HUMBOLDT AND METABIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of contemporary anxieties about climate change and environmental degradation, biographers of Alexander von Humboldt have sought inspiration from his life as an explorer, a plant geographer and a scientific writer. A ‘green Humboldt’ has emerged, to many a key thinker on the environment, to some the founding father of modern environmentalism. During earlier times and in separate places, in the course of the nearly 200-year tradition of Humboldt biography, different – even very different – biographical traits have been highlighted, different narratives have been produced, each related to contemporaneous predilections and preoccupations. Does this mean that in telling Humboldt’s life – or in telling scientific lives more generally – ‘anything goes’? Are we ‘telling it as we like it’ or ‘telling it like it is’? Can we have ‘lives after death’, that is, a plurality of biographical Humboldts, suited to distinct times, places and concerns and yet, for each of them, lay claim to authenticity? The genre of metabiography systematically engages with questions such as these and recognises the possible historical validity of multiple appropriations and Humboldt reincarnations, aka avatars. This article traces the recent emergence of scientific metabiography, and discusses some of the points that are being made pro and con.

Angesichts der zeitgenössischen Besorgnis um Klimawandel und Umweltzerstörung haben sich Alexander von Humboldt-Biografen von seinem Leben als Forscher, Pflanzengeograf und Wissenschaftsautor inspirieren lassen. So ist ein ‘grüner Humboldt’ entstanden, der für viele eine Schlüsselfigur des Umweltgedankens ist, und für manche der Gründer des modernen Umweltschutzes. Im Laufe der fast 200-jährigen Tradition der Humboldt-Biografik wurden schon in früheren Zeiten und an verschiedenen Orten unterschiedliche – sogar sehr unterschiedliche – biografische Züge hervorgehoben; unterschiedliche Narrative wurden produziert, die jeweils in Zusammenhang mit zeitgenössischen Vorlieben und aktuellen Fragestellungen standen. Bedeutet dies, dass bei der Erzählung von Humboldts Lebensgeschichte – oder ganz allgemein bei wissenschaftlichen Biografien – ‘erlaubt ist, was gefällt’? Erzählen wir, ‘wie es uns gefällt’, oder erzählen wir, ‘wie es wirklich ist’? Kann es unterschiedliche ‘Leben nach dem Tod’ geben, d. h. eine Vielzahl von biografischen Humboldts, je nach den verschiedenen Zeiten, Orten und Anliegen, und können wir dennoch für jeden von ihnen den Anspruch auf Authentizität erheben? Das Genre der Metabiografie setzt sich systematisch mit Fragen wie diesen auseinander und erkennt die mögliche historische Gültigkeit von Mehrfachaneignungen und Humboldt-Reinkarnationen, auch Avatare genannt, an. Dieser Aufsatz zeichnet die Entstehung der wissenschaftlichen Metabiografie in jüngerer Zeit nach und erörtert einige der Argumente zum Für und Wider.
In the wake of contemporary anxieties about the climate crisis and environmental degradation, biographers of Alexander von Humboldt have sought inspiration from his life as an explorer, a plant geographer and a scientific writer. A ‘green Humboldt’ has emerged, to many a key thinker on the environment, to some perhaps the father of environmentalism.

Ever since Humboldt’s years as a mature scientist, a continuous, annual output of biographical Humboldt literature has appeared. This output repeatedly reached peaks of many dozens, in some instances several hundreds of publications, especially during commemorative years, such as the centenary or bicentenary of Humboldt’s birth, the centenary of his death and, most recently, in 2019, his sestercentennial anniversary. Germany, Spain, the Anglo-American world and several Central-and South-American countries, all enthusiastically celebrated Humboldt’s 250th birthday, near unanimously saluting his foundational contributions to green causes and concerns such as nature conservation and anthropogenic climate change.

In 2019, with Humboldt’s birthday approaching, the authoritative German weekly for politics, economics and culture, *Die Zeit*, splashed Humboldt iconography across the front page, crowning him as ‘Der erste Naturschützer’ and continued: ‘Schon vor über 200 Jahren prangerte der große Entdecker die Zerstörung der Landschaft an. Er ist der Wegbereiter der Ökologie.’ And the cover story declared: ‘Sein Denken war revolutionär – und ist es heute wieder.’

More authoritatively yet, the German edition of *National Geographic* marked ‘250 Jahre Humboldt’ by placing him on the cover of its July 2019 issue and in a lengthy article characterised him as ‘Die Vermesser der Natur’, who had taught that ‘Die Welt ist ein Organismus, in dem alles miteinander verbunden ist’; and the author continued: ‘diese Beobachtung Humboldts ist heute so aktuell wie vor zwei jahrhunderten. Sie machten den genialen Forscher zum Urvater der Ökologie.’

The article was translated into German from an originally English version by the British biographer of Humboldt, Andrea Wulf, who with her much acclaimed *The Invention of Nature. Alexander von Humboldt’s New World* (2015) had set the stage for the 2019 celebrations, relating ‘the myriad ways in which Humboldt’s ideas form the foundation of modern environmentalism’. For the actual anniversary year of 2019, Wulf produced a more popular and in part fictitious cartoon strip version, *The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt* (2019), probably intended to reach an audience of young people.

In Spain, where in 1799 Humboldt, in the company of Aimé Bonpland, set out on their epic journey of exploration of the equatorial Americas,

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1 Fritz Habekuss, ‘Humboldts Welt’, *Die Zeit*, 25 July 2019, no. 31, 27–32.
2 Andrea Wulf, ‘Die Vermessung der Natur’, *National Geographic Magazine*, July 2019, 38–63.
one of the national newspapers of record, *El País*, wrote extensively about ‘Humboldt, el genio romántico que anticipó el cambio climático’.  

Further afield, across the Atlantic, at the venerable Smithsonian American Art Museum, a major exhibition was organised to celebrate *Alexander von Humboldt and the United States: Art, Nature, and Culture* (delayed and only partially opened from 20 March till 16 August 2020). At the end of his journey through the Americas, Humboldt spent merely six weeks in the United States, yet his ideas ‘shaped American perceptions of nature and the way American cultural identity became grounded in our relationship with the environment.’ The thoroughly researched and magnificently illustrated catalogue by Eleanor Jones Harvey that accompanied the exhibition made this point, following up on Laura Dassow Walls’ pioneering *The Passage to Cosmos. Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (2009).

Across the Western world, a plethora of other books, articles, exhibitions, colloquia, lecture series – major and minor – observed Humboldt’s 250th anniversary in the context of present-day anxieties about deforestation, rising sea-levels, the climate crisis and the sixth extinction. At Duke University, an interdisciplinary colloquium, ‘Humboldt forever!’, headed by Duke’s Nicholas School of the Environment, explored the great man’s importance in the context of North, Central and South America. And indeed, much in Humboldt’s life and writings justifies celebrating him as a forerunner of post-World War II environmentalism and the green movement. A passage from his travel account has become famous:

> If one destroys the forests, like the European settlers all over America are doing with careless haste, then the sources [of rivers] run dry or diminish considerably. The riverbeds lie dry for part of the year and turn into currents whenever it rains in the mountains. As along with the growth of wood, also grass and moss disappear from the mountain crests, the run-off of rainwater is no longer held back; instead of gradually seeping into the ground and feeding the streams, the heavy rains during the rainy season create furrows on the mountain slopes, wash away the loosened soil and cause flash flooding, which in turn destroys the fields. From this it follows that the destruction of the forests, the lack of continuously flowing sources [of water] and the existence of torrents are three phenomena that are causally connected.

More broadly, Humboldt has been lauded for his holistic approach to the study of nature, his internationalist attitude in promoting science and scientists, and his cosmopolitan humanitarianism towards cultures and peoples. As an explorer Humboldt inspired a generation of ‘Humboldtian’

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3 Jacinto Antón, ‘Humboldt, el genio romántico que anticipó el cambio climático’, *El País*, 22 September 2019.  
4 Dan Richter, ‘Humboldt Forever! Celebratory Colloquium 250th Anniversary of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859)’, 1–2 November 2019.  
5 Nicolaas Rupke, ‘Alexander von Humboldt 1769–1859’, in Joy A. Palmer and David E. Cooper (eds), *Key Thinkers on the Environment*, London and New York 2018, pp. 76–82 (p. 76).
followers, among them Maximillian Alexander Philipp, Prinz zu Wied, the brothers Adolf, Hermann and Robert Schlagintweit, Robert Hermann Schomburgk, and Charles Darwin. Humboldt’s most outstanding scientific research was arguably in climatology, meteorology and plant geography, and in studies of the distribution of heat across the globe, for which he devised the isotherm as a means of visual representation.

Humboldt’s fame and his writings were to a significant extent the products of scientific expeditions. In Paris, in 1798, he teamed up with the botanist Aimé Bonpland, and together they travelled to Madrid where they received royal permission to explore Spain’s American possessions. On 5 June 1799 Humboldt and Bonpland set sail from La Coruña in the corvette ‘Pizarro’ and after stop-overs in the Canary Islands arrived in Cumaná, subsequently travelling for nearly five years through what later became the countries of Venezuela, Columbia, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico. Especially notable were the trip along the Orinoco River and the trek south along the Andes to Quito. Humboldt climbed several volcanic peaks and, most famously, on 23 June 1802 he attempted the ascent of Chimborazo, then believed to be the highest mountain in the world. Some 400m below the summit at 6,310m, he and his companions had to give up; all the same, they set a new record for mountaineering altitude. Leaving the equatorial zone, Humboldt and Bonpland set sail for the USA and Philadelphia, and visited Washington, where Humboldt met Thomas Jefferson and members of the cabinet. On 1 August 1804 their trans-Atlantic return journey ended in Bordeaux.

Plans for a scientific expedition to the East, conceived not long after Humboldt’s return from the Americas, suffered long delays, until at long last, in 1829, he undertook a Russian-Siberian journey, supported by Emperor Nicholas I. From St Petersburg, he set out in the company of the micropaleontologist Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg and the mineralogist Gustav Rose, almost frantically covering 15,000 km in less than six months. The trip took them across the Ural Mountains and the West Siberian Plains as far as the Central Asian Altai Mountains and, on the return journey, down to the Caspian Sea. The voyage provided Humboldt with comparative information to that on the Alps and the Andes.

Humboldt’s scientific travels were not in the first instance journeys for the discovery of unknown territories. They were primarily journeys of observation, so he took with him a series of state-of-the-art measuring instruments, including chronometers, telescopes, sextants, instruments for measuring magnetism, atmospheric composition and rainfall, as well as various less complex gadgets. With the aid of these instruments, Humboldt collected a large number of data which he used to construct a generalised picture of the distribution of environmental parameters across the globe, altitudinally as well as latitudinally. He added to his *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (1805–7) the ‘Tableau physique des Andes et des pays voisins’, an iconic cross-sectional profile of South America,
from the Pacific to the Atlantic at the latitude of Chimborazo, showing the zoned occurrence of plant life at different altitudes. Later, Humboldt formulated his famous ‘law’ of vegetational distribution which states that the changes in plant distribution by altitude matched those by latitude. Moreover, his application of the isoline technique for plotting the data proved a revolutionary contribution to the cartographic representation of spatial relationships. In the process, Humboldt introduced a style of science that consisted of precision measurement of physical parameters and their visualised distribution on a global scale. Since the late 1970s, in the English-speaking world, this practice of exploration has been termed ‘Humboldtian science’, providing historians with a framework for the discussion of Humboldt’s significance.

At the time, Paris was the glamorous centre of the scientific world and Humboldt became one of its stars. From December 1807, he made Paris his domicile and remained there till 1827. This is where he put together his massive American travel oeuvre, which consisted of some thirty folio and quarto volumes and carried the collective title ‘Voyage de Humboldt et Bonpland’, containing major works such as the Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne (2 vols, 1811); the unfinished narrative of his journey, the Relation historique du voyage aux regions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent (3 vols, 1814–25) and the less voluminous yet influential Essai sur la géographie des plantes. One of the few German publications from this period was the popular Ansichten der Natur (1808).

Upon his return to Berlin, Humboldt presented, between 3 November 1827 and 27 April 1828, his famous Kosmos lectures – a total of seventy-seven lectures for a mixed public. Many Germans, who at times had frowned upon Humboldt’s Francophile life, now accepted and celebrated him as one of Germany’s great sons. No sooner had he completed the ‘Kosmos lectures’ than he planned to get an ‘Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung’ into print. Yet it took nearly two decades for this plan to be realised, and the appearance of the first volume of Kosmos was delayed until 1845 (five volumes appeared, the last posthumously, in 1845, 1847, 1850–1, 1858, 1862). The title, in addition to indicating the vast scope of the book, gave expression to Humboldt’s aesthetic-holistic epistemology, as the word ‘cosmos’ in Homeric times had meant ‘ornament’ and ‘elegance’, and later had come to denote the order or harmonious arrangement of the world. The way Humboldt defined climate, in the first volume of his last great book, accurately reflected this approach:

The term climate, taken in its most general sense, indicates all the changes in the atmosphere which sensibly affect our organs, as temperature, humidity, variations in the barometrical pressure, the calm state of the air or the action of opposite winds, the amount of electric tension, the purity of the atmosphere or its admixture with more or less noxious gaseous exhalations, and, finally, the degree of ordinary transparency and clearness of the sky,
which is not only important with respect to the increased radiation from the Earth, the organic development of plants, and the ripening of fruits, but also with reference to it influence on the feelings and mental condition of man.\(^6\)

Humboldt’s holistic perception of the world was given visual expression in the form of isolines, a representational device that gained widespread acceptance in the context of the Geomagnetic Project of which the international phase lasted from 1829 to the early 1840s. The so-called Magnetic Association, of which Humboldt was one of the leading initiators, produced a wealth of data that was plotted on global distribution maps, making use of the isoline technique. World distribution maps showing isogonics (declination), isoclines (inclination), and isodynamics (total magnetic intensity) were produced. In addition, charts became available showing temperature, rainfall, tidal movements, and, sketched on isotherm maps, the distribution of plants, animals, humans, human diseases, even levels of civilisation and mental development. A veritable revolution in visual representation and communication took place. The Humboldtian charts crossed existing language barriers, allowing the new information to be grasped by all. Whereas in the past, measurements of environmental parameters in distant parts of the globe had for the most part remained isolated observations, these could now be plotted on the isoline maps and made an integral part of the international effort, and be connected to Göttingen, London, Paris, and other European centres of scientific learning. The most famous collection of Humboldtian distribution maps was the *Physikalischer Atlas* (1845–8; 2nd edn: 1852; 3rd edn: 1892), produced by the cartographer Heinrich Berghaus to accompany Humboldt’s *Kosmos*.

Many of the volumes of Humboldt’s ‘Reisewerk’ were lavishly and exquisitely illustrated and the costs of production, which were additional to the costs of the journey itself, reputedly exhausted Humboldt’s private fortune (c.100,000,00 Taler (a German monetary unit)). An example of such illustrated publications is the *Atlas pittoresque. Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (1810–13). From among various geomorphological features, the volcanic peaks particularly drew Humboldt’s attention, and he depicted several of them, showing the stark zonal occurrence of snow caps and eternal snow. Humboldt’s holistic–visual approach went hand-in-hand with a landscape aesthetic that influenced a generation of geographers and painters. In 1833 he gave a presentation to the Breslau ‘Versammlung deutscher Naturforscher und Ärzte’ (Assembly of German scientists and doctors) on the topic of art and science. Humboldt later incorporated his views on the importance of landscape painting for the study of nature in the second volume of *Kosmos*. It influenced a generation of Romantic landscape painters, among them

\(^6\) Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, Baltimore and London 1997, I, pp. 317–8.
Nicolaas Rupke, ‘Alexander von Humboldt’ (note 5), p. 80.

Among Donald Worster’s influential books is The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination (1994). See also Aaron Sachs, The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism, New York 2006.

Alexander von Humboldt, Personal Narrative of Travels, 7 vols, London 1814–29, IV, pp. 142–3.

A judicious assessment of the issue is by Frank Holl, ‘Alexander von Humboldt und der Klimawandel: Mythen und Fakten’, HiN: Internationale Zeitschrift für Humboldt-Studien XIX, 37 (2018), 37–56. See also Heinrich Detering, Menschen im Weltgarten: die Entdeckung der Ökologie in der Literatur von Haller bis Humboldt, Göttingen 2020.

A full account of them appears in Nicolaas Rupke, Alexander von Humboldt: a Metabiography, Chicago and London 2008. For an early use of the term ‘metabiography’, see James Moore,
Let me sharpen the focus of this issue, and of the notion of metabiography, by posing the following questions. When we write about our past scientific heroes, do we connect with the actual person? Is it possible to recover through critical research and in the form of biographical narrative the real person behind the myth? Or are we engaged in a more complex process that involves appropriation, whereby the life, work and impact of our heroes and antiheroes are told and retold as building blocks of contemporaneous socio-political institutions? Against the background of this conundrum, my book Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography, 2008 examined how Humboldt has been portrayed in the biographical literature by his fellow Germans, in the course of the various periods of German political history, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, while Humboldt was still alive, and ending with today’s period of post-reunification. The representations of Humboldt, it turns out, have invariably constituted forms of ‘presentist’ appropriation, with partial recoveries of the historical person at best, in a succession of distinct portraits, each of which is the product of an identifiable institutional and socio-political culture. Limiting my exploration to the ‘German Humboldts’, I was able to show that with each major shift in politics, a new image of Humboldt was created. Successive periods of German political history crafted their very own Humboldt, even, at times of political pluralism, more than one. Humboldt has been appropriated and made a citizen of each consecutive Germany and, more specifically, a member and supporter of the particular group that produced the Humboldt literature of that period.

Some six major, distinct representations of Humboldt can be identified. We recognise a Humboldt who played a role in the revolutionary struggle for the ‘Freiheit und Einheit’ of Germany during the period 1848 to 1871. When some twenty-five larger and smaller German kingdoms and principalities had merged to become the ‘Kaiserreich’, several versions were created of a distinctly Wilhelmine Humboldt (i.e., during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II), who could carry the banners of Germany’s army in World War I and serve the purpose of post-war reconstruction during the Weimar Republic. In the Third Reich, the National Socialists recast Humboldt to suit their supremacist ideology. He acquired a split personality when, after World War II, East and West Germany produced opposing Humboldts, one a Marxist-Leninist, the other a free market internationalist. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, Humboldt assumed an altogether new identity, that of a supranational information network pioneer and a supporter of popular causes ranging from environmentalism to gay rights.

1Metabiographical reflections on Charles Darwin’, in Michael Shortland and Richard Yeo (eds), Telling Lives in Science, Cambridge 1996, pp. 267–81.

2For a summary, see Nicolaas Rupke, ‘A metabiography of Alexander von Humboldt’, HiN: Alexander von Humboldt im Netz VII, 12 (2006), https://doi.org/10.18443/74 (accessed 19 June 2020).
Thus, the literature about Humboldt reveals a striking plasticity of the historical record in the form of a plurality of differing and in some instances opposing representations of him, each expressive of the interests of biographers in a particular world of German political history. Humboldtians have used various discursive and narrative devices to format their hero’s life, at times developing entirely new modes of describing and evaluating him. Many nationalists downplayed or ignored Humboldt’s travels and French-language oeuvre, turning Kosmos into the signifier of his writings, which facilitated Germanising him and appropriating his life and work for causes that ranged from national unification to supremacist expansionism. Similarly, they saw Humboldt’s relocation from Paris to Berlin in 1827 as a fateful moment of destiny and played it up. Humboldt’s debt to the Jena-Weimar tradition of Goethe and Schiller, described early on by some of the Forty-eighthers (supporters of the revolution of 1848), was brought into further prominence by disciples of the Leipzig Circle’s Karl Lamprecht (Leipzig Circle: an heterogeneous group of Leipzig University scientists and humanities scholars around 1900 who promoted a unified science of culture in the tradition of German philosophical idealism), who at the same time showed little interest in his American journey, which, by contrast, was viewed by some as the defining feature of his accomplishment when German politics began projecting itself into the Latin American world. The brief tail-end of Humboldt’s journey to Philadelphia and Washington was by and large ignored until it gained major significance in the context of West Germany’s relationship with the USA. Also, particular friendships have been used to link Humboldt to partisan causes, for example, to Moses Mendelssohn and Henriette Herz, which substantiated his philo-Semitism. A perennial theme has been the friendship Goethe–Humboldt, the retrospectively invented twosome of Germany’s science-and-art tradition, which, like the fraternal relationship Alexander–Wilhelm, functioned as a projection screen for a variety of causes.

Using these and other representational devices, different groups have been able to lay claim to Humboldt – nationalists and internationalists, fascists and communists, militarists and pacifists, moderates and radicals, hetero- and homosexuals, physical and social geographers, and more. Thus, Humboldt has proved attractive as a platform for discussion of German identity. His life and work have become a forum for defining significant aspects of Germanness, enabling Germans to deal with national ambitions, shortcomings, guilt complexes and the like. For Humboldt’s biographers, the question of who he was took on the significance of who ‘we’, the German people, were and are or, conversely, the way in which Humboldt was represented reflected the way ‘we’, the German people, like to be seen. He is a crucial figure from the national past, whose memory has helped mediate the relationships of Germans with non-Germans and German attitudes towards the rest of the world. Humboldt was seen as an intermediary in the case of France and Germany, of the Americas and
Europe, and even of Eurasia and Central and Western Europe, making it possible to draw, from discussion of where he stood, a conclusion about where Germans should place themselves. Humboldt’s life and work proved ideal as a national ‘agora’, shaping a discourse not only about the world abroad, but also at home, within Germany, between the German people and its royal rulers, between revolution and reaction, between science and the humanities, between the professional and the amateur approach, between fascism and communism, as well as between a nationalist and a cosmopolitan political philosophy.

The ‘many Humboldts of the secondary literature’ corroborate the significance of readerships, to which reception studies and the more recent ‘geography of knowledge’ approach have drawn attention; yet metabiography goes further. A stronger claim is made here than that the meaning of a scientific life is determined by how it is received. Humboldt was not merely read in different ways; his life and œuvre were far more aggressively recreated to suit contemporaneous needs. Each Humboldt representation bears the marks, not just of the biographer’s interests and values or those of the period and the place of her or his existence, but of institutional constraints that are shared by groups of biographers, tending to turn their biographical writings into self-confirming appropriations of the past and self-sustaining building blocks. It is a trivial observation that there are as many subtly distinct Humboldt representations as there are Humboldt biographers. Less trite, however, is that the Humboldts of the Göttingen project appear to be collective constructions – not merely individual readings – of Humboldt, and appropriations by groups of authors who in speaking with a similar voice were subject to shared institutional constraints.

Humboldt biography was constitutively linked to a range of institutions that included those of the revolutionary politics of 1848, the Monist movement, the Leipzig Circle, the foreign office and its Ibero-American foundations, the Central Office for the History of German Individuals and Families under Nazi domination, the German Academy of Sciences in Berlin/the Academy of Sciences of the GDR (German Democratic Republic), and the Humboldt Foundation and Society in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany). When the institutional accommodation of interest in Humboldt changed, so did the representation of him, as when the Bismarckian Empire was founded, the Weimar Republic was followed by the Third Reich, the Nazi era was succeeded by East and West Germany, or again when the communist East collapsed to give way to a reunified Federal Republic. When changes in the political culture from one period to the next occurred gradually, representations of Humboldt likewise changed gradually; when sudden, Humboldt also changed abruptly, being appropriated on behalf of wholly new political constituencies.

Thus ‘metabiography’ is a form of historiography that tells the story of a life by looking through the eyes of groups of biographers who
previously described that life. The term should not be confused with Hayden White’s ‘metahistory’, which says that historical narratives can be understood in terms of literary genres, such as romance, comedy, tragedy or satire. Metabiography has much in common with reception theory, yet goes further in its historiographical claims. Whereas reception theory presupposes a ‘Ding an sich’, which is then received, metabiography acknowledges that the very telling of a past life invariably and inevitably changes the object of the story.

POINTS OF CONTENTION

In tracing the recent emergence of scientific metabiography, I discuss here the points that are being made pro and con. In the course of the Göttingen Humboldt Project, it became clear that the conjunction of ‘Humboldt’ and ‘metabiography’ gave offence to more than just a few people, if only because the results that showed a plurality of Humboldt representations, each based on sound biographical scholarship, have a bearing on recent debates about the practice and writing of history, debates provoked by the post-modernist challenge that during the past decades has confronted the humanities including scientific biography. The issues include, but are by no means limited to, the way we frame historical questions, our attempts to capture past meaning, and the relationship of these to ideology, politics and power. My study of Humboldt supports scholars who have argued that the writing of history or even the conduct of research cannot take place above the everyday rough and tumble of ideology and politics. Each generation asks its own questions and writes its own histories. Moreover, within generations, each party, each constituency, each cause writes its version of contemporary history and brings the past to bear on it. The questions we ask are engendered by contemporaneous anxieties and interests. The first generation of Humboldt biographers was preoccupied with the unification of the highly fractured German-speaking world. The most recent generation depicts Humboldt in a way that gives expression to its engagement with globalisation and the climate crisis.

Hence, Humboldt metabiography joins forces with recent writings by those who regard historical scholarship as a form of memory culture, bound and shaped by vested interests, professional methods, intended audiences, socio-political locations, commemorative practices, and sites of remembrance. Scientific biography will never be able to depict a great scientist as he or she really was or to tell the ‘true story’ and give the ‘definitive account’. Inevitably and invariably, biographies are located in the remembrance culture of any one period of political history.

13 Trend setting is Ottmar Ette, *Alexander von Humboldt und die Globalisierung. Das Mobile des Wissens*, Berlin 2019.

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Does this mean that in telling Humboldt’s life – or in telling scientific lives more generally – ‘anything goes’? Are we ‘telling it as we like it’ or, by contrast, ‘telling it like it is’? Can we have ‘lives after death’, that is, a plurality of Humboldts suited to distinct times, places and concerns and yet, for each of them, lay claim to authenticity? Unintentionally, Humboldt biography has become wrapped up in conflict over constructivism, deconstruction and, more generally, postmodernism.

Reactions to the metabiographical approach to Humboldt have been many, in personal conversations and colloquia or conference discussion, in correspondence, as well as in a gratifyingly large number of published reviews. These have run the gamut from dismissive, even scathing, to laudatory and – the highest form of compliment – to following the example of Humboldt metabiography by applying it to other great historical figures (see below). Criticism was voiced first and foremost by historians (of science), whereas appreciative reactions were received from (historical) geographers and, increasingly, also from scholars active in literary criticism. One colleague warned: ‘Be prepared for some stick over the postmodern aspect.’

An older generation of historians saw in metabiography a slippery slope into relativism, in fact, a disreputable flirtation with Gallic relativism. Let me quote here from a selection of private correspondence, as well as published reviews, to compare and contrast reactions. One of the critics was Princeton’s Charles Coulston Gillispie, to whom I had sent a complimentary copy of the Humboldt metabiography. In a long letter that mixed faint praise with crushing condemnation, even emotional appeal to previous accomplishment and national identity, Gillispie wrote:

[...] your approach skirts too closely to socio-political constructivism, relativism, and other so-called postmodern fads. As you can imagine, I’m not sympathetic to any of that. The very word postmodern has to my ears all the appeal but none of the clarity of posthumous. As for socio-politico-cultural construction, the notion that the body of science is nothing but a projection on nature of the relations of scientists to each other and to society appears to me a collective solipsism of staggering and arrogant proportions.

The accompanying notion, for some reason called deconstructive instead of constructive, that historiography and scholarship in general are nothing but similar projections of our own concerns onto the past, though some might find it more plausible, is to me equally objectionable. I doubt that you meant your book that way. It reads to me more like a scholarly stunt than an ideological exercise. I doubt that you mean that a biography of Humboldt true to his life cannot be written. I doubt that you think that your excellent biographies of Buckland and Owen are mere projections of your English phase onto Victorian science. I doubt that readers of my scientific biographies of Carnot and Laplace would learn much about me; or the time when I wrote them, except that I once studied some mathematics and admire the ability to

14 Kevin Sharpe to Nicolaas Rupke (NR), 2 December 2005.
do it. I think that your excellent countryman, the late Reijer Hooykaas, would be immeasurably shocked by any such implication.

As for me, I have read your book as an interesting exercise, and am grateful for a copy and specially for the overly kind inscription. But I’d rather learn German history by reading [Gordon] Craig or, say, [Leopold von] Ranke than through the lens of successive personifications of Humboldt or anyone else, and I would prefer learning about Humboldt from a biography as good as your above two. In fact, I thought that was what you were writing and rather hope you still may.15

A very different reaction came from another eminent historian, Otto Gerhard Oexle, one-time director at the Göttingen Max Planck Institute for History, who enthusiastically approved of the approach and his letter serves as a perfect counterpoint.

Dieses Buch ist wegweisend für die Zukunft der Geschichtswissenschaft. Selbstverständlich werden Sie den mißlaunigen Kommentare derer, die immer noch an Rankes ‘Wie es eigentlich gewesen’ oder an irgendwelchen Formen des traditionellen britischen ‘Empirismus’ (z. B. Richard Evans) festhalten, nicht entkommen können. Für alle diese Leute bleiben Sie ein ‘Relativist’ oder ein postmoderner ‘Fiktionalist’, weil es für solche Leute zwischen der Wissenschaft als Annäherung an ‘die Wahrheit’ und einem völlig beliebigen ‘Anything goes’ nichts Weiteres gibt. Daß diese Frage ja schon längst, und von führenden Wissenschaftlern, gerade auch aus dem Bereich der Naturwissenschaften, und spätestens von Kant anders entschieden worden ist, wird stets ignoriert. Kants Metapher vom Wissenschaftler als einem ‘Untersuchungsrichter’ (Vorrede zur zweiten Auflage der Kritik der reinen Vernunft) – und kein geringer als Marc Bloch hat gerade diese Metapher in die Mitte seiner Reflexion über die Profession des Historikers gestellt –, gerät dabei stets in Vergessenheit. Und diese Metapher ist ja Verweis auf den Kern der historischen Erkenntnis: die Arbeit mit Sachzeugnissen, Zeugenberichten etc. etc., eine empirische Arbeit, die auf ‘die Wahrheit’ ausgerichtet ist und doch gleichwohl nicht als eine permanente Annäherung an ‘die Wahrheit’ verstanden werden kann.16

This book is groundbreaking for the future of historical scholarship. Of course, you won’t be able to escape the disaffected comments of those who still stick to Ranke’s ‘Wie es eigentlich gewesen’ [how it actually was] or to various forms of traditional British ‘empiricism’ (e.g. Richard Evans). To all these people you remain a ‘relativist’ or a postmodern ‘fictionalist’, because for such people there’s nothing in between Wissenschaft [science & scholarship] as approximation of ‘the truth’ and a completely arbitrary ‘anything goes’. That this question already long ago has been otherwise settled by leading Wissenschaftlern [scientists & scholars], especially also from the field of the natural sciences, and no later than Kant, is always ignored. Kant’s metaphor of a Wissenschaftler as an ‘examining magistrate’ (preface to the second edition of the Kritik der reinen Vernunft) - and none

15 Charles Coulston Gillispie to NR, 18 January 2006.
16 Otto Gerhard Oexle to NR, 19 December 2005.

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other than Marc Bloch has placed precisely this metaphor in the middle of his reflections on the profession of the historian - has constantly been forgotten. And this metaphor points to the essence of historical understanding: work with material evidence, witness reports etc. etc., empirical work that aims at ‘the truth’ and yet at the same time cannot be understood as a definitive approximation of ‘the truth’.

One of the points made by Oexle is that science should not be thought of as fundamentally different from the history of science – that is, from scholarship in the humanities, as Gillispie argued – a point that Humboldt himself long ago had made in Kosmos. In a comparison of the disciplines of science and history, Oexle has described how, by around 1900, in opposition to the dominant tradition of nineteenth-century empiricist thought, a new historical ‘Kulturwissenschaft’ emerged, represented by Heidelberg’s Max Weber and others. History, they contended, is not the Rankean ‘Wie es eigentlich gewesen’; it is not a reconstruction of factual reality, but a construction of mental connections. This does not mean that there are no historical facts or that history is fictional, but it does imply that its truth is relational, that it is determined by the question. Thus, the scholar is an intrinsic part of the scholarship, just as in the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics and Werner Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle the physicist, in observing subatomic properties, is part of the observed result. In recent decades, following the challenge of postmodernism, these issues have been debated with renewed vigour. Mainstream historians, by reconnecting with the work on collective memory by the philosopher-sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, have defined historiography in terms of memory cultures and, in the process, have ‘deconstructed’ many a previously canonical narrative. Historians of science, in the meantime, avoided postmodernism in their own work and made the subjects of their study, the scientists, confront the movement, arguing that science is socially ‘constructed’. Yet the narrative representation of the scientific past by the historians of science themselves are constructions no less. As Harvard’s Steven Shapin puts it, metabiography stresses ‘that shifting biographical traditions make one person have many lives’, none of these necessarily more real than any other, because all are ‘configured and reconfigured according to the sensibilities and needs of the changing cultural settings’. ‘The past is never wholly a

17 Otto Gerhard Oexle, ‘Begriff und Experiment. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Natur- und Geschichtswissenschaft’, in Vittoria Borsò and Christoph Kann (eds), Geschichtsdarstellung: Methoden – Strategien, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna 2004, pp. 19–56. For Charles Couston Gillispie’s contrary position, see his Essays and Reviews in History and History of Science, Philadelphia 2007, pp. 405–11.

18 Nicolaas Rupke, ‘Nature as culture: the example of animal behavior and human morality’, in James D. Proctor (ed.), Envisioning Nature, Science and Religion, West Conshohocken, PA 2009, pp. 271–92 (p. 289).
foreign country, and we make and remake past lives to suit our present purposes.\footnote{19}

Further afield, among (historical) geographers, for many of whom Humboldt is a (the) founding father of their subject, a warm reception was given to the notion of Humboldt metabiography. Edinburgh’s Charles W. J. Withers wrote in an annual review of the history and philosophy of geography: ‘For here revealed is the dual importance of geography to biography and of the geography of biography in assessing the place of biography in geography.’\footnote{20} In a series of by now classic conferences, organised by Withers in cooperation with the Queen’s University of Belfast’s David N. Livingstone, they significantly advanced the so-called ‘spatial turn’, which highlights the importance of place and time in our understanding of the content of both science and its history.

More substantively yet, Justin D. Livingstone turned to another great nineteenth-century geographer to apply the metabiographical approach, namely to the Victorian geographical explorer and missionary David Livingstone. In a monograph, \textit{Livingstone’s ‘Lives’: a Metabiography of a Victorian Icon} (2014), Justin, in offering a smörgåsbord of information about the life of ‘a Victorian Icon’, explores the extensive literature on Livingstone, looking at his \textit{dramatis persona} through the many lenses of the biographers’ accounts and finding not only one character, but several different, and in some ways contradictory, figures. The single \textit{dramatis persona} turns out to be a plurality of \textit{dramatis personae} who, following the year of his passing, has been given a multiplicity of biographical afterlives. Justin’s remarkably original study presents us with no fewer than half a dozen different ‘Livingstones’, each an appropriation of the man’s fame for partisan ends, each a Livingstone with an identity fitted to the interests of groups of biographers, each the product of a particular memory culture or what Justin refers to as a ‘site […] of construction’\footnote{21}. He recognises that biographical narratives, like creations in the fine arts, are not independent of their creators, but are manufactured out of personality and in culture, and bound by the interests, prejudices, and sensibilities of the times.

Let me end this section with the views of a social scientist (for a lit. crit. reaction, see the concluding section of this article):

\begin{quote}

The \textit{metabiography} signals the arrival of a new representational phase. The subtitle of […] Rupke’s […] biography of Alexander von Humboldt declares that it is a metabiography, and its publication marks a turning point in the
\end{quote}
visibility and credibility of the genre [...]. The primary source material in *Alexander von Humboldt* is not the letters, diaries, or any other conventional resource that would be foremost in the mind of a traditional biographer, but instead consists of earlier Humboldt biographies, lots of them. By sifting through layer by biographical layer, Rupke deconstructs how Humboldt became Humboldt.\textsuperscript{22}

**HUMBOLDT’S BRITISH AVATAR**

To recapitulate, the six biographical Humboldt avatars as identified in *Alexander von Humboldt: a Metabiography* are the products of Germany’s history with its several major and traumatic political *caesurae*. No other Continental European or Anglo-American country has experienced so many changes and upheavals or such profound sequences of them and therefore cannot be expected to have engendered a similar plurality of Humboldt portrayals. All the same, the question can be – and has been – asked: ‘Do the non-German countries that produced abundant Humboldt biographical literature, develop their own, national Humboldt(s), clearly distinguishable from the German reincarnations?’ Patricia Fara, herself an accomplished metabiographer (of Isaac Newton) writes: ‘Rupke misses the opportunity to relate his [German] Humboldtian study to other cases of multiple representation. […] Similarly, Rupke mentions fleetingly but frustratingly that communities in other countries – North American frontier explorers, Latin American Creoles – created their own particular stereotypes of Humboldt. An international and comparative metabiography of Humboldt would inevitably be painted with a broader brush, but it could constitute a truly innovative meta-meta-project.’\textsuperscript{23}

Fara’s notion that we internationalise Humboldt metabiography is commendable. Non-German Humboldts do indeed exist. A French Humboldt, Spanish Humboldt,\textsuperscript{24} US Humboldt, Mexican Humboldt can all be identified; and, above all, so can a British Humboldt. Of crucial importance to the representation of Humboldt in the English-speaking world was the translation of his narrative of travels by Helen Maria Williams. In fact, Humboldt biography began in the UK, as an off-shoot of the translation into English of Humboldt’s own *Relation historique*, which appeared under the title: *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New-Continent* (7 vols, 1814–29). Largely drawing on this travel account but also on descriptions of Humboldt’s Siberian journey of exploration of 1829, the Aberdeen naturalist William MacGillivray (1796–1852), wrote

\textsuperscript{22} Eva Hemmungs Wirtén, ‘The Pasteurization of Marie Curie: A (meta)biographical experiment’, *Social Studies of Science*, 45/4 (2015), 597–610 (600).

\textsuperscript{23} Patricia Fara, in a review of Rupke’s Humboldt metabiography, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 40 (2007), 293–4 (294).

\textsuperscript{24} A defining biography of a ‘Spanish Humboldt’ might be Sandra Rebok, *Alexander von Humboldt und Spanien im 19. Jahrhundert: Analyse eines wechselseitigen Wahrnehmungsprozesses*, Frankfurt a. M. 2006.
the first book on Humboldt’s life and work, *The Travels and Researches of Alexander von Humboldt* (1832) (the first German Humboldt biography appeared nearly two decades later, written by the Hanover physician Hermann Klencke (1813–81), *Alexander von Humboldt. Ein biographisches Denkmal* (1851)). At the time, MacGillivray was Conservator of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh; later, in 1841, he returned to his native Aberdeen to take up the Chair of Natural History. The book was a success, also internationally. A new edition appeared as early as 1833, a further one in 1849, and a third after MacGillivray’s death, in 1859. An American edition came out in ‘Harper’s Family Library’ in 1842 and among the translations there was even a German one.

Let us look more closely at the British Humboldt. The Humboldt research based in Göttingen was rooted in a study of the differential reception of Humboldt’s main publications in the nineteenth-century periodical press, comparing and contrasting France, Great Britain and the German-speaking world. Even during his lifetime, Humboldt had an exceptionally good press. Ever since the appearance of his first book, on the nature of basalt, a steady stream of notices and articles was published in the periodical press on his work and, increasingly, on his life. These many periodical articles can be classified in three different categories. The first includes reviews of books written *by* Humboldt, the second contains reviews of books written *about* Humboldt and the third embraces biographical articles on Humboldt, most of which appeared in connection with commemorative events. One could add a fourth category: translated extracts from books by Humboldt or translations of articles by him that appeared in such periodicals as the *Edinburgh (New) Philosophical Journal*. The extracts reveal what was considered interesting and significant in Humboldt’s writings, yet they belong, *sensu stricto*, to writings *by* Humboldt rather than *about* him.

With respect to the first category, reviews of books *by* Humboldt, the Göttingen Humboldt Project systematically searched fifteen representative British, French and German periodicals.

Table 1. European periodicals, searched for reviews of books by Alexander von Humboldt

| British | Years Covered |
|---------|---------------|
| British Quarterly Review | 1845–1865 |
| Edinburgh Review | 1802–1865 |
| Monthly Review | 1790–1845 |
| North British Review | 1844–1865 |
| Quarterly Review | 1809–1865 |
| (London and) Westminster Review | 1824–1865 |

*(Continued)*
We counted the words used for reviewing books by Humboldt in the fifteen periodicals in order to arrive at a measure of relative public notification. The word count was plotted as a frequency diagram (see Figure 1), in which the number of words is shown vertically, and the years of publication are shown horizontally.

Three crests of reviewing intensity can be detected: two fairly sharp ones, centred respectively on 1810 and 1846, and a more diffuse one, made up of smaller peaks from 1815 to 1826. Which books produced these pinnacles? The first and largest peak of reviewing success was produced by Humboldt’s *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne* (1811; German translation: 1809–14; English translation: 1810–11). This is the book that gave content to Humboldt’s international fame – the treatise that made him a household name in the educated circles of the Western world. The main component of the diffuse, middle bulge was the *Relation historique du voyage aux regions equinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1814–25; German: 1815–32; English: 1814–29). Unsurprisingly, the third was almost entirely made up of essays on *Kosmos* (1845–62; English: 1847–58; French: 1847–59).  

Notable differences can be found between the British, French and German reviews of Humboldt’s book on Mexico. There are also remarkable contrasts between reactions to Humboldt’s subsequent review successes, the *Relation historique* and *Kosmos*. The decline in interest among German and French reviewers, relative to the attention paid by British reviewers, is astonishing (see Figure 2).

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25 For a partial account of this work, see Nicolaas Rupke, ‘A geography of enlightenment: the critical reception of Alexander von Humboldt’s Mexico work’, in David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (eds), *Geography and Enlightenment*, Chicago and London 1999, pp. 319–39.
Figure 1. Frequency diagram of the number of words used in reviewing Alexander von Humboldt’s books in fifteen representative British, French and German periodicals, plotted against the years in which these reviews appeared.

Figure 2. The frequency diagram for Figure 1 showing, in addition, differences in the word count of reviews between the British, French and German periodicals.
The book by Humboldt that enjoyed the warmest and longest lasting reception in Britain was the account of his journey of exploration in the tropical Americas, the *Relation historique* (1814–25). This was one of the books Darwin carried with him to read on his ‘Beagle’ journey around the world. As mentioned above, it also formed the basis for MacGillivray’s book on Humboldt, in which he is described as an ‘adventurous traveller’. This description captured the essence of what Humboldt meant to most of the Britons who knew his work. The travails of his arduous expeditions, especially those through the tropical jungle of South America, made him an example to emulate for those who went overseas to explore colonial frontiers in the conduct of empire. MacGillivray’s characterisation has remained the dominant image of Humboldt in Britain, judging by, among other things, the adventurous journeys of Britons following in Humboldt’s footsteps through the Orinoco jungle or going further afield to cross the Amazon region, e.g. Richard Spruce (1817–93), Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) and, more recently, Redmond O’Hanlon (*In Trouble Again: a Journey between the Orinoco and the Amazon* (1988)), who all felt inspired to re-live Humboldt’s harrowing experiences along the Orinoco River. When Humboldt died, the British obituary eulogies, English as well as Scottish, strongly emphasised the equatorial American travels and explorations of Humboldt as the very essence of his life’s accomplishments. The *Athenaeum* recounted how Humboldt had been inspired by George Foster, who had accompanied Captain Cook on his second voyage around the world and ended by encouraging ‘other adventurers’ to follow in his footsteps. And *Fraser’s Magazine*, in its ‘Alexander von Humboldt. In memoriam’, while putting *Kosmos* forward as supportive of natural theology, highlighted Humboldt’s travels, citing the *Personal Narrative* particularly as ‘by far the most interesting portion to the public at large’ of all his American travel books.

Admittedly, major differences existed in the reviewing practices of the three nations and these practices significantly determined the word count. But by far the longest reviews and the greatest number of them were written by the British. To a certain extent, this was because the classic review periodicals in Britain, such as the *Quarterly Review* or the *Edinburgh Review*, had no equivalent in Germany and France. Yet the contents of the British reviews were markedly different from those of other reviews and a characteristically British Humboldt was constructed who reinforced British values and beliefs – values relating to empire building and beliefs continuing the tradition of natural theology. The *Personal Narrative* was made a building block of the former, and *Kosmos* of the latter. When *Kosmos* appeared, several English-language reviews criticised Humboldt for not explicitly referring to ‘God’. British reviewers and translators compensated
by integrating Humboldt’s great work into their native tradition of natural theology.\(^{27}\)

No such interpretation of Humboldt can be found in the serious German literature about him. Some attention was paid to his travel adventures, but primarily in early, juvenile literature, such as *Alexander von Humboldts Reisen um die Welt und durch das Innere von Suedamerika* (1805) (translation of subtitle: Interesting Reading for Young People), by F. W. von Schuetz, the author of a book on Captain Cook. The German reviewing periodicals paid scant attention to the *Relation historique* and to the ‘popular’ *Kosmos*. Yet a characteristically German ‘Humboldt’ was constructed that matched the political aspirations of many of his followers. In other words, the scientific content of Humboldt’s *oeuvre* was not stressed – what was stressed instead was the assumption that his writings belonged to German literature. A literary Humboldt was constructed, the ‘Goethe of German Science’.\(^{28}\)

**CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: HUMBOLDT (META)BIOGRAPHY IN AN AGE OF CULTURAL PLURALISM**

The most common censure of metabiography is that it is not biography and in fact kills the fun and inspiration we may derive from ‘proper’ biographical literature. An old friend, an Oxford poet and playwright, after struggling through the Humboldt metabiography, warned me that with this metabiography I was entering ‘the cul-de-sac of those will-o’-the-wisps’ of ‘thoroughly discredited’ French postmodernists and added: ‘the Humboldt book is written inside out. It is not a biography at all […] There is a hole at the centre[…] It is *Hamlet* without the Prince.’\(^{29}\)

In answer to points of condemnation by literary critics, and to conclude this article, perhaps I may call on Caitríona Ní Dhúill, of University College Cork. In her recently published *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (2020), she has dealt more broadly and extensively than anyone with the genre of metabiography, impressively laying out a new sub-field in historical scholarship. Seeking to account for the complex, dynamic relationships between lived and narrated lives, she brings historical as well as fictional writings into dialogue with perspectives from gender theory, literary theory and theories of subjectivity, opening up metabiography to a wider range of biographical discourses and text-types.

\(^{27}\) Nicolaas Rupke, ‘Introduction’, in Humboldt, *Cosmos* (note 6), I, pp. vii–xxxv.

\(^{28}\) On Goethe and Humboldt, see Nicolaas Rupke, ‘Goethe und Alexander von Humboldt’, in Elmar Mittler (ed.), ‘Goethe ist schon mehrere Tage hier; warum weiß Gott und Goethe?’ Vorträge zur Ausstellung ‘Der gute Kopf leuchttet überall hervor’ – Goethe, Göttingen und die Wissenschaft, Göttinger Bibliotheksschriften, 13 (2000), 197–210.

\(^{29}\) Francis Robert Le Plastrier Warner to NR, 6 December 2005.

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Rupke’s method allows the changing meanings and investments of biography to come into view, revealing the elusiveness yet stubborn appeal of any ‘definitive’ or ‘authentic’ biographical account. Rupkean metabiography also helps us to account for the curiously time-bound quality of biographies, their tendency to ‘go off’ and become outdated, and to understand the frequently attested need for ever revised, ever re-written biographies of key cultural figures as a symptom and consequence of what Virginia Woolf called biography’s ‘high death rate’. […] The method Rupke elaborates – a critical, comparative, and diachronic analysis of the biographical discourse on Humboldt, revealing its uses, abuses, and allegiances – can be applied to any historical figure on whom there is a sufficiently extensive biographical literature.

However, – Ní Dhúill continues:

[T]his is in fact where the problems begin, or rather where Rupke fails to push his own metabiographical concept far enough. Because if the precondition for metabiographical analysis is the existence of an extensive biographical literature, metabiography runs the risk of shoring up once again a canon of historically visible figures – the ‘Great Men’ of history, along with a few ‘Great Women’ – whose agency in historical and cultural processes, so effectively contested by Marxist, structuralist, and poststructuralist approaches, is then implicitly reasserted and reinstated.30

I accept this fruitful critique, but would like to add the observation that it may lead to an even larger number of Humboldt avatars, for example, when countries that have produced only a modest body of biographical literature – and/or other instances of commemoration – nevertheless passionately take Humboldt on their own, national terms. An example is Ecuador, where, during the 2019 Humboldt 250th anniversary commemorative events in Quito, a distinctly Ecuadorian Humboldt was brought into focus. A poster, *Humboldt a través del tiempo*, proclaimed: ‘No hay solamente un Humboldt, sino muchos’ (‘We not only have one Humboldt, but many’), and ‘La imagen que pintamos de Humboldt dice tanto sobre él como sobre nosotros mismos’ (‘The image we paint of Humboldt says as much about him as about ourselves’). In confidently making such pronouncements, Ecuador’s Humboldt community expressed its concurrence with the German Humboldt Foundation, which in its annual *HumboldtKosmos* for 2019 referred to Humboldt as ‘an eternal idol’ and ‘everybody’s star’, i.e. a Humboldt who can be variously appropriated – a far cry from the Anglo-America-dominated ‘Atlantic Humboldt’ promoted by the Foundation during the second half of the twentieth century.31

30 Caitríona Ní Dhúill, *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography*, Cham, Switzerland 2020, p. 31. See also the section ‘Metabiography: First Attempt’, pp. 21–42.
31 See Georg Scholl (text) and Miriam Bauer (illustrations), ‘Everybody’s star’, *HumboldtKosmos*, 109 (2018), 20–3.
None of this lack of definitiveness and uniformity in Humboldt biography should lead to cynicism or resignation – on the contrary. As Oexle argues, the metatheoretical ambiguity of the world makes possible a plurality of dialogues in a confluence of complementarities, differences, antagonisms, and in a meeting of cultures and their different interpretations of the world.\textsuperscript{32}

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\textsuperscript{32} Oexle, ‘Begriff und Experiment’ (note 17), p. 56.