



INTRODUCTION: THE LEGACY OF ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT (1769–1859). A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL 250 YEARS ON

ANDREA ACLE-KREYSING 
(GLOBAL AND EUROPEAN STUDIES INSTITUTE, UNIVERSITÄT LEIPZIG)
ADRIÁN HERRERA FUENTES 
(ROMANISCHES SEMINAR, UNIVERSITÄT ZU KÖLN)

What makes Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) truly remarkable is that 250 years after his birth, he still appears to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration. His works continue to be the subject of an abundant scholarship, while his life persists in capturing the imagination of a broader audience. His actuality cannot be related only to the fact that he foresaw the huge potential of science in shaping human destinies, thus anticipating the spectacular technological advances of the last two centuries. Humboldt's appeal is also related, we contend, to his ability to think globally and cross-culturally, gained through his legendary travels to the Americas and Asia. During these overseas endeavours, Humboldt became aware of how the colonial expansion of Europe had turned the world into an increasingly interconnected – but not necessarily fairer – place. Consequently, however centred upon the study of nature Humboldt's writings were, they became socially engaged, with political commentary often sliding into a critique of both slavery and colonialism. Nonetheless, he remained an optimist who believed that civilisation ('Gesittung') would continue to be a force for progress among all peoples of the world:

Es liegt in der Natur der Gesittung, daß sie vorwärts schreitet ohne darum da zu erlöschen, wo sie zuerst entstanden war. Ihre fortschreitende Bewegung von Ost nach West, von Asien nach Europa, beweist nichts gegen diese Behauptung. Eine helle Lichtflamme behält ihren Glanz, auch wenn sie einen größeren Raum erleuchtet.¹

The progressive, even revolutionary nature of Humboldt's thinking accounts for its sustained influence over time. Nowadays, science historians worldwide attest to the actuality of his pioneering views on nature and human-induced climate change, as well as on the viability of political and economic systems on both sides of the Atlantic. In the twenty-first century, discussions as to what Humboldt *meant* and still *means* have acquired a global character and look likely to continue gaining in significance. In this Special Number, we aim to provide a reappraisal of Humboldt's work

¹ Alexander von Humboldt, 'Ueber die künftigen Verhältnisse von Europa und Amerika', in *Ueber die künftigen Verhältnisse von Europa und Amerika*, ed. Oliver Lubrich, Hanover 2010, p. 41.

which highlights a scientific practice that, through collaboration with other disciplines, engages with contemporary discussion and – with an inclusive and egalitarian outlook – does not shy away from acknowledging the links between science and wider structures of political and cultural power.

In contrast to other essay compilations on Humboldt that have appeared in recent years, many of which mainly follow a retrospective approach,² this volume seeks to explain his actuality, that is, his status as a thinker who is continually invoked as being synonymous with both scientific progress and humanistic change. Our aim is to go beyond Humboldt himself. He was unquestionably an original thinker, but he was also someone who took contemporary discussions to a higher level, and whose collaboration with other scientists triggered new discoveries. His fame – and his qualities as a thinker – also need to be assessed in relation to his worldwide legion of followers. Hence, we will explore how Humboldt's ideas have been expanded, furthered, and appropriated over the past centuries, examining a variety of scenarios, countries, and epochs to highlight the challenges posed by his thought and the manifold ways in which his validity has been defended. Our focus on the global reception of Humboldt's work identifies and unpicks key questions. What is lost and gained when applying this great thinker's thoughts to new problems and new audiences? How can we determine whether readings of his work remain accurate despite changes in time and place? Where do we draw the line between a creative reading, an appropriation, and mere instrumentalisation? And, finally, how coherent and unambiguous are Humboldt's works themselves?

This volume is not designed merely as a standalone collection of articles. It is equally conceived within the larger framework of the major shift and expansion that Humboldtian studies have undergone in recent decades. Until the 1970s, Humboldt's *oeuvre* was traditionally limited to the domain of the 'hard' natural sciences, as well as of philosophy and history (written largely from a strictly national perspective) and its reception was mostly limited to his American travel. The work of pioneering specialists such as Marianne Oeste de Bopp,³ Juan Ortega y Medina,⁴ Edmundo O'Gorman,⁵ Kurt-R. Biermann,⁶ Hanno Beck⁷ and Charles Minguet⁸, to mention just a handful, exercised a pervasive influence among several

² In Germany, for example, this is the case with publication of the dossier 'Alexander von Humboldt y Latinoamérica. Un balance 250 años después' (2019), edited by Ottmar Ette for *Revista Iberoamericana*, 70 (2019).

³ Marianne Oeste de Bopp (ed.), *Ensayos sobre Humboldt*, Mexico 1962.

⁴ Two of Ortega y Medina's best known works are *Humboldt desde México*, México 1959; and an annotated edition, with introduction, of Humboldt's *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España*, Mexico 1966.

⁵ Edmundo O'Gorman, *La invención de América*, Mexico 1958.

⁶ Kurt-R. Biermann, *Alexander von Humboldt*, Berlin 1968.

⁷ Hanno Beck (ed.), *Alexander von Humboldt – Studienausgabe*, 7 vols, Darmstadt 1987–1997.

⁸ Charles Minguet, *Alexandre de Humboldt, historien et géographe de l'Amérique espagnole (1799–1804)*, Paris 1969.

generations of Humboldt scholars in both Europe and the Americas. Their work went hand-in-hand with a substantial editorial effort, as the works of Alexander von Humboldt were revisited in new editions and translations. Such developments led to a reappraisal of Humboldt's role in shaping the intellectual and scientific life of the United States, Latin America, and Europe. These reappraisals of Humboldt have flourished in the last thirty years, as reflected in the scientific and editorial work undertaken by academics who, based both in Europe and the Americas, represent a variety of disciplines. Among many others, these include Jaime Labastida,⁹ Nicolaas Rupke,¹⁰ Michael Zeuske,¹¹ Sandra Rebok,¹² Ottmar Ette,¹³ Oliver Lubrich,¹⁴ and Laura Dassow Walls.¹⁵ In parallel with the extensive scholarship on Humboldt produced within universities and institutes of higher education, Humboldt's name is also commonly cited in the realm of European public culture.¹⁶ Nowadays, the most recent scholarship on the great scientist and thinker continues to be inseparable from major translation, publication, and digitalisation projects, many of them multilingual, including his complete travelogues (Potsdam),¹⁷ his vast

⁹ For Jaime Labastida's translations, see Miguel S. Wionczech (ed.), *El Humboldt venezolano*, tr. J. Labastida, Caracas 1974; Alexander von Humboldt, *Vistas de las cordilleras y monumentos de los pueblos indígenas de América*, tr. J. Labastida, Mexico 1995. For Labastida's monographs on Humboldt, see *Humboldt, ese desconocido*, Mexico 1975; *Humboldt y la antropología mexicana*, Mexico 1999; and *Humboldt. Ciudadano universal*, Mexico 1999.

¹⁰ Nicolaas Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005. Further references appear in the text.

¹¹ Michael Zeuske has written numerous works on slavery – an inescapable reality for scientists who travelled in the Americas, like Humboldt – from the perspective of global history. See, for instance, *Sklaverei: eine Menschheitsgeschichte von der Steinzeit bis heute*, Leipzig 2018; *Amistad: A Hidden Network of Slavers and Merchants*, Princeton 2015; *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei: Eine Globalgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin 2009.

¹² Sandra Rebok, *Jefferson and Humboldt: A Transatlantic Friendship of the Enlightenment*, Charlottesville 2014; *Una doble mirada: Alexander von Humboldt y España en el siglo XIX*, Madrid 2009; soon to be complemented by *Humboldt's Empire of Knowledge: From the Royal Spanish Court to the White House* (in the press, 2020).

¹³ Ottmar Ette's key works include: *Alexander von Humboldt-Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, Berlin 2018; *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung: das Mobile des Wissens*, Berlin 2009; and *Weltbewußtsein: Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne*, Weilerswist 2002.

¹⁴ Oliver Lubrich, *Das Schwinden der Differenz. Postkoloniale Poetiken*, Bielefeld 2009. On the reception of Humboldt, see also Rex Clark and Oliver Lubrich (eds), *Cosmos and Colonialism: Alexander von Humboldt in Cultural Criticism*, Oxford and New York 2012; and Rex Clark and Oliver Lubrich (eds), *Transatlantic Echoes: Alexander von Humboldt in World Literature*, Oxford and New York 2012.

¹⁵ Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, Chicago 2009.

¹⁶ For example, in the novel by Daniel Kehlmann, *Die Vermessung der Welt*, Berlin 2009; and in the recent book by Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, New York 2015, later turned into a graphic novel for children: A. Wulf and Lilian Melcher, *The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt*, London 2019.

¹⁷ 'Alexander von Humboldt auf Reisen. Wissenschaft aus der Bewegung'. Editorial project at the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften led by Ottmar Ette and Tobias Kraft, <https://edition-humboldt.de/> (accessed 9 March 2021).

collection of essays and articles (Berne),¹⁸ his complete writings on the Viceroyalty of New Granada (Bogotá),¹⁹ and a new translation of canonical works such as *Kosmos* (Mexico).²⁰

These recent and ongoing endeavours constitute invaluable new tools for researchers; this Special Number both contributes to and benefits from them. It brings together an international and inter-disciplinary group of scholars so that early-career researchers can present their findings alongside established Humboldt scholars. Thus, here, we unfold the issue of Humboldt's actuality, combining perspectives from the fields of literature (Adrián Herrera Fuentes); history (Michael Zeuske, Sandra Rebok, and Andrea Acle-Kreysing); science, with a particular emphasis on ecology (Michael Strobl and Daniel Grana-Behrens); and metabiographical studies (Nicolaas Rupke). Each of these contributions reflects the interests of different national and transnational academic traditions, underlining subjects that are relevant to current social, ecological, and political debates.

MEASURING HUMBOLDT'S ACTUALITY

The articles in this volume can be read as an assemblage of possibilities concerning how to measure Humboldt's actuality from a contemporary perspective. The whole enables a two-fold discussion: firstly, it opens up perspectives on the advantages (and disadvantages) of specific methods of research, as different disciplines and approaches are brought into play. Secondly, it calls to attention the pitfalls – and promises – of reception on Humboldt. While citations from Humboldt are often used to validate claims of faithfulness to the 'original', the fact is that all researchers and commentators are caught in networks of transmission and interpretation. As the pioneering study by Rupke (2005) in relation to Germany has shown, a parade of different 'Humboldts' has been brought to life and celebrated over the past 200 years, each tailored to conform to specific settings and claims. Therefore, we argue, objectivity – however relative – should be measured less in terms of faithfulness to the 'original', but more in terms of a heightened awareness of the 'lens' through which Humboldt is considered. This involves, on the part of the researcher, a willingness to acknowledge that his or her views are often inscribed within one – or multiple – scholarly traditions and national discourses, sometimes complementary, sometimes not. It was Humboldt's ability to synthesise an extraordinary interplay of influences and inputs that gave a universal quality to his *oeuvre*.

¹⁸ Alexander von Humboldt, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 10 vols, ed. Oliver Lubrich and Thomas Nehrlich, Munich 2019.

¹⁹ *Humboldtiana Neogranadina*, 6 vols, ed. Alberto Gómez Gutiérrez, Bogotá 2018.

²⁰ *Cosmos. Esbozo de una descripción física del mundo*. Editorial project currently coordinated by Adrián Herrera Fuentes and Jaime Labastida, to be published by Siglo XXI Editores in 2021/2.

An initial challenge is posed by the works of Humboldt himself. In the second article of this volume 'Contemplation and Empathy: On the Joy of Nature ('Naturgenuss') and Feeling for Nature ('Naturgefühl') in Alexander von Humboldt's Approach to Science', Adrián Herrera Fuentes traces a link between Humboldt's early works such as *Ansichten der Natur* (1808; Nördlingen 1986) and his *magnum opus*, *Kosmos* (1845–62; Berlin 2014). Herrera Fuentes claims that, for Humboldt, science was 'the bridge between the contemplative and the instrumental' while also maintaining an aesthetic and pleasurable dimension. Through the sense of sight, Humboldtian science fostered a relationship between spiritual pleasure, the emotions, and scientific work. In doing so, Herrera Fuentes contends, Humboldt implicitly challenged the idea that science could be understood only as a means to purely pragmatic and profit-oriented ends. Finally, this article brings to the fore the importance of a contextual reading, not only by reconstructing Humboldt's ideas through time, but by ascertaining how he implicitly entered into a dialogue with the previous generation of Enlightenment thinkers in Germany.

The pervasive influence that Humboldt has exercised upon the intellectual and cultural elites of the New World is the subject of the next set of articles. In the last two centuries, these elites have often invoked the figure of an almost mythical Humboldt in order to validate their own political agendas. Hence the need to substitute the legendary Humboldt for the real one, the one whose scientific research was inescapably embedded in power relations, as well as constrained by the practicalities of life and travel. In the third article, 'Humboldt in Venezuela and Cuba: The "Second Slavery"', Michael Zeuske casts a critical eye on Humboldt's famous stance against slavery. His focus is on the time that Humboldt and his companion Aimé Bonpland spent in Venezuela (1799/1800), as well as on the few months they spent in Cuba between 1800/1 and 1804. There, they encountered so-called 'second slavery', which was then the most modern and technologically advanced stage of this exploitative system, controlled by an elite composed of slave-owners and slave-traders (*negreros* in Spanish). In practical terms, this meant that many of Humboldt's most useful social contacts, the ones capable of facilitating his travels and research, belonged to this elite. Yet the fact that Humboldt's host in Havana was a thriving *negrero*, Juan Luis de la Cuesta, is rarely mentioned in Cuban scholarship on the scientist, which often tends towards hagiography. Zeuske reconstructs Humboldt's stay at De la Cuesta's house, showing that this enabled Humboldt to witness, at first hand, what the slave trade entailed, including the arrival of vessels crammed with enslaved adults and children who would be later sold at public auctions. Zeuske's method – a micro-historical reconstruction of the movements and acquaintances made by Humboldt in Latin America – sheds light on the dilemmas faced by Humboldt in reality. On the one hand, he was part of the solution, as shown by his straightforward condemnation of slavery in a later work, the

Essai Politique sur l'Île de Cuba (Paris 1826); on the other, he was part of the problem, insofar as it was among Cuba's wealthy and cultured slave-owning elite that he found not only hospitality but also the power and influence that was translated into means for advancing his own research.

From the 1810s onwards, as most of the Spanish colonies in the Americas became independent nations, the balance of power in the region changed dramatically. The demise of Spain as a colonial power opened the door to the rapid expansion of European (mainly British) and North American economic and political interests in the region. In the fourth article, 'Humboldt and the American West: Defending or Defeating the "Manifest Destiny"?', Sandra Rebok examines the appropriation of Humboldt's prestige to support the territorial expansion of the US, allegedly justified by the country's 'exceptionalism'. Aided by correspondence and press articles, Rebok reconstructs Humboldt's visit to the US in mid-1804, stressing the friendship he established with President Thomas Jefferson as well as his overall admiration for the new nation. Humboldt, as Rebok states, praised the young democracy and was impressed by the active role its government played in the promotion of scientific knowledge. In 1804, he undoubtedly favoured the republican Jefferson over the Spanish Crown or even Napoleon, who had just declared himself Emperor. Rebok suggests that, in 1846, Humboldt might have entertained doubts about the US President James Polk, who, full of expansionist fervour, decided that year to invade Mexico, a country to which Humboldt had strong ties. It seems that Humboldt, despite his general admiration for US political and economic values (except for slavery in its southern states), refused to openly express his views on the ensuing Mexican-American War (1846/8) as it might have required him to play the role of judge in the conflict. Rebok nevertheless concludes that US expansionism was at odds with his 'moral convictions'. Ultimately, the question raised by Rebok is not whether science can be neutral, but rather whether it can be ethical. After all, as the complex relationship established between Humboldt (the real one and the mythical one) and the US political and cultural elites shows, scientific practice – as knowledge is applied and resources are distributed – has an inescapably political dimension.

The complicated relationship between 'race' and cultural difference is examined in the fifth article, 'Bulwark against Racism? Humboldt's Influence on the Racial Notions of German Writers in Mexico (1920s–1940s)' by Andrea Acle-Kreysing. Writers such as Alfons Goldschmidt and B. Traven represented a first wave of politically committed travellers which extended to a second wave composed of refugees from fascism, such as Egon Erwin Kisch, Ludwig Renn, and Gustav Regler. In this article, the author emphasises the intricacies of reception, noting that the appraisal of Humboldt was coloured by political ideology and national discourses. As a starting point, Acle-Kreysing recounts how Humboldt's appreciation

for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, an illustration of his belief in the essential unity of humankind, was re-purposed by anti-fascist exiles as a weapon in their own struggle against the racist tenets of National Socialism – which was also present in Mexico's German colony. Acle-Kreysing takes a polemical approach to demonstrate that Humboldt's legacy was not free of ambiguity, and therefore the implementation of his anti-racist ideals was not as self-evident as these exiles claimed. It was one thing to affirm the abstract equality of all peoples, and another to consider non-Europeans as intellectual peers. Significantly, Acle-Kreysing seeks to vindicate the figure of Goldschmidt who, putting himself under the symbolic patronage of Humboldt, became an outspoken critic of Nazi racial thinking as well as of the alleged superiority of European civilisation. This article contributes to a strand of scholarship that seeks to emphasise how Humboldt – and, by extension, his followers – need to be read in the context of a reciprocal exchange of 'knowledges' and scholarly traditions between Europe and the Americas.²¹

Another way of measuring Humboldt's actuality is to revisit his research methodology, as well as the impact of his findings within the realm of the natural sciences. In the sixth article of this volume, 'Alexander von Humboldt's Climatological Writings', Michael Strobl sets himself the task of reconstructing Humboldt's climatological thinking. This topic, far from being the subject of a single work by Humboldt, is scattered across several of his writings and essays, many of which have recently been newly re-published.²² Strobl exposes how Humboldt's innovative research on isothermal lines allowed him to debunk the traditional climate anthropologies of the Enlightenment, which posited, among other things, the inferiority of the New World's inhabitants on the basis of climatic determinism. By sponsoring scientific theories such as monogenism (the common origin of humanity) and affirming that all people could acclimatise to different weathers, Humboldt made clear political statements. Strobl asks to what extent Humboldt transformed, redirected, and corrected the then current knowledge on climatology and to what extent these results anticipated contemporary discussions on climate change.

In the seventh article of this Special Number, "Big Data" and Alexander von Humboldt's Approach to Science', by painstakingly reconstructing the number of scientific instruments deployed by Humboldt, as well as the areas of knowledge covered by his massive collection of observations (which nowadays we would call data), Daniel Grana-Behrens shows how

²¹ See, for example, the classic study by Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York 1992.

²² Strobl worked on the editorial project involving Humboldt's complete essays and writings, led by Oliver Lubrich at the University of Berne and published in ten volumes in 2019 as *Sämtliche Schriften* (note 18).

the Prussian scholar was able not only to move across different disciplines, but to connect apparently insignificant details to major global results. He examines how the scientist dealt with the monumental task of linking and combining seemingly unrelated information in a navigable manner. Grana-Behrens is convinced that the systematic way in which Humboldt collected and stored his data, seen as ‘the basis of empirical science to describe cross-connections’, strongly anticipated modern methods of research. Nonetheless, the difference between Humboldt and today’s ‘Big Data’, as this author concludes, is that the latter not only describes but also predicts and seeks to manipulate these cross-connections. Yet, in both cases, as Grana-Behrens aptly reminds us, data cannot be regarded as being ‘raw knowledge’ as such. Data only makes sense in relation to a cultural context, and its transformation into actual ‘ideas’ involves a deliberate act of interpretation.

HUMBOLDT TODAY: STILL EXCEPTIONAL, BUT NOT SACRED

In 2019, the celebration of Humboldt’s 250th birthday marked a new peak in the output of Humboldt-themed writings and conferences. Roughly speaking, it marked the crystallisation of yet another ‘Humboldt’, one that prefigured today’s post-colonial and globalised world, as well as modern eco-criticism. In other words, a Humboldt who was able to prophesy the shape of our contemporary times. This can be illustrated by a colloquium recently organised by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and funded by the German government, which presented Humboldt as ‘an international networker, a pioneer of climate research, a science communicator, and a marketing genius’ as well as ‘a political maverick’ who was ‘open to the viewpoints of other countries and peoples’.²³ Yet the commemorative events also paved the way for deeper discussion of the real and imaginary Humboldt, thus a tension between sacralising and desacralising tendencies emerged. Such preoccupations are the subject of the final contribution to this Special Number, Nicolaas Rupke’s article ‘Humboldt and Metabiography’, which can be read as a continuation of his ground-breaking monograph (2005), which showed how contingent upon time and place the reception of his works has been. In this text, Rupke shows how, in today’s Germany, Alexander von Humboldt has served the purpose of conveying a desired idea of ‘Germanness’ in times when Germany, at the political and economic head of the European Union, strives for an identity that is more European

²³ See programme of the Humboldt Colloquium: ‘Research without Borders – Alexander von Humboldt’s Legacy Today’ (11–13 April 2019, Madrid), organised by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung in cooperation with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and sponsored by the Auswärtiges Amt, <https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/web/press-release-2019-07.html> (accessed 12 June 2020).

than German, more continental than national, and decidedly multi-ethnic rather than exclusively 'white'. Moreover, opening the door to future research topics, Rupke reflects on Humboldt's 'non-German' avatars and insists upon the need for reading him in the context of other cultural memories, beyond Germany.

What picture of Humboldt emerges from this collection of articles? It is one that acknowledges the uniqueness of his thought, and yet refuses to see him as an exceptional individual, unconstrained by his context. He was indeed a harsh critic of colonialism, racism, and slavery in his lifetime, but it is also undeniable that Humboldt profited from the privileges of his nationality and his aristocratic background. There is, therefore, a need to read Humboldt in relation to the asymmetries of power – political and economic, but also cultural – which (still) exist between Europe and (Latin) America and between the so-called developed and developing countries (or the so-called Global North and South). And there is a need to acknowledge that these asymmetries, however unwittingly, often worked in Humboldt's favour, and opened countless doors for him.²⁴ This gave him an advantage over other contemporary scientists when it came to establishing a new discourse on Nature and the Americas. Writing in French – the *lingua franca* of his age – from Paris, one of the world-capitals of modern science, Humboldt absorbed and even partially silenced the contributions of lesser-known scientists in the deep web of citations and sources sustaining his work, as Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has cogently demonstrated.²⁵ A defender of the oppressed, Humboldt could not help but establish alliances with the oppressors for the sake of knowledge, while his ideas found reception among both liberal and conservative elites – although often through partial and instrumental readings. Much like scientists today, he was confronted with questions of both intellectual ownership and funding. Thus, in the process of becoming a universal scientist and world citizen he was aided not only by personal choices, but by the means to follow them: by his vast personal fortune and, once that had dwindled, by the patronage of both the Prussian Emperor and the Russian Tsar, which brought significant restrictions to his freedom of expression.²⁶

²⁴ On how the patronage of the Spanish king turned out to be Humboldt's most effective 'door opener' in colonial Spanish America, as well as one reason why locals (from government officials to scholars) often reacted with mistrust, envy or sheer defensiveness, see Christiana Borchart de Moreno, "El favor de la corte abre todas las puertas". Aspectos políticos del viaje americano de Alexander von Humboldt', *International Review for Humboldt Studies, HiN*20, 39 (2019), <http://doi.org/10.18443/284> (accessed 10 June 2020).

²⁵ On how 'derivative' Humboldt was, see J. Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire and Nation*, Stanford 2006, especially chapter 6; and Gregory T. Cushman, 'Humboldtian Science, Creole Meteorology and the Discovery of Human-Caused Climate Change in South America', *Osiris*, 26 (2011), 19–44.

²⁶ Otmar Ette, 'dass einem leid tut, wie er aufgehört hat, deutsch zu sein': Alexander von Humboldt, Preußen und Amerika', in *Preußen und Lateinamerika im Spannungsfeld von Kommerz, Macht und Kultur*, ed. Sandra Carreras and Günther Maihold, Münster 2004, pp. 31–57.

A final reflection concerns the idea that Humboldt's open-mindedness towards other cultures prefigured an (ideal) globalisation. His cosmopolitanism was much more than the sum of biographical details and trips around the world. It was also a specific way of coming to terms with *difference* – as determined by history, geography, biology, or 'race'. Ottmar Ette has argued that Humboldt's favourite intellectual and rhetorical device was to trace comparisons between elements in which, at a first glance, others might only find opposites.²⁷ In doing this, Humboldt suspended logic for an instant with the aim of enabling his readers to find similarities between their own (European) world and that of (non-European) others. This enabled him to identify peculiar qualities but, more importantly, still to find common denominators not only in past civilisations, such as Roman Europe and Mesoamerica, but also between contemporaries, such as Cubans and Prussians. We argue that, ultimately, Humboldt went beyond comparisons and made use of analogies that imply a minimum of empathy, an inversion of roles. An analogy does not merely involve comparing 'black' with 'white' within a prescribed hierarchy but, significantly, imagining what would be if black were white, or *vice versa*. Analogies in creating commonalities and links allow for the emergence of global connections without denying or suppressing difference.

Although we are aware that Humboldt cannot provide us with the definitive answers for the different ecological, scientific, economic, cultural, and political questions raised in this volume, our authors' contributions are based on the fact that his comparative insight can help us to better understand our globalised and culturally diverse age and, moreover, to rethink the role of science in shaping today's world. Nonetheless, following Nicolaas Rupke, this raises an important question – which is not free of scepticism – concerning our own reception of this German author and scientist: are we looking for an idealised Humboldt? The contributors to this volume hope to have found a (more) objective and authentic one – even if he does not necessarily comply with the Humboldt they wished to find.

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²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35. On Humboldt's use of analogies, see also Luiz Estevam O. Fernandes, 'Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain: Humboldt and the history of Mexico', *HiN* 15, 28 (2014), 24–33.