

# Through the Tropical Looking Glass: The Motif of Resistance in U.S. Literature on Central America

Herman Melville, writing in 1846, begins the American literary encounter with the tropics, an encounter we are here calling “tropicalization.” Early in his first work, *Typee*, Melville anticipates his arrival in the Marquesas:

The Marquesas! What strange visions of outlandish things does the very name spirit up! Naked houris—cannibal banquets—groves of coconut—coral reefs—tattooed chiefs—and bamboo temples; sunny valleys planted with breadfruit trees—carved canoes dancing on the flashing blue waters—savage woodlands guarded by horrible idols—*heathenish rites and human sacrifices*. (Melville 5; emphasis in original)

Melville’s lines provide a good introductory description of “tropicalization.” As I will use it here, the term suggests that travelers or fictional characters in U.S. literature, forced out of their cultural milieu, encounter, or believe they encounter, “strange visions of outlandish things.” Tropicalization, then, is a process by which the hidden axioms and assumptions of the “temperate” North American culture have been tested in some way by exposure to a tropical environment, culture, or society.

Melville’s paean exemplifies several conventions typical to North American accounts of the tropics. First, and perhaps most important, Melville’s Marquesas are imaginary, an invention of the colonizer’s mind, much like the Orient was invented by Europeans and turned into, in Edward Said’s description, “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 5). Second, Melville’s visions focus on “outlandish things,” including all manner of exotica from the sensual (“naked houris”) to the lurid (“cannibal banquets”). Third, for Melville’s narrator, the

advantageous side of the tropics is associated with nature or the land—in particular its tropical ambience. On the other hand, the baleful side of the tropics is identified exclusively with the natives and their horrible “heathenish rites.”

This early representation of the tropics in U.S. literature establishes a precedent that remains remarkably consistent over time, despite changes in politics and aesthetic programs. As Marianna Torgovnick has noted in *Gone Primitive*, first encounters between cultures are usually what count most (Torgovnick 48). Such is the case in the U.S. encounter with tropical cultures. In work after work, the image of the tropics that dominates the North American imagination can be reduced to a single formula: tropical lands are desirable, but tropical people are not (though there are exceptions, especially where females are involved). Such a perception encouraged neocolonial and imperial aspirations. That a potentially bountiful land remained undeveloped and unexploited “attested to a debased people, willing to live in an indolent standoff with nature because they lacked the moral stamina to conquer it” (Pike 125). The corollary to this view was that a superior race had the right to dominate these debased peoples and their lands.

. . .

My focus here is on a particular motif that derives directly from this formula: the motif of resistance. This resistance is grounded in the First World travelers’ need to protect themselves from the unsettling influences of the Third World. The motif emerges from a fundamental tension between two contrasting North American attitudes towards the tropics. On the one hand, there is a tremendous attraction to the tropics that draws Americans there with visions of an earthly paradise, fecundity, and surpassing beauty. On the other hand, there is also a fear of tropical charm (in the pejorative sense of the word) and excess that repels North Americans from these anticipated paradises, so that their sojourns turn dreary and monotonous at best or nightmarish at worst. This swift reversal is neatly summarized by the bold-lettered blurb on the paperback cover of Paul Theroux’s *Mosquito Coast*: “An American family’s search for paradise becomes a hellish fight for survival!”

Initially, the search for tropical exotica discovers a salubrious tropical freedom from the routine and dullness of home. But with time, the seekers’ image of the tropics darkens. They experience the sinister aspects of life in the tropics and soon abandon their paradisiacal expectations. In short, the pre-journey paean transforms into a scoff, and enthusiasm yields to disparagement.

*Typee* provides a useful starting place, but in general, and in contrast to other U.S. writers, Melville is sympathetic to the tropics and tropical peoples, an early voice decrying the corruption that “civilization” brings to so-called primitive places and peoples. Other writers are far more disparaging. Since my interest lies in the disparagement and rejection of the tropics, I will focus on

the motif of resistance as it appears in U.S. literature on Central America. North Americans have written about Central America since the 1820s. Travelers such as John Lloyd Stephens, Ephraim Squier, Helen Sanborn, and Joan Didion have attempted to produce Central America for their compatriots, while writers of fiction—including O. Henry, Richard Harding Davis, Paul Bowles, Robert Stone, and Paul Theroux—have used Central American settings as testing grounds for their North American characters. The motif of resistance constantly appears in these works. Only in very recent works, the poetry of Carolyn Forché, for example, is the motif questioned and reconsidered.

Like Melville's narrator in *Typee*, these travelers have great expectations about what they will find in the tropics. They anticipate a feminized landscape of marvels and natural wonders beyond anything to be found in the temperate climes, a place for pleasures unavailable at home. For example, Frank Holliswell, a character in Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise* (1978), considers the fictional Central American country of Tecan "a seductress, *la encantada*, a perfect place of pleasure" (Stone 101).

The first U.S. text to use Central America as a setting for imaginative literature—Ephraim G. Squier's *Waikna* (1855)—voices these same desires. Squier, who visited Nicaragua on a diplomatic mission in the 1850s, published *Waikna* under the pseudonym of Samuel Bard. Subtitled "Adventures on the Mosquito Shore," the semi-fictional narrative tells of adventures during travels from Jamaica to Nicaragua and then up the Caribbean coast into Honduras, pursuing the romantic allure of the tropics. For other travelers as well, Central America promises to be "the glorious tropics" or some such paradise. Allie Fox, protagonist of Paul Theroux's *Mosquito Coast* (1982), sees Central America as a land of escape. He is hoping to flee the decadence of the United States for a place where people have room to do as they please, an extension of the American frontier. Indeed, the call of the tropics, as it has sounded through American literature, is in many ways a call toward the frontier and the libertarian attractions that the frontier held: escape, freedom, individuality, and trial in nature's primitive state. Certainly, the call to the south was related to the expansionist urge of manifest destiny.<sup>1</sup> Allie Fox's Central American paradise, like Squier's, does not really involve people, and especially not natives. Although Fox expresses a certain respect for the natives' freedom, his admiration does not extend to the culture of the Mosquito coast upon which he has intruded. Indeed, he continually calls the people savages, and it is apparent that he, like so many North Americans before him, considers the land under-used and empty.<sup>2</sup> Frederick Pike, in discussing the "ambivalent myths and stereotypes of civilization and nature [that] seem to lie at the heart of American attitudes toward Latin America," (xiii) notes that most North Americans assumed that the natives were incapable of progress "precisely because they could not get the upper hand over nature" (Pike 49). Allie Fox agrees: a savage, he says,

is “someone who doesn’t bother to look around and see that he can change the world” (Theroux, *Mosquito Coast* 157).

Often in U.S. literature on tropical America, this disparagement of the natives begins with arrival. The expected rapture of being in a tropical Eden yields to bewilderment, discomfort, disgust, and disappointment. Helen J. Sanborn, in *A Winter in Central America and Mexico* (1886), aptly captures the sense of vertigo or displacement that immediately strikes the touring North American:

I wondered if I were in fairy-land; but then there were no fairies, for the inhabitants of this land dwelt in mud huts and were dark enough to be goblins. I felt like pinching myself to see if I were awake or dreaming, and said to myself, “Who am I?” “Where am I?” “Can this be part of the same earth on which I dwell?” (Sanborn 27)

Almost a century after Sanborn, Joan Didion felt a similar bewilderment when she arrived in El Salvador, which struck her as “a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse” (Didion, *Salvador* 3).

This bewilderment puts the travelers on their guard; something sinister—and certainly not very Edenic—seems to lurk in the land. Quite often they are frightened by the sudden excess of flora and fauna, or they are put out by the heat. But by far the greatest source of disappointment and dread are the natives of the country. Travelers like Sanborn wonder “with something of apprehension how we should fare when we came to penetrate this land and mingle with this uncivilized people” (Sanborn 27). One sight of the natives is enough to awaken a host of doubts. For one thing, the natives are black (in the eyes of North Americans) and black means primitive. Squier’s narrator expresses typical shock upon seeing the natives: “There was a large assemblage on the beach, when we landed, but I was amazed to find that, with few exceptions, they were all unmitigated negros, or Sambos (i.e. mixed negro and Indian)” (Squier 58).

A typical convention of the literature is to single out from the “large assemblage” a native who stands for the whole race. Frequently, this individual is a customs agent, whom the arriving North Americans immediately hold in contempt. Squier describes “a very pompous black man,” comically dressed, whose “final purpose seemed narrowed down to getting a dram, and pocketing a couple of dollars” (57). In early works, the tone is derisive. Later writers, however, drop the derision in favor of fear, using the occasion to establish an atmosphere of dread (e.g. Joan Didion’s apprehension at having to “negotiate” customs in “a thicket of weapons” [Didion, *Salvador* 4]). In all cases, the travelers emphasize that a boundary has been crossed—the physical frontier, of course, but also a more nuanced border, as if the travelers had crossed into a bizarre Wonderland.

In sum, the arrival is a period for conflicting impressions from which travelers draw generalized conclusions about the “strangeness” around them. The ambivalence felt by Charlie Fox, narrator of *The Mosquito Coast*, best illustrates this tendency. From the ship, as he arrives, the Honduran coast looks “dazzling white,” but up close he notices a “stinking air,” and the town appears “yellow and jammed.” “Everything was backward here,” he concludes, and the shacks of the natives disgust him (Theroux, *Mosquito Coast* 101). Evening, however, softens his reaction; he hears a boy playing a flute, and the music casts “a soft spell on the beach, as purple-blue as the sky over the sea” (103). The town at night is “magic.” He imagines “the whole place to be made out of green pillows, creepy-quiet and cool” (103). But with morning’s harsher light, he changes his view once again. To Charlie, the town now appears “cracked and discolored and mobbed by people actually screaming above the braying car horns. There was no magic now, nor even anything familiar” (104). All his expectations become “a nightmare of summer ruin.” Many Yankee travelers in Central America experience this same alternation of enchantment and disgust that Charlie feels.

The warning signs perceived upon arrival soon become indications of grave dangers; “an endemic apprehension of danger in the apparently benign” is the way Didion puts it in *Salvador*. Even tropical nature, which formerly held out Edenic promises to the traveler, is suddenly fraught with danger. It does not take long for North Americans to conclude that the tropics are inimical to whites. Soon after his arrival in Guatemala (1838), John Lloyd Stephens visited the grave of an American diplomat dead of yellow fever; Stephens himself was to die of a disease contracted in Panama. Squier’s narrator, Samuel Bard, once so enthusiastic about his journey to Central America, quickly recognizes the perils: “Under the tropics, serious consequences often follow from these slight causes. I have known tetanus to result from a little wound, of the size of a pea . . .” (Squier 279). He warns against the “wickedness” of attempting to start colonies of whites on the “low, pestiferous shores, under the tropics” (58). And so it goes for nearly every traveler on record. Their accounts are not complete, it seems, without the experience of some horrible (and specifically tropical) illness. Richard Harding Davis’s Captain Macklin becomes ill with malaria, as do several characters in O. Henry’s *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), a collection of stories set in “Anchuria” (Honduras). One of these, a certain Hal-loran, “dried up to gristle and bone and shook with chills every third night.”

Usually, the existence of these diseases—and their dangers for whites—is considered further evidence of the inferiority of the inhabitants of tropical lands. Mary Louise Pratt points out that “unexploited nature tends to be seen in this literature [travel books on Latin America] as troubling or ugly, its very primalness a sign of the failure of human enterprise” (Pratt 149). Diseases spread, the logic goes, because the people are physically unclean and morally not right

with God. Danger is so rampant that even the more peaceful aspects of the tropics conceal hazards, especially for gringo minds and souls. The texts all issue an implicit warning: even when the tropics are apparently salubrious—with warm breezes, tranquil sunsets, and lazy afternoons—the North American had best beware. O. Henry, more than any other writer, broadcast this warning; his stories are filled with Anglos who have fallen under the spell of “this dreamy land, where time seemed so redundant.” Tropical enchantment, no longer desired by Yankees once they experience its reality, turns out to be as inimical as the tropical diseases.

The big problem is that a Central American idyll means, inevitably, contact with Central American culture and all its supposed debauchery and amorality. The Yankee who is not careful will most likely succumb to turpitude, and the writers leave no doubt that this is a distinctly undesirable fate, one to be avoided at all costs. Squier encounters several lost and degenerate whites on his journeys. O. Henry uses allusions to Circe and the lotus eaters to call attention to the horrors that befall enchanted Yankees. Over and over, the laziness of the natives—which is perceived as the result of living in an environment where food is plentiful and can be had just by plucking it—is cited as a reason for avoiding Central America. In other words, the laziness is contagious. For example, the boat captain taking the Fox family to Honduras in *The Mosquito Coast* warns Charlie about the jungle that is to be their new home:

“Some people there have never seen a white man or know what a wheel is. Ask Reverend Spellgood. If they want to eat, they just climb a tree and pick a coconut. They can live for nothing. Everything they need is right there—free. Most of them don’t wear any clothes. It’s a free and easy life.”

I said, “That’s why we’re going.”

“But it’s no place for you,” the captain said. (83)

It is curious how often this alleged aspect of tropical life—the ease with which food can be obtained—is cited as a cause of native indolence. Considering the dreams of paradise which have lured the travelers to Central America, this sudden disapproval of the one Edenic attribute they find is inexplicable. Allie Fox, who has come to Honduras seeking freedom from restraints, goes so far as to ban bananas in his utopia because they encourage laziness.

But for the most part, North Americans find very little tranquility in Central America, especially where society and culture are concerned. A paradoxical dilemma emerges from which Central America cannot escape: when the place is pacific, it is dangerous, and when it is active, it is even more dangerous. More often than not, North Americans locate decadence in the violence, disorder, and corruption of Central America’s “radically bad social order,” to use the words of the famed filibuster William Walker.<sup>3</sup>

Most travelers from the north had nothing good to say about Central American societies. Pratt, in commenting on nineteenth-century travel writing, notes that "Spanish American society in general . . . is relentlessly indicted for backwardness, indolence, and above all, the 'failure' to exploit the resources surrounding it" (Pratt 151). In 1855, William Walker justified his invasion of Nicaragua by citing the need for "regenerating" the "worn-out" societies of the isthmus. A few decades later, it was popular novelist Richard Harding Davis's turn. A character in his romance *Captain Macklin* tells his fellow mercenaries what the place is like:

I know all of Central America, and it is a wonderful country [*sic*] . . . But it is cursed with the laziest of God's creatures, and the men who rule them are the most corrupt and the most vicious. They are the dogs in the manger among rulers. They will do nothing to help their own country; they will not permit others to help it. They are a menace and an insult to civilization, and it is time that they stepped down and out, and made way for their betters, or that they were kicked out. (Davis 199)

This character voices a frustration that soon entered official North American discourse, and has continued to guide U.S. policy at least until the 1989 invasion of Panama, which was supposed to rid Panama of the latest "dog in the manger," Manuel Noriega (the invasion's official code name, Operation Just Cause, reveals how little has changed in U.S. thinking). The U.S. Marines invaded Nicaragua as early as 1908 and controlled the country for the next four years, withdrawing (briefly) in 1912 after failing to establish a democracy. The U.S. blamed the failure on the Nicaraguans themselves. A 1913 article in *National Geographic* explained to the U.S. public that the "hopeless Nicaraguans" would never be fit for "good government." Like Davis's character, the article's author, William Showalter, did not blame outside intervention for contributing to the problems; they both considered Central America so hopeless that not even the U.S. Marines could save them.

Examples of this convention abound in U.S. discourse. A character in O. Henry's *Cabbages and Kings* makes a similar complaint of Honduras, where he is working as "private secretary to the president": "I get sick at times of this country. Everything's rotten. From the executive down to the coffee pickers, they're plotting to down each other and skin their friends" (Henry 593). Pratt comments that

Such a litany of criticism is anchored, of course, in the sheerest hypocrisy for it is [Latin] America's purported backwardness that legitimates the capitalist vanguard's interventions in the first place. Ideologically, the vanguard's task is to re-invent [Latin] America as backward and neglected, to encode its non-capitalist landscapes and societies as manifestly in need of the rationalized exploitation the Europeans bring. (Pratt 151-52)

The observations of Paul Theroux, who wrote of his travels by train through Central America, maintain a connection with those of nineteenth-century visitors, like Walker, to tropical America:

Central America was haywire; it was as if New England had gone completely to ruin, and places like Rhode Island and Connecticut were run by maniacal generals and thug-gish policemen; as if they had evolved into motiveless tyrannies and become forcing-houses of nationalism. It was no wonder that, seeing them as degenerate states, tycoons like Vanderbilt and imperial-minded companies like the United Fruit Company took them over and tried to run them. (Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express* 174)

These denigrations are engendered by the general North American feeling that society is not well-ordered in Central America. Theroux's crucial experience, for example, occurs at a soccer game, where the violent disorder of the crowd has infernal connotations for him.

This type of turmoil, with violence and terror inherent or given in the place, is also prevalent in the use that Paul Bowles makes of Central America as a setting. In Bowles's fiction, the dangers of the place are particularly acute for visiting North Americans, who are apt to be raped ("Under the Sky"), drugged and murdered (*Up Above the World*), brutalized ("The Echo"), or "disappeared," in the Spanish sense ("Tapiama"). Bowles's North Americans are generally unsympathetic characters who have wandered into the "primitive" world of Central America. They clearly do not belong there, and soon find themselves implicated in trouble. Western values do not provide comfort or guidance in this alien terrain; instead, they lead the characters deeper and deeper into danger.

For U.S. writers, violence always seems to lurk beneath Central America's surface. It threatens to erupt at any moment (these "eruptions" contributing in turn to the popularity of volcanos as natural metaphors for Central American society), and the North American feels particularly vulnerable. In early travel literature, confrontations with "bandidos" or showdowns with local mobs are common textual conventions. The people themselves are assumed to be inherently violent, and random encounters with locals usually present occasions for this violence to direct itself toward the vulnerable visitor. In a contemporary account, Joan Didion summarizes one such encounter by calling it "a pointless confrontation with aimless authority," yet another aspect of the "local vocation for terror" (Didion, *Salvador* 85).

Didion has a love-hate relationship with tropical places. Certainly her diction is more "tropicalized" than that of other North American writers. Her prose is full of the heat, light, liquidity, and dreamy listlessness that she associates with the tropics. Again and again Didion refers to "opaque equatorial light" or a "fluid atmosphere" or a "certain liquidity." In Didion's tropics,

"surfaces dissolve," "nothing is fixed or hard," and things are "vaporous" or hold "a perilous attraction, like a mirage." One experiences "weightlessness"; one feels "listless" and "uneasy" as though "in a kind of waking dream." But she also, like so many other North American writers, associates the tropical ambience with turmoil: "few lessons get learned in tropical cities under attack from their own citizens. Lines only harden. Positions become more fixed, and privileges more fiercely defended" (*Miami* 45). In the end, Didion equates what is for her a destabilized tropical environment with a destabilized political and social situation, so that the peculiar combination of tropical terror and tropical unreality produce "a certain weightlessness, the heightened wariness of having left the developed world for a more fluid atmosphere, one in which the native distrust of extreme possibilities that tended to ground the temperate United States in an obeisance to democratic institutions seemed rooted, if at all, only shallowly" (Didion, *Miami* 23). The fact that Didion is writing about Miami here is significant, for her version of Miami sounds very much like her version of El Salvador. The subtext of her poetic descriptions is that the cancer of tropical violence and terror has spread northward to U.S. soil. Miami is the first tropicalized U.S. city, a portent of what may come if North Americans do not resist the tropical disease.

These, then, are the reasons given for resistance: Central America is deadly, diseased, dangerous, disorderly, dissolute, and decadent. If visiting North Americans are to remain sound of mind and body in such a place, they must protect themselves; they must resist the horrors of the land and its cultures. For this reason, in almost every text North Americans report an inclination, growing stronger with time, to reject the influence of both the tropics and Central American culture, and to insist on Yankee virtues in the face of tropical decadence. For those unable to resist, degradation and demise are inevitable.

This tendency is most apparent in O. Henry's short stories, where the "lotus-eater" theme recurs frequently. Several of O. Henry's Yankee characters have become wastrels on the "monkey coast," and it is clear that the malevolent influence of the tropics (along with a weakness for drink) causes the condition. Throughout *Cabbages and Kings*, O. Henry reiterates the dangers of tropical enchantment in what he calls "the land of the lotus." The characters who survive these dangers are those who resist and reject them. Thus, several of the characters who have spent the most time in O. Henry's fictional country of Anchuria—Billy Keough, Frank Goodwin, and Jim Clancy—are incessantly disparaging the place, as though their refusal to admit that anything good can be found there will somehow protect them from its insidiousness.<sup>4</sup>

A review of these derogatory comments on Anchuria reveals the extremity of the characters' prejudice. At various times, O. Henry's characters refer to the fictional Central American country as "a tropical mud puddle," "this grocery

and fruit stand that they call a country," "the monkey coast," and the home of "missing links." This excessive disparagement allows the Yankees to protect themselves; asserting their superiority is considered the best way to mitigate the debilitating effects of life in the tropics: "Thus in all the scorched and exotic places of the earth, Caucasians meet when the day's work is done to preserve the fullness of the heritage by the aspersion of alien things" (Henry 616). It is telling that the narrator considers Anchurian things "alien," even though technically it is the Yankees who are alien.

The importance of this activity is revealed through several cautionary tales. One concerns the previously mentioned Halloran, a character who is trapped in Guatemala, unable to leave a railroad work crew because of a tropics-induced lethargy. "The fault's wid these tropics," Halloran says. "I've lost my grip. 'Tis the tropics that's done it" (622). A second example is Beelzebub Blythe, a drunkard for whom the tropics are an inferno: "Once in some Paradise Lost, he had foregathered with the angels of the earth. But fate had hurled him headlong down to the tropics, where flamed in his bosom a fire that was rarely quenched" (602).

O. Henry is not the only writer to note the danger of "the fetterless, idyllic round of enchanted days" in the hot countries. Squier offers some cautionary tales of his own, though in both cases the afflicted white man is not American but English. There was, perhaps, a political reason for describing lotus-eating British citizens. In the 1840s and 1850s, the U.S. was challenging British hegemony in the region; thus, comparing the faults of Englishmen (particularly their immorality in falling prey to tropical enchantment) with Yankee industry and diligence confirmed for Americans the righteousness of their manifest destiny over not only native inferiority but also old-world immorality. The cautionary tale, however, applied to all white men, no matter what their national origin: the dangers in the tropics, dangers inherent in both the hostility of the natural environment and in the indolence of native life, were deadly, and precaution was necessary.

This denigration of Central America in the works of North American writers has helped to deepen and harden the perceived distinctions between Yankee superiority and Central American inferiority. A political vision informs the subtext of their works, a vision that validated the difference between North and South, Yankee and Latin. North Americans, possessors of what they considered a stronger culture, have felt called upon and obligated to penetrate Central America and define it, interpret it, even capture it so that it might be saved from itself and redeemed. North American writers have re-produced Central America as a place of comic opera and decadence; anything serious in its political, social, or cultural life is discounted and dismissed. Central Americans have not been allowed political or ideological lives of their own. This reproduction was (and is) one way of justifying Yankee interference and domi-

nation: a trivial and comical people "require intervention by some civilized nation" (to use the words of Roosevelt's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine).

Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers were certain of the efficacy of resistance, if only because they believed that Anglo-Saxon superiority ensured their ability to rise above the hindrances imposed by an inferior native culture. Writers in the later years of the twentieth century have sensed the same need for resistance on the part of visiting North Americans. In their works, however, the success of this resistance is by no means assured. Very often, in fact, characters fail precisely because of the inadequacy of the Anglo ideals upon which their resistance is based.

This failed resistance is exemplified in the stories of Paul Bowles and to a certain extent in Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*. But the single best example of a work that calls into question the efficacy of resistance is Paul Theroux's novel *The Mosquito Coast*. This is somewhat surprising, since among contemporary travel writers Theroux is the one most firmly in the tradition of O. Henry and Richard Harding Davis—the impervious and supercilious Yankee in Central America. As a traveler, Theroux resists tropicalization at every step. The disorder of the tropics and its inhabitants dismays him, and throughout his travel book *The Old Patagonian Express*—which devotes six chapters to Central America—he comments again and again on derelict buildings, trains, and people. His assumption is that Central Americans do not recognize their degeneracy, and at last he gets "sick of lecturing people on disorder." As a sign of his resistance, he makes a point of reading the lesser-known works of great U.S. authors. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* occupies much of his time on the train; he glances up from the book only to note more examples of Central American degradation.

The imperviousness and resistance to the tropics that distinguish Theroux's travel book are also important characteristics of Allie Fox, the protagonist of Theroux's novel. Fox is a pure Yankee. Although he has gone to Honduras in order to escape the constraints that North American society imposes upon the individual, Fox retains his Yankee energies and ideals. He sees himself as one of the last true North Americans, steadfastly committed to the libertarian values of the frontier. In American history, such a commitment led inevitably to the expansion of the frontier, to manifest destiny, and when the frontier vanished, to an imperialist expansion. *The Mosquito Coast* allegorizes that history and relocates it on the tropical frontier.

Because the North American continent can no longer offer him the freedom he needs, Fox heads south to a land he believes will be free from restraints. There, Fox's Yankee energies and ideals clash with a tropical environment and a tropical culture. Unwilling to remake himself in this new land, he resists the tropical environment and rejects the adaptations that native cultures have made to that environment. Moreover, he is certain that the best way to live in

the jungle is by adapting it to his purposes. Thus, Fox, a self-proclaimed "Yankee with a knack for getting things accomplished," attempts to fix "haywire" Central America, confident that he possesses the capacity to do so.

At first things go well. Fox's self-built jungle village, Jeronimo, is "a masterpiece of order." "Control, that's the proof of civilization," Fox tells his family and the admiring natives. But maintaining that control—"the true test"—proves difficult. The tropics abrade the visitors until their world-conquering energy, represented by Fox's miraculous inventions (which stun the natives into worshipful subservience), is consumed by the chaotic jungle. This erosion is symbolized by the loss of Fox's proudest creation, the iceberg that he is towing upriver "to the hottest, darkest, nastiest corner of Honduras, where they pray for water and never see ice, and have never heard of cans, much less aerosol cans" (176). Fox fails in his attempt to deliver the ice, however.<sup>5</sup> Just as Fox's iceberg melts in the tropical heat before he can reach his destination, the energies of the Yankee begin to wear away. Resistance to the tropics fails. Manifest destiny grinds helplessly to a halt in the awesome jungle.

Frederick Pike argues that the North American frontier experience was supposed to follow a paradigmatic "dialectical process": "The civilized person arrives in America. He or she represents the thesis. Then the civilized person plunges into nature, embodying the antithesis. Ultimately, out of this process emerges the re-made human, the synthesis in which opposites fuse" (Pike 126–27). In U.S. mythology, this synthesis occurred again and again on the continental frontier. But when the frontier shifted to Latin America (as Pike demonstrates) and Anglos attempted to apply "the maximizing, extractive paradigm of capitalism" (Pratt 151), the synthesis somehow did not occur, and so the Yankees blamed the place and condemned it as evil. Allie Fox is but one example of a North American who does not experience the synthesis that is insisted upon in U.S. mythology.

Near his own end, Fox recognizes this failure but refuses to give in. His new appreciation of the Central Americans, however, stands in marked contrast to Theroux's own harsh judgments in the travel book:

He shook his head and said, "When I came here to the Mosquito Coast, I was appalled that these people had done so little to better themselves. They lived like hogs. I used to wince at their weedy crops and pathetic houses . . . That's what I used to think. Now after a year, it amazes me that they've got so much . . . I'm full of admiration for them." (291–92)

Still, Fox resists the kind of effective adaptation that has permitted the Zambus to survive in the tropics. Their type of survival seems too brutal to the North American. Ultimately, however, Fox is the one who does not survive. Resistance leads to his death.

Contemporary writers recognize the dangers of resistance. There is at least one contemporary writer, however, for whom these dangers, while real, provide the means to a deeper understanding of Central Americans. This is the poet Carolyn Forché, whose sequence of poems "In Salvador" (the first eight poems of *The Country Between Us*) is guided by the impulse to confront and cross cultural boundaries. Her poems take the persona and the reader through three stages of immersion. This process of immersion amounts to a deconstruction of the resistance motif.

The first stage of her immersion is the same experience of dislocation and de-familiarization that informs the works of so many U.S. writers. As with Joan Didion, it is a stifling terror that causes de-familiarization. This terror has a lasting effect on the persona, even when she has left El Salvador:

... I was afraid more than  
I had been, even of motels so much so  
that for months every tire blow-out  
was final, every strange car near the house  
kept watch and I strained even to remember  
things impossible to forget.  
("Return")

But Forché is led to a second stage in her immersion: the recognition that all North Americans, including herself, are implicated in this terror, since it is their government that manipulates the structures that create the terror. She has not recognized this earlier, having lived her life "in the heart/of the beast" without hearing it pounding ("The Island"). Forché learns more about the nature of the beast in El Salvador, especially through the person of the U.S. attaché there, a drunken man interested more in keeping fish than in keeping track of the situation in the country. The beast itself becomes embodied in the Salvadoran colonel, a product of U.S. training, who fills grocery sacks with human ears, the ears of his tortured victims. These things have happened in part, Forché realizes, because of our innocence, our lack of involvement, and our reluctance to question. North Americans are privileged and protected:

There is a cyclone fence between  
ourselves and the slaughter behind it  
we hover in a calm protected world like  
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.  
("Ourselves or Nothing")

Seeking to escape from this trap of Yankee making, the persona learns to overcome her culture-bound sensibilities and fears. She learns that resistance

is inadequate and misdirected. Unlike travelers in other texts, she becomes a participant in Salvadoran life, learns its history, and hears its voices, such as that of the poet Claribel Alegría. Thus, Forché is led to a third stage of immersion, the impulse to witness, "to cry out until my voice is gone to its hollow of earth." For Forché, resistance has become engagement. This engagement is, in a sense, a direct attempt to address and to redress what we might call the "official resistance" manifested in the dominant form of discourse in North American life, the media. After her journey to El Salvador, the poet is aware that the prevalent U.S. image of the place is the one served up on television news: a violent and out-of-control El Salvador edited and adjusted to fit a two-dimensional sequence of images. This "official discourse" sanctions a sort of national resistance to those images. The impressions of El Salvador are conveyed in neatly controlled fifteen-second spots that adapt the images for the nightly news spectacle, alternating them with aspirin commercials, no less and no more important. The audience gets a dose, but only a small dose, and no harm is done. El Salvador is reduced to an object lesson soon lost among other images. The dominant discourse of the media thus inculcates resistance. Forché seeks to counter this discourse by exposing it and deconstructing it.

Several writers have alluded to Wonderland in their works on Central America. O. Henry in particular found correspondences between Central American reality and Lewis Carroll's fantasy. *Cabbages and Kings*, taking its title from the walrus and carpenter episode in *Through the Looking Glass*, develops what amounts to a running gag on the Wonderland theme. The implications of this set of allusions help illuminate the motif of resistance.

The idea, of course, is that Yankee travelers, like Alice, find themselves in an illogical place, where everything is backward, askew, or "haywire." And like Alice, the travelers—whether factual writers of travel accounts or fictional characters on a journey—resist the gravitational pull of the place's illogic. Alice demands reason and rationality (as she conceives them) and the Yankees demand order, efficiency, progress, and civilization. What both Alice and the Yankees forget is that *they* are the strange ones; it is their logic or ideals that are out of place, backward, or askew. By insisting that the natives of Wonderland and Central America have got it all wrong, by resisting the cultural geography of the place, by imposing their own maps, they are attempting to assert a superior, privileged world-view that simply does not obtain on the other side of the boundary. Ultimately, the Wonderland allusion betrays more than the writers intend; they share with Alice an inability to comprehend that things are different through the tropical looking glass and that this difference has its own distinct validity.

## Notes

1. Many people in the United States in the nineteenth century were certain of a not-too-distant future in which the Anglo-Saxon race would control tropical America. As early as 1801, Thomas Jefferson envisioned a time "when our rapid multiplication will expand itself . . . and cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms, and by similar laws; nor can we contemplate with satisfaction either blot or mixture on that surface" (quoted in Horsman 92).
2. Reginald Horsman, in his excellent study *Race and Manifest Destiny*, demonstrates that North Americans were apt to consider the rest of the hemisphere empty and available for their own expansion.
3. Walker's book *The War in Nicaragua* is one of the central documents in the history of United States–Central American relations, a document as telling as the Monroe Doctrine or the Roosevelt Corollary. The book is significant for several reasons: (1) it is one of the first books written by a North American on Central America; (2) it is an exceptional exposition of the racial attitudes toward Latin America prevalent at that time; (3) it details a clash between North Americans and Central Americans that in many ways presages the numerous clashes that followed; and (4) it is a highly unusual travel book, perhaps unique, given that the traveler in this case ended up taking over the government of the country. For an extended analysis of Walker's prose, see my article "William Walker and the 'Discovery' of Central America."
4. My own experiences in the "gringo bars" of Central America have taught me that this type of talk still persists among the rather large expatriate community in the region. People who have spent years in Central America love to gather in these bars and decry the native culture. It is a curious contradiction.
5. An interesting parallel can be made with the opening chapter of García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad*, in which a band of gypsies succeeds in delivering the first chunk of ice ever to appear in remote Macondo. The gypsies succeed where Allie Fox, the North American "with a knack for getting things done," fails.

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