

Who Measures the World? Alexander von Humboldt's Chimborazo Climb in the Literary Imagination

On June 23, 1802, Alexander von Humboldt, Carlos Montúfar, Aimé Bonpland, and three guides attempted to climb the Andean peak Mount Chimborazo, which at 6267 meters (20,561 feet) was thought to be the highest mountain in the world. The ascent was one of the highlights of Humboldt's legendary five-year research trip to the Spanish colonies in the Americas that began in 1799 in the Canary Islands and continued to Venezuela, Cuba, Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the United States. Unlike previous forays to the new world, Humboldt's expedition was independently financed, approved by a special travel permit granted after an audience with the Spanish King Carlos IV, and not tethered to any immediate colonial, national, economic, or political aims.¹ Rather, Humboldt's *Wanderlust*, with no preset agenda or prescribed travel route, was steeped in the Romantic ideal of travel and exploration. Thanks to the generous inheritance from his mother, Humboldt was able to realize a lifelong dream, breaking away from military-focused Prussia, from aristocratic-bourgeois family expectations, a predetermined professional career, heterosexual gender roles, and his clinical depression. Yet it was precisely the escape from a safe European environment that ultimately guaranteed Humboldt's triumphant return to Paris in 1804, enabling thousands of Europeans to vicariously enjoy his risks and adventures. Humboldt's carefully crafted illustrations, scientific reports, and adventurous tales of his expedition to the Americas contributed to a growing European fascination with scaling heights previously thought inaccessible and fueled the public consumption of such exploits.

This essay looks at Humboldt's own narrations of his Chimborazo climb and three representations of the event, including Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's drawing "Höhen der alten und neuen Welt bildlich verglichen" (1807), Rainer Simon's DEFA film *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* (1989), and Daniel Kehlmann's bestseller *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005). It compares these diverse fictional representations in order to examine the imaginative and ideological bent of each interpretation. While Humboldt, in the face of insur-

mountable difficulties, emphasized the failure of his endeavor and gave only cryptic descriptions of the climb, his interpreters much more readily embellished Humboldt's feat in widely disparate stories. Goethe depicts Humboldt as heroically reconnoitering a new world that is a mirror image of the old, while Simon portrays him as a passionate scientist, educator, and revolutionary. Both images clash with Kehlmann's recent representation of Humboldt as an emotionless Prussian who merely measures the world with tedious determination. Kehlmann not only reduces Humboldt's creative and interdisciplinary talents, but his novel formulates, structures, and gives closure to an event that Humboldt intentionally left open to the imagination. While Humboldt insisted on representing the climb as a failure, it is Kehlmann rather than Humboldt who "measures the world" in the sense that his text provides an accessible, highly readable, and rational narrative of the Chimborazo climb.

As part of his research on vegetation zones and volcanism, Humboldt climbed several volcanoes such as Pico del Teide on Tenerife (1799), Silla de Caracas in Venezuela (1800), Puracé in Colombia (1801), and Antisana, Pichincha, Cotopaxi, and Chimborazo in Ecuador (1802). These mountains were climbed in small groups with different explorers and local guides, but without mountaineering boots, proper attire such as gloves and parkas, or any climbing equipment. On May 26, 1802, Humboldt's second attempt to scale Mount Pichincha proved successful; he measured its height at 14,940 feet while struggling with fog, snow, dizziness, uncooperative guides, and the sulfur stench emanating from the summit. On Mount Chimborazo, Humboldt's team encountered similarly adverse conditions and was famously stalled at an impassable cleft of rock and ice, forcing them to turn around approximately 1000 feet below the summit. Yet the climb itself, as well as the fact that no person had ever before reached such heights (approximately 19,300 feet), sparked the imagination of contemporary and future scientists, artists, travelers, and laymen alike.

Humboldt himself was the first to partially satisfy such curiosity and simultaneously generate more. In his monumental work on the American journey, *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*, written in French after his return to Paris and published in twenty-nine volumes between 1807 and 1838, Humboldt used Chimborazo in many images that depict the geography, geology, and botanical life of mountains. Yet the work disappointed those who had hoped for a detailed narrative of the Chimborazo climb. Not only was the overall description of the American journey (*Relation historique*, 1814–25) published years later than the illustrations, but Humboldt never completed volume four (on the year 1802), which would have included his Chimborazo climb.² Perhaps this is even more surprising since several narratives of the ascent already existed. In his French travel diary of June 23, 1802, Humboldt minutely chronicled his climb, and later added annotations to the

description; five months later he recounted the event in a letter to his brother Wilhelm. Upon his return to Europe, Humboldt also told audiences about his mountain adventure in countless lectures. Despite the public's eager consumption of such narratives, the first published account appeared only thirty-five years later in the 1837 essay "Ueber zwei Versuche den Chimborazo zu besteigen,"³ long after his altitude record had been surpassed and even higher mountains had been discovered in the Himalayas. If Humboldt downplayed the importance of his Chimborazo ascent, his contemporaries were much quicker to put Humboldt on the mountain, as the following examples demonstrate.

In his first published depiction of Chimborazo—a copper engraving based on a 1803 drawing—Humboldt illustrated climate and vegetation zones, glaciers, volcanic eruptions, plant names, geological and meteorological observations, and height measurements of the Andean volcanoes Cotopaxi (5897 m or 19,347 ft) and Chimborazo (Figure 1).⁴

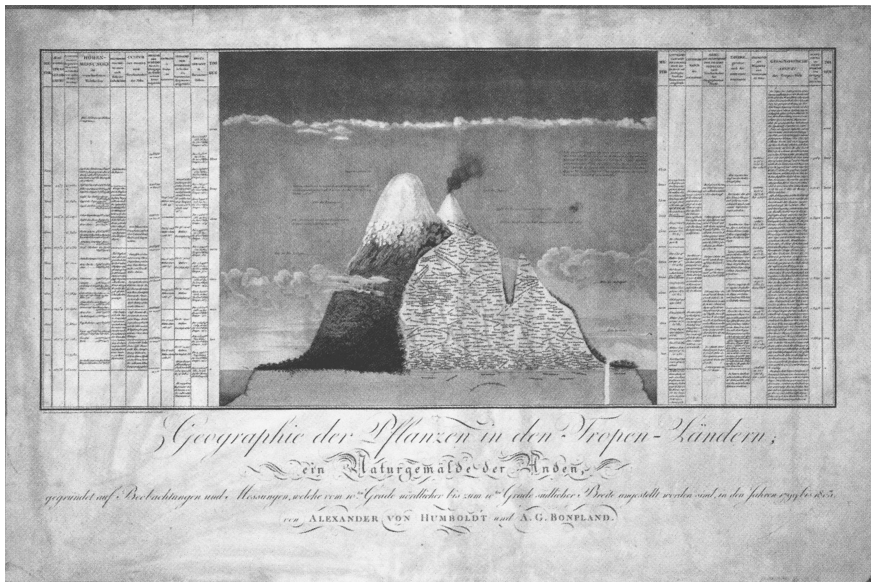


Figure 1. Alexander von Humboldt, "Geographie der Pflanzen in den Tropen-Ländern: ein Naturgemälde der Anden" (1807)

The by-now famous diagram graces the cover of both the 2004 edition *Reise in die Äquinoktial-Gegenden des Neuen Kontinents* and Daniel Kehlmann's 2005 novel *Die Vermessung der Welt*. It was first published in 1807, with an accompanying essay in both French and German, the latter of which, *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer*, Humboldt dedicated and sent to Goethe. Upon receiving Humboldt's essay (in

which the plate was missing since it had not yet been completed), Goethe wrote a letter of thanks to Humboldt on April 3, 1807:

Ich habe den Band schon mehrmals mit großer Aufmerksamkeit durchgelesen, und sogleich, in Ermanglung des versprochenen großen Durchschnittes, selbst eine Landschaft phantasirt, wo nach einer an der Seite aufgetragenen Scala von 4000 Toisen die Höhen der europäischen und americanischen Berge gegen einander gestellt sind, so wie auch die Schneelinien und Vegetationshöhen bezeichnet sind. Ich sende eine Copie dieses halb im Scherz, halb im Ernst versuchten Entwurfs und bitte Sie, mit der Feder und mit Deckfarben nach Belieben hinein zu corrigiren, auch an der Seite etwa Bemerkungen zu machen und mir das Blatt bald möglichst zurückzusenden. (297)

Indeed, Goethe had completed his own drawing, “Höhen der alten und neuen Welt bildlich verglichen” (Figure 2), which was later etched in aquatint and published by Friedrich Justin Bertuch in 1813, with an introduction by Goethe and dedicated to Alexander von Humboldt. Goethe’s illustration proved so successful that it was published in a separate printing in France that same year and also found its way into several atlases in England.⁵

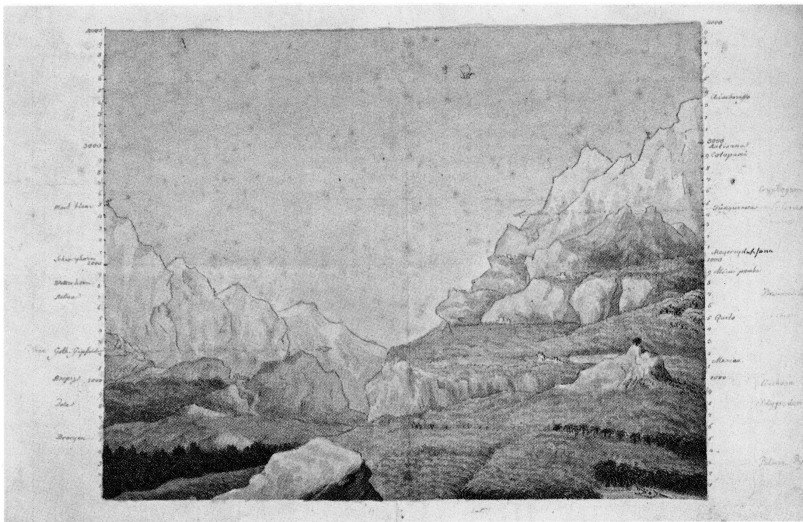


Figure 2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Höhen der alten und neuen Welt bildlich verglichen” (1807)

While Humboldt’s drawing contains the results of his research, Goethe fashioned an image that to his mind correlated with Humboldt’s essay and would function as a substitute for the missing plate. A comparison of the images not only reveals differing representations of the old and new world by the

scientist and the writer, but offers an example of how a prolific contemporary (mis)read and (mis)understood Humboldt. Both images identify elevation, snow lines, and vegetation zones of various mountains. In Goethe's initial drawing, the left-hand portion of the image depicts mountains he had visited: Mont Blanc, Schreckhorn, Wetterhorn, Ätna, Gotthard, Dôle, and Brocken (a later version includes other European mountains that Goethe did not visit). The St. Gotthard Pass with its hospice on top juts out prominently, forming the only man-made structure on the European side of the painting (Goethe had ascended the pass three times). To the right, the volcanoes Chimborazo, Antisana, and Cotopaxi rise above the mountain cities Mexico City and Quito, with an imagined landscape of deep valleys, lakes, palm and cinchona forests, even a crocodile at sea-level below (Figure 3). The drawing also singles out the scientific and mountaineering achievements of three men: the Swiss aristocrat, botanist, and geologist Horace-Bénédict de Saussure⁶ stands atop Mont Blanc (Figure 4), waving to Humboldt on his high point on Chimborazo (Figure 5), and above both hovers Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac⁷ in a hot-air balloon (Figure 6).

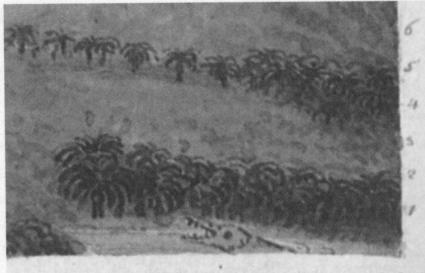


Figure 3.

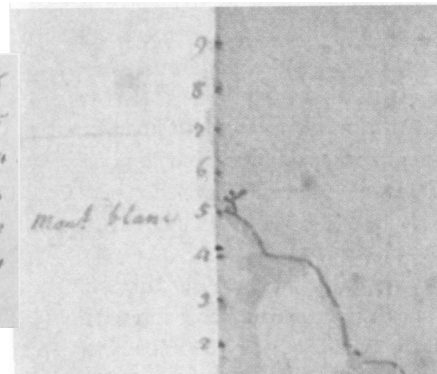


Figure 4.

Although a pure product of imagination, Goethe's work testifies to convention and tradition, and thereby conveys a deep-rooted dualism. It imparts the information of Humboldt's essay in a two-dimensional drawing and marginalia, which also contrasts bottom and top, left and right. Gorges, peaks, meadows, and forests form a dramatic landscape below, while the lone scientists tower in the snowy heights above all plant life—on the left de Saussure on Mont Blanc, and on the right Humboldt on Chimborazo. This juxtaposition not only blatantly omits the fact that two Italians, Dr. Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat, were the first to scale Mount Blanc on August 8,

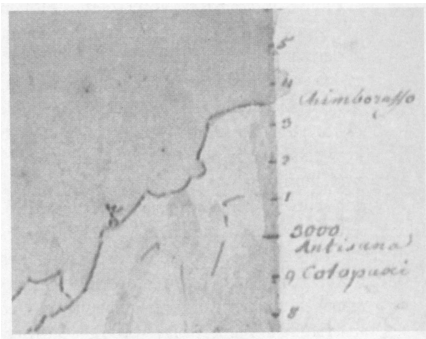


Figure 5.

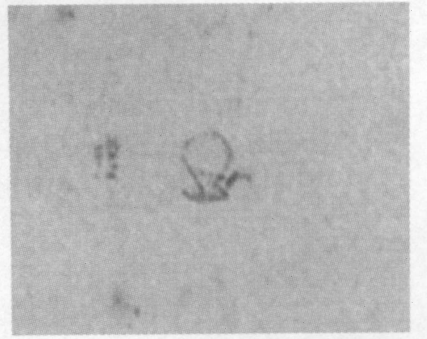


Figure 6.

1786, but also erases Humboldt's travel companions and guides (as well as Gay-Lussac's companion Jean-Baptiste Biot). In this way, both the old and the new world are symbolically and literally surmounted by two European aristocrats and scientists. The lowlands of the new world seem remarkably pastoral and manicured, even if the etching recognizes its exotic flora and fauna. Illuminated by the sun, the mountains on the right literally overshadow Europe on the left. The "visual comparison" thus reveals that the new world is essentially a mirror image of the old, composed of valleys, mountains, meadows, forests, and volcanoes, with the only difference being that the right-hand new world overthrows the scale of the left-hand old world. In the deep-seated European fascination and imagination of the new world, the unknown simply becomes grander and taller by contrasting it with the familiar.

While Humboldt never answered Goethe's quest for more information and apparently remained skeptical about his Eurocentric make-believe world, Goethe's drawing was hailed as more artistic and intelligible: "der textlastigen, monolithischen Darstellung Humboldts stellt Goethe ein dialogisches Bildgerüst gegenüber" (Wyder 142). Indeed, it can be seen as a harbinger of how future artists would successfully misrepresent the scientist and replace his work with their own imagination, thereby popularizing and polarizing Humboldt. Yet arguably, Humboldt's work is even more imaginative in form and content. Instead of a dualistic framework and two-dimensional form, Humboldt chooses a one-dimensional cross-section through the mountain, below and above sea level. Rather than depict the new world as a mirror image of the old, with Europe as the reference point for a "comparison," the diagram exclusively depicts the Andean volcanoes Cotopaxi and Chimborazo. The image shows divergent, merging layers in vegetation, geology, and atmosphere,

using written information both in the drawing itself and in multiple margins. It also mixes imagination and scientific fact: while the mountain rises at an impossibly steep angle, the image and text recognize a diversity of climate and vegetation zones often lost in other representations of the tropics. One of the most original aspects of the image are the botanical names inserted horizontally, diagonally, and arched in and under the mountain, representing plants Humboldt found and catalogued at various elevations. Filling the mountain with both plant images and text, Humboldt produces an abstract yet aesthetic form of representation.

The term that Humboldt selected for his diagram, “portrait of nature” (*Naturgemälde*), underscores the truly innovative quality of this representation and exploration of nature. As Humboldt elaborates in the introduction to his 1807 German work *Ansichten der Natur*, a portrait of nature is supposed to convey the synthesis (*Totaleindruck*) of detailed local analysis:

Überblick der Natur im großen, Beweis von dem Zusammenwirken der Kräfte, Erneuerung des Genusses, welchen die unmittelbare Ansicht der Tropenländer dem fühlenden Menschen gewährt, sind die Zwecke, nach denen ich strebe. [...] Überall habe ich auf den ewigen Einfluß hingewiesen, welchen die physische Natur auf die moralische Stimmung der Menschheit und auf ihre Schicksale ausübt. (7–8)

Humboldt’s *Naturgemälde* as a conscious integration of aesthetic description and scientific detail, of nature and culture, science and art, calls attention to human involvement and creativity in the representation of nature, imbuing the scientific table with aesthetic and even moral qualities. As recent North American scholarship has revealed, Humboldt’s innovative perception and representation of nature influenced American Romantic writers and painters such as Frederick Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁸ Even though German scholarship has likewise recognized the scientific, aesthetic, and moral concerns emerging from *Ansichten der Natur* and the later *Kosmos*, Humboldt’s particular *Naturgemälde* illustrations have been characterized as merely representative of the Age of Goethe, with Humboldt being “Goethe’s disciple” (Mattos 143).⁹

Upon his return to Paris, Humboldt published the highly anticipated *Vues des Cordillères et Monuments des Peuples Indigènes de l’Amérique* (1810–13),¹⁰ which included two engravings (based on Humboldt’s field drawings) of Chimborazo from below. But rather than depicting the climbers themselves, as Goethe had, or replicating their perspective from above, Humboldt refers only indirectly to his ascent: the first plate shows the mountain with little snow cover before the expedition and the second one with a blanket of snow, hinting at the snowstorm that hindered the ascent. In the accompanying essay to plate XVI, Humboldt remarks:

Über einen schmalen Grat, der auf dem südlichen Abhang aus dem Schnee ragt, haben wir, die Herren Bonpland, Montúfar und ich, nicht ohne Gefahr versucht, zum Chimborazo zu gelangen. Wir haben Instrumente bis auf eine beträchtliche Höhe getragen, wengleich wir von dickem Nebel umhüllt waren und die dünne Luft uns sehr zu schaffen machte. Die Stelle, an der wir angehalten haben, um die Neigung der Magnetnadel zu beobachten, scheint höher zu sein als jede andere, die Menschen auf dem Rücken der Berge je erreicht haben; sie liegt elfhundert Meter über dem Gipfel des Mont-Blanc, den der gelehrteste und kühnste aller Reisenden, Herr de Saussure, unter noch größeren Schwierigkeiten als denen, die wir am Chimborazo zu bewältigen hatten, glücklich erreicht hat. Diese mühevollen Exkursionen, deren Erzählung gewöhnlich das Interesse des Publikums erregt, bieten dem Fortschritt der Wissenschaften allerdings nur sehr wenige nützliche Resultate. (*Ansichten der Kordilleren* 136–37)

Acutely aware of the public interest in his climb, Humboldt skillfully creates a tension between what is said and what remains unsaid, oscillating between success and failure, grandiosity and humility—all in a language packed with both superlatives and negation. He mentions but does not elaborate the dangers encountered; he publicizes his altitude record but admits that de Saussure overcame greater difficulties on Mount Blanc; and he acknowledges the public's curiosity but downplays the scientific use of his mountain expedition altogether. The two views (*Ansichten*) of Chimborazo stand in marked contrast with the written account, in which the travelers' view was blocked by a thick fog. Yet the few lines have invited, and indeed still invite, readers to imagine what happened hidden from sight at the then-inaccessible heights.

While Goethe may have been the first artist to tie Humboldt to the mountain visually, others soon followed suit, making Chimborazo a favorite backdrop of Humboldt-portraits. Friedrich Georg Weitsch's famous oil-painting, "Alexander von Humboldt und Aimé Bonpland in der Ebene von Tapia am Fuße des Chimborazo" (1810), depicts the Europeans with their respective scientific instruments before a backdrop of Indians, mules, cacti, and Chimborazo towering in the distance, maintaining a strict nature-culture and old-new world divide. Karl von Steuben's "Alexander von Humboldt am Chimborazo" (1812) portrays the explorer with pen and paper leaning against a rock, Chimborazo rising behind. A final depiction, "Alexander von Humboldt" (1859), painted by Julius Schrader the year of Humboldt's death, shows the white-haired scholar bent over his notebook, with Chimborazo in the distance (apparently, Humboldt himself chose the mountain as a background motif). As Lubrich and Ette point out, in the course of the paintings, Humboldt grows larger in relation to the mountain: in the first painting he is still overshadowed by the mountain, in the second he is at eye-level with the mountain; and in the final painting he seems to tower over Chimborazo (10–11). With Humboldt's fame rising even after his failure to reach the mountaintop, Chimborazo evolved into a symbol of his entire American

journey. Despite Humboldt's insistence on the meager scientific value of his expedition, the mountain came to epitomize the explorer's scientific travels, and remained an accepted benchmark of the new world even after higher mountains were discovered.

If Humboldt's contemporaries deemed Chimborazo a symbol of the new world and saw his ascent of it as a triumph of Western science and European exploration, the peak is imbued with a different symbolic dimension in *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo*. Shot on location in Ecuador by the acclaimed GDR director Rainer Simon, the (first and only) co-production of DEFA and ZDF with the Ecuadorian Asocine production company was released in Germany one day before the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 8, 1989. Ironically, this momentous time of release superseded one of the film's central messages, namely the critical overtones in displaying the young Humboldt's desire to travel to foreign shores and mountains far beyond reach of GDR citizens.¹¹ *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* not only puts on screen static long shots and slow panning movements of Chimborazo and the Andean landscape underlayed by mystical Indian music, but features indigenous actors, elaborately documenting Indian culture and practices. Indeed, the production in Ecuador amidst the deep-seated changes in Germany was also a personal *Wende* in Simon's life, as the director became deeply fascinated with Ecuador's indigenous cultures and returned to the country numerous times after travel restrictions were lifted. Following the Chimborazo film, Simon co-directed three films with the Ecuadorian filmmaker Alejandro Santillán, and participated in festivals, readings, film workshops, and photo exhibitions on indigenous art. Comparing his approach to Humboldt's, Simon asserts:

Alexander von Humboldt beschwerte sich in seinem Tagebuch, dass Kriegsherr Napoleon ihm seinerzeit den Weg zu den italienischen Vulkanen versperrt habe, und er deshalb—ohne diese vorher studieren zu können—zu den lateinamerikanischen aufbrechen musste. Auch mir und vielen anderen versperrten einst politische Verhältnisse den Weg dorthin. Dank Alexander von Humboldt "musste" auch ich—privilegiert wie er—zuerst zu den feuerspeienden Bergen Amerikas reisen—um dort einen Spielfilm zu drehen. (*Besteigung des Vesuv*)

Even though the first and last scene of Humboldt in *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* depicts him measuring, Simon's characterization of Humboldt and his travels has little in common with Kehlmann's portrayal in *Die Vermessung der Welt*. Through frequent flashbacks of various periods of Humboldt's life, presented in tinted black-and-white and color sequences, the film focuses most prominently on Humboldt's upbringing in Berlin, his travels to England, France, and Spain, and his dreams, plans, and organization of the American journey. The actual ascent of Chimborazo provides a convenient framework and picturesque setting of the new world which is contrasted with the closely framed, claustrophobic indoor setting of Europe. In

contrast to Kehlmann's Humboldt, Simon's protagonist is a young rebel in constant conflict with his conformist brother Wilhelm and his detached mother, who wishes nothing more than to escape the restrictive Prussian environment. On screen, Humboldt pursues his scientific experiments with a passion and openly acts out his homosexuality.¹² If Kehlmann (for reasons to be discussed later) erased Carlos Montúfar in order to center on Aimé Bonpland as Humboldt's travel companion, in Simon's film it is the young Creole Montúfar who is Humboldt's most important companion on the trip to Chimborazo, as well as his lover.

Simon also imbues the film with a political message: on the one hand, Humboldt rallies against the traditions and bureaucracy of a Prussian State that calls to mind an inflexible East German regime, especially in his cries about "unerfüllte Sehnsucht nach Ferne." On the other hand, Humboldt remains a true GDR hero, teaching people to better the world, openly criticizing colonialism and capitalism, and using his research in the name of progress: "wir forschen, damit alle besser leben können." In this vein, the film elaborates on the *freie Bergschule* that Humboldt established and financed in his early twenties as a senior mining official, in an effort to teach young workers calculus, spelling, and the geology, history, and laws of mining. It emphasizes Humboldt's friendship with the revolutionaries Georg Forster¹³ and Carlos Montúfar, and indeed characterizes Humboldt as an uncompromising revolutionary himself—one who condemns colonialism, speaks out against slavery, and seeks to educate and emancipate the Indians. Yet these attempts ring hollow if not preposterous when Montúfar proclaims "eine unterdrückte Seele ist wehrlos," while Humboldt teaches the natives some German while climbing the mountain (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Jan Josef Liefers as Alexander von Humboldt, *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo*.

Representing the indigenous Indians as childlike and somewhat naïve students, Montúfar as a passionate Humboldt-devotee, and Humboldt as a Prussian turned wild—a lonely troubled rebel, jealous lover, and a driven, even cruel scientist—the film cannot avoid being trapped by a host of stereotypes. The long scenes of stunning Andean mountains, valleys, and rivers veiled in fog and clouds are reminiscent of Werner Herzog's romantic visions, yet here the sublime landscape is filled with Indian songs and languages, and images of genuine, somewhat superstitious Indians in tune with nature and their natural selves. The film's idealization of indigenous people as a utopian Other reflects, at best, the folkloric interests of a Western tourist and at worst, the eighteenth-century notion of the "noble savage," an ideology that romanticized primitivism and thus (inadvertently) promoted stereotypes and racism.

During the ascent, Humboldt, Bonpland, and Montúfar are accompanied by an adolescent Indian porter, and equipped with modern climbing gear: ropes, ice axes, even glacier goggles.¹⁴ The unrealistic dramatization of the climb is underscored by the team's skilled ascent of near-vertical slopes, followed by their sudden metamorphosis into blind, bloody, almost ghostlike individuals. Chimborazo remains unclimbed and unconquerable, and Humboldt's ultimate goal unattained. In existential fashion, the search for identity must also remain unfulfilled: in Simon's words, Humboldt's failure "ist ein schönes Bild für alle unsere Unternehmungen."¹⁵ A sudden cut concludes the film, its allegorical ending resonating with the viewer.

In somewhat simplified terms, *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* continues the deep-seated dualism of the old and new world found in earlier representations, even if the value judgments assigned to these realms are reversed. Yet Simon succeeds in making the material politically relevant in the midst of the conservative climate of the two Germanies in the late 1980s: as he revealed later, both States chose Humboldt as a seemingly apolitical figure for their first co-production.¹⁶ Reflecting Marxist values and hopes, the film highlights the impact of Humboldt's friends Reinhard von Haefen, Georg Forster, and Carlos Montúfar, and details Humboldt's inspiration from indigenous cultures, influences that are deemphasized or omitted entirely in *Die Vermessung der Welt*.

Most recently, Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* places Humboldt's attempt to scale Chimborazo at its very center. The text has become one the most successful books published in postwar Germany: it sold over 1.2 million copies in the German hardcover edition (a paperback edition was published in February 2008), led the *Spiegel* bestseller list for thirty-five weeks, was translated into over forty languages (including an English translation by Carol Brown Janeway), and garnered enthusiastic reviews.¹⁷ Continued success is certain: in 2008, the journal *Text + Kritik* devoted its January edition to Daniel Kehlmann, Rororo published an accompanying volume with documents, interviews, and interpretations, and both Cornelsen and the

Oldenbourg Schulbuchverlag came out with volumes on using the book in the classroom. New biographies of Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauß were also published last year.

Kehlmann's fifth novel, published just after the German-Austrian writer turned thirty, freely mixes fact and fiction, historical detail and unfettered invention. Drawing on the tradition of magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, *Die Vermessung der Welt* combines grotesque, sardonic elements with a seemingly realistic story about historical luminaries. In this way, Wilhelm von Humboldt seeks to poison his brother with rat-toxin (21), Alexander spots a sea monster rising from the ocean near Tenerife (45), and Gauß invents a formula to correct errors in measuring the orbit of planets during intercourse on his wedding night (150). These obvious and imaginative hyperboles are related without a single direct quote; indeed, the entire novel employs only indirect speech, undermining any claim to historical truth. Using satiric elements and ironic distance, the text critiques the kind of rational measuring that is, according to Kehlmann, not only Humboldt's and Gauß's quest but part of the German national character.¹⁸

Given that Kehlmann's novel intentionally flaunts historical realities, it would be meaningless to fact-check the text or accuse the writer of straying from historical sources.¹⁹ In the following analysis, however, I draw on Humboldt's own writings to suggest that Kehlmann's imaginative portrait diminishes rather than expands our image of Humboldt. Reducing him (and Gauß) to forbidding and unyielding Germans who neither appreciate nor understand the creative arts, Kehlmann submits the historical figures to stereotypes. Though presented as a postmodern text with a clever literary structure, witty narrative devices, and obvious bending of historical truth, Kehlmann continues rather than questions the dualistic and didactic framework of earlier representations of Humboldt from Goethe to Simon. Using Humboldt to exemplify the incongruity of science and the arts, Kehlmann's work thus returns to longstanding clichés of the divide between the sciences and the humanities, which by extension includes the divide between civilization and savagery, city and wilderness, indefatigable heterosexuality and repressed homosexuality.

Kehlmann positions Humboldt's Chimborazo trip at the very center of his work, in the eighth chapter of the novel. Indeed the chapter synthesizes and condenses a leitmotif present throughout the novel, namely the protagonists' (false) belief in progress, science, and measurement. On Chimborazo, the men who epitomize the enlightenment not only fail to reach new heights, but aimlessly stumble up the mountain, overcome by weakness and lost in hallucinations. Plainly titled "Der Berg," the chapter opens with the night before the climb when a feverish Bonpland writes—per Humboldt's instruction—a farewell letter, in case the pair does not return. The narrative escalates concurrently with the team's ascent, and concludes briskly when Humboldt and Bonpland abort their mission.

In fictionalizing the ascent, Kehlmann incorporates historical sources, but cleverly replicates some details and distorts others so that Humboldt emerges as a narcissistic character whose obsession with records and measurements barely hides his inability to communicate with or relate to his fellow travelers. In describing the physical circumstances of the climb, Kehlmann merely paraphrases Humboldt's words on the thick fog encumbering the expedition (Humboldt 98, Kehlmann 171)²⁰ and replicates his descriptions of the team's afflictions: bleeding gums, lips, and noses, frozen and skinned hands, nausea and dizziness (Humboldt 86, 98; Kehlmann 169, 170, 172). Yet Kehlmann also enlivens his narration by including typical experiences of high-altitude mountaineers such as vomiting, a lost sense of time and place, and hallucinations.

At other moments, however, Kehlmann deliberately alters his sources, sometimes to superb comic effect—for instance when Humboldt mentions his companion Montúfar sinking deep into the snow:

Im Schnee von Quito würde man 5 Toisen tief einsinken, wie wir es am Antisana, am Pichincha und besonders am Chimborazo erlebt haben, wo Herr Montúfar fast im Schnee verlorengegangen wäre. (Humboldt 97)

In Kehlmann's more embellished version, it is Humboldt who disappears in the snow and seems facetiously concerned with his scientific instruments:

Humboldt stieß einen Schrei aus und verschwand in einer Verwehung. Bonpland grub mit den Händen, bekam seinen Gehrock zu fassen und riß ihn heraus. Humboldt klopfte den Schnee von seinen Kleidern und überzeugte sich, daß kein Instrument beschädigt war. (171)

In playful provocation, Kehlmann even inverts left and right, willfully twisting scientific (and thus seemingly objective) observations on directions. Humboldt writes:

Wir stießen auf einen schmalen Grat, auf eine sehr eigenartige cuchilla. [...] Der Hang zur Linken war von erschreckender Steilheit und mit an der Oberfläche gefrorenem (verkrustetem) Schnee bedeckt. Zur Rechten gab es kein Atom Schnee, aber der Hang war mit großen Felsbrocken übersät (bedeckt). Man hatte die Wahl, ob man sich lieber die Knochen brechen wollte, wenn man gegen diese Felsen schlug, von denen man in 160–200 Toisen Tiefe schön empfangen worden wäre, oder ob man zur Linken über den Schnee in einen noch viel tieferen Abgrund rollen wollte. Der letztere Sturz schien uns der grauenvollere zu sein. Die gefrorene Kruste war dünn, und man wäre im Schnee begraben worden ohne Hoffnung, je wieder aufzutauchen. Aus diesem Grund neigten wir unseren Körper immer nach rechts. (49)

In Kehlmann, this becomes:

Hoch droben, für Momente erkennbar, dann wieder verschwunden, führte ein verschneiter Grat zum Gipfel. Instinktiv neigten sie sich beim Gehen nach links,

wo der Abhang schräg und frostverglast abfiel. Zu ihrer Rechten öffnete sich senkrecht die Schlucht. (170)

Besides inverting left and right, Kehlmann fictionalizes the event (it is Humboldt rather than Montúfar who disappears), adds details to it (Humboldt is preoccupied with his instruments), and dramatizes it (Humboldt's slope of talus boulders becomes a vertical chasm). But in the process of creating a story about Humboldt, Kehlmann swiftly removes and replaces Humboldt's own story. For instance, when Humboldt envisions (in the subjunctive voice) being buried by snow and breaking one's bones when falling on rocks, the fearful fantasies do not fit with Kehlmann's crafted portrayal of the detached scientist, and are thus removed.

A similar reduction is visible in the chapter's ending, when Kehlmann's Humboldt considers pretending to have scaled Chimborazo and brags about his achievement.

Sie beide, sagte Humboldt, hätten den höchsten Berg der Welt bestiegen. Das werde bleiben, was auch immer in ihrem Leben noch geschehe.

Nicht ganz bestiegen, sagte Bonpland.

Unsinn! [...]

In der Nacht schrieb Humboldt, zum Schutz gegen das Schneetreiben zusammengekauert unter einer Decke, zwei Dutzend Briefe, in denen er Europa die Mitteilung machte, daß von allen Sterblichen er am höchsten gelangt sei. (179–80)

Kehlmann's conclusion is perhaps the most dramatized aspect of his Chimborazo chapter. In reality, Humboldt did not mention his height record in the letter describing the climb to his brother Wilhelm; he repeatedly refuted false reports that he had indeed reached the top of the mountain (Lubrich and Ette 52). And while Humboldt undoubtedly could have written a heroic account that would have satisfied the curiosity of his European audience, he disappointed such expectations.

Another reduction of complexities occurs when Kehlmann deletes Montúfar in order to make Bonpland Humboldt's counterpart. In reality, Humboldt set out to climb Chimborazo together with the French botanist and physician Aimé Bonpland, the Creole naturalist Carlos Montúfar, and three indigenous porters whose names are not known. In Kehlmann's version, there are only two climbers, Bonpland and Humboldt, and their respective imaginary companions (a pulsating honeycomb and a lost dog). Through Bonpland, Kehlmann adds a layer of mediation and distance from the central figure. For instance, Bonpland's farewell letter relates infamous anecdotes about Humboldt, such as his refusal to let himself be carried by porters, and his "scientific experiment" of rounding up a couple of crocodiles with a pack of dogs in a pen. For most of the description of the trip, however, Kehlmann uses Bonpland as a contrast to Humboldt: Bonpland is a womanizer who likes his

sleep, dwells on his suffering, and prefers altogether more physical pleasures than the high-minded, uncompromising Humboldt.

This antagonistic pairing mirrors the novel's overall structure, which is motivated by the similarity and dissimilarity of its two protagonists, Gauß and Humboldt. Narrating the disparate stories of the two scientists, Kehlmann meticulously switches each chapter back and forth from Gauß to Humboldt throughout the first two-thirds of the book. Only in the last part of the novel does Kehlmann bring them into fictionalized contact. Though Gauß and Humboldt are both scientists, they differ (in Kehlmann's version) in their scientific methods (quantitative versus empirical) and approaches (study at home versus exploration of the world).²¹ Moreover, they come from different social backgrounds (a meager living in provincial Göttingen versus an aristocratic background and privileged childhood in Berlin), and lead altogether different personal lives (Gauß, the twice-married father and visitor of brothels versus an asexual Humboldt who never married or fathered children). Sharpening the novel's dualistic structure, Kehlmann pairs and contrasts each protagonist with yet another character: Gauß with his son Eugen, and Humboldt with Bonpland. In the latter setup, Humboldt is Bonpland's German counterpart, allowing Kehlmann to poke fun at German and French stereotypes alike.

In his essay "Wo ist Carlos Montúfar?" Kehlmann addresses the dualistic arrangement and elaborates on his decision to strike the travel companion from the novel:

So verwandelte ich den Assistenten des Barons, den treuen und vermutlich eher unscheinbaren Botaniker Aimé Bonpland, in seinen aufmüppigen Widerpart. In Wirklichkeit war Humboldt meist inmitten einer sich ständig verändernden Gruppe gereist: Adelige und Wissenschaftler gesellten sich dazu, solange sie Lust und Interesse hatten, von den Missionsstationen kam der eine oder andere Mönch eine Strecke mit. Nur sehr kleine Teile der ungeheuren Distanz legte Humboldt tatsächlich alleine mit Bonpland zurück. Mein Humboldt aber und mein Bonpland, das wusste ich von Anfang an, würden sehr viel Zeit zu zweit verbringen. Mein Bonpland würde lernen, was es hieß, sich in Gesellschaft eines uniformierten, unverwüstlichen, ständig begeisterten und an jeder Kopflaus, jedem Stein und jedem Erdloch interessierten Preußen durch den Dschungel zu kämpfen. Also mußte ich auf Carlos Montúfar verzichten. (20)

Undoubtedly, Kehlmann's carefully considered choice helps to compact his narrative neatly and create tension. Yet it is also indicative of the text's general tendency to favor an extreme dualism over a complex reality. In this vein, it is telling that Kehlmann favors Bonpland over Montúfar. Bonpland, another European scientist, never told his own version of the events and thus remains a fairly colorless historical figure (Kehlmann characterizes him as "unscheinbar"), much more open to fictional invention and appropriation than the vibrant Montúfar.²² The young naturalist and son of Quito's Creole

high-nobleman, Marqués de Selvaegre, met Humboldt on his visit to Quito and thereafter joined the expedition. Montúfar was an enthusiastic traveler, possibly Humboldt's lover (the two lived together in Paris for seven years), and later joined the resistance under Simón Bolívar; he was shot by the Spanish during the liberation.²³ Thus, Montúfar is simply not conducive to the kind of polarity the narrative advances.

Such binarism is also visible when Kehlmann characterizes Humboldt in the above quotation as a uniformed Prussian hacking his way through the jungle. In fact, Humboldt hated what he called a provincial Berlin (dubbing his childhood home in Tegel "Schloss Langweil")²⁴ and sought to avoid working in military-focused Prussia in favor of the worldly Paris ("Macht nur, daß ich niemals nötig habe, die Türme Berlins wiederzusehen").²⁵ As Kirsten Belgum states, "Humboldt did not define himself in terms of a single geographical place or one language" (109). He was not only a man of the natural sciences but studied languages, cultures, societies and their organization, literature, and the visual arts, seeking to interrelate the disciplines. And by his own account, Humboldt did not encounter a "jungle,"²⁶ but highly developed civilizations. By opting for a streamlined narrative, Kehlmann misses out on exploring these inherent complexities and conflicts.

Both Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* and Simon's *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* thus rely on separation rather than interaction of the old and new world, of European and indigenous cultures, of supremacy and "wilderness," and thereby return to notions popular during the Age of Goethe. On the one hand, Simon expounds his fascination with Ecuador's indigenous cultures by displaying the unspoiled, "pure" civilizations that evoke the myth of a noble savage visible in both Goethe's and in particular Schiller's works. On the other hand, Kehlmann's critique of Humboldt's efforts to measure and civilize the world reiterates (nearly verbatim) the stereotypes that Schiller unleashed in his harsh words on Humboldt in a letter to Gottfried Körner:

Ueber Alexandern habe ich kein rechtes Urtheil; ich fürchte aber, trotz aller seiner Talente und seiner rastlosen Thätigkeit wird er in seiner Wissenschaft nie etwas Großes leisten. Eine zu kleine, unruhige Eitelkeit beseelt noch sein ganzes Wirken. Ich kann ihm keinen Funken eines reinen, objectiven Interesses abmerken, - und wie sonderbar es auch klingen mag, so finde ich in ihm, bei allem ungeheuern Reichthum des Stoffes, eine Dürftigkeit des Sinnes, die bei dem Gegenstände, den er behandelt, das schlimmste Uebel ist. Es ist der nackte, schneidende Verstand, der die Natur, die immer unfaßlich und in allen ihren Punkten ehrwürdig und unergründlich ist, schamlos ausgemessen haben will und mit einer Frechheit, die ich nicht begreife, seine Formeln, die oft nur leere Worte und immer nur enge Begriffe sind, zu ihrem Maaßstabe macht. Kurz, mir scheint er für seinen Gegenstand ein viel zu grobes Organ, und dabey ein viel zu beschränkter Verstandesmensch zu sein. (Letter from August 6, 1797. 112–13)

Even though Körner immediately replied, "Your opinion of Alexander

Humboldt appears to me too severe,” and the publisher of the letters saw reason to add a footnote, “Schiller’s fears have proved groundless,” the letter condemning Humboldt as a cold and calculating scientist has proven influential. As Werner Biermann has documented, it is quite possible that Schiller was merely jealous of Humboldt’s friendship with Goethe or that he misunderstood Humboldt’s science by ignoring its aesthetic and moral concerns.²⁷ Yet Schiller’s devastating words have shaped the image of Humboldt as an inflated narcissist, replicated most recently in Kehlmann’s novel.

In theoretical texts, Kehlmann claims that Humboldt’s writings are “bestürzend langweilig” (*Scherze* 29) and merely a “nüchterne Aufzählung der Fakten” (“Carlos Montúfar” 20), and maintains that only his novel gives justice to the chaotic, immeasurable world that Humboldt encountered:

Erzählen, das bedeutet, einen Bogen spannen, wo zunächst keiner ist, den Entwicklungen Struktur und Folgerichtigkeit gerade dort verleihen, wo die Wirklichkeit nichts davon bietet — nicht um der Welt den Anschein von Ordnung, sondern um ihrer Abbildung jene Klarheit zu geben, die die Darstellung von Unordnung erst möglich werden läßt. Gerade wenn man darüber schreiben will, daß der Kosmos chaotisch ist und sich der Vermessung verweigert, muß man die Form wichtig nehmen. (“Carlos Montúfar” 14–15)

Justifying his severe alterations of historical sources, Kehlmann argues that only a clear-cut narrative form allows a fundamentally chaotic world to show through. While I appreciate Kehlmann’s satirical wit in its bare-bones characterization of his clueless protagonists, I am not convinced by this argument. Through a dualistic character constellation and a reduction of his sources’ intricacies, Kehlmann makes Humboldt (and the world) seem more simplistic rather than complicated. In this way, Kehlmann’s magical realism replaces the magical elements in Humboldt’s own narrative.²⁸ Humboldt’s own representations of his Chimborazo climb offer an example of how a convoluted yet compelling narrative can do justice to a complex world. In his 1802 diary entry, for instance, Humboldt fuses scientific and aesthetic representation, incorporating a personal narration of events, drawings, tables, annotations, comments, data, and calculations, some of which were added later in the form of notes. As Lubrich and Ette have documented, Humboldt dramatically interrupts his entry in the middle of the word “Spal-te” (*cre-vasse*) with six pages of excursus on the team’s failure: “Hintersinnig hat Alexander von Humboldt das Scheitern seines Gipfelsturms originell gestaltet und mit der Konzeption seiner Wissenschaft und seines Schreibens verbunden” (Lubrich and Ette 18). The diary thus exudes self-reflection and conscious play with narrative forms and conventions.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Humboldt’s first published descriptions of his climb did not appear until the essay “Ueber zwei Versuche den Chimborazo zu besteigen” was published in 1837, six years after the French chemist Jean Baptiste Boussingault had surpassed Humboldt’s height

record by 400 feet (hence the title). In 1853, the essay appeared in revised form as "Ueber einen Versuch, den Gipfel des Chimborazo zu ersteigen." Both essays make the failure of reaching Chimborazo's summit an overarching theme, beginning with the word "Versuch" in the title.

Humboldt portrays the then-legendary climb with subtle irony rather than as an heroic conquest. He begins by referring to higher mountains in the Himalayas, reiterates the small scientific value of his undertaking, claims to have brought the sextant and other instruments in vain since the summit was veiled in fog, and concludes unceremoniously: "Wo die Natur so mächtig und gross und unser Bestreben rein wissenschaftlich ist, kann wohl die Darstellung jedes Schmuckes der Rede entbehren."²⁹ Lubrich and Ette thus interpret Humboldt's essays as a conscious rejection of heroic travel literature and its traditional dramatized epic form, concluding:

Statt einer Kunst der Beherrschung entfaltet Humboldt in seinen Chimborazo-Texten—ganz anders, als man dies gemeinhin von ihm zu erwarten pflegte—eine Kunst des Scheiterns. Sie aber liefert sowohl eine Ästhetik als auch eine Epistemologie des Scheiterns. (Lubrich und Ette 58)

Yet even with Humboldt's emphasis on failure, his temporary and fragmentary insights and measurements, and his open-ended and understated narration, it seems misguided to champion Humboldt as an early postmodernist. As a hybrid between scientific treatise and travel narrative, Humboldt's Chimborazo narratives fuse measurements and observations on vegetation and volcanic rock with an aesthetic description of the climb; they diagnose and detail the symptoms of altitude sickness, and refer to the grandiosity of experience. While this mixture is innovative and intriguing, it nevertheless remains deeply rooted within the nineteenth-century paradigm.

In a similar vein, Humboldt both refers back to and expands on nineteenth-century aesthetic categories, such as the sublime. As Nancy Leys Stepan recognizes:

To his empirical descriptions of the physical environment he married an intensely aesthetic approach to nature, creating a view of the tropics as a sublime place, a *topos* that lasted long after his pre-evolutionary and Enlightenment political optimism had been replaced by an evolutionary, and more pessimistic, interpretation of the natural and social world. (36)

Not only did Humboldt grace both *Ansichten der Natur* and *Vue des Cordillères* with majestic images of rivers, waterfalls, mountains and rock formations, he also frames his view of Chimborazo in the published essay in distinctly sublime terms:

Die Nebelschichten, die uns hinderten, entfernte Gegenstände zu sehen, schienen plötzlich, trotz der totalen Windstille, vielleicht durch elektrische Prozesse, zu zerreißen. Wir erkannten einmal wieder, und zwar ganz nahe, den

domförmigen Gipfel des Chimborazo. Es war ein ernster grossartiger Anblick.
(142)

By comparing the mountain to a cathedral and describing his view of it as a solemn yet magnificent experience, Humboldt's words recall the trope of the sublime as defined by Burke and Kant, and furthermore represented in the allegorical landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich. If in Kant's definition, the mystic, boundless greatness of nature is capable of causing a sublime experience, Friedrich depicts such terrifying and awe-inspiring revelation in his paintings of crosses and churches in the mountains. Humboldt reiterates this discourse and expands it to a tropical alpine nature, including the Andean peaks. His references to the sublime, however, point to yet another inconsistency in his oeuvre: while a sublime experience would overwhelm all attempts at quantification and control in the face of the mysterious wonders of nature, Humboldt remarks on the power of the sublime—and then proceeds with his measurements.

To Humboldt, his failed climb seems to have remained an ambiguous experience, at once triumphant, troublesome, and transgressive. Perhaps his search for an appropriate narrative form and his delay in publication reflects the difficulty of describing a mountain he viewed as both an object to be measured and a sublime force, a mountain that later came to symbolize both his failure(s) and the height of his fame. It is these gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies that remain unmeasured in the literary representations of Humboldt's climb and indeed Humboldt himself.

Notes

¹ However, as Pratt argues, Humboldt's expedition paved the way for the "ideological reinvention" of South America, with surveys, maps, and charts as new tools of oppression in the colonial world (111).

² The text ends rather abruptly with volume three, after Humboldt arrived in Columbia. Lubrich elaborates on this missing volume in "Spaltenkunde."

³ Humboldt's illustrations and descriptions of Chimborazo are excellently documented and reprinted in Lubrich and Ette's edited volume.

⁴ My thanks to the Goethe Jahrbuch and Wallstein Verlag for permitting illustrations originally in Margrit Wyder's article (see Works Cited) to be reproduced here.

⁵ For an excellent analysis of the origin, reception, and impact of Goethe's drawing, see Wyder.

⁶ De Saussure (1740–1799) was unsuccessful in climbing Mont Blanc in 1785 and made a reward offer to the first person to reach the summit. After Michel Paccard and Jacques Balmat did so in 1786, de Saussure climbed the mountain himself in a third ascent. Like Humboldt, he carried barometers and thermometers on his climbs for scientific measurements. He published his findings in the multi-volume *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779–1796).

⁷ Gay-Lussac (1778–1850) was a French chemist and physicist known for his work on gases and water-alcohol mixtures. In 1804, he ascended with Jean-Baptiste Biot in a hot-air balloon to an altitude of 6400 meters. Later he befriended Humboldt and collaborated with him on experiments on the composition of the atmosphere and water.

⁸ See for instance Sachs.

⁹ See also Meyer-Abich 156.

¹⁰ In 2004, Lubrich and Ette edited the first complete edition in German translation.

¹¹ As Rupke reveals, the representation of Humboldt in East and West Germany diverged sharply, with East German scholarship focusing on Humboldt's concerns for the working man in his early career as a Prussian mining inspector, his condemnation of slavery, and the revolutionary ideas harbored by his friend Georg Forster (105–39).

¹² The film shows Humboldt in the bedroom with both his friends Reinhard von Haefen and Carlos Montúfar. While prominent Humboldt biographers fiercely dismissed the notion that Humboldt could be homosexual and instead explained his lack of romantic interest in women with his devotion to science (Abich 47), from the 1990s on, (queer) scholarship has increasingly outed Humboldt. See Rupke 196–202.

¹³ The German naturalist, ethnographer, and travel-writer Johann Georg Adam Forster (1754–94) accompanied his father Reinhold Forster as an 18-year-old on Captain Cook's second voyage to the Pacific (1772–75). Upon his return, Forster published *Reise um die Welt* (1777), which combines ethnographic observation with analysis and philosophical insight, and greatly shaped the emerging genre of scientific travel literature. Back in Germany, Forster befriended the young Alexander von Humboldt. Forster enthusiastically supported the French Revolution; he joined a radical Jacobin Club and helped establish the Mainz Republic. But after French troops seized control of Mainz, Forster was outlawed from Germany and forced to live in Paris without family or income until his early death in 1775.

¹⁴ In reality, there was no mountaineering gear available at the time, as wooden ice axes, hob-nailed boots, and hemp climbing ropes (not to mention sunglasses) were first invented in the mid-1800s.

¹⁵ Interview with Rainer Simon at Potsdam-Babelsberg on July 10, 1995; quoted in Meurer 225.

¹⁶ "1988 hatten sich die beiden deutschen Staaten geeinigt, dass der Humboldt-Film *Die Besteigung des Chimborazo* eine erste offizielle Co-Produktion sein sollte. Weltbürger Humboldt schien für beide Seiten politisch unverdächtig" (*Besteigung des Vesuv*).

¹⁷ The book not only received positive reviews in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Die Welt*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, but also garnered literary awards such as the Thomas-Mann-Preis (2008), Candide-Preis (2005), Heimito-von-Doderer-Preis (2006), and Kleist-Preis (2006), and made the final round in the selection for the 2005 Deutscher Buchpreis.

¹⁸ "Eine satirische, spielerische Auseinandersetzung mit dem, was es heißt, deutsch zu sein—auch natürlich mit dem, was man, ganz unironisch, die große deutsche Kultur nennen kann. Für mich ist das eines der Hauptthemen des Buches" (Kehlmann, "Ich wollte schreiben wie ein verrückt gewordener Historiker" 27–28).

¹⁹ Yet this approach was taken by Griep, who points to numerous instances when fact and fiction collide in his review in *Die Zeit*, "Der Kehlmann-Kanal."

²⁰ Page numbers refer to the new translation and reprint of Humboldt's "Reise zum Chimborazo. Das Reisetagebuch vom 23. Juni 1802" (Lubrich and Ette 77–106) and to Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt*.

²¹ Describing the genesis of his book in "Ich wollte schreiben wie ein verrückt gewordener Historiker," Kehlmann concedes: "Und plötzlich sah ich diese Szene: die beiden alten Männer, der eine, der überall war, der andere, der nirgends war; der eine, der immer Deutschland mit sich getragen hat, der andere, der wirklich geistige Freiheit verkörpert, ohne je irgendwohin gegangen zu sein" (27).

²² Bonpland did not write about the journey in published articles or a diary, and there are no extant letters that reveal his perspective on Humboldt. Though historically inconspicuous, Bonpland is neither uninteresting nor ordinary: in contrast to Humboldt, he realized his dream of returning to South America and accepted a professorship at the University of Buenos Aires in 1816. After his involvement in the war of independence, Bonpland was imprisoned by the dictator of Paraguay, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. Upon his release, he refused to return to Europe but continued to live in Argentina with his Indian wife and children until his death in 1858.

²³ Montúfar also gave a description of the Chimborazo climb in his unpublished diary, archived at the Lilly Library at Indiana University.

²⁴ Humboldt as quoted in Biermann 11.

²⁵ Humboldt as quoted in Abich 110.

²⁶ Humboldt did not use the word *Dschungel*, and poked fun at the European overuse of the word *Urwald* (see *Ansichten der Natur* 217).

²⁷ See Biermann 66–68.

²⁸ See, for instance, Humboldt's description of a *Kuhbaum* that provides nourishing milk akin to breast milk, or his fearful *Gespenstergeschichten* after the ship almost capsizes (Biermann 144, 214).

²⁹ Humboldt, "Ueber zwei Versuche den Chimborazo zu besteigen," as quoted in Lubrich und Ette 149.

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