

Renaë WATCHMAN
(University of Arizona, USA)

Friendship: Indigenous Hosts & German Travelers

18th-19th centuries travel to the "contact zones" of diverse Indigenous communities by European Others initiated new experiences, which were further re-presented to Europe via detailed, albeit one-sided narratives. The Indigenous – as a site or as a prototype – were imagined, fictionalized, and befriended by German explorer-intellectuals through Travel Literature. The European understanding of the indigenous world was heightened, while, the Indigenous counter-gaze reveals mutual curiosity and resistance through a re-reading of Indigenous acts of song, dance, laughter and silence found in the travelogues of Humboldt and Forster.

key words: Travel Literature, Kadu, O-Mai, Humboldt, Forster, Indigenous, Native American, Germany, Naturalist

In the midst of collecting plants and other scientific specimens, Alexander von Humboldt paused to recognize a pressing topic that his research overshadowed; he prophesied “As we advance further into the interior of the continent this subject (the Indigenous) will become even more interesting than the phenomena of the physical world.” This subject, i.e the collective Indigenous, has hosted curious non-European explorers since at least 980 of the common era when Eirik the Red and his Norse crew came upon Greenland, and later in 1000 CE when his son Leif happened upon Vinland. We are all aware of the 15th century “discovery”, and in this paper, I will cast a light upon two explorers, one of whom is known as Germany’s Columbus, for having “rediscovered” South America. It is also one of my objectives to give an Indigenous counter-narrative where appropriate, as is here. Humboldt keenly alluded to yet an even earlier “discovery” than those just shared: “*The skill of the Guaiqueri pilots is such that the voyages of 120 to 150 leagues in open sea, out of sight of land, are done without charts or compasses, as with the ancients. The Indian pilot guides himself by the polar star or the sun.*”¹ Current Indigenous scholarship argues that well-made pirogues, coupled with strong eastbound ocean currents, made it possible to travel to European shores before Columbus’

¹ Alexander von HUMBOLDT, *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, trans. Jason Wilson, London 1995, p. 131.

famed landfall in the opposite direction.² Delaware-Lenape scholar Jack Forbes (1934-) illuminates the strength and efficiency of the humble Indigenous craft, and argues compellingly for a reassessment of the original “discovery”. Throughout the centuries, documented accounts of exploration to Indigenous frontiers often consumed an eager European reading public because of the image sketched by Europeans of Indigenous people. Though the subject and focus of travelogues, Indigenous people had no say in how they were depicted. Through the European hegemonic lens, the goodwill of Indigenous people was eclipsed by how they were treated: as exotic, slaves, prostitutes, infidels, and child-like research subjects. Woven through this concoction, was the thread of (ig-)noble savagism. Through various trading encounters, scientific missions, and prolonged visits among Indigenous hosts, German travel writers reported on native physique and speculated on Indigenous knowledge, but paid little attention to their hosts as “friends.”

For this seminar, I am sharing the 4th chapter of my dissertation, *Fictionalizing the Indigenous*, where I looked at accounts of travel by lettered-Germans spanning the period from 1772-1834. I was interested in their ostensible factual travelogues and argued they were fictional accounts because of the lack of an Indigenous perspective, despite having the occasion to discourse with Native participants during their humanitarian visits. There is a large body of German travel literature, and in this paper I will focus on Georg Forster’s (1754-1794) travelogue *A Voyage Around the World* (1777),³ and Alexander von Humboldt’s (1769-1859) *Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent* (1834).⁴

For Forster and Humboldt, both products of Enlightenment thought, and thus on strict research agendas, fostering friendships, partaking in convivial gatherings and accepting Indigenous hospitality were not items on their to-do list. In a broader sense, “Friendship, Conviviality and Hospitality” were part and parcel of the entire exhibition, for the explorers did not find themselves in isolation. Acts of tolerance, gift-giving, intimacy, respect, admiration, companionship and cultural sharing are indicators of the theme of this seminar, and were also embedded within the master narrative. The themes are not always comprised of positive traits, however, as betrayal and disappointment were documented, suggesting that “friendship, conviviality, and hospitality” between Indigenous hosts and European travelers was fragile, painful, and oftentimes misunderstood.

Forster and Humboldt’s travels are divided by 25 years of turbulent European history: Forster’s journey was in 1772-1775, and Humboldt’s began in 1779 and ended in 1804. During this time, Europe underwent rapid historical and politi-

² Jack D. FORBES, *The American Discovery of Europe*, Urbana and Chicago 2007, pp. 5-27.

³ The complete title is: *A Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution, Commanded by Capt. James Cook, during the Years, 1772, 3, 4, and 5*. His own translation from the original English to German appeared in 1784 as *Reise um die Welt*.

⁴ Original work is found in Volumes 28-30 of *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1805-1834).

cal change, while at their destinations (the South Seas and South America, respectively) were in the process of gradual, political and cultural change, seemingly not immediately turbulent as could be experienced in Europe. While greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideals, the French Revolution, and Romanticism, Forster and Humboldt could not help to project these ideologies onto the Indigenous hosts and landscapes which were ostensibly up for scientific discovery. Anthony Pagden put it this way: The explorers “*had come to the recognition...that being in the ‘New World’ demanded complex strategies if it was to be made not merely intelligible, but commensurable in any degree with the only world which they knew.*”⁵ Because their journeys were under the umbrella of scientific research, their encounters and relationships with Indigenous people were not easily “measured” thus, the concept of conviviality and hospitality often goes unnoticed. However, actual encounters with very diverse cultural groups allowed the German explorer-intellectuals to record these moments as first-hand experience. In claiming experience, the authors claimed to know, to understand, and to even tolerate by studying, measuring, and gazing onto Indigenous subjects, without Indigenous insight. Pagden asserts that “*Humboldt was confident that his narrative would be assured of its absolute truthfulness, not only because of the battery of instruments he carried with him to substantiate what he claimed to have measured...but because he could be certain of the authority of his ‘I’ – the eye of the ‘man of science’.*”⁶ These men of science practiced what would become known as ethnography, or “*nation writing*”, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary.⁷

To write about a Nation, one should befriend and include the voice and perspective of the Nation in question, or the composition is immediately flawed. In Susanne Zantop’s review of Russell Berman’s *Enlightenment or Empire* she recognized Berman’s insistence “*on the contribution of Enlightenment thought to a genuine understanding and acceptance of alterity.*”⁸ From the European standpoint, the Indigenous inhabitants were positioned and rendered as different, as alter-egos, as *Others*. I argue that because they were on Indigenous soil, the European explorers were the *Others*, the German *Others*. In several instances, we see Indigenous communities welcome the European vessels, with gifts in hand and sometimes with weapons aside – or as hospitable friends. Upon their first meeting with Indigenous New Zealanders, Forster noted the European attempt at a peaceful acquaintance: “*... a canoe* appeared off a point, at about a mile’s distance from the sloop; there were seven or eight people in it, who looked at us for some time,*

⁵ Anthony PAGDEN, *European Encounters with the New World: from Renaissance to Romanticism*, New Haven and London 1993, p. 48.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁷ *Ethnography*, in: Oxford English Dictionary, Second Ed. 1999, 1 January 2007 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50078524?single=1&query_type=wordandqueryword=ethnography&first=1&ndmax_to_show=10>.

⁸ Susanne ZANTOP, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture*, in: *The Modern Language Review* 96.2 (2001), pp. 586-588.

but notwithstanding all the signs of friendship which we could make, such as calling to them to come to us, waving a white cloth, and promising beads, they did not care to come nearer, and paddled back again the same way they came."⁹ The Europeans were confused at the wary Indigenous, and continued to pursue them: "To conciliate their good will, we left some medals, looking-glasses, beads, &c. in the canoe, and embarked again after a short stay." Even so, "Indians" no longer came back to the cove. The crew returned to their ship and everything was left untouched. Finally, On Tuesday April 6, 1773, while sightseeing the crew made actual contact. What follows is a lengthy quote, documenting Forster's impression: "As we were returning home, we heard a loud hallooing on the rocky point of an island, which on this occasion obtained the name of Indian Island; and standing in to the shore, we perceived one of the natives, from whom this noise proceeded. He stood with a club or battle-axe in his hand, on a projecting point, and behind him, on the skirts of the wood we saw two women, each of them having a long spear. When our boat came to the foot of the rock, we called to him, in the language of Taheitee, *tayo, harre mai*, "friend, come hither;" he did not, however, stir from his post, but held a long speech, at certain intervals pronouncing it with great earnestness and Vehemence, and swinging round his club, on which he leaned at other times. Captain Cook went to the head of the boat, called to him in a friendly manner, and threw him his own and some other handkerchiefs, which he would not pick up. The captain then taking some sheets of white paper in his hand, landed on the rock unarmed, and held the paper out to the native. The man now trembled very visibly, and having exhibited strong marks of fear in his countenance, took the paper: upon which Captain Cook coming up to him, took hold of his hand, and embraced him, touching the man's nose with his own, which is their mode of salutation."¹⁰ Out of suspicion, the Islanders were equipped to defend themselves if necessary from the strange man waving papers and throwing down pieces of fabric. After this initial meeting, in which we saw the man vocalize some sort of discourse, unknown to the world, he allowed Captain Cook to venture towards him, and he did not take a defensive stance as could be expected. He rather allowed the captain to take his hand, hug him, and, according to Forster engage in their mode of salutation.

Indigenous recognition of very different people from places unknown was their way of accepting alterity, of practicing hospitable exchange during this enlightening period of European travel, of fostering friendships. Forster's attention to the Indigenous islanders portrayed them (mostly) in a positive light, but because of his inexperience and his youthful gaze, he witnessed traumatizing encounters between Indigenous islanders and his much older shipmates.

Forster's rendition of the voyage includes many incidents among various Indigenous inhabitants, which he recollects by name, indicating an attempt at

⁹ Georg FORSTER, *A Voyage Around the World*, ed. Nicholas Thomas, Honolulu 2000, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

gaining trust, understanding and friendship. At the initial New Zealand visit, the crew met a family of natives, who set the stage for subsequent encounters. Forster acknowledged and recognized their need to be on a first-name basis: “A canoe now came alongside, of a somewhat larger size than the rest, and brought a handsome man, above six feet high, and three women, who all came on board. The man who immediately informed us, that his name was O-Taï, seemed to be a person of some consequence in this part of the island...”¹¹

After their lengthy introduction with O-Taï, which included a detailed account of his phenotype, the crew inquired about the condition of a relative they had met on Cook’s First Exhibition. Through their broken vocabulary, they were able to determine that the person was dead, which had an effect – they were saddened. Forster was equally entranced by O-Taï’s female companions, “... one was his wife, and the other two his sisters: the latter took great pleasure in teaching us to call them by their names, which were both sufficiently harmonious, one was called Maroya, and the other Marorai.”¹² Here, we see the women assert their own agency in engaging all to repeat and know their first names. Forster described the complexion of these women as even fairer (i.e. more attractive) than their brother, and coupled with their garb, they brought to mind ancient Greek statues. Sadly the sailors had more than friendship on their minds: “Among them were several females, pretty enough to attract the attention of Europeans, who had not seen their own country-women for twelve long months past. These wore a piece of cloth with a hole in the middle, through which they had passed the head, so that one part of the garment hung down behind, and the other before, to the knees; a fine white cloth like a muslin, was passed over this in various elegant turns round the body, a little below the breast, forming a kind of tunic, of which one turn sometimes fell gracefully across the shoulder. If this dress had not entirely that perfect form, so justly admired in the draperies of the ancient Greek statues, it was however infinitely superior to our expectations, and much more advantageous to the human figure, than any modern fashion we had hitherto seen.”¹³

Exceeding the preconceived notions of the crew, the Island women resembled classical monuments and evoked a distant utopic society. Upon the meeting of another “friendly Native” as Forster began to label the inhabitants, he took note of the trust that began to quickly form by the Natives of the crew. Along with this trust, was gift-giving, a sign also of friendship: “... this man after saluting them with his nose against theirs, gave each of them a new cloak or piece of cloth made of the flax-plant, curiously interwoven with parrot’s feathers, and presented the captain with a piece of green nephritic stone, or jadde,* which was formed into the blade of a hatchet.”

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 145-146.

¹² Ibidem, p. 146.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 144.

Upon comparing the offerings of gifts, it is quite apparent the unbalanced worthiness of the gifts. Cook offered white sheets of paper, bringing the great orator to tears, while another unnamed Indigene offered a complexly woven and colorful cloth and a valued, hand-carved piece of jade. Indigenous generosity far outweighed the traveling visitors'. As the crew embarked upon island after island, Forster notes that Cook would send representatives onshore, and more common than not, he summarized: "*the people he sent ashore were treated with the greatest marks of friendship and kindness.*"¹⁴

Despite the documented Island hospitality, both entities were justified in their suspicion of one another, however. Natives usually stayed away and observed if a situation or meeting was in question. Captain Cook, on the other hand was famous for having a bad temper. In one tragic instance, recorded by Forster, there was a misunderstanding, which resulted in the shooting and killing of several Natives. "... *but these good tempered people, forgetting the great loss they had sustained, and the wounds their brethren had received, made peace with him soon after, and furnished him with a profusion of refreshments, consisting of several roots, many sorts of rich fruit, fowls, and hogs.*"¹⁵ Perhaps to sway such future acts of violence, Captain sought the assistance of an Indigenous counterpart. He wanted a Native translator, and brought aboard a young Tahitian. Forster's first meeting with the Tahitian, Tetuby Homy, better known to the world as Mai¹⁶ occurred in September of 1773, and Forster documents Mai's physical characteristics in detail, as was common: "*The qualities of his heart and head resembled those of his countrymen in general; he was not an extraordinary genius like Tupaia, but he was warm in his affections, grateful, and humane; he was polite, intelligent, lively, and volatile.*"¹⁷ Mai was an outcast on this particular island, he was a perfect match to accompany the crew on their circumnavigation. He accompanied them on their travels to Indigenous islands, and decided to stay with the crew all the way to England. Here we see a reversal of hosts and hospitality.

As the first noted islander to travel to England for an extended stay, Mai was not, according to Forster, the best representative sample of Tahitian culture. Forster favored another individual, Tupia, for his intelligence and agreeable island physiognomy. Forster's various experiences with Mai on their long journey does not offer an Maian perspective, but Mai's presence aboard ship and within Europe was remarkable for that time, such that his visit prompted Europeans to try to interpret Mai's presence through various theatrical productions, epistles, and other high-cultured mimicry. One such epistle is credited to Mai as author, but he did not

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 142.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Mai is the correct name. "*His name is more properly Mai - O'mai means "it is Mai".*" from: <http://www.captaincooksociety.com/ccsuhodges.htm> accessed 7. Sept. 2008.

¹⁷ G. FORSTER, o. c. in note 9, p. 254.

compose the *Historic Epistle*.¹⁸ This utopist poem, dedicated to Joseph Banks,¹⁹ was an attempt to see, feel, and speak through the Indigene, Mai, and here is only a sample:

*“Where’er I turn, confusion meets my eyes,
New scenes of pomp, new luxuries surprise;
How could I too in generous floods impart,
The candid friendship of a guileless heart!
There fondly straying o’er the sylvan scenes,
Taste unrestrain’d what Freedom really means
And glow inspir’d with that enthusiast zeal,
Which Britons talk of Otaheiteans feel.”*²⁰

The bulk of this epic poem criticized enlightened Europe for its furtive wealth and casts a longing gaze back upon an untainted Tahiti. Such self-reflecting critique of European policy was paradigmatic of the period, and Forster would have been the first to identify that Mai was not capable of such extended prose. Forster’s reasoning is found in his own preface: “*O-Mai has been considered either as remarkably stupid, or very intelligent, according to the different allowances which were made by those who judged of his abilities.*”²¹ Forster reflected on Mai’s proficiency in playing chess and juxtaposed it to his inability to converse intelligently in the English language, despite having spent two years in London. Mai’s English was replete with solecisms, and outsiders who examined Mai’s native tongue accused it of being “*simple*”, and lacking abstract constructions. Pagden observed: “*...language was the prime indicator of rationality, that what a man spoke was, to a very large degree, what a man was.*”²² Because of all the cultures and diverse languages being “discovered” in the Americas and in the Pacific during this period, it should suffice to note that Europeans misunderstood cultural cues and overlooked the abilities of multilingual Indigenous speakers by labeling them “stupid” for lapses in (English) prosody. Mai was a celebrity in Europe and his demanding schedule of appearances restricted him from learning anything about the foreign country he was in. Despite being in the company of royalty, Mai was never tutored as young aristocrats were. He, however, was treated as a royal subject “*... he was immediately introduced into genteel company, led to the most splendid entertainments of this great and luxurious metropolis, and presented at court amidst a brilliant circle of the first nobility. He naturally imitated that easy and elegant politeness which is so prevalent in all those places, and which is one of the ornaments of civilized society; he adopted the manners, the occupations, and*

¹⁸ *An Historic Epistle, From Omiah, to the Queen of Otaheite; being his Remarks on the English Nation. With Notes by the Editor*, London 1775.

¹⁹ 1743-1820. Joseph Banks traveled with Captain Cook’s first expedition.

²⁰ *Historic Epistle*, o. c. in note 18, pp. 8, 48.

²¹ G. FORSTER, o. c. in note 9, p. 10.

²² A. PAGDEN, o. c. in note 5, p. 120.

amusements of his companions, and gave many proofs of a quick perception and lively fancy."²³

His British hosts used and displayed Mai to prestigious elite circles for their personal gain. Forster observed that if Mai was able to have benefited from European society, he could have taken useful civic tools back to the islands, which would in turn, promote progress (based on European standards). Forster claimed that Mai's lack of a true friend, or a mentor was woeful, and despite this, he was able to quickly adopt and mimic European traits and mannerisms. As an Indigenous man who could morph into a European by way of "elegant politeness" in "civilized society", Mai was the noble savage defined by Rousseau and his followers. After two years abroad, Mai returned to his homeland and was at a genuine loss for words at his departure: "*At parting from his friends his tears flowed plentifully, and his silence and outward behaviour proved him deeply affected.*"²⁴ Mai had developed a strong attachment to his British hosts, and it saddened him to depart.

Mai was sent home by the British, and Forster does not delve into detail, as he was not there. What is known is that Mai brought gifts, as was his disposition, from Europe to the islanders, which they did not seem to accept with any significant gratitude.

Decades later, Humboldt financed his own research trip to South America. Before establishing a trusted envoy, he first observation and contact with Natives was from afar and he evoked mythology to describe them and their canoes: "*...like all those used by Indians, were cut from one tree trunk. In each canoe there were eighteen Guaiquerí Indians, naked to the waist and very tall. They looked very muscular, with a skin colour between brown and coppery red. From afar, sitting still and standing out against the horizon, they could be taken for bronze statues. Their appearance did not correspond with the traits and extreme weakness described by previous travelers.*"²⁵

Previous travelers had fictionalized the Indigenous as inferior in build, character, and intelligence, but they also imagined the first "Americans" to be marvelous, and mythical. That eighteen well-built, tawny natives could fit into a halved-out bulk of wood, brings to mind the mythical wooden horse, filled with Greek warriors, led by the oft-bronzed Odysseus. In Humboldt's musings, though, the South American warriors do not clandestinely wait to attack the European visitors; instead, they resemble statues, or muted hosts to their humble islands.

The first Guaiquerí native he came into contact with happened to also be one who bestowed knowledge and skill, which Humboldt greatly admired: "*The chief of one of the pirogues offered to stay on board to guide us as a coastal pilot. He was a most trustworthy Guaiquerí; a keen observer, and led by a genuine thirst*

²³ G. FORSTER, o. c. in note 9, p. 10.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 10-11.

²⁵ A. von HUMBOLDT, o. c. in note 1, p. 47.

for learning he had studied the produce of the sea and land around him. It was fortunate that the first Indian we met on arrival was a man whose knowledge was to prove extremely helpful for our journey's objectives. With great pleasure I record his name as Carlos del Pino, who accompanied us for sixteen months up and down the coast, and into the interior."²⁶

Carlos del Pino, as his name indicates, was from a native community that had almost completely succumbed to the Spanish conquerors. Humboldt could not have "reinvented" America without native insight, knowledge, and empiricism. Yet, Carlos del Pino's voice is insufficiently cited and we know little of the person whom Humboldt so enthusiastically introduced. Humboldt's fondness for Don Carlos is only evident through a careful reading of his text, and their initial meeting, in which: "*We spent part of the night on deck as the Indian pilot entertained us with stories about the plants and animals of his land.*"²⁷ Humboldt enjoyed Don Carlos' company, and used the moment to solidify not only the inherent friendship, but of course to advance his knowledge about the area. Another intelligent Indigenous assistant whose services and knowledge Humboldt utilized was named Zerepe: He was: "*...an extremely intelligent Indian who later served us well, but at the time refused to travel with us. ...his father was from the Maco tribe and his mother from the Maypure; he had run off to the jungle (al monte) and lived with wild Indians for years. He had learned several languages, and the missionary used him as an interpreter.*"²⁸

Humboldt befriended Zerepe after he heard his cries from a beating. Humboldt whisked him away from the inhumane situation. Outside this brief encounter with Zerepe, Humboldt did not dwell on their encounter as one of friendship or mutual cultural exchange. It is true that Humboldt's primary objective was to order, to discover, and to classify unknown botanical species and landscapes, as opposed to making friends. Part of his planetary systematizing, however, allowed for the scientific unearthing of the origins of humanity. Though famous in the pantheon of natural sciences, Humboldt's ethnography has gotten little critical attention, despite his authoritative credentials. Intermingled with his analytical jargon was his documentation of several Indigenous nations, their languages, and their life ways. He cited experiences among the Chaima, Guaiquerí, Warao, Saliva, and Peruvians to name a few. Notwithstanding the multiplicity of Indigenous Nations, Humboldt's journey began with the following query: "*Where are the primitive inhabitants of these countries?*"²⁹ By primitive, he meant those nations who had not succumbed to the teachings of the Church, nor had acquired the "civilized" skills brought over or transplanted by colonists. "*The Indian has kept his language, his customs and national character; but the loss of quipas and symbolic paintings, the introduction*

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 48.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 198.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 38.

of Christianity, and other factors, have made the historic and religious traditions vanish."³⁰

Indigenous people did not "lose" their pre-contact administrative system (Quipas) or other tangible cultural effects. Humboldt, like many before and after him, attributed the aggressive, inhumane pilfering and erasure of historical evidence to miraculous vanishing. Conquistadors set these items ablaze, and it would take millennia to recover fragments of the stolen history that Humboldt claims to have been lost. He does, however, correctly attribute the church's role in attempting to smolder Indigenous cultural traditions: "*Missionaries have managed to rid the Indians of certain customs concerning birth, entering puberty and burying the dead... but it was far easier to suppress practices and memories than it was to replace the old ideas with new [Christian] ones.*"³¹ Humboldt correctly observed that missionaries suppressed communities of their cultural ceremonies, but they were not completely purged. Throughout time, and without written documentation, traditional birthing practices, songs, and ceremonies, as well as coming of age rites continue to be performed, albeit with facets of Christian undertones. Overall, Humboldt's keen insight as to the retention of Indigenous languages and customs amid new, European ones distanced him from his compatriots' policies. Humboldt was aware of the policies against Indigenous people, languages, and land. He quickly identified those Indigenous nations who either had amicable relations with the governing powers, or took a stand against those very powers: "*The [Guacara] Indians live a life of ease because they have just won a legal case restoring lands disputed by whites.*"³² This is a monumental observation, because over time, land claims become ever difficult to voice. Humboldt did not seem to be aware of the magnanimity of the event, and paid very little attention to the issue. On the other side of the coin, Humboldt spent ample time among the Guaiquerí, having befriended key leaders to assist in his research endeavors.

In one instance, and according to Humboldt, the carelessness of an Indigenous guide caused valuable notebooks to fly overboard, which angered him: "*When we criticized our pilot for having sailed too close to the wind he resorted to that typical Indian phlegmatic attitude: 'that the whites would find plenty of sun on the beaches to dry their papers.'*"³³ Because of his annoyance, Humboldt was insulted. They offended one another equally, which strained their ostensible friendship.

During his five-year trip in the depths of South America, "Germany's Columbus"³⁴ dared the elements with an endless supply of scientific tools and specimens. Obviously, he could not transport these items alone, and despite his outspoken opposition to slavery, he "employed" his trusted guides to carry his burden.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 76.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 120. My emphasis.

³² Ibidem, p. 155.

³³ Ibidem, p. 192.

³⁴ Susanne ZANTOP, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870*, Durham 1997, pp. 166-172.

The servants, pilots, and guides he hired were the distant relatives of the “*primitive inhabitants*” he originally sought.

Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* exposed the employment of such guides along rugged terrain “*The human infrastructure required by their own travels required armies of muleteers and peons, not to mention the famed Andean silleteros who carried Europeans across the Cordillera on their backs.*”³⁵ Along with his team, Humboldt also utilized the services of *silleteros*: “*The farmers and their slaves cut a path through the jungle ... For safety [from a suspected jaguar] the Indians returned to the farm to fetch small dogs. ... We walked on a very narrow ledge... when it narrowed, so that we could not walk along it any further, we climbed down to the torrent and crossed it on foot, or on the backs of slaves, to climb up the other side.*”³⁶ This matter-of-fact narrative reflects Humboldt’s indifference, or mastery over the *silleteros*. Obviously, any human could traverse the narrow ledge, as was proven by the slaves. Not only did they carry scientific instruments and people comfortably sitting on a chair strapped to their backs, they were also expected to transport their own transportation: canoes. On one hand, Humboldt objected to the use of slaves, yet on the other, he viewed them as a necessary inconvenience. Did he assume that since he paid the slaves, as opposed to not having paid for the slaves, that his reliance upon them was acceptable? Granted, providing goods and services demands a decent salary, yet it is Humboldt’s own words that force me to consider his motives: “*we ordered our instruments to be disembarked;*”³⁷ “*We set off before sunrise, at five in the morning, with the slaves carrying our instruments;*”³⁸ and “*Fearing that our guides would use the fog to abandon us we made those carrying the instruments go ahead of us.*”³⁹ As “Master” Humboldt ordered, commanded, expected, and demanded. The compensated servers, or slaves, responded with resistance and indifference – what Humboldt would later classify as commonplace laziness. Despite Humboldt’s vocal opposition to the use of slaves, he was a partaker in the act. To defend his action as necessary to the advancement of science, his research endeavors, or anything related to the South American journey would be fallacious, for he even brought an Indigenous Caripe servant back to Europe with him, which he did not explicitly mention in his *Personal Narrative*, yet it is illuminated in the translator’s endnotes. This oversight is a prime example of Humboldt’s denial to look at his hosts as equal, as friends. Conversely, however, the Indigenous guides and hosts maintained a happy disposition as retold in this instance: “*It was a Sunday night and the slaves danced to the monotonous and noisy music of guitars. ... We should be wary of criticizing this mixture of thoughtlessness and frivolity for it sweetens the evils of*

³⁵ Mary Louise PRATT, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York and London 1992, p. 153.

³⁶ A. von HUMBOLDT, o. c. in note 1, p. 91, my emphasis.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

a life of deprivations and suffering!"⁴⁰ His alternative viewpoint saw the human side of his employees: they were indefatigable, musical and spirited people amid a life of shackles.

Humboldt's empericism was successful, and made him famous. But he could not have done this without the use of slaves. Because Humboldt happened upon a country that had been overrun by the Spanish crown, they were in a sense, used to enslavement, and most spoke Castilian first, and their Indigenous tongues second. The explorers were able to utter a few Indigenous words compiled from questionable lists, sometimes from faulty sources, so it remained a challenge to engage in a two-way dialogue. Humboldt, however, spoke superior Spanish; he was on equal linguistic ground with the colonized Indigenous inhabitants. Because they did not all speak fluent Spanish, he had to find a way to communicate with them. Humboldt's five years abroad was ample time to seek out Indigenous speakers, but because the majority spoke Spanish, he began to question their national character. Because Indigenous people acquired European tongues and were able to communicate, Pagden asserts they were "*already half colonized*".⁴¹ They never considered multilingualism a plus. In any event, after several months in Native South America, and more importantly, after a significant amount of time deciphering innumerable languages and cultures, Humboldt looked back 300 years to illuminate facts about certain Indigenous nations. The Guaiquerí, for instance were (like most) mistakenly renamed by early travelers: "*The name of this tribe was quite unknown before the conquest. The Indians who use this name used to belong to the Warao who still inhabit the marshy area of the Orinoco delta. ... not one Indian has spoken anything but Castilian for over a century. The word 'Guaiquerí' like the words 'Peru' and 'Peruvian,' owes its origin to a simple mistake.*"⁴² Humboldt clarified that *guaike* meant "pointed stick" and was the instrument that was used for probing fish. When Columbus' crew came across these ancestors, they were in the process of catching their meal. The fishermen tried in vain to explain that their *guaike* was not a weapon to be feared, but with patience and trust the *guaike* would feed the invading Europeans. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the word was misunderstood, and their initial attempt at pantomime resulted in the misnomer of an entire people. These avid fisherman were not only misunderstood by Columbus centuries earlier, but Humboldt also erred in understanding their long-standing cultural ways of life: "*These poor people live from fishing on the coast and in neighboring shoals rich in fish. They seemed content with their fate and found it strange that I asked them why they had no gardens to cultivate nutritious plants. 'Our gardens,' they replied, 'lie on the other side of the straight; we bring fish to Cumaná and they give us cassava, bananas, and coconuts in return.'*"

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 68.

⁴¹ A. PAGDEN, o. c. in note 5, p. 140.

⁴² A. von HUMBOLDT, o. c. in note 1, p. 54.

*This economic system, which flatters laziness, is followed at Maniquarez and throughout the Araya peninsula.*⁴³

Humboldt scorned an efficient trading practice that has sustained the Indigenous inhabitants for an unprecedented amount of time. The European work ethic made little sense to the original South Americans, just as the Indigenous “economic system” was considered lazy. Humboldt noted that the hands of oft-naked Indigenous laborers⁴⁴ built entire cities and churches, but when their methods did not match or aspire to European standards, they were dismissed as being lazy. As he traveled from community to community, he had Indigenous slaves haul his scientific gadgets and personal gear. Back in Germany, Humboldt was an aristocratic and served in a manner only known to those of his stock. This behavior was expected of the Indigenous South Americans and their resistance resulted in Humboldt’s disapproval and disgust: “*We had walked barely a league when our guide decided, at every opportunity, to sit down and rest... We observed this characteristic trait whenever we traveled with Indians;... The copper-coloured Indian...complains more because nothing stimulates his interest...This same Indian, who would complain when we loaded him with a box ... would row his canoe against the strongest current...in order to be back home.*”⁴⁵

Humboldt’s once admiration for skilled and knowledgeable natives slowly lapsed into disdain for them. The longer he was outside of Europe, it appears from his own writings, that he began to see the Indigenous population in a negative light – they were no longer worthy of respect or admiration. Humboldt observed that “*lazy guides*” protested ill treatment and demanded respect, and, when possible, would paddle “*against the strongest current*” to avoid work. Similarly, when the Indigenous guides had to climb rugged mountains, laden with Humboldt’s effects, their sluggish efforts were immediately noticed and their “*bad tempers*”⁴⁶ were to blame for any slight delay. The abject Indigenous quality of laziness contradicted with Humboldt’s blind observation of their efficiency, expediency, obedience, and industriousness: “*It is astonishing how easily Indian villages are moved about. ...Indians feel bound to the land with such weak ties that they indifferently accept orders to demolish their houses and build them again elsewhere. ... Whole villages have transported several leagues just because a monk did not like the view from his house.*”⁴⁷

Because of their supposed “*weak ties*” to the land, Indigenous villagers easily managed to relocate at the whim of an unhappy monk. They abandoned their homelands, demolished their houses, and traversed “*several leagues*” without ex-

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 71, my emphasis.

⁴⁴ Humboldt notes that Priests allocated money first for the building – and colonization – of cities and churches before any funds were to be set aside for personal clothing; this did not bother the Indigenous ones, however, as they preferred to go *au naturel*. Ibidem, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 32.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 97.

PLICIT defiance. Indigenous silent indifference is markedly telling. To be indifferent is to lack enthusiasm, to detach oneself from the experience. They were not happy to up and move, but they did, repeatedly. This characteristic sharply contrasts with all of the “evidence” that Humboldt supplied in his *Narrative* of laziness. As further evidence of Indigenous work ethic, Humboldt described his amazement at their frequent and seemingly effortless clothes washing by hand.⁴⁸ He noted the work involved in cleaning laundry, and did not aspire to mimic their exertion. Although he did not envy the labor involved in performing chores, he paid more attention to the fact that though they washed clothes, they hardly wore them!

Through sign language, body language, oratory, and multilingualism the Indigenous hosts conveyed and articulated guidance, teachings, anecdotes, tales, jokes, superstitions, and challenges to the visiting Europeans, but their stories were often minimized or footnoted. One final example of hospitality, which was a common occurrence in Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative* but brushed aside as anecdotal is: “... *Four Indians sat round a small brushwood fire eating a kind of white paste spotted with black that aroused our curiosity. These black spots proved to be vachacos, large ants, whose abdomen resemble lumps of grease...Two young Indian women came down from their hammocks to make cassava cakes for us.*”⁴⁹ Humboldt regarded their actions as obligatory, but even so, he had respect enough to consume the food that was prepared for him. He thought the ants to be rancid and did not comment on the cassava. This impromptu feast is one of many that has a skewed perspective, and the Indigenous autoethnographic text⁵⁰ has been given little scholarly attention. Mai and Don Carlos volunteered their expertise as guides, teachers, and open-minded interlocutors for German Others. Both were sometimes directly cited, but their perspective, their voice, was often omitted in favor of the author’s, as expert.

In conclusion: why is it important for a 21st century Indigenous person to delve into the depths of 18th century “friendships” between explorers and hosts? Because a perspective does exist, despite being that of the observer, rather than of the observed. The explorers were witness to a plethora of now-extinct cultures and languages. Though their language lists were flawed and cultural cues misunderstood, their voices have survived and despite my tireless search for the Indigenous counter-narrative, the German voices remain fixed. Their travelogues were widely read, inspiring generations of would-be travelers, authors, and admirers of Indigenous people. Just a few short years later, local governments would instill genocidal policies against Indigenous people in both South and North America, as well in disparate island communities. Meanwhile, back in Germany fictional accounts of Native people were composed by Karl May and others and would capture 19th and

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 115.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 238.

⁵⁰ “If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.” M. L. PRATT, o. c. in note 35, p. 7.

20th century readers globally. In short, on one side of the ocean Indigenous people were befriended in the hearts of readers, while on the other side they were almost destroyed. For the attentive reader and their progeny, Indigenous people demanded respect, understanding and tolerance. Today, traces of animosity towards “real Indians” still exists in their native lands, but in German-speaking lands, one can find organizations like Powwowfreunde, Lateinamerikafreunde, German-Lakota Friends Dusseldorf, and the Freundschaftskreis Nordamerikanische Indianer, all claiming to be hospitable in one way or another to the Indian/Indigenous. Reactions to such organizations are varied, as they partake in either “traditional” or “progressive” forms of hobbyism, with and without a Native informant/friend, however, they do so on German soil. So, circles of friendship, of conviviality have truly come full-circle. The 18th century explorers left Germany to pursue science, but instead happened upon complex relationships and experiences, and today we find Indigenous people partaking in celebrations across Europe, as well as Europeans partaking in Indigenous gatherings world-wide, the end result is a search for a deeper mutual understanding, trans-cultural tolerance, and the exploration of friendship, conviviality and hospitality, which appear to be timeless, without boundaries, and mutual.

Renaë WATCHMAN