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## *Threats to the European Subject*

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While traveling near the town of Anoch in Scotland's Western Isles, Samuel Johnson described the plant life in the area in the following manner: "The appearance is that of matter incapable of form or usefulness, dismissed by nature from her care and disinherited of her favours, left in its original elemental state, or quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation" (Johnson 1775, 26). In the midst of this untended profusion, Johnson allows himself to experience a crisis of psychic overload: although he knows there is no real danger, the writer voluntarily entertains a series of "imagination[s]" that have as their focus the dissolution of the physical and mental self of the subject. For Johnson, the region around Anoch evokes the possibility of "want, and misery, and danger" (Johnson 1775, 27).

Samuel Johnson's imaginative response to the vegetative overgrowth of the Western Isles may at first seem irrelevant to a study of Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1818–1827).<sup>1</sup> After all, Humboldt's descriptions of South America's highly fecund spaces are often positive. His enthusiasm for tropical profusion leads him, for instance, to revise upward Malthus's pessimistic

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1. I cite here Helen Maria Williams's translation of Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (Humboldt 1818–29). For ease of reference, I cite Williams's translation parenthetically by volume and page. Although Humboldt approved of and was actively involved in Helen Maria Williams's edition, later translators have argued that her version often varies, particularly in tone, from the French original. They argue that as a significant figure in British Romanticism, Williams brought a distinctive voice to the translation. For instance, Thomasina Ross deemed her own 1851 re-translation necessary because she felt that Williams's version "abounds in foreign terms of expression"; Jason Wilson, who completed a new translation in 1995, finds that Williams "interpreted and exaggerated" Humboldt's original French prose (which Wilson characterizes as "curiously flat, scientific, and modern"), particularly in passages where Humboldt waxes enthusiastic. For instance, in Williams's translation, "wild nature" becomes "wild and stupendous nature," "dark curtain of mountains" becomes "vast and gloomy curtain of mountains," etc (Wilson 1995, lix–lx). On Humboldt's active involvement in Williams's translation, see Biermann (Biermann 1986, 11–12).

carrying capacity estimates for the “New Continent;” such appreciation also caused him to pioneer new methods for measuring and cataloguing the productivity of the Americas and to call for political and economic development in the region.<sup>2</sup> At its most teleological, *Personal Narrative* sketches an optimistic – if distinctively European – future for South and Central America: Humboldt imagines a time when “populous cities enriched by commerce, and fertile fields cultivated by the hands of freemen, adorn those very spots, where, at the time of my travels, I found only impenetrable forests, and inundated lands” (I.li). Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, although he ventures no further than the geographic periphery of the British Isles, sees only “matter incapable of form or usefulness” heaping itself up around him at a frightful pace. In fact, when Johnson’s imaginations do turn to the “New Continent,” he becomes positively terrified, admitting to himself that Scottish “spots of wildness” cannot evoke anything like the terror encountered in the vast and threatening “deserts of America” (Johnson 1775, 27). Where Johnson sees want and lack in natural spaces peripheral to European centers of commerce, Humboldt sees potential.

And yet, a study of *Personal Narrative* that stresses only “commerce, and fertile fields” would be incomplete. After all, the overwhelming power of “impenetrable forests and inundated lands” is just as crucial to the portrait Humboldt paints of tropical America. In a number of memorable passages, *Personal Narrative* foregrounds the capacity of vegetable excess to resist colonization, impede productive enterprise, and overwhelm European modes of psychic and social life. Thus, while he might never have characterized South American vegetation as “sullen” or “useless,” Humboldt’s teeming New World spaces do evoke a kind of Johnsonian anxiety. Like the Western Isles, tropical nature threatens to degrade or fully overwhelm the coherence of the European subject. My analysis calls attention to passages in *Personal Narrative* that stress the dangers tropical fecundity posed to European identity and modes of civilization; I go on to explore Humboldt’s related worry that South American vegetable and visual overload will exert a destabilizing effect on his own aesthetic sensibility and on his ability to create a coherent textual representation of the New Continent. Investigating the instabilities experienced by the expatriates and colonists that populate *Personal Narrative* promises to draw out tensions latent in Humboldt’s own treatment of tropical landscape and to illuminate significant epistemological shifts often precipitated by and worked out within travel narratives during the period.

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2. Humboldt’s innovation in gathering demographic and economic information can be seen most clearly in his monographs on Mexico and Cuba. See, for instance, his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (Humboldt 1811).

*“Man no longer appears as the center of the creation:” Excess Verdure and the Traveling Observer*

Early in *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt suggests that the “moment of leaving Europe” is transformational: the traveler passes into a fundamentally different realm, “entering in some sort on a new state of existence” (I.31),<sup>3</sup> one of the most distinctive features of which is the “luxuriousness of the vegetation” (V.441). In Humboldt’s lengthy work, a complex and often contradictory relationship between vegetable (hyper)fecundity and the traveling observer emerges. On the one hand, tropical excess is viewed positively: it is powerful, moving, and unprecedented in Humboldt’s experience. On the other hand, such vigorous plant life is often a serious impediment both to the observer’s ability to perceive nature accurately and to the efforts of colonists to preserve a coherent European identity.

For instance, Humboldt worries that even his trained vision may not be a reliable servant in South America. In spite of his prodigious capacities as a careful observer, record-keeper, and statistician, spaces that are “overloaded with plants” impede observational accuracy. Humboldt’s description of the banks of the Río Cedeño suggests the irony inherent in observing and describing South American verdure – that is, plant life itself presents the single greatest hindrance to the study of plant geography in the tropics. In a place where tree trunks are concealed “under a thick carpet of verdure” and “lianas” climb from the ground to the tree tops in a “continual interlacing of parasite plants, the botanist is often led to confound the flowers, the fruits, and leaves, which belong to different species” (III.36–37). That an experienced botanist cannot see the tree trunks for the forest, so to speak, suggests the power of tropical fecundity to disrupt even an expert’s sense of nature’s deep structure.

Humboldt faces similar problems as a human demographer attempting to quantify the extent of agriculture – and thus the size of the population – in South America. While in Europe the extent of cultivation corresponds in a predictable way to population size, even the “most populous regions in equinoctial America still [retain] a savage aspect” (III.15–16). Here “[s]pontane-

3. Ann McClintock sees psychologically significant boundary crossings as a common feature of European travel narratives. Furthermore, explorers regularly code the “dangerous thresholds of their known worlds” in gendered terms: the “threshold” is an erotically charged space that generates a set of ritual and fetishistic practices on the part of the traveler (and travel writer) which “[betray] acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss.” Although I do not address the role gender plays in Humboldt’s text (and significant work remains to be done in this regard), my analysis of *Personal Narrative* substantiates McClintock’s suggestion that passing into the tropics generates acute anxiety at the possibility of “boundary loss”—in this case national and cultural boundaries are at stake (McClintock 1995, 24).

ous plants...predominate by their quantity over cultivated plants, and determine alone the appearance of the landscape.” Here man does not inhabit the landscape as “an absolute master, who changes at his will the surface of the soil, but as a transient guest” (III.15–16).

One senses two competing value systems at play in such passages, where Humboldt praises the verdant fecundity of tropical nature even as he signals that such a fertility can impede accurate interpretation. On one hand – as Engelhard Weigl has noted – Humboldt stood in the tradition of Buffon and the Forsters in favoring the beauty of a tamed and civilized nature (Weigl, 2001, no pagination), tended by what Forster called “the moderate care of rational beings” (Forster, 1778, 99-100). As Johnson did, such a value system privileges order, visibility and productivity. Yet Humboldt also subscribed to an emerging counter-discourse about nature – one associated, but not co-extensive, with the discourse of Romanticism. This discourse asserted the value of wild untamed spaces, sublime scenes, and unsymmetrical or obscure natural landscapes. Kristian Köchy (Köchy, 1997 and 2002) and others have sketched Humboldt’s complex relationship to the discourse of German Romanticism and Williams’s translation can certainly be said to engage with the epistemology and language choices of a certain strand of British romanticism.<sup>4</sup> This delineation of the “sublime” gave aesthetic value to scenes that were complex, threatening, or difficult to interpret.

It is clear that these two philosophical inclinations come into tension in *Personal Narrative*. The conflict manifests itself in Humboldt’s simultaneous attraction to (on aesthetic grounds) and rejection of (on pragmatic grounds) the visually provocative, but dense, messy, and seemingly uninhabited South American landscape. As we have already seen, these contradictory impulses crystallize around the (apparent) absence of human activity in spaces where plants “determine alone the appearance of the landscape.” Humboldt finds himself deeply moved by places where “[m]an no longer appears as the center of the creation,” thrilling at views in which it is only “the conflict of the elements, which characterizes...the aspect of Nature.” Yet in the very same paragraph, Humboldt also laments the melancholy impression conveyed by “[a] country without population.” Unpopulated but obviously arable terrain “appears to the people of cultivated Europe like a city abandoned by it’s [sic] inhabitants” (III.512). While it is normal and even desirable to respond with

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4. On Williams, see note #1. For the nineteenth-century British reader, the key entries in this genealogy of Romantic aesthetic language would have included Edmund Burke’s influential differentiation of the sublime (“whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects”) from the beautiful; Samuel Johnson’s analogous opposition between the “awefully vast” and the “elegantly little”; and Kant’s more internally oriented categories (the sublime results from a thing’s “*limitlessness*, yet with a superadded thought of its totality,” while the beautiful is primarily a “question of the form of the object” (Burke 1757, 36; Johnson 1759, 61; Kant 1790, 90 [SS 23])).

deliciously “strange and sad” feelings to places where humans could never thrive anyway (the ocean or desert, for instance), it is distressing to “seek in vain the traces of the power of man” in a place that is “adorned with eternal verdure” and should therefore be habitable and productive (V.290-91). The text seems caught between lamenting and romanticizing the absence of human civilization in the tropics.

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*“[N]ational remembrances are insensibly effaced”:  
Tropical Threats to the European Subject*

If vegetable profusion could obscure the presence of civilization in Central and South America, it also had the power to transform its character. In addition to attributing the culture and personality of indigenous South Americans to the influence of climate, Humboldt repeatedly implies that European colonists – even those who have only recently emigrated – are in danger of losing their distinctive culture if they remain in the tropics. Living in the presence of so much vegetation seems to mark colonists with a “wild and uncultivated” character “which belongs to nature, the primitive type of which has not been altered by art” (III.15–16), overwhelming even settlers with strong European traditions. In fact, cultural continuity seems only to be retained in parts of South America where the climate is temperate (II.290). Those colonists “settled in a zone, where the climate, the productions, the aspect of the sky, and the scenery of the landscape, differ altogether from those of Europe,” repeatedly fail to preserve familiar modes of life.

Even when these settlers make conscious efforts to retain familiar habits, they don’t succeed for long. For instance, Humboldt is particularly affected by abortive attempts to build community through acts of naming:

The colonist vainly bestows on mountains, rivers, and vallies [sic], those names, which call to his remembrance the sites of the mother country; these names soon lose their attraction, and have no meaning with the generations that succeed. Under the influence of an exotic nature, habits are generated, that are adapted to new wants; national remembrances are insensibly effaced; and those that remain, like phantoms of the imagination, have neither ‘a local habitation, nor a name.’ (II.287)

For subsequent generations of settlers, place names fail to index European experiences and attitudes; rather, they serve only as a vague and melancholy reminder of loss.<sup>5</sup>

For Humboldt, a series of encounters dramatize the power of tropical verdure to denationalize European settlers. While traveling on the Río Apure, for instance, the Prussian scientist encounters a man who claims recent Spanish heritage. Although the man has pretensions to culture, Humboldt suggests

that he has lost all ability to think outside the moment, failing even to “[construct] an *ajoupa* of palm-leaves” to prepare for the inevitable tropical rains. Humboldt’s penchant for sarcasm shows through as he chides this man who presumes to “[call] his wife and his daughter, who were as naked as himself, donna Isabella, and donna Manuela” (IV.430). That night, as Humboldt had feared, a heavy rainstorm soaks the party. He records that as it “rained in torrents on our hammocks, and the instruments we had landed, don Ignacio congratulated us on our good fortune in not sleeping on the strand, but finding ourselves in his domain, among Whites and persons of rank” (IV.432). Clearly annoyed and bemused, Humboldt concludes that it is a “singular...spectacle, to find in that vast solitude a man, who believes himself of European race” but who “knows no other shelter than the shade of a tree” (IV.432–33). The account suggests that for Humboldt, even in circumstances where the “idea” of European heritage has been preserved, its constitutive characteristics seemed to have been lost.

Humboldt’s encounters with expatriates from *northern* Europe make it clear that Spanish colonists are not the only ones who become subject to an erasure of identity in the tropics. Language retention and loss figure prominently during encounters in which Humboldt meets a Frenchman who had “forgotten his native language” (V.677) and later a fellow Prussian who has no interest in “the sight of a man who could talk to him of his country” – he can, in fact, neither remember German nor “explain himself clearly in Spanish.” Of the encounter, Humboldt drolly notes that “our conversation was not very animated” (VII.441).

To these portraits of stateless expatriates, we can add Humboldt’s own experiences as a European exposed to the torrid zone. Humboldt frequently notes the power of the tropics to affect a traveler’s memory and state of mind. For instance, Humboldt writes that the “climate of the Indies” made an impression “so great, so powerful...that after an abode of a few months we seemed to have lived there during a long succession of years” (III.354). This distortion of time is tied to the erasure of familiar memories in the face of excessive stimuli: tropical verdure, acting “upon our imagination by it’s [sic] mass, the contrast of it’s [sic] forms, and the glow of it’s [sic] colours,” has the power to “weaken antecedent impressions” in the mind of the traveler (III.355). Europe is easily forgotten and even a return to Paris or Berlin may not fully renationalize the traveler: Humboldt’s impressions left him with a

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5. The anxiety registered in this passage about the health and sustainability of temperate cultures in tropical climates should be placed in the broader context of the discourse of “seasoning” and acclimatization that characterized European writing about the tropics in general and the Americas in particular. To name just one instance, Karen Ordahl Kupperman has documented long-running apprehension about the detrimental physical effects of hot climates—and the cultural price to be paid for acclimatizing—in the writings of English colonists in Virginia and the West Indies (Kupperman 1984, 213–40).

melancholy longing for the tropics – and a “vague desire to revisit that spot” (III.255) – years after his return to Europe.<sup>6</sup>

It is in relation to recent attempts at European settlement that the torrid zone threatens its most forceful – and worrisome – disruptions.<sup>7</sup> Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* suggests that, like the Prussian who could speak neither German nor Spanish, European colonists quickly lose their way between two worlds. Comparing South American settlements unfavorably to Greek and Phoenician colonies in antiquity, Humboldt suggests that these ancient settlers managed to combine the old and the new so as to create a vibrant “intellectual culture” that even “excited the envy of the mother countries” (II.292). This is not the case in the New World, where European colonists fail to forge a unique and superior alloy; instead, they forget European traditions and fail to embrace those of America, foolishly “[disdaining] whatever relates to the conquered people.” Humboldt describes the stateless and cultureless colonist in this way:

Placed between the remembrances of the mother country, and those of the country where he first drew his breath, he considers both with equal indifference; and in a climate where the equality of seasons renders the succession of years almost imperceptible, he abandons himself to the enjoyments of the present moments, and scarcely casts back a look on the times that are past. (II.291-292)

In this way, national disidentification brings with it temporal dislocation and stasis, effectively removing tropical colonies from the teleological regime of progress that would dominate nineteenth-century views of history.

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*“[The traveler]... can scarcely distinguish what most excites his admiration:” Aesthetic Overload and Textual Excess in “Personal Narrative”*

Late in his travel account, Humboldt pauses to consider the difficulty of preserving written records in Central and South America. In the torrid zone, teeming insects

devour paper, pasteboard, parchment, with frightful rapidity, destroying records and libraries. Whole provinces of Spanish America do not afford one written document, that dates a hundred years back. What improvement can the civilization of nations acquire, if nothing link the present with the past, if

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6. Of course, Aimé Bonpland’s eventual return to South America is a significant subtext in such a discussion of Humboldt’s statements about the pull of the torrid zone.

7. Humboldt expresses the relationship using the following syllogism: “The forms of plants determine the physiognomy of nature; and this physiognomy influences the moral dispositions of nations” (V.52).

the depositaries of human knowledge must be repeatedly renewed, if the records of genius and reason cannot be transmitted to posterity? (V.116)”

In this passage, the tropics are again a place where the past is quickly lost and future improvement is therefore unachievable. It is striking, though, that Humboldt’s statement about the impermanence of writing appears only after the (English) reader has waded through nearly three thousand pages of text that has successfully survived the tropics. Although in several dramatic moments Humboldt and Bonpland’s records and collections are in danger of decay or loss, the text of *Personal Narrative* is its own proof that writing about the tropics can survive. However, Humboldt’s emphasis here on the power of the torrid zone to destroy writing – to literally consume the traces of human discourse – calls attention to the risks he sees as inherent in committing representations of the region to paper.

In fact, it is the psychic, rather than the physical, act of writing that seems to be most under siege in South America. *Personal Narrative* repeatedly registers anxieties about all stages of writing – observation, cognition, and inscription – on a continent where instability and overwhelming fecundity combine to resist representation. Considering a similar problem, Oliver Lubrich has noted the ways in which *Personal Narrative* foregrounds its own generic instability. Through a careful study of its grammar and structure, Lubrich argues that the text “[undermines] the conventional format of the travelogue” because all the categories which normally “lend the text coherence and make it readable for the recipient” – including the subject, the object, the addressee, and the text itself – “are charged with multiple meanings and become thus destabilized.” By refusing to operate on familiar generic terrain, *Personal Narrative* resists established interpretive schemas and “de-authorizes imperial forms of colonial writing” in the process.<sup>8</sup> Building on Lubrich’s provocative analysis, I wish to suggest that excessive inputs precipitate a crisis of representation in *Personal Narrative*.

Before doing so, however, it is important to briefly review the characteristics of Humboldt’s distinctive philosophical method. Because the development and intricacies of Humboldt’s approach have been dealt with expertly and extensively elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> I cite here only the preface to the English translation of *Personal Narrative*. Working with Humboldt’s detailed input (Bier-

8. Lubrich views the destabilizing character of Humboldt’s text positively, suggesting that it creates a discourse in which “there are no ‘identities’ and ‘differences’ which can be defined unequivocally from a privileged perspective” (Lubrich 2003, no pagination).

9. In the rich scholarship on the subject, Humboldt’s philosophical method has been given a variety of names: see Laura Dassow Walls on Humboldt’s “rational empiricism” (Walls 1995, 69–70); Susan Faye Cannon on “Humboldtian science” (Cannon 1978, 82); Mary Louise Pratt on “planetary consciousness” and “transculturation” in Humboldt’s work (Pratt 1992); and Ottmar Ette on Humboldt and the idea of “Weltbewusstsein” (Ette 2002). *Itbewusstsein. Alexander von Humboldt und das unvollendete Projekt einer anderen Moderne*. Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2002.

man 1986, 11-12), Helen Maria Williams states the Prussian observer's philosophy in terms that would have been familiar to an English readership: "[t]he appropriate character of [Humboldt's] writing is the faculty he possesses of raising the mind to general ideas, without neglecting individual facts" (I.ix). Operating, as it does, within the binary of the general and the particular, Williams's statement may have reminded her readers of Samuel Johnson's assertion that "[s]ublimity is produced by aggregation, and littleness by dispersion. Great thoughts are always general, and consist in positions not limited by exceptions, and in descriptions not descending to minuteness" (Johnson 1779-1781, 594). Yet in supplementing Williams' description with Johnson's statement, the possible tensions between part and whole inherent in such an epistemology already begin to show themselves. For while Johnson's "sublime" can only be achieved through the "aggregation" of information and effects, this very act of amassing data risks pushing the whole system towards incoherency and "dispersion."

Humboldt is acutely aware of this tension between the general and particular in his own work. While he wants to fuse "individual facts" into "general ideas" in his writing, he also recognizes that the huge volume of information his writings must present to achieve this end may itself threaten his goal; in fact, Humboldt commented on the struggle for balance between generality and minuteness in the work of other scientific travelers. At a time when scientists had more and more analytical tools at their disposal, traveling naturalists were producing increasingly cumbersome and difficult texts:

itineraries have partly lost that unity of composition, and that simplicity, which characterized those former ages. It is now become scarcely possible to connect so many different materials with the narration of events; and that part which we may call dramatic gives way to dissertations merely descriptive. (I.xli-xlii)"

These epistemological and aesthetic tensions between dispersion and aggregation are brought into particularly stark relief in narratives about the tropics, where the traveler is faced with an unprecedented variety and volume of potentially sublime sensory input.

Humboldt recognizes that he cannot follow the generic conventions that placed the human traveler at the center of the narrative. As a result, he fears he cannot help but violate a crucial convention of travel narrative: the generation of a writer-centered text. Because "the unity of composition can be strictly observed only when the traveler describes what has passed under his own eye...It is the man himself that we continually desire to see in contact with the objects that surround him" (I.xli). One thinks here, perhaps, of Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* – cited at several points in *Personal Narrative* – in which Park's adventures drive the episodic

and often sentimental narrative forward. Humboldt is aware of this expectation to keep the narrative centered on himself, but he also recognizes the power of the tropics to disrupt first-person, narrator-based accounts.

For instance, Humboldt addresses this question of narrative focus and linearity while writing about how the view from the summit of Tenerife might best be represented. He argues that, paradoxically, if he *were* to place himself and his responses to nature at the center of his travel account, the result would not be a clear narrative trajectory, but rather an incoherent series of expressions of wonder in the face of too many varied sensory inputs:

It is a difficult task, to describe those sensations, which act with so much the more force as they have something undefined, produced by the immensity of the space as well as by the greatness, the novelty, and the multitude of the objects, amidst which we find ourselves transported. When a traveler attempts to furnish descriptions of the loftiest summits of the globe, the cataracts of the great rivers, the tortuous vallies [sic] of the Andes, he is exposed to the danger of fatiguing his readers by the monotonous expression of his admiration. (I.180-181)<sup>10</sup>

Faced with a “multitude of objects” and aware that he couldn’t make his experiences in the Americas into a coherent linear narrative even if he wanted to, Humboldt opts instead for the massive comparative and analytical project that we now recognize as “Humboldtian science.” In practical terms, this decision allows Humboldt to organize certain portions of *Personal Narrative* according to scientific theme or the availability of comparative data—a strategy that permits the lengthy digressions and labyrinthine footnotes characteristic of his writing. Although this kind of heterogeneous and comparative approach makes sense in light of Humboldt’s emerging philosophical system, it does seem at odds with his previous aesthetic privileging of the “man himself...in contact with the objects that surround him” as the proper subject of the travel narrative (I.xli). Humboldt does often manage to remain – by sheer force of personality – at the center of a more-or-less linear text. But this apparent contradiction is perhaps the point: *Personal Narrative* travels uncomfortably between the poles of vivid, first-person incident and comparative, descriptive analysis of “the peculiar character that distinguishes each zone” (I.181). The “multitude of objects” presented by tropical nature precipitates this tension and helps generate *Personal Narrative*’s often contradictory form.

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10. For a similar case, see Vol. 5, where Humboldt compares the melancholy effect of a place lacking the visible signs of human culture to the effect his own work may be having on the reader: “I paint the impression produced by the monotonous aspect of those solitary regions. May this monotony not be found to extend itself to the journal of our navigation, and tire the reader accustomed to the description of the scenes and historical memorials of the ancient continent!” (V.290–91)

There is another way in which Humboldt's text fails to fulfill the expectations of the metropolitan reader. After all, not all late-eighteenth-century travel narratives possessed a dynamic narrator who engaged in a series of exciting incidents: a journey might, instead, be expected to produce a series of aesthetic impressions in the picturesque style. To name just one example from a thriving genre, Ann Radcliffe's *A Journey Made in the Summer of 1794*...presents a series of discrete, carefully framed picturesque scenes calibrated to produce a specific aesthetic effect. This effect – what one critic has referred to as the “subject-centered picturesque” – stresses the use of mediating devices like a coach window or a “Claude glass” in order to establish distance between the “single and unique beholder” of the scene and the landscape itself. Mediation and distance allow the writer to describe the scenery even while carefully managing its effect on the written text. (Kuczynski 1998, 247). Humboldt is clearly familiar with this scene-based picturesque style, producing it admirably on several occasions – as when he skillfully uses the drifting clouds on Tenerife (I.82–83) or the mouth of the Cueva del Guacharo (III.127–28) to frame those two picturesque scenes.

But this analytical and aesthetic tool is also strained to the breaking point “on a vast continent, where everything is gigantic.” Humboldt quickly encounters difficulty containing nature within the well-marked borders of the picturesque scene. Instead, multiple worthy scenes present themselves at every turn. Humboldt addresses this threat to picturesque description directly, noting that if a traveler in the tropics “feel strongly the beauty of picturesque scenery, he can scarcely define the various emotions, which crowd upon his mind; he can scarcely distinguish what most excites his admiration” (III.36). Humboldt is left with an unsolvable selection problem: if he describes every interesting scene to his readers, the written text will break under its own weight, descending into incoherence. On the other hand, if he fails to fully describe all the worthy scenes he encounters, his depiction of the aesthetic character of South America will be incomplete and therefore inaccurate. Because tropical excess affects the way Humboldt “pictures” South America, it also influences the final written form of *Personal Narrative*. Indeed, the naturalist's *full*, thirty-volume travel record signals the degree to which only heterogeneity and supplementarity seem appropriate for representing the masses of sensory input to which Humboldt has been sensitized in his aesthetic and scientific training.

In some interesting cases, the representational practices of the societies Humboldt encounters in Central and South America reflect and inform his own difficulties in creating coherent and manageable representations. For instance, Humboldt criticizes the failure of Spanish and Portuguese colonists to construct “memorials” to help them preserve their cultural identity against

an onslaught of tropical impressions. This “absence of memorials...[has] something painful to the traveler, who finds himself deprived of the most delightful enjoyments of the imagination”; more importantly, a lack of remembrances makes it extremely difficult to “bind the colonist to the soil on which he dwells” (II.287).

While European settlers fail to retain memorializing traditions, cultures native to South America seem to recognize and even embrace the futility of creating lasting monuments in the “torrid zone.” In fact, according to Humboldt, some tribes incorporate the annihilation of individual subjectivity and cultural memory – the very idea that so terrorizes Johnson and Humboldt – into their cultural practices. The Tamanacs, for instance, practice a set of death rituals that center on *erasing* “remembrances:” when a tribe member dies, the families “lay waste the fields of the deceased, and cut down the trees which he has planted. They say, ‘that the sight of objects, which belonged to their relations, makes them melancholy.’ They like better to efface than to preserve remembrances” (V.626). Given Humboldt’s repeated observations that tropical plant life has the power to conceal or destroy civilization and rupture links between past and present, his interest in Tamanac practice makes a kind of sense: the tribe seems to feel that the only reasonable and sustainable representational strategy available to them in the face of tropical excess is not the preservation of human culture, but rather the preemptive erasure of the traces that add up to a human life.

Humboldt ultimately retreats from the radical implications of Tamanac ritual, returning the reader to a quantitative and mercantilist frame by noting that such burial practices “are very detrimental to agriculture” and that the monks therefore oppose them (V.626). However, his interest in the scene calls attention to questions of representational coherence and textual permanence and must be read against the power of the tropics to disrupt or even “devour” representation “with frightful rapidity.” This incident, taken together with the other passages I have examined in this section, suggests that Humboldt himself hadn’t solved the problem of how best to process and represent tropical nature. Hyper-fecundity and aesthetic overload present themselves as serious obstacles both to the progress of civilization in the “torrid zone” and to the production of coherent textual representations of the region.

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### *Conclusion*

In *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt implies that tropical profusion (in terms of information and sense impressions) makes it difficult to deploy Western descriptive modes in writing about that region. Although his dedication to a liberal, mercantilist economic system—and to the productive potential of

Central and South America – remains clearly in place,<sup>11</sup> Humboldt's recognition that tropical profusion has power to destabilize his text often threatens this rationalistic and progressive vision in subtle ways. Sensory overload precipitates moments of doubt that manifest themselves as uncertainty about the ability of the European subject to preserve identity and the capacity of the European writer to reconcile the generic conventions of travel narrative with the actuality of the tropics.

In other work, I have attempted to sketch these difficulties as expressed by Humboldt in his work and to connect them to broader epistemological shifts occurring in response to similar instances of information overload in other areas of nineteenth-century life. In this regard, *Personal Narrative* serves an important function in British intellectual culture by calling early attention to the challenges inherent in representing a nature that is unstable, mutable, and resists efforts to control its excesses or to make them productive. Furthermore, I suggest the question of proliferation (vegetable and otherwise) is a fundamental issue in nineteenth-century aesthetics. As Harriet Martineau observed in 1838, the knowledgeable traveler was inevitably put under strain by the number of "views" he or she was required to process: she laments that "[t]he wearied mind soon finds itself overwhelmed by the multitude of unconnected or contradictory particulars" (Martineau 1838, 16). As the reading public grew, and as the quantity of published travel narratives increased, the epistemological stresses and strains affecting the informed traveler rapidly became the stresses and strains of the informed reader. Humboldt's struggle to represent the tropics while working within the generic boundaries of the travel narrative may therefore serve more broadly as a guide to analyzing other nineteenth-century efforts to deal with complexity.

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11. Humboldt's belief in the achievement of progress through economic development can be seen clearly late in *Personal Narrative*. Humboldt expresses hope for a future relationship between Europe and the Americas in terms that sound familiar even today: he anticipates that a "noble rivalry in civilization, and the arts of industry and commerce, far from impoverishing the ancient continent, which has been so often prognosticated, at the expense of the new, will augment the wants of the consumer, the mass of productive labor, and the activity of exchange." (VI.116).

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