

Representations of Tropical Forests and Tropical Forest-Dwellers in Travel Accounts of *National Geographic*

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ABSTRACT

As one of the most widely read genres of literature, travel writing plays a crucial role in forming popular images and understandings of foreign places and foreign peoples. This essay examines the dominant images of rainforests and rainforest peoples portrayed in accounts of travels in tropical America published in *National Geographic*. Special attention is paid to the issues of how particular representations are privileged in this magazine's travel accounts and how these representations relate to questions of authority and power. The analysis shows that the prevailing representations of the tropical forests and tropical forest-dwellers in the travel accounts of *National Geographic* rely on historically changing, but equally categorical distinctions between 'good' and 'bad', and 'natural' and 'unnatural'.

KEYWORDS

Travel writings, representations, images, tropical forests, tropical peoples

INTRODUCTION

Far-away and fabulously exotic tropical lands and tropical peoples have long inspired curiosity and aroused the imagination, finding expression in both scholarly and journalistic writing (Raffles 2002; Slater 2002; Stepan 2001). Travel writing is one of the most important sources of popular discourses and images of tropical landscapes and tropical peoples. As such, travel writers play a crucial role in shaping public understandings of tropical forests and tropical forest-dwellers, as well as in regulating public opinion in relation to the implications of

environmental policies that need to be implemented in the tropics (Arnold 1996: 141–68; Duncan and Gregory 1999; Holland and Huggan 1998: 67–81).

In this essay, I examine the highly selective, essentialist images that have come to represent indigenous and non-indigenous forest-dwellers in accounts of travels in tropical America published in *National Geographic*. This famous U.S. magazine, with an authoritative voice and a total circulation of 9.5 million copies per month, offers an excellent source of discourses and images that have come to represent the neotropics and its peoples in Western popular imagination.¹ My main aim is to show how particular representations and discourses are privileged in the magazine's travel accounts and how they tend to create hierarchical polarities. For the purpose of this examination, I have analysed all the relevant travel writings with a focus on neotropics and neotropical forest-dwellers that were published in *National Geographic* (earlier *The National Geographic Magazine*) during the years 1888–2004. Most of these, thirty-seven accounts in all, were written by British or U.S. travellers.

Anthropologists, geographers, and literary historians have recently called attention to a rich corpus of 'Western' narratives that tend to categorise 'non-Western' peoples as racial, cultural, and gendered others.² Torgovnick (1990), Arnold (1996) and Stepan (2001) have analysed the discourses of primitivism and otherness embedded in Western thinking about the tropics, while Pratt (1992, 1994) has examined the imperialist discourses interwoven in the early Western travel accounts of the world outside Europe. Lutz and Collins (1993) have analysed the images of non-Western peoples as exotic others as portrayed in *National Geographic*, while Rothenberg (1994) has called attention to the magazine's representations of non-European women as mysterious and naturally erotic others. Ramos (1994, 1998) and Slater (1996, 2002) offer inspiring analyses of the historical trajectories of the images of the Amazonian rainforests and the Amazonian Indians as now infernal, now paradisaical others.

Characteristic of many of these analyses is the view that Western narratives of the non-Western world rely on a powerful distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Lutz and Collins 1993: 26, 110–11; Torgovnick 1990). My research on travel accounts by *National Geographic* starts from a somewhat different point of view. As will be shown in the following analysis, the poles of this dichotomy are not simply 'we' and 'the other', or 'the West' and 'the rest'. Instead, the accounts produced by *National Geographic* construct essentialist images of tropical forest-dwellers as either 'good' or 'bad' others. Whereas most of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century travel writings of *National Geographic* presented rainforest Indians as wild savages and the non-indigenous people as progressive pioneers, this distinction began to reverse in the early 1970s. In accordance with the growing global concern over tropical deforestation and the increasing attention being paid to tropical rainforests as remarkable sites of biodiversity protection, more recent travel accounts tend to produce images of rainforest Indians as 'noble natives', dwelling in nature according to

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nature, while small-scale settlers and non-indigenous rural poor are portrayed as 'ignoble villains', who are in need of control and order.³

This duality in the Western views of the other, as either good and peaceful or bad and violent, is implicitly present in Torgovnick's (1990: 3) statement that primitive peoples 'exist for us in a cherished series of dichotomies; by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternatively, what we should fear'. This challenging idea, also suggested by Slater (2000: 78), has, however, rarely been elaborated further in analyses of the discourses on tropical forest-dwellers. Especially when dealing with representations of Amazonia, the attention has so strongly focused on the 'majestic forests' and 'mysterious Indians' that the non-indigenous residents have largely remained invisible. As remarked by Nugent (1993: 20, 43), non-indigenous Amazonians represent an 'incomplete other', having little culture and little history and thus lacking sufficient status of difference to be included in discussions of Amazonia.

Based on the theoretical argumentations by Lutz and Collins (1993: 1–3), the focus in the following analysis will not be so much on how 'realistic' the images of tropical forest-dwellers presented in the travel writings of *National Geographic* are, but on the imaginative spaces that the tropical peoples occupy in the travel writers' minds. Narratives about foreign places and alien practices, whether scientific or not, are never simple documents or objective mirrors of reality. They also either reinforce or challenge general understandings of cultural similarity and difference, thus reflecting substantially the attitudes of those who are behind the text (Briggs 1996; Graham 2002; Oakdale 2004). As will be demonstrated below, the predominance of particular representations at a particular time depends not so much upon essential differences between the target populations themselves, but upon the prevailing regimes of representation that shape the writers' perceptions and interpretations of the issues under consideration (Duncan and Gregory 1999; Porter 1993; Schwartz 1996).

In this connection, the images presented in the travel narratives of the tropics and tropical peoples can not be simply dismissed as incorrect or false. Instead, they need to be examined in relation to the contexts in which they are generated and the purposes they serve. Certain representations become socially dominant not merely on rhetorical grounds; they are also closely related to issues of authority and power (Conklin 2002; Jackson 1997; Li 2000). In producing feelings of closeness and empathy with some, and distance and discredit towards others, narratives of tropical forests and tropical forest-dwellers build upon social classifications and moral cartographies that construct hierarchical patterns of otherness. At the same time, these narratives have considerable influence on popular understandings of environmental agendas and environmental policies related to the tropics.

My examination of these travel accounts combines qualitative content analysis with textual interpretation in an effort to identify the characteristic representations

they construct and the transformations and consistencies that can be observed in them over time. For this purpose, I have utilised the QSR N6 qualitative data analysis programme.⁴ Owing to space limitations, I will focus here on what I take to be the dominant representations in the analysed accounts. This does not, however, imply that the perceptions of neotropical forests and neotropical peoples portrayed in these accounts were absolutely reified or monolithic. As remarked by Arnold (1996: 142–57) and McEwan (1996), the images of tropical forests and tropical peoples, although essentialist and stereotypical, can also be ambivalent, containing elements of different sets of imagery side by side.⁵ In this respect, it is important to note that the selection of the narratives and representations accepted for publication in such a well-established magazine as *National Geographic* is often a result of negotiation and compromise among various stakeholders and their personal and institutional ambitions. The following analysis aims to understand the significant alteration in the images of indigenous and non-indigenous forest-dwellers in the accounts by *National Geographic* during the 1970s within the changing context of travelling and the changing role of tropical rainforests in the global environmental discourses and policies.

CONQUERING THE 'GREEN HELL'

Characteristic of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century travel writings on tropical America in *National Geographic* is the view of tropical forests as an impediment and/or a challenge. At that time rainforests were considered to be demeaning peripheries as well as landscapes of abundant potentiality. These views have much to do with the social and political climate of scientific and economic exploration in which many of these travellers entered the neotropics. Many of them were 'scientist-adventurers' who were searching for new knowledge and new economic opportunities in largely 'unexplored' tropical lands.⁶ This spirit of intrepid exploration was indicated already in the headlines of many of these accounts, including 'Across Nicaragua with Transit and Machéte' (Peary 1889), 'Exploring the Valley of the Amazon in a Hydroplane' (Stevens 1926), and 'A New World to Explore: In the Tree-Roof of the British Guiana Forest Flourishes Much Hitherto-Unknown Life' (Hingston 1932).

Typical of these accounts is the representation of tropical forests as lands that are completely unknown. They are behind beyond, terrains that have never been trodden by the foot of a white man. The writers present heroic stories of solitary explorers who survey hitherto unknown rivers and hack their way through tangled forests, carrying heavy packs of supplies and enduring the pervasive isolation of the jungle (Holt 1933; Schurz 1936; Stevens 1926; Sultan 1932). This atmosphere of emptiness and desolation is necessary in order to justify the Western discovery and conquest of the tropical regions, represented as uninhabited

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peripheries (Lowenthal 1997; Stepan 2001). As a symbol of conquest, some of the explorers carry the flag of their own country during their travels.

Many of these narratives also present allegories, reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe, of men taming the wild forests. Gill's (1934: 139–43) account of pioneering in Ecuador offers an illustrative example: 'It seemed incredible that, out of all this disorder, we could establish a small area of civilisation for ourselves by the primitive means available.' Gill's account also portrays a picture of the giant cinnamon tree which was the first to fall when the 'modern Crusoes' began the difficult task of carving a modern home out of the jungle. As is typical of imperialist travel accounts (Pratt 1992; Spurr 1993), many of these writers use sexual images to portray their masculine conquest of the virgin forest. The term 'man' is used to refer to humans, and the female pronoun represents nature in accounts describing the traveller's eagerness to probe nature's secrets and tap the forest's wealth.

Accounts of the hazards encountered during the expedition merely magnify the achievements of the intrepid explorers. The explorers are beset by pounding rains and insufferable heat; they are covered with insect bites, ravaged by malarial fevers, and frightened by snakes and jaguars. Such hardships abound in the account by Robert Peary (1889), the famous discoverer of the North Pole, of his journey through the untouched forests of Río San Juan, Nicaragua. According to Peary, the days were filled with constant obstacles, and the tropical thicket was so dense that it was impossible for even a strong, active man to penetrate through it without a machete. One had to wade in knee-deep mud and be alert for crocodiles, peccaries, and venomous insects. For Peary, Río San Juan was an awesome jungle, with few links to the outside world, and for this reason its exploration could not be delegated to just anyone. As such, Peary's account repeats the epoch's conventional narrative of the white man conquering the hostile tropics.

In the travel accounts of *National Geographic* at this time, the rainforest is commonly presented as a 'Green Hell' and an 'enemy of mankind'. Romantic views of tropical forests as a source of nostalgia and a cradle of peacefulness are not absent, but they are more uncommon.⁷ In several accounts, the rainforest is presented as a gloomy and disease-ridden jungle that represents an untamed savagery. This heart of darkness is considered to be a source of fear and panic that easily engulfs lonely travellers. In his account of an expedition through British Guiana, Hingston (1932: 625–8) describes his feelings 'of being completely shut in' by a jungle with no horizon and his 'immeasurable relief on getting back at last into the open and enjoying the spaciousness and freedom'. Sultan (1932: 593) conjures up visions of the riotous vegetation of Nicaraguan rainforests, 'where the footing is always insecure' and the jungle is 'so thick that you can rarely see ten feet in any direction'.

Given these conceptions, a great number of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century travel writings published in *National Geographic*

consider the value of the tropical forest to arise from the possibility that its remarkable potential could be harnessed in the service of human progress. In these accounts, rainforests appear as an obstacle to be overcome and/or as a mysterious 'El Dorado' to be discovered. Such views are closely linked to the epoch's Western-oriented political-economic ambitions, which considered tropical forests as inexhaustible resources to be exploited and dominated by means of Western scientific and technological innovations (Nugent 1994). In accordance with this conception, many of the epoch's travel writers tend to project categorical views of tropical forest-dwellers as either primitives living in the backwoods or as frontier-breakers taming the hostile jungle.

INDOLENT SAVAGES VERSUS PROGRESSIVE PIONEERS

Concerning the people living in the neotropics, the travel accounts of *National Geographic* during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century tend to produce strict distinctions between those who are cultivated and those who are not. Like tropical nature itself, the rainforest Indians are considered dangerously unpredictable until controlled (Rothenberg 1994: 164–5). In the photographs of these accounts, the Indians are portrayed either as powerful hunter-warriors who glare wild-eyed at the camera or as backward savages who are dazzled by the modern devices of the white man. Stevens (1926: 400–2) presents a picture where 'the tallest of the Mayongong Indians came hardly more than shoulder-high to members of the expedition', claiming that this was the first time that these natives 'had any contact with the civilisation'. By emphasising the Indians' primitivism, the travel writers provide moral justifications for 'modernising' them.

At the same time, non-indigenous farmers are presented as backward but hard-working pioneers who are eagerly participating in the development of modern society. Although the accounts of *National Geographic* of this time regret the general nonchalance of the rural people living in the neotropics, several texts laud the tropical settlers, who are rescuing their living spheres from a state of idleness and abandonment. De Pinedo (1928: 283) describes with relief how 'here and there, along rivers and the Matto Grosso's fringe, farms and plantations are cut from the ever-engulfing jungle', while Stevens (1926: 383) describes how the Boa Vista forest frontier 'reminds one of bygone American frontiers', with open ranges and cattle shipped down river. According to Sultan (1932: 609), the few cars on the Nicaraguan roads, carrying some government officials or landed proprietors on business, 'add the touch which shows that you are traveling in a civilised country'.

The differences between indigenous and non-indigenous livelihoods are interpreted as the effects of uneven cultural development. The rainforest Indians are portrayed as eking out a miserable hand-to-mouth existence through hunting

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and gathering and considered doomed to give way to more progressive ways of exploiting the tropical resources. An illustrative example of this perception is Holt's (1933: 600–1) description of how agriculture among the natives of Brazilian Amazon 'has not progressed beyond the simple stage' and how an Indian, when he travels, 'carries his entire household. The whole family go, and with a pot, a few fishhooks, bow and arrows for baggage, are prepared to live indefinitely off the country'. Correspondingly, Sultan (1932: 608) describes how 'the huts of the Sumo Indians are simple structures, thatched with palm leaves' and 'their worldly possessions are confined to bows, arrows, blowguns, and one or two pots and pans'.

Even though Indians serve as indispensable guides for many of these travellers, the native conceptions of nature rarely become an object of study (cf. Miller 1996: 12). Hingston (1932: 642) describes how the Arawak Indians paddle the travellers' boats, clear the forest paths, climb tree trunks, skin specimens, and accomplish a dozen other tasks associated with life in the jungle. Although the Arawak are depicted as 'born naturalists', their environmental knowledge is still described as primitive. In several narratives the native inhabitants are considered as culturally backward which is reflected in the writers' tendency to use animal metaphors when referring to Indians. Stevens (1926: 412) makes disparaging comments on Parima Indians, who stand on one leg 'like storks' when he tries to photograph them.

The non-indigenous residents of the neotropics are, in contrast, described as assiduous entrepreneurs who are introducing more rational ways of utilising the tropical resources. Holt (1933: 587, 602) portrays a picture of Santa Isabel on Río Negro where three houses, standing in a small grassy clearing, 'greet the eye at this remote outpost of commerce'. He also praises the residents of Pará for their persistent efforts to remedy the backwardness of an environment 'still beleaguered by the jungle'. 'After voyaging up the Amazon for 900 miles between forest walls with hardly a gap', Holt (1933: 599) admires the modernity of Manaós, where 'handsome buildings, electric lights, and boulevards lined with artistically trimmed fig trees' have been created 'as if by magic from the jungle'.

One of the most powerful indicators of Indian primitivism is their nakedness: the Indians are described as going naked, without showing any shame, until civilised. An illustrative example of this conception is Stevens' (1926: 385) description of how the Indian women in Branco learn to 'look askance at their still naked sister' after they have been garbed 'for the first time in their lives'. The non-indigenous residents are, in contrast, portrayed as people dressed in civilised clothes, and their festivals are depicted as beautiful gatherings where gentlemen in neat shirts and trousers keep company with ladies clad in showy print dresses. Peary (1889: 331) tells with delight how, after getting from the jungle to more civilised parts of Nicaragua, he meets 'black-eyed and brown-limbed *señoritas*, instead of wild hogs and turkeys', and at night, 'he hears, not

the scream of tigers [jaguars], but the songs of the *lavandera*'s [laundress'] ecru daughters floating across the stream'.

Concerning the 'marvels of modernity', the early travel writings of *National Geographic* depict Indians as innocent primitives who are afraid of radios and flashlights and who examine mirrors with wonder, thus implicitly bolstering the view that the Indians lack any self-consciousness until contacted by modernity (cf. Hyndman 2002: 50). Sultan (1932: 621) frets over their Indian servants, who do not understand why sheets should be tucked in at the foot of the bed or what possible use there could be for two forks at one meal, while Gill (1934: 158, 161–2) makes light of the Ecuadorian 'jungle Indians' among whom 'one's calling card is his own painted face'. She also makes disparaging comments on how these Indians do not comprehend the idea of typing but are astonished 'why anyone should spend so much time poking the keys merely to make rows of black marks on paper'. Correspondingly Stevens (1926: 408) laughs at the Maku Indians, who have difficulties in putting on the clothes received as a gift from the white man. He describes the plight of a Maku chief, who finds difficulty in fastening his first shirt around his neck and 'calls on his squaw for assistance, much as a civilised husband sometimes calls on his wife for help in a similar difficulty'.⁸

In contrast of these portrayals of primitive Indians in the woods, the travel accounts of *National Geographic* of this time praise tropical fields and plantations as islands of opulence and civilisation. In accordance with the epoch's global political economy, many of these accounts express fervent optimism about the future prospects in the neotropics. At the end of his journey in Nicaragua, Peary (1889: 334–5) gazes down upon the valley of Tola and paints an enthusiastic vision of this landscape, when 'fields have replaced forests' and 'the fertile shores of the Tola basin are occupied by cacao plantations'. This picture gives Peary much pleasure, for it means 'the dream of centuries realised' and 'the cry of commerce answered'. Hulse (1927) and Marden (1944) are equally convinced of the success of converting tropical forests into coffee plantations and cattle estates in Central America, while de Pinedo (1926) has ambitious visions of the introduction of steamboats and sawmills in Amazonia. A similar vision of the Western exploitation of the neotropics continues in the magazine's travel writings up till the 1970s, when the representations of neotropical forests and neotropical forest-dwellers portrayed in the magazine start to reflect new attitudes toward global environmental policies and public opinions concerning the rainforests.

PRESERVING THE VERDANT EDEN

Whereas the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century travel writings of *National Geographic* on the neotropics were stylised as heroic accounts by

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'modern Crusoes' who were struggling to conquer the hostile Inferno of Nature, many of the magazine's more recent travel writings present the rainforest as a fragile sanctuary that demands assiduous care. It is lauded as an earthly Garden of Eden, where eternal greenery and untamed luxuriance reign. This evergreen realm is seen as a refuge from the ills of civilisation and as a source of tranquillity for the human spirit.

This reversal from the rhetoric of the Green Hell to that of Paradise Threatened has close links to the international concern for tropical deforestation and forest degradation that came into prominence in the early 1970s (Nugent 1994; Slater 2002: 9–16). Under the banner of a new environmental awareness and new environmental politics, the rainforests have since then been regarded as endangered global resources whose destruction presents worldwide risks and whose rescue from obliteration requires worldwide efforts. These rainforests are repositories of incredible richness and sources of scintillating insights awaiting wide-eyed scientists; they are the Earth's green belt, the world's largest reservoir of genetic traits and an irretrievable memory bank that has evolved over billions of years (Melham 1990; Morell 1999; White 1983).

As a consequence, the tropical rainforests are losing their earlier hostile image and becoming places of impassioned protection. Many of today's writings on the neotropics published in *National Geographic* are written by persons who have participated in scientific expeditions to learn about the natural wonders of the rainforests and to understand the complexity of tropical ecosystems. They include detailed descriptions of scientists who devote themselves to studying the tropical hotspots of biodiversity and training the native peoples to preserve their environmental and cultural heritages (Garrett 1989; O'Neill 1993; Kamper 2000; Morell 1999).

The second type of contemporary travel accounts published in *National Geographic* is that which elaborates originality and adventure. Whereas the earlier accounts portrayed images of explorers who went to the tropics to discover 'untouched' territories, modern accounts tell about travellers who go to the tropics to (re)discover their 'authentic' self (cf. Blanton 1997: 1–29; Short 1991: 60–1). These writers emphasise the spiritual regeneration and the mental renewal experienced during their tropical journeys. Typical of these individual odysseys is the portrayal of rainforests as places of recreation instead of work, and as spaces of spectacular feelings instead of sober observation. To distinguish themselves from 'ordinary tourists', the travellers trek into the most pristine forests and visit the most secluded peoples to know the rainforests and their inhabitants profoundly (Risse 1998; Steve 1999). Schreider and Schreider (1970), and Chmielinski (1987) describe their participation in the race to be the first team to navigate the Amazon from the source to sea and to see with their own eyes every foot of this unique waterway.

The third group of contemporary travel accounts are those narratives in which the writer devotes himself/herself to efforts to understand the native culture and

to record the Indians' traditional way of life. These writers focus their narratives on descriptions of their extraordinary experiences while living among the 'last' Indians. Their accounts are framed in the language of cultural relativism, and they eagerly position themselves as specialists in other cultures. Webster's (1998) account of his visit among the Yanomami offers an illustrative example. Ignoring the rich anthropological literature on the Yanomami, Webster (1998: 8–13) argues that the Yanomami territory is so little explored that only rarely are anthropologists 'allowed into these forests'. He then describes how the Yanomami greeted him with hoots and screams and how their headman repeatedly slapped him on the chest as a sign of welcome. In these accounts, native people are referred as 'my' Indians, whose acceptance the traveller appears to have won to the point that he/she is treated like kin.

Characteristic of the contemporary travel writings published in *National Geographic* is the writers' tendency to focus on their own feelings and their own reactions to the tropics. The traveller's unique appreciation of the tropical landscape becomes the main focus of inquiry in repeated descriptions of hikes taken in tropical forests that stretch to the horizon, devoid of any sign of human presence. According to Schreider and Schreider (1970: 109), 'cruising for hours past walls of unbroken forest, we sometimes seemed to be the only boat on the river [Amazon], the only people'. Kamper (2000) describes how the first view of the Madidi National Park in Bolivia compensated for all the difficulties of the journey: 'Breathtaking landscapes, abundant birdlife, utter wildness as far as the eye could travel'.

At the same time, today's travel writings on the neotropics convert the earlier images of chaotic jungles into pictures of marvellously complex rainforests. This perception becomes clear already in the titles of recent *National Geographic* accounts, among them 'Nature's Dwindling Treasures: Rain Forests' (White 1983) and 'Wilderness Headcount' (Morell 1999). The image of the rainforest as a threatened Garden of Eden is reinforced by verbal and visual references to paradisaical icons. The rainforest is depicted as lush, breathtaking, and primeval, and although there are also descriptions of rainforests as gloomy and tangled, they do not appear in the same frequency as in earlier writings. More commonly, the rainforest is a place that 'feels like paradise', where 'scarlet macaws fly overhead, their wings pounding against the jungle twilight's electric blue sky' (Webster 1998: 11). It is also an immense library whose unbridled burning resembles the burning of the ancient library of Alexandria (White 1983: 24).

The current situation, in which the tropical rainforests are 'rapidly being clear-cut, strip-mined...bulldozed, and burned' (Melham 1990: 113), leads the contemporary travel writings to underscore the urgent need for international intervention on behalf of tropical conservation. Although it is evident that there are severe problems of deforestation and environmental degradation on many tropical forest frontiers, in some of the *National Geographic* accounts the pictures painted of the worldwide disaster that will result from the conversion of this

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lush greenery into a rusty red desert may be too ominous (Ellis 1988; McIntyre 1988). In contrast to earlier accounts which championed the uncontrolled exploitation of tropical resources, current narratives draw ugly pictures of tropical forest frontiers whose resources have been brutally degraded. To substantiate this view, the rainforests are described as razed, raped or denuded (Garrett 1989: 439; McIntyre 1977: 708; Kamper 2000: 16). Through simplified interpretations of ongoing environmental policies and programmes of forest management in the neotropics, any use of rainforests is condemned as an abuse.

FOREST-FRIENDLY VERSUS FOREST-UNFRIENDLY CULTURES

Parallel to the changing views of the rainforests, the dominant images of tropical forest-dwellers produced in the travel accounts of *National Geographic* have changed considerably in recent decades. Indians, whose impacts on nature were dismissed or ridiculed in earlier accounts, are now depicted as guardians of the forest, blessed with inherent environmental wisdom. They stand in sharp contrast to tropical settlers and non-indigenous rural poor, whose relationship to nature is considered to be based on short-term forest encroachment and who are easily portrayed as forest ravagers, with little awareness of the need to protect nature.

This new perception has much to do with the growing worldwide concern about the survival of the tropical forests, which has promoted the environmentally-founded rediscovery of the rainforest Indians as providers of a human face for the global attempts at rainforest protection (Brysk 2000; Conklin and Graham 1995; Oakdale 2004). Characteristic of this discourse is the portrayal of native peoples as a part of this magnificent nature. The Indians are included with the tropical flora and fauna as part of the overall spectacle of a divine fragility that needs protection (Slater 2000). This view becomes clear in various more recent *National Geographic* accounts of Indians, who blend into the forest background so completely that they seem to be part of the landscape. They either stand silently in the forest like statues – which makes it difficult to visualise one separated from the other – or when speaking for themselves, they present themselves as traditional stewards of nature.

At the same time, current *National Geographic* travel writings project tropical settlers as nomads who flock into the tropical forests to hack out homesteads. While the Indians are described as profoundly territorialised peoples in metaphors that refer to roots and soils, the settlers are depicted as culturally uprooted populations with liquid metaphors of movement in the descriptions which speak of waves of colonists and floods of migrants that stream into the forest frontiers (cf. Malkki 1992). According to Ellis (1998: 788), these settlers ‘came on foot and by bicycle. They came clinging to one another as they rode on top of cargo in trucks that undertook the axle-breaking journey along the access road. They

came in the rain, and they came during the dry season... And when they came to claim the land, they brought with them all the social ills of a frontier boom.'

This juxtaposition of nature-friendly versus nature-unfriendly forest-dwellers has brought the rainforest Indians into the limelight of global media's admiration. According to recent travel writings, the Indians live in the rhythm of the forest and feel a sense of oneness with nature. The small-scale colonists seldom receive a similar amount of attention, simply because they do not represent such an exotic way of life, nor can they claim the same status as champions of nature (Nugent 1994). When they appear in current travel writings, the settlers are rather portrayed as rootless penetrators who mindlessly destroy nature's precious gifts. Their livelihood strategies are described as a 'drama of man against the jungle' (Schreider and Schreider 1970: 117) or a 'veritable war between man and nature' (White 1983: 38). In the *National Geographic*'s special number on Tropical Forests in 1988, McIntyre's article on the Urueu-Wau-Wau Indians is entitled 'The Last Days of Eden', while the article by Ellis on Amazonian colonists is entitled 'Brazil's Imperiled Rain Forest: Rondônia's Settlers Invade'.

Characteristic of these representations are the portrayals of the breathtakingly beautiful rainforests, with giant trees and cascading rivers. Brilliantly-plumaged macaws and jewel-like orchids form an integral part of this enchanted realm, in which sensitive humans harmoniously participate. This view of Indians living in the forest free from the chains of civilisation characterises, for example, Melham's (1990: 154) description of his trip among the Yanomami: 'Just outside [the Yanomami lodge] stood eight or ten visiting Mucajai Indian women, nude save for their *tangas* (string girdles), and all smiled as they painted stripes, zigzags, and delicate stylised flowers on each other's skin. They were so happy, so full of childlike delight and innocence in the bright sunlight.' Correspondingly, Webster (1998: 13) describes how the Yanomami life goes on 'as it has probably been lived for thousands of years... Families doze in hammocks and huddle around fires.'

According to contemporary travel writings, this transcendent harmony of tropical world is on the verge of being inundated by the massive flow of colonists who are portrayed as harmful elements in the global drive to protect tropical nature. The images of the tropical settlers produced in recent travel accounts of *National Geographic* include portrayals of intractable invaders who are attracted to the jungle by an ardent pioneer spirit. The settlers' parcels are depicted as denuded spaces carved from burn-downed jungles, 'littered with charred logs and smoldering stumps' (McIntyre 1977: 708). They are also described as 'malarial acres' which 'lie blackened and scarred like a battlefield in war' (Ellis 1998: 782). The settlers' life on the forest frontier is portrayed as gloomy and unattractive, where makeshift houses proliferate across the landscape, and 'insects are the only wildlife around cleared areas' (Ellis 1988: 788). The forest frontiers are also depicted as political trouble zones and undercurrents of lawlessness where issues are decided at the point of a gun. According to Ellis,

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the Amazonian frontier drama is being ratcheted up 'to full throttle' where men 'staring and seldom smiling', fight, guzzle and hang around listening to the night music of debauchery. Many of the writings emphasise the similarity of tropical forest frontiers to the North American 'Wild West' a century ago.

At the same time, the rainforest Indians are represented as colourful performers whose culture is manifested in spectacles rich in myth and mystery. In contemporary travel accounts, the native people are often illustrated in ritual adornment, sometimes even when working. There are also descriptions of Indians with their 'pre-Columbian' dugout canoes, the canoe thus becoming an icon of the Indians' timeless life-style. A revealing example of this kind of iconisation is van Dyk's (1995: 27) description of 'six Indians paddling past just a few feet away, arrow-shaped paddles dipping silently in the river. It seemed an ancient image, almost a dream.' Likewise, Devillers (1983: 66) describes how a Wayana Indian hunter skilfully bends his bow and takes careful aim, motionlessly awaiting the proper moment until his arrow penetrates his prey. This dynamic unity, formed by the Indian body and the tropical landscape, is depicted as a symbol of the fragile beauty of the indigenous world, associated with a timeless attachment to tropical nature.

The settlers' life is, on the contrary, described by accounts of poverty and brutality. While Indians are presented as skilful archers, the settlers are portrayed as miserable colonists, clearing the land more as a 'burden rather than a skill' (Lutz and Collins 1992: 146). In the photographs, the Indians are typically presented in profile against a greenery that gives no evidence of social context, thus showing more interest in the Indians' place in nature than in their links to the larger society (Ramos 1994). The settlers are, instead, illustrated standing in a crowd and staring directly at the lens, all of which conveys a message of their anarchic way of life and their threatening potential for violence. While Indian women are depicted as sexually aesthetic and alluring others, with naked bronze bodies, non-indigenous women are portrayed as indiscreet and excessive in their sexuality. Von Puttkamer (1971: 440) tells about his encounter with three Cinta Larga women: 'who wore necklaces of dyed nutshells and almost nothing else. Though demure, they were unabashed and headed directly for our kitchen.' Impressed by the Indians' poise, von Puttkamer calls them the 'Three Graces'. In contrast, McIntyre (1977: 691) describes his unpleasant experience on a Brazilian frontier, where thirty men 'showed up on Saturday night to share dollar-a-bottle Coke and warm beer by candlelight with forlorn-faced women ... The bouncer wore a Smith & Wesson .38.'

Analogous to these images, the journeys to Indian territories are depicted as voyages of discovery, creating the impression that visiting these people is like moving back through the millennia. The travellers launch forth from the modern city to a remote jungle, where the Indians have survived with minimal changes in their 'Pre-Columbian cultures' (Garrett 1989; von Puttkamer 1979; Webster 1998). In this pre-modern realm, modern techniques have little valid-

ity and the Western sense of superiority easily loses its power. Schreider and Schreider (1970: 62–3) describe how a Campa Indian ‘glided through the jungle like a wraith ... moving so silently that the symphonic trill of unseen birds and insects hardly changed its pitch’. As the Schreiders clumped after him, ‘feet squishing in the damp sponge of rotting vegetation, it seemed as though the conductor had dropped his baton’. Correspondingly von Puttkamer (1971: 435) tells about how Cinta Larga boys allowed the travellers’ to accompany them on hunting trips, but expected them to carry the game they killed. When they came to streams deep enough to harbour electric eels, the Indians silently climbed upon the travellers’ backs.

At the same time, the settlers’ living spheres are presented as an ugly monotony of the curses of modernisation or as a helter-skelter of pre-modern backwardness and post-modern chaos. Schreider and Schreider (1970: 109) describe Amazonian frontier towns where their journey ‘began to follow a script that never varied: The same greying wood shacks, the same bleached thatch roofs and dusty red streets, the same stocks of cane alcohol, cigarettes, and canned beef in the same bare-shelved shops’. Sartore, the photographer who accompanied Kamper (2000: 28) in his journey to Bolivia, has a similar impression of the frontier town of Pelehuco: ‘Poverty abounds. Everything is worn out or broken. The kids ... swim in raw sewage’. Van Dyk (1995) and Webster (1998) both wonder at the architectural disharmony of Amazonian frontier cities, where cardboard shacks and skyscrapers, dugout canoes and high-tech containerships mix abruptly with each other. In contrast to earlier travel accounts, which presented the modernisation of the tropics as a panacea, current travel writings evoke nostalgic sentiments recalling a vanishing pre-modern world, unspoiled by the ills of globalisation.

CONCLUSION: TRAVEL WRITINGS AND TROPICAL TROPES

Instead of rehearsing the conventional dichotomy between ‘we’ and the ‘other’, this essay has shown that the travel writings of *National Geographic* produce representations of neotropical peoples that rest on essentialist categorisations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ others. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts, rainforests are typically presented as ‘Green Hells’ and rainforest Indians as primitive savages, while the non-indigenous settlers are praised as virtuous pioneers who are exploiting the tropical jungles. Since the rise of global concern of tropical deforestation and environmental degradation in the early 1970s, the accounts of *National Geographic* have instead tended to depict rainforest Indians as faithful guardians of marvellous forests, while tropical settlers are seen as mindless destroyers of tropical biodiversity. These historically changing, but equally essentialist images are based on repeated contrasts between the ‘virtuous’ and the ‘vicious’.

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The importance of the role of travel writings in formulating popular conceptions of tropical forests and tropical peoples can hardly be overestimated. With the global spread of tourism, travel narratives – like travel itself – have been made available to a large audience, and the genre of travel writing has become one of the most popular and widely read forms of literature today (Holland and Huggan 1998: 1–2). This essay has intended to show the crucial role that travel accounts in such a well-established magazine as *National Geographic* have played in how the neotropics and the neotropical peoples have been envisioned over time. While referring to actual people and places, the *National Geographic* accounts are interspersed with highly selective tales and images of neotropical forests and neotropical forest-dwellers. In spite of these elements, the writers present their narratives as authentic transcriptions of reality with little recognition of the inequality of the encounter and little analysis of how the encounterer's life is related to that of those whom he/she encounters. This is not to say that all the presentations of tropical forest-dwellers in *National Geographic* are categorically reified. Several writers also note the discrepancy of images in tropical resource conflicts, by stating that the conflicts are complex and difficult to understand. Some of them also recognise that the problem of tropical deforestation reaches far beyond settler culture in a situation where colonists suffer from a lack of economic assistance and intimidating bureaucracy.

Many of the travel accounts in *National Geographic*, however, operate within a pre-established semantic field, repeating the same tropes over and over again, while excluding the elements that do not accord with the conventional conceptions. Although the prevailing images portrayed in the accounts have changed over time, the same categorisations such as friendly versus unfriendly and pure versus impure, crop up repeatedly. The majority of the accounts present the Indians' and the settlers' conceptions of their environments monolithically, with little recognition of the existing intracultural diversity in the ways human beings experience nature. At the same time, the differences between the indigenous and the settler landscapes are categorised as cognitive, with limited recognition of the variety of conditions that these people encounter in meeting the daily requirements of their livelihoods. There is also little recognition of these people's differentiated positions in relation to governmental policies and global environmental agendas and advocacy networks.

While the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century travel writings of *National Geographic* reflect a desire to control tropical nature-society relationships by constructing essentialist images of culturally primitive Indians, the present-day images of rainforests as a threatened Eden that demands global protection rest on a similar kind of desire for control. The overall concern for what is natural overshadows the tropical forests as historical, political, and cultural spaces (Nugent 1994; Slater 2000: 76–7). The contemporary travel writings of *National Geographic* on neotropics are especially thin in history, positing tropical forest-dwellers as ahistorical beings with little knowledge of the world around them.

By portraying cultural difference in terms of distance and isolation, they show little interest in analysing the links between the representations and the wider issues of politics and power. The argument that the protection of nature is an inherent aspect of native life portrays the Indians in terms of Western images of 'stewards of nature' (Kirsch 1997). This image does not necessarily coincide with the Indians' own visions, which are based on increasing self-determination and control over their own resources (Conklin and Graham 1995; Oakdale 2004; Ramos 1998).

In the same way, the disregard of non-indigenous settlers for the environment is explained by their lack of forest culture, with limited attention to the structural roots of resource destruction on tropical forest frontiers, including unequal control over resources and settlers' vulnerable position in relation to the global economy. These accounts show little awareness of forest frontiers as places of social injustice and political marginalisation. This reification of people's relationship with nature fails to recognise the diversity of lived environmental relations and the complexity of the power struggles that mediate the ebb and flow of competing environmental images and environmental policies concerning tropical forests and tropical peoples (Graham 2002; Nygren 2004; Raffles 1999). It also ignores the fact that, in reality, the majority of the indigenous and non-indigenous neotropical forest-dwellers have for centuries been the most marginalised members of their national societies. In the earlier travel accounts of *National Geographic*, the social exclusion of Indians is wrapped in the pejorative comments on their cultural primitiveness, while today's narratives package it with picturesque images of Indians living in the peace of mystery. Correspondingly, the social marginalisation of the small-scale settlers is shrouded in their cultural uprootedness and their homesteader mentality.

All this shows how the representations of tropical forests and tropical forest-dwellers produced in travel writings of *National Geographic* create categorical narratives with limited interest in allowing these people to speak with their own voices. Despite the writers' professed intentions to approach tropical peoples with open minds, essentialist distinctions prevail. In this context, there is a need for more sensitive narrative approaches that would permit more diversified views and more plural voices to be heard, without diminishing the popularity of this magazine. Such perspectives could reflect more complex portrayals of tropical peoples and reveal the multifaceted patterns of exchange and interaction that take place when different realities mingle together. They could also show the artificiality of making categorical distinctions between what is 'authentic' and what is 'spurious'. In today's world of globalisation and hybridisation, one can no longer predict who will put on a loincloth and lift up a blowgun and who will slip into jeans and pick up a mobile telephone.

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NOTES

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¹ See www.nationalgeographic.com (visited on 10 June 2005).

² I am well aware of the problems involved in terms 'Western' and 'non-Western', or 'First World' and the 'Third World'. My use of these terms includes a critical notion that none of these categories is a monolith nor can they be considered to exist in sharp distinction with each other.

³ A similar dichotomy is found in much advocacy literature, which distinguishes ecologically benevolent indigenous peoples from settlers as enemies of sustainability. For criticism of such dichotomies, see Li (2000), Nugent (1997), Nygren (1998, 1999) and Slater (2000).

⁴ Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching & Theorizing Qualitative Data Analysis Program, version 6.0, 2002. QSR International, Melbourne, Australia.

⁵ In this respect, see also the study by Conklin (2001) on the European colonisers' attitudes toward Wari Indian cannibalism, which offers an inspiring analysis how the discourses of horror and disgust became interwoven with the discourses of humanism and cultural relativism in the colonisers' accounts.

⁶ Although some of these 'scientist-travellers' had no direct links to Western political and commercial ambitions in the tropics, their intensive investigations nevertheless contributed to Western economic exploitation of the tropics (Slater 2000: 12; Stepan 2001: 31).

⁷ For more on the historical ambiguities in the images of tropical forests, see Arnold (1996), Putz and Holbrook (1988), Raffles (2002), Slater (2002) and Stepan (2001).

⁸ In this respect, see also von Puttkamer (1971: 433).

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