

# HUMBOLDT'S MEXICAN TEXTS AND LANDSCAPES\*

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**ABSTRACT.** While in New Spain from 1803 to 1804, Alexander von Humboldt interacted with some of its landscapes and the texts that represented them. Analysis of those interactions regarding the Basin of Mexico and the Gulf lowlands demonstrates what purely text-based studies of the production of places cannot: The contrasting landscape elements and patterns that had emerged over millennia during precolonial times in those two places, their relative degrees of depopulation during the colonial era, and the relative degrees of rigor Humboldt applied to interacting with the resulting landscapes and the texts that represented them greatly affected his representations of those places in his 1811 *Essai politique sur le royaume de la Nouvelle-Espagne*. His representations of the precolonial Basin of Mexico as productively developed and of the precolonial Gulf lowlands as pristine have influenced the transformations of those places in the two centuries after New Spain became the Mexican republic through its wars of independence (1810–1821). *Keywords:* economic development, Alexander von Humboldt, landscape, Mexico, pristine myth.

*Notwithstanding the extreme care which I bestowed in verifying the results, I have no doubt of having committed many [plusieurs] very serious errors, which will be pointed out in proportion as my work shall excite the inhabitants of New Spain to study the state of their country.*

—Alexander von Humboldt, 1811

The bicentennial of Alexander von Humboldt's year-long sojourn in Mexico, from March 1803 to March 1804, provides the stimulus to analyze his role in the relationship between long-term landscape transformation and the cultural bias that continues to be such a central orthodoxy in modern economic development (Sluyter 1999). That orthodoxy, the "Pristine Myth" in William Denevan's (1992) terms, maintains that the precolonial landscapes of the Americas were undeveloped and, therefore, that non-Westerners are unproductive and economic development must equate to cultural westernization (Sluyter 2001). James Blaut (1993) coined a slightly different term to label that same orthodoxy: the "myth of emptiness," which dictates that development must diffuse from the West to the non-Wests. Despite this article's historical focus on Humboldt's visit to late colonial Mexico, the following analysis directly concerns present-day economic development (Sluyter 2002).

Mary Louise Pratt (1992) has already cast Humboldt in a central role in that phenomenon. She concluded that Humboldt reinvigorated the colonial pristine myth on the eve of the independence of many of the Latin American republics. His characterization of the Americas as "primordial nature" turned a colonial belief into a

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