JUNGLE STORIES: NORTH AMERICAN REPRESENTATIONS OF TROPICAL PANAMA

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ABSTRACT. As the American tropics came under the influence of the United States during the nineteenth century, policymakers, businesspeople, and bureaucrats began to act directly on the region. Based on firsthand experience and on knowledge gained from published accounts, a picture of Central America, particularly Panama, began to take shape in the collective imagination. Eventually two general narratives—one positive, one negative—emerged. These contradictory narratives were used to legitimate imperialist intervention and actions in the Panama Canal Zone in the early twentieth century. Keywords: imperialism, Panama, Panama Canal Zone, representations, tropics.

'Tis a land that still with potent charm
And wondrous, lasting spell
With mighty thrall enchaineth all
Who long within it dwell
'Tis a land where the Pale Destroyer waits
And watches eagerly;
'Tis, in truth, but a breath from life to death,
In the Land of the Cocoanut Tree.

—James Stanley Gilbert, Panama Patchwork, 1908

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as tropical Central America came under increasing U.S. influence, U.S. policymakers, businesspeople, missionaries, and bureaucrats began to transform the region to meet their needs.¹ They built railways, led military invasions, established banana and coffee plantations, and eventually dug a canal across Panama. Their published accounts and artistic renderings of Central America drew on more generalized, archetypal ideas in the art, history, literature, and photographs of tropics around the world to form a specific discourse about the Central American tropics.² Two opposing narratives constituted this discourse: positive ones about Edenic paradises, fertile soil, and exotic beauty; and negative ones about moral laxity, dangerous landscapes, disease, and the

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threatening abundance of the jungle. These varied ways of seeing Central America revealed themselves in more than just semantic representations; they influenced U.S. actions and policies in the tropics. These contradictory narratives were used to legitimate imperialist intervention and actions in the Panama Canal Zone in the early twentieth century.

The Discourse of the Tropics

Lines of latitude have long been used to demarcate tropical regions. Aristotle, for example, separated the world horizontally into frigid, temperate, and torrid (tropical) zones. Today the tropics are depicted as the region that lies between 23°30' north latitude and 23°30' south latitude—the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn. Alternatively, the tropics have been defined using temperature and precipitation isolines. These have varied somewhat, from Ellen Churchill Semple’s (1911) inclusion of areas within the 20° mean annual isotherm to Isaiah Bowman’s (1937, 381) use of the 25° mean annual isotherm. A physical geography textbook today designates them as lands within the 18° mean annual isotherm (Strahler and Strahler 1996, 165).

Agreement on the climatic character of the region—the heat and humidity associated with the tropical lowlands—is more general. In fact, highland areas such as the Meseta Central of Costa Rica were excluded from the tropical discourse because, as one traveler stated, they are as “cool and healthful as the coastal plains are torrid and fever-infested” (Putnam 1913, 10). The interpretation of tropical heat and humidity has shifted over the past two centuries, however. At various times North Americans have imagined the Central American lowland tropics as distant paradises or fever coasts (in the nineteenth century), as banana republics (in the early to mid—twentieth century), as places for revolution (in the 1970s and 1980s), and as sites for romantic ecotrails (in the 1990s). In this article I use the word tropics to refer to the lowland tropics, and I deal exclusively with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In this geographical and historical context, the character of tropical climates was frequently expressed in subjective terms, even when placed within a so-called scientific framework. Turn-of-the-century U.S. natural science textbooks typically included a classification of the tropical flora, fauna, temperatures, and diseases in Central America. Such descriptions, however, were frequently intertwined with an author’s opinions concerning heat, disease, dark-skinned peoples, hot or spicy foods, exotic fruit, fecund vegetation, and economic underdevelopment. For example, in his 1918 Handbook of Commercial Geography, Geo. G. Chisholm describes the specific rainfall amounts, humidity, and temperature that are characteristic of the tropics while noting the “excessive” heat and “irksome” humidity (p. 23). “Scientific” discourse on the tropics was full of value-laden descriptions.

Without doubt, the label tropical has been used to stereotype and homogenize a wide range of places, from Singapore to Sierra Leone. Even so, the discourse is heavily influenced by a distinctive set of regional identities. In Western discourse, archetypal tropical representations can be identified for Central America, for West Africa, and for the South Pacific. Perhaps most famous among these is the overwhelmingly posi-
tive Eurocentric portrayal of the South Pacific. Based on the gendered, Edenic visions of Captain James Cook, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, and Paul Gaugin, a recognizable image was set by the early twentieth century. Indeed, it was so well ingrained that when Alec Waugh arrived in Tahiti in 1930, he wearily commented: “[T]he South Seas are terribly vieuxjeu. They have been so written about and painted. Long before you get to them you know precisely what you are to find” (Waugh 1930, 20).

By contrast, based on a well-deserved reputation for extremely high death rates, representations of the West African tropics invoked fears of death and disease. “The deadliest spot on earth” was how British doctors described the region to Mary Kingsley prior to her 1893 journey (Kingsley 1987, 12). As epidemiological danger combined with racial prejudice, travelers to the West African coast were warned to prepare “for lonely ports of call, for sickening heat, for swarming multitudes of blacks” (Davis 1907, 8). This discourse, of course, hit its zenith in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1910). Such views are still reproduced in sources as varied as journalistic “rough-guide” accounts of the horrors of West African politics and literary anthologies of “rain-forest” fiction like Tales from the Jungle: A Rainforest Reader (Katz and Chapin 1995), which continue to include as staples selections from Conrad and Kingsley.

Representations of the American tropics likewise developed a recognizable character. More so than descriptions of the South Pacific or West Africa, ideas about the American tropics were ambivalent. As the geographer Susan Place writes,

Since their first encounters with Latin America, Europeans have expressed mixed feelings about the tropical rain forest. The lure of fabulous wealth and the hope of finding El Dorado have wrestled with the dread of mythical beings and horrible diseases in the green hell. Accounts of the tropical rain forest, whether novels, travel journals, or scientific reports, reveal at least as much about their authors as they do about the forest. Every writer represents to a certain extent the prevailing worldview of his or her time and culture, but perceptions of the rain forest are also filtered through the lens of meanings created by the individual’s experiences and beliefs. (Place 1993, 1)

Much of the strongly positive sense of the American tropics was in place by the early nineteenth century. A number of commentators, including Kathryn Manthorne (1989) and Fredrick B. Pike (1992) have suggested that North Americans interpolated the region’s character from only a few sources, including newspaper articles, artists’ reproductions, and lavishly illustrated travelers’ accounts such as John Lloyd Stephens’s 1841 Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan. Given that the U.S. populace knew little of the region, visions of South and Central America were easily lumped together. So it was that, with comparatively little geographical specificity, a “unified pictorial consciousness of Latin America emerged in the United States ... in direct response to a lacuna of knowledge. Its image as a land of scientific wonders, golden riches, and edenic innocence could be maintained only so long as accurate information and direct experience were at a minimum” (Manthorne 1989, 60–61).
By the mid-nineteenth century more detailed knowledge was available. Central America began to take on a more complex (and geographically specific) meaning for the U.S. public after travelers’ harrowing descriptions of tropical places became a commonplace of popular journals (Miller 1989, 118). The serialization of works by Stephens and by Alexander von Humboldt, the accounts of later explorers who were searching for Mayan ruins, and the post-1849 memoirs of California-bound travelers who crossed the Isthmus of Panama increased the information available about the region. Artists (and later itinerant photographers) painted and photographed scenes in Central America (Figure 1). These visual images were then reproduced and shown to general audiences throughout the United States. Whether Frederick Cat- herwood’s etchings of pyramids near Mérida or Martin Johnson Heade’s paintings of hummingbirds, these works influenced the visual image of the tropics.

Writers also depicted a more realistic side of travel, making associations between Central America and tropical diseases, especially malaria and yellow fever. Panama was viewed as particularly deadly (and indeed it was), with death rates of around 60 per 1,000 during the 1880s (Harrison 1978, 163). Although endemic diseases were a significant problem for travelers and residents alike, regional overgeneralization painted all places as dangerous by virtue of their location in Central America.
Books written about agricultural enterprises in the early twentieth century, especially those that described banana plantations, challenged some of these images. To give just one example, a business-oriented writer in 1929, while acknowledging the negative aspects of plantations in the tropics, stressed North Americans' ability to dominate and tame nature: "For four and a half centuries the white man has battled against nature and against his fellows in that region between Cancer and Capricorn which forms the American tropics. And nature until lately has always won. Only now is man gaining a measure of mastery" (Crowther 1929, v). Likewise, the United States' success in digging the Panama Canal further demonstrated that, if North Americans applied "the principles of modern science in their economic and social life" (Price 1935, 2), the dangers of the tropics could be reduced. The theme of "man's domination over nature" was to influence North American visions of the region well into the twentieth century, through images of United Fruit Company or U.S. Marine Corps activities in Central America.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Panama gave the region another very specific, hegemonic meaning and, for a time, exemplified the Central American tropics for the U.S. public. Four factors account for this: First, by virtue of its location—9° north latitude—Panama by definition was the quintessential tropics. It therefore was a suitable model for what a tropical place should look like (Figure 2). Second, Panama (and to a lesser extent Nicaragua) continually intersected with the development of the United States. The United States intervened militarily, signed treaties, built railroads, and dug the canal. In addition, private U.S. investors involved themselves in schemes ranging from railroads to plantations. These common episodes of history meant regular mention of the isthmus in U.S. newspapers. Third, Panama (and again, to a lesser extent, Nicaragua) was the route for North American travelers on their way to California, the Pacific Northwest, and even South America. Because these passengers frequently recounted their experiences, the body of literature on Panama grew. Regional knowledge increased so much that an Englishwoman who sailed to Chile in 1853 could write: "[T]o describe Panama to North American readers would be like describing New York or Boston, or any other city with which we are familiar" (Merwin 1966, 16). Fourth, neighboring countries, especially those to the north, were comparatively underimagined—Panama's strong image vanquished them. The importance of Panama after construction of the canal began is made clear in a 1913 traveler's memoir:

Panama is the key to Central America . . . not only in a geographic sense; the construction of the Panama Canal is doing more than has been done in four centuries to awaken that dormant territory and untangle its political and economic snarls. So far as the United States is concerned, the Canal practically means the rediscovery of Central America; it has focused national attention southward. (Putnam 1913, 1)

North American Images of Panama

Positive views of Panama can generally be connected with traveling to the tropics, whereas negative views can generally be associated with living in the tropics. Until
Fig. 2—Jungles of the Panamanian isthmus. Source: Otis 1867, 95. (Reproduced courtesy of the Special Collections Division, University of Washington Libraries; negative number uw17828)
the advent of long-distance air transport in the mid-twentieth century, travel from the United States to Panama was almost always by boat, thus providing a geographical and temporal pause between the temperate and tropical regions. This interlude was, in fact, highly recommended: “The tropics should be visited by way of the sea. You come into them gently, almost imperceptibly. You are more impressed by the intensifying blueness of the water and sky than by the increasing heat” (Bullard 1914, 1). Such stylized ocean voyages were a form of excitement: “Oh yes, there is always a thrill in it—this setting sail for the hot countries. . . . [I]t enslaves one like a drug of which one disapproves” (Flandrau 1908, 10). From the decks of a steamship the response was overwhelmingly positive:

Tweeds and stiff collars have disappeared, replaced by soft raiment; little “affaires de cœur,” tentative and unsettled until now, take on a serious complexion. After dusk, cozy coigns of vantage on the boat deck testify to the rapid growth of love’s young (or old) dream; beneath the glimpses of the crescent horned moon, romance weaves her magic web, in blissful anticipation of seven lotus-eating days, seven tropic nights to come before the enchantment shall be broken by contact with the world of painful realities. (Bland 1920, 30)

On initial arrival in Panama, writers wondered at the palpably different, exotic nature of the place—a climate and landscape far removed from everyday life in temperate New York, Chicago, or San Francisco. One new arrival commented: “Even at this early hour a drowsy softness pervaded the air—a stillness that could be felt. Was it possible that we were but four days from the snow and sleet, the icy streets and blustering winds of New York City?” (Peixotto 1913, 6). The state of wonderment continued as northerners basked “in a Southern sun . . . all a-glow with a tropical fever” (Tomes 1855, 14). Writers concentrated on what they saw as different and exotic—the lush vegetation, bright tropical colors, unusual insects and animals, and unfamiliar sounds and smells. Arthur Bullard, for example, described “the new scale of color values which the intense sun of the tropics requires” and “the pungent fragrance of the Southland” (1914, 2–3). North Americans also assumed a fecundity about the region, illustrating it in rhyme:

From Jungle fastness they come  
Gay Orchids plucked at morning;  
And then, before the sun has set,  
Zone porches they’re adorning!  
(Core and McKeown 1939)

Visitors marveled at the speed at which plants grew, creating a veritable “flood of tropical vegetation” (Tomes 1855, 78). Even a century later, an author observed that “the tropical cousin of the tree that grows in Brooklyn will likely grow somewhere between two and nine times as fast in Panama or Honduras” (Wilson 1951, 5). Given these assumptions, the commonplace conclusion was that tropical living was as easy as reaching to the closest tree for sustenance. Ellsworth Huntington expressed this thought when he somewhat jokingly opined that in tropical regions “the native has
nothing to do except lie under the trees and wait for the fruit to drop into his mouth” (Huntington 1922, 281). This contrasted with the perceived hard life of winter and work in the temperate zone.

Such positive descriptions were often used to promote agricultural enterprise. Because tropical land was available for the taking with minimal effort by U.S. imperialists, they came up with a variety of schemes to promote rubber, coffee, and banana plantations. Drawing heavily on the idea of tropical fertility, these schemes suggested that one’s choice of crop was as simple as deciding what would bring the highest price on the world market (a claim which is still being made today [Slater 1995, 115]). All that an investor needed was the input of labor and technology. Implicit in such representations was that the indigenous population had been unable to provide adequate labor or technology, thereby explaining the availability of land (Adams 1914, 203).

Investors equated an “untapped” natural landscape with profit. Reference might be made to “the wondrous wealth of the Isthmian forest” (Otis 1867, 90) or to the fertility of the soil. “Stick an umbrella in the ground over night” said one commentator, “and you’ll have an umbrella tree in the morning” (Putnam 1913, 89). Even after a keen awareness of the limitations of the soil developed, the land was still portrayed as an extraordinary, if temporary, resource. Plantation profits “would amply justify the exhaustion of the land” (Crowther 1929, 245).

For much of the nineteenth century the American tropics were represented as a long-lost Garden of Eden, with references to Arcadia, paradise, Atlantis, and Elysium dotting the literary landscape (Manthorne 1989, 11). Although the North American literature on Panama lacked such Edenic narratives, it did extol the idea of “traveling back in time” (McGrane 1989, 104). Exoticized time-travel was typically a journey into the “jungle” and a stylized encounter with the “natives.” Going into the jungle, tacitly moving away from civilization, was frequently accomplished by the most primitive means, which intensified the exotic character of the region. Readers of the National Geographic Magazine in 1922, for example, learned that “to sit in a real dug-out made from a giant tropical forest tree, with the beautifully developed form of an Indian in front of you . . . is an experience of a lifetime” (Fairchild 1922, 141). In their encounters, explorers typically presented nonwhite people as remnant exotic others, “untouched by the outside world as were their ancestors when Balboa passed that way” (Halliburton 1929, 137). Along the route the traveler might come across a “lan-guird native girl swaying in the hammock” (Tomes 1855, 173), surrounded by an abundance of “plantains, bananas, mangoes, melons, mame apples, pines, and yellow oranges, fragrant with their mellow odors, and gushing with ripeness” (Tomes 1855, 174). These narratives led to positive representations that became part of the public discourse about tropical Panama.

Despite these positive expressions, a negative narrative about Panama’s tropics became increasingly common as travelers more thoroughly explored and worked in the region. Panama’s tropics were often presented as a region of danger and discomfort, of snakes, malarial mosquitoes, and rank, dank vegetation. A minor poet who lived in Panama for twenty years warned:
Beyond the Chagres River
Are paths that lead to death—
To the fever’s deadly breezes,
To malaria’s poisonous breath!
Beyond the tropic foliage,
Where the alligator waits,
Are the mansions of the Devil—
His original estates!
(Gilbert 1908, 14)

A recent academic treatise explains the coexistence of positive and negative narratives about the Central American tropics by suggesting that “beneath the appearance of sensual and exotic beauty lurked the threat of sudden and horrible destruction. The most loathsome and terrible creatures crouched in the gorgeous vegetation, coiled in the arabesques of vines, or were disguised in the flowers” (Miller 1989, 120). Given that many nineteenth-century North American visitors arrived in Panama intent on traveling quickly across the country but were slowed by various obstacles, it is not surprising that the purple prose of the romantic arrival scenes was soon supplanted by more dismal reflections on local conditions. A darker description of Panama is evinced: “Forests, so closely interwoven with thick growth that they were impenetrable to light, which had darkened the country in perpetual night for ages, had to be cleared. Walls of jungle had to be struck down, and treacherous swamps, in which man had never before ventured, had to be made firm as a foundation of rock” (Tomes 1855, 114) (Figure 3).

In general, the longer the physical contact with Panama, the more negative the impression. As one perceptive traveler put it, “Our poetic conception of the place, excited by the distant view some hours ago, now began to vanish rapidly and forever” (Scruggs 1910, 2). The heat, once a pleasant diversion from winter, became oppressive. Extended contact with the tropics would eventually negatively affect everyone in some fashion. Environmental determinism, especially in the popular works of geographers, reinforced this concern. Semple, for example, claimed that the tropics induced indolence and self-indulgence by relaxing “the mental and moral fiber” (1911, 626). Others, including Huntington (1924) and Grenfell Price (1939) fortified these sentiments with actual visits to Panama. Panamanians and North Americans who lived in the tropics were described as “gaunt, skeleton persons clothed in white, and with ghastly death’s heads under Panama hats, [who] stared with ghostly wonder upon us animated beings, fresh and fat from the land of the living” (Tomes 1855, 43).

An important point, however, must be made about the relationship between representations of the tropics and the social scientific idea of environmental determinism. North American ideas about Central America were no doubt heavily influenced by long-held beliefs in environmental determinism (Frenkel 1992) and by a particularly virulent strain of determinism that emerged in the late nineteenth century (Livingstone 1991). The tropics were considered an environment that “inhibit[ed] the forward march of civilization” (Blaut 1993, 69). But these elements of environmental
determinism were part of a larger discourse on the phenomenon of tropicality, largely composed of impressionistic reactions to the natural environment—the soil, the jungle, the light, and the heat.

Mention of the tropics also invoked notions of disease. Based on prevailing miasmatic theories of disease, the warm and moist climate was thought to be a breeding ground for disease. “The alternate action of sun and rain upon the rank vegetable growth, saturated with moisture and seething in a constant summer-heat, necessarily keeps up a perpetual process of rotting fermentation, which engenders intermittent, bilious, congestive, and yellow fevers, and the other malignant results of impure miasmatic exhalation” (Tomes 1855, 51). Because yellow fever was historically associated with Central America, some even talked of a “sickly yellow mist of Panama” (Davis 1896, 197).

Disease was indeed a great problem in the nineteenth century, but by the early twentieth century the discovery and understanding of the mosquito vector had changed North Americans’ ability to control mosquito-borne diseases. A dramatic drop was forged in the disease-related mortality rate in the Canal Zone from roughly
Within only a few years it became possible to visit the tropics and experience the “thrill of pleasure in being near this spot and feeling safe, safe from that microscopic enemy” (Fairchild 1922, 140). In other words, living safely was possible in formerly lethal Panama. Still, even though medical reports proved that rates of disease were descending in Panama, not everyone accepted the image of health. For some, simply the idea of living in proximity to Panama or Panamanians remained unacceptable. Their fears were stoked by somewhat higher disease rates outside the Canal Zone, which meant that the Panamanian environment could continue to be portrayed as dangerous. In 1935, for example, doctors dispensed advisories including: “Canal Zone employees, because of danger of malarial fever, dysentery, etc., must, of necessity, confine their recreational activities to the Canal Zone” (PCC 95 A 1/1935).

The negative tropical narrative likewise invoked the notion of jungle, a word well explored in a number of recent deconstructive articles. Candace Slater summarizes its nuances well: “[T]he jungle is an emphatically non-paradisal space. A figurative as well as literal maze (of housing laws, for instance), it is also a place of ruthless struggle for survival (‘Man, its a real jungle out there,’ one may say with a grimace). Rife with disease (‘jungle fever’) and decay (‘jungle rot’), it is home to beasts and unsavory characters such as hoboes and tramps” (Slater 1995, 118).

Jungle may have a precise botanical meaning, but it also, as the preceding account shows, encompasses much of what was mythical or negative about the tropics. Many accounts semantically distilled negative ideas of the jungle from the more ambiguous category of tropics. If imperial North Americans felt competent to cope with the tropics, they considered the jungle to be out of control. They rarely lived in the jungle. Instead, they relished the dangers of their brief journeys into the “primitive” jungle and wrote of them in lurid accounts.

The jungle was taken to be a timeless feature, “centuries old,” casting a “perpetual shadow” over the landscape until “civilization dispersed the dark cloud of growth impenetrable to the sun” (Tomes 1855, 50). From the U.S. point of view, the jungle was antithetical to the evident civilization of cleared and quonsetted suburban landscapes in the Canal Zone. The jungle was something for North American residents to fear and avoid. A similar sentiment was still in full voice, despite the intervening years, when a writer for the National Geographic Magazine described his visit to Panama’s jungle as “a bit frightening suddenly to find, not houses and lamp-posts and the noisy people who have composed the customary environment and whom one understands, but in every direction and everywhere strange, silent tree trunks, no two alike” (Fairchild 1922, 131).

**Responses to the Panama Canal**

These positive and negative narratives of the tropical discourse gave rise to varied responses, which, as James S. Duncan (1993) has argued more generally, served to reinforce dominant ideologies and actions. Certainly the resulting representations
dovetailed with U.S. interests in Panama. Nowhere was this clearer than in the Panama Canal Zone.

Positive narratives were used to make the case that life was good in the region. By 1912, for example, forests were being replaced by a number of small towns. These towns—at least where white North Americans lived—reminded visitors of new suburban developments in U.S. cities. Cream-and-gray stucco houses, fronted by side-walks and trees, were surrounded by lush, manicured lawns. Rosy-hued descriptions of arrival were used to attract even more residents.

Although positive narratives were useful for economic enterprise and reflected a way of life for North Americans in Panama, they never came to dominate early-twentieth-century impressions of the Panamanian tropics, for a number of reasons. First, despite paradisal notions, North Americans found these images at odds with the realities of living in heat and humidity. Second, the hardships of tropical existence were useful for justifying the high salaries and luxurious housing in North American—run settlements. In the Canal Zone, for example, U.S. officials legitimated a substantial housing allowance and a 25 percent salary differential on the basis of the apparent “hardship” of “whites” living in the tropics. As a result, attempts by Canal officials to downplay the positive aspects of Panama were frequent. In a 1921 letter to a congressional-committee staffer, the executive secretary of the Panama Canal Company had to justify extended vacations for employees. He attempted to convince Congress that, despite the glowing descriptions by tourists and despite the observation that the Zone had been transformed from pesthole to paradise, living in Panama was a real hardship: “It cannot be denied that a humid and constantly warm climate such as we have here—nine degrees north of the equator—is enervating, and in the course of months saps the vitality of people from the temperate climates, and it stands to reason that more leave should be granted employees working under such circumstances” (PCC 28 B 5/1921). Although U.S. bureaucrats admitted that Panama could be pleasant, they stressed that for those who really knew, this was an “enchantment lent by distance” (PCC 33 A 11/1925) and that the pleasure diminished with time.

Canal administrators employed various negative tropical narratives to justify their policies. They made much of the mental and moral laxity of life in the tropics that environmental determinists traditionally warned about, and they prepared visitors for a host of climatic dangers (Livingstone 1991). The tropical sun, for example, had to be dealt with. Guidebooks warned travelers to “have at hand brown or blue-glass spectacles or eyeglasses to soften the glare in the middle of the day, wear a wide-brimmed hat, and carry an umbrella” (Barrett 1913, 21). Official houses in the Zone were only painted certain colors—typically institutional green, gray, or white—because of the “well-established fact that certain colors suitable for certain people [that is, North Americans] are absolutely necessary in the homes in the tropics” (PCC 23 N 3/1930).

One of the most direct uses of negative narratives—including notions of environmental determinism—can be linked to the formation of the Canal Zone itself. When North Americans first began to conceive of a canal, much of what would become the Canal Zone was rural. A few individuals cultivated the land, but in North
American eyes the undeveloped areas were all one big jungle. By the 1930s they responded in three ways to the tropical landscape: They demarcated a so-called sanitised zone (Figure 4); they maintained that sanitised zone; and they domesticated (read tamed) the Canal Zone landscape.

Demarcation of a sanitised zone involved depopulating portions of the Canal Zone. Invoking health concerns as well as control over labor, sanitary officers removed all nonofficial and rural inhabitants from the Zone. Except for about 3,000 acres reserved as a sanitised zone, in which it was officially deemed safe to live, the officers depopulated the entire 450-square-mile Canal Zone (Geographical Review 1918, 160). Within the apparent safety of the sanitised zone, planners suggested
building small towns. Although the phrase *sanitized zone* was rooted in health considerations, the label remained long after sanitation efforts had reduced the incidence of malaria and other diseases. Ostensibly, the forced removal from rural areas of the Canal Zone of West Indians (hired as canal laborers by the North Americans) and Panamanians lowered the rates of malaria. As one health official put it in 1912, depopulation “removed from our midst a tremendous number of foci of infections—malaria, intestinal parasites, and other tropical diseases—making the question of sanitation comparatively simple by localizing it in and about the settlements in which the population lived and worked” (PCC 28 B 5/1912).

This pseudoscientific medical justification had a mainly social meaning, for proven dangers had mostly disappeared by the time those words were written. Health conditions in the 1930s Canal Zone were about the same as those in U.S. cities (PCC 37 E 25/1916). Nonetheless, representations of unsafe and disease-ridden tropical landscapes endured. Zonians—long-term North American residents of the Canal Zone—were mentally and physically living in a militarily and culturally sanitized zone.

Panama Canal memorandums were authoritative on the subject of separating the Zone from the surrounding forest, and cleared land was preferred over forest. In a typical health-department memorandum on malaria, white workers were warned not “to leave the Zone in the evenings, not to go swimming or riding outside of restricted areas after dark” (PCC 2 D 9/1920). For residents, life in the Zone was “like a man in a fort surrounded by enemies.” He was “fairly safe if he [kept] within the walls” (PCC 2 D 9/1920). The imagery of a fort under siege invoked a psychological sense of danger and uncertainty that lasted for generations. North American actions and construction in the Zone reinforced these fears, whether the issue was technologically superior hospitals, a prohibition on new houses outside the sanitized zone, or even a halt to Boy Scout camp outs. Even in 1960, a U.S. governor of the Canal Zone described it as “still surrounded by one of the most unhealth[y] regions of the world. [Its] residents must continually guard against external disease” (PCC 28 D 116/1960). Segregation from an alien jungle landscape implied security and signified a great deal more than safety from disease. It spelled safety from unknown cultures, from the climate, and from the threatening and impinging forests.

A final response to the representation of Panama as an out-of-control jungle was the domestication of the sanitized areas, leading to a familiar, suburbanized landscape in the Canal Zone. As North Americans eliminated the jungle near their houses, they took an engineer’s control of the very landscape they rhetorically feared. Formal gardens, which included many plants that were native to the surrounding jungle, allowed North Americans to create a safe and manicured landscape. The jungle became “civilized” within the Canal Zone: “A parklike effect has been aimed at, with open vistas, to the avoidance of the close confusion of the jungle into which native vegetation lapses when left alone or indiscriminately cultivated” (PCC 28 D 3/1921). Thus the very elements that epitomized the jungle were effectively domesticated. When arranged and trimmed back in a controlled fashion, jungle plants were
redefined as safe. Many houses “became through the zeal and taste of their mistresses, . . . veritable gardens of beauty—miniature representatives of the jungle” (Bishop 1913, 311).

THE PANAMANIAN JUNGLE AND THE IMPERIAL TROPICS

Representations produced by the Central American tropical discourse defined the development and landscape of the Panama Canal Zone. These images of the tropics as both paradise and dangerous landscape became Panama’s image from afar. The Canal Zone was, especially for those living there, a distant place, antithetical in many ways to life in the United States. Every cultural aspect was modified by the word tropical, including architecture, race, food, clothing, color, and, of course, disease. Though rooted very much in actual experience, ideas concerning Panama’s tropical setting, with its peculiar combination of positive and negative narratives, formed the basis for a North American understanding of the place and justified U.S. imperialism.

At the same time, it is important to realize that a focus on the representations of North Americans in Panama has limitations. It does not, for example, provide evidence of other voices. It does not show the tropical landscape as experienced by non–North Americans or, indeed, all early-twentieth-century North Americans. Panamanians had an entirely different series of experiences, largely untold. For all intents and purposes, alternative voices of Panama and Panamanians have been silenced through these narratives. Still, such images shaped the physical landscape of the Panama Canal Zone.

Although I have written about the past—more than a century ago—images of the tropics are no less powerful today. Their form, however, is quite different. It is indeed ironic that the same places which turn-of-the-century North Americans viewed with such ambivalence are today considered prime ecotourist destinations—and that the attraction of those places is the very tropicality which was negative in the past. As the first screen of the Panamanian National Tourist Board’s Web site puts it,

Dear Friends:
Panama offers many attractions just waiting to be discovered: virgin rain forests teeming with exotic wildlife and inhabited by pre-Columbian indian tribes; a thousand tropical islands in two oceans; hundreds of white sand beaches. (IPAT 1996)

NOTES

1. Sometimes the term Central America includes Panama, sometimes not. Here I refer to Panama as part of Central America because its landscape and recent history fit into the Central American discourse.

2. Discourses can productively be viewed as sets of preconceptions, prejudices, mind-sets, and ideas that strongly influence, enable, and constrain social practice. In this way, the tropics constitute a discourse of landscape—a bounded mind-set common to those in the dominant society, which mentally and geographically determines meaning attached to a set of facts and perceptions about the place. By informing modes of U.S. representation in Panama, they provide both rationale and validation for actions.
3. In fact, during this era most travel books on South America, and many early accounts of arrival in Oregon and California, began with a chapter on the isthmus simply because it was on the way to many destinations.

4. PCC [Panama Canal Commission] documents. The notations used here reflect the filing system in use from the time of early construction until 1960. The date at the end of each such reference is not usually part of the official code but is added here for the reader’s convenience.

5. Ironically, the jungle of central Panama was far from the monolithic entity suggested by the narrative. As is typical of many observers of so-called traditional landscapes, visitors assumed that because the Canal Zone was cloaked in jungle in 1900, it had always been jungle. However, according to Carl Sauer in The Early Spanish Main, when the Spanish first made contact with Panama, the land was largely open savannah, with shrubby secondary growth along rivers as a result of intensive indigenous land use (1966, 244).

References

Core, S., and A. C. McKeown. 1939. Isthmiiana. Panama: Panama American Publishing Co.


PCC [Panama Canal Commission]. Various dates. Documents at the National Archives Record Center, Greenbelt, Md.


