

**Ben A. Heller**  
**Hofstra University**

**Hope Hollocher**  
**Princeton University**

**Ecotopias: The Disneyfication of Latin American and Caribbean Nature in the Age of Globalization**

"Sail the world, by way of Utopia. ... To come aboard, please contact your travel agent." Crystal Cruises ad, in National Geographic Traveler

The fact that Thomas More's Utopia was set in the New World is not an insignificant detail, although it is ironic given that the word "Utopia" derives etymologically from the Greek for "no place." Utopian thought in the West stretches back at least to Plato's Republic, and Utopias have been imagined in myriad locales, most of them exotic and more importantly unknown to the author and his public. Yet the New World has enjoyed a special relationship with Utopian thought since the conquest. The discovery of the Americas opened up an immense space of possibility, a space for the elaboration of fantasy, and that space rather quickly filled with Utopian imaginings and attempts to put them into practice. Beyond the textual example of More's Utopia, Latin America and the Caribbean have been the setting for actual Utopian movements such as the Jesuit-run reducciones in Paraguay, the rebellion of the messianic Antonio Conselheiro and his followers in the backlands of Brazil, the leftist guerrilla movements of the 1970's and 80's, and, most recently, the Ayn Rand-inspired community called New Utopia, currently being planned for a small shoal east of the Cayman Islands.

Despite the rather constant disparagement of New World peoples and nature (so well documented by Gerbi in The Dispute of the New World), there has existed since Columbus a counter-tradition that has seen the New World as an unspoiled paradise inhabited by people who by their very nature were good. A third tradition has simply seen the New World as primarily empty, and therefore open to colonization by immigrants and the construction of their own Utopian projects. Whatever the rationale, nature has often played a key role in these utopian communities. In the perfect society described by More, the subjects worship one God, Mythras, whose "Supreme Being is identical with Nature" (118); the best way to please this

---

\*Prepared for delivery at the 1998 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, The Palmer House Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, September 24-26, 1998.

Being is to study Nature, and to praise Him for it. Although the main characteristic of a utopia is the just and equitable relationships among its citizens, utopias also generally take root in distant Edenic places of incredible natural beauty and abundance (often on islands), and frequently entail striking revisions of humankind's relationship to nature. It is our contention that the current boom in ecotourism in Latin American and the Caribbean is one manifestation of this utopian tradition, one that balances an almost religious view of the Peaceable Kingdom with a more scientific conservation-oriented philosophy. One might object to this equation of ecotourism and utopias by pointing out that ecotourism puts the accent on our relationship to nature while relegating the issue of social justice to a secondary plane. Yet the ideology behind these utopian spaces extends social justice to include all species, asserting that all living beings have the right to coexist in peace.

We use the neologism "ecotopias" to refer to ecotourist destinations because we wish to underscore the fantasies stimulated in prospective visitors by the brochures, magazine ads, web pages, and other propaganda materials that are used to lure travelers. Ecotourist destinations are usually portrayed as untouched, pristine examples of nature largely outside the realm of history. They are unknown and "no where," defined by their unspoiled character and their distance from "civilization." They are universal exemplars of natural processes, beyond the pollution of history, politics, and culture. Their only engagement with history is the past as cliché, the easy particular which make the place unique and therefore more competitive in the marketplace. Nevertheless, a second reading of these ecotourist locations reveals their historical situatedness. These land practices are superimposed on previous usages of the land (as sites of resistance for escaped slaves, mining, ranching, scientific study, etc.), yet no attempt is made to come to grips with this past in a serious way. They are often the latest incarnation of nature in a series stretching from unexplored "wilderness" to source of wealth to object of scientific observation. Science, in particular ecology and conservation biology, plays a special role in paving the way for ecotourism. It is a crucial mediator between the use of the land as the motor of extract economies to the use of the land for observation, contemplation and the production of knowledge. Through all of these changes nature remains as a powerful center for identification and a key to the creation of a sense of community. However, we contend that whereas nature was bound up in the nation-building drives of the nineteenth and twentieth century, the recent emphasis on ecotopias signifies a return to a universalizing impulse (inherent in science) which takes advantage of global capitalism and its nomadic subjects.

The term "ecotopia" of course cannibalizes the term "ecology," the study of nature and the interrelations among species and between species and their environments. Yet it also shares the root "eco" (from the Greek oikos, house), with "economy." This etymological relationship is not unwanted, because we are interested in the commoditization of nature in supposedly "authentic" forms for

tourism, that is, the economics of making nature into a tourist attraction. In this regard, we are particularly interested in the transformations which nature must undergo in order to be marketed as a tourist destination. The profitability of ecotourism is contingent upon at least three factors: 1) allowing for and controlling access to nature (the site and its species), 2) making nature's appearance somewhat predictable, and 3) allowing for nature to be packaged in certain ways so that it can be taken home by the tourist (as pictures, native crafts, "natural" products, etc.). These factors necessitate certain changes to ecotourist sites, changes we have grouped under the rubric of "disneyfication."

Karen Klugman of The Project on Disney defines "disneyfication" as "the application of simplified aesthetic, intellectual, or moral standards to a thing that has the potential for more complex and thought-provoking expression" (103). This process seems particularly relevant to ecotourist sites, especially with regard to their reductive attitude to prior uses of the land. We also see "disneyfication" as the process of creating and making money off of simulacra, representations which come to take the place of what is being represented. In the case of ecotourism, the demands of accessibility, predictability and marketability often result in the alteration of existing natural areas to the point of creating new environments that stand in for the untidy and often intractable "wilderness" area. This is most simply achieved through the creation of the ever-popular nature trail which, with its explanatory signage, creates an easy path through the forest and imposes tidy, universal descriptors (usually ecological parables and Linnaean nomenclature) onto the chaotic profusion of tropical nature. Either through the creation of these nature trails or through other means of packaging nature, Disneyfication provides a sense of home or of the familiar, making all that burgeoning Life "comfortable" in otherwise often uncomfortable locales.<sup>1</sup>

### **I. Venezuela. Locale: Hato Piñero; simulacra and history, or the colonial as style**

“You can’t be suspicious of a tree, or accuse a bird or a squirrel of subversion or challenge the ideology of a violet.” Hall Borland, quoted in web page devoted to “Hato Piñero ~ Venezuela: A Unique Nature Preserve in the Heart of the Llanos”

Once used for hauling ranch workers, the large pick-up truck ferrying us around the dirt roads of Hato Piñero was now outfitted with metal seats like those on a subway. Protective railings made sure we didn't fall out; the cooler of beer and soda made sure we didn't suffer from boredom or thirst. The truck seemed very much like an open double decker bus, and was obviously designed to let us be out and about in nature. The driver, meanwhile, was hidden from view in the cab below; he would quickly stop the truck, however, when our guide, Gertrudis Gamarra, would tap on the roof. In the last stretch of our

morning outing Gertrudis leaned forward over the cab with hand poised, and mentioned that we should be seeing scarlet macaws.

As if on cue a pair of macaws burst from the tops of the trees across the way and passed overhead, cawing loudly. Gertrudis tapped, the truck stopped, and for an instant it seemed as if someone had let the macaws out of a cage, or catapulted them into the sky from tiny catapults. We couldn't help but imagine that the two macaws were in fact mechanical devices being pulled along on hidden wires, all part of a ploy to guarantee we went home as "satisfied customers." It was then we began to suspect that ecotourism might involve subterfuge, performance, simulacras, even though in this case the success we had was due primarily to Gertrudis' knowledge gained by his long years associated with the land. Still, the experience seemed curiously inauthentic, a repetition of something that had happened before. During that moment we glimpsed that this locale and these activities were all part of a history, that we were not the first here, nor even the second or the third, even though the land is marketed as a "paradise," pure, vibrant, and relatively untouched.

The Hato Piñero is a ranch on the northern edge of the Venezuelan llanos; owned by the Branger family and foundation, it now flourishes as a mixed enterprise combining ranching, a biological research station, and ecotourism. Gertrudis himself embodies the history of the land. He has spent the greater part of the last forty years as a ranch hand, and has come to know the land and the common Spanish names of most of the animals. Lately his bosses have switched him over to ecotourism, and he's learned the English names of many of the birds. He also knows the exact page numbers where the more common birds are featured in the Birds of Venezuela to help the tourists in their quest to match and document what they have just seen in living color with what appears on the neatly drawn color plates. Gertrudis has lived and in a sense is still living the transition from a pure extract economy of ranching to one that mixes extraction with knowledge-oriented activities that preserve the land, specifically one that combines ranching with scientific research and ecotourism. These preservation activities accord the highest priority to the gaze, to the observation and contemplation of nature.

Although many ecotourist sites are characterized by this succession of uses, it may be simplistic to assert that they have moved from extraction to observation. Observation has always been integral to traditional uses of the land such as ranching and farming, and scientific observation in particular has frequently worked hand-in-hand with extractive activities, contributing to the discovery and efficient removal of resources. Recently this association between science and extraction economics has taken the form of bioprospecting; indeed, the potential of bioprospecting has become one of the most common rationales for conservation of natural habitats. Nevertheless, science in general and ecology in particular has often defined itself against extractive uses of natural resources,

and has claimed for itself a gaze unmotivated by material concerns, interested not in the exploitation of nature for wealth but rather for knowledge.

The Hato Piñero story is a complex one in this regard. The first impulse toward conservation seems to have come from Branger himself, who banned hunting, burning, and deforestation on his land in the 1940s and instituted a complex cattle breeding program based on introduction of foreign strains and artificial insemination. In 1982, Hato Piñero set aside a large space for a Biological Station, which has since hosted many visiting researchers. This loose association with science has certainly added legitimacy to the hato's conservation efforts and prestige to its status as a natural area. More recently the hato has capitalized on this status by branching out into ecotourism, deriving profit from the kind of observational practices typically associated with science. Ecotourism in essence marries wealth to knowledge; it seeks to produce wealth from exploitation of the gaze itself. Yet there is curiously little interaction between scientists and ecotourists--each inhabits different areas of the ranch, and their paths rarely intersect.

The hatos are drenched in history and have played a preeminent role in the creation of the nation, since they were the cradle of the Venezuelan llaneros who formed the nucleus of Bolívar's armies. But the history of the area is not embraced in any serious way by Hato Piñero; rather it is appropriated in a reductive fashion for advertising purposes, primarily to add to the uniqueness of the local. The complicated history is acknowledged by the hato's brochure and web pages, which underscore the fact that the ecotourist destination is also an old-style ranch. They do this because this makes the ranch an experiment in sustainable land use, which is the fashionable compromise between exploitation and preservation. Beyond the claims for sustainable land use, history simply adds local color. In speaking of the people, the ads emphasize the authenticity of the people, as if they were one more endemic species that makes this place different from all others--and therefore more marketable.

“Piñero’s workers are mostly locals, skillful men able to perform the arduous labours of the llanos, and they are part of a group of people with special traits. Having an independent nature, their love for freedom led them to play an important role in the Venezuelan War of Independence. They enlisted in the patriotic front and with Simon Bolivar in command, crossed the Andes to liberate Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia from Spanish rule. The music of the "llanero" is perhaps the most authentic of all the national music... they are extraordinary riders and their great knowledge, love and passion for nature is always present in their songs.”<sup>2</sup>.

History here is not a complex phenomenon but rather a narrative of national origins. Just as a visit to Piñero is a visit to “paradise,” a return to that Edenic birthing place where man and nature were in harmony, it is also a visit to the

originary moment of the nation, when valiant men fought for their ideals and became heroes. The true complications of history, the suspicions, accusations, challenges, subversions and ideologies mentioned by Borland in the epigraph to this section, are pointedly left out of the picture.

History is also a primary ingredient of style, and style sells. But to sell, it is necessary that history not provoke. So when Hato Piñero's ads describe the guest quarters, they don't invite inquiry into the colonial situation that made this kind of ranch and this kind of architecture possible or that reinforced a certain social hierarchy. They use the colonial to suggest stability and past splendor. A guest can sleep within the colonial and forget the conflicts of the present and of the past:

Hato Piñero will help you forget your stress. For this is a place for peace and serenity even in the eyes of the animals that cross your path. Ceiling fans provide a calming rhythm in the white, colonial bedrooms with sculpted doors; in the lounges, and in the long soapstone corridor. Yellow-shouldered parrots chatter away in the central patio, against a backdrop of bougainvilleas, hibiscus and orchids.<sup>3</sup>

These uses of history point to a complex negotiation between autochthony and universality. On the one hand, the sites pretend to be perfect examples of nature in its paradisiacal state. Yet all paradises are alike. To market these Edenic locales, it becomes necessary to distinguish them from one another, and "history" can do this, within limits. Too much emphasis on the past can, however, contaminate the illusion of unspoiled beauty and make forgetting impossible.

Rómulo Gallegos' Doña Bárbara, one of the most influential interventions in twentieth-century Venezuelan nationalist discourse, confirms the centrality of the hatos in the national imaginary. Two fictional hatos, Altamira and El Miedo, were the setting for the novel. They were based on a real hato called La Trinidad de Arauca which still exists today and functions as a ecotourist site, much like Hato Piñero. Doña Bárbara is articulated around the dichotomy of "civilization," symbolized by the city-bred hero, Santos Luzardo, versus "barbarism," symbolized by the local tyrant Doña Bárbara and her daughter Marisela, which Gallegos adapted from Sarmiento's influential treatise, Juan Facundo Quiroga, o civilización y barbarie. As Doris Sommer has shown, the novel is a national romance which follows in a long series of such novels from the nineteenth century. "Civilization" ultimately wins out when Santos Luzardo marries Marisela, and Doña Bárbara disappears. That is, "barbarism" is assimilated into "civilization" in a subordinate position. Together they form a new family which will be a firm foundation for the Venezuelan nation. United the Venezuelan family (comprised of law married to earthly energy) can resist a binding attraction to local traditions as well as the pernicious influence of imperialism, incarnated in the novel by the nefarious Yankee, Mr. Danger. For

Gallegos, the hato then is a quintessential Venezuelan social space, one of the symbolic, originary centers of the nation.

It is ironic then that the economics of neoliberalism now demand a wholesale courting of foreign investment and that ecotourism is largely predicated upon trade with foreigners. We might say that in the same way that the man of the city married the country girl in Doña Bárbara, today international subjects "marry" the barbarism of nature through ecotourism. Yet whereas Santos Luzardo and Marisela, rooting and rutting on the hato, symbolically gave birth to a nation capable of resisting transnational capital, the hatos today demand a very different kind of marriage in order to survive.

## **II. Dominica. Locale: Syndicate Nature Trail.**

### **A path through the forest, or ecotourism, science, and spaces of resistance.**

In spite of the island's steep terrain and high backbone, much of the lush mountainous expanse is easily accessible. Well-paved roads show you the way. Where roads end, trails begin. One scenic trail leads to another. Each is a tribute to nature, in its purest form.

--From Destination Dominica: The Official Visitor Magazine of the Dominica Hotel and Tourism Association

We should have known we were on the right road to the Syndicate Nature Trail when we saw the huge construction equipment and the road turned into mud and cloying red clay, making the road all but impassable. Two days before, the same kind of half-bulldozed road had greeted us when we drove up to the trailhead for Middleham Falls. Parking the car by the side of the "road" to avoid the risk of getting permanently stuck, we slopped on for another mile or so until we finally came upon the entrance to the trail. So by the time we attempted Syndicate, hiking along the access road through groves of bananas and oranges with mud up to our knees seemed familiar to us and vaguely expected. After a mile we did indeed come to a well-maintained path into the forest, complete with little signposts giving the scientific and creole names beneath the best examples of certain trees. A short spur off the trail to the right led to "Parrot Lookout," a rather high ledge from which we saw no parrots.

These stretches of primeval mud are clear testimonials to Dominica's legendary rainfall (and it wasn't even the rainy season!). Perhaps it was just our bad luck that "improvements" were being made to the roads providing access to Dominica's major ecotourist sites. Nevertheless, the constant trekking through muddy tractor trails drives home the constructed nature of the nature preserves. When one includes the nature of the trails themselves, with their ecological

signage, and at some of the more used trails, picnic shelters, restrooms, benches, railings, steps and even asphalt, then we see that pristine nature is not quite pristine after all. While the goal of these improvements, according to Forestry and Wildlife Division officer Ashton Lugay, is "to ensure that the negative impacts created by heavy visitation are kept to a minimum," the end result is the installation of nature simulacra that act as seductive bait to hordes of cruise ship tourists.<sup>4</sup> Ecotourism changes the land, and as it becomes more popular, it will change the land even more.

This is certainly the experience Dominica is undergoing, especially as it makes efforts to attract the cruise ship trade with promises of a perfect (and brief) stopover on the "Nature Island of the Caribbean." At present, the generally relaxed rhythm of life in Dominica is punctuated by the thrice-weekly arrival of the cruise ships. On cruise days tiny stands pop up along the main road across the island, where tourist merchandise is hawked, everything from Carib baskets to the bark of the bois bandé tree soaking in tiny jars of rum and professed to act as an aphrodisiac. Sudden traffic jams abound as the mini-busses set off on the only road around the island for their tours. Given this sudden influx of short-term visitors, certain easily-accessible ecotourist sites have received a disproportionate amount of attention. Emerald Pool, for example, has been turned into a "sacrificial cow," according to historian Lennox Honychurch.<sup>5</sup> While the "sacrifice" of certain sites may make sense if such practices result in the protection of others, the logical outcome will be that tourists will push the envelop more and more. As the accessible sites become more degraded, more enterprising tourists will go to ever greater lengths to reach the pristine. It is only a matter of time before the caterpillars finish the roads and make Syndicate, Middleham Falls, and all the other major ecotourist sites accessible to the mini-busses. Yet despite this pessimistic scenario, it must be admitted that Dominica is far ahead of the other Caribbean islands in the percentage of land set aside in relatively untouched natural areas. The island's Morne Trois Piton National Park is one of only two Natural Heritage Sites in the Caribbean. In the entire region, Dominica is only comparable to Belize and Guyana in its ability to market itself as a nature destination. Why?

Dominica's geography and climate are largely accountable for its lack of development and exploitation, and therefore for the preservation of large tracts of undisturbed forest. The island is rugged and steep and it rains so much one feels as if one actually were in a novel by García Márquez. With little flat, easily arable land, Dominica has never been capable of large plantation agriculture, and has thus been left as a bit player in the global economy for centuries. Ironically, this marginalization is the very factor spurring Dominica's current entrance into the global economy, through tourism, eco- and otherwise. In addition, this rough geography in part accounts for why Dominica still possesses a Carib population and why the slave rebellions of the eighteenth century were so hard to put down. The same "pristine" lands set aside today in national parks have been traditional refuges, sites of resistance (Pile and Keith) for Caribs,

escaped slaves, and even for a group of Dreads in the 1970s. Gabriel J. Christian asserts the centrality of these areas to the national consciousness:

These forests have always been important to the island: once a refuge for runaway slaves; the source of mythical island lore; the "zion" or "eden" sought after by local dreadlocks; and always--the towering guardians of the Dominican citizenry who craved the cooling shade and barrier against fierce hurricane winds, provided by the stout centuries-old foliage and tree trunks. (173)

We are in the presence here of a myth of paramount importance to the national collectivity: the forest as a living house, the protective oikos of the Greeks, from which the word "ecology" is derived.

Nature is not just the house that surrounds and protects the collectivity. It can also be seen as analogous to the individual human body. Writing in The New Forester, a publication of Dominica's Forestry and Wildlife Division, Evelyn Fabien attempts to bring home the importance of conservation by making the pollution of Dominican nature (especially with the pesticide paraquat) equivalent to the pollution of the body with alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs. Just as one cares for the self, one should care for the island. While Fabien appeals to the current public fascination with personal health to make the case for conservation, Adolphus Christian, writing in the same journal, appeals to Dominican's deep religious convictions for the same purposes. Tracing Dominica's natural beauty back to the creative powers of a caring God, Christian repeatedly calls on his readers to "witness" the scenic spots, which are both unspoiled and "income-generating" (35), and to understand the need to act as custodians of God's gifts. All in all, his tone is revivalistic and self-serving, as he seems to reserve his greatest praise for the forest service itself. Yet such a piece does make clear the interconnections among religious notions of Divine order and of natural paradise, current conservation efforts, and nationalism.

Most Dominican tourist literature ignores this strong national identification with natural areas, as well as the past uses of these lands. The accent typically falls on the idea of nature as unchanging and eternal. The propaganda is not subtle in this regard: "Dominica is a modern-day treasure island. Because here you can find something that scarcely exists in the world today: an undisturbed natural paradise that has hardly changed for thousands of years. And people who have preserved their natural friendliness."<sup>6</sup> Just as was the case for the hatos in Venezuela, Dominican history itself is only invoked in the most stereotypical way, such as when the dress of the slaves and the plantation workers (generally female) is the standard uniform for servers in fancy restaurants or for the dancers in a creole folk ensemble performing at a guest house. In these cases, history is fashion, designed only to add authenticity and exotic flavor to the show. The paraphernalia of colonial history again adds to the difference of the place, making it quaint and backward, perhaps more

memorable (and certainly more photogenic) to the cruise ship tourist visiting several different islands in just as many days.

History has not always been invisible to the traveler interested in nature. In the late 1870s Frederick Albion Ober visited an abandoned Carib cave as well as shacks built by maroons, or escaped slaves, in the dense inland forests of Dominica. A travel writer and ornithologist, he was in the area collecting bird specimens for the Smithsonian. His description of the maroon refuge in Camps in the Caribbees gives a good idea of the scientific perspective at the time:

Returning to the cabin, my attention was called to the logs of which its walls were built. They were solid rosewood, which once grew wild in these forests. Could they have been transported to the coast, they would have brought a good price. The cabin was one of those built by some of the Maroons, or runaway slaves, some forty years ago, when they escaped to the mountains and formed so formidable a body that troops were required several years to capture and subdue them. ... There were many evidences of the residence of the runaways, in dismantled cabins, and gardens, and fruit-trees. It is thought that the wild hogs roaming about the surrounding hills were from their stock. 153

Ober is primarily interested in untouched habitats and endemic species, especially birds, and he is quite attentive to the ways in which the land has been used and how this use has changed over time. He notes the maroon's utilization of rosewood, now scarce in the area, and their planting of gardens and of fruit-trees; the maroons may also be responsible for the introduction of pigs to the area. Ober's works thus provide a striking example of how science follows on the heels of Others (indigenous Others, maroon Others) who have gone that way before. In this context, science re-penetrates the wilderness previously used as refuge from social persecution and opens up a space for another type of refuge, one that puts a premium on the conservation of natural areas to be used for observation, contemplation and the generation of scientific knowledge. Just as science follows, it also precedes. As in Hato Piñero, science has prepared the ground for tourism: Ober's ornithological travels provided him with the information that would later go into his travel guide to the West Indies, one of the earliest for the area.

This transition from science to tourism, and to ecotourism in particular, characterizes the history of Dominica's Springfield Plantation Guest House, also known as the Springfield Centre for Environmental Protection, Research and Education (SCEPTRE). The Springfield estate was first settled by the French in the mid-eighteenth century; it was they who built the old Plantation House, which is now used as the main guest house. <sup>7</sup>An American anthropologist, John D. Archbold, bought the estate in the mid-1930s and later acquired the adjacent Mount Joy Estate in the 1950s. Both were operated as plantations until he gave

the land to Clemson University in 1990. Clemson established the Archbold Tropical Research Center (ATRC) on the premises and formed a university consortium which used the center for scientific research and as a site to conduct tropical ecology field courses for visiting university students. Direct involvement of Dominicans in the management of the area was initiated five years later when the property was leased to SCEPTRE, as part of Clemson's efforts to garner more local involvement as well as offset the financial burdens associated with running ATRC. While SCEPTRE continued the policies of the university consortium, its new agenda was to demonstrate "sustainable use of natural resources by researching and establishing organic farming, agro-forestry and aquaculture." Though more locally relevant, these aspirations were not conducive to easy profits. Therefore, SCEPTRE continued to house tropical ecology courses at Mount Joy, until the great house used to accommodate the visiting students burned down during a field courses in 1997. With the fire on Mt. Joy and no immediate prospects of rebuilding, SCEPTRE has since catered to a few individual scientists but primarily to ecotourists and other travelers. Instead of growing as a scientific establishment, Springfield is gaining the reputation among tourists as a healthy, cleansing place, where visitors can heal physically and spiritually from the toxic effects of first-world living (even though many locals evince great concern about increasing cancer rates on Dominica, possibly due to contamination of drinking water from agricultural run-off). Springfield has also been forced by financial considerations to provide the stage for creole folkloric afternoons-- complete with entertainment by one of the dance ensembles alluded to earlier-- for cruise ship passengers, although the manager clearly sees these events as hopelessly cliché and contrary to the ecological identity of the organization. On these days, the resident scientist, who once served as an important mediator between science and the visiting college students, is curiously out of place, and appears more like a scientific prop or a nostalgic reminder of SCEPTRE's noble aspirations.

We repeatedly witnessed a startling example of this transformation of Springfield, the scientific research station, into Springfield, the tourist destination, on days when the rigors of our own scientific pursuits would keep us sorting specimens in our room through the later part of the morning. Hearing the bustle of activity below, we would step away from the microscope and out onto the verandah. The sudden announcement of the impending arrival of a cruise ship group to tour the Springfield Plantation colonial structures would always unleash a torrent of activity as the staff of the guest house rushed to squeeze enough "typical" fruit juice for the hordes (juices derived primarily from introduced fruits, but no matter). Forty five minutes later, when the mini-busses would finally wind their way into the courtyard, the staff would be standing by the coolers with tired smiles on their silent faces. As the congo player would begin to tap out a beat, the dance ensemble in colorful creole dress would start the show. And yet it turns out that the local color is a simulacra of what once was and a rather inexact one; the dance ensemble we saw played a Pan-

Caribbean mixture of calypso and actively avoided the local in favor of those tunes familiar to the tourist ears.<sup>8</sup> Here globalization is equivalent to homogenization as all the sharp particularities of place are worn down to present a smooth, unthreatening surface that reflects the fantasies of the tourists, making them feel more at home. In these instances, the dancers were not the only ones participating in cultural homogenization. The tourists too all acted the same, regardless of their port of origin or nationality. German, French, American, and Asian tourists alike, all took picture after picture by the huge, poinsettia tree blossoming right outside our window. A perfect picture for the photo album -- not only extremely beautiful and exotic, but perfectly symbolic of the season. It was Christmastime afterall.

### **III. Panama. Locale: Barro Colorado Island.**

#### **Simulacra and frames, or globalization as canalization.**

"They say, though, and one can actually see for oneself, that Utopia was originally not an island but a peninsula. However, it was conquered by somebody called Utopos, who gave it its present name--it used to be called Sansculottia--and was also responsible for transforming a pack of ignorant savages into what is now, perhaps, the most civilized nation in the world. The moment he landed and got control of the country, he immediately had a channel cut through the fifteen-mile isthmus connecting Utopia with the mainland, so that the sea could flow all around it."

Thomas More, Utopia

After the long morning talk and a lunch in the BCI cafeteria with some of the on-island researchers, we set off for our nature tour. There was precious little time before the afternoon ferry was scheduled to depart for Gamboa, location of our temporary quarters. We particularly wanted to see the large ceiba or silk cotton tree. The rest of the group of about 30 Princeton students had set off about a half hour before us. If we hurried, we might be able to catch them in time for the group photo. Half way up the trail we began to hear human chatter punctuating the natural sounds of the rain forest and we soon saw the group, single file and headed towards us. We missed the group photo opportunity, "but the ceiba's still worth the trip." We pushed on.

It was as big as we expected. Weeks later, looking at the photos we took that day, a problem was immediately apparent. There was no ceiba tree -- we were standing in front of what seems to be a huge brownish wall. There is too much tree inside the frame, and too much outside as well.

In a sense Barro Colorado Island (BCI) is all about framing. It exists because it was “framed” by the waters of the Panama Canal. Once a high spot (La Loma de Palenquilla) it became an island in 1910 when the Canal builders dammed the Chagres River to create Lake Gatún. Much of the area around the Canal was set aside for practical reasons. Intact forest was needed to act as a filter and ensure that the Canal would be continuously fed with relatively clear water. Development or agricultural use of the surrounding lands would have meant increased run off of sediment into the canal, leading to a greater need for dredging and much higher costs for maintaining the canal. Military bases were also established, guaranteeing U.S. control of the canal and acting as a buffer zone between the Canal and the Panamanians. These bases typically enclosed large tracts of forest used for training exercises and target practice, but generally undeveloped. In this context, BCI was left relatively untouched. BCI was designated a biological reserve in 1923 and since then has become one of the most studied tropical rain forest in the world, serving as the locus of several classic ecological studies. Right after the Second World War BCI became a bureau of the Smithsonian Institute dedicated to tropical ecology research; it was renamed the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in 1966, when it expanded its scope to other areas in the tropics. Since then both BCI and STRI have received even greater recognition. In 1977 the drafters of the Panama Canal Treaty designated BCI as a Nature Monument; in 1985, STRI itself was recognized as an International Mission by the Panamanian government.<sup>9</sup>

BCI may not be a simulacra in the same way that the Disney Magic Kingdom is, but STRI publications do refer to it as an “artificial island” (Web site, “Visitors Center Opens in Rain Forest Reserve”) and the scientific research and tourism has promoted the idea of the island as representative of larger tropical rain forests, both in the Canal Area, Panama, and the tropics in general. Given that scientists know exactly when BCI was formed and under what circumstances, it has been considered an ideal location for following island dynamics (colonization, extinction, speciation, etc.) over time. In addition, by its very nature as an island BCI is of special interest to conservation biologists because it represents the more generalized fragmentation of natural areas, which has been accelerated by economic globalization. All of which means that the piece of nature framed by Lake Gatún has been seen as largely representative of the natural areas that fall outside of the frame. But what is it exactly that falls outside of the frame?

What falls outside of the frame is Panama itself and the historical circumstances under which that country was formed, i.e., U.S. intervention in Colombian politics in 1903. Like the Canal itself, BCI is a concrete symbol of a key moment of acceleration in the integration of the global economy, a globalization that is the direct result of canal-ization, beginning with the Suez Canal and leaping forward with the Panama Canal. This sudden move forward in international integration was the product of a historical confluence of forces,

government, business and science, both medical and biological. In this process science came to be closely allied to imperialism and to neo-colonialism; the military has sheltered science since the construction of the Canal. Like it or not, BCI itself by its very nature reflects the extent to which science still inhabits the space(s) of neo-colonialism in Panama. This spatial overlap is also revealed by the history of one of STRI's most important buildings at its headquarters outside of Panama City. The building, named Tivoli, now houses the STRI director and other administrators, but it was once the kitchen of the Tivoli hotel, built early in the century for the state visit of then U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt. (Only one wing of the hotel was finished and appointed by the time he arrived.) After the Panamanian riots of 1964, the old hotel, perceived as a legacy of imperialism, was torn down. All but the kitchen, that is, which STRI bought and renovated, turning the structure to its own purposes in a act of architectural bricolage.

This neo-colonial history, always just beneath the surface, became more visible with the 1977 Torrijos-Carter agreement by which the Panama Canal would be turned over to Panama by the year 2000. It became glaringly obvious with the 1994 U.S. invasion of Panama. As a response to these events, STRI has modified its relationship to the Panamanian government and to local Non-Governmental Organizations by adopting a more collaborative approach. Faced with the prospect of a radically reduced U.S. military presence in the Zone, which protected both nature and the scientists studying it, STRI is reaching out to the local organizations and positioning itself as an educational resource. STRI's education mission has taken on greater prominence and BCI is a center piece of that mission. Within limits STRI is distancing itself from the U.S., or at least from the neo-colonial policies which had determined Panamanian politics from its inception until 1977.

The stated reason why STRI is interested in sharing its scientific knowledge with the lay public is that it hopes that learning about nature will increase interest in conservation (Wong and Ventocilla, 14). To this end STRI sponsors a nine-day course for Panamanian students on the Gigante Peninsula which is adjacent to BCI and part of the nature monument. This field course gives the students a feel for actual research in tropical ecology and culminates in the completion of an independent ecological study carried out by the students. BCI itself is open three times a week for visitors who pay a minimal entrance fee. The focus at present is on natural history. Tourists to the island take a nature trail, for which there is a detailed guidebook titled, A Day on Barro Colorado Island. At present, only distinguished guests get the opportunity to experience the scientific research more directly by talking to individual scientists and visiting their actual field sites scattered across the island. Normal tourists are confined to the nature trail and rarely meet the scientists, who are apt to be out in the field during the day. There has thus existed a gap between the scientists, who are primarily from the U.S. and Europe, and the tourists, who are usually Panamanian. There is however currently a plan underway to hire someone to

live on the island and develop educational programs which would recreate successful experiments carried out by researchers on the island. These simulacra would attempt to bridge the gap between STRI and the local population, and between science and the lay public generally. This sort of education is designed to smooth over the historic fissures of the neo-colonial situation, and the more general split between science and society.

STRI's educational mission is not limited to BCI. There are two prime examples of STRI's expanding educational role and of alternate uses for the land surrounding the canal. First, there is a plan to convert half of Fort Clayton into a "center of services devoted to programs of education, research, innovative technology production, and cultural exchange," to be called the City of Knowledge. The nascent organization already has an executive board with representatives from many different institutions, including STRI, the Ministry of Education, and several Panamanian universities. The City of Knowledge will be comprised of four principal components: academic programs, research programs, a technology park, and a conference center. Just as the Hato Piñero has changed from an economy based on exploitation of natural resources for the production of wealth to one based on exploitation mixed with study and contemplation, so this area of the Zone would change from military use to an economy marrying industry to knowledge producing activities. The City of Knowledge intends to capitalize on Panama's privileged position in the global economy. The propaganda for the project emphasizes Panama's geographic location and historical role in international trade. In a sense the City of Knowledge is modeled after the Panama Canal itself as a global connector: "Its programs will promote cultural exchange and understanding among the peoples of Latin America and the entire world, offering opportunities to work together for the mutual benefit of all" ("City of Knowledge"). Again, the new uses will inhabit the spaces of the old: The military enclosure will become a campus. The military barracks will be renovated to provide housing for the scholars and students, creating the distinct possibility of a visiting academic sleeping in quarters once occupied by a four-star general.

A second use of the land surrounding the canal will be for five star ecotourism, primarily in the Gamboa area. A plan has been developed to combine comfort, education and adventure, which ecotourist organizations like ANCON and other smaller agencies have already done in other parts of Panama. The plan is being developed by Hanna Ayala, the wife of prominent U.S. biologist Francisco Ayala. While few details about the plans are available at present, it is obvious that science is continuing to clear a path for ecotourism. Not only has the neighborhood of Gamboa been home to many STRI researchers, STRI has used the old Gamboa schoolhouse to provide lodging to visiting students participating in field courses in tropical biology. Finally, Hanna Ayala's close personal relationship to one of the most famous of all U.S. biologists,

Francisco Ayala (who reputation is even greater in Hispanic countries), has surely added to the government's receptivity to her plan.

In all this we may be accused of losing sight of the widespread tendency to "forget" (repress, ignore) earlier land uses in the ecstasies of ecotourist contemplation. While this may be possible (with an effort) in Venezuela or Dominica, it is really quite difficult to do in Panama, where prime birding areas may receive the prosaic, yet revealing name of Pipeline Rd.--clear indicators of past industrial schemes. An even more disturbing reminder of the neo-colonial past of the area can be found in the "natural" areas on the west side of the Canal. There have been those who have suggested turning these old military areas over to ecotourism. The only problem would be the unexploded ordinance--horribly expensive to remove, yet horribly destructive if left as is. These shells are a chilling reminder of the origins of the Zone and its century-long role in establishing a U.S. presence in the region.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

Ecotourism follows as the latest use of the land in a chain of uses. It engages the tourists' utopian fantasies and pretends to an ahistoricity and an ethereal universality which it can only maintain by repressing or simplifying the remnants of the past, which everywhere erupt and make their conflicting claims upon the present. In the pageant of ecotourism, the tourist assumes the position of the previous master of the gaze. In the hatos this master is the estanciero, who rides out to survey the extent of his domain; on Dominica, it is the plantation owner, who sits on the verandah of his Plantation House, and watches his slaves or servants as they move; in the Canal Zone, it is the military on patrol, protecting a coveted, strategic locale.

Science is often a prime intermediary in the transformations of nature. In particular, it often follows hard upon extraction economies and introduces an economy of the gaze which is the foundation for ecotourism. While ecotourism is usually seen as beneficial to conservation efforts, we have seen the dynamics of the simulacra and the depredations this kind of tourism can entail. This is ironic because science has typically been conservation oriented but it has opened channels through the wilderness which have been openings for degradation. This is also ironic given that scientists often consider themselves completely separate from the general public--in a world of their own--when in fact they are, or can be, a crucial link between conservation and tourism.

In the three locales examined here, there is obvious variation in the relationship of science to ecotourism. At Hato Piñero, there is a loose association

between the two. Although the ranch, the Biological Station, and the ecotourists share a similar conservation ethic, the scientists are largely separate from the tourists. There is little interchange between the different groups; each is engaged with nature, but in a different fashion. In Dominica, the contradictions between tourism and science are more apparent. SCEPTRE, for example, aspired to combine ecological study with sustainable land practices, but has been forced by circumstances to cater to ecotourists, cruise ship tourists, and scientists as well, all within the space of the old Plantation House. These different subjects, each with different expectations, has induced a kind of ideological schizophrenia in the organization. BCI, meanwhile, is perhaps the premiere location in the world for ecological study of tropical rain forest, and it is located in the midst of an area under increasing pressure of deforestation. However, as the military presence which sheltered both science and nature is withdrawn, STRI is expanding its educational mission, spearheading different uses of the military bases of the Canal Zone and promoting ecotourism at BCI and the surrounding natural areas.

**Bibliography**

- Baker, Patrick L. Centring the Periphery: Chaos, Order, and the Ethnohistory of Dominica. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.
- Christian, Adolphus. "Dominica, Count Your Blessings!" The New Forester 9 (1997): 34-36.
- Christian, Gabriel J. "Nature Island Fading? The Struggle to Preserve Dominica's Natural Environment." In Irving W. Andre and Gabriel J. Christian, In Search of Eden: Dominica, The Travails of a Caribbean Mini-State. Upper Marlboro, MD: Pond Casse Press, 1992.
- Fabien, Evelyn. "Life is Like a Forest." The New Forester 9 (1997): 20.
- Gallegos, Rómulo. Doña Bárbara. Ed. José Carlos González Boixo. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1990.
- Gerbi, Antonello. The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900. Trans. Jeremy Moyle. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973.
- Honychurch, Lennox. The Dominica Story: A History of the Island. 2nd. Edition. London: Macmillan, 1995.
- Lugay, Ashton. "Nature Site Improvement: the Key to Enhanced Ecotourism Development." The New Forester 9 (1997): 21-23.
- More, Thomas. Utopia. Trans. Paul Turner. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1965.
- McCullough, David. The Path Between the Seas: the Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.
- Ober, Frederick A. Camps in the Caribbees: The Adventures of a Naturalist in the Lesser Antilles. Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1880.
- Pile, Steve, and Michael Keith, eds. Geographies of Resistance. London: Routledge, 1997.
- The Project on Disney. Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Sommer, Doris. Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

Tree, Isabella. "Dominica." Islands: An International Magazine. 1998 (October): 100-111.

Wong, Marina, and Jorge Ventocilla. A Day on Barro Colorado Island. 2nd. Edition. Panama: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, 1995.

Zimbalist, Andrew, and John Weeks. Panama at the Crossroads: Economic Development and Political Change in the Twentieth Century. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Given that Disney World is perhaps the premiere vacation destination for U.S. families and honeymoon couples, it is obvious that one of the ways in which American family ideals are defined is through interaction with Disney and its products. The use of Disney-like simulacra of nature for the purposes of tourism brings with it an attendant ideology and commoditization of (American) family life. Unfortunately, the construction of the family through ecotourism is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from Hato Piñero web page, "Hato Piñero," at "[www.branger.com /pinero /about.html](http://www.branger.com/pinero/about.html)".

<sup>3</sup> Quote from Hato Piñero web page, "Hato Piñero ~ Venezuela: A Unique Nature Preserve in the Heart of the Llanos", at "[www.branger.com /pinero /touring.html](http://www.branger.com /pinero /touring.html)".

<sup>4</sup> Ashton Lugay, "Nature Site Improvement" (22).

<sup>5</sup> As Honychurch said in an interview with Isabella Tree: "Some of our most beautiful sites have become like checkout counters. The Emerald Pool was our sacrificial cow. Now there's even talk of a cable car to the Boiling Lake. We're setting ourselves up as the 'Model Ecotourism Destination,' but our government and tourism authorities don't seem to understand what that means" (109). Honychurch's The Dominica Story: A History of the Island is the most widely available historical text devoted to Dominica. Patrick L. Baker's more scholarly Centering the Periphery: Chaos, Order, and the Ethnohistory of Dominica is also extremely valuable.

<sup>6</sup> Tourist Map, "Dominica, Nature Island of the Caribbean," published by the Board of Tourism of the Commonwealth of Dominica.

<sup>7</sup> We are indebted to the management of Springfield Plantation for most of this historical information.

<sup>8</sup> This is true not just for the creole dance groups, but for the Caribs as well. Tree describes the following scenario: "I stop at a café where a Carib cultural group is performing for a busload of French tourists. The Caribs are dressed like a cross between cowboys and Indians; their yellow cotton loincloths are trimmed with nylon fringe. Underneath they're wearing Lycra bicycling shorts. Most of their songs are calypsos" (106). This is not to suggest that all of Dominican culture is a pabulum derived from outsiders' stereotypes and expectation. We are referring here to representations of Dominican culture created specifically for tourist consumption.

<sup>9</sup> Information about BCI and about STRI more generally is primarily derived from Wong and Ventocilla, A Day on Barro Colorado Island, STRI web pages ([www.stri.org](http://www.stri.org)), and interviews (both formal and informal) with STRI staff members, conducted over the course of two visits to Panama, in 1997 and 1998. McCullough's monumental The Path Between the Seas is still the most engaging retelling of the building of the Canal; Zimbalist and Week's Panama at the Crossroads is a good source for recent economic and political history.