

Women Travelers in Humboldt's New World

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Historically, Humboldt's vast travels to continental Latin America have been interpreted as the paradigm for European travel narrative to the New World. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, for instance, labeled Humboldt the "second discoverer" of the Americas, pointing out his debt to Christopher Columbus as well as his departure from the tradition of discovery and conquest (also in Duviols and Minguet 1994, 25). Biographers and critics alike have amply documented Humboldt's status as an eighteenth-century *savant*, cataloguing the interdisciplinary thrust of his writings, encompassing geography, natural science, and geology (in Duviols and Minguet 1994, 25-28), an encyclopedic knowledge which established both the foundations of modern science as well as a new type of travel writing (Ette 2003, 25). Critical reception of Humboldt promoting him as paradigmatic of the scientific voyage to the New World highlights his role in shaping both the rhetoric of European travel writing and the Latin American literary tradition (González Echevarría 1990, 104, 110). These biographical and textual approaches constitute Humboldt's literary legacy, what one critic called "oddly parallel traditions" in praise of his life and work (Ochoa 1999 102). In recent years, Mary Louise Pratt has radically altered this view with her ideological critique of Humboldt, based, coincidentally, on the same paradigmatic value accorded to his travel books. Pratt's approach has marked an important shift in the critical reception of Humboldt (1992, 119-120), highlighting the centrality of Humboldt's oeuvre for post-colonial studies, yet I concur with Ochoa's assessment that her "demonizing view [...] ascribes an inscrutable, totalizing authority to Humboldt" (1992, 138) in need of further revision.

In this paper, I want to pursue the extent to which Humboldt's *relations de voyage*, and particularly his *Personal Narrative of the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1816), have shaped the course of nineteenth-century

European women travelers to the New World. Breaking free of the rhetorical restraints placed on the genre of travel writing – what Pratt identifies as the sentimental and the scientific (1992, 74-75) but which really encompass a wide range of “transdisciplinary” discourses¹ – European women travelers practice the genre with the same healthy eclecticism which characterized Humboldt’s travel writings. Inspired by Humboldt, they trekked the plains, “pampas”, and valleys of the New World, secure in the knowledge he provided but also in hope of establishing their own “personal narrative.” Whether inside a carriage, on horseback, or by foot, the varied journeys of Victorian women travelers particularly are made on the trail of Humboldt, seeing in their illustrious predecessor not merely an abstract model to emulate, but a source of authentication of their varied journeys, an authority needed to construct their own, private forays into unknown territory (Frawley 1994).

It is a mainstay of travel narrative to suggest that the genre forms an intricate web of texts in which the individual itinerary often conjures the writerly paths opened up by previous travelers. At the start of his *Personal Narrative*, Humboldt acknowledges that he “read the ancient voyages of the Spaniards” during the long sea passage from La Coruña to Cumaná (Humboldt, vol. I, 1814). Later on in the voyage, in the dramatic passages describing his intent to discover the bifurcation of the Orinoco, he will repeatedly cite Father Gumilla and La Condamine as his most direct textual precursors (Humboldt, vol. vol. V, 487). It is inside this labyrinth formed by the criss-crossings of previous journeys (Ette, 2003, 24) where we detect Humboldt’s influence on European women, in their double role as both travelers and readers, since reading can be viewed as “a kind of traveling” (Ette 2003, 26-28. In much the same way as Columbus’ inaugural journey reverberates throughout Humboldt’s voyage, traces of his *Personal Narrative* appear on at least three levels in the alternative tradition of European women’s travels.² First, in the perspective of the journey, what has been theorized as the “seeing-man” or “all-knowing I” (Pratt 1993, 7) of the European scientific explorer, and who is most often collided with the first-person narrator of the travel account (Ette 2003, 29). In the critical corpus, the traveler’s pose has been codified as a single male explorer who from a height above absorbs in his gaze the entire sweep of the land below, a mountaintop perspective permitting the comparison of different landscapes and climates (Slovic 1990, 6; Stafford 1984, 150). Humboldt’s ascent to Mount Chimborazo (Image 1-Chimborazo) not only

1. I am indebted to Ottmar Ette’s keynote speech delivered at the “Alexander von Humboldt: From the Americas to the Cosmos” conference, in which he commented on the author’s “transdisciplinary,” rather than merely “interdisciplinary” perspective.

2. En route to the New World, Humboldt claims to follow the exact sea route charted by Columbus, as his allusion to the passing of Cape Three Points, dubbed so by the Almirante, makes clear; *Personal Narrative*, vol. 2, 30.

emblemizes this view, but also illustrates the linear form of the journey, as one anticipating a fulfillment (Ette 2003, 44). In this way, the perspective of the traveler conditions the *shape* or textual organization of the travel account, detailed in Ette's analysis of the recurring tropes in European travel writing (2003). Yet Humboldt's influence is most strongly felt in the approach to landscape, characterized by the Romantic sublime and the use of metaphor, and based, for the most part, on the comparison to similar scenery in Europe (González Echevarría 1990, 108) as well as to more remote regions. Humboldt's "comparative method of landscape description" has been negatively interpreted as downplaying the specificity of a particular terrain or region in favor of a grander "textual atlas" or abstract model of the globe (Slovic 1990, 6, 8). In contrast, in his analysis of the use of analogy in Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain and Views de cordilleras*, Ochoa notes its effectiveness at the sight of inanimate landscape, and the tensions arising when dealing with the culturally Other (Ochoa 1999, 143).

After noting the striking similarities and differences between British women travelers and Humboldt in terms of the rhetoric of travel (that is, perspective and approach to landscape), I want to clear a different path, where Humboldt's influence is also felt. I propose that many nineteenth-century women, particularly those "solitary travelers" devoted to science (Marz Harper), follow Humboldt's trail as a circuitous path to knowledge, an endeavor resulting either in personal satisfaction, conversion into an author, increased self-confidence, or a self-transformation implying all of the above. Although quite a few Victorian "lady travelers" fit this pattern, I want to focus here on a set of four illustrated travelogues that best represents the reception of Humboldt I am suggesting: botanist, artist, and historian Maria Graham, also known as Lady Calcott, whose extended residence abroad resulted in two travel books, *A Journal of a Voyage to Brazil* and *A Journal of a Residence in Chile*, both published in 1824; Fredrika Bremer, dubbed the Swedish Jane Austen, whose sojourn in the United States and Cuba resulted in *The Homes of the New World – Impressions of America*, published in 1853 and translated into English a year later; lastly, Victorian artist Adela Breton, a "globe-trotter" whose travels culminated in a series of trips to Mexico at the turn of the century, who left a stunning visual archive of Mayan architecture and landscape.

Although Mary Louise Pratt has classified Maria Graham as one of the *exploratrices sociales* participating in the rhetoric of European travel writing (Pratt 1992, 164), her books do not conform strictly to the "imperial eyes" model. Instead of a Self/Other dichotomy, Maria Graham's South American journals exhibit, rather, a reciprocal gaze, a mutual recognition and identity, what is best emblemized in the front illustration of *Journal of a Residence*

in *Chile*, where a genteel-looking Graham peeks out of a carriage in expectation of the pleasures of travel (Image 2-Graham 1824, *Chile*, frontspiece). Whereas both Pérez Mejía and Hayward emphasize Graham's alleged pose of superiority as a British subject, "Traveling in Spanish America," the title of this particular illustration, conditions the reader of the *Journal* in a different mode: that of a "fellow traveler" who accompanies the narrator on her journey (Pérez Mejía 1997, 92; Hayward, in Graham 2003 ed., 298). "Traveling in Spanish America" represents a perspective akin to what Humboldt accomplished in *Vues des cordillères*. At first glance, it evokes what one critic called "the subject-centered picturesque," a technique in which "visible nature is arranged for the spectator in such a way that the lines of the pictorial image converge on the eye of the single and unique beholder and places him or her at the centre" (Kuczynski, 247).³ Yet Graham's focus is *outward*, as if the traveling subject were ready to enter unknown territory; her piercing gaze embracing the world, rather than fleeing from it. Almost as if anticipating her experience in the New World, to be revealed as the pages unfold, the illustration functions as a prelude to the book, hence seducing the reader, who is drawn into the text of the journey as the stagecoach progresses. In *La geografía de los tiempos difíciles*, Angela Pérez Mejía interprets this image as necessarily including the gaze conferred on her by the Chilean populace in their attempts to tame the British visitor's "foreignness" (Pérez Mejía 1997, 90-91). Thus the image of Graham inside a coach represents a female subject in transit, comfortable in two worlds, and inhabiting a transatlantic space.

The sketches accompanying the narrator on her way through Chile and Brazil, mostly drawn by her own hand, reenacts the perspective inaugurated by Humboldt in his *Personal Narrative* for the purpose of scientific investigation and inquiry. In many passages, Humboldt must leave a site just visited, but cannot pause enough to examine it further, thus entrusting the task to a future traveler, such as when he points out a rare species of plant found in the tropical zone (1814, vol. III, 28). In this way the future traveler anticipates the reader's "virtual" journey, in a "hermeneutic movement" in which the real journey tracks its future reception (Ette 2003, 40, 50). This same gaze of inquisitiveness is manifested in Graham's illustration, except that she is *sitting down*, in contrast to Humboldt's standing (and presumably more authoritative) pose.

A comparison between Graham's self-portrait at the outset of her *Journal of a Residence in Chile* and Humboldt's depiction while meandering the peaks and valleys of the Orinoco reveals not so much a gender difference as a convergence of point of view before the American landscape. Humboldt's

3. I am grateful to Jason Howard Lindquist of Indiana University for bringing this article to my attention, and for his insightful comments regarding this passage and my paper as a whole.

conquest of the peak of the Chimborazo has been interpreted as the climax of his journey (Goodman 1972, 258-259); more recently, as emblematic of the pose of European superiority and self-assurance assumed by the “imperial eyes” model (Pratt). Yet the inaugural moment for the explorer’s “summit-survey” actually comes earlier in his journey, after the arduous climb to the Silla de Caracas, which elicits the inspired phrase: “The eye commanded a vast space of country” (Humboldt, 1814, vol. III, 506; quoted in Slovic 1990, 6). If compared to the visual account of Humboldt’s journey, illustrated in his *Vues de Cordillères*, the climactic arrival at a peak is preceded by a far humbler pose, depicting the contrast between the human figure and the majestic heights of the “cordillera.” Among other scenes, in *Vue de Cajambé* (Image 3), a pair of male travelers amble in front of a mountain range with a pair of walking sticks – a convention of the illustrated travel account meant to convey the scale of the drawing (Ochoa 163) – but which also suggests the disparity between the natural realm and the human one. In this image, moreover, the focus of the viewer follows the pair of walkers *down below* as they point toward the goal of their expedition – the mountain top – thus signaling both the inaccessibility of the mountain as well as its symbolic status as the object of scientific curiosity; in Stafford’s terms, an example of “willed seeing” (1984, 254).

While both Humboldt and Graham share the comfort (and *dis-ease*) of inhabiting two worlds at once – what I call here the transatlantic perspective – in both cases, the traveler is diminished before foreign terrain. In Graham’s sketch, she appears as a woman facing the unknown, whose fears are heightened by the increased dangers implied in her journey;⁴ whereas, in Humboldt’s painting, he and his traveling companion are dwarfed by the size of the mountain yet proceed on their march in the attempt to scale its heights.

A similar perspective is seen in the art of Adela Breton, a Victorian woman traveler who re-discovered the Mayan world at the turn of the century. In a series of stunning watercolors and sketches devoted to revealing *México profundo*, Breton depicts the same high/low perspective as Humboldt’s *Vue de Cajambé*, particularly in the watercolor of the Jorullo volcano (which Humboldt also visited). On the trail of Humboldt, Breton evokes the volcano immortalized in *Vues des Cordillères*, only her accent is on the compactness and massiveness of the mountain range, the irregular profile of its summits, and the play of light and the shadow in the surrounding valley (Image 4-“Jinete”-Ea 11508). In his depiction of the Volcano of Jorullo, Humboldt focused on the vanishing effect created by the *hornitos*, (Image 5-Humboldt-Volcán de Jorullo), small canonical structures exhaling vapours:

4. The gender restrictions implied in nineteenth-century women’s travels have been amply discussed in Frawley, Mills, and Marz Harper.

“Les cones sont autant de *fumaroles* qui exhalent une vapeur épaisse et communiquent à l’air ambiant une chaleur insupportable. On les désigne, dans ce pays, qui est excessivement malsain, par la denomination de petits fours, *hornitos*.” (Humboldt, 1811). This phenomenon demonstrated the Enlightenment obsession with the composition of earthly matter, perceptible only by means of its “fugitive effects” (Stafford 1984, 197). In contrast to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on verticality, Breton’s central feature is the compactness of the mountain, what resists the eighteenth-century privilege of height (Stafford 1984, 88). Clouded by the density of the mountain range, in Breton’s art the spectator’s gaze falls, instead, on the solitary figure riding away from the heights. This vision from below contrasts, then, with the totalizing view attributed to the male traveler in his “summit-survey” – only Breton combines both dimensions, imbuing both with her own subjective vision. In Breton’s art, the space below is designated not by the distanced European traveler but by the local populace, as in her placid scene of a street in Puebla (Image 6-Breton, Ea 8399) in which its inhabitants appear as part of the surrounding landscape, in contrast to the church steeple on the right.

Nowhere is Humboldt’s influence more deeply felt than in women travelers’ approach to New World landscape. European women’s travelogues exhibit similar rhetorical strategies as their illustrious precursor; namely, the conjoining of science and art involved in the minute observation of natural phenomena, a stance proper to the eighteenth-century man of science (Stafford 1984, 40); the amazement or wonder provoked by the spectacle of New World nature (González Echevarría 1990, 108); and the sensation of the sublime. In the female tradition of travel writing, Humboldt’s vast oeuvre filters the authors’ own encounter with Nature; in many cases, a visit to a particular site or the experience of natural phenomena is marked by a conscious acknowledgement of Humboldt as reliable source. One notable example from Maria Graham’s journals is her pictorial depiction of the “Great Dragon Tree of Oratava,” the second illustration included in *Journal of a Voyage to Brazil* (Image 7) (1824, between 84 bis). This image complements the description of the dragon tree included in the travel book, in which Graham recalls its centuries-long evolution, “the height and size which it boasted till 1819,” along with its subsequent decline (1824, 85), a description evoking, in turn, a similar passage in Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative*. During his stay in Tenerife, Humboldt described a dragon tree of “enormous magnitude” as “one of the oldest inhabitants of our globe” (Humboldt, vol. I, 1814, 142). Rendering in her sketch the ruins of that ancestral tree, Graham wryly comments as a caption to her illustration: “He saw it in all its greatness; I drew it after it had lost half its top” (*Brazil*, 1824, Plates, vi).

In one of Adela Breton's most precious watercolors, taken near San Andrés Chalchicomula (Image 8-Breton, Ea 8401, 1894), the entrance to Puebla is depicted from the perspective of the valley below, through a rocky path opening up beneath a stone aqueduct.⁵ Similar to Graham's coach scene, in this image the aqueduct frames the view from a distance in the shape of "a natural arch," a recurring image in the illustrated travel account used to convey the idea of a "natural masterpiece" or emblem of animated matter (Stafford 1984, 80, 64, 59). In travel literature to the Spanish Americas, its immediate parallel is the lithography of the bridge over the Iconozo river included in Humboldt's *Vues des Cordillères* (Image 9-Pont sur Iconozo). Yet, in contrast to Humboldt's solitary scene, Breton humanizes the landscape: far away, the viewer glimpses the high "sierras"; in the middle, a church dominates the view of the valley; in front, a hint of gender solidarity conforms an artistic vision in the two women silently walking, hidden beneath their *rebozos*.

European women's poetic scrutiny of the landscape conforms to a gendered approach which I call "the gaze of enchantment." For the travelers selected here, reading Humboldt conditions the travelers' self-fashioning, as in Graham's representation in both "Journals" as a "philosophical traveler" (*Brazil*, 1824, 89), what clearly echoes Humboldt's characterization of his own pursuits as a "natural philosopher" (1814, vol. III, 519). Evident in Graham's gaze is Humboldt's dictum that "the duty of the natural philosopher is to relate all phenomena that Nature displays to him" (Humboldt, 1814, vol. III, 519). Traces of the *Personal Narrative* surface in Graham's horseback tours through the Brazilian countryside, particularly in her attention to the thick vegetation typical of the region. Her description of the lovely valley of Laranjeiras, whose jasmine and rose bushes are described as "one thicket of beauty and fragrance" (Image 10) (Graham, 1824, 162; Plate V, 163), exemplifies Humboldt's hypothesis regarding the determining effect of vegetation in providing the identity of a particular zone or region; in his words, "the vegetation determines the character of a landscape and acts upon our imagination by its mass, the contrast of its forms, and the glow of its colours" (1814, vol. III, 354). By depicting Brazil as an "immense garden" both in the written and pictorial account of her travels, Graham's metaphoric rendition of landscape evokes Humboldt's use of the picturesque to highlight the spectacular aspect of tropical scenery, its exuberant forms and verdant color (Moraes Belluzzo, 2000, 21-22). The recreation of Brazil as a landscape composed of mountains and coastline, dotted by isolated mansions in the midst of a lush vegetation – such as in Graham's sixth sketch, simply titled "View from Count Hoggen-dorp's Cottage" (Image 11) (1824, Plate VI, 170) – imprints the reader's eye

5. The view of San Andrés Chalchicomula is also reproduced in *Adela Breton—una artista británica en México* (66), y en *The Art of Ruins* (Ea8401, 108).

in the manner Humboldt described: “how strong are the impressions [...] left on the mind from those countries placed on the limits of the torrid zone, in which nature appears [...] so rich, so various and so majestic” (1814, vol. 2, 2). The “View from Rio from Gloria Hill” (Image 12) (Graham, 1824, Plate VII, 169) typifies a European perspective of distance (Moraes Belluzzo), centered on the contours of the bay, softly enveloped in a luminous atmosphere, an image evoking Humboldt’s description of the Havana bay as well as his constant references to the translucent quality of the air of the tropics (1814, vol. IV, 329).

Although Humboldt’s travels have been theorized almost exclusively from an ocular perspective – the “imperial eyes” model – in a recent book, Ottmar Ette expands the traditional methodology of the study of travel writing by his lucid analysis of the *shape* of the journey, including, but not limited to, the act of physical displacement proper of the genre. Besides spatial movement, Ette considers integral to our understanding of European travel writing the textual organization of the book, dependent, to a great degree, on the circuit traced by the body of the traveler traversing a new geography (Ette 200, 40). Besides the linear model of ascension to a height above, emblemized in the conquest of the Silla de Caracas and Chimborazo, Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* adapts another,⁶ non-linear pattern: that of the star, defined as a type of journey in which the traveler remains stationed at a fixed point, yet takes intermittent excursions to nearby regions (or side-trips)⁷ resulting in a stellar pattern of complicated symmetry and aesthetic effect. As we have seen, European women travelers like Maria Graham and Adela Breton adapt the linear perspective associated both with the “summit-survey” approach to landscape and with the dominant type of travel classified under the rubric of discovery and exploration. Yet they also clearly mark in their journeys the stellate model described by Ette; Maria Graham and Flora Tristan’s travels, for instance, “are emplotted in a centripetal fashion around places of residence from which the protagonist sallies forth and to which she returns” (Pratt 1990, 157-159). Given their prolonged residence in the New World, European women’s travels are particularly suited to this type of arrangement, since it resolved the basic dilemma of women’s travel: privileging the domestic environment (staying home or at a fixed abode) while at the same time procuring the excitement of outward discoveries.

To invoke an alternative form of travel, which implies not merely a delicate balance between the “passive” discourses of femininity and the “active”

6. Compare Humboldt’s description in vol. 2 of his *Personal Narrative* with Graham’s conclusion regarding Brazilian countryside: “It is impossible to conceive any thing richer than the vegetation down to the very water’s edge around the lake” (163).

7. “[A] definitive center, [...] serves as a starting point for more or less circular journeys and leads to a stellate expansion of the traveled and registered space” (Ette 2003, 45-46).

male-encoded explorer (Mills, Marz Harper), I label this type of journey the star-gazer. A number of European women travelers fall under this category, defined as a traveler who projects onto the New World a certain ideal, whether the philanthropic one of the lone adventurer, like the Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer, who prophesized the end of slavery in Cuba, or the political one of Maria Graham, who passionately defended South American independence despite the failures of military and political strategy. The foundational moment of the star-gazer mode originates in Humboldt's *Personal Narrative*, when, early on in his journey, he comments on the "beauty of the southern sky [which] opened up new constellations" (vol. 2, 18). In a scene reminiscent of Humboldt's star-gazing mode, and soon after her arrival in Cuba, Swedish novelist Bremer gazes up at the heavens from her country abode in Matanzas. Vexed because she could not discern the position of the stars in the southern hemisphere, the philanthropist traveler suddenly announces the discovery of a new constellation: "I thus beheld a constellation of considerable magnificence and brilliancy ascend above the hill of cocoa palms. Could it be the ship Argos or the constellation of Sagittarius? I do not as yet know." (Bremer vol. 2, 1854, 272). Towards dawn, the celestial vault reveals a single shining light: "When the blush of morning appeared [. . .], I saw the morning star standing above the earth [. . .]. It seemed to me like an eye full of a bright but sorrowful consciousness [. . .]." (Bremer vol. 2, 1854, 272). Amidst the stark reality of slavery, the star is transformed into a symbol of collective awareness: "That bright star stood above the beautiful island like its clear, accusing conscience." (Bremer, vol. 2, 1854, 272). This effect is captured in "Palm under a Night Sky," a watercolor in Bremer's Cuba album showing a single palm tree under a glitter of stars (*Skissbok*, Fol. 23v). Reminiscent of what Cuban poet José Lezama Lima called *la noche insular*, this upward surge towards the heavens is accompanied, in women's journeys, by an anticipation of the unexpected, a luminous urge for absolutes, and, at times, by a certain nostalgia for a world left behind, to which the traveler will not return unchanged.

As a prelude to his emblematic voyage in search of knowledge, Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* documents an experience unique to the seafaring consciousness characteristic of eighteenth-century European expansion. Humboldt and Bonpland's transatlantic crossing is imbued by what I call *la conciencia marina*, an awareness of forging a living link between two worlds, an embracing of continents and erasing of differences evident in the constant comparisons between the Old World and the New. While for Slovic Humboldt's comparative method produces an abstract profile of the world, rather than delineating regional or local specificities (Slovic 1990, 6, 8), this mapping of the globe from a detached perspective seems to occur primarily

on land or on the mountain top. At sea, however, Humboldt's poetic rapture is tinged with anticipation of the unknown regions lying beyond (Duvoils and Minguet 1994, 27; Humboldt, vol. 5, 5), or with hyperbole, as in his ecstatic descriptions of the cataracts upon embarking up the Orinoco river (vol. 5, 137).⁸ Inheriting this literary legacy, women travelers often engage in solitary reverie at sea, an experience shaping the "solitary travelers" sojourn. In between Brazil and Chile, Maria Graham wrote in a style of a nautical log, recording every date according to latitude and longitude and orienting herself, like a sailor, according to the flight patterns of birds (Graham, 1824, 204-205). (Image 12-title page-Brazil). This style not only evokes Humboldt's detailed measurements of latitude and longitude throughout the *Personal Narrative*, but also the symbolic import of his long sea journey, as both the intermediate space where the horizon of knowledge is devised, and the private domain of introspection proper of the philosophical traveler.

Resisting a characterization of Humboldt as either "detached" (Slovic 1990, 9) or "mystifying" (Pratt 1992, 141), his literary legacy has produced a particularly gendered mode of travel, what I characterize as "the gaze of enchantment." Besides the women travelers who followed his path into the untred regions of South America, echoes of Humboldt reverberate throughout twentieth-century Latin American literature: from the "axolotl of the lake of Mexico" (vol. 1, xxvi) to the "new islands" he faintly discerned off the coast of Venezuela (vol. 4, 140-141), whose traces resurface in Julio Cortázar's and María Luisa Bombal's haunting short stories ("Axólotl" and "Las islas nuevas").

8. "[W]e were never weary of the view of this astonishing spectacle, concealed in one of the most remote corners of the Earth" (Humboldt, vol. 5, 137).