

# **IMPERIAL GO-BETWEENS IN THE AMERICAS: THE US FILIBUSTERS AS TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS**

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## *Introduction*

Transnational actors come in many forms: diplomats, interpreters, reporters, soldiers, transportation personnel or internationally active business managers are some of the “usual suspects” which might immediately spring to mind. These groups have in common that they are usually highly visible on a transnational level. Recent academic research has also focused on actors like refugees, fugitives, migrants and especially (in a historical perspective) slaves that were forced to migrate, and have often been neglected before the postcolonial turn. Yet, some transnational actors operate in illegality and are therefore prone to avoid the light of the public and also of the academic eye. Criminals, pirates or mercenaries are examples of this group. Nevertheless, in these groups one can find some of the most mobile actors, frequently combining multilingualism or mixed ethnic or cultural backgrounds with the absence of a legal framework they have to adhere to.

The following essay analyses the so-called filibusters as transnational actors. Filibusters constituted a special group of adventurers and mercenaries which attempted to conquer mostly Latin American territories at the mid-nineteenth century. This text will zoom in on a group of filibusters (led by the famous William Walker) which managed to rule Nicaragua for a brief period of time between 1855-1857, and will examine the transnational dimensions of this endeavour. The text commences by briefly defining the meaning of the word filibuster (nowadays used in completely different contexts) and then outlines the historical contexts in which the filibusters were active. Following this, the article argues for a transnational perspective in the research on filibusters; a perspective that today is still hampered by national(ist) infringements in historiography and cultural studies.

*Freebooters on Land: Conceptualising the Filibusters*

For centuries, the term mercenary has carried a highly pejorative connotation. When nation states began to emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monopolization of violence was of prime concern for its leaders.<sup>1</sup> With the standing army as the increasingly only accepted actor of violence in the political framework, freelance fighters<sup>2</sup> such as the mercenary started to function “as a scapegoat of modern thought: when imagined as an individual choosing affiliations in return for money, the mercenary embodie[d] in extreme form [...] individualism, independence and contractualism [...],”<sup>3</sup> things that nation states with their self-depiction of an “imagined community,” based on “skin colour, gender, parentage and birth-era – all those things one cannot help,”<sup>4</sup> increasingly abhorred. Private military actors such as the mercenary were not only security risks to the nation state but also implicated the idea of “becoming foreign to the self: the fears of infiltration expressed in anti-mercenary rhetoric involve[d] fears of the native person or the native land choosing to take an alien form.”<sup>5</sup> This fear in the face of such an “excess of individual liberty”<sup>6</sup> led to mercenaries being rendered as “guns for hire,” “adventurers,” “outlaws” or “soldiers of fortune,” all in stark contrast to the citizen soldier who would fight for “honour” or for the “defence of the motherland.”

The more consolidated the model of the nation state became, the more mercenaries were marginalised,<sup>7</sup> yet never vanished completely. Mercenarism thrived especially where the power of state actors to control violence was weak or absent.

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1 See J. E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns. State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe*, Princeton 1994.

2 The English word “freelancer” goes back to the “free lance”, describing a person whose lance was free, i.e. not bound to one contractor and thus for hire. E. Simpson, *Mercenaries in British and American Literature, 1790 – 1830. Writing, fighting, and marrying for money*, Edinburgh 2010, 20-21. argues that the term was coined by Sir Walter Scott in his *Ivanhoe* where it describes “mercenaries, in a conventionally pejorative sense”.

3 E. Simpson, *Mercenaries in British and American Literature*, 21.

4 B. R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 2003, 143.

5 E. Simpson, *Mercenaries in British and American Literature*, 170.

6 See E. Simpson, *Mercenaries in British and American Literature*, 12.

7 In Article 47 of Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which was elaborated in 1977 and subsequently signed by most nation states, mercenaries are denied “the right to be a combatant or a prisoner of war,” thus outlawing them as legitimate military actors. This article also contains a definition of the mercenary which in itself creates a number of problems in defining what a mercenary actually is, especially when trying to distinguish it from volunteers such as the International Brigades that fought against Franco and fascism in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39. The text of the article is available on the website of the International Committee of the Red Cross: <http://www.icrc.org/ihl.nsf/WebART/470-750057?OpenDocument>.

Yet, the role of mercenaries as transnational actors is not confined to killing people of all colours and creeds, as their negative public image might imply. Mostly acting in complex political situations and often with access to national or regional elites, mercenaries have been regularly present in what Mary Louise Pratt has called “contact zones,” the “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>8</sup> The high diversity of most mercenary groups, often bringing together people from various ethnic, religious and national backgrounds, makes them mini-“contact zones” in themselves.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned, “filibusters” was the term used for a special group of mercenaries. May (2002a) notes that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the word generally referred to American adventurers who raised or participated in private military forces that either invaded or planned to invade foreign countries with which the United States was formally at peace.”<sup>10</sup> Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “filibuster” had been in use in the Spanish language since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when *filibustero* referred to pirates roaming Caribbean settlements of the Spanish crown.<sup>11</sup> In the English language, the term became popular when private invasions from US territory gained new heights in the 1850s, although May (2002b) acknowledges that “the term was long overdue when it was coined. Americans since the birth of the republic had been in the habit of conducting private military invasions into foreign lands, and they had been doing it despite a sequence of federal laws and prosecutions in federal courts designed to discourage that very behaviour.”<sup>12</sup> Targets of such expeditions included Canada, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and, in various instances, Mexico,<sup>13</sup> with many more planned, but never realised, amongst them attacks on Venezuela, Peru, Haiti and Hawaii.

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8 M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 1992, 4.

9 M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 195 herself names the armed forces, in her example “the Spanish American armies, both royalist and independentist” as examples of transculturation. As outlined above, I would add irregular military groups, such as mercenaries, to her example.

10 Although concise and useful, May’s definition is rather broad and thus a bit blurry, as he includes active invaders as well as people who stayed at home and were only peripherally involved.

11 See F. González Díaz/ P. de La Lázaro Escosura, *Mare Clausum Mare Liberum, La piratería en la América española*, N. Gerassi-Navarro, *Pirate Novels, Fictions of nation building in Spanish America*, 15-17, 31 and Webster’s ninth new collegiate dictionary 1991, 462.

12 R. May, “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 150.

13 J.A. Hernández, *Merchants and mercenaries: Anglo-Americans in Mexico’s Northeast*, in: *New Mexico Historical Review*, 75 (2000) 1, 55.

In the following section, I will depict the main reasons why for roughly a decade filibustering activities sky-rocketed from some isolated cases into a “fever of expansionism” in the USA.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Filibuster Heydays*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of massive territorial expansion for the USA: The Westward move continually intensified, with new territory being incorporated via purchase (Louisiana), annexation (Texas) or war (Arizona, New Mexico, Utah etc. gained from the war with Mexico in 1846-48). This massive incorporation of new land meant that “the boundaries of the still new nation fluctuated dramatically in both fact and thought, so that for much of the nineteenth century no American would have been able to call to mind a clear picture of his or her nation.”<sup>15</sup> Exploring and incorporating new territory was regarded as a quintessential part of the pioneer nation,<sup>16</sup> and this meant that “the line between pirate and patriot was not well defined”<sup>17</sup> in 19<sup>th</sup> century USA.

Especially the newly independent Latin American republics<sup>18</sup> were viewed with immense interest by US citizens. In the imperial fashion of the day, these countries were considered to be earthly paradises, rich in minerals and fertile soil, and their inhabitants were regarded as uncivilised barbarians. Proof of their lack of civilisation was seen in their failure or ignorance (depending on the imperialist’s viewpoint) to cultivate their land to make (capitalistic) use of their god-given resources. Together with widespread anti-Catholic, anti-monarchic and thus ultimately anti-Spanish sentiments,<sup>19</sup> this resulted in the belief that these countries (not necessarily their people) were in dire need of some civilised guidance to push their development forward. This also fit into the notion that the whole of the Northern American hemisphere was divinely ordained to fall under the direct control and possession of the USA, an ideology known as Manifest Destiny.<sup>20</sup>

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14 V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional: Memorias Comparadas*, Alajuela, 56, translation: A.B.

15 A. Baker, *Heartless Immensity. Literature, culture and geography in Antebellum America*, Ann Arbor 2006, 1.

16 See also, amongst others T. R. Hietala, *The Myths of Manifest Destiny in: Major Problems in the History of the American West* (1997), 169-182

17 A. S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, Cambridge 2005, 269.

18 Most of Spain’s American colonies gained their independence in the 1820s and 1830s with the notable exception of Cuba.

19 See S. Streeby, *American Sensations. Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*, Berkeley 2002, 58.

20 For a good first overview of this topic, see A. K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny. A study of nationalist expansionism in American history*, Chicago 1963 and S. W. Haynes, *Manifest Destiny and Empire*.

Nicaragua in particular was of interest because since the days of Spanish colonial rule it was considered to be the ideal place for an interoceanic canal, connecting the Pacific with the Atlantic Ocean, and thus the US East Coast with the goldmines in California.<sup>21</sup>

As Latin American Liberal Creole elites craved an “independent, decolonised American society and culture, while retaining European values and white supremacy,”<sup>22</sup> they were attracted by the filibuster's rhetoric of civilisation, development and racial hierarchy. Thus, filibusters were often contracted by Creole elites struggling for power in post-independence Latin American countries.

The after effects of the US-Mexican War played an important role, too: For this conflict, the USA had recruited hundreds of volunteers into the nominally small army, and these young men were all left jobless after the war ended. Therefore “conquering soldiers accustomed to military campaigning who dreaded being mustered out of the service (if they were volunteers) or being posted to routine peacetime assignments (if they were regulars)”<sup>23</sup> created a large pool of future filibusters. The same can be said for all the young men who increasingly entered the urban sphere during this time of accelerating industrialisation in the USA. As May (2002a) argues, “Geographical mobility insulated young American males from parental restraints that might have otherwise inhibited them from engaging in expeditions. [...] Teeming port cities [...] provided the anonymity that allowed young men from the country to discover filibustering opportunities without their parents getting wind of their intentions.”

For these young adventure and fortune seekers, filibustering was also a possibility to prove their masculinity. The traditional concept of manhood was increasingly threatened as ways of achieving its status which had been valid for the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – e.g. via the ownership of land or other forms of property – were ever harder to fulfil in a

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American Antebellum expansionism, Arlington 1997. The importance of racial hierarchies was pointed out by R. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny. The origins of American racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Cambridge 1981. The term itself was coined by J. L. O'Sullivan in a magazine article in 1845, which is available online at: <http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/HIS/f01/HIS202-01/Documents/OSullivan.html>.

21 See R. E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861*, Gainesville 2002b, 85 and W. O. Scoggs, *Filibusters and Financiers The Story of William Walker and His Associates*, New York 1916. At this time, still without a Panama Canal, several Isthmian routes competed for passengers, with the one through Panama being the most frequented (A. McGuinness, *Path of empire. Panama and the California Gold Rush*, Ithaca 2008, 7), but Nicaragua considered to be the most profitable one. This route was operated by a company owned by transportation tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt.

22 M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 175.

23 R. E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld. Filibustering in Antebellum America*, Chapel Hill 2002a, 14.

rapidly changing social environment.<sup>24</sup> The best way to adhere to this type of martial manhood, as Greenberg (2005) calls it, was to join a filibuster expedition, grab some foreign territory and return as a hero and independent landowner.

Yet another important incentive for some filibusters was the growing tension in the United States between slave-holding and free states. For many Southerners, the idea of a Caribbean slave empire was the only possibility of survival for the South's *peculiar institution* and they participated in filibuster expeditions specifically to either annex these states and bring them into the Union (which would have tilted the balance in the senate towards slave-holding states) or to leave the USA at a certain point and form a new union with these countries, after re-introducing slavery there.<sup>25</sup>

Although numerically only a minority of the US population actively participated in filibuster invasions,<sup>26</sup> the phenomenon had a huge cultural impact on both the nation of the invaders and, of course, on those invaded. In the USA, the newly developing mass newspapers saw the various filibuster attempts as prime news items which made their papers sell and reported extensively on them.<sup>27</sup> Also, after returning from their attempted invasions, many filibusters wrote biographical accounts, which found a large readership.<sup>28</sup> Due to this interest, filibusters, although marginal in numbers, were an important part of the US discourse on the speed and size of national expansion.

The beginning of the US-Civil War altered many of these preconditions: Young men eager to fight for money or glory could do so on their home turf now, and Southern slave holders had to defend their very base. Other conditions remained unchanged, e.g. the interest in an interoceanic canal, but were now perpetrated via a more informal empire.<sup>29</sup> Thus, scholars agree that the filibuster heydays ended with the US Civil War, which does

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24 See T. Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man American Magazines and Consumer Culture 1900-1950*, Columbia 2000, 1. and R. E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*, 100.

25 See R. E. May, *The Southern Dream*.

26 See R. E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*, 52.

27 So-called *story papers* published long narrative stories and artistic drawings by people who accompanied the filibusters but were often highly partial, if not themselves filibusters. In an age when moving pictures or photographs were still unknown, these visual components had a huge impact on the population's perception of the world, see also S. Streeby, *American Sensations*, especially p. 25ff and 85ff. and B. Comment/ A.-M. Glasheen, *The Painted Panorama*, New York (2000).

28 As two popular examples might serve W. Walker, *The War in Nicaragua*, Tucson 1860 and C. W. Doubleday, *Reminiscences of the "Filibuster" War in Nicaragua*, New York 1886.

29 See T.D. Schoonover, *The United States in Central America. 1860-1911; Episodes of Social Imperialism and Imperial Rivalry in the World System*.

not mean that there were no further privately organised invasions from US territory: Ogorzalek (2008) still lists five major filibusters in the years from 1865 to 1911.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Filibuster to Nicaragua*

One of the most successful filibusters ever undertaken – seen from the attacker’s point of view – was the one under the command of William Walker which invaded Nicaragua in 1855 after having been invited into an already escalated Nicaraguan civil war by one of its factions, the so-called Democrats. This party was one of two dominating political groups, which centred around local power bases and family ties, the other one being the Conservatives.<sup>31</sup> The regional power base of the Democrats was León, the Conservatives could count on their stronghold Granada. Both groups had been involved in an almost uninterrupted conflict about political power since Nicaragua’s independence in 1821.<sup>32</sup> The idea of the nation state was still extremely weak in the conceptual framework of the Nicaraguan people, who did not consider themselves Nicaraguans so much as adherents of so-called *patrias chicas* – little motherlands – describing local or at best regional affiliations.<sup>33</sup>

When Democrats and Conservatives turned their conflict into fully-fledged civil war, each side was looking for new weaponry and allies abroad, and the Democrats opted for contracting roughly 60 young men from the USA to enter the country, fight on their side and offered them land grants for their services. Hiring foreign military muscle was nothing extraordinary in Latin America, and the Nicaraguan Democrats in particular had had rather good experiences with US mercenaries before, as Gobat<sup>34</sup> and Bermann<sup>35</sup> point out. Thus, Democratic leader Francisco Castellón negotiated a contract with Byron Cole, US-newspaper editor and filibuster organiser.<sup>36</sup> This man quickly dropped out of

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30 T. Ogorzalek, *Filibuster Vigilantly. Private Actors, the American State and Territorial Expansion*, Columbia 2008, 17.

31 As with “Democrats,” these denominations are not to be used too strictly according to our 21<sup>st</sup> century parlance. These groups adhered to a set of principles, formed parties along these lines and participated in the institutionalised politics of Nicaragua, but could hardly be subsumed under our understanding of conservatism or democracy.

32 For a short account of this conflict, including the main political fractions, see F. Kinloch Tijerino, *Nicaragua, Identidad y Cultura Política (1821 – 1858)*, Managua 1999, 48-49.

33 See F. Kinloch Tijerino, *El Primer Encuentro con los Filibusteros*, 23-45.

34 M. Gobat, *Reflexiones sobre el Encuentro Nicaragüense con el Régimen Filibustero de William Waker, 1855-1856* in: *Revista de Historia*, 2006, 20, 21.71–89.

35 K. Bermann, *Under the Big Stick. Nicaragua and the United States since 1848*, Boston, 1986.

36 The original contract is reproduced in: F. Castellón, *Contract for Byron Cole*, in: *Taller de Historia*

the scheme and handed the contract to William Walker, who had already actively filibustered before and who started to set sails towards Nicaragua in 1855. After successful military actions, the filibusters managed to control two strategically important points on the interoceanic route through Nicaragua, a situation which gave them a huge surge of confidence in the USA. This, in turn, resulted in an ever growing number of young men eager to join Walker's seemingly successful army. After months of fighting together with the forces of the Democratic party, the filibusters reached such a prominent position in Nicaraguan politics that Walker formed part of the governing, bi-partisan triumvirate after a truce was negotiated.

In March 1856, the Costa Rican president Juan Rafael Mora, long hostile to the foreign presence in his neighbouring country, declared war on Walker, and the filibusters had to fight on several fronts at once. Although US president Pierce finally recognised the filibuster-run government and thus opened up the possibility of a normalisation of the situation, main Nicaraguan politicians began to work together with the Costa Ricans. Walker quickly seized the opportunity: After bogus elections he declared himself president of Nicaragua on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1856. With a series of decrees, Walker tried to accelerate the Americanisation of the country: English was established as the second official language and "enemies of the state" were expropriated and their land handed over to US-American filibusters. This alienated the filibusters' foremost allies, the landed Nicaraguan elite, but Walker desperately tried to attract more men from the USA to join his ranks. In the same vein, he legalised slavery in Nicaragua, thus trying to interest the US slave-holding South in the fate of his project. But to no avail: On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1857 the filibusters had to surrender, were escorted out of the country under British protection, and Nicaragua came to be ruled under the dual leadership of the Conservative Tomás Martínez and the Democrat Máximo Jerez. Walker's Americanisation programme and his move to presidency had – if only for a short time – overcome the frictions between the political sides in Nicaragua and led to a shared government.

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(2006), 10. Despite the chaos and bloodshed that followed, it seems to be a bitter truth that this was a legitimate act on the part of the Democrats, as V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 39 argues.

*The Filibusters as Transnational Actors*

The above-mentioned invasion necessitated a high degree of organisational manpower being put to work simultaneously in the USA (fund-raising activities, organisation of weapons, ammunition and means of transport, publicity relations) and by the cooperating elites in the invaded countries. In Walker's case, Francisco Castellón and other Democratic leading figures – along with other public sectors as, for example, some clergymen<sup>37</sup> – paved the way for the introduction of the US-Americans into the regular Nicaraguan army, the connection with influential local leaders and the organisation of the interoceanic passage for the filibuster supply. These transnational networks between filibusters and creole elites were often organised around leading diplomatic or business figures (Byron Cole, for example, initially wanted to get involved in the opportunities surrounding canal-building) and were surprisingly well-managed. Walker even had a recruiting office in San Francisco, providing a focal point for transnational networking. As many filibusters were repeat offenders (having tried their luck before in Cuba or with Walker in Mexico<sup>38</sup>), such networking was important to bring together this tight-knit and highly interconnected band of young men from different countries such as Cuba, Ireland, Prussia, France and various parts of the USA.

Their international and culturally diverse background helped the filibuster group to gain a foothold in Nicaragua. Especially the Cubans were “the most important intermediators who defined the relations between Walker and the Nicaraguan society,”<sup>39</sup> not simply because they could actually understand and speak Spanish – something that Walker, for example, could only manage elementary<sup>40</sup> – but also because they were familiar with the civil formulas that opened the doors to the Nicaraguan elite circles. Without these intermediators, the filibuster rank and file, which mostly stemmed from lower social

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37 See A. Vijil, Sermon in: *Taller de Historia* (2006) 10, 114 as one incident where an influential Catholic priest praised the filibusters as guarantors of order and peace for long war-torn Nicaragua. The influence of such avowals by prominent religious figures on the majority of the Nicaraguan population should not be underestimated, as also F. Kinloch Tijerino, *El Primer Encuentro con los Filibusteros*, 23 notes.

38 In 1853, Walker had tried to annex parts of Mexico (Sonora and Baja California) with a small band of men, and had failed miserably.

39 M. Gobat, *Reflexiones Sobre el Encuentro Nicaragüense con el Régimen Filibustero de William Waker, 1855-1856* in: *Revista de Historia* (2006), 71, translation: A.B.

40 In his correspondence with his Nicaraguan allies, Walker usually wrote in English, or had his letters written by scribes who could employ the formulas necessary for diplomatic exchanges (see M. P. Allen, *William Walker, Filibuster*, New York 1932, 81). Apparently, even his public speeches and his oath delivered when taking the office of Nicaraguan president were given in English.

backgrounds, might most certainly have failed to successfully build the connections they needed with the Nicaraguan elite.

Such intermediators were also essential for the transnational communication that played an important role for the filibusters: Always dependent on both Nicaraguan and US support, they had to situate their presence and their actions within two different discursive and cultural systems. The major tool for achieving this was *El Nicaraguense*,<sup>41</sup> a newspaper which was founded by Walker, an ex-journalist, as soon as he could lay his hands on a printing press in war-torn Nicaragua. The first number of the paper was written in English and served as a propaganda machine for distribution in the USA; from issue number two onwards, though, its second half was written in Spanish and edited by a Spanish-speaking filibuster: Francisco Agüero Estrada, a revolutionary that had already fought for Cuba's independence from Spain.

*El Nicaraguense's* parts differed profoundly: The English half ran news about the (real and imagined) victories of the filibusters, and also featured many pieces in the form of travel narratives, with descriptions of Nicaragua's fertility and the prospects young, adventurous men could encounter there. For months, it reproduced chapters from John Llyod Stephens' influential *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (1841) and, even more extensively, Ephraim Squier's *Nicaragua, its People, Scenery, Monuments and the Proposed Interoceanic Canal* (1852) to position Nicaragua as a new frontier and the filibusters as settlers, not mercenaries. This part was clearly directed to US society and highly influential: In Nicaragua, a country where few other newspapers existed, a continually available paper (which could be reproduced without the need of translation) was quoted throughout the US press and found many readers. Many US papers, both pro- and contra-filibuster in their opinion, used *El Nicaraguense* uncritically as news source; these articles then circulated to Costa Rica, Honduras and the rest of Central America via the mail, and were there perceived as factual reports, as they seemed to come from established US print media. This transnational circulation of knowledge, embodied in the filibuster newspaper, favoured the party that produced it, the party which had more transnational ties and networks – in this case, the filibusters.

The Spanish portion of *El Nicaraguense*, on the other hand, often varied considerably from its English section: It was reserved for the publication of official decrees, and the

<sup>41</sup> Its name was spelled without the trema on the u throughout its period of publication, and it is unclear if that was a deliberate choice or simply a spelling mistake.

international news that was printed stemmed from Latin American countries, not Anglophone ones as in the English part. Travel narratives were missing, although it translated articles from the English section that claimed the discovery of gold in the country. While from time to time English articles were translated into Spanish, no originally Spanish articles made it into the English section. Clearly the two parts of the paper seldom acted together, underlining the fact that the paper was designed as a transnational platform, but ultimately served two different audiences.

Something that featured in both parts were announcements of social activities organised by the filibusters: On several occasions the filibusters founded social clubs, staged horse races and attended or prepared parties for Granada's high society. Such dances or musicals were important occasions where the filibusters not only tried to mingle with the locals and maintain their support but also were exposed to the Nicaraguan way of life, resulting sometimes in serious bonds (like marriages) with this supposedly "degenerated" people. On such occasions, the filibusters also introduced concepts yet unknown to Nicaraguan society, such as Blackface minstrel shows,<sup>42</sup> thereby also acting as transnational agents. *El Nicaraguense* of 16 Feb. 1856 claimed that Nicaraguans attended and liked the racist Blackface shows – a feature of the mid-nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon USA – but this seems dubious. In general, though, the inhabitants of Granada, where all of the events were staged, reacted positively to these pastimes.

By introducing new customs, habits and recreational patterns, the filibusters followed in a long line of foreign, predominantly US-American travellers and businessmen that had influenced Nicaraguan's society. As Whisnant convincingly argues,<sup>43</sup> this country was already "strongly marked by the syncretistic processes of a history of which the mid-century turmoil was but the latest phase."<sup>44</sup> Amerindian, Spanish and Caribbean influences mingled with growing numbers of US travellers passing through the interoceanic route, interacting with Nicaraguan folk, sometimes staying there for a longer time and thus further hybridizing Nicaraguan society. While the filibusters attempted to portray Nicaragua in wide parts untouched by foreign influences, such influences had

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42 M. Gobat, *Reflexiones Sobre el Encuentro Nicaragüense*, 71.

43 D. E. Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places. The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua*, Chapel Hill, NC, London, 1995.

44 D.E. Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places*, 63.

already arrived throughout the country, especially along the transisthmian transportation route operated by Vanderbilt, as Herrera Cuarezma has shown.

Walker's scheme of Americanizing Nicaragua was not only an act of imperial ambition and nationalist expansion but also an attempt to open Nicaragua for transnational business: With the envisioned interoceanic canal, Nicaragua was supposed to be "opened up" not only to the USA, but to international companies as well. This would have resulted in a hybrid state, incorporating US-style laws with a locally based, yet transnationally active elite network. A similar plan would only become reality roughly forty years later via the then rampant informal US empire and their *comprador* elites in Latin America.

Fernando Coronil notes that in "imperial-subaltern encounters, bodies and borders are mutually defined and transformed through asymmetrical processes of transculturation."<sup>45</sup> This also holds true for the filibusters. The majority of them, of course, did not stay in Nicaragua but had to return to the States and there were regarded as disturbingly foreign by the US-majority. Returning beaten, penniless<sup>46</sup> and barely clad, the home-comers resembled the stereotypical Latin or other dark-skinned men more than "proper" US citizens. Additionally, mostly due to their financial shortcomings, filibusters tended to sleep in the streets, sometimes in hammocks they brought along from the invaded Latin countries. Often described in terms of wildness and with metaphors of animality that were otherwise reserved for black or Latin people, the filibusters were discursively "blackened" by their US compatriots. At a time when nation states were regularly presumed to be made up by members of a homogeneous culture – or "race" – with national and/or geographical borders clearly dividing these different cultures, the filibusters' repeated criss-crossing between national borders resulted in their perception as hybrid, transnational yet essentially untrustworthy characters. In the high period of nationalism, transnationality remained suspect.

These processes of hybridisation in the USA and in invaded Nicaragua are especially ironic when keeping in mind that the filibusters had a clearly dualist, racist world view in which the Anglo Saxon white race occupied the highest, most civilised position and in

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45 F. Coronil, Foreword, in: *Close Encounters of Empire. Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations*, Durham 1998, XII.

46 Filibusters' pay was often issued through bonds or land grants which were supposed to rise in value over time. As all filibusters ultimately failed, this never turned into a profit.

which a mixture of these races (and thus cultures) was anathema. Purity had to be maintained at all costs, but – as shown – the filibusters, along with other actors, played a significant part in undermining this position.

But the filibusters not only acted transnationally in many ways, they also motivated the Central American states to react towards them accordingly. By forcing the usually deeply antagonistic Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala and El Salvador into a common army with a shared command, the filibusters served as catalysts for a short union of these states which let some even dream of a revival of the *Confederación de Centroamérica* (1823-1838).

Furthermore, the filibusters serve as prime objects for a transnational historiography. When focusing on William Walker and his subsequent invasions and attempted invasions to Nicaragua,<sup>47</sup> one will find that they, of course, involve the USA (both Northern and Southern states) and Nicaragua, but also Costa Rica, Honduras and, to a certain extent, Great Britain. They are part of the (national) history of all these countries, but also of a transnational one.

### *The Filibusters and Transnational History*

Since the late nineteenth century, in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, collective memories about the filibuster invasion(s) have been highly important for nation-building efforts. Both countries derive their national heroes from this historical episode: Juan Santamaría in the first, Andrés Castro in the latter case. Whilst in Nicaragua Walker and the filibusters stand in the shadow of Augusto César Sandino and the Sandinista revolution of the 1980s, in Costa Rica the anti-Walker campaign lies at the heart of the country's national myth.<sup>48</sup> This is not surprising: Costa Rica's president Juan Rafael Mora was an outspoken enemy of Walker from the beginning and was the driving force in organising the international coalition which fought against Walker. In Nicaragua, the fight against the US invaders was a civil war, dividing the country along factional lines, and thus obviously the whole incident could not be used in the creation of a national myth<sup>49</sup> as

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47 After being expelled, he mounted four more expeditions to regain power.

48 Acuña Ortega even calls it “the most important historical event in Central America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century”: V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 11, translation: A.B.

49 For the usefulness of the anti-Walker campaign in the nation-building process in Costa Rica, see V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 54 ff., P. Fumero Vargas, *El Monumento Nacional: Fiesta y Develización*, Septiembre de 1895, Alajuela 1998 and I. Molina Jiménez, *La Campaña Nacional (1856 – 1857). Una visión desde el Siglo XXI*, Alajuela 2000.

easily as in neighbouring Costa Rica. In Honduras, Walker is hardly remembered at all. Despite their prominent participation in the anti-Walker coalition and their execution of the filibuster in 1860 (when he was invited by Honduran citizens with British affiliations on an island off its Caribbean coast to help them fight against Honduras' attempt to fully incorporate them into their national realm), Hondurans do not construct their national identity by recurring to the filibusters. The figure of Francisco Morazán, leader of the *Confederación de Centroamérica* and prominent, albeit controversial, fighter for isthmian unity, was chosen as the nation's leading historical figure in the nation-building process,<sup>50</sup> similar to Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua.

In all of Central America, though, the fight against the filibusters was, from the 1870s onwards, subject to historical research. Starting with Jerónimo Pérez and including Lorenzo Montúfar, Jose Dolores Gámez, Francisco Montero Barrantes and Joaquín Bernardo Calvo Mora, many historians from Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica contributed their respective national viewpoints. The different national backgrounds show the transnational appeal of the filibusters; and it is noteworthy that with Montúfar one of the first historians to write about the filibusters was Guatemalan, not Costa Rican or Nicaraguan, as one might expect.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, these historians preferred to adhere to a strictly national(ist) perspective, rarely comparing their findings with scholars from their neighbouring republics, even less so from the USA.

In Central America the filibusters stayed strictly within the academic realm. Unlike in the USA, there were no novels written about Walker and his filibusters. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nicaragua's foremost poet, Ernesto Cardenal, wrote a poem called *Con Walker en Nicaragua* (1952) and the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano included Walker in his epic *Memoria del fuego* (1984). In both instances, though, the poets opted for a historical panorama, consciously or unconsciously confirming Walker's place in Central America's historical rather than in its fictional sphere.

Despite this profound and long-standing research, most US scholars have tended to ignore the findings of Central American academics<sup>52</sup> and independently “re-discovered”

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50 See E. Payne, *Buscar lo Cierto en lo Ignorado William Walker y la Guerra de 1856-1857 en la Historiografía Hondureña (1880- 1980)* in: *Filibusterismo y Destino Manifiesto en las Américas* (2010) 257-271

51 See G. Brenes Tencio, *Y se hizo la Imagen del Héroe Nacional Costarricense: Iconografía Emblemática de Juan Santamaría*, Bogotá 2009, 30.

52 See V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 27.

the filibusters every two or three decades. As the Costa Rican historian Víctor Hugo Acuña Ortega has repeatedly pointed out, the USA has largely forgotten about Walker and filibusters in general, despite their enormous antebellum popularity. This is not to say that there have not been historians *en masse* to find this subject noteworthy: Starting with *The Filibusters* by James Jeffrey Roche in 1891, continuing with William O. Scroggs and his *Filibusters and Financiers* in 1916, then including books by Laurence Greene in the 1930s, Albert Z. Carr in the 1960s, Frederic Rosengarten, Jr. in the 1970s, Charles H. Brown in the 1980s and, most recently scholars like Robert E. May and Antonio de la Cova, the topic of the filibusters has always garnered academic interest.<sup>53</sup> Yet, this research never gained prominence in wider circles, the monographs mentioned usually were confined to a very limited readership. Acuña Ortega argues that this is due to the imperialism that is linked to the actions of the filibusters and the ineptitude of US-America to acknowledge this fact. As filibusters and especially Walker are perceived as *agents of empire* or *agents of Manifest Destiny*, respectively (terms featured in many book titles), they illuminate the “dark side of the civilising mission which the United States has inscribed into themselves from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first on the American continent, and nowadays around the world.”<sup>54</sup> And most US scholars have not been keen to dive into their country’s imperial past.

The filibusters also were – as pointed out before – subject to widespread attention in the public discourse of the antebellum USA. After the US Civil War, the topic was supplanted by traumatized US-Americans with a focus on inward-oriented navel-gazing, but when the United States entered into another imperialist period in the 1890s with their acquisitions of and interventions on Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, the Philippines etc., the popular interest in the subject resurfaced. It was then well-known reporter, essayist and novelist Richard Harding Davis (1864- 1916) who wrote the bestsellers *Soldiers of Fortune* in 1897 and *Captain Macklin* in 1902 – the latter one clearly based on William

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53 J. J. Roche, *The Story of the Filibusters to which is added the Life of Colonel David Crockett*, New York 1891; W. O. Scroggs, *Filibusters and Financiers. The Story of William Walker and His Associates*, New York 1916; L. Greene, *The Filibuster: The Career of William Walker*, Indianapolis 1937; A. Z. Carr, *The World and William Walker*, New York 1963; F. Rosengarten jr., *Freebooters must Die: The Life and Death of William Walker, the most notorious Filibuster of the 19th Century*, Wayne, Pennsylvania 1976; C. H. Brown, *Agents of Manifest Destiny. The Lives and Times of the Filibusters*, Chapel Hill 1980 and May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld*. De la Cova, who focuses on filibusters to Cuba, administers the website [www.latinamericanstudies.org](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org) which contains a wealth of information on the subject of filibusterism .

54 V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 47, translation: A.B.

Walker's Nicaraguan invasion, the first one being a mercenary tale set in the 1890s with references to the filibusters as forerunners to the protagonists' profession – and *Real Soldiers of Fortune*, a compendium of biographies of army generals, mercenaries and filibusters with William Walker as prime example of a heroic soldier of fortune.<sup>55</sup> These works, combined with the academic disinterest in the topic, situated the filibusters in an increasingly fictional context, mixing the character of the filibuster with well-known literary characters such as the adventurer, cowboy or dared-devil soldier (especially in *Real Soldiers of Fortune*), thus obscuring the singularity of the filibusters and the social conditions which helped to create them.<sup>56</sup> This in turn benefited the urge in the USA to forget about the whole episode of filibusterism as an aberration of a supposedly benevolent US policy towards Latin America.

While in the 1890s the term “filibuster” and the name William Walker were still household items, they faded from public memory in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now only resurface in the public sphere when a general critique of the imperialist or hegemonic tendencies of the USA is discussed,<sup>57</sup> as was the case with the anti-Vietnam movement or the discussions of US-support for the anti-FSLN guerillas in 1980s Nicaragua. On these two occasions, two films were produced which explicitly deal with William Walker's Nicaraguan invasion: *Queimada* (1969) by director Gillo Pontecorvo, starring Marlon Brando as William Walker, and *Walker* (1987), directed by Alex Cox and filmed in Sandinista Nicaragua, starring Ed Harris. It is symptomatic that neither movie was a success in the USA, but both – especially *Walker* – proved extremely popular in Central America. Albeit being part of a global, interconnected history,<sup>58</sup> the filibusters' standing in the historiography and popular memory of the various countries they were involved in, is fundamentally different. These national differences still remain – despite efforts by Costa Rican historians from the Universidad de Costa Rica and Nicaraguan ones from the *Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica of the Universidad Centroamericana* – at the margin of academic attention, due to the widespread neglect in

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55 See A. Lubow, *The Reporter who would be King. A Biography of Richard Harding Davis*, New York, Toronto 1992 as a good biographical source on Davis' life.

56 See B. Harrison, *Agent of Empire*, 4-5 for an overview of the U.S. literature that featured references to either Walker or the filibusters.

57 See V. H. Acuña Ortega, *La Campaña Nacional*, 16-17.

58 See V. H. Acuña Ortega, *Introducción in: Filibusterismo y Destino Manifiesto en las Américas*, 2010, 1.

the USA and the Procrustean bed of nationalist sentiments into which the filibuster history is conventionally fit in Central American countries.

As this article tried to show, the filibusters themselves were highly mobile transnational actors which link US and Central American history and society on various levels – politics, business, popular media and historical remembrances – and are proof that when looking at transnational actors, a dive into the more shadowy, illegal and clandestine spheres of transnational agency turns out highly rewarding.

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