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Fall, Juliet Jane

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Raccontare il mondo, descrivere la natura

L'opera di Alexander von Humboldt
tra letteratura e scienza

UNICAp^{ress}/ateneo

a cura di
Valentina Serra e Marcello Tanca



RESOCONTI /8

Descritto dai suoi contemporanei come uno degli uomini più celebri della sua epoca, Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) è stato uno dei personaggi più ammirati del XIX secolo. Fratello minore di Wilhelm, Alexander fu insieme e nello stesso tempo botanico, naturalista, esploratore e geografo. Nel 1799 si imbarcò insieme ad Aimé Jacques Alexandre Bonpland (1773-1858) in un viaggio che li condusse prima a Tenerife, quindi in Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Perù e Messico. Frutto di questo e di altri avventurosi viaggi è una nutrita produzione letteraria e scientifica che in questo volume viene indagata unitamente alle numerose sfaccettature della figura di Humboldt e ai molteplici influssi della sua opera e del suo pensiero in ambito storico, geografico, letterario e linguistico.

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Cagliari

UNICApres

2023

*Nella solitudine degli oceani si saluta una stella
come un'amica che non si incontra da anni*

ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT

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Imagining Humboldt: biography, stalking and leaving the family

Juliet J. Fall

*If research is like stalking, a good and honest writer,
however assiduous in pursuit of his prey,
will still hesitate at the essential sordidness of the task at hand.*
Jill Lepore*

Some historical figures are resurrected more regularly than others in disciplinary histories. Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), a Prussian aristocratic traveller-scientist, polyglot and polymath, is one of the ghosts that haunts geographical history. Humboldt is at times celebrated and called nothing less than the inventor of environmentalism or of nature in bestselling biographies¹ or censured for his omniscient colonial gaze². Many have claimed Humboldt as their own, and in Germany alone he has been variously imagined through the years as a Liberal Democrat, a Darwinian Monist, an Aryan Supremacist, a Marxist, a Philosemitic Cosmopolitan, or even a pioneer of globalization³. He has also, somewhat surprisingly and more recently, become a niche pop icon, claimed by proponents of a variety of causes from socially-aware postcolonial liberation narrated through rap⁴ to gay rights⁵. It is this act of *claiming* that I focus on here.

In the rather breathless way of some French historians of science, well-versed in telling the tales of eminent Great Men, Jean-François Dortier wrote ten years ago that geography «the daughter of travel and of maps»⁶ owed so much to Alexander von Humboldt, «the founding father of modern geography»⁷. Humboldt gave birth to a geographical spirit that combines

* Jill Lepore, *Historians who Love too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography*, «The Journal of American History», 88 (2001), 1, pp. 129-144, p. 139.

¹ Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: A European Explorer and his American Disciples*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007; Andrea Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, New York, Knopf, 2015.

² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Taylor & Francis / Routledge, 2007.

³ Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 301.

⁴ See El Temba and Kurt Tallert aka Retrogott, *Humboldt's Groove*, 2019 <<https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/entdecken/alexander-von-humboldt/humboldts-groove>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

⁵ LGBT History Month, *Alexander von Humboldt 2020 Icon*, Equality Forum <<https://lgbthistorymonth.com/alexander-von-humboldt?tab=multimedia>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

⁶ Jean-François Dortier, *Alexander von Humboldt et la naissance de la géographie*, in *Une histoire des sciences humaines*, éd. par Jean-François Dortier, Auxerre, Editions Sciences Humaines, 2012, pp. 32-39, p. 32: «La géographie, fille des voyages et des cartes». All translations in footnotes are my own.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33: «figure de père fondateur de la géographie moderne».

natural science, ethnography, geometry and mapping with heroic exploration: «it is a man such as Alexander von Humboldt who exalted to the highest level this spirit of scholarly geographical explorer, all the while making geography reach a new stage»⁸. For him, Humboldt was both a catalyst who revealed the true and pre-existing “geographical spirit” now incarnated within modern geography, and a pioneer who shaped it by formulating hypotheses across its entire disciplinary spectrum since «there is no part of physical or human geography to which he has not contributed»⁹. Not only are his theories of volcanoes «considered essential by contemporary vulcanologists»¹⁰ but also «today’s ethnographers consider most of his observations to be trustworthy»¹¹. Likewise, writing largely within a context of anglophone geography in an introductory text for students, Cresswell wrote that «Humboldt was a world traveller who firmly believed in the importance of fieldwork and measurement. [...] Humboldt is often described as the father of modern systematic geography»¹².

If we believe Dortier, Cresswell and others who present Humboldt as the original Founding Father of the discipline of geography, then all who identify as geographers are part of his noble lineage. How lovely! How glamorous! But what if we express some doubt? What if we are deeply suspicious not only of the presentism apparent in this assessment of Humboldt’s many contributions but also wary of this assigned patrilinear family? In this contribution, I wish to explore what such conflicting narratives tell us about biography and disciplinary histories of science, and how we might understand what these imaginings that position geography as part of a specific lineage tell us about how geographers view themselves. Almost twenty years ago, Gillian Rose aptly identified and discarded this “dutiful son” model of intellectual lineage within geography, in which the would-be great cite men already-established-as-great in order to assert their own maturity, while also noting that others construct a paternal line only to revolt against it¹³. She identified both ways of narrating disciplinary history as expressions of male bonding within a relentlessly competitive academic system. Yet, despite these critiques, fawning biographical accounts of Great Men such as Humboldt continue to be written, within and outside of geography, and not only by men, explicitly as acts of claiming him as part of a specific collective.

Science historian Lorraine Daston has called Western science a form of European self-portraiture, not only because it pushes Western epistemologies into places that have other ways of knowing, but also because it creates knowledge holders in its own image: «No other culture has relied so heavily on the history of science to define its own identity. Since Europe became Europe in its own eyes, science has been held up as its image and its emblem – whether understood as inexorable progress or vertiginous change or a tragic loss of tradition»¹⁴. This is grounded in the idea that the only valid producer of knowledge was a Western scientist, rather than local people such as fish harvesters, Indigenous peoples, beachcombers... or women. Debates on the links between self-portraiture and biographies of scientists have taken place in the context of soul-searching in the past twenty years around specific imperialist disciplinary histories, Eurocentric social sciences, and debates on citational practices¹⁵. Humboldt is

⁸ Ibid.: «c’est un homme comme Alexander von Humboldt qui a porté au plus haut point cet esprit de géographe savant explorateur, tout en faisant franchir à la géographie une nouvelle étape».

⁹ Ibid., p. 34: «il n’est pas un domaine de la géographie physique ou humaine auquel il n’ait apporté de contribution».

¹⁰ Ibid.: «considérées comme essentielles par les vulcanologues actuels».

¹¹ Ibid., p. 35: «les ethnologues actuels considèrent comme fiables la plupart de ses observations».

¹² Tim Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 41.

¹³ Gillian Rose, *Tradition and Paternity: Same Difference?*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», 20 (1995), 4, pp. 414-416, p. 415.

¹⁴ Lorraine Daston, *The History of Science as European Self-portraiture*, «European Review», 14 (2006), 4, pp. 523-536, p. 536.

¹⁵ Juliet J. Fall, *Writing (Somewhere)*, in *The SAGE Handbook of Human Geography - Practising Human Geographies*, ed. by Roger Lee, Anssi Paasi and Sarah Radcliffe, London & Thousand Oaks, SAGE, 2014, pp. 296-325; Zoe Todd, *An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ is Just Another Word for Colonialism*, «Journal of historical sociology», 29 (2016), 1, pp. 4-22; Natalie Oswin, *An Other Geography*, «Dialogues in human geography»,

an interesting character against whom some of these debates can be rehearsed, as while he undoubtedly approached the New World «with a firm belief in Western superiority, heralding European achievements in the arts and sciences as universally relevant and impervious»¹⁶, he also immersed himself in his new environment, voiced his unease with colonialism and slavery, and «committed himself to be formed and changed by his surroundings»¹⁷. Humboldt's oeuvre is uneven and contradictory and cannot be easily lumped into simplified tales: reading him can be exciting, but at other times, as page after page of scientific measurements are recounted, it is distinctly boring. Yet biography, of course, allows the narrator to focus on the fun and excitement, selectively editing out the *ennui*.

In this chapter, I discuss how such recurring tales of exploration and adventure, recounted in biographies, might continue to hold us back from developing new critical scholarship. In order to do this, I explore (1) the role played by biography in disciplinary histories; (2) the specific use of biography in geographical history; (3) why thinking about biography as a form of stalking – a pathological form of obsession with a chosen figure – might help us to move forward in understanding how Humboldt has been imagined. Throughout this discussion, I focus on the idea of ownership, on the claiming of another for oneself and the particular dynamics that take place between biographers and their alter-egos in the absence of any possibility of consent by the latter. In the last section, I will draw on two well-received biographies of Humboldt to discuss how he has been imagined¹⁸ as well as briefly mentioning the recent documentary *Humboldt und die Neuentdeckung der Natur* (2018), made by ZDF Media on the basis of Wulf's book¹⁹.

* * *

In response to what is still a largely white, masculine, and Western canonical geographical history, lively debates about whose writing is remembered are ongoing within the discipline. Drawing on her own experience, Cheryl McEwan wrote about what counted as valid contributions in geography in the 1980s:

my first explorations were in an essay written for an undergraduate course on the Nature and Philosophy of Geography, which required me to “write an appreciation” of the work of one geographer in changing geographical thought. I was curious as to why a course that ranged from Ptolemy to Humboldt to Harvey failed to mention a single woman as a producer of geographical knowledge²⁰.

Scholars, such as McEwan have challenged this male, pale and stale flavour since the 1990s, but have not had an easy ride²¹. Despite efficiently highlighting the gendered epistemologies and history as patrilineal histories, including showing how histories of the subject have giv-

10 (2020), 1, pp. 9-18; Martin Müller, *Worlding Geography: From Linguistic Privilege to Decolonial Anywheres*, «Progress in Human Geography», 45 (2021), 6, pp. 1440-1466 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520979356>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

¹⁶ Caroline Schaumann, *Humboldt's Dirty Nature*, «Colloquia Germanica», 44 (2011), 2, pp. 133-147, p. 138.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: A European Explorer and his American Disciples*; Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*.

¹⁹ Perhaps, in doing this, I am unconsciously trying to make sense of my endless bafflement when some of my colleagues – sometimes until the end of their careers – claim to be *the student* of some long-retired colleague («je suis l'élève de X») or repeatedly signal their continued allegiance to their mentor either explicitly («il mio Maestro è...») or through citational practices. Or perhaps is it just that I was lucky enough to have nice parents and therefore never needed to choose other parental figures?

²⁰ Cheryl McEwan, *Taking on the Tweed Suits: Reflections on the 'How the Other Half Lives' and its Critique of Masculinist Geography*, «Area», 52 (2020), 4, pp. 770-777, p. 771.

²¹ See Mona Domosh, *Toward a Feminist Historiography of Geography*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», 16 (1991), 1, pp. 95-104, and responses by David R. Stoddart, *Do We Need a Feminist Historiography of Geography. And if We Do, What Should it Be?*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», 16 (1991), 4, pp. 484-487 and Gillian Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

en the appearance that geographical knowledge was produced almost entirely by men, they continue to be relatively marginal, usually relegated to “other” forms of geographical knowledge²². These debates are nevertheless ongoing, with excellent recent contributions drawing further from feminist epistemologies and decolonial contributions and positionalities²³, as scholars continue to challenge whose voices have been offered disproportionate opportunities and exposure to mould what counts as geography, building on the simple idea that «the writing of certain kinds of pasts is legitimated by, and legitimates, only certain kinds of presents»²⁴. In the following section, I wish to step back from these debates and explore some of the discussions around biography as a scholarly genre. This will help me set out to try to explain why so many contemporary writers, and geographers, continue to dig up Humboldt and dress him in various clothes to narrate particular stories.

1. What role for biography?

Writing biographies is something of a literary industry. Who has not received a large tome of the life of some proverbial Dead White Man from a kind but rather uninspired uncle, or the life of Jane Austen from a well-meaning grandmother? Sometimes these provide fascinating insights into the lives and choices of past others, sometimes they are little more than fluff pieces aiming to project reflected glory on the biographer²⁵. There is a long and varied biographical tradition of telling the stories of people’s lives in the Western world, from the narrated life of Jesus Christ, to various Saints in the Catholic Church, through to Victorian tales of characters deemed exemplary and worth reading for inspiration. While biography might have its roots in the Romantic view of artists or scientists as heroes and Great Men, «biography has become increasingly sophisticated – and self-conscious – about narrative structure, voice, context, but, at least as regards its subjects, biography has largely stayed true to its roots: subjects worthy of biographies, if not necessarily Great Men or Heroes, are important people»²⁶.

In this landscape, how the lives of proverbial Great Men are narrated – because historically they have overwhelmingly been men – has to some extent followed various national traditions, practices and fashions. Writing about the practice of biography, in his magnificent metabiography of Humboldt, Rupke asks whether we are «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? Putting the question differently: how are reputations constructed and reconstructed by national, professional and other remembrance cultures?»²⁷. This question of how reputations are constructed is important, and it is important to bear in mind the very culturally-situated nature of such practices. Although French historiographical practices, for example, have shifted away from

²² Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*; Avril Maddrell, *Reappraising David Livingstone’s The Geographical Tradition from Complex Locations: More-than-contextual Historiographies*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», 44 (2019), 3, pp. 450-453; for a good example, see Tim Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction*.

²³ Cheryl McEwan, *Taking on the Tweed Suits*; Ruth Craggs, Hannah Neate, *What Happens If We Start from Nigeria? Diversifying Histories of Geography*, «Annals of the American Association of Geographers», 110 (2020), 3, pp. 899-916; Mette Bruinsma, *Revisiting the History of Ideas: A Forgotten Resource for Historians of Geography*, «Geography Compass», 14 (2020), 10, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12535>> (accessed 24.02.2023); Anna Jackman et al., *Unearthing Feminist Territories and Terrains*, «Political Geography», 80 (2020), <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102180>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

²⁴ Rose, *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, p. 414.

²⁵ I am writing this at a time when there is speculation within the UK press about whether Prime Minister Boris Johnson is, or isn’t, spending too much time writing a biography of Winston Churchill, and whether his apparent inability to finish it might mean he will need to return his apparently substantial advance payment. Writing a biography of someone often considered to be a great statesman is a pretty transparent attempt to bask in reflected glory. There is in fact a whole genre of biographies written by politicians, although not always very successfully. Some, of course, use ghost writers. President Nicolas Sarkozy, of France, was accused of plagiarizing a former work in his book on Georges Mandel, a resistance fighter.

²⁶ Lepore, *Historians who Love Too Much*, p. 131.

²⁷ Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography*, p. 10.

their almost exclusive focus on biographies since Auguste Comte, the specifically French use of biographies to narrate history remains: «the Great Man can be said to be polysemic as he is, by definition, sufficiently complex, rich or obscure to lend himself to divergent ideological interpretations»²⁸. In other words, it is an apparently apolitical way of writing what can only always be a story imbued with power, in an academic context in which speaking of power and politics clashes with the widespread belief that academic work is somehow removed from these, and draws strength from its apolitical, universal and rational nature²⁹. In Great Britain, on the other hand, biographies have often focussed on author's homes and places of origin and the role of place in their life stories. In the United States, the life stories of specific characters are often written up against the backdrop of the birth of the nation itself³⁰, and so on. More recently, across the world, celebrity sportspeople and media personalities have used ghost-writers specialised in the genre, helping them craft believable myths around their struggles and rise to glory, as well as using media teams to keep uploading material to their supposedly autobiographical social media streams.

In parallel to the continuing publishing success of popular biographies, there has also been something of a biographical turn within critical scholarship since the 1980s³¹, in a number of academic fields. Biography, they write, is not just about telling stories but «is to be regarded as a research perspective that can be applied across the full spectrum of historical research and, as such, is relevant to many fields of study»³². Using biography as a method of enquiry leads to a distinctive framework of historical interpretation, drawing upon one particular “bottom-up” perspective: that of the person studied. It is interesting that it needs stating that this is a legitimate mode of enquiry and goes some way to showing the fraught debates that have taken place within the discipline of history since the so-called “linguistic” and “cultural” turns, as well as the rise and increased legitimacy of ‘microhistory’. Microhistory and biography both scrutinize, challenge and modify established interpretations of history, all the while using the usual scholarly approach of drawing upon diverse source materials, allowing for verification of conclusions drawn about past events and contexts. Although they have much in common, the critical difference between microhistory and biography is not the «obscurity or ordinariness of the subject nor its episodic presentation, but the nature of the narrative»³³. Microhistorians have specific goals in their choice of focus: evoking a period, a problem, a *mentalité*, and trying to answer important historical and historiographical questions, «even if their arguments, slippery as eels, are difficult to fish out of the oceans of the story»³⁴. Microhistory might focus on individual lives, but only so far as they can be somehow exemplary, serving as a sort of allegory for broader issues. Biographers, meanwhile, ground their work in a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual's life and their contribution to history.

²⁸ Alice Gérard, *Le grand homme et la conception de l'histoire au XIXe siècle*, «Romantisme», 100 (1998), 2, pp. 31-48, p. 32: «le ‘grand homme’ peut être dit polysémique, étant, par définition, suffisamment complexe, riche ou obscure pour se prêter à des interprétations idéologiques divergentes».

²⁹ A similar point is made by Bowker and Latour regarding the role played by epistemology in France, as the only real field in which it is possible to talk about politics, in a context where there wasn't – at the time – anything close to an established field of social studies of science as there was in the Anglo world; see Geof Bowker, Bruno Latour, *A Booming Discipline Short of Discipline: (Social) Studies of Science in France*, «Social Studies of Science», 17 (1987), 4, pp. 715-748.

³⁰ Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: A European Explorer and his American Disciples*.

³¹ Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma, *The Biographical Turn: Biography as Critical Method in the Humanities and in Society*, in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. by Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma, London-New York, Routledge, 2016, pp. 19-28.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³³ Lepore, *Historians who Love too Much*, p. 132.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

2. Why use biography in geography?

Writing and narrating a life, including “situating” a person in the past of a contemporary discipline, is a power act that structures and shapes both scientific disciplines and the world. In a piece on lifepaths and geography, Stephen Daniels and Catherine Nash suggest that biography has always been intimately tied up with geography. Lives have always been narrated in connection to spatiality, plotted as lifepaths, incarnated within the Classical and Judeo-Christian idea of physical paths that mirrored those of moral rectitude. Pilgrimages and processions were religious practices that made these connections material. Later on, geographical discoveries enlarged these potential spheres of contemplation and proximity between lives and places:

For European states coming to power through overseas and imperial trade, [geographical discovery] opened a series of spaces – domestic, national, global – through which life stories were plotted. Images of the geographer as a young man at his desk by a window, with maps and compasses in hand, brought together mundane and spiritual dimensions of the lifeworld and the task of charting the way, the truth and the light. Spiritual guides continued to be published for people of every station and occupation, farmers, tradesmen, mothers, widows. [...] These allegorical lives came to terms with the phenomenology of daily life, its places, tasks, routines and accidents, sometimes to the point where the Puritan hermeneutic was inverted. As a moral world was assembled from a primary material world of sense impressions, so the self became something made and remade in different situations, cast adrift from the continuity of the soul. Life took on meaning from an engagement with the material world which was more than a form of spiritual warfare³⁵.

There is a difference, of course, between saying that lives can be narrated through a geographical lens and using biography within the scientific discipline of geography to tell the history of geographical thought. The traditional view of disciplinary history is that putting the focus on key individuals helps to explain the whole:

a discipline’s history is sometimes presented as a grand narrative stressing the important ideas and techniques which dominated it at certain times, plus the debates about ends and means which punctuated those episodes. But those grand stories are amalgams of many smaller ones, the products of individuals working in and for the discipline. The whole is more than the sum of the parts but, without acknowledging those parts, and the roles of specific individuals in them, a full appreciation of disciplinary history cannot be grasped. [...] And so the individuals who created those milieux can rightly claim a place in a history of geography as a gallery of heroes, as individuals who had impact and influence³⁶.

While there has been much-needed criticism of the history of geography written as this “gallery of heroes”, it must be remembered that this biographical approach was first proposed as an alternative to detach geography from its over-reliance on tales of conquest, discoveries and imperial narratives: from geography as a sequence of stories of *Great Discoveries*, to a discipline sensitive to the social, economic and political circumstances of these individual scholars as citizens of the world³⁷. Like many other academic disciplines, geography was very largely a twentieth-century creation³⁸, and while teaching on geographical topics started at the very end of the 19th Century, many European universities only started establishing professorships in geography in the first half of the 20th Century. Daniels and Nash remind us for example that «when the International Geographical Union initiated its commission of the History of

³⁵ Stephen Daniels, Catherine Nash, *Lifepaths: Geography and Biography*, «Journal of Historical Geography», 30 (2004), 3, pp. 449-458, p. 453.

³⁶ Ron Johnston, *Learning our History from our Pioneers: UK Academic Geographers in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, «Progress in Human Geography», 29 (2005), 5, pp. 651-667, p. 662.

³⁷ Daniels, Nash, *Lifepaths: Geography and Biography*.

³⁸ Johnston, *Learning our History from our Pioneers*.

Geographic Thought in the 1970s, it intended to free the history of geography from the history of discovery and exploration, focussing on the works of scholars, including cartographers and natural historians as well as university geographers, in the form of a series of "bio-bibliographical studies"³⁹.

Drawing from others speaks to us about how we think and work today, grounding today's legitimacy in references to past illustrious figures. The young discipline of geography, like many others, has been particularly active in laying claim to past figures, perhaps seeking reflected glory while trying to inscribe itself into a sort of disciplinary *longue durée*. The quotes from Dortier at the beginning of this paper can very much be read in this manner: finding pioneers⁴⁰, forefathers, imagined paternities⁴¹ in past figures makes the historical construction of a discipline appear solid and durable. This can be a legitimacy for the discipline of geography as a whole, as well as for particular biographers as individual authors. As Pelletier writes scathingly at the start of his biography of Elisée Reclus, a quasi-contemporary of Alexander von Humboldt: «the new-found interest for Reclus in France had as much, if not everything, to do with the tracing of the disciplinary and quasi-personal boundary of an academic field in which geography was a battleground of a wider academic and ideological battle. It was as much about these individual battles as it was about taking forward a specific forward-thinking geography»⁴². The art of biography is a specific literary form that seeks, to a certain extent, to capture the glory and legitimacy of others for oneself in a constructed and coherent narrative.

This need for recognition is particularly acute for geography, a discipline balancing historically between social and natural sciences, considered by some so marginal that it did not even deserve a mention in portraits and discussions of academic life such as Pierre Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus*⁴³. It is difficult to develop a scientific identity if nobody even speaks about you! As Giuseppe Dematteis wrote, geography's strength, and its tragedy, might lie in its apparent uselessness and banality, at least in the popular imagination. «What do we remember of the geography we learned at school? Apparently nothing. Nothing problematic, no interpretation, no opening up of debate (Is Lisbon the capital of Portugal, or isn't it?). The assigned role of geography in scholarship and in cultural debates makes us doubt that it could ever be object of reflexive thinking»⁴⁴. In this somewhat fraught context in which inferiority complexes regarding other disciplines were rarely far away, choosing glamorous lineages made particular sense.

Geographers interested in biography have frequently explored what present and future purposes are served by remembrance, and how the inevitable contradictions and complexities of a life are narrated⁴⁵. These purposes are of interest not because everything in a life is open to contest: that could be a most violent erasure of a life lived, at odds with the very project of biography, removed from facts. Biography, as I mentioned earlier, isn't just about writing down a succession of facts: writing a life, and in the case of scientists, the situating of that person within the past of one or several disciplines, is a political act that structures both disciplines and worlds. Paradoxically, even if the names of the past need no longer serve only as figures of veneration, in a move that perhaps shows continued disciplinary parochialism, there is still often a temptation to define the newness of the new in relation to an identifiable disciplinary

³⁹ Daniels, Nash, *Lifepaths: Geography and Biography*, p. 455.

⁴⁰ Johnston, *Learning our History from our Pioneers*.

⁴¹ Rose, *Tradition and Paternity: Same Difference?*, pp. 414-416.

⁴² Philippe Pelletier, *Élisée Reclus, géographie et anarchie*, Paris, Éditions du Monde Libertaire, 2009, p. 11: «le regain d'intérêt pour Reclus en France avait autant, sinon essentiellement, pour objectif de tracer un pré carré disciplinaire, et presque personnel, au sein d'un champ universitaire où la géographie servait aussi à faire la guerre académique et idéologique, que de prolonger, en l'actualisant, les principes d'une géographie novatrice».

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988.

⁴⁴ Giuseppe Dematteis, *Le metafore della terra: la geografia umana tra mito e scienza*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1985, p. 11: «Che cosa resta della geografia dei nostri ricordi scolastici? Apparentemente nulla. Niente di problematico, nessuna interpretazione, nessuna possibilità di discussione (è o non è Lisbona la capitale del Portogallo?). La latitanza della geografia nella saggistica e nel dibattito culturale fa dubitare che essa possa essere oggetto di pensiero riflessivo».

⁴⁵ Charles W. J. Withers, *History and Philosophy of Geography 2004-2005: Biographies, Practices, Sites*, «Progress in Human Geography», 31 (2007), 1, pp. 67-76.

past⁴⁶. Like Barnett, I suspect that many geographers presenting themselves as broadly “critical” – including me, here! – seek to «disinter the rotting corpses of long-dead ancestors in order to display the acumen with which they can now be reburied even deeper. Names from the past no longer serve as figures of veneration, yet, in a move which perhaps displays a continuing disciplinary parochialism, it seems as if it has once again become necessary to be able to define the newness of the new in relation to identifiable disciplinary pasts»⁴⁷. But whatever the intention, the fact remains that biography is always the result of something happening between two people: the narrator and the narrated. In the following paragraph, I will try to develop this idea a little more, exploring how the idea of consent might help us think this through a little more.

3. Biography as stalking: inserting oneself into the story

I mentioned Lepore’s⁴⁸ aside that biography is a bit like stalking. She elaborates on this idea writing that «when the stalker finally catches up with his prey, the badness of his intentions is revealed. Even – or perhaps especially – when a writer begins by identifying with her subject, even loving him, she may well end up despising and, sometimes quite literally, betraying him»⁴⁹. The term stalking, and therefore stalker, derives from the verb ‘to stalk’ in the meaning of ‘to walk circumspectly’, ‘to walk furtively’, also indicating a ‘hunter in ambush’. The term stalking, in a legal context, designates a criminal set of continuous harassing behaviours, consisting of uninterrupted presence or surveillance near the victim’s home or commonly frequented environments, further repeated by intrusions into the victim’s private life in search of personal contact. In suggesting that biography is like stalking, I certainly do not wish to trivialise what real-life stalking actually is: a most deranged and scary criminal behaviour that damages victims in unspeakable ways, striking at the core of intimate identities and vulnerabilities. My choice to use the term cautiously in this context is to put focus on one particular aspect of stalking: the criminal’s imagined proximity and intimacy with their prey, and the lack of consent given by the victim for this behaviour. A stalker’s harassment is grounded in the delusional belief that their obsession with their victim reflects a real, reciprocal relationship between both people. Although a stalker may not wish for a relationship in daily life with the target of their unwanted attention – and may indeed be incapable of holding reciprocal personal relationships with anyone – some sort of relationship between them and their target exists in their mind. They believe they have some sort of common destiny with the target of their obsessive behaviour.

This is not entirely unlike what some biographers end up believing: even in cases where their subjects are long-dead, their unique focus on their lives and the time spent uncovering what are often the *minutiae* means that they are heavily invested in making sense of what is, in effect, a one-way relationship. This does not apply to cases where someone is designated as authorised or official biographer before someone’s death or continues to carry out what was an established role during the person’s life⁵⁰. In the absence of an official role, a biographer is transformed from «a greedy burglar to an almost saintly benefactor who is seen as sacrificing years of his life to his task, tirelessly sitting in archives and libraries and patiently conducting interviews with witnesses. There is no length he will not go to, and the more his book reflects his industry the more the reader believes that he is having an elevating literary experience, rather than simply listening to backstairs gossip and reading other people’s mail»⁵¹. I love this

⁴⁶ Clive Barnett, *Awakening the Dead: Who Needs the History of Geography?*, «Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers», 20 (1995), 4, pp. 417-419.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁴⁸ Lepore, *Historians who Love Too Much*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵⁰ Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, *Living with your Biographical Subject: Special Problems of Distance, Privacy and Trust in the Biography of G. Ledyard Stebbins Jr.*, «Journal of the History of Biology», 32 (1999), 3, pp. 421-438.

⁵¹ Lepore, *Historians Who Love Too Much*, p. 140 (partly quoting Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, London, Picador, 1994).

idea that biography shares something with voyeurism and is somehow as debatable as reading someone's mail, looking over their shoulders while pretending to be intimate friends! This poses the question of the actual relationship between narrator and narrated, and whether this needs necessarily to be a benevolent relationship, with the former having honourable intentions towards the latter.

Developing this question of intentions, Lepore wrote of Janet Malcolm who studied the story of a convicted murderer, tricked into heart-felt confessions by a male journalist who appeared to empathise with his presumed innocence, only to turn around and write damning portraits of him. Malcolm's conclusion was that although this might be debatable behaviour, journalists – and, one assumes, biographers – could not really be condemned for carrying out such deceptions⁵². While the historian is not obliged to disclose his or her state of mind and attitude towards their subject, this compulsion is often not resisted. Lepore quotes Scott Casper, a historian of biography, who suggests that the contemporary culture of biography actually owes much of its recent reshaping to the prominent practice of autobiography. The biographical information that readers want is «the stuff of the first-person interview and psychologist's couch. Even biographers get in on the autobiographical act. They confess how immersing themselves in someone else's life helped them understand their own, as if self-diagnosis were a benefit of writing biography, not just of reading it»⁵³.

Even if finding out and writing about people, living or dead, is tricky work and requires balancing intimacy with distance while at the same time being inquisitive to the point of invasiveness⁵⁴, it remains a strictly one-way intellectual pursuit in cases when the subject is dead⁵⁵. If the biographical subject is still alive, the personal dynamics are very different. But I should like to suggest that the identification, i.e. the process by which the biographer feels something of a union with their subject, identifies with them, or comes to share values, concerns, attitudes or even behaviours⁵⁶ can be similar whether the subject be personally known to the biographer or long dead – the main difference being that when the subject is dead they really do have absolutely no way of consenting to the relationship!

In the next section, I will attempt to explore how this tradition of biographical research has connected biographers to Alexander von Humboldt, making him into a mythical forefather, pioneer and prophet of many things, including of the discipline of geography.

4. Geographers writing about Alexander von Humboldt

In his 1958 piece on the nature and history of geography as a science of space, the American geographer Richard Hartshorne tracked down Alexander von Humboldt's apparent definition of geography in *Kosmos*, published three times in all as a footnote in Latin, in the midst of long explanations of other things⁵⁷. This *Erdkunde / Geognosia*, he wrote, translated here by Hartshorne from the original Latin as *Geography*:

⁵² Jill Lepore adds an interesting twist to the story in saying that Janet Malcolm was herself attacked for some of her writing by a scholar who thought she would write about him «as a dashing iconoclastic hero» (see Lepore, *Historians Who Love Too Much*, p. 135) only to find that he was in fact portrayed as «an intellectual gigolo» (Ibid., p. 135)!

⁵³ Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth-century America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1999, in Lepore, *Historians Who Love Too Much*, p. 138.

⁵⁴ Lepore, *Historians Who Love Too Much*.

⁵⁵ Betty Smocovitis, whose biographical subject was personally known to her, has some fabulous insights into what happens when there actually is a two-way, lively relationship between both people, witnessed in a sort of quasi-official "marital union" or, as she prefers to call it, a "*pas de deux*". She discusses issues of distance, privacy and trust, including with the subject's extended family and friends (Smocovitis, *Living With Your Biographical Subject*), and what happens when the subject dies (Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, *Pas de deux: The Biographer and the Living Biographical Subject*, in *The History and Poetics of Scientific Biography*, ed. by Thomas Söderqvist, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 207-220). When this happened in her case, the relationship was transformed: as a biographer she was suddenly both freer and yet still locked into an odd co-dependent relationship with a person she hadn't always found particularly pleasant.

⁵⁶ See Smocovitis, *Pas de deux: The Biographer and the Living Biographical Subject*.

⁵⁷ Richard Hartshorne, *The Concept of Geography as a Science of Space, from Kant and Humboldt to Hettner*, «Annals

studies animate and inanimate nature both organic and inorganic bodies. It is divided into three parts: solid rock geography, which Werner has industriously studied; zoological geography, whose foundations have been laid by Zimmerman; and the geography of plants, which our colleagues have left untouched. Observations of individual parts of trees or grass is by no means to be considered plant geography; rather plant geography traces the connections and relations by which all plants are bound together among themselves, designates in what lands they are found, in what atmospheric conditions they live, and tells of the destruction of rocks and stones by what primitive forms of the most powerful algae by what roots of trees, and describes the surface of the earth in which humus is prepared. This is what distinguishes geography from nature study, falsely called nature history; zoology (zoognosia), botany (phytognosia) and geology (oryctognosia) all form parts of the study of nature, but they study only the forms, anatomy, processes, etc., of individual animals, plants, metallic things or fossils. Earth history, more closely affiliated with geography than with nature study, but as yet not attempted by any, studies the kinds of plants and animals that inhabited the primeval earth, their migrations and disappearance of most of them, the genesis of mountains, valleys, rock formations and ore vein the earth surface gradually covered with humus and plants, denuded again by violent stream floods, and once more dried and covered by grass. Thus zoological history, the history of plants, and the history of rocks, which tell only the past state of the earth, are to be clearly distinguished from geography⁵⁸.

Because, as I stated earlier, geography only really started to take shape in the late 19th Century, labelling Alexander von Humboldt as a *geographer* is inherently anachronistic. As Ron Johnston and James Sidaway have written, «particularly before the creation of university departments or degree programs in geography, the label “geographer” or “geographical writer” was not a self-evident one for many who we might judge today as central figures in the “geographical canon” (e.g. Immanuel Kant or Alexander von Humboldt). Geography as a discipline is therefore, very largely a retrospectively constituted tradition»⁵⁹. Their own position is that, even if there are good grounds for feeling uneasy and self-conscious about the invention of tradition, we cannot do without a tradition if we are to engage in common dialogue, avoid historical superficiality, think critically and creatively about the nature of what geography has become. In effect, it doesn't really matter whether Humboldt was or was not a geographer – the question is irrelevant, anachronistic and unsolvable.

Regardless of how he might have placed himself, as an independent scholar never attached to any university and largely self-funded in his various travels, Humboldt's influence on academic geographical practices is often mentioned enthusiastically. David Livingstone does not shy from calling Humboldt a geographer, arguing that it was not his initial studies that made him one but his travels:

far more important than his university introduction to physics and chemistry, it was his time travelling with Forster and his experience in the early 1790s as an assistant inspector with the Department of Mines which allowed him to travel widely in what is now Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, northern Italy, and the Swiss and French Alps. These were the experiences that made him into a geographer, for through them he learned first-hand about the spatial distribution of organic life and its umbilical ties with environment, and this induced in him a lifelong respect for empirical methods⁶⁰.

Likewise, in a paper calling for geographers to re-examine past figures to find new inspiration at a time of what she called a “renaissance of geographical awareness”, Anne Buttimer wrote that «the legacy of Humboldt provides unquestioning rationale for again exploring dialogue amongst geography's specialist so-called humanistic and scientific branches. Without

of the Association of American Geographers», 48 (1958), 2, pp. 97-108.

⁵⁸ Alexander von Humboldt, translated in Hartshorne, *The Concept of Geography as a Science of Space*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ Ron Johnston, James D. Sidaway, *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American Human Geography Since 1945*, London-New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 398.

⁶⁰ David N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992, p. 135.

such dialogue, how could geography really deliver the best that our discipline has always sought to provide by way of insight into sustainable ways of life?»⁶¹. For her, Humboldt is the much-needed ancestor who provides geography with a path through troubled environmental times, in which scientific practices are becoming increasingly specialised. Tim Cresswell, largely summarising Livingstone's position, argued that Humboldt did indeed leave us with a number of "Humboldtian practices" that stemmed from his definition of geography mentioned above, including

measurement (the importance of quantifying geographical phenomena through empirical measurement with specific instruments – what physical geographers now call "fieldwork"); the importance of the region (Humboldt believed the world to be divided up into natural regions identified through their flora and fauna); and finally the use of mapping as a way of recording data that are spatially distributed⁶².

In these three examples of writing by leading geographers, Humboldt was invoked in the pantheon of useful ancestors. Consulting a number of introductory geography textbooks designed for Bachelor-levels students confirms what appears to be quite a consistent pattern: Humboldt, when and if he is mentioned by geographers, usually serves as a sort of example of either travel geographies, enlightenment geographies, "geography as the new science of nature and culture" or, less frequently, as the originator of geographical vegetation maps and geographical interest in the natural world. But these are not written as biographies *per se*, even if they almost inevitably contain biographical elements. Instead, they are written as parts of wider disciplinary histories in which Humboldt is taken as an indicator of something broader and reified: geography as a scientific discipline.

Trying to determine whether he *actually* was a geographer is anachronistic, an excellent example of presentism: using an understanding from the present *as it is now* to understand the past. This links up to many long-standing epistemological debates within history⁶³ that I will not go into here. What might matter more is identifying when later scholars claim him as such, and model their understanding of the present accordingly, as Dortier did when he called Humboldt the founding father of geography. This presentism is inherent in the idea of him being "a pioneer" of anything and everything. For example, during the so-called *Humboldt Year* of 2019, celebrated around the world in many ways to mark the 250th anniversary of his birth, a German governmental website laid out what they termed a «list of facts that prove that Humboldt was far ahead of his time»⁶⁴ calling him a «Climate protection pioneer», a «Master of networking», a «Technology-obsessed data collector», a «Science star and influencer», and an «Indefatigable visionary»! This explicit use of contemporary terms and descriptors is, I assume, seen as a true compliment: a way of making clear that he was both in and outside of time, timeless and visionary, a sort of intellectual time-traveller. If anything, it seems like a rather desperate attempt to make him appear relevant today, trying terribly hard to make him seem cool. Which, if anything, is really rather rude.

Another point to bear in mind when thinking about writing Humboldt's biography is to remember his own agency: Humboldt is not a passive surface onto which our present concerns can be projected. He too actively selected what can be remembered, especially working on this during his time in Paris in order to maintain and craft his position in polite and scholarly society. He is quoted in a biography, written to celebrate the centenary of his birth, writing that

⁶¹ Anne Buttimer, *Renaissance and Re-membering Geography: Pioneering Ideas of Alexander von Humboldt 1769–1859*, «South African Geographical Journal», 85 (2003), 2, pp. 125–133, p. 131.

⁶² Cresswell, *Geographic Thought: A Critical Introduction*, p. 39.

⁶³ Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1971.

⁶⁴ See <<https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/humboldt-year-2019-seven-facts-about-alexander-von-humboldt>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

my horror of biographies is almost as great as that which I feel for the portraits of old men painted by the sun, although both may be viewed in the history of science as a disagreeable necessity. Life is daily losing for me its charm, and I need your kindest indulgence, my worthy friend, for this idiosyncrasy of an old man. I have even inserted a clause in my will forbidding that any eulogy should be pronounced over me at the Institute⁶⁵.

Clearly, his first biographer thought nothing of ignoring this request! The actual clause, recorded in his will preserved in the royal palace at Potsdam, reads: «I request that my dear relatives and friends will endeavour to prevent the appearance of any biographical notice of me or laudatory article either in the “Staatszeitung” or other public journal over which they can exercise any control»⁶⁶.

This agency of Humboldt has been beautifully analysed by Oliver Lubrich in a discussion of Humboldt’s voice, and particularly in his *Relation historique du voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent*⁶⁷. In a careful analysis of his writing, Lubrich notes that Humboldt continually disorients his readers, completely turning on its head what is usually thought of as travel writing. For Lubrich, Humboldt cannot decide if he is writing down the facts of his travels, his impressions or his scientific observations. Lubrich is a generous reader and concludes that the beauty of the work is that it continually reports in many ways on its own breakdowns in form and genre. «Humboldt», he concludes,

is, by no means, the author of “totality”, which he is so often seen to be. His writing deals, rather, with the impossibility of grasping foreign reality and presenting it in the traditional forms of (metropolitan) literature. Humboldt’s aesthetic is an aesthetic of lost certainty, his poetic is a poetic of de-authorized form. Humboldt’s travel report is an allegory of the deconstruction of the travel report, of the inadequacy of authorial formats in coming to terms with cultural difference⁶⁸.

Yet despite his enthusiasm for what he terms a revolutionary way of writing travel, Lubrich is honest enough to quote Friedrich Nietzsche’s only line written on Humboldt that «the deficiencies of style sometimes have a certain charm»⁶⁹!

5. Stalking and lifepaths: imagining and chasing Humboldt

A popular genre of biography connected to geography in terms of place, movement and displacement, are lifepaths: «a popular genre assumes the style of a quest or pursuit in which the life story of the biographer is entwined with that of their fugitive subject»⁷⁰. In this genre, the narration of the life of the fugitive subject is at least partially intertwined with that of the biographer:

The Invention of Nature is my attempt to find Humboldt. It has been a journey across the world that led me to archives in California, Berlin and Cambridge among many others. I read through thousands of letters but I also followed Humboldt’s footsteps. I saw the ruin of the anatomy tower in Jena in Germany where Humboldt spent many weeks dissecting animals, and at 12’000 feet on the Antisana in Ecuador, with four condors circling above and surrounded by a herd of wild horses, I found the dilapidated hut where he had spent a night in March 1802. In Quito, I

⁶⁵ Julius Löwenberg, Robert Avé-Lallemant, Alfred Dove, *Life of Alexander von Humboldt: Compiled in Commemoration of the Centenary of his Birth*, ed. by Karl Bruhns, transl. by Jane and Caroline Lassell, London, Longmans, Green, and Company, 1873, I, p. VIII.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ Alexander von Humboldt, *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent, fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803 et 1804*, Paris, L’Imprimerie de J. Smith, 1815.

⁶⁸ Oliver Lubrich, *Alexander von Humboldt: Revolutionizing Travel Literature*, «Monatshefte für deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur», 96 (2004), 3, pp. 360-387, p. 380.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1875-1879, Kritische Studienausgabe*, hrsg. v. Giorgio Colli und Mazzino Montinari, 15 Bd., München-Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1988, VIII, p. 466; in Lubrich, *Alexander von Humboldt: Revolutionizing Travel Literature*, p. 380.

⁷⁰ Daniels, Nash, *Lifepaths: Geography and Biography*.

held Humboldt's original Spanish passport in my hands – the very papers that allowed him to travel through Latin America. In Berlin, I finally understood his notes – marvellous collages of thousands of bits of paper, sketches and numbers. [...] The most exciting moment was when I finally climbed Chimborazo, the mountain that had been so elemental to Humboldt's vision. As I walked up the barren slope, the air was so thin that every step felt like an eternity – a slow pull upward while my legs felt leaden and somehow disconnected with every step. [...] The Invention of Nature is my quest to rediscover Humboldt, and to restore him to his rightful place in the pantheon of nature and science⁷¹.

In her book *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, Andrea Wulf uses Humboldt's ascent of Chimborazo as the starting climax of her tale: the moment when all his thinking and experiences came together and he, as she puts it, invented nature. She opens her story with this vignette, which she presents as the turning-point in his life:

It was 23 June 1802, and they were climbing Chimborazo, a beautiful dome-shaped inactive volcano in the Andes that rose to almost 21'000 feet, some 100 miles to the south of Quito in today's Ecuador. [...] As he stood at the top of the world, looking down upon the mountain ranges folded beneath him, Humboldt began to see the world differently. He saw the earth as one great living organism where everything was connected, conceiving a bold new vision of nature that still influences the way we understand the natural world⁷².

Neither Wulf nor Humboldt actually reached the summit of Chimborazo⁷³, something that is clearly suggested here. He probably didn't even get as high as the 1000 feet below the summit that he claimed. However, facts aside, this description of Wulf's narrative approach is a good example of this quest that inserts the biographer into the tale. It is very different from biographical portraits that serve to insert Humboldt into a disciplinary history, as in the examples mentioned earlier.

In an interview, Wulf has compared herself directly to Humboldt:

Like Humboldt, I walked up to the top of the Chimborazo volcano in Ecuador, but I was wearing good shoes and carrying modern equipment. But I didn't even climb as far as he did. I only got to about 5000 meters, and that was utterly exhausting. In 1802, Humboldt climbed nearly 6000 metres wearing canvas trousers and tattered shoes and with bleeding feet. It must have been incredibly tough going. [...] This ascent was important to me, because up there on Chimborazo, Humboldt had a flash of enlightenment that became central to his understanding of nature⁷⁴.

She thankfully didn't carry this type of cloying narration throughout the book, and this remained within the *Prologue* and *Epilogue*. Wulf was certainly fond of imagining and describing the quasi-religious experiences of revelation that, she claimed, Humboldt experienced during his own ascension, making her feelings mirror those she assigned to him. This *mise-en-scène* was meant to add verisimilitude. «After all», she seemed to suggest, «I too have stood there and felt what he felt. Who are you, reader, to doubt my version of this tale?». In her portrayals of these events, she drew and quoted from Humboldt's extensive writing, selecting one of his versions for certain episodes that appeared narrated repeatedly and differently in all his writing related to his travels. In the filmed documentary that followed her book, this portrayal of the biographer's quest led to many shots of Wulf hopping out of helicopters and resting on beaches, speaking to the camera while attempting to conjure up a sense of place within which to inscribe the narrative. In so doing, she made herself into a sort of invisible companion to

⁷¹ Wulf, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt's New World*, p. 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷³ Caroline Schaumann, *Andrea Wulf, The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt and the New World (Review)*, «Green Letters. Studies in Ecocriticism», 21 (2017), 3, pp. 308-310, p. 309.

⁷⁴ Andrea Wulf <<https://www.humboldt-foundation.de/en/explore/alexander-von-humboldt/a-testimony-to-a-restless-spirit>> (accessed 24.02.2023).

Humboldt: a hidden shadow, an indispensable travel companion who is both close friend and all-knowing, all-seeing judge... and invisible stalker.

In a scholarly piece on Humboldt's perception of nature, Caroline Schaumann, on the other hand, was less inclined to take Humboldt's word at face value, or to select from his various versions, preferring to compare how Humboldt narrated episodes first in his travel journals or diaries, and then in his subsequent publications, written years later. This led to a more nuanced reading that allowed his grumbling, frustrations, bodily discomforts, and fragmented narratives interrupted by physical shortcomings to emerge⁷⁵, beyond his recounted scientific heroism. She carefully showed how his *Relation Historique*, for example, was a thoroughly reworked narrative that eluded his physical suffering and focussed instead on the pleasant scenery, exceptional views and skilled climbing. For her, the more immersed Humboldt was in his environment, the less he relied on predetermined, Old-World notions of sublime landscapes and aesthetics. Instead, when he really was in the field, surrounded by stench, ash, steep ice or overcome by fear, Humboldt seemed to acknowledge and yield to an entangled, complicated living world. Yet, when revising his material for publication, «he returns to depicting his experiences in established models of a visual experience or detached scientist, while remaining frustrated with the incompatibility between material confrontation and human representation»⁷⁶. Biographical subjects, as I have said, have agency. And Humboldt was clearly a master-narrator, reworking his own life to prepare the path for others to narrate it.

In his biography of Humboldt *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism*, Aaron Sachs⁷⁷ used a rather lighter and less fawning approach in his biography, making use of autobiographical and self-deprecating asides to push various points on the disorientating nature of travel and his sometimes futile attempts to track down traces of Humboldt. In the tradition of North American biography, this portrayal of a life is inscribed into the destiny of a nation and the emergence of a uniquely American relationship and style of writing related to the environment. Writing about another mountain ascent, he noted the disorientation that he himself felt, rather than any great coming together of everything, as Humboldt had retrospectively narrated in the case of his ascent of Chimborazo:

It was one of the hardest climbs I've ever done, and I didn't even reach the top. [...] All I wanted was experience, and though it turned out to be one of the least pleasant hikes I've ever taken, it was perhaps the most intense. And I'm still grateful for that taste of nineteenth-century mountaineering – despite my subsequent research that I had probably climbed the wrong mountain. [...] Perhaps more important, I could now understand, in a deep, empathic way, the explorer's daily trial – the experience of being lost and confused. One of the great historical constants must be a sense of disorientation. [...] We may never completely understand our relationship to the world, but that relationship compels us to keep exploring⁷⁸.

This portrayal is one of the biographer as an explorer, not only of the lifepath of another person but also, in parallel, of the world itself. It seems a rather apt description of what it means to try to retrace lives in biography.

Conclusion: biography, stalking and leaving the family

In this chapter, I have explored how writers invoke the past in various narratives, telling us as much about *now* as about *then*. I started by laying out what biography does to history, and how writing about past lives is connected to other historiographical approaches such as microhistory. I then sought to understand how writing lives is connected to disciplinary histories, and in particular to the history of geography and geographical thought. I tried to tease

⁷⁵ Schaumann, *Humboldt's Dirty Nature*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁷⁷ Aaron Sachs, *The Humboldt Current: Nineteenth-Century Exploration and the Roots of American Environmentalism*, New York, Viking Penguin, 2006.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36.

out how geography can be thought of as a contested discipline that often suffers from bouts of self-doubt and has, as a result, sought to further historicise, build and confirm its own legitimacy by invoking noble ancestors and pioneers. I then moved on to explore how biographies are used to insert different actors into the story: the individual biographer him or herself as a sort of imagined friend or (mostly) benevolent stalker, but also the discipline of geography, as a sort of over-arching, inescapable family or backdrop to which the character being portrayed is assigned. Taking a critical look at some of these genealogies is important, as understanding how our disciplinary histories get crafted and canonised helps to understand how other, alternative tales are erased, how other forms of geographical practices and forms of knowledge are set aside, and how other historical characters are forgotten. If thinking about biography as stalking helps to make some of these figures a bit less sacred, and our own work in writing up their lives a bit less about setting the past in stone, then so much the better. We need to give ourselves the freedom to leave the family, when necessary and if we prefer, or free up our imagination to invite new and unexpected members to join us.