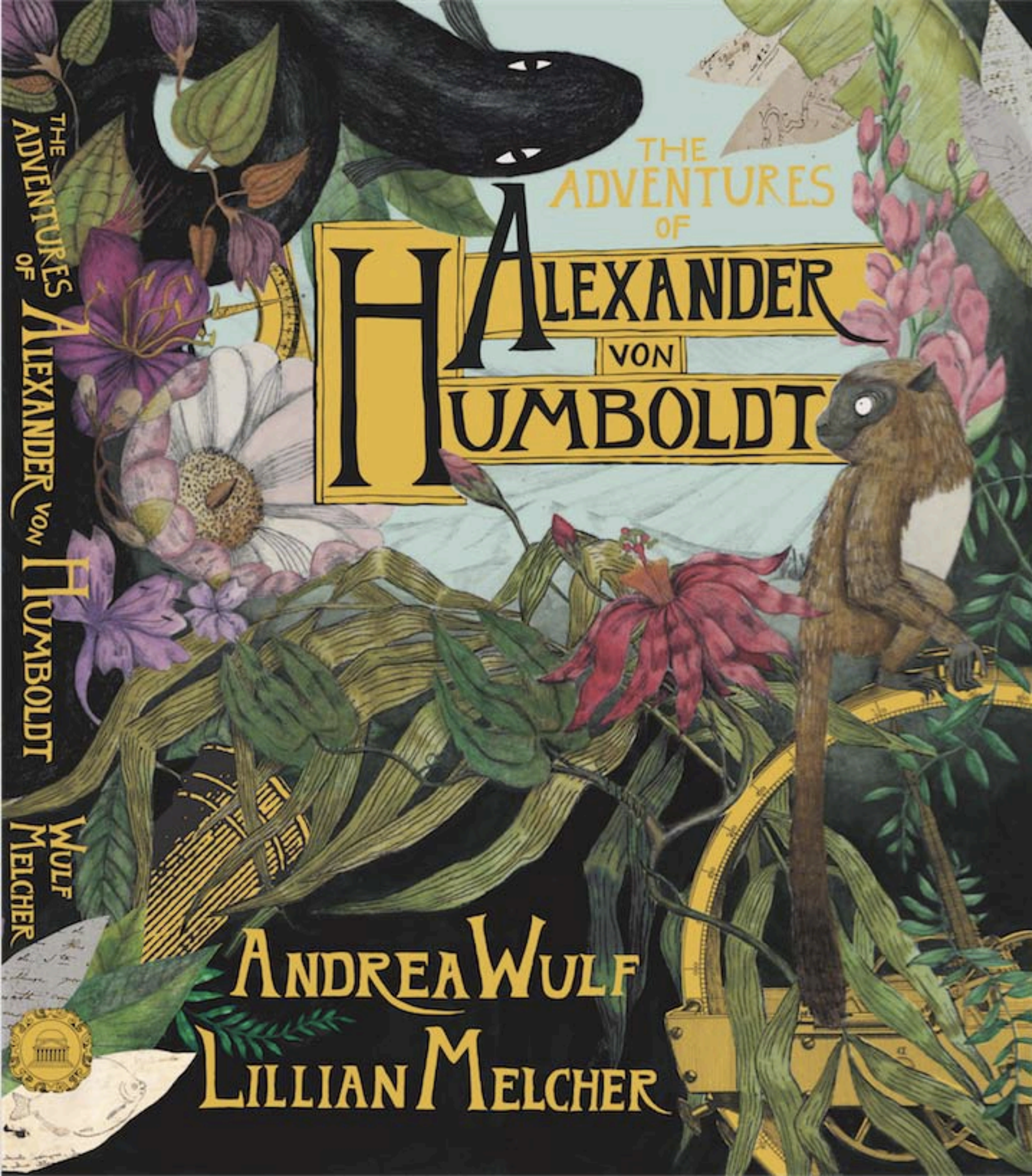
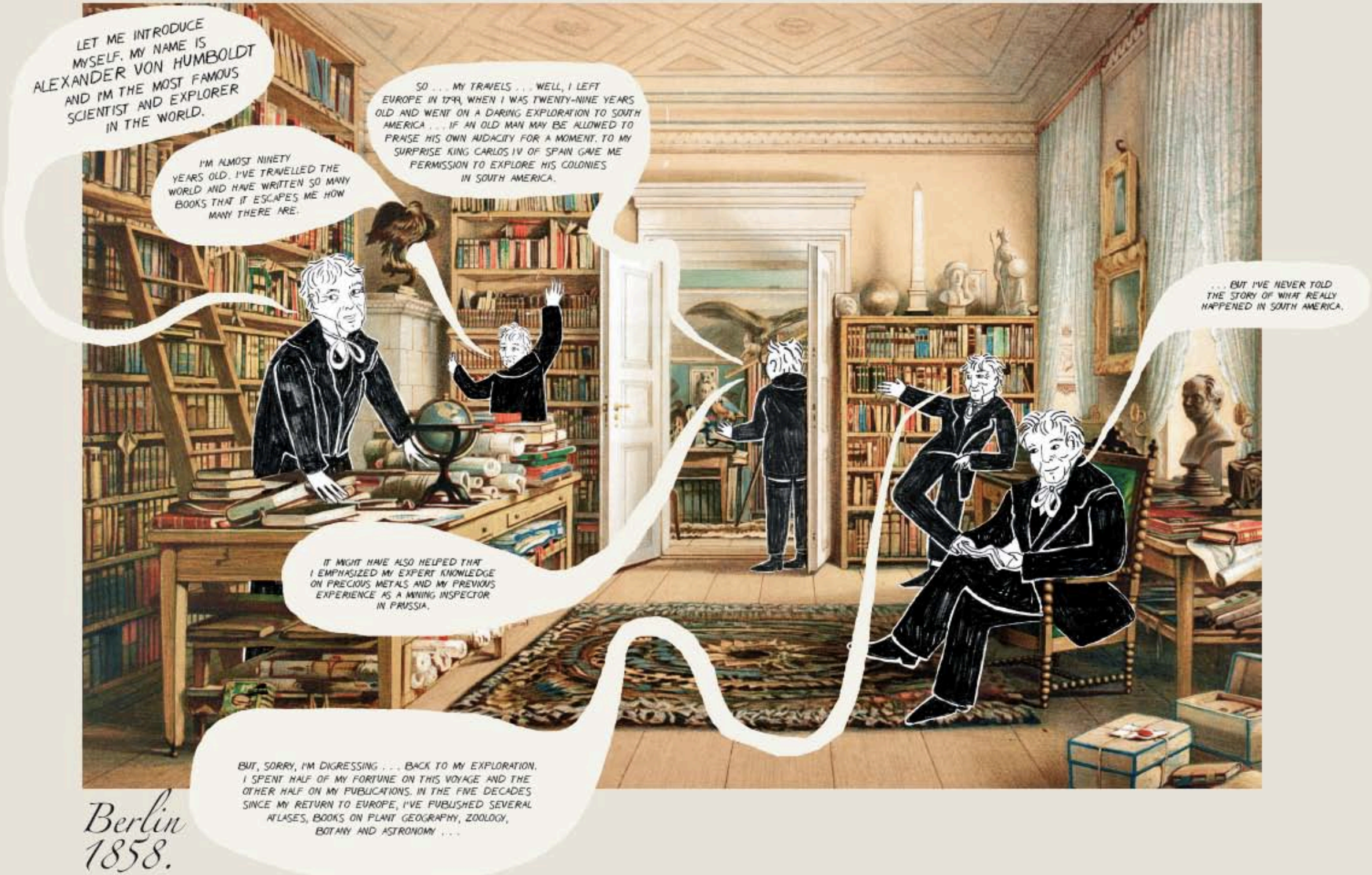

THE ADVENTURES OF
ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT
ANDREA WULF
LILLIAN MELCHER
THE ADVENTURES OF ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT
WULF MELCHER


LET ME INTRODUCE MYSELF. MY NAME IS ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT AND I'M THE MOST FAMOUS SCIENTIST AND EXPLORER IN THE WORLD.
I'M ALMOST NINETY YEARS OLD. I'VE TRAVELLED THE WORLD AND HAVE WRITTEN SO MANY BOOKS THAT IT ESCAPES ME HOW MANY THERE ARE.
SO . . . MY TRAVELS . . . WELL, I LEFT EUROPE IN 1799, WHEN I WAS TWENTY-NINE YEARS OLD AND WENT ON A DARING EXPLORATION TO SOUTH AMERICA . . . IF AN OLD MAN MAY BE ALLOWED TO PRAISE HIS OWN AUDACITY FOR A MOMENT. TO MY SURPRISE KING CARLOS IV OF SPAIN GAVE ME PERMISSION TO EXPLORE HIS COLONIES IN SOUTH AMERICA.
. . . BUT I'VE NEVER TOLD THE STORY OF WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN SOUTH AMERICA.
IT MIGHT HAVE ALSO HELPED THAT I EMPHASIZED MY EXPERT KNOWLEDGE ON PRECIOUS METALS AND MY PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A MINING INSPECTOR IN PRUSSIA.
BUT, SORRY, I'M DIGRESSING . . . BACK TO MY EXPLORATION. I SPENT HALF OF MY FORTUNE ON THIS VOYAGE AND THE OTHER HALF ON MY PUBLICATIONS. IN THE FIVE DECADES SINCE MY RETURN TO EUROPE, I'VE PUBLISHED SEVERAL ATLASES, BOOKS ON PLANT GEOGRAPHY, ZOOLOGY, BOTANY AND ASTRONOMY . . .
Berlin 1858.

AT THE END OF MARCH, ALMOST TWO MONTHS AFTER WE LEFT CARACAS, WE REACH A REMOTE CAPUCHIN MISSION IN SAN FERNANDO DE APURE ON THE RIO APURE WHERE THE MONKS SELL US A BOAT. MY TEAM IS SMALL - BONPLAND AND JOSÉ, OF COURSE, AND THEN FOUR INDIANS TO PADDLE AND ONE PILOT TO STEER THE BOAT . . . AND, I ALMOST FORGOT, WE FOUND A STRAY DOG IN THE MISSION. HE FOLLOWED US AROUND AND WE DECIDE TO ADOPT HIM. WE NAME HIM TURCA. WE ALSO PURCHASE CHICKENS, EGGS, BANANAS, CASSAVA ROOTS, ORANGES, THE POD-LIKE FRUIT OF THE TAMARIND TREE AND SHERRY - PROVISIONS THAT WILL LAST US FOR FOUR WEEKS. WE WILL HAVE TO RELY ON WHAT WE CATCH - WE HAVE FISHING RODS, GUNS AND OUR GUIDES BRING THEIR ARROW AND SPEARS. THE INDIANS REASSURE US THAT THESE RIVERS AND FORESTS ABOUND WITH GAME, BIRDS, TURTLES AND FISH. WE JUST NEED TO CATCH THEM AND FILL OUR BELLIES. I'M SO EXCITED TO FINALLY BEGIN OUR REAL ADVENTURES. WE'RE GOING TO EXPLORE THE ORINOCO AND ITS NETWORK OF TRIBUTARIES . . . I'M DETERMINED TO FIND THE CASIQUIARE RIVER.

I WANT . . . NO, I NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD AROUND ME AND WANT TO DISCOVER HOW EVERYTHING IN NATURE IS CONNECTED. AND SO, WE SLOWLY PADDLE TOWARDS THE JAGUAR – BUT WHEN IT HEARS THE NOISE OF THE OARS, IT DISAPPEARS INTO THE UNDERGROWTH. DELIGHTED BY THIS TURN OF FORTUNES, THE VULTURES BEGIN FEASTING ON THE DEAD CAPYBARA. BUT NOT FOR LONG. THE JAGUAR SUDDENLY REAPPEARS. WITH ONE BIG LEAP, IT PLUNGES INTO THE GROUP OF VULTURES AND DRAGS THE CAPYBARA INTO THE JUNGLE.


AFTER A FEW DAYS ON THE APURE RIVER, WE REACH THE ORINOCO WHERE OUR PILOT LIKES TO SHOW OFF WITH DARING MANEUVRES.
WHAT IS THE PILOT DOING? WHAT A FOOL!
WE'RE GOING TO DROWN.
IF THE CROCODILES AND SNAKES DON'T KILL US FIRST...
IT'S NOT TOO FAR TO THE RIVERBANK.
I CAN'T SWIM!
I CAN SWIM WITH YOU ON MY BACK, IF WE HAVE TO.
WE DIDN'T DROWN AND AMAZINGLY I ONLY LOST ONE BOOK ... BUT THESE WATER-STAINED PAGES IN MY DIARY WILL ALWAYS REMIND ME OF THAT DAY.
YOU BLANCOS ARE STRANGE. WHY WORRY MORE ABOUT YOUR BOOKS AND PLANTS THAN YOUR LIVES?

A FEW DAYS AFTER OUR ACCIDENT WE ARRIVE AT THE LAST MISSION BEFORE THE ATURES AND MAIPURES RAPIDS. OUR BOAT IS TOO BIG FOR THE RAPIDS BUT THE MISSIONARIES SELL US A SMALLER CANOE - AND ONE OF THEM, FATHER ZEA, JOINS US.

AS WE PENETRATE DEEPER INTO THE FOREST, THE WATER GETS WILDER AND FINDING CAMPS IS INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING.

NIGHT 1: WE SLEEP ON GRANITE BOULDERS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RIVER . . . AND THE BATS THAT HIDE IN THE CRACKS KEEP US AWAKE.

NIGHT 2: WE TRY TO SLEEP ON A ROCK ON A 60° ANGLE AND SPEND ALL NIGHT CHECKING THAT NO ONE SLIPS INTO THE ORINOCO.

NIGHT 3: A STORM ALMOST STEALS OUR CANOE.

OUR DAYS ON THE OTHER HAND ARE MUCH MORE AMUSING. I BOUGHT A TITI MONKEY IN ONE OF THE MISSIONS AND HE ENTERTAINS EVERYBODY IN OUR LITTLE CANOE. I SHOW IT GEORGES CUVIER'S FAMOUS NATURAL HISTORY BOOK *Tableau Elémentaire d'Histoire Naturelle* . . . I KNOW . . . BUT MY LITTLE MONKEY IS EXTREMELY CLEVER.

ON 23 MARCH 1803, A LITTLE MORE THAN A MONTH AFTER WE HAD LEFT GUAYAQUIL, WE LANDED IN ACAPULCO . . . THEN WE MADE THE ARDUOUS TREK ACROSS THE RUGGED SIERRA MADRE DEL SUR TO MEXICO CITY.

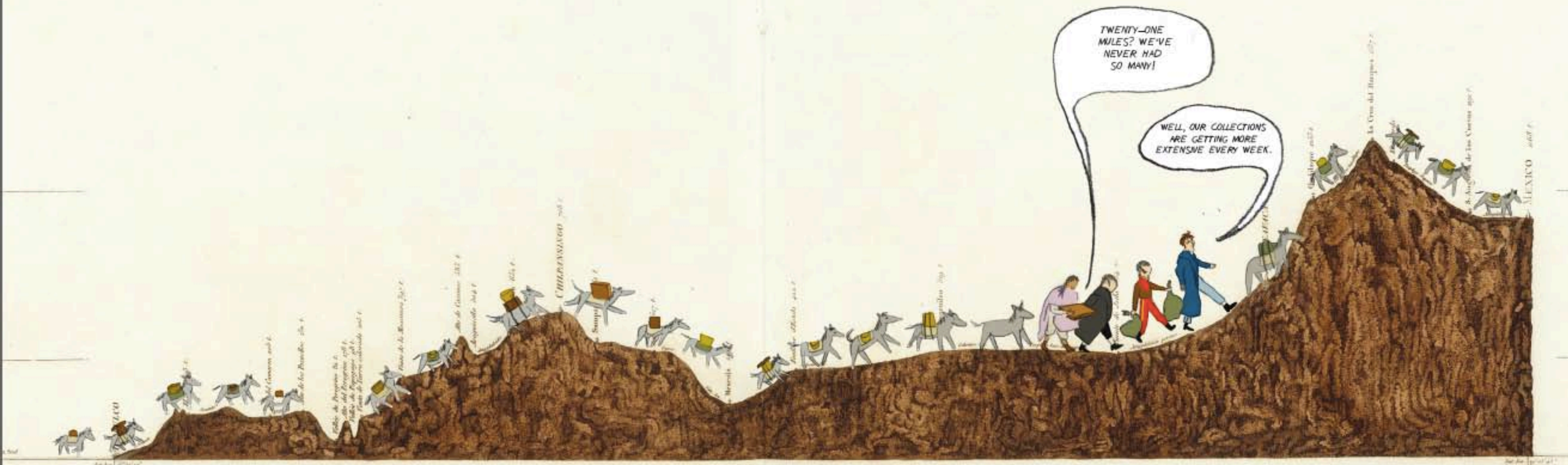


Tableau physique de la pente Occidentale du Plateau de la Nouvelle Espagne

(Chemin de Mexico à Acapulco)

Dressé d'après des mesures Barométriques prises en 1803 par M.r de Humboldt

THE WINDS POUND OUR VESSEL. IT'S ABSOLUTELY TERRIFYING . . .
EVEN THE OLD SAILORS FEAR FOR THEIR LIVES.