Shaky Grounds:
Bolívar, Humboldt, and the Birth of Catastrophe Politics

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Westphalia, Holland, Lisbon, Buenos Aires, Paraguay, El Dorado, Surinam, England, Venice, Paris, Transylvania, Turkey—the errant cartography traced by Voltaire’s *Candide, ou L’Optimisme* (1759) shows a contingent world shaken by the power of the first global catastrophe. Two worlds—the Old and the New, the necessary and the contingent—are brought together by a central event: the earthquake that shook Lisbon on the first of November, 1755, in an unprecedented manner, leaving the city in ruins and the world out of joint. Although the intellectual debate—which famously brought together enlightened thinkers such as the young Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire—has been studied in books like Susan Neiman’s *Evil in Modern Thought* as a convulsion within the European intelligentsia, one fact must be underlined: the earthquake that struck Lisbon the Saturday morning of All Saint’s Day had its epicenter in the Atlantic. Rather than as a continental event, the Lisbon Earthquake must be understood as the paradigm of those episodes that in the coming century would shake the imperial foundations of the transatlantic world.

Lisbon, November 1, 1755: from the tip of the Old World and the courts of its empire a seismic wave shatters the static optimism of Leibnizian theodicy. As critics have duly noted, Voltaire’s picaresque—in its attack on Leibnizian optimism, in asking, “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?”—represents an attempt by enlightened thinkers to break into the closed world of enlightened theodicy. A world where evil is let loose is a world where contingency reigns. When the best of all possible worlds collapses, what appears is the historicity of other possible worlds. As Pangloss’s errant itinerary suggests, a reconfiguration of the relation between ground and representation, symptomatic of a crisis within the empire of letters, is set in motion by the advent of catastrophe.

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Voltaire’s question regarding the possibility and nature of other worlds, implicitly a question about the possibility of a universal history, calls for an American
reading. It demands a study of the historical as well as the discursive repercussions that the emergence of America as an independent region during the Spanish American wars of independence had within European Enlightenment. In this article I wish to explore the role that the discourse on natural catastrophe, in particular a discourse surrounding the figure of the earthquake, came to have in the emergence of a cartography of contingent worlds that shook the continent at the turn of the century. From Humboldt’s paradoxical fascination with the natural disruption of his fundamental concept, the *chain of being*, to Simón Bolívar’s rhetoric concerning the 1812 earthquake of Caracas in his “Cartagena Manifesto,” I will show how, in the nineteenth century, nature and politics came to be discursively interlinked in such a way that natural catastrophes, understood as political events, became figures of the opening of the world to unforeseen possibilities. The world is out of joint: the play upon Hamlet’s phrase describes both the situation of the transatlantic empire at the turn of the nineteenth century as well as the disjointed temporality brought on by the earthquake. Rewriting Reinhart Koselleck’s well-known definition of modernity as “ongoing crisis,” one could say that the nineteenth century sees the emergence of a new mode of transatlantic modernity as the dialectics between catastrophe and reconstruction, between shock and aftershock. In the advent of catastrophe, nature ceases to be natural in order to become historical. Today, when ecological concerns seem to gain preeminence and an apocalyptic sense rules the popular imaginary, it seems apt to return to the nineteenth century in order to see how this knot between nature and politics, discursively mediated by the figure of the natural catastrophe, expressed a new paradigm of historical experience.

**Tabula Rasa: The Quaking of Representation**

In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western Culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws; and it is the same ground that is once more stirring under our feet.

—Foucault, *The Order of Things*

The young Alexander von Humboldt who in 1799 prepares to depart from Europe—the land of his early studies—is still a naturalist. Like many of his contemporaries, he sits at a threshold between the taxonomical science of Linnaeus and an extensive, uncharted land of knowledge yet to be deciphered. He dreams, however, not unlike Linnaeus, of sketching the “chain of being,” that impossible map of a world in which harmony presides, in which reality is interwoven by the swift movement of a tender hand. America, the new continent, remains the blank page upon which he can project such illusions of continuity. As a naturalist, he travels to America with the intention of naturalizing history. He is unable to imagine that to some extent it will be nature that will turn historical. Aboard the *Pizarro*, awaiting his departure, he writes:
In a few hours we sail around Cape Finisterre. I shall collect plants and fossils and make astronomic observations. But that’s not the main purpose of my expedition—I shall try to find out how the forces of nature interact upon one another and how the geographic environment influences plant and animal life. In other words, I must find out about the unity of nature. (ix)

History, however, seems to conspire against this vision of unity and harmony. It is the turn of the century: soon, a revolutionary wave that has already begun at Saint-Domingue will extend throughout the whole continent with the same expansive force to which Humboldt refers in his letters as the forces of nature. For the young Humboldt the question remains: can this wave be contained within the limits of unity? Can the forces of nature be organized within the stability of a tableau of knowledge? It is a question of order and stability; a question of politics. Natural history, as the science of observation and measurement, as the science of classification and cataloguing, constitutes a political archive in itself. Humboldt, however, does not know this yet. Prepared with his notebooks, chronometers, telescopes, sextants, pendulums, and other scientific instruments, the young naturalist leaves for the tropics with the hope of measuring and classifying the excesses of their exuberant nature. Soon, he would find the volatile reality of a continent whose latent political turmoil would translate into a compulsive recording of natural catastrophes. As he himself states in his diary:

When shocks from an earthquake are felt, and the earth we think of as stable shakes on its foundations, one second is long enough to destroy long-held illusions. It is like waking painfully from a dream. We think we have been tricked by nature’s seeming stability; we listen out for the smallest noise; for the first time we mistrust the very ground we walk on. (131)

Humboldt encounters a convulsive continent. The figure of the earthquake designates the physical phenomenon while providing a philosophical metaphor for the political events that would end up shattering the historical ground and, with it, the tabula that had theretofore organized the cosmos of naturalists like Linnaeus. In the abyss created between the event and its figure, between the earth-quake and the extent of its metaphorical force, lies the true revolutionary potential of the natural catastrophe: a whole system of historical semiotics is set in motion.

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“It is like waking painfully from a dream.” The comparison Humboldt makes in his diary between the earthquake and the illusion-breaking moment of awakening evokes the complex metaphorical power of the figure of the earthquake.\footnote{Susan Buck-Morss’s treatment of the topic in \textit{Dreamworld and Catastrophe} is illuminating in this sense: “When an era crumbles, ‘History breaks down into images, not into stories.’”}
Catastrophe breaks the illusion of a stable ground of representation, bringing forth the possibility of those “other worlds” mentioned in Voltaire’s Candide. By unmasking the illusory nature of the stable tableau of knowledge, it exposes the contingency of that ground of representation on which naturalists had so far archived reality. The emergence of the earthquake metaphor can then be understood as a symptom of the crisis that had assaulted the paradigm of knowledge that until then had determined Europe’s understanding of Latin America—natural history. As Foucault states in The Order of Things, the emergence in the seventeenth century of the classical episteme through the works of Aldrovandi, Buffon, and Linnaeus, among others, had been determined by the naturalization of history:

For natural history to appear, it was not necessary for nature to become denser and more obscure, to multiply its mechanisms to the point of acquiring the opaque weight of a history that can only be retraced and described, without any possibility of measuring it, calculating it, or explaining it; it was necessary—and this is entirely the opposite—for History to become Natural. (128)

In natural history, nature and history had converged within the representative grounds of the tableau: “The natural history room and the garden, as created in the Classical period, replace the circular procession of the ‘show’ with the arrangement of things in a table” (131). This naturalization of history, as Foucault goes on to argue, was only able to subsist within a semiotic system that had guaranteed the stability of representation. This stability began to falter at the turn of the century: the tableau could no longer be taken for granted: “It is in this classified time, in this squared and spatialized development, that the historians of the nineteenth century were to undertake the creation of a history that could at last be ‘true’—in other words, liberated from Classical rationality, from its ordering and theodicy: history restored to the irruptive violence of time” (132). Rather than the naturalization of history, the nineteenth century sees the opening of nature to the “irruptive violence of time.” Nature itself, behaving erratically, called for a tabula rasa, a putting into question of the act of representation.

Without the narration of continuous progress, the images of the past resemble night dreams, the ‘first mark’ of which, Freud tells us, is their emancipation from the ‘spatial and temporal order of events.’ Such images, as dream images, are complex webs of memory and desire wherein past experience is rescued and, perhaps, redeemed” (68). What is at stake in the birth of sublime historiography is precisely the emergence of a non-narrative moment within historiography.

2 Tracing its origin all the way back to Aristotle’s treatise On the Soul, passing through Avicenna’s writings, the figure of the tabula rasa had reentered modern discussions mainly through John Locke’s 1689 An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, where it was used to illustrate what would later become the “nature versus nurture” debate: if the mind was like a tabula rasa, then existence had to be explained in relation to circumstance rather than essence, in relation to accidents rather than substances. With this argument Locke was, in a way, foreshadowing the empiricist critique of creationist theodicies that would eventually lead to a historiography of nature. For a condensed history of the concept, see Steven Pinker.
As Martin Rudwick has shown in *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution*, the sudden irruption of time within the catalogue of natural history is an event in the history of ideas that coincides with the period historians have called the “Age of Revolutions.” At the same time that the imperial cartography begins to crumble, the atemporal tableau of natural history begins to totter. As Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, if the Classical period had naturalized history, modernity responds by introducing time into the atemporal tableau. History regains its place by rendering nature historical:

It is this configuration that from the nineteenth century onward changes entirely; the theory of representation disappears as the universal foundation of all possible orders; language as the spontaneous tabula, the primary grid of things, as an indispensable link between representations and things, is eclipsed in turn; a profound historicity penetrates into the heart of things, isolates and defines them in their own coherence, imposes upon them the forms of order implied by the continuity of time. (xxiii)

The nineteenth century sees the emergence of a new mode of historicity, of a new relationship between nature and history. Time has violently interrupted the catalogue of knowledge. As Jason Wilson has noted, Humboldt’s voyage to the New World must then be understood in its paradoxical complexity: his project sketches the aporias of a naturalist who suddenly finds himself immersed in the trembling grounds of history. His prose, with its frequent allusions to catastrophes and its hyperbolic style, is symptomatic of an era for which the unity of nature, the *great chain of being* of Linnean taxonomy, has become an object of nostalgic desire rather than an object of study. Awoken from the dream of representation, Humboldt witnesses in the constant catastrophes that assault the New World the struggle of forces that battle at the surface of that tabula rasa called history. But he will only realize this in 1834—as he writes his *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America*, he remembers with nostalgia the friends that he has lost in the wars of independence. Only then will the figure of the earthquake come to signify for him the natural power of the historical event. The earthquake will signify not only the personal awakening of the naturalist, but also the political awakening of a whole continent.

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Waking up from a dream, however, is never easy. As the practice of psychoanalysis shows, waking up is primordially a hermeneutical activity: the subject is given the task of interpreting his dreams. As Hayden White has noted in *Metahistory*, historical experience, as it is transfigured in the nineteenth century, seems to work similarly: it is within this abyss between the event and its interpretation, between the shock and the aftershock, that the semiotic machine of history is put in motion. Humboldt would personally experience the force of this after-shock effect within his own writing. When Humboldt’s *Personal Narrative of a Travel to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent*, the three-volume memoirs of
his travels to the New World, was published in 1834, more than three decades had elapsed since his voyage. The initial impressions of the eager disciple of Linnaeus had traversed the dense web of history. If, as John Lynch claims in The Spanish American Revolutions, the revolutions of independence span from 1808 to 1826, Humboldt left America before the revolutions and wrote about his trip after their conclusion. The atmosphere of latent political turmoil that the young Humboldt had experienced as a mere disturbance of his purely scientific pursuit had since become a continental revolutionary wave that led to the wars of independence that would turn many of his former friends, among them Simón Bolívar, into continental heroes. The seemingly abstract nature of the debate regarding the nature of the New World—the famous Querelle d’Amerique that brought together thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, the Comte de Buffon, Antonio de Ulloa, and even Hegel—had acquired a political dimension.3 Recounting his departure from Caracas, his memory links revolution and catastrophe, nature and ruins:

The memory of this period is today more painful than it was years ago. In those remote countries our friends have lost their lives in the bloody revolutions that gave them freedom and then alternatively deprived them of it. The house we used to live in is now a heap of rubble. Terrific earthquakes have transformed the shape of the ground; the city I described has disappeared. (142)

Humboldt’s use of the trope of the earthquake is illuminating: political catastrophe turns history into a heap of rubble. From the earthquake that destroyed Cumaná to the volcanic eruptions on the island of Guadalupe, Humboldt’s retrospective account seems at times to be more of an encyclopedia of catastrophes than a catalogue of nature. Humboldt’s archive had felt the first tremors: the chain of being had been disrupted by a series of political events that deserved to be called natural catastrophes. Nature had retrospectively turned revolutionary. The earthquake becomes a metaphor for the tottering paradigm of natural history itself: it comes to signify the moment of erasure of the tableau, the instant in which the stability of the picture becomes the pure potentiality of the tabula rasa. What is registered here under the name of catastrophe is a new relationship between temporality and meaning, a new relationship between nature, history, and the archive. Following recent discussions—from Hayden White to Alain Badiou—this retrospective view of history under the trope of natural catastrophe discloses the new structure of the revolutionary event. As Michel Foucault argues in The Order of Things, “[w]hat first comes to light in the nineteenth century is a simple form of human historicity—the fact that man as such is exposed to the event” (370). Catastrophe presents itself as the event that disrupts the continuity

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3 For the paradigmatic historical reading of the Querelle d’Amerique and its main protagonists, see Gerbi and Canizares-Esguerra’s How to Write the History of the New World, a fascinating account that traces the precursors of the historical period I study. For Humboldt’s precursors, see Cañizares-Esguerra’s “How Derivative was Humboldt?”
of the catalogue, the harmony of its taxonomy, leaving in its place a pure multiplicity. This notion of the revolutionary event as pure multiplicity, as interruption, demands a new reading of the canonical texts of the independence movements. One could, however, object: is not a natural catastrophe, and in this case the figure of the earthquake, merely a metaphor, a trope for an event? This objection ignores the power of metaphor: in the absence of the tableau that until then had secured the knot between nature and history, the trope of the natural catastrophe came to work as their mediating force. As Hans Blumenberg has shown, a metaphor is always more than a mere embellishment: it determines a paradigm.

The Political Epicenter: Bolívar’s “Cartagena Manifesto”

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent.
—Matthew 27:51

Earthquakes are oddly punctual: as the ground begins to shake, space and time gain a singular intensity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rhetorical usage of the figure of the epicenter. The epicenter flags the natural event and inscribes it within the historical archive: here and now something happened. The nineteenth century was to see, under the rubric of geohistory, the consolidation of this discourse interlinking history and nature under the figure of natural catastrophe. As Martin J.S. Rudwick has documented, the decline of a natural theodicy marks not only the decline of natural history, but also the emergence of the historicity of nature. Freed from the creationist imaginary of biblical exegesis, challenging their links to the mythical Deluge, natural catastrophes were finally able to establish themselves in a semantic as well as syntactic connection to history. In the wake of the storming of the Bastille, savants across the Republic of Letters such as Blumenbach, Montlosier, Pini, and de Luc began to discuss what it would mean to view nature as an archive of revolutions. From Blumenbach’s “total revolution” to Montlosier’s “continuous revolution,” revolution, along with its semantic web, would slowly begin to claim its place within the realm of nature. Despite its early ties to biblical catastrophism, a growing positivism would eventually lead this discourse to break loose from biblical exegesis and to construct nature as an eventful space inscribed with traces of revolutions. With the emergence and authorization of the figure of the fossil, the geologist came to be seen as a figure for the historian. As Dolomieu writes in *Discours sur l’étude de la géologie* (1797), nature had burst the limits of time:

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4 In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Hans Blumenberg explores the connection between the discursive layer of metaphor and the material practices of the underlying culture, as well as the processes through which a metaphor comes to establish a paradigm of knowledge.

5 Blumenbach on the archive, fossils and nature’s coins: “If one regards fossils from the great standpoint that they are the most infallible documents in nature’s archive, from which the various revolutions that our planet has undergone can be determined” (298). And Montlosier: “one finds coins struck by nature at every age, bearing witness to all he stages of its work and its progress” (303).
Only the study of nature itself, lifting the imagination to the level of geology’s high conceptions, can discover in the combination of circumstances the history of times long before the existence of the peoples who have figured on the world’s great stage, long before even the existence of the human race and of all organisms. . . . Bursting the limits [durée] of all historical times, and scorning as it were the brevity of epochs relative to the human species, the geologist walks in the immense space that preceded the organization of matter in order to find there the epochs of those great events of which he observes the monuments. (256)

For the savants of the decaying and death-stricken Republic of Letters, fossils were the traces of past revolutions. Their attitude betrayed their conservatism. The focus on the past amidst the trembling landscape opened by the French Revolution was a symptom of the ideological implications that readings of nature would take in the coming century. As members of the old regime, their discourse referred to the past rather than to the future, to fossils rather than to ruins, to origins rather than to contingencies. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has stated in How to Write the History of the New World, across the Atlantic, enlightened by many of the same readings, a new generation of creole intellectuals would take this debate in an opposite direction. Rather than seeing in this new connection between catastrophe and revolution a discourse about the past, they found prophecies about the future, as well as signs of possibility and contingency. Alexander von Humboldt, an intellectual divided between two worlds, knew the abysms that could open between a natural catastrophe and its political repercussions. It would be amidst the political ruins left by an earthquake that his friend Simón Bolívar would produce his first major public document, the “Cartagena Manifesto,” a document in which the politics of catastrophe and witnessing, of fidelity and reconstruction, become a prognosis of the state of the patriot revolution.

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On March 26, 1812, during the celebrations of Maundy Thursday, Caracas felt the initial shock of an earthquake that would not only interrupt the services of Holy Week, but also bring down the recently established First Republic of Venezuela. The shock would mark the end of the political structure that had been established two years earlier, precisely on another Maundy Thursday, that of April 19, 1810. As John Lynch has noted in his recent biography of Simón Bolívar, between the revolution of Maundy Thursday and the earthquake of Maundy Thursday, the movement of independence grew into a confederation amid the civil war that flared up after the congress declared independence. At the moment of the great tremor, the patriots—guided by the intrepid Francisco de Miranda—were celebrating the second anniversary of the Republic and planned to recuperate the region of Guyana from the royalists. The earthquake would bring all of this to an end, with superstitious clergy, partisans of the royalist cause, proclaiming that the coincidence and holiness of the date heralded
an ominous truth: god was angry at the triumphs of the independence movements and had brought this catastrophe upon the Republic. The earthquake had, in fact, tilted the tower of the Caracas Cathedral. Working within the frame of biblical exegesis, within the closed world of theodicy, the clergy still belonged to an epoch that viewed natural catastrophes as necessities rather than contingencies. It would take another patriot, the then relatively unknown Colonel Bolivar, to step in and, amidst the ruins, offer a new interpretation. As José Domingo Díaz, a famous royalist doctor, was to state years later in his 1829 Memoirs of the Caracas Rebellion, Simón Bolívar’s reaction to the catastrophe was memorable:

En aquel momento me hallaba solo en el medio de la plaza y de las ruinas; oí los alaridos de los que morían dentro del templo; subí por ellas y entré al reciento. . . . En lo más elevado encontré a don Simón Bolívar que en mangas de camisa trepaba por ellas para hacer el mismo examen. En su semblante estaba pintado el sumo terror, o la suma desesperación. Me vio y me dirigió estas impías y extravagantes palabras: “Si se opone la naturaleza, lucharemos contra ella y haremos que nos obedezca.” (120)

Behind Bolívar’s enlightened words, which removed the catastrophe from the realm of theology, there is a strategy: by claiming that the seism was merely a nonpolitical, natural phenomenon, he performed the first political intervention upon the event. “Si se opone la naturaleza, lucharemos contra ella y haremos que nos obedezca.” Politics is finally forced to face nature. These words do not mean that nature was outside of the political realm—years later, Bolívar himself would use the metaphor of revolution as catastrophe in his “Angostura Manifesto”—but rather that in this first revolutionary moment what was at stake was a freeing of the event from theological necessity. By presenting the earthquake as a purely natural phenomenon, Bolívar was in fact endowing it with that rightful historicity which would later be evident in his interpretation of the event. As John Lynch has noted, the earthquake of Maundy Thursday was to mark the entrance of Simón Bolívar into the public sphere. His “Cartagena Manifesto,” written on December 15 of that same year, amidst the ruins of the First Republic, departs from the earthquake metaphor of a republic in ruins in order to provide a diagnosis of the disjunction of the political confederation that, according to him, had led to the destruction of the First Republic of Venezuela. As I shall now proceed to expound, it was in this first statement that Bolívar, in a gesture that rendered revolutionary what in the case of his friends from the Republic of Letters had remained conservative, was to first hint at the possible implications that the emerging non-theological discourse of natural catastrophes had upon the revolutionary cartography of the republican movements. An unknown Colonel

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*There is another coincidence crucial to my transatlantic argument: according to an essay by Diego Torres de Villarroel, the tower of Salamanca is now leaning due to the earthquake of Lisbon. Furthermore, following Jesus’s death, on Maundy Thursday, there was an earthquake: “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent” (Matthew 27:51).
Bolivar begins his now-famous Admirable Campaign by discussing an earthquake. With this gesture, which would have made his friend Alexander von Humboldt proud, he begins his campaign as *El Libertador*.

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Years later, a moribund Bolivar will write, in a disillusioned letter to his friend Francisco de Paula Santander, “mi época es de catástrofes” (211). His pessimism springs from his realization that his megalomania would remain frustrated: the former Spanish possessions of the New World could not be unified. However, thirteen years earlier, amidst the ruins left by the earthquake of 1812, what we find is an enlightened humanist—a reader of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Locke—who passionately believes in the capacity of humans to impose order upon the social disorder released by natural catastrophes. Bolivar’s “Cartagena Manifesto,” his first major political statement, attempts to explain what he calls Venezuela’s “physically and politically ruinous state.” In its attempt to read the causes that had led Venezuela to its “destruction,” it reads as a passionate plea for a reformulation of the federalism that, according to him, undermined the achievements of the revolution. After referring to the chaos brought by the clerics’ reading of the earthquake as damnation, Bolivar proceeds to grant the earthquake a role within the collapse of the First Republic. However, for the young Bolivar, nature—no longer controlled by theodicy—is not superior to the political power of man:

El terremoto de 26 de marzo trastornó ciertamente, tanto lo físico como lo normal; y puede llamarse propiamente la causa inmediata de la ruina de Venezuela; mas este mismo suceso habría tenido lugar, sin producir tan mortales efectos, si Caracas se hubiera gobernado entonces por una sola autoridad, que obrando con rapidez y vigor hubiese puesto remedio a los daños sin trabas, ni competencias que retardando el efecto de las providencias, dejaban tomar al mal un incremento tan grande que lo hizo incurable. (63)

According to the political scenario sketched out here by Bolivar, the earthquake of Maundy Thursday could only bring the Republic to ruin precisely because the state that the patriot army had won for itself after its first revolutionary wave was already in ruins. Bolivar’s radical dialectic could then be summarized as follows: the revolutions of independence—understood as a necessary catastrophe—had produced a cartography of devastation, of ruins and fragments, which then had to be politically comprehended as a totality. As Leopoldo Zea has noted in his book on Bolivar, this dialectic between fragment and whole, between ruin and totality, would remain central to Bolivar’s political project (68). Seven years later, in 1819, when Bolivar is asked to address the Angostura Congress, amidst the discussions regarding the new constitution for the emerging nation of Gran Colombia, he will return to the image of catastrophe and reconstruction that had characterized his first political stance:
No ha sido la época de la República, que he presidido, una nueva tempestad política, ni una guerra sangrienta, ni una anarquía popular, ha sido, sí, el desarrollo de todos los elementos desorganizadores: ha sido la inundación de un torrente infernal que ha sumergido la tierra de Venezuela. Un hombre ¡y un hombre como yo! ¿qué dijéndes podría oponer al ímpetu de estas devastaciones? En medio de este piélago de angustias no he sido más que un vil juguete del huracán revolucionario que me arrebataba como una débil paja. Yo no he podido hacer ni bien ni mal; fuerzas irresistibles han dirigido la marcha de nuestros sucesos. (113)

This interplay between catastrophe and reconstruction will guide Bolívar’s political project until his death—the territorial reconstruction of America as a totality out of the fragments of post-revolutionary anarchy. Once the tabula rasa had been politically proclaimed, the process of political representation had to begin all over again. As such, his speech should be placed in the context of the romantic notion of the sublime. The notion of the sublime also has to do with the relationship between the fragment and the whole, between ruin and totality—with the tension between the destructive power of nature and its teleological unity. Bolívar, once again, meets his friend Humboldt at that enigmatic threshold where political discourse finds its natural counterpart: in both cases what is at stake is the political implication of what could be called, following Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, “the historical sublime.”

The Historical Sublime: Where History Meets Nature

[World history is to me a sublime object.]
—Schiller, Of the Sublime

In their introduction to Humboldt’s Views of the Cordilleras and Monuments of the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, Vera M. Kutzinski and Ottmar Ette emphasize two of Humboldt’s contributions. By portraying the New World as a continent with history, Humboldt, they claim, intervened in the centuries-long “Dispute of the New World” that had until then attempted to portray the New World as a place without history. Alongside this interest in the history of the New World, they underline his second major contribution: an aesthetic vision of history, from the perspective of what they call a “poetics of the fragment” (xxi). Humboldt’s work must be understood in relation to the discursive constellation of historical and aesthetic concepts that had emerged in the late eighteenth century and that would concretize itself in the nineteenth century. “Nature herself is sublimely eloquent” (34): Humboldt’s words, as well as his insistence on the aesthetic nature of his descriptions, make him a precursor of sublime historiography.

The sublime, as a concept, has a long history leading all the way back to Longinus, but it is within the field of aesthetics—famously initiated in the eighteenth century by Baumgarten—that the sublime acquires its proper theoretical and
conceptual density in relation to the excesses of the project of the Enlightenment. As Phillip Shaw shows, the history of the concept in the nineteenth century revolves around two main focal points: British Romanticism, represented by figures such as Burke, Wordsworth, and Lord Byron, and German Idealism, embodied by thinkers such as Kant, Schiller, and Hegel. More importantly, as Shaw also states, the concept has a political dimension and history (9). Critics like Marie-Hélène Huet, Charles Hinnant, and Hayden White have noted that the emergence of an analytic of the sublime at the end of the eighteenth century should be understood in its relation to the political terror unleashed by the French Revolution. The sublime emerges in the late Enlightenment as a concept that stages the paradoxes of the enlightened project. Perhaps the first relevant contribution is Edmund Burke’s 1756 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. One year after the Lisbon earthquake, Burke publishes a book in which catastrophic nature is seen as the prime example of sublime astonishment: “The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (53). The sublime, causing both horror and pleasure, is opposed to the pleasing touch of the beautiful upon the senses. As Hayden White notes, it is this opposition between the sublime and the beautiful that would prove so productive for modern politics. To the conservative option of a beautiful historical progression, White juxtaposes the radical gesture of what he calls the historical sublime: “Romanticism represented the last attempt in the West to generate a visionary politics on the basis of a sublime conception of the historical process. . . . The domestication of history effected by the suppression of the historical sublime may well be the sole basis for the proud claim to social responsibility in modern capitalist as well as communist societies” (129). In his diaries, Humboldt would sketch this distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in cartographic terms. America would be to Europe what the sublime had been to the beautiful: “If men of science who visit the Alps of Switzerland or the coasts of Lapland should broaden our knowledge about glaciers and the aurora borealis, then a traveler who has journeyed through Spanish America should mainly fix his attention on volcanoes and earthquakes” (59). Glaciers and the aurora borealis, examples of the beautiful, find their counterpart in the sublime catastrophic phenomena of the New World—volcanoes and earthquakes. Europe, the land of the known, of the necessary, projects its excessive shadow upon the New World. As Mary Louis Pratt notes, this catastrophic paradigm of history forces Humboldt to adopt new, non-narrative modes of historical representation: “so engulfed and miniaturized was the human in Humboldt’s cosmic conception that narrative ceased to be a viable mode of representation” (118). What is at stake in the sublime is a crisis of representation as paradigm of knowledge. The sublime, as Kant writes in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, interrupts representation by presenting understanding with something excessively great. In fact, Kant’s catalogue of examples of the sublime reads as if it had been taken from Humboldt’s notes:

On the other hand, consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rock, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving
about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river and so on. (120)

In Kant, the power of the sublime is associated with nature’s capacity to break boundaries. The sublime—understood here as event and as action—breaks the fabric of reality by introducing a moment of absolute negativity. Rather than dismissing Humboldt’s aesthetics as mere romanticism, we should proceed to read romanticism itself as the excessive shadow of European Enlightenment. Humboldt’s work should then be read against the grain: rather than repeating his comments regarding the unity of nature, we should see how his arrival to America was accompanied by a fascination with the destructive aspects of catastrophe. There are numerous political implications of this romantic gesture: unknowingly, Humboldt was participating in a subterranean discourse on the boundaries of enlightened cartographies that would traverse the twentieth century from Sandino to Che Guevara, up to the masked Subcomandante Marcos in the Lacandon Jungle. The question remains: how can the history of these excesses that refuse to assimilate into the hegemonic symbolic regime be narrated? How can the cartography of those regions that refuse to belong to the imperial landscape be traced?

In his 1801 essay “On the Sublime,” Friedrich Schiller tackles a problem that is of particular interest to us: that of the relationship between world history and the politics of the sublime. Schiller starts by sketching the image of a man in a constant battle between freedom and order: “Freedom, with all of its moral contradictions and physical evils, is for noble souls an infinitely more interesting spectacle than prosperity and order without freedom, where the sheep patiently follow the shepherd and the self-commanding will is degraded to the subservient part of a clockwork” (16). He then proceeds to state what this search for freedom above order would imply for the notion of world history: “Considered from this point of view, and only from this one, world history is to me a sublime object. The world, as historical object, is at bottom nothing other than the conflict of natural forces amongst one another and with the freedom of man, and history reports to us the result of this contest” (17). Like Schiller, Humboldt—as Kutzinski and Ette have shown—was interested in understanding the ways in which the discovery of the New World had complicated the notion of a world history, of a Weltbild and Weltanschauung, forcing scientists to think of new figures for universal unity. As the erratic cartography of Voltaire’s Candide makes evident, sublime history poses universal history as a problem precisely because it breaks the order of representation imposed by theodicies and their political embodiment—empires. Once the imperial cartography is fragmented by the revolutionary power of nature, the question of how to regain a common ground for historical representation becomes crucial. Humboldt’s work, like Bolívar’s, must then be read as a monumental attempt to grasp the sublime dialectic between fragment and totality, between periphery and center. Namely, as an attempt to narrate history after the destruction of the imperial cartography that until then had sustained history’s lawfulness. Humboldt’s task, like Bolívar’s, is one of
reconstruction: it enacts the dialectics of fragments and unity, of ruins and totality, that came to characterize American history after the revolutions of independence.

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As Mary Louis Pratt has argued in *Imperial Eyes*, the America that Humboldt so effusively described was in fact the enormity of nature, a sublime nature:

Alexander von Humboldt reinvented South America first and foremost as nature. Not the accessible, collectible, recognizable, categorizable nature of the Linneans, however, but a dramatic, extraordinary nature, a spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding. Not a nature that sits waiting to be known and possessed, but a nature in motion, powered by life forces many of which are invisible to the human eye; a nature that dwarfs humans, commands their being, arouses their passions, defies their powers of perception. No wonder portraits so often depict Humboldt engulfed and miniaturized either by nature or by his own library describing it.

Pratt notes that Humboldt’s nature was not the classifiable nature of the tableau but rather a catastrophic nature whose forces conspired against Humboldt’s desire for unity. America’s nature, in Humboldt’s terms, was in constant battle with the frame of its descriptions, always in conflict with the stability of the archive. Although Pratt’s arguments regarding “the miniaturization of men” are correct, what her account seems to ignore is how time and history filter the naturalist’s narrative: Humboldt’s task was to take a new turn when—while writing the memoirs of his trips—his imagination was filtered by the images of the revolutionary wars. Humans had metaphorically entered the picture posing one question—how should they be placed within this landscape that had originally seemed beyond their grasp, a landscape that had seemed too big for humans to assert their agency? Humboldt’s brilliance lies in realizing that the solution lay in nature itself: what he had at first confronted as catastrophic natural phenomena held the metaphorical power to introduce political action within a landscape that now gained the true potentiality of its Janus-faced reality. Under the metaphor of catastrophic history, sublime nature became sublime history. Structurally, the metaphor of natural catastrophe—as his contemporary Schiller understood it—contained all the elements necessary to provide a model for political action: a discourse on power and forces, on fragmentation and unity, on destruction and reconstruction, on the boundaries of enlightened reason. Moved by his romantic drive, faced with the problem of his historical involvement, Humboldt was participating in the emergence of a new mode of historiography as the shadow of enlightened historicism. If, as Frank Ankersmit has noted, sublime history would return in the coming century under the figure of trauma, terror, and disaster, it is because the historical sublime, as construed by Humboldt, already signaled towards a critique of the Enlightenment.
The Ruins of the Enlightenment: On Bolívar’s Elusive Rome

A great volcano lies at our feet.
—Simón Bolívar, Letter to General Páez

“If this is the best of all possible worlds, then what are the others like?” In Voltaire’s Candide, the great earthquake of Lisbon had opened the Enlightenment to the possibility of other, erratic, peripheral worlds. The cartography sketched by the protagonist’s voyage is indeed a political one: from the Grand Inquisitor of Portugal to the slave Candide meets in El Dorado, from the Jesuit revolution in Paraguay up to the constant discussion of utopia, Voltaire’s picaresque sketches the cartography of an empire in ruins. Deprived of the theological order imposed by divine necessity, the unity of the world is at stake. Voltaire’s political cartography foreshadows the task that Simón Bolívar was to assume in what is perhaps his best known text: the “Jamaica Letter” (1815). The question Bolívar faced also interrogated the politics of territoriality: under what terms could we consider the cartographic and conceptual unity of the revolutionary project that had spread over the whole continent? Once again, the language of catastrophe comes into play: the recurring image is that of an empire in ruins, and more specifically, the image of a heap of rubble that the political subject is meant to reconstitute. As Humboldt had written in his diaries, “[t]he house we used to live in is now a heap of rubble. Terrible earthquakes have transformed the shape of the ground; the city I described has disappeared” (142). The figure of the heap of rubble, of the ruinous multiplicity of the shattered ground, comes to represent the problematic nature of Spanish American modernity after the collapse of its imperial foundation. Bolívar’s “Jamaica Letter” sketches a politics of territoriality as the constant negotiation between the ruinous multiplicity of the shattered imperial ground and the sublimated image of a single Latin American nation arising from the imperial ruins.

As John Lynch shows, the ideological life of El Libertador had begun ten years earlier amidst a landscape of ruins. In 1805, as part of his trip to Italy with his mentor, Simón Rodríguez, and his friend Fernando del Toro, Bolívar visits Rome. In Rome, the young Bolívar—who in his early years had, in the neoclassical spirit of the times, filled his mind with images of Augustan grandeur—gazes admiringly at the sublime landscape of imperial ruins. As legend has it, he then hurries to the Aventine, the Monte Sacro where, as part of the First secessio plebis of 494 BC, Sicinius led a plebeian revolt against the patrician rulers. There, according to Bolívar’s disciple Daniel O’Leary, he vows to liberate Spanish America from its colonial status: “On Monte Santo the sufferings of his own

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7 For two interesting readings of the role of neoclassical rhetoric within Bolívar’s speeches and writings, see Cussen and Rojas. Both agree that at the very center of the revolutionary enterprise there existed a tension between a neoclassical conservative discourse and a more radical romantic approach.
country overwhelmed his mind, and he knelt down and made that vow whose faithful fulfillment the emancipation of South America is the glorious witness” (67). Amidst such ruins, as Simón Rodríguez tells Manuel Uribe Ángel, Bolívar reflects upon the past glory of Rome and the status of Spanish America:

La civilización que ha soplado del Oriente, exclama Bolívar, ha mostrado aquí todas sus faces, ha hecho ver todos sus elementos; mas en cuanto a resolver el gran problema del hombre en libertad, parece que el asunto ha sido desconocido, y que el despejo de esa misteriosa incógnita no ha de verificarse sino en el Nuevo Mundo. (Qtd. in Lozano y Lozano 85)

Amidst the sublime landscape of the Palatine Hill, the discursive relationship between Rome, ruins, freedom, and the history of independence is first sketched out. Throughout his writings, the image of ruinous Rome will return, once and again, as an allegory for the disjointed state of that necessary catastrophe that was the revolution of independence.

Nowhere is the image of Rome’s ruin and its relationship to the wars of independence articulated with more clarity than in the “Jamaica Letter.” Written in response to Henry Cullen, a British merchant who had settled on the island in an attempt to get the support of the British Empire, Bolívar’s letter returns multiple times to the example of Rome’s decadence in order to explain both the decadence of the Spanish Empire and the present state of the revolution: “Yo considero el estado actual de América, como cuando desplomado el imperio romano cada desmembración formó un sistema político” (91). In Discurso desde la Marginación y la Barbarie, Leopoldo Zea points out that Bolívar’s image of a ruinous Rome serves a double purpose. It provides him, on the one hand, with a model for the emergence of a national cartography out of a catastrophic landscape—namely, the emergence of an integrated Europe out of the ruins of the Roman Empire. On the other hand, it offers him a way of explaining the impasses of the revolutionary project—the ruinous state of post-colonial Spanish America as a disjointed cartography without a clear common ground of political representation (50). The figure of imperial ruins allows Bolívar to rephrase his concerns within the dialectic of catastrophe and reconstruction, of fragment and totality, which we have claimed came to represent Spanish American historiography in the years following the wars of independence. The “revolutionary storm,” as he will later call the wars of independence, functions precisely like Humboldt’s earthquake: it shakes the historical tableau of representation, forcing the political subject to reconfigure the relation between fragment and totality. The historical sublime, as conceived by Bolívar, is a search for unity within the ruins left by the collapse of the Spanish Empire.

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At the end of his career, exiled in Pativilca, Peru, after the collapse of another constitution, Bolívar would write, in a letter to Francisco de Paula Santander, some of his most disenchanted yet illuminating words:
Echando la vista por otra parte, observe usted estos trastornos de las cosas humanas: en todo tiempo las obras de los hombres han sido frágiles, más en el día son como los embriones nonatos que perecen antes de desenvolver sus facultades, por todas partes me asaltan los espantosos ruidos de las caídas, mi época es de catástrofes: todo nace y muere a mi vista como si fuese relámpago, todo no hace más que pasar, y necio de mí si me lisonjease quedar de pie firme en medio de tales convulsiones, en medio de tantas ruinas, en medio del trastorno moral del universo! (211)

Within Bolivar’s letter, catastrophe remains the sign under which history is thought to be both a contingent potentiality and a tragic reality. Lost within the ruins of Rome, incapable of organizing a coherent narrative for the emerging state, El Libertador looks back and sees in history the mere heap of rubble once described by Humboldt. Bolivar’s ruinous cartography, his reduction of history to a Humboldtian heap of rubble, foreshadows Walter Benjamin’s discussion of allegory and ruin in his book on the Trauerspiel as well as his definition of catastrophe in his Theses on the Philosophy of History. There history is reduced to a heap of rubble by the storm of progress. The storm of progress marks the threshold where the progressive logic of the Enlightenment, reaching its end, turns against itself with catastrophic violence:

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress is this storm. (257)

For Benjamin, revolutionary history—the Angel of History—must work through the dialectic of catastrophe and reconstruction that ends up reducing history to a heap of rubble. In his task of sketching out the unity of the cartography in ruins left by the “revolutionary storm,” Simón Bolívar—the political subject who had emerged as such amidst the ruins left by the earthquake of Maundy Thursday—was unknowingly entering into dialogue with a series of future political philosophers who would question the dialectic between progress and ruin, and history and catastrophe, within the project of the Enlightenment. As Daniel Castillo-Durante has stated, the heap of rubble comes to represent the negative excess of the First World:

In the last resort, the rubbish heap is an abstraction of which the hegemonic cultural politics of the techno-scientific world of an industrial and post-industrial capitalism are only able to offer a negative
presentation. Inexpressible and unrepresentable, the concept of rubbish heap perhaps makes possible to think of Latin American periphery as the sublime expression of the center. The “Third World” which terrorizes the centre and sends shivers up its spine functions as sublime object. (61)

Pairing Castillo-Durante’s thoughts on the figure of the heap of rubble as the negative sublime that terrorizes the First World with both Humboldt’s phrase and Bolívar’s discourse of ruins, we get a refracted version of the discourse on the sublime. More than a century before the emergence of a post-industrial society, Bolívar conceives his political journey in terms that foreshadow Castillo-Durante’s analysis. Forced to think the unity of a territory whose vastness contains multiple natural discrepancies, Bolívar must account for the impossibility of his task. Bolívar’s achievement was perhaps to remain faithful to a task he knew to be impossible, that of the utopia of unity disclosed by the figure of the heap of rubble.

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