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# A Return to Nature's Order: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Alexander von Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*

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When Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859)<sup>1</sup> sailed for the Spanish colonies in the Americas in June of 1799, the twenty-nine year old was already well trained in a range of subjects, including geology, botany, mathematics, chemistry, mining, and surveying. Having an inheritance and being thus wealthy enough to travel at his own expense, he had nevertheless an open-ended passport as an introduction from King Carlos of Spain. So provided, Humboldt traveled from 1799 through 1804, accompanied by his French botanist friend Aimé Bonpland (1773-1858), throughout much of the Americas, especially northern South America (Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru), Cuba, and Mexico (New Spain); and, sailing back to Europe, he stopped off briefly in the new young republic of the United States. From this five-year trip, undertaken when the man was only in his early thirties, came the majority of his life's work. From the time he returned to Europe and for the next fifty-five years, he wrote and published his findings and hypotheses based on his discoveries and investigations made during this one trip. As a travel writer he occasionally enhanced these scientific writings with sometimes very colorful accounts of the journey

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1. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt (born Sept. 14, 1769, Berlin--died May 6, 1859, Berlin).

itself. At his death in 1859,<sup>2</sup> he was still at work on his magnum opus *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, a multi-volume tour de force throughout which he relies heavily on the information and experience he had garnered during those five years in the Americas.

In this essay, I base my arguments on the *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (published in 1811) but also on his other works, especially *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* (1814). In the two-volume *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, Humboldt provides a detailed account of the researches and travels he undertook during his year-long stay in Mexico in 1804. He presents his political attitudes toward the Indigenous peoples throughout this somewhat statistical and demographic description of the land, the flora (including cultivated crops), and the people. A few examples from this *Political Essay* suggest the different ways through which Humboldt makes his argument concerning the interconnectedness between treatment of the land and treatment of the Indigenous people. My fundamental argument here is that Humboldt's work is that of a Romantic scientist whose attitudes toward the land and its people are based on hard science as well as the scientist's unique ability to maintain a Romantic understanding of connections and interrelations of that land and those people.

## Fame Based on *Political Essay* Publication

Over the past few decades, Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* has been one of his less read books and is certainly under appreciated by scholars. Much more valued, based on the amount of scholarly attention, are others, especially the massive work *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* (1814) and the previously mentioned *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe* (1850). It is *Cosmos* that Laura Walls refers to as Humboldt's "signature work" (Walls, "Greening" 96),

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2. "After his return from the New World, Humboldt spent the next twenty-two years in Paris, exhausting his considerable inherited wealth in preparing and publishing the results of his explorations. These included sixteen volumes on botany (including descriptions of some 8,000 plant species, 4,000 of them new), two volumes of zoology and anatomy (primarily descriptions of new animal species), four volumes of astronomical and geophysical observations, two volumes each of geographical and pictorial atlases, three volumes on the history of exploration and nautical astronomy of the New World, four volumes on the political economy of New Spain (Mexico), seven volumes of the never-finished *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, a volume of popular essays—and one small volume on the geography of plants" (Jackson, "Introduction," 3).

for example. Another title evoking much recent scholarly interest is Humboldt's reluctantly written *Personal Narrative of a Voyage to the Equinoctial Regions* (first published in French in 1807, translated into English between 1815 and 1826). But it is his book on *New Spain*, not these others, for which he first gained international recognition. According to Nicolaas Rupke, "Humboldt's early international acclaim was [...] the result of his account of the political economy of Mexico." And "the nature of the [nineteenth-century] international response to this major work indicates that Humboldt rose to prominence in his role as a colonial surveyor of Spanish Central America" (Rupke 335). Indeed, it is the *Political Essay on New Spain* that served to make Humboldt a household name, familiar throughout Europe. At the time of his death in 1859 he had a much, much wider international audience than did Charles Darwin, for example, who in 1839 had published his travel account, *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Of course, it must be noted that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had only been first published that very year, 1859. Of the traveler-scientist's overall impact on his contemporaries, Lewis Pyenson writes that "Humboldt had a direct influence on a wider range of people than any scientist since Newton" (Pyenson 259).

## Romantic Tendencies

Scholars argue over the degree to which Humboldt is a Romantic philosopher as opposed to an Enlightenment era scientist, but they argue without resolution. Certainly Humboldt can be said to juggle, or even fuse, the strictly scientific approach to the natural world and the idealistic or Romantic in which the natural world includes that which science simply cannot describe or explain. This balancing act results in what was for the time period (first half of the nineteenth century) a progressive and "enlightened" view of the Indigenous peoples; Humboldt invests his understanding of the Indigenous peoples with Romantic principles without succumbing to a reductive notion of the "noble savage," that belief in the Romantic notion of the Indigenous people as uncorrupted by civilization and therefore noble in the sense of retaining the inherent goodness and innocence that exists in untrammelled nature, for instance. Rather, he bases his opinions on thorough investigation, research, and personal experience. His *Political Essay on New Spain* includes a call for a fuller understanding of Indigenous Mexicans: their history, culture, and present situation vis-à-vis their changing environment and their political and cultural relationships with the colonial government in New Spain. According to Malcom Nicholson, Humboldt "may be seen as both a product of German Romanticism and as an important exponent of a Romantic style within natural inquiry" (183, qtd in Rupke 320). Meanwhile Humboldt's emphasis on harmonies and occult

forces, argues Mary Louise Pratt, aligns him with the spiritualist aesthetics of Romanticism (See Pratt 124). One scholar relates Humboldt to what he calls “radical romanticism” (Sachs 41). The English publisher and translator of the *Personal Narrative* (first published in 1829) also argues that Humboldt was a Romantic thinker and writer, at least insofar as he could bring forth “general ideas, without neglecting individual facts; and while he appears only to address himself to our reason he has the secret of awakening the imagination, and being understood by the heart” (qtd in Walls, 43). According to William H. Goetzmann, “*Humboldtian science* is synonymous with Romantic science” (qtd in Walls 126, my emphasis). Stephan Jay Gould suggests that Humboldt plays the idealistic child to Darwin’s realistic adult (Gould 104). In sum, Humboldt’s idealism marks him as a Romantic. Thus, according to these scholars, in these ways, Humboldt is the quintessential Romantic.

Yet, if a Romantic, he is a unique one in that he is, according to Mary Louise Pratt, extremely adept at fusing “the specificity of science with the aesthetics of the sublime” (Pratt 121). And as Laura Walls explains it, Humboldt’s method constitutes a “science with heart” (Walls 19). Susan Faye Cannon argues that Humboldtian science consists of the “accurate, measured study of widespread but interconnected real phenomena in order to find a definite law and a dynamic cause” (qtd in Walls 126). This is the case, in part, because, as Walls argues, Humboldt recognized that “without knowledge of physics, all else was mere impression” (42). In a description of the ways by which one can enjoy the contemplation of nature, Humboldt concedes that there is an enjoyment “wholly independent of an intimate acquaintance” or knowledge of natural phenomena, but at the same time he thoroughly debunks the naïve and idealistic contention that “nature may by degrees lose a portion of the charm and magic of her power as we learn more and more how to unveil her secrets” (*Cosmos*, Vol. 1 38-39). For Humboldt, then, the scientific and the magical (so to speak) can walk hand in hand.

It might be profitable at this juncture to compare Humboldt’s ideas as precursors, in a sense, to New England’s Transcendentalists, especially those of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau too retains his sense of the mystical when or as he takes extremely careful and thorough measurements of Walden Pond, a procedure he describes in the chapter of *Walden*, “The Pond in Winter”: “There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it” (Thoreau 209). Thoreau offers three methods of dealing with the bottomlessness of the pond. The first method is to lie on the ice and feign an attempt to stare through the illusive medium. Already believing the pond

bottomless, the people using this method arrive at hasty conclusions that pond is indeed bottomless. A second method is practiced by those who use bad science and reach inaccurate conclusions, mis-measuring and therefore continuing to believe in the pond's bottomlessness. The third method is to measure accurately and precisely using good science, Thoreau's method: "I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone weighing about a pound and a half, and could tell accurately when the stone left the bottom, by having to pull so much harder before the water got underneath to help me" (Thoreau 209).

But what has this to do with Humboldt and his contention that nature does not lose its magic "as we learn more and more how to unveil her secrets"? Thoreau concludes his paragraph about measuring the pond with an insistence that it has a reasonably tight bottom yet it can be understood as bottomless. It is the knowledge of its precise depth that gives the pond its magical hue: "This is a remarkable depth for so small an area; yet not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless" (Thoreau 209-10). In a different context, David Robinson writes that "Thoreau devised a set of interlinking projects in which empirical observation and metaphysical conceptualization played vital and complementary roles" (Robinson 177-78). Here, like Humboldt before him then, Thoreau is fusing science and a belief in the symbolic, the pure, the mystical. Both writers are thus Romantic while accepting and promulgating the importance of sound science.

## Humboldt's Organicism

From the interpretations of Humboldt's rational, careful science imbued with heart, it is clear that he firmly believed everything to be connected and inter-related; he pursues explanations of that idea throughout most of his published work. In *The Humboldt Current*, Aaron Sachs maintains that "In science, Humboldt pushed the borders of several fields of study by attempting to combine them, on a global scale" (Sachs 43). Even the organizational style of *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments*, for example, indicates such interrelatedness. According to Walls, "Since everything is connected, everything he sees reminds him of a dozen other things" (Walls 42), and hence the apparent chaos, but only apparent, in the structure of the book. Gerard Helferich maintains that Humboldt concentrates "on the complex relationships between the land and its people" (Helferich 268). And for Walls, Humboldt displays "the complex ways in which nature and culture produce each other" (Walls 5-6). Meanwhile Stephen T. Jackson asserts that Humboldt "wants to convey a vision of what

plant geography is, or can be, and why it matters intellectually, practically, and aesthetically” (Jackson 19).

For Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau, this concept of interrelatedness, this organicism, underlies a philosophy of the natural world. For Thoreau the idea of organicism is illustrated as he watches the thawing sand and clay along a railroad bank. As the thawing sand

flows it takes the form of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopard’s paws or birds’ feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds” (Thoreau 223).

Thus, concludes Thoreau, one finds “in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf (Thoreau 224).

In the vegetable the animal, including the human. “Thus it seemed that this hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature” (Thoreau 225). And thinking about these interrelationships, Thoreau concludes that “Nothing is inorganic” (Thoreau 225).

Sean Ross Meehan places Emerson in the tradition of organicism too, but for Emerson it is the human mind that finds its template in nature. According to Meehan:

Emerson discusses... the Platonic doctrine of ‘reminiscence’: things in nature resemble somewhat the ecology and imagination transcendent forms remembered or recognized only by the soul. Metaphor is the figure of resemblance; such is the organic metaphor named in the line from *Nature—a metaphor of the human mind[...]*as face to face in a glass—and key to the tradition of Romantic organicism (Meehan 310-11).

Though Emerson and Thoreau might have somewhat different ideas of the organic nature of the natural world, both can be seen to derive their ideas from Humboldt. According to Michael West, for example, it was “Wilhelm von Humboldt and Romantic science that inspired Thoreau to ‘conceive of words biologically’ and understand language as a living organism” (West 197). Language and words, yes, but more to the point in my context here, it is the interrelationships between all aspects of nature, of the natural world, that have a fundamentally related pattern or structure.

Before Emerson and Thoreau, Humboldt recognizes that “the local details of climate, flora, fauna, soil, and culture could all be seen as parts of broader regional and global patterns” (Jackson 4). Stephen Jackson maintains that “Humboldt’s *Essay [on the Geography of Plants]* provoked people to think about

the globe in fundamentally new ways—as a single entity with interlinked biological, physical, and cultural properties” (Jackson 4). If everything is connected, reasons Humboldt, it follows indisputably that the well-being of the natural world must be very closely linked and related to the well-being of Indigenous populations. In the physical as well as in the moral and cultural world, argues Humboldt, everything terminates in a return to the order prescribed by nature.

## Treatment of and Attitude toward Indigenous Peoples

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt glosses over the *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, but she does pause long enough to comment that Humboldt approaches “human society through statistical and demographic description and a social analysis based on environmental determinism” (Pratt 131). She argues ultimately that the work shares “two aspects of the mythic world of primal nature: ahistory and the absence of culture” (Pratt 131). Pratt also maintains that Humboldt has come to be seen, reductively, as having simplified Spanish America, especially Spanish South America, with merely three iconic images: jungle, plain, and mountain, arguing that Humboldt himself is to blame because he promulgates a simplistic approach to understanding the continent: “Three images in particular, all canonized by Humboldt’s *Views*, combined to form the standard metonymic representation of the ‘new continent,’” submits Pratt, “superabundant tropical forests. . . snow-capped mountains [...] and vast interior plains.” She continues: “Humboldt singled out this canonical triad himself [...] the noblest objects of nature.” In addition to the “Ocean,” he names “the forests of the Orinoco, [...] the savannahs of Venezuela, [and] the solitudes of the Peruvian and Mexican mountains” (Pratt 125).

Pratt argues, curiously, that Humboldt leaves out the land’s human occupants, the Indigenous peoples of those jungles, plains, and mountains. “What is shared with scientific travel writing” she writes, “is the erasure of the human... The human inhabitants of the *Ilanos* are absent” (Pratt 125). Lack of history and absence of culture seem curious lacunas for a travel writer-scientist who argues for and repeatedly identifies the complex relationships between the land and its people. And in fact, as it turns out, Pratt’s charge that Humboldt’s depictions deny the Indigenous peoples their history and a presence is easily refuted. As even Pratt herself points out, Humboldt describes how archeological finds throw light on the [pre-contact] history of the Aztec civilization (Pratt 134). As a scientist-historian Humboldt takes great pains to place the original Americans in history, writing at one point, for example, that in order to understand the Indigenous people of his day and give an accurate idea of them, it would be



necessary to go back “to a remote period, when governed by its own laws the [Aztec] nation could display its proper energy” (*New Spain* I, 140).

Humboldt is in fact extremely interested in the early history of the Indigenous Americans. In his lengthy descriptions of Native food stuffs in his *Political Essay on New Spain*, for example, he inevitably devotes space to speculations concerning their origins, pre-contact trade routes, and communication systems. He speculates on how the potato can be found in Virginia and Peru but not in Mexico (*New Spain* 488). And he recounts the pre-contact spread of maize and its different varieties based on its different locations (*New Spain* 440). Not only is he interested in the early history of the first peoples, but he maintains that they developed a particularly sophisticated culture; he writes that “so great a number of indigenous inhabitants undoubtedly proves the antiquity of the cultivation of this country. Accordingly we find near Oaxaca remaining monuments of Mexican architecture which prove a singularly advanced state of civilization” (*New Spain* II 132). Furthermore, Humboldt points out that these pre-contact cultures had their own histories and writing systems, noting that the “hieroglyphical tables of the Aztecs have transmitted to us the memory of the principal epochs of the great migrations among the Americans” (*New Spain* II 132-33). In addition to an elaborate writing system, the pre-contact arts, argues Humboldt, “bear [...] a striking analogy to several monuments of the most civilized people” (*New Spain* II 140). Humboldt points out and laments the loss of knowledge that results from colonial conquest and from attempts to force Christianity onto the Indigenous people: “The monks burned the hieroglyphic paintings by which every kind of knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation. The people, deprived of these means of instruction, were plunged in an ignorance so much the deeper as the missionaries were unskilled in the Mexican languages and could substitute few new ideas in place of the old” (*New Spain* I 156). Clearly then, as these examples demonstrate, Humboldt’s work is replete with accounts of and questions about the pre-contact Americans and their history.

In his long work, *Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas*, Humboldt offers a depiction of a sculpted bust of an Aztec priestess. Although he suggests that the piece represents “the infancy of the art,” he does note that the sculpture otherwise compares artistically and favorably with known examples from the Western world, and he praises the craftsmanship. There are, he maintains, “remarkable points of similarity” between the arts of the Old and New Worlds, and such a work definitely makes manifest understanding and skill regardless of the “sources of enlightenment” (*Views* 20). Humboldt maintains that the beaded headdress suggests pre-Columbian trade between Mexico City and the coast of California. He also insists

on the sculptor's skills: "The folds of the headdress, and especially the pearls, have a very smooth finish, although the artist, lacking steel chisels, and likely working with [...] copper and tin tools, must have had a difficult time perfecting them" (*Views* 20).

In another instance Humboldt presents a view of a Mexica relief found near Oaxaca, to the southeast of Mexico City. As Humboldt describes it, the relief depicts "a warrior" "leaving a battle scene" (*Views* 70). And, insists Humboldt, such work "Heralds an emergence from an artistic immaturity" (*Views* 67).

The rhetoric of Humboldt's phrasing in his description of this particular piece of art is especially interesting and especially telling. Here is the sentence: "The natives of the northwest coast of the Americas have never been counted among the highly civilized peoples, yet they have succeeded in making drawings whose accurate proportions elicited the admiration of English traders" (*Views*, I, 70). Humboldt constructs the sentence with two independent clauses connected with the conjunction "yet." The first clause, which includes the negative "never" is in the passive voice. Rhetorically, then, the pejorative clause with the negative lacks force because it lacks agency. The "thing" doing the counting is grammatically and therefore rhetorically absent. The second clause, the "appreciative" clause, in contrast, employs the active voice: *they have succeeded*. The clause has a positive connotation and insists on agency. The rhetorical power of the sentence as a whole thus resides with the second clause, the one praising the "natives," those who have succeeded. Furthermore, Humboldt loads that same second clause with words which are rich in positive connotations, words such as *succeeded*, *accurate*, and *admiration*. In this sense, our author includes and praises the Indigenous peoples even on the levels of semantics, syntax, and grammar.

Humboldt draws parallels between his studious interest in pre-contact cultures of Mexico and his observations of the contemporary Indigenous population. Through his investigations into contemporary and ancient Indigenous cultures in Mexico, he accounts for the contemporary populations in New Spain, devoting an entire book to the Indigenous peoples. Describing people living in the mountains, for instance, he offers this somewhat idyllic picture which romanticizes the people: "the Aztec people love to inhabit the summits and brows of the steepest mountains. [...] What a pleasure it is for the traveler to follow these peaceful conquests of agriculture and to contemplate the numerous Indian cottages dispersed in the wildest ravines and necks of cultivated ground" (*New Spain* II 409). Here Humboldt romantically expresses the ideal.

However idyllic, though, these Romantic suggestions are not without the indication of sincere interest in contemporary Indigenous peoples. He demonstrates, for example, a stark disapproval of their treatment by the colonists. That

is, at the same time that he paints such an idyllic picture, he regrets and exposes the ill-treatment of the Indigenous peoples at the hands of the Spanish. He deplores the initial colonial “carnage” as he calls it (*New Spain* I, 139) and points out to his readers that the original Mexicans have been “victims of European ferocity” and of “Christian fanaticism” (*New Spain* I, 156). Carnage, ferocity, fanaticism are his words (in translation from the French, of course: *carnage*, *ferocité*, *fanatisme*). Humboldt also expresses his disapproval of the enslavement of both Africans and Indians. He may privilege the picturesque, but he is not blind to the reality. He notes that “These plains are watered with the sweat of [...] slaves! Rural life loses its charms when it is inseparable from the aspect of the sufferings of our species” (*New Spain* II, 403).

In addition to condemning slavery, Humboldt deplores the colonial oppression of the Indigenous peoples more generally, writing that the

conquest rendered the state of the lower people still more deplorable. The cultivator was torn from the soil and dragged to the mountains where the working of the mines commenced; and a great number of Indians were obliged to follow the armies and to carry, without sufficient nourishment or repose, through mountainous woods, burdens which exceeded their strength. All Indian property, whether in land or goods, was conceived to belong to the conqueror. This atrocious principle was even sanctioned by a law which assigns to the Indians a small portion of ground around the newly constructed churches (*New Spain* I, 181).

The colonial legal system necessarily imposed additional barriers on the Indigenous populations, impositions that Humboldt finds reprehensible insofar as they make it impossible for the people to participate in the colonial economy:

In an age when it was formally discussed if the Indians were rational beings, it was conceived granting there a benefit to treat them like minors, to put them under the perpetual tutory of the whites, and to declare null every act signed by a native and every obligation which he contracted beyond the value of 15 francs. These laws are maintained in full vigor; and they place insurmountable barriers between the Indians and the other castes, with whom all intercourse is almost prohibited. Thousands of inhabitants can enter no contract which is binding; condemned to a perpetual minority, they become a charge to themselves and the state in which they live (*New Spain* I vi 188).

Given the forced dependence, the inequality, and general mistreatment, Humboldt stipulates that there is a definite need for a change in the political system that ignores and so limits the potential of the Native peoples in New Spain.

## Need for Change in Political System and Attitude toward Indigenous Americans

Ultimately we must ask the question: to what extent does Humboldt simply reinscribe colonial attitudes as opposed to insisting upon the need for and actually genuinely calling for change? According to Pratt, referencing Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*, he simply "naturalizes colonial relations and racial hierarchy, representing Americans above all, in terms of the quintessential colonial relationship of *disponibilité*" [availability] (Pratt 130). Aaron Sachs is more generous, arguing that Humboldt "was not a man of political action; he did not take direct steps to block colonialism. But he did register protests and show respect for the separateness of the colonies" (Sachs 51). Sachs also argues that although Humboldt "took for granted the superiority of certain aspects of European 'civilization,'" he believed that all peoples were "capable of contributing to those arts and sciences" (Sachs 67). In this context, Pratt's assertion seems to overlook Humboldt's insistence that the Indigenous peoples of Mexico have long had a sophisticated and complex history and a relatively advanced civilization. Moreover, argues Humboldt, their apparent lack of sophistication in the present day results from the oppressive nature of colonization. Therefore, he argues, there is a crying need for a change in attitudes and in the political systems that so oppresses the Indigenous population in Mexico.

I argue that Humboldt does indeed call for change.

He calls for change on the economic and agricultural levels, for instance, arguing that "When civilization shall have made farther progress in the country[...]enlightened government might introduce indigenous productions" (*New Spain* II 402-03). He also maintains that the "new colonies were not established among people altogether barbarians." Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Indians were already clothed. "Men who knew the process of weaving cotton or spinning the wool of the Llamas and Vicunas were easily taught to manufacture cloth; and this manufacture was established at Cuzco in Peru, and Tezcuco in Mexico, a few years after the conquest of those countries on the introduction of European sheep into America" (*New Spain* II 463).

On the overtly political spectrum Humboldt points out the lack of Native input in political decisions that affect all the people, implying that the Indigenous people should have a political voice, lamenting, for example, the fact that divisions of land "have been made without consulting the chiefs of the different tribes who inhabit these countries" (*New Spain* II, 385). He calls for an end to slavery. And he argues for the importance of citizenship for all. In so doing, he definitely goes against the grain and he has to be somewhat diplomatic. Here he demonstrates his political savvy.

## Humboldt's Political Savvy

One must acknowledge that on occasion Humboldt softens or even misrepresents the colonial interactions with the Indigenous populations, accepting and even reinscribing without first-hand experience or even research some of the uninformed ideas of his day. For example, he often refers to the Indigenous peoples as ignorant savages, referring at one point to the “stupid indolent Indians” (*New Spain* I 200). Writing about Indians in the United States, in another instance, he seems to let a Romantic viewpoint allow him to gloss over wars and removals in order to maintain that “At the approach of the new colonists, the native gradually retired towards the western savannas” (*New Spain* I 260). Is the verb “retire” a euphemism for forced removal? Or does Humboldt sincerely believe the Indians moved of their own accord? In another place he writes that the North American Indians “chose rather to withdraw [...] to avoid being forced to live among Europeans” (*New Spain* I 137). The implicit suggestion here is that the Indigenous peoples moved voluntarily from their homelands, and hence Humboldt discounts the devastating effects of wars and forced removals. Here he seems to subscribe more to the Sentimental-Romantic worldview of a James Fennimore Cooper than a political Emerson or a Thoreau. Emerson, of course, deplored the Cherokee Removal, for example, and makes clear that the people of that Nation are not removing voluntarily. In an open letter in 1836, he castigates the federal government for its actions: “the American President and the Cabinet, the Senate and the House of Representatives, neither hear these [Cherokee] men nor see them, and are contracting to put this active nation into carts and boats, and to drag them over mountains and rivers to a wilderness at a vast distance beyond the Mississippi” (Emerson 50). Granted, this removal takes place well after Humboldt is writing his *Political Essay*, but forced removals had a long history, and were going on well before the federal Removal Act to which Emerson refers. Almost immediately after the American War for Independence, the tribes occupying the regions south of the great lakes (in present-day Indiana and Illinois, for example), lost their lands. In the 1780s and 1790s the removals began, and under the leadership of the governor of the Indiana Territory, future president William Henry Harrison, the Delawares, Shawnees, Miamis, and Potawatimis were forceably removed. As governor between 1803 and 1809, Harrison played a major role in land cessation treaties and militarily supported removals. In short, Humboldt could have known and perhaps did know about these removals well before publishing misinformation about North American Indians voluntarily seeking greener pastures west of the Mississippi, using language like “gradually retired” to the West, or suggesting that the indigenous peoples are “indolent.”

Such comments as these must be understood in Humboldt's context, however. The apparently indolent Indians appear as they do, maintains Humboldt, only because they have been deprived of their basic human rights and have therefore been forced to rebel against a severely oppressive Spanish government. And because of this oppression, the Spanish are continually running the risk of experiencing a rebellion, perhaps a violent rebellion.

In this context Humboldt demonstrates both his refusal to succumb to a strictly Romantic idea of a noble savage and his political savvy. He both warns of the threat of revolt by Indigenous populations and offers a means of preventing such revolt. His proffered solution is radical for the time, and he thus presents it in the words of the "respectable" Bishop Antonio de San Miguel rather than in his own words. That is, in this instance, Humboldt couches his bid for more humane attitudes toward and treatment of the Indigenous people, implies the abolition of slavery, and the granting of citizenship by quoting another's call for the outcome he himself seems to desire. Humboldt is thus able to publish his views but at the same time manage to avoid risking his own political legitimacy and remain able to retain his authoritative voice: he shares with his readers what he calls "the wisest views and most liberal ideas (*New Spain* I 189). What he offers, in short is this: by implementing "a very simple [economic] calculation it is undeniable that "the conceding to the Indian all the rights of denizens [...] will increase considerably instead of diminishing the revenues of the state" (*New Spain* I vi 197). Speaking in his own voice, Humboldt then reminds his readers of the dangers of perpetuating the racist and segregated culture: "Recent example ought to teach us how dangerous it is... to perpetuate their insulation, barbarity of manners, misery, and consequently motives of hatred against the other casts" (*New Spain* I 200). As if such pleas to his readers' human decencies might not be enough, he turns from strict economic and military benefits of a humane interaction to a more general plea: "It is therefore of the greatest importance, even for the security of the European families [in New Spain] [...] that they should interest themselves in the Indians, and rescue them from their present barbarous, abject, and miserable condition" (*New Spain* I vi 203).

In short, Humboldt applies what we can now call, in the words of Sachs, for example, "an ecological sensibility to the problem of frontier expansion." Humboldt winds up "decrying abuses against comparatively powerless groups like Indians and the collateral devastation of environmental resources like forests and soils" (Sachs 20). *That* is Humboldt's legacy. *That* is the work of a Romantic scientist. What he had to offer in this context, in the context of his own epoch, was world changing. He warned of the dangers of colonial oppression and Indian revolt, but he also advocated as the appropriate preventative measure

equality of opportunity rather than suppression, subjugation, and military brutality. He demonstrated to the Western world the “complex ways in which nature and culture produce each other” (Walls 5-6). That may well remain one of his most valuable contributions as a travel writer, as a scientist, and as a Romantic, a contribution lasting into the twenty-first century.

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**Résumé :** Cet article s'intéresse à la manière dont Alexander von Humboldt présente, par le biais de ses descriptions statistiques et démographiques de la terre, de la flore (y compris des cultures) et des peuples, sa vision des politiques coloniales affectant les peuples indigènes dans son livre *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811). On peut dire que Humboldt combine une approche exclusivement scientifique avec une attitude romantique et l'association de ces deux éléments se solde par ce qui était pour l'époque (la fin du dix-huitième siècle) une vue progressiste et éclairée des peuples indigènes. Le *Political Essay* de Humboldt appelle à une compréhension plus complète des indigènes Mexicains, incluant leur histoire, leur culture et leur situation vis-à-vis des changements dans leur environnement et dans la nature du lien politique entre eux-mêmes et le gouvernement colonial en Nouvelle Espagne (le Mexique et les Etats-Unis du sud-ouest en ce temps-là).

**Mots-clés :** Humboldt, Nouvelle Espagne, Mexique, indigènes mexicains

**Abstract :** Basing its arguments primarily on his travel account of his stay in Mexico in 1804, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1811), this paper looks at how Alexander von Humboldt presents his political attitudes toward the Indigenous peoples throughout his statistical and demographic descriptions of the land, the flora (including cultivated crops) and the people. Humboldt can be said to juggle or even fuse a strictly scientific approach with his Romantic attitudes, and this balancing act results in what was for the time period (turn of the nineteenth century) a progressive and "enlightened" view of the Indigenous peoples. Humboldt's *Political Essay* includes a call for a fuller unders-



tanding of Indigenous Mexicans: their history, culture, and present situation vis-à-vis their changing environment and their political relationship with the colonial government in New Spain (Mexico and southwestern United States at the time).

**Keywords :** Humboldt, New Spain, Mexico, Indigenous Mexicans

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