



Stefano Tijerina* and Sonya de Laat**

CONSTRUCTING MODERNITY AND PROGRESS: THE IMPERIALIZING LENS OF AN AMERICAN ENGINEER IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

1. Introduction

The Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway (1900-1961) and the Panama Canal (1904-1914) were two American expansionist efforts of the early 20th century. American engineer Maxwell Waide Smith (1884-1961) took photographs while working on these two projects. His pictures offer an important alternative perspective on American capitalist expansionism and are valuable primary sources in reimagining these engineering projects from the lens of someone who was on the ground, diligently working in his professional capacity. While documenting his labor force with his camera, he inadvertently made records of the social, political, environmental, and economic dynamics of the time. As indicated by historian Emily Rosenberg, the historical analysis of United States' foreign affairs "must, to a large degree, focus upon these nongovernmental forces" (1982, 12). Taken by a skilled professional navigating between the social locations of laborers and company officials, Maxwell Waide Smith's photographs offer a micro lens on the daily operations of the modernization projects that catapulted the United States into a hemispheric position of power in the early 20th century.

* Stefano Tijerina is a Lecturer in Management at the University of Maine's Maine Business School. He has published internationally on Canadian-Latin American and U.S.-Latin American business relations, focusing on business-government partnerships, the expansion of capitalism, and the management of labor relations. He is the recipient of the first Chris Kobrak Research Fellow in Canadian Business History as well as the recipient of multiple Kentucky Historical Society Research Fellowships that laid the foundation for the Maxwell Waide Smith project. He is the author of *Filling in the Gaps in the Americas: Canada and Colombia, 1767-1968* (University of Toronto Press – forthcoming in 2018), and has published articles in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *Ensayos Sobre Política Económica*, *Desafíos and Perspectivas Colombo Canadienses*, as well as chapters in several edited volumes including *Mercados en Común: Estudios sobre Conexiones Transnacionales*, *Negocios y Diplomacia en las América (siglo XIX y XX)* and *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in Petroleum*. He writes for several blogs including the *New Economic Papers-History Blog (NEP-HIS Blog)*, *ActiveHistory.ca*, and *The Glocal* featured in the *Bangor Daily News*.

** Sonya de Laat is currently Postdoctoral Fellow in Humanitarian Health Ethics with the Humanitarian Health Ethics Research Group, based at McMaster University. Her dissertation work looked at histories of humanitarian photography and the role of photography in shaping humanitarian imagination at different points in time and in different geographic locations. She has published articles and reviews in the *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*, *Visual Studies*, and *History of Photography*. She has also contributed to the *Online Atlas on the History of Humanitarianism and Human Rights*, and the *Canadian Network on Humanitarian History* blog. Her interdisciplinary engagements have resulted in publications in *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, and an edited volume, *Disaster Bioethics*. She is also a curator and photographer. Her co-curated exhibit (with Valerie Gorin, from CERAH in Geneva) on histories of humanitarian photography was part of a Humanitarian Policy Group (ODI-HPG) exhibit at the *World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey in May 2017*. You can see, and follow, her work at www.sonyadelaat.weebly.com.



Numerous scholars have focused on the history of the Panama Canal;¹ fewer have explored the history of the US-Mexico railway project.² For the most part these histories have been written from the top down, centering on the macro-picture of the corporate projects. Political and diplomatic historiography has predominantly centered on top decision makers such as government officials and diplomats (Greene 2009; LaFeber 1978). Alternatively, labor histories have focused on the experiences of local and migrant workers, and on gendered perspectives from the ground up (Senior 2014). Minimal attention has been given to those in-between figures such as the engineer, the skilled professionals, the middle manager, or the average American blue-collar worker. A broader understanding of American expansionism and nation building could be unraveled by looking at the experiences and lives of those stakeholders that have been largely invisible in American history or—for that matter—imperial history.

In this paper, we engage in “watching” (Azoulay 2008) Maxwell Waide Smith’s photographs of the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway (1907-1908) and the Panama Canal construction project (1913-1914). In this manner, it is possible to explore the arena of action and actors beyond the frame of the photographs, so as to contextualize other realities that have been overlooked by traditional historical approaches.³ Viewing photography as an event rather than an artifact enables consideration of the encounters recorded by the camera, and the relations and repercussions generated by the photographic situation, from the perspectives of those implicated in the picture-making process. These photographic albums provide an opportunity for exploring an engineer’s perspective that can be contrasted with views of laborers and local communities, and those of company officials and political elites as they were all caught up in American nation-building activities. Alongside an expansion of historiography on these two engineering projects, Maxwell Waide Smith’s photographs invite a reflection on “potential histories” (Azoulay 2013) or (discounted) opportunities to build a cooperative rather than competitive America, and to explore the internal cultural changes that took place within the US as the nation moved from a progressive engine of modernity to an agent of expansionist imperialism. His camera and, more specifically, the railway project album and its position within his overall collection of photographs illustrate a clear transition from the perspective of a young, naïve engineer in his first field project in Mexico to a more imperialist perspective as a seasoned engineer in Panama. The transition is made visible in the relationships depicted in the images as they open onto more expansive, contextual histories that exist beyond the pictures’ frames. Working on Maxwell Waide Smith’s photographs, which represent the bulk of his archive, reveals a microcosm of the thousands of engineering projects across the Americas that together composed the American imperialist project of the early 20th century. At the same time, from Maxwell Wide

¹ For more on the history of the Panama Canal see, for example, Richard H. Collin, *Theodore Roosevelt’s Caribbean: The Panama Canal, the Monroe Doctrine, and the Latin American Context*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990; Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal*, New York: Penguin Press, 2009; and Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. For more on labor relations and the construction of the canal see, for example, Olive Senior, *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the Building of the Panama Canal*, Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2014; for more on the politics behind the canal see, for example, Michael J. Hogan, *The Panama Canal in American Politics: Domestic Advocacy and the Evolution of Policy*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986; and for recent spatial interpretations of the canal zone see, for example, Marixa Lasso, “A Canal Without a Zone: Conflicting Representations of the Panama Canal,” *Journal of Latin American Geography*, 14.3 (2015): 157-74.

² For a history of the railway construction project see John Leeds Kerr, *Destination Topolobampo: The Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway*, San Marino: Golden West Books, 1968, and J. Wallace Higgins III, “The Orient Road: A History of the Kansas City, Mexico and Orient Railroad,” *The Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin* 95 (October 1956): 10-46; for an anecdotal perspective see Arthur E. Stilwell, *Cannibals of Finance: Fifteen Years’ Contest with the Money Trust*, Chicago: The Farnum Publishing Co., 1912; and for a synopsis of the railway industry perspective see W.C. Winsborough, “Kansas City, Missouri: Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway Co.,” *The North American Review* (March 1903): 481-86.

³ The collection consists of 119 photographs. The Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway album consists of 91 photographs and the Panama Canal box consists of 28 photographs. Most of the collection is made of gelatin prints and there are a handful of negatives. Maxwell Waide Smith Papers, 1879-1961. “Photo Album Mexico 1907,” *Kentucky Historical Society*, MSS40, Box 2, Folder 3; Maxwell Waide Smith Papers, 1879-1961. “Panama Canal, 1913-1914,” *Kentucky Historical Society*, MSS 40, Folders 1-3, Box 2, Folder 8.



Smith's point of view, the photographs reveal the development of an imperialist expansionist project that was greater than him.

2. Encountering Maxwell Waide Smith's Photography

In keeping with the conceptual framework of the photographic situation introduced in Ariella Azoulay's visual theories (2008; 2012), we take as our starting point the understanding that "there is much more to the photographic situation than can be seen in any given image" (Sliwinski 2012). Accordingly, we explore the multiple social, political, and historical dimensions of the arena of actors and actions within and beyond the frame of Maxwell Waide Smith's photographs. Our approach is not to "look" at these photographs as illustrations in the sense of their adding 'color' to the archival documents accompanying the two engineering projects; it is, instead, to "watch" the pictures (Azoulay 2008). We borrow the distinction between "looking" and "watching" from Azoulay, who reclaims watching a picture as a fundamental act of historical thinking, which "entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image" (2008, 14). Azoulay's entreaty is deliberate, motivating and enabling many perspectives, histories, and legacies associated with the pictured event to emerge. There is a praxis in Azoulay's approach to photography: it is a form of intentional engagement that seeks deeper understanding of and commitment to affected communities. For Azoulay, "watching a photograph" becomes a "civic skill" where "cultural and social hierarchies that organize the power relations between photographer, camera, and photographed person" can be (re)situated in their past while also considered for their ongoing impact in the present (Azoulay 2012, 24-25). Adapting Azoulay's concept of "watching" to approach Maxwell Waide Smith's albums becomes an intentional act of viewing the "photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others [to become] a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation" (2008, 14). In our case, "injury" is taken to refer to the impact of American expansionist activities on local populations, governments, cultures, and environments.

Photographer and visual scholar Allan Sekula (1983) claimed "semantic availability" in archived photographs as they are removed from their historical timelines or 'continuums' (Berger 2013). "Liberated from the actual contingencies of use," or their original intent, archived photographs more easily open to interpretation. Sekula cautions, however, that "this liberation is also a loss, an abstraction from the complexity and richness of use, a loss of context" (1983, 194).⁴ For our purposes, there is indeed such duality at play. On the one hand, it is liberating for the photographs to be removed from dominating ideological forces such as potentially restrictive descriptive texts or samples of their publication. On the other hand, such lack of documentary evidence limits our abilities to reinscribe links to the past and to describe the different social encounters presented by the photographs. That being said, the lack of this material is not a total loss. For it is not so much novel meanings we are looking for in watching Maxwell Waide Smith's pictures, but rather a way to break from dominant meaning(s) in order to open up the "potential histories" Azoulay refers to. In a sense, we give agency to the photographs by removing them from the dormant state of imperialist complacency and exposing them to the debates about the injustices of economic, political, social, and cultural imperialism.

The concept of "potential histories" is a theoretical tool—a heuristic device if you will—meant to confront and work through difficult truths; in this case, American imperialist expansion and the complicated roles and relationships forged through it. Our application of Azoulay's concepts bears similarities to John Berger's idea of photography as "a radial system" through which photos "may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic" (Berger 2013, 60). For Azoulay, to explore potential histories is an act of challenging official memory and dominant histories that obscure or deny the spectators' ability to recognize a situation as a disaster, let alone their being implicated (or even complicit) within trajectories that might have happened if the mechanisms of control had been different or nonexistent (Azoulay 2013, 550). Becoming aware of and exploring these potential histories can lead to lines of questioning and even the possibility of restoring "the other possible options and to understand how the mere fact of their existence was removed" (2013, 552).

⁴ Sekula goes on to maintain that photographs, once in an archive and removed from their social lives, become emotionally homogenous as "the underlying currents of power are hard to detect" (1983, 195). Indeed, "within the archive, meaning exists in a state that is both residual and potential" (Sekula 1983, 197).



3. Maxwell Waide Smith Picturing the Engineering of American Expansionism

Maxwell Waide Smith was born in Arkansas to a farming family at a time of nascent American expansionism.⁵ He graduated as a civil engineer from the State College of Kentucky in 1906 and went on to work on numerous engineering projects throughout his career. Two of these projects included the construction of a section of the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway between 1907 and 1908, and building construction at the Panama Canal Zone between 1913 and 1914. He was the only one out of a class of one hundred and one students to obtain a job in an overseas project.⁶ Smith's collection of personal artifacts—including photographs, letters, photo albums, and personal documents—provides limited information with which to reconstruct the life of the engineer. Nevertheless, his photographic accounts offer glimpses into the life of the company towns and the social dynamics that unfolded between locals and foreigners as the United States advanced its expansionist efforts and asserted its political, economic, and cultural influence across the Western hemisphere.

Smith was part of a generation of professionals that were trained under the premise that “other nations could and should replicate America’s own developmental experience,” that these initiatives should rest in the hands of the private sector, that they should be backed by pro-free trade and investment policies, and should be safeguarded from cultural nationalism that could impede the propagation of this American ideology (Rosenberg 1982, 7). His engineering tasks in Mexico and Panama made him an instrument of American internationalism, and as part of these business-government partnerships he became the physical presence of “American-led progress” in the field (*ibid.*).

Smith's images reflect the difference between the privately funded railway project and the government-funded canal project—two different endeavors that required different skills and labor dynamics as well as scientific and technical knowledge. The presence of technology, machines, equipment, laborers, their families, engineers, and the transformations of foreign landscapes depicted in his photographs symbolize American progress and the idea of a world “destined to follow American patterns” of economic development (Rosenberg 1982, 7). His own ability to be on site with an instrument that allowed him to document the day-to-day advancement toward modernity and progress was in itself proof of the capacity of American internationalism. Yet Maxwell Waide Smith was also just a man, a single individual who, on his own, could not exert great influence. He was influential to the extent that he was a white American backed by machines, technology, financial capital, corporate and military might, modern management science, and the will of an imperialist nation.

It is not possible to conclude whether or not the engineer consciously recognized his role in these historic endeavors as imperialistic, as milestones of progressive modernity, or merely as engineering feats, but it is unarguable that his pictures represent a unique primary source that helps historians reconstruct how life was like at two of the hundreds of sites that catapulted the United States' government-business partnerships far beyond its national borders. Whether he recognized it or not, Maxwell Waide Smith was an agent of what historian Emily S. Rosenberg called “liberal-developmentalism,” an ideology that “merged nineteenth-century liberal tenets with the historical experience of America’s own development,” and that advanced the idea that what worked for the United States would work for other nations (1982, 7).

Tied to the ideas of liberalism was the ideology of the American Dream, and Smith's life was symbolic of this new emerging idea. As indicated by Rosenberg, the American Dream had a domestic and a global version, and Smith exemplified both versions (1982, 12). He was the educated engineer that built a career on America's construction of modernity and then exported that same value system to Mexico, Panama, and later to Europe as a Colonel for the Corps of Engineers during the First World War. The role of the private citizen was crucial in exporting liberal ideals; it was people like Smith that shaped “America's role in the world” and that spearheaded the nation's expansionist efforts across Latin America during the early 20th century (Rosenberg 1982, 12).

⁵ For more on the life of Maxwell Waide Smith see Maxwell Waide Smith Papers, 1879-1961, “Scrapbook 1880-1920,” *Kentucky Historical Society*, Box 2, Folder 8.

⁶ It is also important to highlight that the graduating class of civil engineers at the State College of Kentucky had gone from 9 to 101 students between 1897 and 1907, revealing an explosion of engineering degrees as American expansionism unfolded (State of Kentucky 1907, 297).



In narrowing in on the two projects that Smith recorded with his camera, it is possible to watch cultural and social exchanges that took place between locals and American promoters of liberalism—exchanges made possible by American business expansionism. Indirectly, Foreign Direct Investment was responsible for the trajectory of Smith's early career. The foreign investment efforts of US businesses increased the need for engineers, and it was the investment strategies that placed Mexico and Panama on the business map of American interests. Between 1897 and 1914, "American direct investment abroad more than quadrupled, rising from an estimated \$634 million to \$2.6 billion" (Rosenberg 1982, 25). Smith's travel costs and salary came from those billions of dollars; possibly, from those dollars also came the money that he used to purchase his own camera.

3.1 The Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway Construction Project, 1907

A year after graduating from engineering school Maxwell Waide Smith got a job in the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway construction project (Smith Papers, Folder 8). It was at this job site that he had his first encounter with the world outside of the United States. His eye for photography led him to document his visit across the Rio Grande, including his own perceptions of the juxtaposition between modernity and tradition. The ninety-one photographs he took throughout the five months at the Municipality of El Fuerte in the Mexican state of Sinaloa represent a small portion of a railway construction project that lasted sixty-one years (1900-1961).

The railway was the idea of American railroad promoter Arthur Edward Stilwell and Mexico's president Porfirio Díaz (who was in office between 1876 and 1880 and again between 1884 and 1911), who together envisioned a project that extended over 879 miles, connecting Mexico and the United States through Texas, and providing access to the Topolobampo port on the Mexican Pacific Coast (Figure 1). President's Díaz's administration would be known as the *Porfiriato*, a period of open market and free trade policies laying the foundations that accelerated Foreign Direct Investment into Mexico while also establishing conditions of social disparity and racial segregation. Stilwell capitalized on the laissez-faire policies implemented by Díaz, and it was under this foreign-local initiative that Maxwell Waide Smith found himself in El Fuerte, Sinaloa.

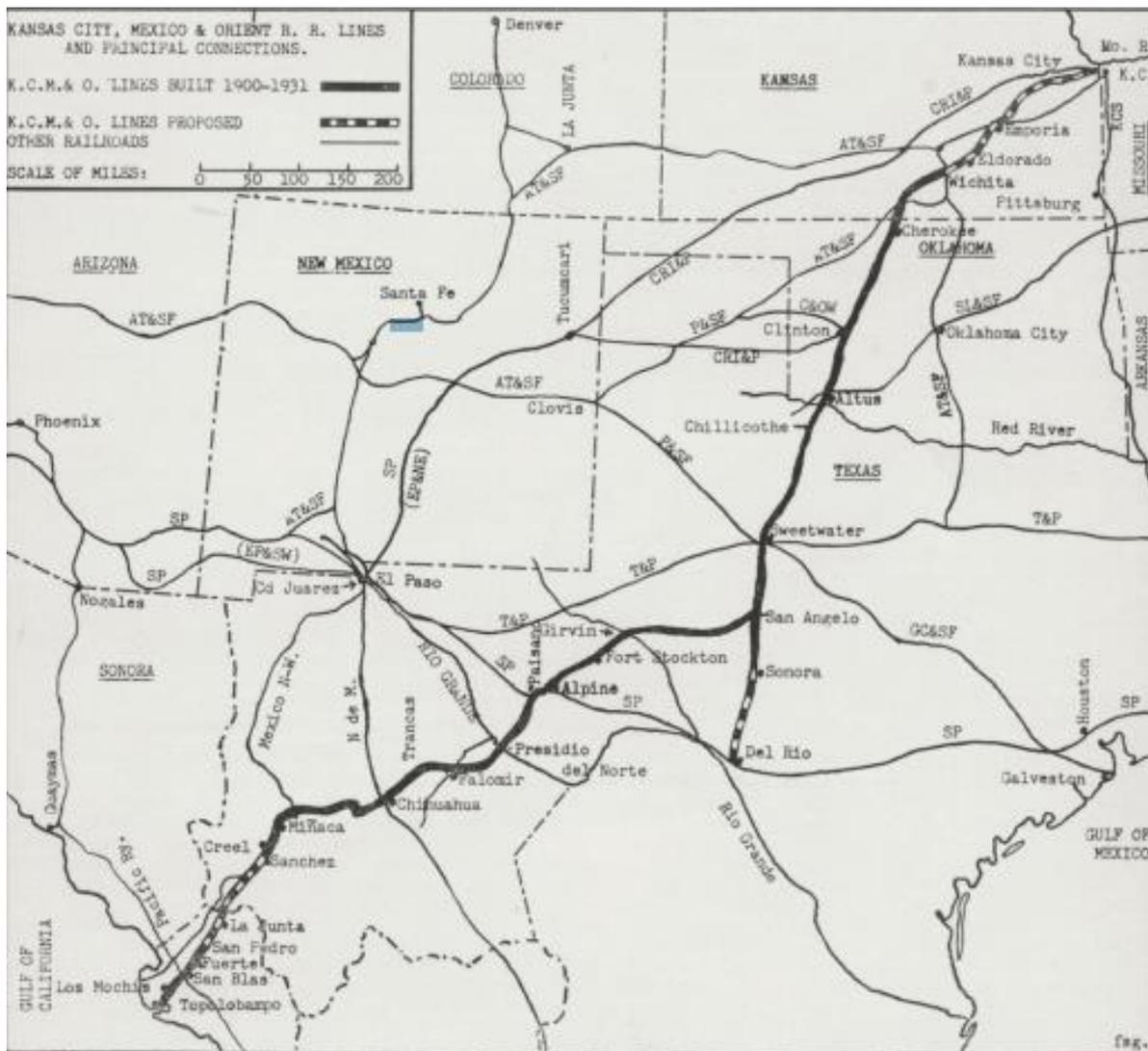


Fig. 1: Map of the Kansas City, Mexico & Orient Railway project (Higgins 1956, 15)

According to John Leeds Kerr, the project's topography and geography produced "construction and fiscal difficulties of epic proportion," and its isolation and "traffic vacuum" made it a mysterious and dangerous route (1968, 7). Maxwell Waide Smith's photographs depict the "rugged and desolate" landscape described by Kerr; a territory "untamed by civilization" (1968, 10).⁷ Yet the objective of the railway line was not to build civilization or markets for Mexicans. Calling into question the development objectives of American expansionist ideologies, the aim of the rail line was to allow American companies to secure an alternative port in the Pacific that would reduce export costs while at the same time tapping into the vast Mexican resources of the west in order to bring them back to the American market.⁸

Maxwell Waide Smith's mission at El Fuerte was to complete the line that would reach the Pacific Coast at Topolobampo. The construction of the line had started in 1900, but stalled in 1904 when Stilwell ran out of funding for the project (Kerr 1968, 74). After securing new investors in London, Brussels, and Amsterdam, Stilwell reopened construction operations in 1905. By 1907 the El Fuerte-Topolobampo construction section was reactivated just in time for the newly graduated Smith to find employment (Kerr 1968, 79).

At El Fuerte Maxwell Waide Smith joined Palmer R. and C. Bake, two other American engineers already at the construction camp (Smith Papers, Folder 3_1_005). For the next five months the Americans would coexist

⁷ See, for example, Maxwell Waide Smith Papers, 1879-1961, "Photo Album Mexico 1907" MSS40, Box 2, Folder 3_1_011, 012, 014.

⁸ For more on American business objectives see Stilwell 1912.



with local workers, including “Mexican peons” and “Opata and Tarahumara” natives (Kerr 1968, 74). Smith’s album of the *Ferrocarril* project, as he called it, is the only complete album in his archived material. Often, historians have to make the most of single images strewn between linear feet of other archived material. Rare is the treat of a full album created by the photographer. Rarer still are those embedded in that same person’s collection of other photographs made over the better part of a lifetime, which is the case with Smith. The boon with an album such as Smith’s is that in his deliberate ordering and careful curation of images is a maintenance of close ties to his mind, intentions, and ideological perceptions all alongside the depictions of his physical surroundings—an insightful construction of a linear history.



Fig. 2: “Looking South, Sta. 7129.” Photograph by MWS. MSS40_Box2_F3_1_011

Leafing through the album, there is no doubt that Smith was an engineer through and through. A large portion of the pictures focuses on the basic steps in building the railway. If not observed through the eye of an engineer, the bulk of the pictures could be interpreted as a study in form and light (Figure 2). The deep trenches or raised track beds being readied for a new rail line, stretching as far as the eye can see towards the distant Sierra or curving off into the left or right side of the pictures’ frames, with the strong, direct sunlight casting hard shadows here and there, are part of Smith’s documentation of the process and progress of this project. The limits intrinsic to photography prevent us from knowing the extent to which Smith interpreted his work as part of a larger project of imperialism. Without any other documentary evidence—like, for instance, writings by or of Smith on his experiences and perspectives—we are left to wonder: how much did he believe, or justify? Did he even think that the Americans were anything but legitimate in being the owners of this line, or question the ‘justness’ of the project? Looking at the album’s contents, and his subsequent collection of photographs, it appears evident that he was passionate about his chosen career. The repetition of the same subject matter and the pattern of his point of view—situated, more often than not, in the middle of the emerging railway, standing in for the railcar he could imagine eventually coming down the not-yet-laid track—are a clear indication that his understanding of his purpose was to ensure the proper construction of this formidable task. It appears that his focus was engineering and not expansionism or international trade.

Many similar images in his album as the one described above include workers in the trenches digging with shovels and pick-axes. In another picture, men can be seen returning with empty wheelbarrows at the top of the trench, while inside it is another group of men filling even more wheelbarrows (MSS40_Box2_F3_1_012). Manual labor is the order of the day, and in the case of the railway project, it is largely a local, Mexican labor force at work. With sombreros as guards against the blazing sun, and terra-cotta jugs of water dispersed along the work zone, the local population appears to ‘accept’ this project at least at some level. To what degree it is



hard to tell. But some of the pictures that bookend these somewhat repetitive scenes complicate those historical accounts that might present the railway project as perceived negatively by the Mexican people. Included in Maxwell Waide Smith's album are images of his social life and his cultural encounters while in Mexico, making for a captivating narrative of him as a young man involved in the larger project of (American) nation building. Indeed, the most compelling aspect of the *Ferrocarril* album, beyond the incessant repetition of track beds, is the first page (Figure 3). On this first page are two portraits. The first is of a man identified by Smith's caption on the print as Rufino Montes. He is clearly a local Mexican, dressed in a white shirt and dark pants with a scarf around his neck and waist. His sombrero sits back on the top of his head allowing the sunlight to illuminate his face. The other portrait on this page is of Smith himself. These two figures introduce the album, and together they set a reflexive tone for the rest of the images to come and cast a complex shadow over the engineer.

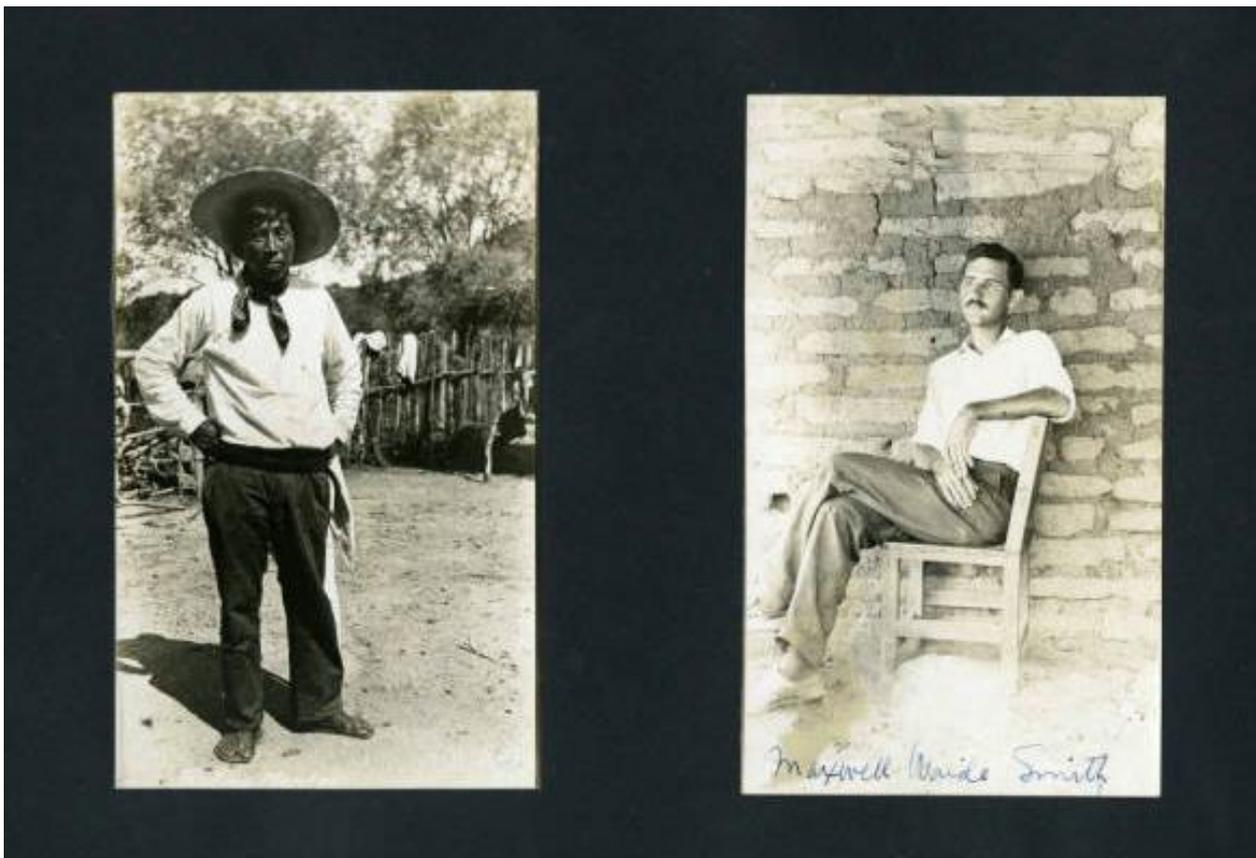


Fig. 3: First page in Maxwell Waide Smith's album depicting Rufino Montes, left, and Maxwell Waide Smith, right. 1907. Kentucky Historical Society. MSS40_Box 2_F3_1_004

Maxwell Waide Smith sits looking wistfully off into the top left corner of the frame. On a chair placed parallel to a nondescript brick wall, Smith is performing a scene of confidence and future-oriented self-assurance fitting for an American looking into the distance of his Manifest Destiny. Rufino Montes, in contrast, stands, hands-on-hips, facing the camera front-on. His casual self-assurance is one that might have unsettled many Americans: such a stance—particularly from someone not considered an equal—could be construed as aggressive or defiant. Instead, Montes, pictured in his own community, and Smith's placement of him as the first portrait in the album, suggest a very respected man, by Smith at least. Based on his important role in the album, we might speculate that he was perhaps a guide, an intermediary between the foreigners and locals, providing the 'know-how' for survival in the unknown territory.

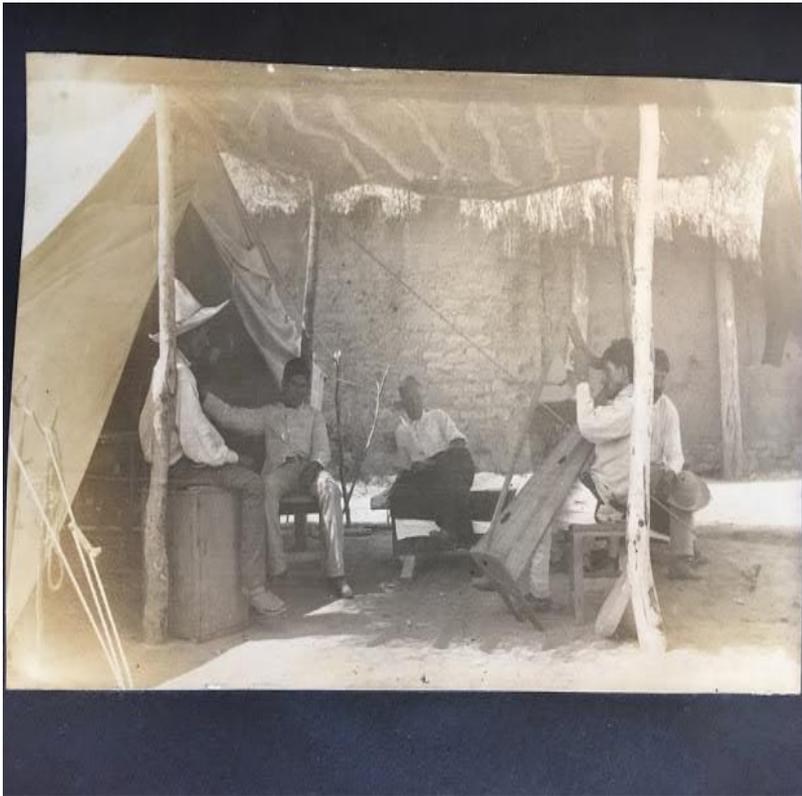


Fig. 4: Photograph by Maxwell Waide Smith, MSS40_Box2_F3_1_029

The relationship that Maxwell Waide Smith developed with Montes is not altogether clear, but it is certainly a result of the closeness shared by the American skilled laborers (Smith among others) and the local Mexicans. This is further highlighted in Figure 4, where Smith depicts a large canvas tent with carpet-covered benches underneath a canopy made of grasses and leaves. Smith made several exposures at this location, at various different times and from different angles. This is the tent that served as a common area. In more distant views, Smith shows that this tent and the others that make up the American workers' camp are situated in the same compound as the local community members. Their structures are made of adobe with straw thatched roofs, and are much larger than the foreigner's dwellings.

The recurrent appearance of this location in his album gives a glimpse into the social relations between Smith (the Americans) and the local people. The engineer was using a 4x6 large format camera while in Mexico; each photograph had to be planned and organized so as to set up the tripod, take time under a heavy black cloth to adjust the focus, and make one exposure per sheet of film. The pictures of activities under this sun canopy in front of the large open-flapped tent appear casual. Work and leisure were shared with the locals; though not perhaps entirely equally, as Mexican musicians play and American men recline.

These are not the only casual, almost candid photographs in the album. The collection includes other pictures of men, both local and foreign, resting by some boulders and tree trunks, smiling and playing with a dog. And there are a number of photographs of local people, often named or given terms of endearment (e.g., Buster Brown). These images suggest close engagement, a personal interest, and the ability to develop relationships. Near the end of the album is a series of photographs of Smith's travels to Mexico City; here he shows evidence of interest in Mexican culture and history with photographs of monuments representing Aztec and Spanish figures. The album also includes visual documents of the closest urban center, El Fuerte, where the company offices were located, highlighting its simple and somewhat "backward" life. His photographs of the public squares further show Smith's playfulness with his "first attempt at illumination photography": a night scene of the public square (MSS40_Box2_F3_026). His own explorations led him to the outskirts of El Fuerte where he also documented life in the rural area, naming a particularly pictorialist image "the simple life" (MSS40_Box2_F3_1_028).

There is little in the available historical records to indicate Maxwell Waide Smith's rationale for making his exposures. Without any evidence that he was commissioned by the company to make the photographs, and



given their rather intimate everyday-ness, it is likely that Smith made the images for his own personal use, and to show the people back home how the world looked like outside of Kentucky. He was not a professional photographer; he was not at these engineering sites with the purpose of making photographs to sell for publication or other commercial purposes. He was there as an engineer; nevertheless, he was a photographer constructing a colonial narrative reflecting “an overt colonial instrumentality” (Lien, Edwards and Legêne 2012, 263). Even in the variation that appears in Smith’s photography, it is evident that there is no “homogenous ‘colonial archive’” (Lien, Edwards and Legêne 2012, 263), and by extension, no homogenous colonial person. Indeed, an ambiguous individual emerges from Smith’s pictures, but one who can still be regarded as part of—even complicit with, or at the very least implicated in—a larger structure of expansionist imposition. His photographs speak to the “condition of coloniality” (Lien, Edwards and Legêne 2012, 263), providing glimpses of those experiences on the side of various actors that intersected and lived those realities in different roles, in the social and political positions allowed at the time. In essence, there was an innocence in Smith’s pictures that is erased by the time he arrives in Panama five years later.

3.2 *The Panama Canal Project, 1913-1914*

The Panama Canal was the United States’ first government-led infrastructural expansionist project. Maxwell Waide Smith arrived at the engineering site during the last year of the construction efforts. By that time, the Isthmian Canal Commission had overcome a sanitary crisis that had led to the initial failure of the French initiative at the Canal Zone and that had ultimately resulted in the project’s bankruptcy and later takeover by the Americans in 1904. Smith was in Panama during the tenth anniversary of independence from Colombia, an outcome that had been encouraged if not motivated by the Americans. Despite such apparent support for Panamanian sovereignty, Smith belonged to a generation that would pioneer American expansionist efforts across the hemisphere. Panama represented the initial move into South America. Being in the midst of it, Smith’s camera played witness to the outcomes and results of the government-business partnership meant to showcase to the world the capabilities and vision of American culture.

While he took with him to Panama his keen interest in photography, Smith never created as complete an album as the one he made of his time in Mexico. The lack of historiography on ‘invisible’ stakeholders such as Smith prevents us from reconstructing what life was like for those Americans working on site, but his photographs do offer a glimpse of the more distanced and separated role of the engineer on this project when contrasted with the Mexican one. Decisions made prior to Smith’s arrival in Panama on the implementation of rigid divisions of labor at the Canal Zone resulted in a completely different experience for him than in Mexico. In contrast to the railway project, in Panama he was less engaged in human interaction and more focused on machines and construction. Smith’s photographs depict a more distanced relationship with both management and workers. Here, his mission was the handling of machines and of human labor as machines: this is clearly depicted in his architecturally focused photography.

Hired as an engineer for the construction of building projects under the Permanent Building Division, Smith was an integral part of the vision of leaders such as President Theodore Roosevelt, who threw his political weight behind the project because in the end it symbolized America’s success (Smith Papers, Folder 1-3). As indicated by Maurice H. Thatcher, Civil Governor at the Canal Zone (1910-1913) and member of the Isthmian Canal Commission, the success of the construction of the Panama Canal Zone did not only have international but also domestic repercussions. While impressing the world, it also showed Americans how ingenuity and perseverance could unite their own nation, North and South, to collaboratively work on a non-military expansionist project (1930, 15). There is little doubt that Smith—a person who took pride in the construction projects he was involved in, as evidenced by his multiple exposures of them—was sympathetic to this expansionist ideology.⁹ But what his ideals specifically were remains unclear. We can only surmise that he recognized his time in Panama as a contrast to that in Mexico. In Panama he was not interested in documenting his labor relations, the social dynamics of the project, leisure, entertainment, or his daily life.

⁹ Smith’s commitment to American values, beliefs, and ideas would later be evidenced by the photographic collection documenting his engineering work during WWI, when he served as a Colonel in the American Army Corp of Engineers.



Much like in Mexico, Smith's role in Panama involved navigating between the company officials and those implementing their decisions on the ground. Nonetheless, here everything was experienced on a grander scale, from the overall project to the number and diversity of workers and officials, the economics and the social realities and expectations. Even the budgets, technology, and environmental impacts were of a different caliber: this was an expansionist effort of great magnitude. In his collection from Panama are a number of pictures of corporate elite members often on their own, and sometimes with their spouses. The photo reproduced here as Figure 5 is insightful in that Smith reveals that he was in a position to 'rub elbows' with the pictured officials. That his photographs of these elites were often taken at company locations, and the fact that they are pictured mid-action, suggests that they were not part of his social circle. They were certainly not pictured in casual situations away from work in the way Smith photographed his colleagues in Mexico, or American skilled laborers relaxing in Panama (MSS40_Box2_F9_98_001).



Fig. 5: "Col. Sibert, Maj. Hoffman." Group of men standing on the side of a lock. Panama. Photograph by MWS, 9-26-13. MSS40_Box2_F8_51_001

In contrast to the management bureaucrats whom he met and who worked almost exclusively from within headquarter offices, Smith was at construction sites observing the dynamics of human labor coexisting with innovative machinery. More striking than his portraits of Americans in Panama are the relatively few pictures that focus on local people, and the fact that almost no picture depicts social engagement or interaction between himself and his American colleagues and local or migrant laborers. In Panama, the scale of the project and the arrangement of the working environment meant that Maxwell Waide Smith was much farther removed from the laborers and the local people.

Differently from Spanish, French, or British expansionisms, American internationalism-driven expansionism did not depend on a heavy presence of government bureaucracy. The unique government-business partnership, of which Smith was a part, required minimal interference by government officials, leaving great autonomy to private initiatives (Rosenberg 1982, 10). This is clearly depicted in the case of both of these engineering projects, which reveal labor-management dynamics that stress classical theories of economic liberalism. Smith's photographs show clear divisions of labor where specialization predominates—particularly in the Panama Canal operation, where the strategic interaction between machines and humans became part of the solution of the issue of comparative advantage of labor. From Smith's point of view, Panama was locks, machines, technology, buildings, controlled environments: it was a window to modernity. For him, in his America-centric world, Panama was not the native Guna and Emberá nor the mestizos, freed black slaves, mulattos, and whites that populated the newly independent nation. Smith, in essence, hid the local reality from the eyes of the viewer. His pictures in Panama repeatedly reflect this diminished interest in humanity. Seen from his abstracted engineering eyes, labor becomes merely a part of the mechanical process of construction; not human but instead—as evidenced in Figure 6—almost literally part of the machine.

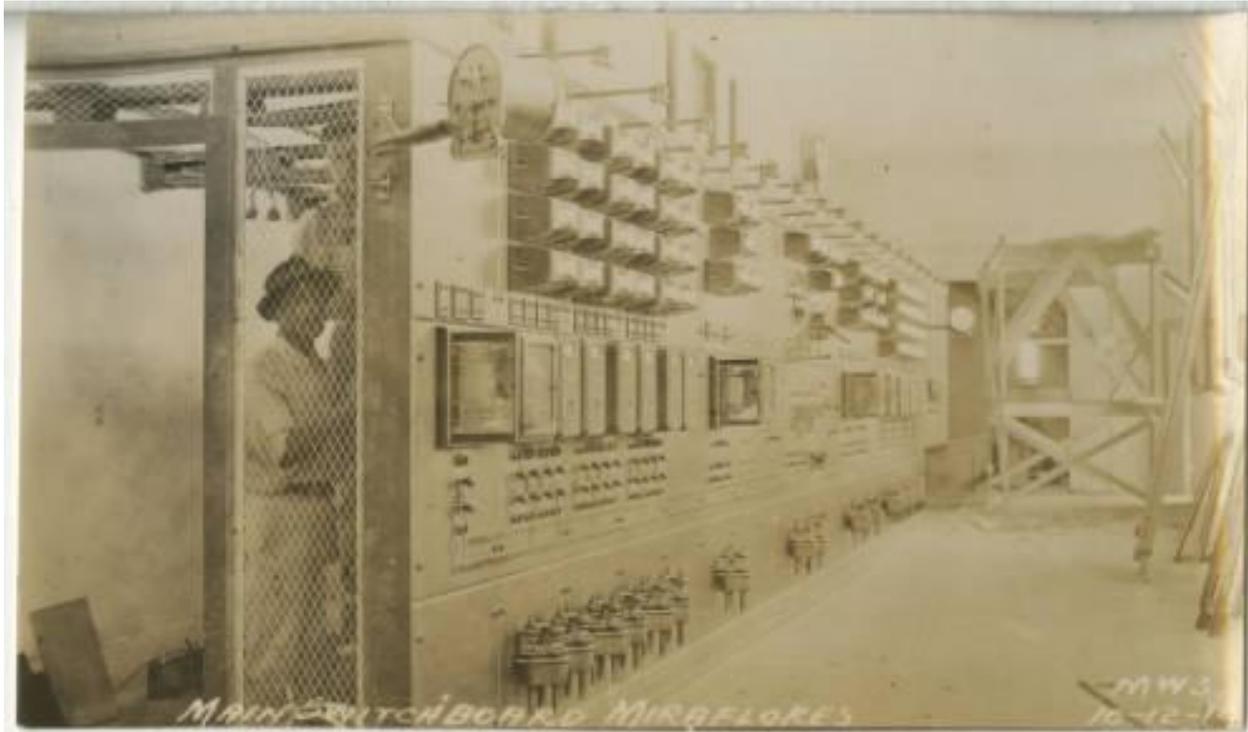


Fig. 6: “Main switchboard Miraflores,” MWS 10-12-14.

Very few pictures in Smith’s Panama collection include—let alone focus on—laborers. More often than not, laborers appear incidentally—and often in miniscule—in photographs where the main subject is the engineering structures (Figure 7). At its peak, the Isthmian Canal Commission oversaw 75,000 workers, of which 10,000 were “white Americans” (Thatcher 1930). Smith was one of those Americans building nation in Panama: in contrast to his experience in the Mexican railway project, in Panama he became much more of a cog in the machine, one of thousands of Americans deployed to the construction site to serve the mission of American imperialism. In Mexico, the engagement, though still hierarchical, was much more egalitarian, leveled. In Panama, the high angle of his camera lens reflects a greater social stratification and a more amplified colonial organization than the ones found in the earlier project. His Panama photos merely reveal loneliness, isolation, empty buildings, and machines.

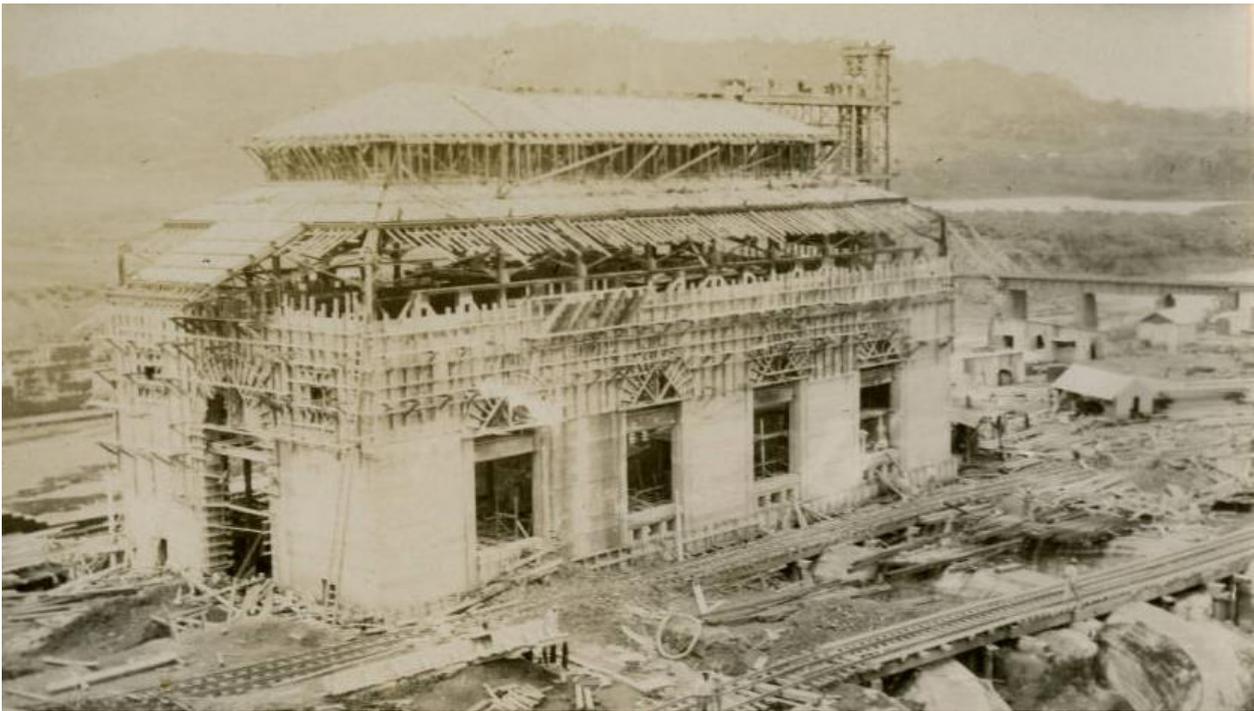


Fig. 7: “North Side of Gatun Hydro-Electric Station.” 1913. Kentucky Historical Society. MSS40_Box 2_F9_68_001

The two photographs where labor appears to be the central theme are, ironically, out of focus (Figure 8). There is little doubt that Smith had limited contact with laborers in Panama: such lack in the development of interpersonal relationships gave him much less reason to want to document his experience creating mnemonic devices. The nature of the company town segregated foreigners from local and imported labor. While Americans enjoyed the luxury of modern Western life, the “others” lived in deplorable conditions clearly demarcated by explicit and implicit rules. Skilled workers (American workers) were paid in gold coins while unskilled workers were paid in silver coins, enforcing structural rules of segregation.¹⁰ Due to this lack of intimate interaction, surely Smith had fewer opportunities to consider the personal impact of the hope and promise of the canal project on local populations, particularly the largely West Indian migrant labor force that had been enticed to work on the project represented as endowed with unimaginable economic improvements (Conniff 2012). Segregation by design, the replication on American culture in the Canal Zone (including English language use on sign and warnings across the project, as seen in Figure 5), the import of comfort, and technology also cemented the divide between Americans and non-Americans.

¹⁰ For more information on the structural segregation at the Panama Canal Zone see, for example, “Life in the Zone,” *The Land Divided, the World United*, 2018, <http://panama.lindahall.org/life-zone/>.



Fig. 8: Workers excavating a trench on the Panama Canal. MSS40_Box2_F9_86_001

Maxwell Waide Smith was part of this world of racial segregation. The lack of connection with local workers might be the outcome of his own racial biases: this cannot be ultimately proven, but racism may have led to his lack of interest in documenting the people that did the heavy lifting in this particular engineering project. His engineering training, vision, and culture also distanced him from the environmental impact and the landscape transformation that unfolded at the Panama Canal Zone as well as in Mexico's railway project. Inadvertently, Maxwell Waide Smith's images of the engineering project are evidence of the environmental impact of modernity. American expansionism came with a high environmental cost, but it was not in the engineer's vision to reflect on it. Both projects in which he was involved register environmental transformation, but the Panama Canal Zone project highlights and amplifies it most.

While it is evident that the railway line in Mexico was cutting through nature like a thin razor, the Panama project was not only cutting: it was also transforming the landscape from tropical jungle to cement locks, new re-routed rivers, buildings, electric power, and a modern company town. The wild tropical vegetation became domesticated and transformed into the decorative gardens of the corporate elite, while the cement locks replaced the rivers that naturally provided resources and sustainability to the locals. Even the mosquitoes that threatened the project with malaria were eradicated and controlled, altering the natural sustainable dynamics of the ecosystem.

Maxwell Waide Smith's images of the locks, buildings, and other man-made machines and infrastructures construct a landscape that was only real within the context of the project and starkly different from the area that surrounded the project. Curiously enough, Smith never explores the tropical world outside of the Canal Zone—like he had done in the Mexico project and depicted in those photographs—thus forcing the viewer to observe an artificial landscape that was actually surrounded by a natural landscape left outside of the photographic frame.

4. Conclusion

Maxwell Waide Smith's photographs of the Mexican railway project illustrate a human interconnectedness at the heart of Progressive development projects. They create a stark contrast to the overpowering of that interconnectedness through the division and specialization of labor implemented at the Panama Canal Zone and documented in his other photos. At the center of this bifurcation one finds technology and machinery; Western technological innovations, including the figure of the engineer, eventually broke the collaborative civic spaces in exchange for abstract efficiency. Smith's photographs reveal the historic spatial dimension wherein the worker and the engineer eventually became instrumental parts of the bigger machine of modern capitalism. Tempting as it is to relegate Smith to a homogenous imperialist imposition of "colonialism," his pictures reveal a more nuanced reality of expansionism, in which possibilities for sociability are gradually abrogated in economies of scale. In a sense, Smith and his pictures can be read as a metaphor for American expansionism: careful and respectful when just starting out to become cold and distant as confidence builds. To engage his



images in this way, however, risks to be unfair, because too little can be found in the historical records to access his perceptions; we can only do so in a very limited way through his photographic choices. What values and ideologies he held to are uncertain. As an engineer, he probably espoused a Progressive vision of development, seeing social and economic benefit in modern construction. His views on the ability of local populations to move with those changes or, conversely, on the inevitability of their being swept away by them is unclear. So much has been surmised, yet there remains more to be gleaned by exploring the context around the pictures; in that sense, the pictures are like a vessel and an opening onto past conditions of coloniality. In 'watching' Smith's photographs, and given their liberation in the archive from fixed meaning, it is possible to glimpse experiences of social hierarchies and the injuries of decisions made 'in camera' on human relations.¹¹ While here we focused on Smith's encounters with the people and projects around him, other possible directions of inquiry would include reinscribing broader social and geographic histories from the perspective of local inhabitants, or investigating the environmental injuries of expansionist projects. Historical accounts of these two expansionist projects exist, and also the photographic evidence from Smith's own camera, but there is no historical account of the connecting level between upper management and laborer. Maxwell Waide Smith's photographs illustrate the dynamics of this critical role in the expansion of capitalist economic development. Through his lens, we can observe the engineer slowly removing himself from people and humanity, and shifting his focus on buildings and infrastructure as his labor specialization was ultimately consolidated. Smith's experiences between 1907 and 1914 exemplify the progression of the specialization of labor and the sophistication of the structural organizational dynamics of modern capitalism.

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¹¹ The phrase 'in camera' has its origins in the obscurity afforded by the black box of the camera technology; to say something is taking place 'in camera' implies that the activities are being done in private, away from public scrutiny (Sliwinski 2011).



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