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# Humboldt in the Americas

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# HUMBOLDT IN THE AMERICAS\*

KENT MATHEWSON and ANDREW SLUYTER

Guest Editors

No one would dispute that Alexander von Humboldt has long been a fixture in geography and its allied disciplines. Courses on the history of geography characteristically place him at the premodern pinnacle of geography and at the point of departure for the modern discipline. That Humboldt died in the same year that Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* appeared, 1859, can take on paradigmatic significance. Humboldt thereby becomes, by some accounts, the omniscient progenitor of our many specialized subfields—the last “Renaissance man.” The eclipse of Humboldt's attempt to understand and venerate the manifest unity of a personified Nature—an eclipse encouraged by reductionistic disciplines that seek to explain and control nature's structures—thus seems to some a lamentable loss of holistic aspirations and to others a heroic passage into scientific maturity.

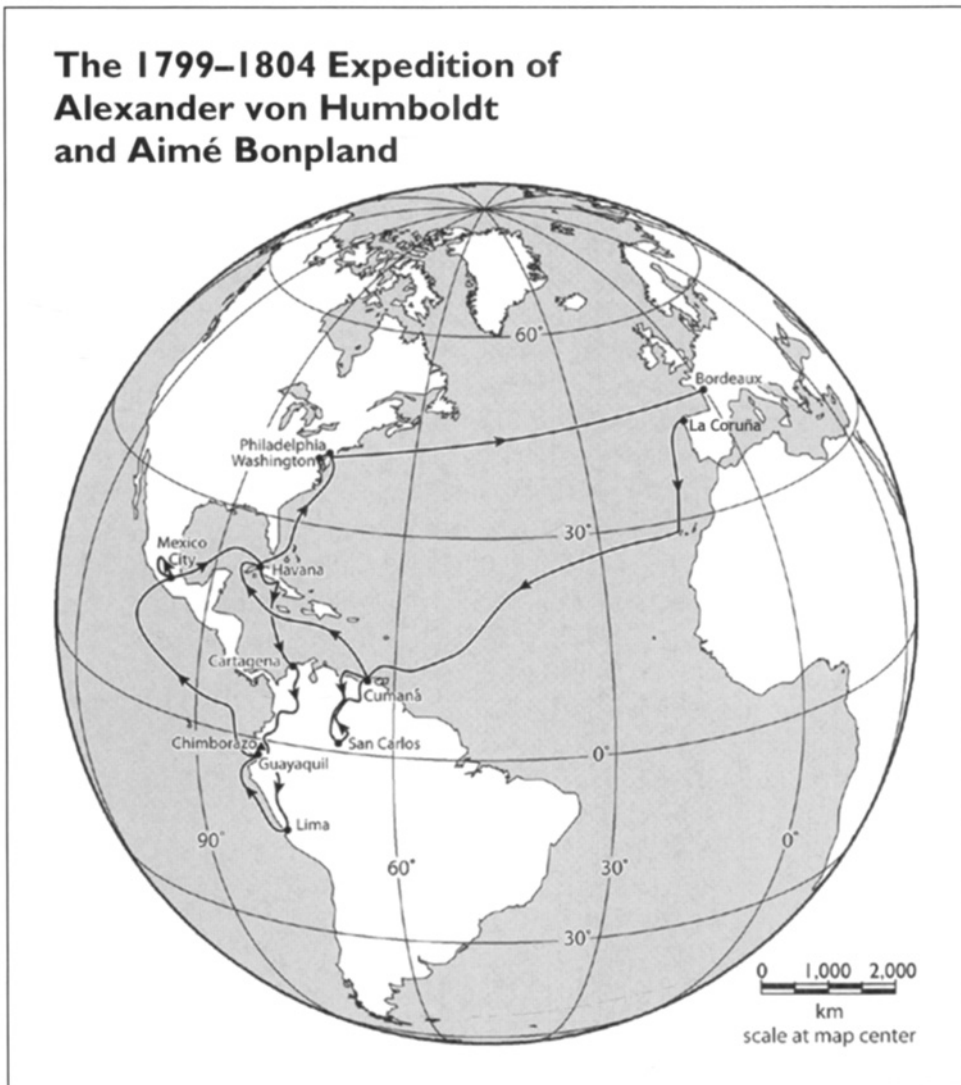
New research has begun to reveal different sorts of Humboldtian legacies, however. With Immanuel Kant's question, “What Is Enlightenment?,” as he titled a 1784 essay, relevant once again, geographers and others are reanalyzing Humboldt's role in the emergence of disciplinary knowledge and power. In a way, that work continues the reengagement with Humboldt spurred by the 1959 centennial of his death. Then biogeographers began to echo the Humboldtian quest for holistic understanding by placing him at the core of an emerging “geoecology.” Cultural-historical ecologists began drawing on him in the study of relict landscapes, like those of intensive wetland agriculture in South America, either literally because he provided relevant information or figuratively because he legitimated foreign fieldwork during a time when the discipline increasingly stayed home.

The following contributions on Humboldt in the Americas—a project originally conceived and organized by Kent Mathewson and Anne Buttimer to reconsider the legacy of Humboldt's American sojourn—achieve a qualitative difference from that preceding reengagement by not just drawing on Humboldt but also at-

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The route taken by Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland during their 1799–1804 expedition to the Americas. (Cartography by Andrew Sluyter and Clifford Duplechin, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University)

tempting to understand his role in the emergence of disciplinary knowledge and its involvement in the persistence of colonialist forms of social power. They derive in part from the Humboldt sessions at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Philadelphia in 2004, the centennial of the organization's founding in that city and the bicentennial of Humboldt's visit there. Buttimer, Sandra Nichols, and the two of us presented initial papers at those sessions. Additional contributors to this special issue—Frank Baron and Detlev Doherr, Suzanne Zeller, and Karl Zimmerer—have added breadth.

The itinerary of the five-year journey that Alexander von Humboldt and the botanist Aimé Bonpland made through the Americas serves to organize the contributions. Buttimer's essay contextualizes Humboldt's expedition to the Americas and the following research articles within his broader intellectual project and its continuing legacy. Karl Zimmerer and Andrew Sluyter follow Humboldt along segments of his Andean and Mexican routes, respectively. Zeller, Nichols, and Mathewson pick up the journey in North America, each presenting different types of analyses of his changing relationship with the United States and Canada. Frank Baron and Detlev Doherr introduce a project representative of several similar efforts in the Americas and Europe, one that uses the Internet to facilitate exploration of the interrelationships among the many dimensions of the Humboldtian cosmos. Finally, notes on recent Humboldt-related activities and a book-review essay on two recent reassessments highlight Humboldt's renewed transdisciplinary reach.