

Putting the World in Order: John Lloyd Stephens's Narration of America

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the Romantic quest for disappeared indigenous societies in travel texts by John Lloyd Stephens, particularly in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843). Stephens asserts the "Imperial" presence of the United States in his Humboldtian narrative, which outlines his project of recovery and appropriation of these ruins for his envisioned "Museum of the Americas." Through his self-representation as a Hero who uncovers the mysteries of the "New World," Stephens projects Orientalist "imaginative geographies" onto Mexico and Central America in order to contain these new spaces within the U.S. nationalist project of capitalist expansion and political and cultural hegemony.

Key Words: Travel literature; United States and Latin America; archaeology.

During the nineteenth century, travel narratives were one of the most popular genres for middle class consumption. One could argue that this genre helped to shape much of the cultural and transcultural knowledge that was infused into the ideological construction of democracy and the U.S. symbolic presence in the Americas. Before the development of the highly sophisticated digital and audiovisual media industry we have today, newspapers and travel books were the way Americans could experience the foreign and the self simultaneously. This article examines what were by nineteenth-century standards "best-seller" travel books, and ana-

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lyzes the political and social implications of the “disinterested” science and “innocent” adventure described in them.

The romantic quest for lost “American Civilizations,” exemplified by the travels of John Lloyd Stephens, found expression in his *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843).¹ The quest for lost civilizations dates back to the conquistadors’ thirst for gold (Wertheimer, 1999).² This quest takes on special importance in the nineteenth century, when issues of national identity were debated in the context of the extermination and the displacement of the American Indian. The growing interest in alterity—the Other, the native, the primitive, the American—served as a measure of individual and national identity. In his travels to Central America and the Yucatan, John Lloyd Stephens asserts the “imperial” presence of the United States, with an anti-conquest account as defined by Mary Louise Pratt. His Humboldtian narrative, modeled on a totalizing project of reimagining America through “the specificity of science with the esthetics of the sublime” (Pratt, 1992: 121), outlines his project of recovery and appropriation of the Mayan ruins for his envisioned “Museum of the Americas.” Since the museum is a monumental spectacle of history presented as a purposeful narrative, Stephens’s prototypical contribution to the nineteenth-century public sphere seems noteworthy. Through his self-representation as a hero who uncovers the mysteries of the “New World,” Stephens projects Orientalist “imaginative geographies” onto Central America to contain it within the U.S. nationalist project of capitalist expansion. Both elegiac and commercial forms of exploitation join the peripheries to the mainstream as American cultural artifacts. The simultaneous fetishization and commodification of indigenous cultures reveal a dual motive in Stephens’s travel narratives: the narratives mix mythmaking and pragmatism in a contradictory quest that asserted the project of modernization by re-appropriating the value of premodern societies. First, Stephens’s trips in “America” exemplify the embracing of monocultural views and the Orientalist tropes employed by early nineteenth-century explorers for mapping Central American places and peoples.³

¹ John Lloyd Stephens was born in New Jersey 1805 and died of malaria in 1852 in Central America, while working for an American railroad company. His father was a prosperous owner of a New York merchandising firm. He studied law in Litchfield, Connecticut and, while working in his father’s firm, became active in the Democratic Party. When he became ill with a weakening throat infection, he left on a journey to Europe in 1834. Thus, he started his numerous travels and later his dedication to writing travel narratives.

² Specifically Francisco Pizarro’s search for El Dorado.

³ Schueller’s book on the representation of the Orient during the nineteenth century complements my arguments about the use of “Orientalist tropes” with Latin American cultures. One of her main points is that: “In the United States, however, imperialism, particularly with respect to the Orient, could be constructed much more benevolently, as teleology. Since the ‘discovery’ of the Americas by Columbus was popularly transmitted as the outcome of a vision to reach the Orient, contemporary arguments about seizing

Stephens viewed Central America through the prism of romanticism, natural history, archaeology, and U.S. nationalism. He used the indigenous past to establish the moral, ontological, and political bases of settler (frontier) society. One could argue Stephen's travel narratives in Latin America, functioning within the tropes of "objective observation," are committed to the metaphysical foundations of nation and empire.

The conception of the "New World" as pristine, Eden-like nature constituted the major theme of U.S. art and writing before E. George Squier discovered the Indian mounds along the Mississippi and published his observations in 1848 (Harvey, 2001: 150-193).⁴ Of course, at the end of the eighteenth century, Alexander von Humboldt had commenced a change of *Weltanschauung* by describing monuments of the Aztec and Inca peoples, in addition to his "discoveries" of volcanoes, mountains, waterfalls, and exotic plant and animal life of the unexplored regions of the Americas. But for the most part, Europeans (and their Anglo-American counterparts) believed that America lacked a historical past and therefore lacked a future. Indians were considered people without history (Wolf, 1982). Because the native inhabitants were seen as primitive, many thinkers, philosophers, and scientists felt that America's origins were inferior in comparison to those of the "Old World." Buffon, for example, theorized the inferiority of American animals. Buffon described America as a New World where plants, animals, and men degenerate into inferiority because of environmental factors (Gerbi, 1973). Thomas Jefferson forcibly refuted this Eurocentric notion in his *Notes on Virginia*. Euro-Americans were interested in discarding the notions of the degradation of the white man that some eighteenth-century European scientists such as Buffon and Raynal had postulated.

This theme of a hostile, corrupt natural world became a leitmotif in nineteenth-century writing. In his travel writings about Spanish America, John Lloyd Stephens develops this struggle between nature and culture into a very powerful metaphor, one which can be seen in Frederick Catherwood's illustrations of Stephens's texts as well. Stephens proposes the United States as the protagonist to save the remains of civilizations, which are about to disappear.⁵ The rise and fall of civilizations (the

Oriental trade or civilizing Orientals through missionary activity were accompanied by visionary statements about completing Columbus's original mission. Tropes of expansion and control over various specific Orients were thus mystified as 'natural' through the complex genealogy of the country's intimate associations with the search of the Orient" (Schueller, 1998: 9).

⁴ George Squier also traveled extensively in Latin America and wrote several travel narratives. Other publications by Squier worthy of mention include *Antiquities of the State of New York* (1851), *Nicaragua: Its People, Scenery, Monuments, Resources, Condition, and Proposed Canal* (1852), and *Peru: Incidents of Travel and Exploration in the Land of the Incas* (1877).

⁵ According to Clifford, "Ethnography's disappearing object is, then, in significant degree, a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice: 'salvage' ethnography in its widest sense. The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text" (Clifford, 1986: 112). Clifford disputes, however, "the

theme of Gibbon's great history) was a key theme in nineteenth-century archaeology and Romantic art. The perfect example in American art is Thomas Cole's great historical series, *The Course of Empire* (1836). Cole's paintings made a statement about the cyclical nature of civilization, from the Wilderness to the Garden, from "Consummation" to "Destruction." The last painting of the series, entitled *Desolation*, shows an empty landscape where ruins are the only sign of human history. Stephens's encounter with the Mayan empire in a stage of desolation offered a useful moment to reconstruct that "lost" past. Thus, Stephens's endeavor speculates about the antiquity of the continent. The United States, after all, did not lack modern technology, but this anxiety of lacking a "civilized" past provides us with an idea of how central the idea of antiquity was for the understanding of "modernity" in U.S. culture. On the one hand, antiques helped to situate the modern self at the end of the long historical development of civilization. On the other, they made the Romantic soul appreciate, in concrete terms, the modern, republican, industrialized institutions of the United States. This symbolic recognition of a "lost" empire provides the U.S. hero with the recognition of the future. In a sense, Stephens prophetically recognizes the future in the "hidden" past.

For the United States, the nineteenth century was a time of expansion. The nation expanded economically and politically; the sciences and a national literature were on the rise, and, in general, the United States was becoming a powerful and unified nation. But there were some unresolved conflicts: the slavery question, the clash between the economic models of North and South, the ambiguous zone of the frontier, the diversity of new immigrants, the violent appropriation of the land from the Native Americans, and so forth. At the time, the United States was trying to create cultural symbols that would unite the people of the expanding nation. Those symbols were to represent the consolidation of American culture as a unique entity, independent from Europe. Lewis and Clark had revitalized the narrative of exploration in America and amateur writers, historians, and artists were "discovering" the country and exploring its national limits.

Ralph Waldo Emerson shared this enthusiasm for establishing America's cultural independence. In 1837, he gave his famous address, "The American Scholar," to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard, in which he proclaimed the moment of intellectual independence of the American mind: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (Emerson, 1940: 45). Thus, Emerson declared the United States to be a creator of new knowledge, and

mode of scientific and moral authority associated with salvage, or redemptive, ethnography. It is assumed that the other society is weak and 'needs' to be represented by an outsider...The recorder and interpreter of fragile custom is custodian of an essence, unimpeachable witness to an authenticity" (Clifford, 1986: 113).

the American scholar was the individual who would put this program into practice. At the same time that Emerson disdained mundane utilitarianism, he described the new American scholar as a cultural hero: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential....Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action" (Emerson, 1940: 52). Emerson's depiction of the American scholar came directly from Thomas Carlyle's treatment of the modern hero. Emerson was proposing that the American mind would have to take on epic magnitude and play an active role in the American cultural revolution. American writers were developing a taste for travel and the reach of the picturesque. "Authors," Emerson continues, "we have in numbers, who have written out their vein, and who, moved by a commendable prudence, sail for Greece or Palestine, follow the trapper into the prairie, or ramble round Algiers, to replenish their merchantable stock" (Emerson, 1940: 54). Even though Emerson thought that scholars should simplify and study common and everyday things (as Thoreau would later do in *Walden*), most of his audience and many other writers were interested in the cultural aesthetics of Romantic quests and exploration into "new" knowledge. Travel, in a sense, was seen as the prototypical transcendence of custom, lore, and convention. The discoverer and the adventurer were two models of the heroic mind.

In his book-length study, *The Adventurous Muse*, William C. Spengemann analyzes

the emergence of the American Romantic novel out of two very different fictional poetics: a poetics of adventure invented by the American travel-writers to portray the metamorphosing world that appears to someone who stands on its moving frontier; and a poetics of domesticity, devised by certain highly influential English novelists to restrain and discredit this potential subversive vision of reality (Spengemann, 1977: 3).

The combination of these two types of poetics identified by Spengemann can be found in the work of many nineteenth-century American authors including Francis Parkman, Herman Melville, and Washington Irving. In his *Tour of the Prairies*, Irving confesses that the American public was hungry for books whose "subversive vision" could capture the national imagination, such as those about the West. Nonetheless, readers' interests were not limited to tales of western expansion; the success of works by Irving, Melville, Twain, James, and others provides us with evidence that the American reading public eagerly consumed books on travel to Europe and other exotic locations as well.

In the same year that Emerson was addressing his Harvard audience, John Lloyd Stephens consolidated his career as a travel writer with his publication of *Incidents*

of *Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (1837).⁶ In his address, Emerson had pointed out that the American public was expecting heroes who would ignite their imagination and could bring about a moral unification:

They [the poor and the low] cast the dignity of a man from their downtrod selves upon the shoulders of a hero, and will perish to add one drop of blood to make that great heart beat, those sinews combat and conquer. He lives for us, and we live in him (Emerson, 1940: 59).

In Emerson's words, the complete reciprocity between travel writer and audience is clearly delineated. Thus, the travel writer also had a responsibility to his audience back home. He was to play no ordinary role, but to live for his "imagined community" of American readers. The public's imaginative participation in heroic travels was definitely achieved by Stephens, whose *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* sold 21 000 copies in two years (Hagen, 1970: xl).

Many travel narratives can be read as a means of locating oneself in the world, a means of understanding the value of one's native soil. Emerson's insistence on the importance of the American scholar in the articulation of his dream of "a nation of men" (Emerson, 1940: 63) finds its parallel in a review of Stephens's book:

The discoveries, which these recent travelers have made, tend to confirm the truth of the Scriptures, and to increase the Christian's confidence in those "exceeding great and precious promises," which as yet remain to be accomplished.

One practical remark is suggested by these facts, which is that, of all men, the Christian ought to be the most zealous friend of science and literature, for these are constantly aiding to elucidate the history, the geography and the language of the word of God (June 1838: 181).

Stephens starts on a religious quest and establishes himself as a pilgrim to "confirm" passages from the Bible as a book of historical truth. For Stephens, this Christian journey holds national significance. Through this connection between nationalism and religion, Stephens locates America's destiny in the trope of the "Chosen People" looking for the Promised Land. His "Grand Tour" of Rome, Naples, Sicily, Russia, Poland, Greece, Smyrna, Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and finally the Holy Land transforms him into a pilgrim looking for the origins of Western Civilization, an American writer with national concerns.

⁶ On April 16, 1835, with the publication of "Scenes in the Levant" in the *American Monthly Magazine*, Stephens became an "author."

Stephens evaluates the meaning of the sites for Americans and examines the presence of America wherever he goes. At the city of Petra, he asserts the historical significance of his visit:

I was the first American who had ever been there. Many of my countrymen, probably, as was the case with me, have never known the existence of such a city; and independently of all personal considerations, I confess that I felt what, I trust, was not an inexcusable pride, in writing upon the innermost wall of that temple the name of an American citizen (Stephens, 1970: 257).

The gesture of writing has a double significance. First, the name is located among the ruins of a wondrous city, a temple to civilization's impermanence. The mere presence of the American citizen ensures the connection with that "unknown" past. At the same time, the writing implies the violence of inscription on the rock as a means to assert the traveler's self. This vandalism, and the pride that goes along with it, can only be explained when inscribed in national meaning. The contradiction between discursive preservation and the destructive energies of inscription seems to be the key to understanding Stephens's conception of identity. Through visiting sites of antiquity, he can find out who he is, and his nation can discover what it will be.

Patriotic religiosity is played out in reviews of the book. A reviewer from a religious newspaper offers this reading: "Our traveller pursued the very route which must have been passed over by the Israelites in their march to Mount Sinai" (Alexander, 1838: 67). The Exodus contained a metaphorical significance in the New World for the Puritans. For if the Puritan Pilgrims left England reluctantly, according to Perry Miller in his book *Errand into the Wilderness*, the great migration of 1630 had been conceptualized with a positive sense of mission. As Miller indicates, "It was an act of will, perhaps of willfulness. These Puritans were not driven out of England (A thousand of their fellows stayed and fought the Cavaliers) –they went of their own accord" (Miller, 1956: 4). The ideological construction of their "New Jerusalem" at the point of arrival in the New World indicates the constructed historical origin of the nation and their sense of mission. The reviewer begins to identify even more closely with Stephens. He continues, "On the tenth day from Cairo, our pilgrim, as we may now call him, as he was going to visit places deemed holy by Jews, Christians, and Mohammedans, was all day in full view of the top of Mount Sinai" (Alexander, 1838: 69). "Our traveller" becomes "our pilgrim," for the writer's actions confer a feeling of communion and impart a sense of the whole nation's presence in that pilgrimage. Finally, the reviewer makes this point evident:

"We respect in our countryman these sentiments of patriotism –they require no apology. We would that the breast of every American, who visits foreign climes, might be actuated by the same glow of patriotism" (Alexander, 1838: 70). Not only has Stephens become a travel writer, but also he has become an "American" travel writer.⁷

In addition to the religious pilgrimage, Stephens seems particularly motivated in his placement of the moral and intellectual force of the American Republic:

In Greece I had, moreover, another subject of reflection. In Greece I had been struck with the fact that the only schools of instruction were those established by American missionaries, and supported by the liberality of American citizens; that our young republic was thus, in part, discharging the debt which the world owes to the ancient mistress of science and the arts by sending forth her sons to bestow the elements of knowledge upon the descendants of Homer and Pericles, Plato and Aristotle; and here on the same distant land was standing as an apostle over the grave of Christianity, a solitary laborer striving to re-establish the pure faith and worship that were founded on this spot eighteen centuries ago (Stephens, 1970: 347-348).

Paradoxically, the traveler who has followed the itineraries and locations explored in Homer and Herodotus's writing now sees American citizens as the educators of the ancient world. In the spirit of the English colonists at Plymouth and at Boston, the United States derived its sense of direction from the idea of the establishment of a New Jerusalem in the New World.⁸ Generated by those early idealistic pioneers, this sense of mission to redeem the Old World continued as an emblematic feature into the nineteenth century. For Stephens, his trip only confirms something that he had already suspected: America's young republic is the regenerative force in the sciences and the arts as well as in religion.

⁷ Francis Bacon had theorized this connection between travel and "home":

When a traveller returneth home, let him not leave the countries where he hath travelled altogether behind him; but maintain a correspondence by letters with those of his acquaintance which are of most worth. And let his travel appear rather in his discourse than in his apparel or gesture; and in his discourse let him be rather advised in his answers, than forward to tell stories; and let appear that he doth not change his country manners for those of foreign parts; but only prick in some flowers of that he hath learned abroad into the customs of his own country (1955: 50).

In the quotation, Bacon emphasizes the idea of home. According to him, travel enriches the individual, yet the idea of home remains present during and after the traveler returns from the foreign parts. The traveler's native country and local customs continue to be the most important effect of experiencing other cultures.

⁸ Ernest Lee Tuveson explains the re-flourishing of the ideology of the "chosen people" and the special covenant Puritans had with God. He discusses excerpts from Herman Melville, Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman as examples of universal regeneration rhetoric in the hands of U.S. culture and institutions (Tuveson, 1968).

The concept of antiquity, Stephens believed, was essential for the understanding of modernity. Stephens demonstrates nostalgia for antiquity in his articulation of the idea of degeneration. Places and monuments become signs, which express an absence. This negation or dissolution of antiquity, along with the affirmation of progress and national identity provides the mechanism by which Stephens asserts his cultural authority over Africa and the East. As Edward Said has pointed out,

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient –dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said 1979: 3).

In a sense, Stephens was learning the discourse of Western domination over “Other” places. This authority (his knowledge of Egyptian architecture, for example) would later provide him with a basis for establishing his authority on his own continent. During his first trip to Central America, he compares Mayan architecture to the monuments of ancient Egypt. At Ocosingo, for instance, he grounds his explanations of the ruins in the connections he sees between the Old and New Worlds:

The roof was formed of stones, lapping over in the usual style and forming as near an approach to the arch as was made by the architects of the Old World...The door was choked up with ruins to within a few feet of the top, but over it, and extending along the whole front of the structure, was a large stucco ornament, which at first impressed us most forcibly by its striking resemblance to the winged globe over the doors of Egyptian temples (Stephens, 1969, vol. 2: 259).

The arched roof and the stucco ornament are described less by their individual features and more by their resemblance to other, non-American architectural styles. It is interesting to note that Catherwood, a well-known British artist and architect, accompanied Stephens on this particular trip. Both Catherwood and Stephens were very familiar with Old World remnants of the past, and they used this knowledge to assert their authority in an assessment of New World antiquities.

In 1839, Stephens was sent by President Van Buren on a secret diplomatic mission to Central America;⁹ the accounts of his travels through Central America and

⁹ According to Larzer Ziff, “Stephens learned of the death of William Legget, the American minister to the Republic of Central America, and Democratic Party loyalist that he was, applied to President van Buren and received the post” (Ziff, 2000: 86).

later to Yucatan would become famous and applauded by the American reading public. In his second book, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843), Stephens established himself as the archaeologist and hero. Martin Green explains that “adventure tales are in fact where the two cultures come together...that of reflection (enshrined in our universities) and that of action or violence (institutionalized in our army, our police, our prisons)” (Green, 1984: 5). Stephens became the popular adventurer who united the power of the academic mind with patriotism and physical prowess.¹⁰ He constructs both “Central America” and later Yucatan as distinct regions in the nineteenth-century imagination. Central America is a region entrenched in a war of social classes and divided between the ideals of conservative, proclerical traditionalists and anti-clerical republican factions. Stephens’s narrative attempts to reconstruct a lost civilization. But ultimately, he appropriates that loss in order to inaugurate a “higher” civilization –that is, Anglo-America. As a representative figure of his “imagined community,” he becomes the legitimate heir of the ancient ruins of the American continent.¹¹

Already Stephens’s trademark, the title “Incidents of Travel” in the case of his American wanderings, suggests a certain degree of irony. The minuteness of the expression “incidents” enters into contradiction with the grandiosity of the undertaking: the exploration of monuments in a “pure” jungle setting; encounters with wild animals and insects such as fleas and giant mosquitoes; the threat of malaria and robbers; the dangers of examining volcanoes up close; and the possibility of being killed by either side of the civil war going on at the time. All this, he carries out for the “selfless” endeavor of acquiring knowledge for the “civilized world.” Apart from his scholarly pretensions, Stephens had a more practical reason for his trip: to determine the feasibility of constructing a Central American canal which would help commerce and ensure westward expansion. Therefore, Stephens was actively participating in the development of communication and transportation at the service of capital.

¹⁰ Green talks about the particular variety of adventure narrative that appears in the United States as a consequence of its political and social ideals. Green establishes the ambiguity implied in U.S. adventure:

The energizing myth of America, like that of the other nations of the modern world-system, has been ambiguous. On the one hand, it has been passionately anti-imperialist; born in rebellion against the British empire, America has detested tyranny, aristocracy, militarism, courts, and castes, and has suspected every elegance that seemed to speak of social privilege, even the purely intellectual. On the other hand, it has been triumphantly imperialist; it has not only spread westward like a prairie fire to take a whole continent away from its original inhabitants but has spread American styles of technology and discourse all over the world, to displace other indigenous cultures....Adventure has been the energizing myth of both aspects of America, and thus has recommended both plain, peaceable manliness and triumphant imperial militarism (Green, 1984: 3-4).

Stephens might be considered the hero of “peaceable manliness,” bearer of both physical and intellectual abilities.

¹¹ We might go as far as to say that Stephens was imagining the empire as much as the nation.

In volume one of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, Stephens publicly discusses the possibility of American investment in a canal he surveys in Nicaragua. He imagines the appearance of a commercial emporium:¹²

The harbour was perfectly desolate; for years not a vessel had entered it; primeval trees grew around it; for miles there was not a habitation. I walked the shore alone. Since Mr. Bailey left not a person had visited it; and probably the only thing that keeps it alive even in memory is the theorizing of scientific men, or the occasional visit of some Nicaragua fisherman, who, too lazy to work, seeks his food in the sea. It seems preposterous to consider it the focus of a great commercial enterprise; to imagine that a city was to rise up out of the forest, the desolate harbour to be filled with ships, and become a great portal for the thoroughfare of nations. But the scene was magnificent. The sun was setting, and the high western headland threw a deep shade over the water. It was perhaps the last time in my life that I should see the Pacific; and in spite of fever and ague tendencies, I bathed once more in the great ocean (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 400-401).

His “enterprise” is synonymous with “civilization.” Ultimately, Stephens’s “civilization” brings commercial expansion for nations like the United States and England whose economies rely on the flow of capital, their consumption of nature and the redistribution of labor. Stephens’s symbolic last bath symbolizes a “sacred” ablution for the bourgeois quest and the arrival at the Pacific. The sublime “enterprise” appears in the imagination and is symbolized in the beautiful natural scene.

In his concept of the “ideology of adventure,” Michael Nerlich explains the ways in which travel invested in the myth of the hero as a community “leader.” Nerlich argues, “Knight and bourgeois brought forth what I call the ideology of adventure, that is, the systematic glorification of the (knightly, then bourgeois) adventurer as the most developed and most important human being” (Nerlich, 1987: xx). The epic-like adventure in Stephens’s text represents the nation’s quest for a canal that would consolidate capitalist expansion into the West, extending the borders of the nation up to the Pacific Ocean. Stephens hopes to be seen as a national hero (or knight) by his American (bourgeois) reading public. His adventure not only predicts future national expansion, but also justifies the moral implications for it as an attempt to

¹² In *Return Passages*, Larzer Ziff offers a very different picture of Stephens as an “official diplomat.” Ziff believes that Stephens’s role as a U.S. diplomat was quite secondary and not his main emphasis (Ziff, 2000: 86). I would argue precisely the opposite. One cannot understand Stephens without capturing the many-sidedness of his narrative persona: archaeologist, government agent, pilgrim historian, ethnologist, and empire-builder. The construction of the canal is closely related to the expansion into Mexican territory a few years later. I would agree, however, with Ziff’s assessment that Stephens’s narrative emphasizes the development of “networks of transportation on which new manufactories and new markets would depend” (Ziff, 2000: 98).

validate the bourgeois national project. In Stephens, empire envelops itself in a nation-building mission.

While *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841) deals primarily with his diplomatic role and its ramifications, Stephens's second travel narrative, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (1843), focuses on Yucatan and his archaeological survey. Throughout both works, Stephens creates a morally justified historical order. His archaeological findings are as much about the creation of a pre-conquest, romanticized past as about the origins of Latin American peoples (whites, Indians, and Africans).

At the end of the second volume of *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, Stephens's scientific discoveries are summarized concisely. His first argument is that Spain's policies consciously intended cultural genocide: their goal was "to subvert all the institutions of the natives, and to break up and utterly destroy all the rites, customs, and associations that might keep alive the memory of their fathers and their ancient tradition" (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 308). His second argument is that "a people possessing the power, art, and skill to erect such cities, never could have fallen so low as the miserable Indians who now linger about the ruins" (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 309). The first argument, infused with the rhetoric of the Black Legend,¹³ blames the conquistadors' ignorance, greed, and destructive tendencies; the second argument dismisses the possibility that the modern Indian peoples could be the heirs of the discovered ruins. In Stephens's account, we find the transfer of the region's cultural authority into the hands of foreign experts and observers such as Stephens himself.¹⁴ He accuses the native people of appearing indifferent and oblivious to their antiquities and reprimands the white Creoles for not contributing to general and universal knowledge and science. As an enlightened traveler, he neither ignores nor destroys this newly discovered ancient culture; rather, he becomes a builder who will reconstruct the past. The ideological enlightenment construct of the "light of

¹³ "The Black Legend" was "a propaganda campaign" initiated by Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar, with his *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (*Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*) "against the Spanish conquest and colonizing of the Americas, later taken to extreme heights by the English and Dutch in their competition with the Spanish for the new lands. By emphasizing and exaggerating the conquistadors' and colonists' inhuman treatment of the natives, the other colonial powers assumed the moral high ground and justified their designs on Spanish-held territories" (Kanellos, 1995: 12).

¹⁴ Pratt points out this phenomenon in what she calls "anti-conquest" narratives. She refers to "certain strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (Pratt, 1992: 7). Pratt continues, "The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is a figure I sometimes call the 'seeing-man,' an admittedly unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (Pratt, 1992: 7). Humboldt and other scientific travelers assume their authority over the land they see and their assessments are supposed to be of universal validity while the inhabitants are clearly represented as "ignorant" of the world that surrounds them.

progress" is a modern conceit to provide the producers of knowledge with the power and control over other societies.

The author's narrative employs a rhetoric of wonder, mapping exotic America for his English-speaking audience. Stephens's narrative of "incidents of travel" is about creating an ancient culture that will make the region's current inhabitants seem backward and ultimately "primitive." By denying that the Indians had any hand in making the ancient cities, Stephens makes them foreigners in their own country, a telling colonialist move. At the same time, his mapping of Central America creates an exotic "Other" who appears ambivalently "American."

As we might expect, this exotic picture of America borrows images from the Orient. Places, ruins, and people are all "Orientalized." He establishes a credible equivalence between America and the Orient through allusions to myths promoted by Spanish colonial texts that represented Indian cultures as "Arab." This is further complicated by Stephens's borrowing from Washington Irving, who envisioned Spanish culture itself as Oriental in his stylized tales of the Alhambra. Stephens employs images and tropes known to his audience in order to explicate the exotic and otherness. His text is marked by a motif of pilgrimage into American antiquity. For example, as Stephens descends into Guatemala on his first trip, he explains:

The plain reminded me of the great waste-places of Turkey and Asia Minor, but was more beautiful, being bounded by immense mountains. For three hours the church was our guide. As we approached, it stood out more clearly defined against mountains whose tops were buried in the clouds (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 166).

America is translated with all its exuberant nature through the Oriental. As a way of mapping "unexplored" space, Stephens inserts these "waste-places" into predetermined and recognizable language. Through the use of memory ("The plain reminded me") Stephens interconnects the two spaces and brings the reader with the Orientalist trope into a narrative of religious pilgrimage and self-discovery. The Orientalist rhetoric, combined with sublime yet destructive nature, makes the adventure more exhilarating. Stephens sees himself as a (crusader) knight fighting the destruction of the ruins by natural forces – be it simple people who do not appreciate the value of the ruins, or more literally, as seen in Catherwood's engravings (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 33-35)– the heavy vegetation and the force of time.

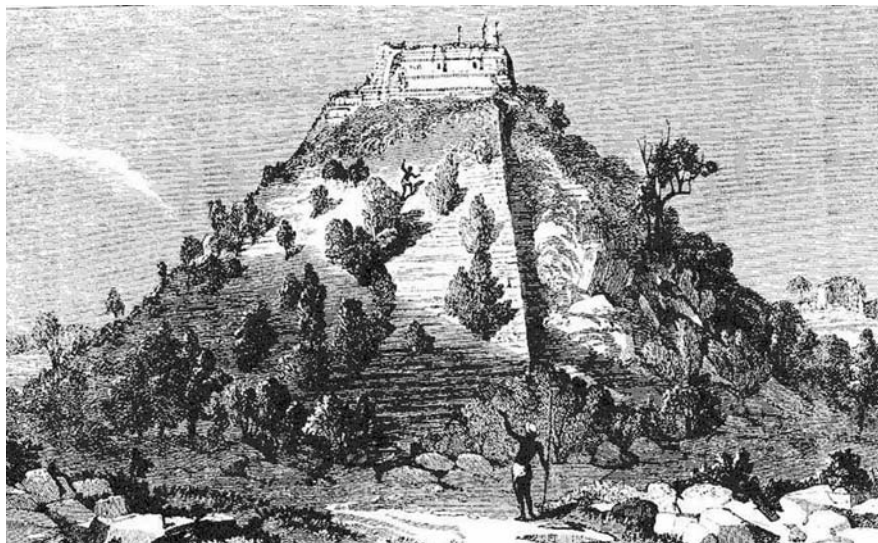
The ruins are also depicted as having Oriental qualities. At the ruins of Labná, Stephens comments:

In its ruins it gave a grand idea of the scenes of barbaric magnificence which this country must have presented when all her cities were entire. The figures and ornaments in this wall were painted; the remains of bright colours are still visible, defying the action of the elements. If a solitary traveller from the Old World could by some strange accident have visited this aboriginal city when it was yet perfect, his account would have seemed more fanciful than any in Eastern story, and been considered a subject for the Arabian Nights' Entertainment (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 32).

The ruins are domesticated as a site of exotic tales. They evoke a civilization that was "barbaric" yet "magnificent," a real, yet seemingly fictional place worthy of the *Arabian Nights*. With the help of the imagination, Stephens induces a mental return to a point where time stands still in the past. In addition, Stephens calls some of the architectural structures "pyramids," a term which originally applied to Egyptian architecture, though the function and design of the Mayan structures are clearly not the same (figure 1).¹⁵

For Stephens, the paintings in the ruins also recall this displaced Orient: "in position and general effect reminding me of processions in Egyptian tombs. The

Figure 1



"East Front of the House of the Dwarf", engraving by Frederick Catherwood, en Stephens (1969: 80).

¹⁵ The historian Ivan van Sertima, author of *They Came Before Columbus*, might disagree with me on this point. His controversial study argues that Africans traveled to America long before 1492 and had left their cultural imprint all over the American social landscape.

colour of the flesh was red, as was always the case with the Egyptians in representing their own people" (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 125). At Uxmal, he finds other connections between the symbolic, aesthetic and philosophical aspects of the American aboriginal culture and the Orient.

The emblems of life and death appear on the wall in close juxtaposition, confirming the belief in the existence of that worship practiced by the Egyptians and all other Eastern nations and before referred to as prevalent among the people of Uxmal (Stephens, 1963, vol. 1: 192).

Not everything bespeaks the "Arabian Nights," however. Stephens finds evidence of human sacrifice and barbaric rituals which make his "home" seem more civilized than ever, thus providing a progressive picture of "Occidental ways." Stephens calls for the evangelization of America, but he finds that Catholic institutions (such as local priests) are too corrupt and "Oriental." Conversion, he believes, can only take place with the arrival of Protestant ethics.

Stephens also orientalizes in various ways the inhabitants of the regions where he travels. For instance, he describes Rafael Carrera, the mestizo leader of the Central American revolutionary movement, as a despotic fanatic:

He was boyish in his manners and manner of speaking, but very grave; he never smiled and conscious of power, was unostentatious in the exhibition of it, though he always spoke in the first person of what he had done and what he intended to do....My interview with him was much more interesting than I had expected; so young, so humble in his origins, so destitute of early advantages, with honest impulses, perhaps, but ignorant, fanatic, sanguinary, and the slave of violent passions, wielding absolutely the physical force of the country, and that force entertaining hatred to the whites (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 249).

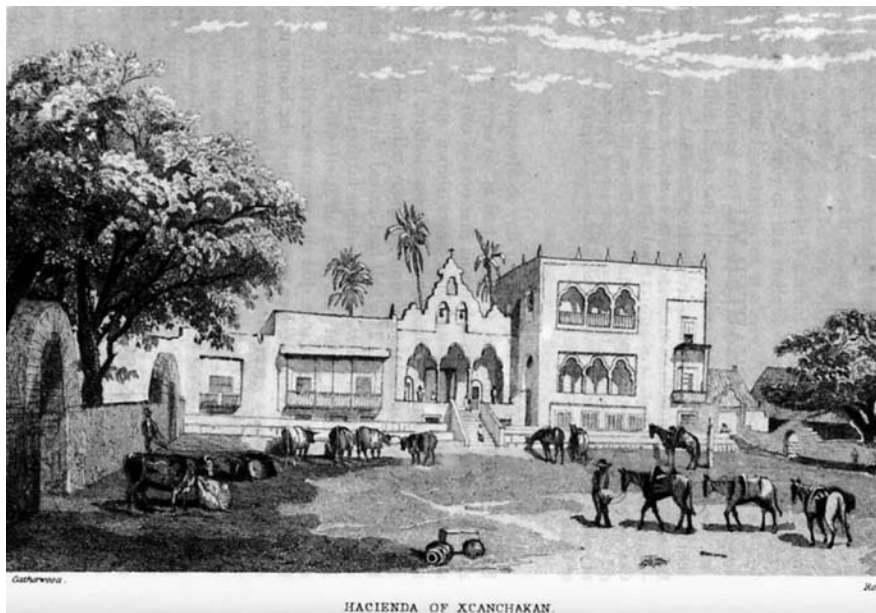
The leader represents the fanatical, impassioned forces directed against whites. Carrera's appearance in the text is marked by Stephens's use of the vocabulary of Orientalism.¹⁶ This society of *mestizos* and Indians, Stephens suggests, promotes political anarchy and suspect morals and spirituality:

It was the day before Good Friday; the streets and the plaza were crowded with people in their best attire, the Indians wearing large black cloaks with broad-brimmed felt sombreros, and the women a white frock, covering the head except an oblong opening for the face; some wore a sort of turban of red cord plaited with the hair (Stephens, 1969, vol. 2: 204).

¹⁶ Interestingly, Stephens's description of Carrera mirrors Said's description of Orientalist vocabulary: "Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality" (Said, 1979: 4).

The Easter scene presents itself as exotic. The Oriental image of the women with their faces concealed and wearing red turbans makes the local scene extremely striking. Stephens offers a picture of Spanish American Creole culture by mapping their customs like the primitive bullfights, the perverse tendencies of the Catholic priests who have “harems” of *mestizas*, or the incomprehensible bloody civil wars in Central America. Stephens’s rhetoric of Orientalism is reinforced by his comparisons to Moorish cities and Far Eastern homes. Of course, while some colonial architecture does echo North African cultural forms, the discursive displacement is not by chance. The Creole hotels, when available, are nothing but “a sort of caravansary, or stopping place for travelers, a remnant of Oriental usage which still existed in Spain, and which she had introduced into her former American possessions” (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 183-184). Catherwood’s engraving of the Hacienda of Xcanchakan, for example (Stephens, 1963, vol. 1: 80) depicts Spanish colonial architecture (figure 2).

Figure 2



“Hacienda de Xcanchakan”, engraving by Frederick Catherwood, en Stephens (1969: 80).

The Oriental features of the ruins excite Stephens, heightening his sense of marvel and inflating his fantasies about exotic heroes or societies as well as accentuating his authority as “archaeologist.” However, he finds the Indians an aesthetic nuisance who destroy the sublime experience of visiting the ruins:

Ascending a hill, we saw through the trees the “old wall” of the ancient inhabitants. It was one of the wildest places we had seen; the trees were grander, and we were somewhat excited on approaching it, for we had heard that the old city was re-peopled, and the Indians were again living in the buildings...but as we approached we almost turned away with sorrow. It was like the wretched Arabs of the Nile swarming around the ruined temples of Thebes, a mournful contrast of present misery and past magnificence (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 141).

The “scene” presents itself to the aesthetic eye/I of the traveler, and the inhabitants spoil the picturesque of the scene and the sublimity of the ruins. In this description, the Indians are depicted as “swarming” insects, in clear contrast to the splendor of the ancient ruins. Their presence accentuates what Stephens seems to see as a backward movement in the region from civilization to barbarism. Moreover, we should note the traveler’s position in this scene. He claims for himself a “superior” position, both physically and intellectually. This allegedly objective distance allows him to remain untouched by the dehumanization of the “wretched” Indians. Stephens alone possesses the ability to perceive the sublime, to understand America’s past, to grasp beauty. For Stephens, both “races” in Yucatan –Indians and whites– form “a simple primitive, and almost patriarchal state of society” (Stephens, 1963, vol. 1: 121). If the ruins represent a *culture stationnaire* or stationary culture as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1971), the Indians and the Spanish American whites in Stephens’s texts appear as members of societies that are not merely inert or stationary, but even worse, quickly devolving.¹⁷

In his narrative, Stephens domesticates his Others through the appropriation of their history. In this way, Stephens makes manifest his quest for “progress.” He takes his moral and cultural superiority for granted, deluded by his search for scientific “truths” and calculations, his architectural accounts of the ruins, and his racial arguments about Central America’s inhabitants. As Edward Said has pointed out, the discursive power of Orientalism lies in the creation of an Idea in order to understand, manipulate and incorporate the geographical space of the Orient into the West. In a similar way, Stephens activates a self-definition of Anglo-American culture: a progressive, democratic, and learned entity. The creation of an American Orient enables the creation of an American Occident. Thus, the United States is

¹⁷ For a different perspective, but somewhat interrelated to the one presented here, see Scott Michaelsen’s main argument in *The Limits of Multiculturalism* about Stephens and the development of archaeology. According to Michaelsen, Stephens’s main question of inquiry –“Who built the ruins?”– as well as other “fieldwork” evidence, altered his understanding of the pyramids as a sign of antique civilization in the Americas as presented in his first book on the topic into the symbolic representation of “barbaric magnificence” in *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* (Michaelsen, 1999).

privileged in Stephens's systematic ordering of ethnic, racial, and national groups. Claude Lévi-Strauss defines a cumulative culture as a concept in relation to a stationary culture. One might describe Stephens's project as an attempt to identify the United States's *histoire cumulative*, or cumulative history. Readers of Stephens's travel accounts can see his journeys as a symbol of the United States securing cultural knowledge about the historical forces of Spanish colonialism and the dark Indian past. Thus, Central American and Yucatan cultures exist merely as points of reference for North American identity. In the narrative, the rhetoric of negation and the logic for domination are clearly articulated.

On his first trip, Stephens not only collects his observations and archaeological data, but literally collects actual objects (or artifacts) in order to confer "authenticity" on his narrative:

[I] suggested to Mr. Catherwood "an operation" (hide your heads, ye speculators in uptown lots!) to buy Copán and remove the monuments of a bygone people from the desolate region in which they were buried, set them up in the "great commercial emporium," and found an institution to be the nucleus of a great national museum of American antiquities! (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 115).

Stephens buys an entire ancient city for U.S.\$50. This seems to demonstrate Stephens's great vision as well as the Spanish American Don Carlos's nearsightedness. For the transaction Stephens wears his "diplomatic coat with a profusion of large eagle buttons" (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 127). His archaeological and political roles blend nicely in this scene; both constitute a national "operation." The aboriginal ruins serve as a fetishistic symbol of national appropriation: he could "cut up one idol and remove it in pieces, and then make casts of the others. The casts of the Parthenon are regarded as precious memorials in the British Museum; and casts of Copán would be the same in New York" (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 115). The aboriginal culture would be incorporated in U.S. museums and archives for North American consumption. In spite of his criticisms of Spanish colonialism, Stephens follows similar procedures of cultural appropriation. He connects the British Museum's appropriation of Greek art to his own hopes for placing the Mayan ruins in a New York museum. He fails to recognize, however, the imperialist implications of such a move.

In this indirect fashion, Stephens inserts the rationale for imperialism into the discourse of the nation. The "authentic" American art provides a base for the reconfiguration and envisioning of the North American present. Art unifies the discourse of a nation, providing it depth in a project of knowledge acquisition that can bring cap-

italist acquisition. In a discussion of cases of archaeological “salvaging,” James Clifford compares two motives for collecting: “clandestine collecting for profit” and “scientific collecting for knowledge.” He distinguishes between “the moral evaluations of the two acts,” but notes that “commercial, aesthetic, and scientific worth in both cases presupposed a given system of value....Temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge” (Clifford, 1988: 222). The horrific project of “preservation” is but a scheme of the capitalist appropriation and imperialist destruction of ancient art. In Stephens, this “preservation” of the past becomes a metaphor for the construction of the present and the determination of the future of the nation.

During his travels to the Yucatan Peninsula, Stephens finds skeletons among the ruins. He takes the liberty of transporting them as scientific specimens of aboriginal races.¹⁸ He describes this process at Ticul:

And again there was the universal and unhesitating exclamation of the Indians, “They are the bones of our kinsman.”

But whosoever they were, little did the pious friends who placed them there ever imagine the fate to which they were destined. I had them carried to the convent, thence to Uxmal, and thence I bore them away forever from the bones of their kindred. In their rough journeys on the back of mules and Indians they were so crumbled and broken that in a court of law their ancient proprietor would not be able to identify them, and they left me one night in a pocket-handkerchief to be carried to Doctor S.G. Morton of Philadelphia (Stephens, 1963, vol. 1: 165).

The connection between the ruins and Yucatan Indians seems ambiguous. The Indians maintain that the bones found in the ruins belong to their “kinsman.” Yet Stephens resists this claim. He steals the skulls and bones for Dr. Morton, the Philadelphian author of *Crania Americana*, who had developed theories attempting to prove whites’ intellectual superiority through the measurement of human skulls (Gould, 1996; Stanton, 1960).¹⁹ Thus, Stephens’s journey serves a North American science which generates systems of racial hierarchy and social control back home. The literal appropriation of the past offers the traveler the possibility of establishing a connection between the modern and ancient worlds. The indigenous past is desecrated for the benefit of the present and future of the United States. These anecdotes express the growing disregard for the Other in the Americas. In the travel nar-

¹⁸ “Grave-robbing” played an important role in the development of ethnological museums and “racial” theory in America and in Europe.

¹⁹ Morton was a famous craniologist whose theories were crucial to race theory. Stephens establishes the first connection between travel to Latin America and the creation of “universal” racial theories that would disseminate via travel narratives which sought scientific “truth.”

rative, indigenous cultures seem to have as their only function to serve as an object for study and a reason for the exaltation of home. The project of Manifest Destiny and messianic expansion of the nation becomes mythologized in the narrative and ultimately appears as a self-evident fact.

The following day, Stephens decides to gather –or rather, steal– some skulls from the local cemetery. He had picked out and laid aside the skulls earlier, when he attended the funeral of a local woman. He confesses:

I had heard so much of her that she seemed an acquaintance, and I had some qualms of conscience about carrying her skull away. In fact, alone in the stillness and silence of the place, something of a superstitious feeling came over me about disturbing the bones of the dead and robbing a graveyard. I should nevertheless, perhaps, have taken up two skulls at random, but, to increase my wavering feeling, I saw two Indian women peeping at me through the trees, and, not wishing to run the risk of creating a disturbance on the hacienda, I left the graveyard with empty hands. The mayoral afterward told me that it was fortunate I had done so, for that if I had carried any away, it would have caused an excitement among the Indians, and perhaps led to mischief (Stephens, 1963, vol. 1: 175).

Here Stephens stands between science and his own conscience. Though he briefly seems unsure of the rectitude of his plan, he ultimately reveals his complicity with a project that disturbs the sacred memory of the Indians.

In a way, the book functions as a museum where the ancient American monuments and idols are evidence of a “New World” past “in their capacity as objects of aesthetic pleasure, exotic delectation and spectacle” for Anglo-American bourgeois elites. As Annie E. Coombes points out in her work on “the recalcitrant object,” this aesthetic appropriation helps concretize colonial relations (Coombes, 1994: 92), but I would add that it also hides them in mythical systems of meaning that become available for use and consumption. Ultimately, these objects act as metonyms for a true “civilized” America. As visual traces of that projected museum, Catherwood’s illustrations create a sense of sublime wonder. While some are simply records of artifacts or examples of architecture, others depict a romantic setting with exotic spaces, full of adventure and danger. The drawings create a system for authenticating the past. Like the episodic narrative, they constitute a collection of “sites” for the North American nineteenth-century reader. As James Clifford has affirmed, “Collecting –at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible– implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss” (Clifford, 1988: 231). Stephens endeavors to preserve the ancient history of America. Since Stephens discards the aesthetic value of the works he encounters, he assigns

their value to family history and the ethnographic memory of America. What he and Catherwood collect are “strategic and selective” elements of Mayan culture that justify the interpretative and appropriative role of Anglo-American culture in relation to its “Others” in America.

As Frederick Merk points out, the Monroe doctrine responded to a combination of protectionist ideas and a “sense of mission” around the early nineteenth century (Merk, 1970: 15-17). James Monroe’s 1823 address dictated non-intervention of European empires in the New World. As Merk explains, “a special variety of nationalism –resentment in the nation over interference by Europe in the affairs of Texas– is credited in some accounts with having generated Manifest Destiny” (Merk, 1970: 59). As a good patriot, Stephens applied the Monroe doctrine to the field of archaeology, projecting a sense of “natural dominion” over the whole continent to the United States:²⁰

Very soon their existence [other ruins’] would become known and their value appreciated, and it would be the friends of science and the arts in Europe who would get possession of them. They belonged by right to us and, though we did not know how soon we might be kicked out ourselves, I resolved that ours they should remain (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 115-116).

Here, the “us” is unambiguous; it means U.S. culture, not “them,” European scientists and artists. So the cultural struggle is, in the end, between European and Anglo-American cultures, both metaphorically and materially. At this time of expansion of northern European nations in all the corners of the world, the United States would follow suit and try to consolidate their expansion into the American West. In order to do so, the United States needed to find means of transportation. Almost half a century before, Humboldt had suggested the creation of a canal in Central America. Stephens’s diplomatic role in Central America is “to acquire information in regard to the canal route between the Atlantic and Pacific by means of the Lake of Nicaragua and the River of San Juan” (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 350-351). He argues for the construction of the Central American canal as a universal good. The only problem is the irrational war that is taking place at the time between Central American Liberal and Conservative parties. The canal is both the symbol and the concrete means for capitalist expansion. But, the political instability of the area prevents the capitalist North from establishing diplomatic arrangements to commence surveying and engineering the project.

²⁰ This concept of “natural dominion,” according to Merk, “was spelled out by Adams” in the year 1819, “at a cabinet meeting in a discussion of delays made by Spain in ratifying the Adams-Onís treaty” (Merk, 1970: 16).

Stephens portrays the problem within the dichotomy of progress and anarchy. War prevents those countries from reaching a utopian future of progress and prosperity, and Stephens believes that a capitalist influence would deliver peace:

[The canal] will compose the destructive 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 connection 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 (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 419).

The canal is a torch for civilization and peace. It will make Central American countries modern; perhaps it will even start the process of industrialization. The dream of U.S. commercial elites represents a Universal dream of humanity. This is a transcendent picture of humanity that erases the power struggles and cultural imposition that take place. The canal, as Stephens suggests, is more than a useful tool for international travel and commerce. This capitalism offers “a taste for making money” and, modeled on North American society, appears as the only and best alternative to preserve peace and order. For Stephens, capitalism renders the possibility of conversion: from divided nations to a nation united in industry. This is the project of “modernity” as defined by the “heroic mind.”

As indicated in a letter of July 20, 1831, from Edward Livingston, United States Secretary of State, to William N. Jeffers, U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Central America (Manning, 1933: 3-9), the area was a crucial strategic locus for the economic and political development of the United States. The proposed canal would serve a strategic commercial function for trade between China, the Philippines, the Northwest coast of America, the Pacific coasts of the new states of North and South America and the islands of the South Seas, with the rest of the world. Livingston also points out that “the commercial enterprise and extensive capital of our merchants; the skill and number of our seamen, and our proximity, must give us great advantages in this extensive field for competition in commerce and navigation (Manning, 1933: 4). After all, some of the elite groups in Central America regarded the United States very positively and had even sent a formal deputation to Washington with the request that Central America be admitted into the Northern Union. In his instruction to his special agent, Livingston leaves several patriotic points clear: “This cannot but be gratifying to our national pride, and may be made useful in promoting good understanding, commercial relations, and respect for our political institutions,” and, “You will endeavor to create, if it does not exist, and to foster, if it has already sprung up,

a feeling of common interest between the Republican Governments of America, not of a hostile, but a defensive character, in relation to the monarchies of Europe" (Manning, 1933: 6).

Stephens collects information on these political and socioeconomic issues that will benefit U.S. hegemony in the Caribbean and the Pacific, consolidating U.S. expansion on the continent. In his second travel narrative, he pays attention to the friction between the political elites in the Yucatan republic and Mexico, and he suggests the possibility of annexing the Yucatan to the U.S. This explains the presence of the Texan schooner in Yucatan and the 1847 trip by Justo Sierra O'Reilly to the United States to ask for help with the war.²¹

In *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, Stephens represents himself as a quixotic figure whose quest has been achieved against all odds: "Albino explained that we were travelling over the country in search of ruins, and the gentleman looked at him perhaps somewhat as the inn-keeper looked at Sancho Panza when he explained that his master was a knight-errant travelling to redress grievances" (Stephens, 1963, vol. 2: 159). This ironic comment shows that the traveling narrative is motivated by a quest ideology, even though sometimes the narrator employs mock-epic elements. His quest in Central America is to envision the canal (part of the "imagined empire"); in Yucatan it is to uncover the mystery behind the ruins. He is a member of a privileged, educated class who is able to surmount the dangers and difficulties of traveling. About the canal, he predicts:

To men of leisure and fortune, jaded with rambling over the ruins of the Old World, a new country will be opened. After a journey on the Nile, a day in Petra, and a bath in the Euphrates, English and American travelers will be bitten by mosquitoes on the Lake of Nicaragua, and will drink champagne and Burton ale on the desolate shores of San Juan on the Pacific. The random remarks of the traveler for amusement, and the observations of careful and scientific men, will be brought together, a mass of knowledge will be accumulated and made public, and in my opinion the two oceans will be united (Stephens, 1969, vol. 1: 418).

There is no doubt in Stephens's mind that English and American travelers and men of leisure are the same group of people. In his project, both the Euphrates and the Lake of Nicaragua have something in common: they have bourgeois travelers in

²¹ John F. Chuchiak IV mentions the influence of Stephens's travel narratives in the intellectual elites in Yucatan such as Sierra O'Reilly. Also, Chuchiak points out how after Sierra O'Reilly's trip to the United States, he came to the realization that the "issue of race was a major factor in shaping that country's image of the Yucatecan elite. In the eyes of the U.S. press, Yucatecans were merely a little lighter than the Indians" (Chuchiak, 2000: 67).

spaces where they can exercise their lust for adventure, where they can obtain the knowledge that enables them to exercise their power.

Central America allowed Stephens to summarize a Pan-American and comparative model of the origin and history of the continent. Yet that past was for him a screen onto which to project the future, and much of his narrative accordingly reflects the anxieties and projected ideals of Anglo-Americans. Stephens's circular rhetoric of affirmation and negation of the existence of an indigenous American civilization make him an ambivalent transculturator. At first, his pilgrimage is economic and political: travels with the diplomatic mission of finding a government in order to establish a new commercial treaty and to negotiate the construction of the needed canal. Yet that first vision of the land, with its deeply seductive vistas and sublimely tropical archaeological traces, seduced him to return. Second, within the process of recording his travels, the archaeological mission: to uncover the mystery of the Mayan ruins. He searches for a unified government and a nation which he only finds in his own mind, in communion with his audience back home. In short, these "incidents" occasion the self-fashioning of American culture as projected onto Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan. As Richard Preston has put it, "[Stephens] was seeking wonders to feed a Romantic imagination—with facts" (Preston, 1992: 259). Stephens's texts about Latin America are examples of imperialist propaganda, which, through "Orientalist" rhetoric and an ideology of adventure, encouraged attitudes that would ensure U.S. political and economic intervention in the area. Paradoxically, his formulation includes images and the possibility of resistance, which could be appropriated by different groups in Central America to develop a national project of identity. In the travel narratives analyzed, adventure, science, and archaeology are directly affiliated with domination at home and in the neocolonial space. Stephens and his travel books seem to have served the budding empire well.

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