interconnection of all species (an inclination that Darwin would take and repurpose), that all peoples and cultures are equal and have equal dignity, and that the arts– not the science– are the primary modes for one to find his or her own place in the world. In the years following this trip, Alexander wrote extensively, composing several voluminous books and tens of thousands of personal correspondences that also show this deeply Romantic philosophy. In writing, he hoped that these numinous experiences of nature could be shared with readers who would never have the opportunity to travel and see them for themselves. He and Bonpland spent four years exploring Spain's possessions in this manner, exploring not only for the sake of science, but for a

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Spanish mistreatment of native peoples and poor stewardship of the land, among other things.

higher meaning to life, existence, and community. It is these details that many 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars have overlooked.

Before heading back to the cities of Paris and Berlin<sup>3</sup>, Alexander and his crew made a two month visit to the United States of America, the place he was known to adore more than any other. He even exclaimed later in life, while addressing a group of Americans in Berlin that he felt at least "half an American" because it was the country that he considered to hold truest, but not perfectly, to his radically liberal, democratic beliefs. During late May, June, and early July of 1804, Alexander von Humboldt visited the cities of Philadelphia and Washington. He made use of every precious moment of this trip too: visiting with James Madison and his family, President Jefferson (with whom he would remain a close and frequent correspondent and confidant), the American Philosophical Society, various painters, various botanists and scientists, and the list could go on.

To the American public, which was already well familiar with his endeavors in both the sciences and the

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<sup>3</sup> Paris and Berlin were the cities in which Humboldt spent the majority of his remaining years, undertook the daunting task of analyzing the data and objects collected on his trip, and wrote extensively.

arts, Humboldt became an instant celebrity. Frederick Church, Americas most renowned Romantic landscape painter went on a trip to the Andes just to experience the sights and sounds that Alexander once did; Edgar Allen Poe dedicated "Eureka!", the last thing he ever wrote, to him; John Muir is known to have claimed how deeply he "desire[d] to be a Humboldt"; Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson both referenced Humboldt's works continually; and Charles Darwin too found inspiration in his works. Less recognizable people also found inspiration in him, including the surveyors of the American West, various scientists and philosophers, and just ordinary travelers from all around the world.<sup>4</sup>

Humboldt rose to such stardom in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that a large number of cities, counties, and geographical features have been given his namesake, and the

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<sup>4</sup> For details regarding Humboldt's travels in the United States, see Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 121-134; and, Ingo Schwarz, "Alexander von Humboldt's Visit to Washington and Philadelphia, His Friendship with Jefferson, and his Fascination with the United States," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 44-56. For Muir, see: Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *The Life of John Muir* (New York: Knopf, 1945), 96. Frederick Turner, *John Muir: Rediscovering America* (Cambridge, MA: Merloyd Lawrence, 1958), pp. 65-66. For Darwin, see: Francis Darwin, ed., *The Letters of Charles Darwin, Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1959), p. 422.



entire front page of the *New York Times* on 15 September 1869 was devoted to him. It shows how many tens of thousands of people celebrated the centennial of his birth in many cities around the country. These celebrations included various parades, eulogies, and an unveiling of a Humboldt bust in Central Park. The banner on the day's paper read "HUMBOLDT. The One Hundredth Birthday of the Philosopher. Celebration Generally Throughout the Country. Unveiling of the Bust at the Central Park. ORATION BY DR. FRANCIS LIEBER. Processions, Banquet and Speeches in this City. EXTENSIVE OBSERVANCES IN BOSTON. Eulogistic Address by Professor Agasiz." Every square inch of this page and a portion of the next were dedicated to explaining how the previous day's celebrations were handled in specific cities across North America and Europe.<sup>5</sup> Cities with the largest public celebrations included Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Chicago.

This stardom seemed to last into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as publications about—both popular and academic—sold steadily until about the 1940s, though with a steady decline. By the 1950s publications and references to Humboldt seem to have

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<sup>5</sup> "HUMBOLDT.: The One Hundredth Birthday of the Philosopher. Celebration Generally Throughout the Co..." *New York Times*, 15 September 1869.

dropped quite considerably. Simple searches in the University of Northern Iowa's Rod Library and affiliated networks demonstrate a unique history of authorship about the "German Baron". Such a search garners a large number of texts specifically about Humboldt the individual—many of them seemingly hagiographic. But upon further examination, one finds that nearly all of these texts were written during or before the 1950s. Yes, the university has kept them around and maybe for quite a good reason; after the 1950s there was a markedly steep decline in Humboldt publications, making the older works the best available references. This decline into somewhat of a historical oblivion lasted until the later 1990s, when something happened in the historical literature that made him relevant again. During the 1990s and into the present day, Humboldt has made a still-growing resurgence within the historical literature. This trend offers myriad historiographic questions on which one could delve: why was there such a strong publication history on Humboldt in the first place? Why did these publications drop out of fashion? Did they drop out of fashion or out of relevancy? And, why is he making a comeback into the historical literature?

Laura Dassaw Walls is one of two prominent historians working to bring Humboldt back again. In her article, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America" she details just how popular Humboldt was in the United States, first as a traveler and scientist, then once his magnum opus, *Kosmos*, was published in English, as a literary and philosophical figure as well. She details the litany of prominent American thinkers who used his works in their daily musings and how many various publications cited his works. These publications ranged from scientific journals, to popular publications like poetry. On top of these connections, Walls points out three very important pieces of American History that added to his fame. One, he was considered a "Second Columbus" and often cited and taken out of context for reasons of westward expansion and supporter of manifest destiny.<sup>6</sup> Second, Walls points out that he was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson

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<sup>6</sup> Humboldt, in his writings, commented on the pattern of great civilizations' tendencies to grow and develop within certain limits of latitude. Many American exception lists and imperialists understood this as a reason for the United States to continue its path within these very same degrees of geography: Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 126. In regards to manifest destiny, this is one Historical Context that I feel has been ignored in this historiographic debate and will pick up further in my primary research.

and contemporary of the American revolutionaries, an association that made him a naturally-popular and reminiscent figure of historical authority. And third, Walls briefly cites America's "German Craze" in the antebellum period, in which Americans had a fascination with German thought and aesthetics in general.<sup>7</sup>

As to his fall into general obscurity, she gives two features of American history that account for this phenomenon. First was the Civil War, which to her sparked a turn toward industrialization and capitalist competition; the other was Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* being published the same year as his death, which changed Humboldt's harmonious interconnection of all living things into an interconnectedness of challenge, competition, and survival. In sum, Walls sees the end of the Humboldt craze as being related to his perceivably naïve and harmoniously Romantic perception of life as competition took the main stage within the many facets of American scientific and philosophical thought.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 127.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist*

Aaron Sachs is the other leading historian on Humboldt. His book "The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism" attributes the fall of Humboldtian scholarship at least in part to religion. The British public initially dismissed his works as "heresy" for not including the word God anywhere, but Americans could find "the Spirit of God" within his works on unity of human beings, working within the Deist, Transcendentalist, and Agnostic traditions, perhaps a part of Walls' "German Craze". But never the less, with the Great Awakening and further developments of Christianity within American daily life, Humboldt's godless perspectives grew out of favor.<sup>9</sup> In the book's prologue, Sachs also discusses Walls' interpretation of Darwin having taken over the scientific

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8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 128. For information about Walls interpretations on this issue please see Laura Dassaw Walls, "'The Napoleon of Science': Alexander von Humboldt in Antebellum America," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 14 no. 1 (1990): 71-98; and. Laura Dassaw Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*, Madison Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. Dassaw Walls is a Thoreau historian, as indicated by her works here, and has subsequently been led to the important role of Humboldt within the American conscience during this period.

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism* (New York: Viking Publishing, 2006), 90-92. Walls and Sachs are both Environmental historians who have rediscovered Humboldt, for reasons discussed in their works, and each of them have found certain reasons that make him relevant to any sort of study of 19<sup>th</sup> century United States.

mode of thought. He gives value to this as well, saying that the scientific and literary communities took a liking to Darwin's discipline-specialization and specificity in writing, as opposed to Humboldt's broad and multi-discipline works. This idea of both religious development and Darwinism seem to be contradictory.<sup>10</sup>

In his article, "The Ultimate 'Other': Post-Colonialism and Alexander Von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship with Nature" Aaron Sachs gives deeper insight to why Humboldt was greatly ignored throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries middle years. He points to post-colonialist historians such as Mary Louise Pratt and Anthony Pagden, as the responsible figures for losing sight of him. Pratt and Pragden<sup>11</sup> often discuss Humboldt as a European, male, elitist that worked to empower the colonial empires. For this reason, many historians have come to write him off as just another European elite scientist travelling what he perceived as "virgin" lands. Sachs concedes that Humboldt's works have often been mis-interpreted this way and often he

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<sup>10</sup> I feel that the religious explanation is the least convincing reason for this trend. If godlessness rendered Humboldt unwanted, then it would certainly have done the same for Darwin.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); and, Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1994).

was working under the name of the Spanish crown or Russian Czar, but that a close examination of his writings and correspondences definitively state the opposite. Sachs is working to bring Humboldt back into relevancy from the post-colonial turn that he believes wrote him off far too quickly.<sup>12</sup>

Kent Mathewson is a geographer, who discusses the importance of Humboldt to the United States in his article called "Alexander von Humboldt's Image and Influence in North American Geography, 1804-2004". After detailing the long history popularity, and legacy of Humboldt to the disciplines of Human Geography, Physical Geography, and others, Mathewson discusses the "Turn of the Century Downturn" in Humboldt's prominence. Again, during this period the eclipse of Darwin's specificity and "pessimism" over Humboldt's "Enlightenment optimism and Romantic exuberance" becomes evident. But during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century he remained unforgotten, still remembered within

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<sup>12</sup> Aaron Sachs, "The Ultimate 'Other': Post-colonialism and Alexander von Humboldt's Ecological Relationship With Nature," *History and Theory* 42, no. 4 (December 2003): 111-135. In this piece, Sachs does not make an effort to disqualify the school of post-colonial history, but does strongly believe that they have overlooked the true intentions and efforts of Alexander von Humboldt. That is addressed in this piece specifically. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); and, Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale university Press, 1994).

the national conscience. The next section, titled "1920s to the Present" he details the same historiographical patterns that I had found, a steep drop off in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with a recent rise of interest, finding him in footnotes or in brief paragraphs. Mathewson believes that overall, the recently heightened interest of Humboldt within the historical literature has a lot to do with the recent trend of cross-discipline studies and postmodernism. By studying more histories, people must be rediscovering the importance of Humboldt.<sup>13</sup>

Another scholar that falls into the school of thought that believes Charles Darwin upstaged Humboldt is Alicia Lubowski-Jahn. In the twenty-fourth footnote of "A Comparative Analysis of the Landscape Aesthetics of Alexander von Humboldt and John Ruskin," she writes that, "The importance of man's reactions to personal experience of the natural world [Romanticism], so integral to Humboldt and Ruskin's viewpoint was threatened by Darwinism. For Darwin, sensory faculties (such as optical vision) were understood as fallible, and the power of evolution trumped the centrality of the human species." Indeed, this co-opts

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<sup>13</sup> Kent Mathewson, "Alexander von Humboldt's image and Influence in North American Geography, 1804-2004," *Geographical Review* 96, no. 3 (July 2006): 416-438.



Matthewson's work showing that Humboldt's generality and naiveté lost their influence once the more concrete and logical argumentation of Darwin was more widely understood.<sup>14</sup>

Sandra Nichols has summed up this debate rather succinctly and offered three reasons as to why Humboldt was forgotten, in "Why Was Humboldt Forgotten Anyway?" In conjunction with Sachs, Walls, and Mathewson she details the changing climate in scientific discussion one reason for loss of Humboldt enthusiasm. Secondly, troubles with effective translation and writing style may have changed the way Americans viewed his works. But thirdly, and most convincingly, she demonstrates how growing anti-German sentiments and growing interest in French culture may have shut him out of the intellectual and literary discussions. During the Franco-Prussian War, and definitely during the World Wars, anti-Germanism spread throughout the national consciousness. Nichols believes that a rediscovering of

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<sup>14</sup> Alicia Lubowski-Jahn, "A Comparative Analysis of the Landscape Aesthetics of Alexander von Humboldt and John Ruskin," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no. 3 (July 2011): 321-333.

Humboldt is necessary to help people rediscover the interconnectedness of the cosmos.<sup>15</sup>

There have also been a small number of contemporary Environmental Historians that are working to demonstrate the importance of Humboldt, in the vein of Aaron Sachs' work. They include Richard Judd and Eric Wilson. Richard Judd's *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservatism in America, 1740-1840* puts Humboldt towards the very beginning of the work, even before the section on the early republic. Judd praises Humboldt for his scientific discoveries as well as his courageous philosophies.<sup>16</sup> For him these broad contributions profoundly helped to ignite the earliest American spirit of conservationism. More specifically, he points to Humboldt's strong support for and recognition of forests in preserving

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<sup>15</sup> Sandra Nichols, "Why was Humboldt Forgotten in the United States?" *Geographical Review* 96, no. 3 (July 2006): 399-415. The Mathewson and Nichols piece have both come from the same issue of *Geographical Review*, and issue with the label "Humboldt in America". These pieces are important to highlight, though not specifically from a historical journal, though this specific journal is peer reviewed. It is important to use these pieces because the field of geographic study was one of the few strains that have kept Humboldt, at least partially, within their historiography. These scholars, like the Environmentalists mentioned above, are finding a new-found relevance in the once mostly-ignored Humboldt.

<sup>16</sup> Richard W. Judd, *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America, 1740-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59. Here, he points to the importance of Humboldt in creating a scientific methodology as well as his recognition of all matters'—living and non-living—interconnectedness in nature.

the health of both human and non-human habitats; he sites *Kosmos* as the primary vehicle and catalyst for this idea. Judd describes though, how this notion was not widely-understood and rarely even held in Early-Republic America. In fact, he demonstrates how Humboldt had to combat the common American conception that deforestation was good for economics, health, and environment.<sup>17</sup>

Presenting an even more Romantic perception of Humboldt is Eric Wilson, who, in *Romantic Turbulence: Chaos, Ecology, and American Space*, emphasizes his importance in forming the beliefs of Henry David Thoreau and other prominent American naturalists. The quote from *Kosmos* that he presents as the most important thesis of the book is: "Nature. . . is a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole." Again, he presents this as Humboldt's thesis and self-described purpose in publishing *Kosmos*, and he puts forward the idea that this was a very important piece to the formative years of American Romanticism and naturalism. Wilson's work seems

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<sup>17</sup> Richard W. Judd, *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America, 1740-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 287-288.

to co-opt Sachs and Judd quite nicely, and many of his sources come from Wall's work.<sup>18</sup>

During the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a progressive and imperial mindset, the people of the United States focused more and more on the aspects of Humboldt that complimented their worldviews and supported their imperialist efforts in the American West, as well as Latin America and elsewhere. It was this increased emphasis on his travels and exploits than on his Romantic and liberal philosophies that led to an obscured perception of him, and allowed for the post-colonial interpretation of Humboldt as an elite exploiter to win out over the perception of him as a Romantic, an idea which faded away into general obscurity. With this post-colonial interpretation, Humboldt became less and less worthy of note, until most recently when scholars of American Romanticism and Geography began to pick up and read his authorship once again. Many of the scholars addressed in this project have been working for this revival movement.

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<sup>18</sup> Eric Wilson, *Romantic Turbulence: Chaos, Ecology, and American Space* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 98-100, 158. Both Wilson and Judd were published in 2000; though their works do not focus specifically on Humboldt, their work fits very nicely into the contemporary perspectives on him. Also, they do not speak to any reason why his identity was changed or forgotten.

To demonstrate evidence of this theme, I would like to use periodicals such as *National Geographic*, *New York Times*, and *Popular Science*, academic papers and books referencing Humboldt, and other sorts of literature that may have manipulate the national understanding of the individual. To remain within the parameters of this project I have selected only but a few pieces from *The Popular Science Monthly*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *The Popular Science Monthly* was founded in 1872, and is the fifth oldest continually-published periodical in the United States. It demonstrates many of the themes I have chosen to explore in my own approach. Many of the sources citing Baron von Humboldt can be accessed here: "Popscie Archives," popscie.com, <http://www.popsci.com/results?query=humboldt> (accessed 30 April 2012). For more information on *The Popular Science Monthly*, now simply *Popular Science*, the fifth oldest continually published publication, please visit their website: "The History of Popular Science," popsci.com, <http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2002-07/history-popular-science>, 23 July 2002 (accessed 30 April 2012). By 1915 there were 150,000 copies of each issue in publication (this includes both subscriptions and newsstand copies), by 1928 there were 350,000 subscribers, and today there are 1.3 million subscribers worldwide.

## CHAPTER 3

## HUMBOLDT IN POPULAR PRINT AND WRITING

It was in part because of my own misunderstanding and misconception that helped me to first explore this topic. I had always breezed over any mention of Alexander von Humboldt in any footnote or textual reference. Because of what my personal education and preconceptions of him were, I had simply dismissed him as a scientist-explorer myself. But, when I began to find mentions here or there that briefly mention how important he was to developing human knowledge in other ways, I decided to research him further. In doing so I found this pattern of how American memory of the man has changed within the last 150 years. I want to correct this distorted memory and help bring Humboldt back as a Romantic philosopher.

An understanding of Humboldt's greater worldview in this context will give a unique insight into understanding how his feelings and writings on Racial America came to be. It will also help to understand the modes in which he shared these thoughts.

The approach that I would like to introduce to this discussion is something that seems quite obvious: during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, in a progressive and imperial mindset, the people of the United States focused more and more on the aspects of Humboldt that complimented their worldviews and supported their imperialist efforts in the American West, as well as Latin America and elsewhere. It was this increased emphasis on his travels and exploits than on his Romantic and liberal philosophies that led to an obscured perception of him, and allowed for the post-colonial interpretation of Humboldt as an elite exploiter to win out over the perception of him as a Romantic, an idea which faded away into general obscurity from the American mind.<sup>1</sup> With this post-colonial interpretation, Humboldt became less and less worthy of note, until most recently when scholars of American Romanticism and Geography began to pick up and read his authorship once again. Many of the scholars addressed in this project have been working for this revival movement. To demonstrate evidence of this theme, I would like to use periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Popular Science*. Other sources to be used would certainly include academic papers and

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<sup>1</sup> Walls includes this in her article: Laura Dassow Walls, "'Hero of Knowledge. Be Our Tribute Thine': Alexander von Humboldt in Victorian America," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, Special Issue 1: Alexander von Humboldt's Natural History Legacy and its Relevance for Today (2001): 126. But there is practically no discussion on the issue. It is my goal to take this idea and advance it.

books referencing Humboldt, as well as other sorts of literature that may have manipulated the national understanding of the individual.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, I do not wish to wholly disqualify the post-colonial interpretation, but to simply show that the knowledge of Humboldt with which they operated was already distorted—to show that there was a tradition, beginning with the Progressive Era—that mis-interpreted him and therefore gave scholars of the mid- to late-20<sup>th</sup> century a misguided knowledge of him.

#### *The Popular Science Monthly*

*The Popular Science Monthly* was founded in May 1872, making it the fifth oldest continually published publication in existence. It was founded as a journal for laymen interested in science. Scientists, scholars, and authors could contribute pieces to the publication and share with the American public the things that they were researching, or just make general commentary about the scientific field. Few publications cite Humboldt as many

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<sup>2</sup> For the parameters and scope of this project, I will be looking primarily at *The Popular Science Monthly* with some auxiliary research into the *New York Times*, there was not time nor space to delve into the hundred plus articles mentioning Humboldt pre-1920. Also, *National Geographic* will not be used for research at this specific moment. Further research will certainly include a more complete investigation of the three.



times as *The Popular Science Monthly* did, and few publications offered as much lip service to the man. With the final quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the editors saw a lot of new technological advances, in the fields of electricity, communications, and evolution, just to name a few; there were certainly a lot of exciting, big-name scientists they had to cover. But, they continually found themselves recognizing Humboldt, for his genius and contributions to science. The company saw continual growth during the progressive era too; by 1915 there were 150,000 copies printed of each issue, so Humboldt's name was sure to have been seen across the country.<sup>3</sup>

One of the first articles to mention Humboldt came in the March 1873 issue, in an article entitled "The Recent Progress of Natural Science". It opens almost as a eulogy to Humboldt (then four years dead), referencing *Kosmos* with increasingly reverent language. He references Humboldt's magnum opus as: a book that comprised "a view of the whole created universe, depicted with the most wonderful

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on *The Popular Science Monthly*, now simply *Popular Science*, the fifth oldest continually published publication, please visit their website: "The History of Popular Science," [popsci.com](http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2002-07/history-popular-science), <http://www.popsci.com/scitech/article/2002-07/history-popular-science>, 23 July 2002 (accessed 30 April 2012). By 1915 there were 150,000 copies of each issue in publication (this includes both subscriptions and newsstand copies), by 1928 there were 350,000 subscribers, and today there are 1.3 million subscribers worldwide.

sympathy," a "canon forming a key to every thing that was known of nature," a "Divinia Commedia" that easily rivaled Dante's, and an "overwhelming picture of nature, of surpassing beauty of outline, abounding in grand perspective, with the most careful execution of the smallest detail". Yes in the early stages of this periodical, one can find hints towards Humboldt's Romanticism and environmentalism in the words *beauty*, *sympathy*, *perspective*, *Divine Comedy*, and perhaps others.<sup>4</sup> However, the article continues on to demonstrate his empiricism and the things that scientists have learned since his time. The stage was set for further interpretations.

Operating under similar pretenses was Emil Du Bois-Reymond, Rector of the University of Berlin, when he submitted the text of a speech he gave entitled "Alexander von Humboldt" in December 1883. This article is most revealing of Humboldt's complex Romanticism and nature philosophy than any other to ever be printed in the periodical. Du Bois-Reymond reveres Humboldt greatly, placing him as one of the smartest men of all time. Du

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<sup>4</sup> "The Recent Progress of Natural Science," *The Popular Science Monthly*, March 1873: 598.

Bois-Reymond mentions that most people even forget that there were naturalists and Naturalism before him. He comments on the tendency of people, thinking in this same way, to treat Humboldt as people had once treated Hercules—by ascribing all deeds and success to him. This certainly speaks to his popularity, but the rector also makes a point to detail the Romantic environmentalism that influenced Alexander as he grew into adulthood and into old age:

This period of momentous transformation in Germany, when aesthetic contemplation of the world and overweening speculation were mutually crowning each other and pushing intelligent experiment, like Cinderella, into a corner—this period was that of Alexander von Humboldt's youth. A remarkable youth he must have been, exuberant of thought, and yet burning with the thirst for action; eloquent and enthusiastic like a poet, yet devoted with all his mind to the study of Nature. . .

The writer then details how Humboldt was an artist and poet, above a scientist, although his grasp of mathematics and science were excellent. Du Bois-Reymond claims throughout the text that Humboldt was led by aesthetic thinking that was then prominent in Germany; that *Kosmos* was not only as aesthetic as Goethe's *Faust*, but just as well contemplated over a course of decades as well; he also claims that Humboldt's writings are concerned more with the "graphic" rather than the "mechanical".

Indeed, this article is the most revealing of Humboldt's Romantic Environmentalism, and examples abound throughout the rest of the piece. This theme reaches its climax however when Du Bois-Remond recalls, in beautiful prose, Humboldt's emotionally Romantic experience on Mt. Chimborazo, as a giant chasm separated him from the mountains highest peak. But of course, the piece details his influence on science and scientific thought as well. For instance, he puts forth the idea that Humboldt was a Darwinian before Darwin himself published, and how his works advanced the development of Western society into the modern age. Emil Du Bois-Reymond's piece was certainly the most accurate piece and eloquent article to be put in *The Popular Science Monthly* regarding the scientist. From this point on, his Romanticism and naturalism get forgotten more and more, in exchange for his scientific empiricism and travelling exploits.

Between 1873 and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were a number of articles that bring up the significant life and deeds of Alexander von Humboldt, many of them in reference to his influence on the lives and

works of specific scientists that came after him.<sup>5</sup> Included here are articles on such scientists as: Jean-Baptiste Dumas, an organic chemist known for his foundational work in atomic weights and energies; Sir Charles Lyell, a notable geologist<sup>6</sup>; Heinrich Wilhelm Dove, a physicist and meteorologist<sup>7</sup>; Jacob Moleschott, a dietitian<sup>8</sup>; Friedrich Woeler, a chemist and biochemist<sup>9</sup>; John Tyndall, a physicist known for his studies on the movement of heat and sound<sup>10</sup>; and Charles Darwin.

These articles, express many things—much more than just the influence of Humboldt on modern science. To begin with, they demonstrate how great of a polymath he really was. To have been so influential in such a wide variety of scientific—not to mention philosophical—fields truly demonstrates how easily he grasped, explored, and advanced

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<sup>5</sup> A. W. Hoffman, "Biographical Sketch of Professor Dumas," *The Popular Science Monthly*, December 1880: 257-261.

<sup>6</sup> Grant Allen, "Sir Charles Lyell," *The Popular Science Monthly*, March 1882: 491-607.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Hoffman, "Sketch of Heinrich Wilhelm Dove," *The Popular Science Monthly*, December 1879: 261-265.

<sup>8</sup> E. P. Evans, "Sketch of Jacob Moleschott," *The Popular Science Monthly*, July 1896: 399-406.

<sup>9</sup> Charles A. Joy, "Biographical Sketch of Frederick Woeler," *The Popular Science Monthly*, August 1880: 539-551

<sup>10</sup> "Further Concerning the 'Sound' Controversy." *The Popular Science Monthly*. October 1876: 751-755.

the level of thought in a great many ways. Reading deeper than this though, one can see how articles in this particular publication shifted away from his philosophical and environmental efforts. Its focus turned sharply to the advancement of scientific knowledge, and specifically onto how he was integral in the development of modern technology.

Also worthy of note is an article written for the April 1907 edition of *The Popular Science Monthly*. The piece, written by German Ambassador to Washington, DC, Baron Speck von Sternburg, is aptly titled "Alexander von Humboldt" and is a part of a series of articles called "Pioneers of Science in America". This series was transcribed from a series of dedications given at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History at the unveiling of these *pioneers'* busts. Humboldt's dedication is the second in the series, coming immediately after Benjamin Franklin and before such personalities as John James Audubon. This hagiographic piece has many segments worthy of mention. For instance, "In this immortal man," the piece opens:

whose bust we have gathered to unveil, the world reveres its greatest master since the days of Aristotle. His genius covered all that man ever thought, did and observed in nature. There is no branch of human knowledge into which his mind did not penetrate. His *Cosmos*, that marvelous

monument of meditation and research, is a new Genesis in which the universe mirrors itself in all its vastness and minuteness. . .

As demonstrated throughout the piece, one can see how deeply revered Humboldt was within the academic and scientific community. One can also find evidence as to how celebrated the man was among the general American populace: "It is not necessary to give you more detailed picture of his life. All this is so well known and so dear to the whole learned world of America; for never has a foreign scholar been more honored in this country than Alexander Humboldt. . ." and when referencing his posthumous title of the *Scientific Discoverer of America*, Sternburg claimed that, "The benefits of his investigations in America returned to that country in the course of time. No wonder that her people recognize him as their benefactor." <sup>11</sup>

Another piece from *The Popular Science Monthly*, dated March 1912, written by Chicago's Dr. Edward F. Williams, and simply entitled "Alexander von Humboldt", gives a deeper detail of Humboldt's life, this piece goes into great detail about his scientific advancements and their meanings for America's advancements in geology, astronomy,

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<sup>11</sup> Speck von Sternenberg, "Alexander von Humboldt," *The Popular Science Monthly*, April 1907: 292-296.

agronomy, biology, meteorology, and physiognomy. But with this increased detail, comes only a stronger focus on Humboldt the empiricist; there is absolutely no mention of his Romanticism or radicalism. Humboldt, who he likens to Columbus, followed three principles according to Dr. Williams: reason first; enlarged horizon of observation second; and with the first two, a deeper understanding of physical world.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it would have been this type of repeated reinforcement of this kind of perception that would lead Americans to perceive him as nothing more than an elite white, male, explorer—all things that he was, yes, but there was a much deeper emotional and Romantic dimension to Humboldt that was forgotten. As Humboldt the Romantic was forgotten in exchange for Humboldt the Romantic. This led to his nearly-complete forgottenness by the post-colonial historians. During the progressive era, historians, scientists, and anyone else writing on Humboldt, began to focus on only those aspects of his life that supported that progressive notion of scientific advancement, imperialism, and manifest destiny.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward F. Williams, "Alexander von Humboldt," *The Popular Science Monthly*, March 1912: 351



There are numerous articles offered by *The Popular Science Monthly* between its founding in 1872 and 1920 that discuss the importance of Humboldt to the American scientific community, and my preliminary investigations into this periodical have upheld the thesis: that going into the Progressive Era, his Romanticism was slowly pushed aside, in an effort to not only advance science but rationalize imperialism as well. The articles discussed above are only but a sample. However, this is a periodical specifically published by scientifically-minded people for people interested in science and scientific developments—Romantic philosophy would certainly not have been their priority, especially Romantic philosophy that was becoming more and more outdated. So, I intend to corroborate these finding with, as mentioned above, various other periodicals and publications from the same time period.

#### *New York Times*

The *New York Times* was the most widely distributed periodicals of the day, and its historical archives serve as one of the most reliable sources for news articles. This combination makes it one of the best resources for understanding what people were reading and learning about historic events, people, and ideas. To this, the *New York*

*Times* offers a wealth of articles about Alexander von Humboldt.

Most notably was 15 September 1869, when the entire front page and a bit of another were devoted to him. This piece shows how many tens of thousands of people celebrated the centennial of his birth in many cities around the country. These celebrations included various parades, eulogies, and an unveiling of a Humboldt bust in Central Park. The banner on the day's paper read "HUMBOLDT. The One Hundredth Birthday of the Philosopher. Celebration Generally Throughout the Country. Unveiling of the Bust at the Central Park. ORATION BY DR. FRANCIS LIEBER. Processions, Banquet and Speeches in this City. EXTENSIVE OBSERVANCES IN BOSTON. Eulogistic Address by Professor Agasiz." Every square inch of this page and a portion of the next were dedicated to explaining how the previous day's celebrations were handled in specific cities across North America and Europe.<sup>13</sup> Cities with the largest public celebrations included Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Chicago.

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<sup>13</sup> "HUMBOLDT.: The One Hundredth Birthday of the Philosopher. Celebration Generally Throughout the Co..." *New York Times*, 15 September 1869.

Before this article however, there were others. For instance: "New Publications.; Humboldt's Gossip. . ." from 5 May 1860; and, "Elements of Empire." from 14 March 1861. The first is a book review of a book entitled *Letters of Alexander von Humboldt to Varnhagen von Ense*, a book that claims that the book will "essentially damage the reputation of Humboldt." However, the reviewer put little stock in the author's incomplete sources and claims that the book will be of little consequence. Ultimately he must have been right, because there were a great many pieces to come after it, that seem to do all but worship Humboldt's life—there seems to be no reference or inference to this line of thought in any subsequent publications.<sup>14</sup> The second article demonstrates how Humboldt played an important role in manifest destiny, by sighting his works on the abundance of minerals in mountainous regions. The article continues to press for expansion of the United States into these areas. It demonstrates the change of interpretation that has been discussed throughout this project.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "New Publications.; Humboldt's Gossip. . ." *New York Times*, 5 May 1860.

<sup>15</sup> "Elements of Empire," *New York Times*, 14 March 1861.

## CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSION

By looking at these primary sources resources, and at secondary texts that were written over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, one can see the continued reinforcement of ideas that were spawned by Humboldt's work. Humboldt's work was well recognized at the time of his death, but came to escape the collective memory in the United States, but thanks to the work of modern historians and supported with the cultural analyses here contained, his importance is once again coming to be recognized. Alexander Humboldt was not simply an explorer measuring the world imperially. He was responsible for supporting a more abstract, romantic, and progressive paradigm of nature, the human condition, and the cosmos.

It is right that Humboldt has been given a second look in the past few decades. It would be an injustice to him and his contributions for him to remain nothing more than European elite measuring the new world for the sake of industry and colonization. His understanding of the cosmos as a larger interconnectedness had a great impact on modern thought and the development of the United States. This was clearly reflected in published writing during and shortly

after Humboldt's life. It was eventually lost to the collective memory into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but revisiting the evidence has helped to reimage the impactful Humboldt.

The pieces explored through this study, especially those from *Popular Science* and *The New York Times*, help to understand this timeline. They help to show how Humboldt was enshrined as a scientist explorer, rather than what he was and what the historical corpus is beginning to rediscover: a romantic idealist.

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