7. Colonial nature: negotiating the tropics

While snow and ice function as a screen on which fantasies of masculinity in the history of the modern environmental imagination are projected, tropical forests and rivers call for a different kind of engagement. Tropical environments suggest lushness, fecundity, fullness, and exotic as well as erotic excess, qualities that are commonly – at least in the popular imagination – coded as female. They are frequently negotiated on rivers. Rivers and river journeys have fascinated mankind ever since the beginning of history. In the middle of Piazza Navona in Rome, the Bernini fountain Quatro Fiumi depicts all of the four continents then known with allegorical figures of their most powerful rivers, the Danube, the Nile, the Ganges, and the Amazon. In the vicinity of those four rivers lie the world’s oldest hubs of civilization. Rivers are the object but also the subject of poetry; they metaphorically represent ideas of nationhood, or they stand in allegorically for life itself. Early European exploration into the interior of foreign continents is intimately tied to the possibility of navigating virgin territories via waterways, in a physical as well as mythical sense. Marco Polo traveled East on the “Silk Road,” largely relying on waterways and established trade routes long before the opening of the sea routes was imaginable. Meriweather Lewis and William Clark traveled west on the Ohio River in North America, then further on the Mississippi and the Columbia to reach the Pacific in what is today Astoria, Oregon. John Wesley Powell traveled down the Colorado in 1869 to explore and chart the last frontier of the American West. All these explorers returned with a wealth of scientific data on the course of the river but also information on and impressions of the surrounding landscape, the geography of the region, its geology, its plant and animal life, and the local cultures.

Descriptions of adventurous river journeys through virgin landscapes seek to establish a sense of place for the reader. In the act of reading they hope to recreate some of the pleasures and challenges of movement through unknown territory. An ecocritical reading of these narratives foregrounds this sense of place and “focus on descriptions of specific, real places that give primacy to the place itself rather than to thematic issues connected to the narratives in
which scenic set-pieces are embedded” (Byerly 2002: 78). In this chapter, I return to Alexander von Humboldt and Werner Herzog, specifically their work on tropical environments, to establish a genealogy of engagements that foreground the agency of nature and complicate the process of tropicalization. I analyze descriptions and depictions of tropical river journeys with the help of the conceptual framework of tropicality and the archive of tropes that we utilize to narrate and depict tropical environments. How and when did the tropics become tropicalized? I suggest a connection between Alexander von Humboldt’s rafting trip up the Orinoco and modern day reimaginings of tropical environments, using the example of a description of the journey through the Brazilian jungle in Robert Müller’s novel Tropen and Werner Herzog’s Amazonian films, including their conversation with modern-day concepts of nature. Furthermore, I compare Herzog’s work on underwater photography with Leni Riefenstahl’s images of tropical reefs. The tropical environment emerges as the site where the European adventurer imagines himself in stark contrast with the environment, but also as a product of interacting with it. The opposite of us is staged in front of our eyes in all its otherness, and our temperate European identity is formed in the process of watching the spectacle of tropicality unfold. Herzog’s tropical voyagers negotiate that tradition, Fitzcarraldo more successfully than Aguirre and his crew. The jungle is always already part of their soul, it is never simply a backdrop.

A classical articulation of tropicalization is found in Claude Levi-Strauss’ Tristes Tropiques, a critical commentary on the French anthropologist’s extended sojourn in Brazil in the 1940s. “Tropical countries”, he begins his reflections, “as it seems to me, must be the exact opposite of our own” (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 49). This difference consolidates the temperate European identity. In a later passage Levi-Strauss reveals that “to the European traveler, this is a disconcerting, because an unclassifiable landscape. We know nothing of untamed Nature, because our own landscape is entirely subject to our needs and desires” (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 98). The tropical landscape is disconcerting to the European eye, because it is not entirely subjected to our needs and desires. It has its own agenda. Levi-Strauss is upfront about the fact that the tropics of Brazil existed in his mind before he even set foot there. He tells us how he read Louis de Bougainville and how he “imagined Brazil as a tangled mass of palm-leaves, with glimpses of strange architecture in the middle distance, and an all-permeating smell of burning perfume” (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 49) – an image so vivid that it evokes the sensation of smell, an