6 | Nature and Civilization: Nineteenth-Century Travelers and Twentieth-Century Escapists

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PART THREE
Ascending, we [. . .] saw behind us a beautiful valley extending toward Hocotan, but all waste, and suggesting a feeling of regret that so beautiful a country should be in such miserable hands.
—John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1: 86)

**One of the recurrent** elements of many representations of the Latin American Other is nature—nature as sublime mountainscapes, forbidding deserts, or luxurious tropical vegetation and wildlife. Often, exotic nature is linked to the local population; for better or worse, *indios* and *mestizos* are seen as closer to nature, that is, in beautiful harmony with their natural environment or else as equally savage. In a hemispheric perspective, this tied in with fear and temptation as parts of the cultural imaginary concerning the south. It was closely linked to fantasies or politico-economic programs of exploration, penetration, appropriation, and exploitation. In her article “Landscape and the Imperial Subject: U.S. Images of the Andes, 1859–1930,” Deborah Poole has shown how the scopic regimes governing pictorial representations of the mountain ranges—a painting by Frederic Edwin Church, an engraving by Ephraim George Squier, and photographs by Hiram Bingham—can be regarded as deriving from differing and competing intellectual approaches, but also “as part of a single discursive and political formation premised on the unquestioned right of North Americans to appropriate the South American landscape to their own, sometimes fanciful ends.” But in her conclusion she also states, “I would not want to argue that these—or any—images are bound by any single ideology or discourse. The images [. . .] also carried within them [. . .] a sensuous undercurrent of historical memory, myth, and desire” (Poole 132). Art, cultural productions in general, we may say, carry their share of subjectivity, openness, possibly even antidiscursive messages. As far as Latinamericanism is concerned, it is necessary to consider to what extent the nature-culture complex is part of the appropriative approach or else a redeeming feature. This chapter focuses
on travel narratives and fictions from the nineteenth and the middle-to-later twentieth century. But whose nature? Whose culture? Isn’t the imperial gaze part of a reciprocal process? An example from Mexican literature may shed some light on the questions to be asked.

Shortly before his violent death in revolutionary Mexico of 1913, the male American protagonist of Carlos Fuentes’s novel *Gringo Viejo* (1985) comments that for US Americans, there is no frontier left except the one toward the south. The old gringo, that remarkable fictional version of the American writer Ambrose Bierce, and the female protagonist, Harriet Winslow, have traveled to Mexico,

he consciously, she unintentionally, to confront the next frontier of American consciousness, the most difficult of all, [. . .] the strangest, because it was the closest and therefore the one most often forgotten, most often ignored, and most feared when it stirred from its long lethargy. (Fuentes, *Gringo*, 186)

The experience of crossing the border makes Harriet wish that she might learn not to have the urge “to save Mexico for democracy and progress” but to “live with Mexico in spite of progress and democracy, that each of us carries his Mexico and his United States within him, a dark and bloody frontier we dare to cross only at night: that’s what the old gringo had said” (187).

The equation of national and individual identity in this passage reveals that the novel depicts the experience of collective identity formation as a process of intercultural reciprocal mirroring. This process is presented in the shape of interpersonal encounters that, in turn, influence as well as symbolize the intrapersonal discovery of selfhood. Alterity thus appears as the alien self. In keeping with Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Fuentes points out the parallelism of the processes of individual and social development and emphasizes that instinctual repression is the decisive albeit irksome achievement of culture/civilization.¹

The three main characters all have difficulties in their confrontation with Eros and their death instinct, and in their efforts to mediate between egotistical, chaotic-instinctual desire and altruistic, culturally promotive self-restriction.² Individually and in their interaction, they demonstrate, however, that the borderline between nature and culture is an artificial one, the effect of force, an abstraction, and as such part of a model scientifically described in psychoanalysis and cultural semiotics. It would be fatal to equate the two poles with certain national properties. The pole of nature, for instance, is as present in the United States as beyond, because the Mexican desert is but a continuation of the American one: “He was deep in the Mexican desert [. . .], continuation of the Arizona and Yuma deserts, mirror of the belt of sterile
splendors girdling the globe as if to remind it that cold sands, burning skies, and barren beauty wait patiently and alertly to again overcome the earth from its very womb: the desert” (Gringo, 15).

Their profession and, indeed, calling may make both American protagonists representatives of the party of culture: Ambrose Bierce as a writer and cultural critic, Harriet Winslow as a teacher who initially claims the position of the superego vis-à-vis the Mexicans. Yet both also follow nature, that is, their instinctual nature. The old gringo satisfies his death instinct, he fulfills his desire for dissolution. Harriet, on the other hand, is made aware of her problematic ego structure by the sexual experience that the revolutionary general Tomás Arroyo provides for her. Arroyo, in his turn, is associated with nature both by his sensuality and by his ambiguously symbolic name: arroyo meaning both “creek” and “dry wash” or “gully.” To regard him exclusively as associated with nature, however, is a typically American misunderstanding. His ethnic and social status as a mestizo and as the son of a hacienda owner and a servant woman, born out of wedlock and deprived of his material as well as his cultural inheritance, make him the representative of that racial and sociocultural mestizaje seen by the author (but also, for instance, by Octavio Paz) as a characteristic feature of the Mexican people.

By linking individual and national varieties of identity formation and the construction of alterity, Fuentes is primarily concerned with the Mexican self-image, namely a coming to terms with the assumed US American perspective, but he is also an astute observer of stereotypical problems US Americans have in dealing with their southern neighbors, and by no means only those near the border. This includes the discursive occupation of the opposition of culture and nature. The border on the Río Bravo/Rio Grande marks a historical trauma for the Mexicans who, after having lost the war with the United States, had to cede more than half of their territory. For them, nature on both sides of the river is not pristine but has been changed by their civilization, a mixed culture of Spanish and Native origin. Seen from the US side, on the other hand, the border rather has the appearance of an extension of the frontier, the historical border connecting and separating wilderness and civilization. This view entails the claim that US civilization has to be spread in the south in order to make those territories usable after the West has lost its potential for perfecting American society.

Hence the old gringo still rides into Mexico on horseback, in the tracks and, as it were, in expiation of what his father had done when he rode with the American army of conquest. Harriet, however, travels by railroad. On the one hand, she thereby represents a view of civilization that is more one-sided and more dominantly technological than that of her older and wiser compatriot. On the other hand, this difference corresponds to that of their
respective age groups, a generation gap making the historical development manifest. The United States, like its colonial predecessors, had seen itself as to a large extent defined by the uniqueness of “American” nature, as “Nature’s Nation” (cf. Perry Miller). At the beginning of the twentieth century, its self-understanding was derived from the complete subjugation of this very nature. At the end of this process, the wilderness was to be permitted to survive only in shape of the nature preserve, the national or regional park, and that is, as a part of culture, in refuges for the collective imagination, which according to Freud can be defined “as the place of compensational pleasure, the fulfillment of impossible desires, the affirmation of the greatness of one’s ego, but at the same time as a medium for the establishment of cultural identity.”

**Nature, Culture, and Civilization** are highly contested terms. To make them useful for my present argument, each has to be briefly discussed.

1. The age-old distinction between *nature* as all that is given in the universe that is not the result of human activity and, on the other hand, *culture* as the sum total of human ideas, belief systems, forms of social organization, pragmatic activities, and products is highly problematic. Philosophers have posited and evolutionary biologists have proved that humans form a separate species of animals, nothing more. All of human culture is therefore also part and product of human nature (and may be distinguished from the cultures that other animals have developed). To see nature and culture as a totality and to speak of “naturecultures” as Donna Haraway has done appears therefore as much more adequate. Nonetheless, the distinction is still in use and heuristically valuable to describe forms of interaction of humans with their environment. It turns up, in particular, in contexts where a developmental model is used: the closer a group of people are to nature, the more primitive, the less civilized they are, and vice versa. In the inter-American context, this distinction forms part of the discursive construction of the Other.

2. The second use of culture, that of an identity-defining category, also goes back a long way and was brought into discussion most forcefully by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. The idea that different groups have different sets of cultural values, ideas, and praxes, and thus form different *cultures* in the plural, is the basis of modern anthropology and cultural studies. In this sense, it is a relational category. In Fredric Jameson’s well-known, succinct formulation,

   culture [...] is not a “substance” or a phenomenon in its own right, it is an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups.
This is to say that no group “has” a culture all by itself: culture is the nimbus perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and observes another one. (“Cultural Studies,” 33)

In the holistic notion of culture as introduced in the late nineteenth century by the British founder of social anthropology, Edward B. Tylor, “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society” (Primitive Culture, 1). Tylor assumes that culture in this sense comprises every aspect of the collective life of a given human population that is not the result of biological inheritance, and that for the individual members of a group, culture is a complex of knowledge and behavior to be acquired by socialization, that is, enculturation. This holistic concept has since come under severe attack and has to be supplemented by a series of additional aspects: all cultures are subject to historical change from within or from contact with other cultures; there is a wide range of intracultural variation depending on factors such as gender, upbringing, and individual choice; there are cultural group formations even within a given society so that an individual will belong to more than one cultural group and her or his identity will be formed by several affiliations and thus often represent some kind of hybridity or else transdifference.6 This is particularly relevant for multicultural societies like those of both Americas.

3. Civilization is often used purely synonymously with culture but is always associated with a comparatively high complexity of social organization, technology, systems of exchange of products, and communication systems (particularly writing), but also art, religion, as well as institutionalized and enforced value systems, that is, predominantly, urban culture. In this sense of the term, the contrast with an assumed natural state becomes particularly obvious. Hence, civilization is often seen as a process, either in the sense of progressive affecational control, in which the term civilisation was used during the French Enlightenment,7 or, following Condorcet, as the historical process of gaining more and more knowledge and skills as well as developing increasingly complex social structures and institutions, growing emphasis being put on technological innovation. Civilizations can thus be stages in the process of historical cultural refinement as in Norbert Elias’s concept of a “civilizing process.”

The claims to the highest kind of civilization have been part of the US American self-image since the nineteenth century, but this civilization is primarily associated with material wealth and technological advancement.8 Latin Amer-
Hemispheric imaginations, on the other hand, have claimed a higher form of culture, epitomized, for instance, in the figure of Ariel versus Caliban mentioned in Chapter 1.

The conflict of nature and culture in US American history and its literary echoes have been described in Leo Marx’s classic study as that of “machine” and “garden,” but this conflict has been inherent in the idea of pastoralism, that is nature directed toward the human sphere, from its very beginning. No matter whether America was seen as a paradiasiac garden or a threatening wilderness, as a protective, maternal or a dangerous, seductive woman, whether the amount of human work necessary for its full use was considered as small or gigantic—an improvement mentality became dominant in US American history almost from the beginning. This made it possible to view the transitions from the state of nature to an agrarian country and then into an urban, industrial society as continuous, however dramatically and full of tension they might have been experienced and appeared in the cultural imaginary, including its artistic forms of expression. However strongly the ideal of a reentry into paradise, that is, a nonconflictual merging of nature and culture, may have been hoped for initially (cf. Achilles), the practice of settling the country and its discursive foundation was soon more shaped by the idea of an appropriation of the natural, if needs be, by force. The discussion about the nature of the frontier here offers material galore (cf. Fussell; Slotkin). Vestiges of the idea of paradise have survived, for instance in tourism advertisements, but by and large it has dwindled to the function of a rhetorical figure.

It is not possible here to dwell exhaustively on the changes of the ideas of nature in the United States and its colonial predecessors, nor on those of the terms nature and culture in general. There is an enormous semantic range from the religiously informed concept of nature employed by the Puritans to the notion of a nonteleological nature forming the precondition of a scientific-technological control of it. The most interesting forms of dissent have been elicited by the question as to what extent the human is part of nature. What is essential in the present context is only the basic assumption of an opposition, that is, of a sphere contrasted with nature, a sphere than can be minimally defined as that of free, and thus not nature-directed human action. In the United States, the term culture has been closely linked with the notion of a process of civilization.

When the United States saw its Manifest Destiny in its original sense as fulfilled, that is, when it had occupied and to a large extent put to use its part of the continent from east to west, but even before, when the end of this process was in sight, more attention was devoted to those other areas of the Americas that had been included in the American sphere of interest at least since
the Monroe Doctrine. Primarily this meant the south, Latin America. The paradigm of nature versus culture that had served as a discursive figure of thought during the development of social, political, and certainly also literary models of one’s own country now served as an important instrument of perceiving Latin American reality, too. However, it could not be applied to the new terrain without much difficulty.

As far as external nature (topography, flora, and fauna) was concerned, utilitarian as well as aesthetic ideas in the United States through the late nineteenth century were governed by the given or potential usefulness of the area. For a long time, only (originally) wooded regions were considered acceptable in this sense, whereas the treeless prairies were thought of as “barren” in every respect (Stilgoe 23). After it had been shown that the prairies could be developed after all, these experiences were projected onto Latin America. It was assumed that those areas most similar in climate and landscape, that is the moderate zones of Argentina and Chile, could be opened up for progress in the same manner. American investors and potential emigrants were disappointed when these countries were not ready to create or were incapable of creating the necessary conditions with respect to military security as well as political and social stability (cf. Fifer).

In his important book *Facundo, o civilización y barbarie* (1845), the Argentine writer and later president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento contrasted “barbarism,” that is the Catholic, colonial Spanish tradition and the wild nature of his country, including the *indios* and gauchos, with “civilization,” that is the modern, Europe-oriented, urban culture. This version of the nature-culture paradigm remained very influential in nineteenth-century Latin America, whereas North Americans regarded it as rather disconcerting because of its sweeping disparagement of nature. If such differences existed even regarding areas that were topographically and demographically the most similar to those of parts of the United States just mentioned, the dissimilarity of the regions covered with tropical forests or the Andean mountains was regarded as much more striking. The excess of the familiar regarding the dimensions of space, the variety of flora and fauna, the formations of landscape, and the phenomena of weather and climate, which European immigrants registered when traveling in North America, was once again surpassed by what one found in the southern continent. US Americans also noticed a backwardness in the process of utilization of nature that was partly attributed to these geographical conditions, but partly also to a different attitude among Latin Americans, one more passive than shaping and changing.10

To place the peoples south of the Rio Grande into any pattern of nature and culture proved even more difficult if they happened to be the descend-
ants of the pre-Columbian great civilizations. Most US citizens regarded the majority of Latin Americans as comparatively primitive, but it was a primitiveness that differed considerably from that attributed to the “savages” of one’s own country by appearing less based on a proximity to wild nature. This observation was easily explained by the concept of degeneration. Anglo-Saxons had applied this concept to Mediterranean Europeans when their captivity in outdated political and religious institutions, their civilizational backwardness, and their reputed moral deficiency were compared to what one imagined classical antiquity to have been like. According to race theories popular even in the twentieth century, it was primarily the mixture of races that produced such degeneration. In many US American texts, mixed-bloods of Spanish or Portuguese colonists and the Indian aboriginal population fare particularly poorly.

The difficulties resulting from a modeling of reality based on the dichotomy of nature and culture or civilization are visible already in early US American fictions and travel literature. Indeed, not only those North Americans coming as invaders, but also those entering Latin America as visitors, travelers, tourists, engineers, entrepreneurs, or even immigrants, found the spaces they encountered prestructured by their discursive order of things and by their geographical imaginations (as explained in Chapter 4). This becomes most obvious in what we call travel literature because this genre will usually adhere to patterns of experience or of mental configuration rather than to the demands of plot and character development. One influential book about Latin America that was known to many US writers and that escapes the invasive model at least to a certain extent is Alexander von Humboldt’s *Vues des Cordillères et monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique* (1810).

As Laura Dassow Walls has shown in her impressive study *Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, the influence of the German explorer and polymath on the scholarly world, the arts and letters not only of Europe and Latin America, but particularly the United States during the nineteenth century, can hardly be overestimated. And of course he served as a model, inspiration, or source of information for numerous later explorers, naturalists, travelers, and, yes, invaders. Obviously, Humboldt’s enormous venture of first exploring and then textually constructing Latin America, his decisive role in the “reinvention of América” (Pratt 112) cannot be separated from the European efforts of that period to arrive at an understanding of the globe from a Eurocentric perspective and to thereby also open it to economic exploitation and political control, a process that has much to do with industrialization beginning in the
eighteenth century. Humboldt’s and Aimé Bonpland’s travels through the Americas from 1799 through 1804 therefore figure prominently in Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*. Yet, as Walls’s study makes clear, Humboldt as the politically, intellectually, and materially independent liberal, opponent of slavery and defender of the indigenous peoples, was not guided by the acquisitive, assimilating gaze of others. His explorations of the physical, cultural, anthropological, economic, and political structure of the parts of the globe he visited, and his achievement to form his insights into a cosmos (to use his own word) of coherences and correspondences remain unique. Although he cannot be separated from his age, as, indeed, he would have emphasized himself, and although quite a few of his findings served others well—for instance, the maps he had drawn when it came to the US expansion into Mexican territory—his aim was to enlarge the human mind, not the property of his or other countries. His combination of what we are used to call science and humanities may look idealistic and, indeed, is influenced by the ideas of German and international Romanticism. But, as Walls’s book shows again and again, his major works opened many vistas, for instance in the direction of modern ecology and environmental science. His influence on Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin is well documented. His descriptions of Latin American countries and regions were an eye-opener by breaking through the wall of colonial Spanish secretiveness. And his insistence that natural and cultural phenomena, space, and (historical) time had to be seen together carried rich fruit, for instance among American literati such as Irving, Prescott, Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.

Bridging fields, impressions, and opinions is also the basic structural principle of *Vues des Cordillères*. As Oliver Lubrich and Otmar Ette have demonstrated in their postscript to the marvelous German edition of 2004, Humboldt transgresses the conventions of the travelogue by replacing the chronological itinerary with discontinuity and a nonchronological moving backward and forward, organized by a relational, retinal order of observations, learned treatises, travel narrative, and illustrations. Humboldt begins his *Views and Monuments* with the discussion of an Aztec statue, that is, with his stay in Mexico from 1803 to 1804, and ends with an observation from his visit of Tenerife in 1799. This dissociation from the travelers’ spatiotemporal itinerary continues throughout the book, so that the temporal references are the history of mankind and geological history rather than the autobiographical chronology. Humboldt avoids the narrative approach prevalent in the travel writing of his time because it focuses on the merely personal (Pratt 120–21).

In addition, Humboldt gives a more complex impression of the social diversity of the countries and regions of many parts of Latin America than
either the metropolis-centered Spanish perspective or the homogenizing Northern superiority discourse would allow. And he finds a generic blend of personal travelogue and scholarly treatise that fits this avoidance of an ingression turning into transgression (cf. Lubrich and Ette 415–18). Central to his work is a view of the New World as characterized by an overwhelming nature, and the archaeological objects included are those of peoples in tune with the wild nature of the Andes, the llanos, or the volcanoes of central Mexico. Culture is seen as in dialogue with nature and, in a sense, as its offshoot. Human figures usually form only illustrative supplements to the views of natural wonders depicted on the plates, and where, rarely, contemporary civilization comes into play, as in the picture of the Peruvian letter carrier swimming down the river with the mail securely carried in a head scarf, Humboldt points out the efficiency of this method in the absence of roads—quite a far cry from his admirer Edward Everett’s derisive comments on the same method quoted in Chapter 2. Humboldt sees, and by the book’s arrangement presents, primal nature and human culture and civilization as “harmony and connection” (Pratt 133), even though his aesthetic standard concerning cultural productions remains that of the Mediterranean world.

John L. Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) presents a completely different model of travel literature. As Humboldt was accompanied by the French botanist Aimé Bonpland, so was Stephens by the Englishman Frederick Catherwood, who created the engravings for the book (of which those of Mayan antiquities have gained great reputation in archaeological and art historical research). Stephens and Catherwood had planned to travel in Central America in order to study the archaeological sites when Stephens was made United States Minister to the Central American Federation that had been formed in 1825 after independence from Spain had been achieved. The country had newly been united under Francisco Morazán (1831–39), but his and the Liberals’ purge of the Conservatives and the clergy had met with strong opposition in several of the states that formed the federation, and Stephens arrived at the very time when the *indio* Rafael Carrera, leading the troops of the Conservatives and particularly his religiously fanaticized Native regiments, defeated the central government and the country fell apart. Stephens’s effort to be accredited by the national government failed completely, and, indeed, he and Catherwood spent months traveling from Belize to Guatemala and then to El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica in a series of vain attempts to find and identify the legal government. Eventually, they gave up and moved on to Yucatán, where they explored and excavated the Mayan ruins of Palenque—their lasting merit and an enormous contribution to awakening the popular and scholarly interest in that almost forgotten civilization.
The traveling took place under extremely difficult conditions because of a lack of roads and means of transportation, and often Stephens and Catherwood found themselves in great danger, caught between the fighting parties, because the war was waged with utmost brutality and under conditions of disorder, shifting allegiances, and an absence of any regard for life and property of even the civilian population. Neither Stephens’s papers nor his diplomatic dress, with a hat bearing the American eagle, were safeguards against the ignorant rabble soldiers of the warring parties. We find the American and his British companion alternating between a position of social, discursive, and, not least, economic superiority (if need be, Stephens simply buys some Mayan ruins in order to have free access) and almost complete victimization by the circumstances surrounding them. Different from “the great Humboldt” (*Incidents*, 1: 98), with whose work Stephens is familiar, he does not try to bring order and a system of relationships (however open and suggestive) to the chaotic material with which he is confronted, but in his often day-to-day account makes the reader follow him from one difficult and confusing situation to the next. We can follow his route on the map, yet there is rarely anything like a superior perspective in the text. Like the travelers, we are usually made to work our way through almost impassable wildernesses and equally irritating and confusing human encounters. Often, this makes for exciting reading, but not exactly for deep and detached insights. Where Humboldt describes the practice of crossing steep mountain passes by human carrier, that is, sitting in a chair strapped to the back of a native *carguero*, he remarks that this practice may appear to be degrading in our eyes (and it was in his), but is not for the locals, who consider it an honorable profession practiced voluntarily in spite of hardship and poor pay and not because of pure need (*Humboldt, Ansichten*, 36–38). This is at least an attempt to arrive at a balanced view. Such an effort is lacking in Stephens, who is forced by illness to try this transportation once, but finds it intolerable:

> It was bad enough to see an Indian toiling with a dead weight on his back; but to feel him trembling under one’s own body, hear his hard breathing, see the sweat rolling down him, and feel the insecurity of the position, made this a mode of travelling which nothing but constitutional laziness and insensibility could endure (*Incidents*, 2: 276),

properties he attributes to many of the local population. He reports that “Though toiling excessively, we felt a sense of degradation at being carried on a man’s shoulders” (2: 274), because the procedure unsettles his US American sense of civilized human interaction, not because it is considered degrading for the carrier.15
The material space of Central America thus does not interact with an imagined space that is governed by globally conceived geographical and geological structures, social systems, and patterns of sociocultural history as in Humboldt. Stephens’s geographical imaginations consist, on the one hand, of aesthetic patterns in the European tradition that he applies to the grandiose landscapes and the tropical birds and flowers, and, on the other hand, of notions of an omnipresent decay and degeneration. He starts out describing nature and landscape in terms of the beautiful and the sublime (and, occasionally, the picturesque) as they had been defined in eighteenth-century Europe. They had now, in the period of a US American national culture defining its own range and specificities, been applied by Irving, Cooper, and the painters of the Hudson River School to the landscapes of North America, in order to demonstrate that these were not inferior to those in Europe even though they were almost completely lacking in historical associations. And just like some of the authors discussed by Leo Marx, Stephens deals with the conflict of the “garden” and the “machine” entering even here by assuming a position of aesthetically transforming detachment:

Steamboats have destroyed some of the most pleasing illusions of my life. I was hurried up the Hellespont, past Sestos and Abydos, and the Plain of Troy, under the clatter of a steam-engine; and it struck at the root of all the romance connected with the adventures of Columbus to follow in his track, accompanied by the clamour of the same panting monster. Nevertheless, it was very pleasant. We sat down under an awning; the sun was intensely hot, but we were sheltered, and had a refreshing breeze. The coast assumed an appearance of grandeur and beauty that realized my ideas of tropical regions. There was a dense forest to the water’s edge. Beyond were lofty mountains, covered to their tops with perpetual green, some isolated, and other running off in ranges, higher and higher, till they were lost in the clouds. (1: 26–27)

In later passages Stephens continues to draw comparisons with European sceneries, particularly the English park landscape, or with mythological scenes, and he credits the indios with possessing “that eye for the picturesque and beautiful in natural scenery which distinguishes the Indians everywhere” (1: 32). In such an environment, the Native is bound to be a noble savage.

However, closer observation produces difficulties. The jungle proves to be virtually impassable and the mountains as almost impossible to cross. When the pure-blood Carib Indians turn out to be “completely civilized” (1: 28), this is proved only by the fact that they appear as pious Catholics. Repeatedly, Stephens delights in what Pratt has called “the-monarch-of-all-I-survey scene” (201–8):
At eleven we reached the top of the mountain, and, looking back, saw at a
great distance, and far below us, the town of Chiquimula; [. . .] and, rising
above a few thatched huts, another gigantic and roofless church. On each side
were mountains still higher than ours, some grand and gloomy, with their
summits buried in the clouds; others in the form of cones and pyramids, so
wild and fantastic that they seemed sporting with the heavens, and I almost
wished for wings to fly and light upon their tops. (1: 77)

But this ultimate elevation cannot be reached; the church ruins signal deterio-
ration and loss. The jungle swallows pre-Columbian pyramids and Spanish-
colonial edifices alike. At this point Stephens begins to complain about the
lacking utilization of the country. “The scenery was grand, but the land
wild and uncultivated, without fences, enclosures, or habitations” (1: 57).
Rather than cultivating the external as well as human nature and making it
subservient to technological and sociopolitical progress as is the custom in
his own country, people here submit to their frailties: their indolence, but
also their passions and violence. At the same time, they submit to nature as
it surrounds them and by its climate conditions, by a vegetation all but im-
possible to control, by earthquakes and volcano eruptions appears to mirror
or even support these negative human tendencies. The net result is decay
and decline. The prehistoric ruins that must have been built by a completely
different kind of people find their counterparts in destroyed or decaying
churches. Stephens evokes the pre-romantic, melancholic tradition of the
ubi sunt reminiscent of Goldsmith and the school of the picturesque when
he speaks of “a picture of a deserted village” (1: 79), yet on the whole his is
not a comfortable aesthetic but a critical point of view:

At six o’clock we rose upon a beautiful table of land, on which stood another
gigantic church. It was the seventh we had seen that day, and, coming upon
them in a region of desolation, and by mountain paths which human hands
had never attempted to improve, their colossal grandeur and costliness were
startling, and gave evidence of a retrograding and expiring people. (1: 78–79)

Although living in republics, the people have no idea of democratic in-
teraction as it is practiced in the United States, but seek the physical anni-
hilation of their political opponents and thus live in a Hobbesian state of
constant civil war. Following then current discourses of the degenerating
effect of racial hybridity, Stephens sees the social order as corrupted by a
mixture of many ethnicities. In one of the small towns, he finds “Indians,
negroes, mulattoes, Mestizoes [sic], and mixed blood of every degree, with
a few Spaniards” (1: 37). Soon he has to realize that many of the couples are
not married, that further inland the male and female population, regardless
of race, walks around semi-nude, worst of all “a little white girl, perfectly
naked” (1: 57). The clergy conforms to Anglo-American notions about the
corruption and sexual immorality of the Catholic priests: “In the evening
we visited the padre [...]. He was a short, fat man, [...] and we found him
swinging in a hammock and smoking a cigar. He had a large household of
women and children; but as to the relation in which they stood to him, peo-
ple differed” (1: 66). Stephens has a hard time handling these impressions
with a certain detachment, although with “people differed” he manages to
produce an almost Twainian irony. And when he tells a hacienda owner
at whose place they spend the night and who, it turns out, has two wives,
that “in England he would be transported, and in the North imprisoned for
life for such indulgences,” he receives a lesson in cultural relativity: “he re-
sponded that they were barbarous countries; and the woman, although she
thought a man ought to be content with one, said that is was no peccato or
crime to have two” (1: 89).

While chastising what he considers a transgression of basic social and
religious rules, Stephens is in fact guilty of a transgression of his own by
transferring his set of rules to an alien culture. Without completely acknowl-
edging it, he is in precisely the situation often encountered by ethnologists
and described by David Signer. The cool observation of the Other, which
presupposes a clear distinction of an object and a subject uncontaminated
by what he or she tries to describe, as well as the potential reversal of the
two positions, remains an illusion. Rather, and in tune with psychoanalytic
tenets, we recognize the object only as far as it is part of ourselves and thus
also the subject of a projection (Signer 102). The proximity of transference
and transgression observed by Freud (cf. Knellessen, Passett, and Schneider,
introduction) finds its realization in Stephens’s disgusted comments about
half-naked women and his falling in love with a local young woman, whom
he desires because “her manner was so different from the cold, awkward,
and bashful air of her countrywomen, so much like the frank and fascinat-
ing welcome which a young lady at home might extend to a friend after a
long absence” (1: 390). The transgression he commits by first tempting her
into closer contact than her society would normally permit is topped by the
second when he leaves her the next morning: “I walked out of doors, and
resolved that it was folly to lose the chance of examining a canal route for
the belle of Guanacaste” (1: 392).

He regrets “that so beautiful a country should be in such miserable hands”
(1: 86), and it cannot come as a surprise that just as he visits the wildest
and most untouched region of Nicaragua, Stephens sketches the plan for
an isthmian canal preferably to be built by US Americans. The project of a
canal, which was to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and to which
Stephens did in fact devote part of his later life, is not only to become a boon for world trade but also a means of saving Central America:

It will compose the distracted country of Central America; turn the sword, which is now drenching it with blood, into a pruning-hook; remove the prejudices of the inhabitants by bringing them into close connexion [sic] with people of every nation; furnish them with a motive and a reward for industry, and inspire them with a taste for making money, which, after all, opprobrious as it is sometimes considered, does more to civilize and keep the world at peace than any other influence whatever. [. . .] I would not speak of it with sectional or even national feeling; but if Europe is indifferent, it would be glory surpassing the conquest of kingdoms to make this greatest enterprise ever attempted by human force entirely our own work. (1: 419–20)

The metaphor of the fertilizing streams of civilization coming from the urban center develops the biblical image of heavenly Jerusalem and the waters of life and the Puritan one of the “City upon a Hill” into a program of purpose for the future American commonwealth, secularizing the image and strangely exchanging the poles of nature and culture. It follows that in Stephens’s opinion, the civilizing feat of the construction of a canal at the connecting point of the Americas should be carried out by the United States, possibly only by the City (!) of New York. Civilization, coming from the metropolis and epitomized in the steamship, will literally penetrate Central America; needless to say that Stephens’s vision was to be realized more than seventy years later with the opening of the Panama Canal, fulfilling his economic hope, albeit hardly those of “civilizing” the country. As we also know, this aim was achieved by powerful intervention without changing the situation of most Latin American countries in the manner anticipated by Stephens.16

There are moments of regression when Stephens, quite in keeping with Freud’s theory of culture and civilization, discovers in the natural scenery he encounters an island of wish fulfillment and thus a niche reserved for art in the system of sublimation required by civilization:

[O]n a point above us was a palm-leafed hut, and before it a naked Indian sat looking at us; while flocks of parrots, with brilliant plumage, almost in thousands, were flying over our heads, catching up our words, and filling the air with their noisy mockings. It was one of those beautiful scenes that so rarely occur in human life, almost realizing dreams. Old as we were, we might have become poetic, but that Augustin came down to the opposite bank, and, with a cry that rose above the chattering of parrots and the loud murmur of the river, called us to supper. (1: 55)
The reality principle wins out against the dream, the poetic and the anti-language of the parrots.

In view of the comparative scarcity of nineteenth-century fictional texts on Latin America by American female writers, the following text stands out as an exceptional treatment of the encounter of a North American woman with nature, civilization, and cultural differences in Latin America. Mary Peabody Mann’s Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago was published posthumously in 1887 but presumably written in large parts before the Civil War. The novel is based on a fourteen-month recreational stay at a friend’s plantation in 1830s Cuba, where Mary Peabody had accompanied her sister Sophia, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s wife-to-be, and thus offers perspectives usually not available to American women at that time. If Juanita had been published in the 1850s, it might have become a major abolitionist text. Peabody Mann might also have fulfilled the role of an “ambassador of culture” (Gruesz), and as such might have represented a counter-model to New England poet Maria Gowen Brooks, who inherited a plantation in Cuba and became a member of the slaveholding criollo class there. Because Mann focuses almost exclusively on the horrors of slavery and on racial inequality, her book is less dominantly an example of Latin-Americanism than other texts discussed here. Where she describes Cuba in general, she uses the conventional, stereotypical elements: church depravity, political corruption, civil disorder, immorality, all of which is made worse by the institution of slavery. In view of “a people so nationally ignorant as the inhabitants of the Spanish Colonies” (Juanita, 201), the only hope for improvement lies in an annexation by the United States; but Mann is afraid that this might strengthen racism even at home and thus echoes the fear of an infection. After all, the action of the novel is set about fifty years before slavery is finally abolished in Cuba in 1886 and about thirty years before the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

What makes the novel exceptionally interesting in the present context, though, are its detailed descriptions of nature and the way nature is perceived by the foreign observer. Nature appears as closely related to what makes Cuban society and culture of that period more different from and more similar to those of, respectively, the Northern and the Southern United States, that is, the peculiar institution of slavery. The central, focalizing figure of the novel is Helen Wentworth, an unmarried New England schoolteacher who comes to visit her former schoolmate Isabella Rodriguez, who has married a plantation owner. He is, as abolitionist Helen is horrified to find out, a slaveholder. It is Helen’s observations (closely modeled after Mann’s own) that we are made to follow. Right at the beginning, she notices...
the beauty of scenery and vegetation, but also the way the plantation houses are hidden from view:

After leaving the white limestone formation that surrounds the city of Havana, and which is very dazzling and trying to the eyes, they passed into the deep, rich, red soil of the interior, which makes such fine contrast with the luxuriant foliage. No fences mar the beauty of the scenery, but the plantations are bordered with broad lime hedges, impervious, by reason of their spines, to man or beast, and often covered in their turn by a little blue convolvulus, whose delicate vine trails over them and the adjacent earth. No houses are seen from the road, but gates, sometimes of great architectural beauty, and always more or less pretentious, shut in long avenues of trees. (28)

The slight suspicion that is already here cast over the harmony of nature and culture grows deeper later on:

Vegetation clothed the earth there [in New England] as here, but here its rank luxuriance, while untamed, typified the unbridled sweep of human propensities, while the curbs and restraints that a certain measure of civilization imposed upon it only concealed the fens and marshes that were the product of a decay as pestiferous to the physical as the corruptions of the heaven-born passions are to the moral atmosphere. (49)

And, indeed, corruption and decay mark slaveholding Cuba far more drastically than even the degeneration pointed out by Stephens.

The culmination of this darkening view of tropical nature against the background of the horrors of slavery is reached when Helen and others witness the opening of the gigantic, magnificent blossom of the night-blooming cereus cactus, which is described in great detail and leads Helen to the following observation: “This most glorious of all flowers, shining out upon the dark night, brought back her old faith, that God had not forsaken even the land of the slave” (114). However, when they return to the plantation house, “Helen’s heart sank within her, for she apprehended some new calamity, and immediately she saw a tall, stout negro, with his hand hanging by the skin from his wrist, severed from the arm and spouting blood” (114). It is a fugitive slave whose hand the brutal overseer has cut off with a machete because the slave had injured one of his dogs used in the pursuit. The two scenes follow immediately, one after the other, and make abundantly clear that in this land of horrors, Helen’s trust in a divine order is ill-founded. Sympathetic nature responds by sending a violent storm that creates great damage, as we are to find out later. The sum total of Helen’s observations is that Cuban civilization, for instance as far as agricultural technology is concerned, is only weakly developed if compared to that of the United States.
that Cuban society is totally corrupt, and that “[t]he confusion created by a succession of rulers each following the policy his own self-interest suggests, gives rise to many evils that are not found in United States slavery” (209)—a comparative view of civilizations that sheds light on the fundamental divisions characterizing the United States and the US American perception of its neighbors that might be of interest for either the Southern or the Northern side of the divide.

The corruption of humans and nature in Cuba is made most glaringly obvious by the introduction of the embodied moral alternative, Juanita. The eponymous heroine of the novel is a light-skinned woman of “singular Moorish beauty, which bore no trace of the negro” (62)—although an abolitionist, Mann shares many of the racist conceptions of her age, down to her description of black slave Camilla’s “long, orang-outang arms” (85). Juanita has Moorish and European ancestors and belongs to a group of slaves that were legally emancipated under British pressure, but whose status has been denied to them by the tyrannical Spanish Captain-General Miguel Tacón and the majority of the Cuban plantation owners. She is well educated and an accomplished painter. Although aware of her status as emancipada but in contrast to her rebellious brother, she makes no attempt to leave the Rodriguezes, partly out of loyalty toward some of the family members, partly because she is in love with Ludovico, the Marquis of Rodriguez’s son, who also loves her and for whose children she is a surrogate mother. When Juanita is at last set free, Ludovico, after his horrible white wife has died, proposes to marry her, but she realizes that her role as a former slave would “ruin his earthly life. His father will never consent to it or forgive him. It is enough for me that he wishes it. If I marry him, I shall be a dark cloud upon his life” (211).

Juanita’s noble self-sacrifice conforms to that of many female characters in nineteenth-century fiction. When she is caught together with her brother under the suspicion of rebellious activities, they and “twelve hundred other negroes, free and enslaved” (217) are herded together in a building. There, all of them perish when a furious mob sets fire to the house. That is, she suffers the fate of the tragic mulatto whose social role (albeit not racial background) she fulfills (Ard xxi). According to Patricia M. Ard,

Mann used her own form of the romance to tell a story of slavery in the Americas and its corruption of what she valued most—marriage and the family. […] But Mann unintentionally told another tale as well. By taking away Ludovico, her beloved, from Juanita, not once (when he married a white woman) but twice (when she dies), Mann re-inscribes the culture of ethnic dominance and rejects a vision of a racially harmonious future for the Americas. (xxxiii–iv)
However, this is an all-too-simple notion of the function of fictional literature to offer role models for real life. Juanita’s fate abounds in ironies. She dies physically because she is taken for a slave, which she is not legally but through her fate, but she has already died symbolically when she renounced Ludovico because she realized that—even in view of all the cases of miscegenation that occurred in all slaveholding societies—the consummation of her erotic desire would bring about the collapse of the social, that is civilizational, status of her beloved and his children. She, the sensual (slightly) dark heroine, is the most culturally refined of all the characters in the book, overcoming her instinctual nature for the sake of fulfilling her role as savior of the core element of the official, European and North American civilization of her age, namely the family and parenthood. She is culturally superior also because of her art, by which she reconciles nature and the human spirit:

[In Juanita’s portfolios she [Helen] found abundant food for reflection. There was the history of a soul, as it were. The difference between Juanita’s sketches, whether of a rare flower or tree or landscape, or of a head—of which there were innumerable specimens,—and the drawings of Ludovico, was the difference between talent and genius. Juanita’s were not transcripts of anything, though portraits, but were expressive of the highest thought suggested by the image. (Juanita, 145–46)]

Juanita’s art has overcome the split between nature and culture, and that between the civilizations. More than the other characters who have contributed their share in Victorian home-created art—Isabella, Helen, Ludovico—she is the one who deserves to pursue her vision as a self-determined, gifted person, and the ironic, despairing message of the novel is that liberation needs other, economical, forces to succeed. As the last, retrospective pages of the novel make clear, in the final analysis poetic justice can be hoped for only in the afterlife. Religion is the refuge for those who are part and parcel of the cultural discourse but are powerless to step out of it, as it is the reward promised to those whose flesh and spirit are mutilated by this very culture.

Most North American mental constructions of Latin America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century focused not on a timeless paradisiac nature but on the usable, changeable environment. After the failure of the development hoped for on the Pampas, the pioneer or cowboy and, after 1849, the soldier as those character types who, emulating the winning of the American West, open the land for themselves, their civilization, and society, are replaced by the engineer, the planter, the merchant, and the entrepreneur; examples have been discussed in Chapter 4. The image of the Garden of Eden is now used only to lure American capital.
In his annual report for 1900–1, the first US governor of Puerto Rico after the Spanish-American War says, “Puerto Rico, the loveliest island washed by the ocean’s waves, lies between the Atlantic and the Caribbean. [. . .] Nature has here ‘planted a garden’ and man has only ‘to dress it and keep it’ to make it blossom like another Paradise” (qtd. in Binder, “Tropical,” 93). Reductionist literary texts of this period therefore did not even need to develop a suitable plotline in order to defend the marriage rules, that is, to defend white protagonists against the embraces of seductive, dark-skinned natural men and women, as James Fenimore Cooper and others had found it necessary. In Claude H. Wetmore’s *In a Brazilian Jungle* (1903), the wedding between a young American woman and a British nobleman functions as the confirmation of a community of interest of the Anglo-Saxon master race. Remarkably, the component of sexuality is completely eliminated from the discourse on exotic, savage alterity. Anglo-Saxon cooperation is also required when US coffee importers and English marines jointly put a criminal Brazilian coffee planter out of action, a man who has been associated by the appropriate imagery with the treacherous side of tropical nature in the shape of snakes and tarantulas. Never is there a question about the validity of the imperialist discourse of superiority. Brazil is described only in its function as a potential supplier of natural raw materials that have to be produced and processed by competing North American and European businessmen.

Around the middle of the twentieth century, however, other perspectives appear. The escapist motif in Stephens is now taken up by a small but noticeable group of writers, among them the Beat Generation of the 1950s and 1960s. By now the political situation had changed dramatically since the days of classic imperialism. The Cold War had brought the idea of a Third World, and Latin America was considered to be part of it, a zone of influence that was now, for the first time after the role and investments of the European powers had been reduced to second place, seriously contested between the United States and the Soviet Union. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress sought to keep the Latin American countries firmly at the side of the West as it was then conceived of. New developmental measures were introduced by US administrations, and Latinamericanism, though still intact in its basic elements, for a while displayed a friendlier side that included respect for the various democratic and social movements in several countries, even while the support for anticommunist dictators continued. Such shifts in US policy vis-à-vis Latin America had occurred before, but now the discourse of socioeconomic development, in conjunction with the images that post–World War II mass tourism had brought home, created a mood for a less arrogant approach to the southern neighbors.
At about the same time, the disillusionment with capitalism and the materialism and technology orientation of the American way of life among many young people north and south, and the wish to escape from it; the enthusiasm for revolutionary movements for the underprivileged at home or abroad, and the fetishizing of leaders such as Malcolm X or Che Guevara; and the environmental movement and alternative lifestyles, like that of the hippies, brought about a heightened awareness of other cultures and differing forms of culture, now clearly distinguished from civilization as the ruling model for dealing with the Other in need of development. This also brought a new sensitivity for the conflicts or convergences of nature and culture. Recent studies such as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* or Molly Geidel’s *Peace Corps Fantasies* have revealed that neither government-created volunteer work in the “underdeveloped” countries nor the revolutionary movements could truly overcome the barriers separating the visitors from the target population, especially indigenous peoples, nor could they develop a true alternative to the developmental narratives of capitalist thinking in the period. Still, at the time such dreams were dreamed, and they find their representation in literary texts like the ones discussed in the last part of this chapter.

Real or pretended escapism presents itself in almost touching naiveté in the writings of the Beat Generation. However, this does not imply a diminishment of the claim of control, even where that control is not openly admitted, for instance when the young beatniks in Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* enter Mexico. The categories of description used in their approach to alterity stem from their own needs of projection, and thus of appropriation and internalization of the Other. Thus, the Mexicans the travelers see along the road are called “cats” (*Road*, 276) or “straw-hatted Mexican hipsters” (275). Kerouac also dehybridizes the local population by continuously calling them “Indians,” a term that he then applies to a major part of the traditional human population on earth. In the eyes of Kerouac’s fictional alter ego Sal Paradise, Mexico is a territory belonging to one part of that globe-encircling, archaic fellah population that will outlive the atomic apocalypse and guarantee the fresh start of natural man:

The boys were sleeping, and I was alone in my eternity at the wheel, and the road ran straight as an arrow. Not like driving across Carolina, or Texas, of Arizona, or Illinois; but like driving across the world and into the places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world from Malaya (the long fingernail of China) to India the great subcontinent to Arabia to Morocco to the selfsame
deserts and jungles of Mexico and over the waves to Polynesia [...]. These people were unmistakably Indians and were not at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly civilized American lore—they had high cheekbones, and slanted eyes, and soft ways; they were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it. The waves are Chinese, but the earth is an Indian thing. As essential as rocks in the desert are they in the desert of “history.” And they knew this when we passed, ostensibly self-important moneybag Americans on a lark in their land; they knew who was the father and who was the son of antique life on earth, and made no comment. For when destruction comes to the world of “history” and the Apocalypse of the Fellahin returns once more as so many times before, people will stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well as from the caves of Bali, where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know. (280–81)²¹

In opposition to traditional US notions, Mexico is being masculinized by this chain of associations, but its “fatherly” inhabitants display features connoting femininity. As in D. H. Lawrence three decades earlier,²² the Indio-Mexicans are feminized: the keyword “soft” occurs repeatedly and is contrasted with a destructive masculine US American hardness. Or one might say that the pervasive body imagery of this text reduces the difference between the genders and makes the locals appear as belonging to a natural, Adamic state before the fall. Entering Mexico is also stepping out of history, which is seen as a destructive process. Timelessness or a cyclic return of the same are the marks of natural mankind before “civilization and its discontents.” The central bordello scene thus appears like a fantasy of primal wish fulfillment: sex, drugs, dance, and music make a “long, spectral Arabian dream in the afternoon in another life” (289) come true, which even the pecuniary coda cannot ruin.

By recoding the traditional American auto- and hetero-stereotypes, the drifters come to regard Mexico as a natural paradise. What is usually held to mean cultural degeneration is here seen as a positive resistance against the American way of life, or as its shrinking to a more humanly acceptable measure, so that even economic weakness turns into something positive: “We gazed and gazed at our wonderful Mexican money that went so far” (276). The friends explicitly distance themselves from the earlier American invaders or importers of civilization, and in their enthusiasm they even shift the spatiogeographical proportions:

Behind us lay the whole of America and everything Dean and I had previously known about life, and life on the road. We had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic. “Think
of these cats staying up all hours of the night,” whispered Dean. “And think of this big continent ahead of us with those enormous Sierra Madre mountains we saw in the movies, and the jungles all the way down and a whole desert plateau as big as ours [. . .]. It’s the world! We can go right on to South America if the road goes” (276–77).23

Their geographical imagination replaces what most observers agree on as real by dream and fiction (“the movies”); the process of cultural sublimation is reversed. Quite in tune with this inverted repression of their rejected identity components in favor of a view of nature as resistant, they never realize the contradiction of their own lifestyle on the road and the natural sedentary one of the “Fellahin.” Perversely, even the traffic, noise, and bustle of Mexico City are presented as “Fellahin-childlike” (302) and thus as a sign of an existence close to the earth.24

Like the theme of the Other in general, that of alien nature as compared to civilized society has often been used for cultural criticism in the twentieth century, and particularly after World War II. A decisive development of the potential range of this topic is presented in Paul Theroux’s novel The Mosquito Coast (1981). As told by his son, Al Fox—a Yankee from Massachusetts—is an inventor and a sharp critic of the wastefulness and the social as well as ecological sins of American civilization, which he thinks is destined to come to a catastrophic end. Together with his family, Fox emigrates to Mosquitia, the most remote region in Honduras, to risk a new beginning in the jungle where he erroneously expects to find an untouched new world. With his wife and children as well as a group of natives (mestizos and zambos, that is, people of mixed Indian and black genealogy), he creates a community by using that which nature has provided in a seemingly optimal manner. “This was the distant empty place that Father had always spoken about. Here he could make whatever he pleased and not have to explain why to anyone” (Mosquito Coast, 164).

“The Iron Age comes to Jeronimo,” Father said. “A month ago, it was the Stone Age—digging vegetables with wooden shovels and clobbering rats with flint axes. We’re moving right along. It’ll be 1832 in a few days! By the way, people, I’m planning to skip the twentieth century altogether. [. . .] You look at Jeronimo and you can’t tell what century it is. This is part of your original planet, with people to match [. . .]. What’s a savage? [. . .] It’s someone who doesn’t bother to look around and see that he can change the world.” (162–65)

A production plant for ice blocks turns him into a bringer of civilization—“Ice is civilization” (39)—and indeed Fox might fulfil the role of an “am-
bassador of culture,” but when he tries to get rid of three armed intruders by freezing them in his ice machine, the plant explodes and contaminates the whole area. Even Fox now admits the destructive side of his paranoid ideas. “‘All right, I admit it—I did a terrible thing. I took a flyer. I polluted this whole place. I’m a murderer.’ He sobbed again. ‘It wasn’t me’” (275). His sorrow does not refer to the people he has killed, but to the dead plants and animals. From now on, accompanied only by his family and increasingly under the spell of his delusions, Fox tries possibilities of a fresh beginning with ever simpler means but is defeated by uncontrollable nature, with which to live in real harmony (as his children do in their playground camp) he is too proud and too technology obsessed. He will admit only his own, nonwasteful concept of a technological-scientific civilization, and finally meets his death when he tries to destroy the technical equipment of an American mission.

Ironically, yet also sympathetically, Theroux narrates the failure of the refugee from American civilization who represents this very civilization in archetypical purity: as a believer in progress even where he criticizes progress, as a loner and extreme individualist in spite of his role as father of a family, and, in spite of his notions of cooperation, a work fetishist who will not tolerate anybody by his side, let alone in front of him. Unmistakable intertextual references make him a reborn version of Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee who, in the end, can also not improve but only (partially) destroy the alien and nature-oriented world he has entered. Fox’s struggle against the superstition of Christianity may be as justified as that of Twain’s Hank Morgan, but because both can replace it only by new myths of the perfectibility of mankind, myths that cannot be turned into reality with humanity as it is, the catastrophe is predictable.

Fox’s fearlessness in facing the alien in man and nature may distinguish him from others: “‘When a man says women are all the same, it proves he’s afraid of them. I’ve been around the world. I’ve been to places where it doesn’t rain and places where it doesn’t stop. I wouldn’t say those countries are all the same’” (84). But as he cannot yield himself to this Other, he does not develop a fruitful alternative position. In this context it is worth noticing that for the protagonist, sexuality is of no importance because outside this theoretical statement, it does not seem to influence his notion of the country to be opened up. It is exactly this point that puts him in line with a series of American heroes to whom Annette Kolodny attests immaturity:

Our continuing fascination with the lone male in the wilderness, and our literary heritage of essentially adolescent, presexual pastoral heroes, suggest that we have yet to come up with a satisfying model for mature masculinity on this
continent; while the images of abuse that have come to dominate the pastoral vocabulary suggest that we have been no more successful in our response to the feminine qualities of nature than we have to the human feminine. (*Lay of the Land*, 147)

It is significant that Fox speaks of the small model of his ice machine as “she,” but of his plant in the jungle as “he” (*Mosquito Coast*, 31, 163). The closeness of his experiments to the products of the very civilization he tries to escape is verbo-satirically exposed when a native speaker of Creole calls them “‘spearmints’” (165).

Theroux confirms and updates not only Twain’s criticism of progress, but also his skepticism with regard to the possibility of an escape from civilization. His narrator is Fox’s oldest son, a boy of the age of Huck Finn, who, together with the other children and in their own little refuge place, playfully explores the gesture of nudity and a life of and with nature:

> I felt that ours was a greater achievement than Father’s, because we ate the fruit that grew nearby and used anything we found, and adapted ourselves to the jungle. We had not brought a boat-load of tools and seeds, and we had not invented anything. We just lived like monkeys. (177)

In the end, however, the son dreams of only one thing: a return to the United States where he would ironically find a well-stocked (factory-made) refrigerator. His father’s claim to improve upon creation fails already because of the insufficiency of man’s physical nature. At the end of his life, Fox is paralyzed by a bullet and can only drag himself across the sand on his belly, like a reptile: “Father was missing, but we could see the groove-mark of his body across the sand, like a lizard track, with handprints on either side” (380). Along the coast that is covered with the debris of civilization swept here by the sea, only the natives are able to survive, because they have learned to recognize their limits vis-à-vis nature and have adapted their lifestyle to a very small stock of cultural possessions. They are the representatives of a shadow economy, mixed-bloods not only of race and language, but also because they maintain an in-between status between wilderness and civilization. Theroux’s critique is pervasive: while US Americans cannot escape their destructive culture qua civilization because it corresponds to their inner nature, a large part of Latin Americans exist in constantly shrinking niches of survival, dependent on a reconciliation of nature and culture that is constantly growing less probable under the pressure from the north.

For the late twentieth-century engagement of North American writers with the irritatingly ambiguous Latin American alterity, the paradigm of nature versus culture still plays an important role, but the poles have become
confused. The achievement of culture now does not rest on a perfectly rational management of existence, but in the most complete adaptation to the given. “Scavengers”—the seagulls feasting on refuse both in Massachusetts and in Honduras, Fox himself, who at the end uses trash to create a new basis of civilization, and the vultures taking care of his remains—are the prototypes of a new world for which the border between Anglo and Latin America, between culture and nature, will not be relevant any longer.