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Proposal for the Symposium  
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## You Can't Put Your Arms Around a Memory: The Multiple Versions of Alexander von Humboldt's »Kosmos-Lectures« (1827/28)

In our contribution to the *Versioning Cultural Objects Symposium* we would like to present a collection of primary sources related to Alexander von Humboldt's world-famous »Kosmos-Lectures«. These lectures, held in Berlin in 1827/28, mark a milestone in the history of sciences and their popularization. Given their indisputable significance, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the lectures. One reason for this was, until recently, the lack of primary sources available. With the online-publication of all currently known lecture notes by attendees of the »Kosmos-Lectures«<sup>1</sup> and the ongoing digitisation of Humboldt's legacy collection<sup>2</sup>, this situation has changed significantly: While beforehand we had too few, it now seems as if we had too many witnesses—or: *versions*—of Humboldt's lectures.

So far, we have gathered 10 individual notebooks by Humboldt's auditors, comprising more than 3,500 manuscript pages, and have identified some 600 leaves of preparatory notes by Humboldt himself. The documents in this corpus give different, sometimes even conflicting accounts of said event. We will introduce this exceptional corpus and reflect upon the implications its shape and content has for the presentation and reception of the material. We will argue that applying a concept of multiple *versions* is as indispensable for the presentation of these types of primary sources as it is for their interpretation: Any attempt to determine the most »adequate« witness would not only be eventually futile but would be based on a misconception to begin with. While one might assume that the lecturer's own manuscripts would be the most important and most reliable source, it is important to notice that Humboldt's manuscripts were drafted some time *before* the sessions, typically contain only the keywords as a basis for extemporisation and have been preserved only partially. The notebooks of his auditors, however, do cover the complete lectures, but were written by students or laymen hours or days *after* the event, based on notes taken hastily in class. Therefore, neither Humboldt's manuscripts nor the notebooks of his listeners can be considered to be *the* basis to reconstruct what has actually been said in the lecture hall.

Our claim is that historical events—e.g. singular performances like oral lectures—elude our grasp. They are only accessible in the form of different, equally (in)adequate *versions*. While these fundamental observations may appear trivial at first glance, they have far-reaching methodological and practical consequences. We will argue that each document represents one distinct, equally valid version of the »Kosmos-Lectures« that has to be presented and received in its own right. Even if we had the most intimate sources at hand, it would still be impossible to »reconstruct« an event like a public oral lecture. We remain struck with a multitude of witnesses, i. e. versions at hand. We believe that the implications we derived from this exemplary corpus are transferrable to many other, similar instances in which we necessarily are dealing with various, but always »indirect« historical transmissions.

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- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Humboldt-University's *Hidden Kosmos* project (2014–2016), <https://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/hidden-kosmos>. A list of the manuscripts published in the course of the project can be found here: <https://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/de/forschung/projekte/hidden-kosmos/veroeffentlichte-nachschriften>. [All URLs accessed 2016-08-30.]
  - <sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://humboldt.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werk/>, sections “Nachlass Alexander von Humboldts in Berlin” and “Nachlass Alexander von Humboldts in Krakau”.