

SPRING 2013

# ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA

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## PANAMÁ

CROSSROADS OF  
THE AMERICAS



## Crossroads

Five hundred years ago this fall Spanish explorer Vasco Núñez de Balboa became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean. Climbing alone to the high peak of a mountain, he saw a glimmer of what was then called “the South Sea.” Four days later, he and his men reached the ocean and claimed all of what was to become the nation of Panamá for Spain. As Arys-teides Turpana notes in his article, the Guna leader Bab Giakwa guided the Spaniards there, hoping that they would follow their illusions of coffers of gold and stop the displacement of native people.

That September 25, 1513, sighting marked the opening of a crossroads between the Pacific and the European worlds, between the indigenous culture and the Spaniards. It led to the hopes and illusions and fears and tragedies for generations—from the Spanish conquest to the building of the Panama Canal, connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic for the first time in history.

I also think of the encounter with the Pacific as setting the stage for other crossroads: the ethnic and cultural diversity of bustling port cities, the diversity of northern and southern species, and the sometimes difficult junction of modernization and underdevelopment, democratization and authoritarianism. The geographical configuration of the country made it ideal for a canal to join the two oceans, although neighboring Nicaragua was also a stiff contender for the passageway. The French came first, undertaking a huge feat of engineering in 1881, but were ultimately defeated by rains, jungle and tropical disease. Then came the Americans, taking over the territory of the Panama Canal Zone and eventually conquering the jungle, torrential rains and tropical disease to successfully build the canal. The United States finally returned the Canal Zone to the Panamanian nation on December 31, 1999.

Living next to such a powerful ocean, forging history in a place where geography is destiny, creates a particular resilience. Once a part of Colombia, once virtually a colony of the United States, Panamá with the powerful Pacific on one side and the sprawling Atlantic on the other has come into its own. As Roberto Eisenmann observes, Panamá is possibly the only country in the world that celebrates three independence days.

As a little girl, I'd listen over and over again to the story of “The Little Engine That Could.” That's the way I envision Panamá— as “the little country that could.” And it's the reason that we decided to honor the Spanish spelling of the country in this issue. It's a little salute to a small but determined country. Panamá has conquered disease and geographical challenges; it has built and developed and modernized. The canal is being expanded; the historical center of Panama City is drawing a thriving tourist business; new museums and a lively art scene stimulate Panamanian identity and culture. The country's economic growth rate in 2012 was estimated at 10.6%. Yet, as many of this issue's authors point out, the country still faces many challenges—including inequality and repression.

This magazine is the product of the collaboration of many courageous, resilient and creative people—for the most part Panamanians. A special thanks to all of them, and, in particular, to Fernando Berguido, editor and friend, without whom this issue would not have been possible.



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# PANAMÁ

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### ON THE COVER

Fireworks over Panama City. Photographer Eric Batista of  
*La Prensa* of Panamá made this image.



## The Isthmus and Its Challenges

BY FERNANDO BERGUIDO

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS PANAMÁ HAS MAINTAINED enviable economic growth. During the last decade, the country consistently ranked among the top in economic growth in all of Latin America. Despite the serious economic crisis that devastated Europe and the United States, this small country experienced a more than 10 percent growth rate in 2011 and 2012. The infrastructure in progress—including the first subway in Central America, hundreds of skyscrapers, new residential neighborhoods, ports, and other logistics zones—astonishes visitors who come to Panama City.

Following the 1989 U.S. military invasion of Panamá, the nation's political forces came together to rebuild an open, democratic, and demilitarized country. Since then, Panamá has held four national elections with transparency. Furthermore, opposition candidates won all four elections. Their victories were promptly accepted by the electoral authorities, as well as by the other candidates.

It is no coincidence that economic growth coincided with the establishment in Panamá of a democratic regime that left behind two decades of military control and saw the transfer of the administration of the Panama Canal to Panamanian hands. In fact, after covering operational costs, Panamá received in just one year dividends equivalent to the sum of all dividends received during the ninety years of U.S. control of the waterway.

Under democracy, the administration of the Panama Canal became an independent and technical body, devoid of party politics. The canal has been under Panamanian management since December 31, 1999, and has been an example of

efficiency and good administration. Ships that transit the waterway today do so faster and with fewer accidents than ever before in the history of the canal, even before the conclusion of an ambitious expansion project underway that should be ready next year.

While enjoying this bonanza, economic growth has not been transferred to its entire population in an equitable and efficient fashion. Pockets of urban and rural poverty remain at unacceptable levels. According to the Economic Commission for Central America and the Caribbean (Cepal), 12.4 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty (*Panorama Social de America Latina*, 2012). The percentage of Panamanians living in extreme poverty has decreased in the last 10 years from 18 percent to 12.4 percent, but this is entirely unacceptable, especially when an additional 15 percent of the population is at the “poverty” line, and that does not count participants in the informal economy who escape inclusion in the statistics.

Public education continues to be a calamity; twenty years of democratic government have not been able to improve teacher quality, much less the performance and test results of students. And the level of education reflects in the quality of the labor force needed to sustain economic growth. At present, unemployment figures are under 3 percent, but 46 percent of workers have not finished high school, according to Cepal.

Panamanians are also facing an enormous political challenge: the administration of justice. The judicial branch is being steadily taken over by the country's political machinery. After the U.S. invasion, initial efforts to give independence







Clockwise from left: A view of Panama City; on board Captain Felipe Joseph's tugboat heading to the Atlantic from the Pacific on the Panama Canal; Alberto Nichols, 63, seaman leader, is a crew member on Captain Felipe Joseph's tugboat. Joseph was a member of the transition team that negotiated with the United States on the minutiae of the canal handover.

to judges and prosecutors (during the military dictatorship, the judicial system was under the absolute control of the government) began to wane when political leaders sought to protect themselves from charges of corruption committed during their administrations. This failure is a veritable tragedy for Panamanians. It's a ticking time bomb if corrective measures are not taken.

The judicial system has a vertical control structure. The president appoints the nine members of the Supreme Court of Justice, who are then ratified by the National Assembly for 10-year periods. The Supreme Court directly appoints all appellate court judges. These, in turn, appoint all circuit judges. And circuit judges appoint all minor judges. Between four and five justices are appointed during every presidential term, and his-

tory has shown that the ratification of these appointments by the National Assembly is a mere formality. President Ernesto Perez Balladares, followed by President Mireya Moscoso, initiated the practice of appointing justices with loyalty to the current administration to the Supreme Court, but even worse, judges who were willing to cover the president's back during their tenure. This practice has come to its lowest point with President Ricardo Martinelli, who has coopted the court in an unprecedented fashion, at a time when acts of corruption have stigmatized his administration from the first moment he took office. In opinion poll after opinion poll, the Panamanian judicial branch receives a less than 20 percent credibility rating.

Elections will take place next year, in May 2014. On the same day, voters will

choose their president, vice president, all 71 members of the National Assembly (Panamá is one of the few countries in the world where the congress is unicameral), and all of the country's mayors and municipal councils. The presidential term, as well as those of the deputies and mayors, is for five years.

Martinelli won in 2009 with a vast majority. His promise of "change" was based on a head-on fight against corruption that is becoming a chronic problem for the country. The majority of the electorate believed in Martinelli's campaign promises. After all, he was a multimillionaire who promised to solve Panamá's problems—as he had done in the private sector—as an outsider and with zero tolerance toward corruption. He sold Panamanians a Bloomberg-type of leadership; instead, he became a Berlusconi.

Unlike in the political arena, this year and next look promising in the economic field. Panamá will be ready to open up to the world an expanded canal and a modern city, with an environment in which thousands of U.S. and European retirees have chosen to live. Panamá's great challenge at this point is not to sustain the growth of its economy but to strengthen its fragile institutional democracy, to substantially improve its education system, and to initiate a serious commitment toward an independent administration of justice before these institutions collapse and cause problems that could overshadow the good rating that financial credit-rating institutions have given us.

***Fernando Berguido** was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. He is a former publisher and editor of La Prensa, a past president of Transparency International-Panamá, and a member of the Truth Commission of his country. He received his law degree from the Universidad Santa Maria La Antigua School of Law and earned—as a Fulbright Scholar—a Master of Laws degree from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law (UCLA).*



A man steers his boat as dawn breaks over the Panama City skyline.





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# THE CANAL: SHAPING HISTORY

The Panama Canal helped shape the nation's history. It spurred the campaign against tropical diseases. It led to independence from Colombia and to the country's complicated relationship with the United States. Now with the huge expansion through a third set of locks, it is leading the country toward a renewed presence as a commercial and trading hub.

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# The Story That Panamá Decided to Write

The Panama Canal through the Years **BY ALBERTO ALEMÁN ZUBIETA**

A FEW DAYS PRIOR TO THE DATE SET FOR THE transfer of the Panama Canal from the United States to Panamá, a reporter from a U.S. news network asked me, “Mr. Alemán, what can you tell the American public about what will happen the day after December 31, 1999?”

This question summed up all the doubts the international community had about our country’s ability to operate one of the most important commercial infrastructures in the world. After recalling the tremendous effort that Panamanians

and Americans alike had made during the past four years to achieve a seamless transition of the canal to Panamanian hands, I looked at the reporter and replied, “The only thing that will come after December 31, 1999, is January 1, 2000.”

Today the comments about the canal and Panamá do not express doubts whether Panamá can accomplish its goals. The story now centers on how its decision to expand the canal will influence what countries like the United States are doing to adapt to the new shipping market that

will emerge as a result. By 2015, the canal will have a third set of locks, resulting in increased traffic and bigger ships. The work is already half completed.

Yet, with the passage of time that gives us a different perspective, the former doubts and uncomfortable questions surrounding the transfer of the canal to Panamá are more understandable.

Since the signing of the Torrijos-Carter treaties in 1977, Panamá experienced political instability, having to rebuild its democracy nearly from scratch in the



**Left:** The third set of locks is shown under construction in Gatún. Concrete is being poured for the foundation of the third set of locks in the Atlantic area in preparation of the excavation and removal of a large quantity of dirt. The photo was taken on June 1, 2011. **Above:** Panama Canal workers (ACP) perform maintenance on the Miraflores locks on September 6, 2011.

early 1990s after the U.S. invasion. All of this happened within 10 years of receiving the waterway.

However, the canal for us was not only an economic asset to be incorporated to our economy, but something far more deeply rooted in our identity as a nation. From the beginning of the 20th century, many generations fought, and even sacrificed their lives, to make the canal Panamá's patrimony and to correct a historical injustice that gave the United States the right to manage it perpetually.

And now that we have achieved the dream of several generations, we are not going to let it fade away. Prior to the transfer, Panamanian society as a whole—employers, trade unions, professionals, students, politicians—decided to create a

constitutionally mandated independent status for the canal to ensure the waterway's efficient operation and to generate the benefits that we had longed for during so many years.

Here I'm referring to something more comprehensive than a legal change. Think about it; even in the midst of a severe economic crisis, Panamanians decided to bet on the canal's development instead of eating the goose that lays the golden egg. The canal would be managed by a public entity, independent of the government. This entity would manage the canal's budget and its procurement system, keeping out of politics and avoiding problems that do so much harm to other government institutions.

These and other new legal standards

were part of the transition that was in process in different areas of the canal as part of the treaty. Therefore, on December 31, 1999, we were ready to receive the canal.

#### A TIME OF CHANGE

Receiving the canal in an orderly and seamless fashion was only one of the challenges ahead. Our citizens had the double challenge of generating more profits for Panamá and improving the service provided to the international community.

We were always implementing new programs or strengthening the existing ones. For example, we swiftly implemented an ambitious modernization plan to replace or rehabilitate key canal operations equipment such as locomotives and tugboats, as well as marine traffic, management and many other systems. It was a 10-year plan that required the investment of more than US\$2 billion dollars.

Along with the operational modernization, we undertook studies and strengthened our relationships with the international maritime industry to better understand the business and its needs. This led us to take measures such as segmenting different types of customers, creating a reservation system and introducing new products. We started new training and promotion programs for the nearly 10,000 Panama Canal employees. We began a permanent crusade for performance efficiency and excellence. We revamped completely the way the institution contracted its goods and services, measured performance and planned for the future.

Most of these measures were difficult to implement, so we had to be consistent in our decisions and, above all, continue to improve the quality of our service. The growing confidence of customers and the international maritime community helped us make major changes such as a new toll structure. The maritime community understood that the fees should be based on the value of the service provided, allowing for what it costs to maintain a route that helps save time, distance and money.

The canal also had to change its relationship with Panamá. Even though the waterway was in the heart of the country,

it was unknown territory to many Panamanians. A cultural change was crucial. Community relations programs gave the canal a national presence. Visitor centers were built so all Panamanians could admire the patrimony that they had been deprived of for so many years.

As part of that effort, work with the communities along the Panama Canal Watershed began to ensure water availability. The waterway uses 2 billion gallons of water to ensure the transit for close to 40 vessels from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, and vice versa, on a daily basis, and the only way to safeguard this resource was to preserve the basin surrounding the canal. The Panama Canal Watershed also supplies Panama City and several major urban centers with drinking water. To ensure water availability it was necessary to help farmers to better exploit their land by granting them land titles and working with them to show them ways to have sustainable farms. Today, the canal is one of the top water managers in the world, and its alliance with its neighboring communities has been recognized internationally.

#### THE MOMENT TO GROW

Once the canal had gained customer confidence and credibility among its stakeholders, it was time to make the necessary decisions in order to grow, expand, compete and capitalize on international market demand. Previously, at the beginning of the 1990s, a commission made up of members from the United States, Japan and Panamá had examined the possibility of expanding the waterway, but the effort succumbed to political complexities.

We then undertook a study that led us to the development of the Panama Canal Master Plan, describing the main challenges for the canal. We hired the best experts in engineering, design, water, environment and finance and administration. The study determined that the canal's operation would reach full capacity in a few years, resulting in a decrease in service levels. In our discussions with the maritime industry, it became clear that they were interested in our taking on the expansion project. However, the first

step was to confirm that the country as a whole agreed. In accordance with our Constitution, the proposal had to be submitted to national referendum.

An interesting challenge for the Panama Canal arose. The majority of us were engineers and technicians in specialized fields, and now we faced the challenge of explaining in accessible terms the need to expand the canal to all Panamanians. It had been only six years since we received the canal and already we were contemplating its future.

As the institution responsible for the project, it was up to us to explain the canal's needs to all levels of society. It was not an easy task. We were talking about investing close to \$5 billion dollars at a time when the national debt was close to \$10 billion dollars. In this sense, a fundamental premise of the expansion project was that the canal should use its own funds, without governmental guarantees and never decreasing its direct economic contributions to the state.

After an extensive national debate, on October 22, 2006, the Panama Canal Expansion Project was approved by nearly 80 percent of the national vote. That is, eight out of every ten Panamanians voting agreed with the expansion.

In 2007, we started the expansion project that is rapidly moving towards its goal of transforming the global shipping industry. The canal expansion is changing trade patterns as it did almost 100 years ago with its opening. This time it is neither the French, nor the Americans who are doing it; this time it is the Panamanians.

The waterway's expansion has triggered important discussions in the United States, the principal user of the waterway, regarding the country's maritime and port facilities. Last July, the White House ordered expediting work on five port facilities on the East Coast to adapt them to the dimensions of the new vessels that will transit through the expanded canal, carrying more cargo and with more trade moving to and from the United States. Latin America will have enormous opportunities for trade through this project; in fact, Colombia, Jamaica, and Chile are

already taking measures to capitalize on the new value the canal route will offer. The expansion is half completed and is expected to be in operation by mid-2015.

Next year the Panama Canal will reach its centennial, and its contributions to humanity are far beyond the union of two oceans. From the Isthmus arose contributions to medicine, engineering, environmental conservation, work safety, job security and many other developments that are now common concepts.

For Panamá, these 100 years of history are full of sacrifice, effort and achievements. It took Panamanians only six years to surpass the economic contributions of 85 years of U.S. administration. As a matter of fact, from the year 2000, the Panamanian government has received more than 8 billion dollars in direct contributions from the canal. In its main business route, from Asia to the East Coast of the United States, the canal went from a market share of 11 percent to 43 percent today. Thanks its credibility, Panamá obtained financing for its expansion project in 2008 without major drawbacks, during one of the worst financial crises in history.

With the expansion of the Panama Canal, new times begin that promise more changes, but all with the constant of a country committed to use its geographical position to bring the world together and contribute to the sustainable development of its people.

On the national level, however, the challenge remains to transfer the canal's success to other aspects of social life. Our geographical position provides us with unique natural competitive advantages that we must know how to develop. It's not easy, of course, but as we have shown the world, we have already done it with the canal.

*Alberto Alemán Zubieta, a professional engineer, was CEO of the Panama Canal between 1996 and 2012. During his tenure, the United States handed over to Panamá the management of the waterway, the canal was modernized and the expansion of the canal, the largest project since its construction in 1914, was undertaken.*





# Panamá and the United States

A Love-Hate Relationship **BY I. ROBERTO EISENMANN, JR.**

**MARCHING BANDS IN THEIR COLORFUL UNIFORMS** from schools all over Panamá fill the streets of the City for the November 3 Independence Day parades. Panamá is possibly the only country in the world that celebrates not one but three independence days every year. The people of Panamá have a strong sense of nationhood. The country's complicated history has resulted in a love-hate relationship with the United States that eventually became an extraordinary foreign policy success for both countries.

Today, the Panama Canal Authority is completing a US\$5.5 billion self-financed expansion program that will allow the transit of much larger ships. Both Republican and Democratic U.S. administration officials have publicly admitted: "Panamá is doing a much bet-

ter job running the Canal than we did." To understand the current situation, one must first understand a bit of history. In 1821, Panamá declared its independence from the Spanish Crown and in an effort to protect its nation voluntarily joined "The Great Colombia." Those were many years of total abandonment by Colombia, including a congressional rejection of a treaty to assure the building of the Panamá Canal. In 1903, following the Thousand-Days' War, a civil conflict in Colombia that also engulfed its Panamanian province, Panamá declared its independence from Colombia. This second revolutionary act was successful in part because of the support of United States gunships off the coast (similar to the French support of U.S. revolutionaries in 1776)....thus the love part of the Panamá-

U.S. relationship. In the following days a very well-connected and shrewd Frenchman, Philippe Bunau-Varilla, involved in the failed French Panama Canal project, hastily signed (hours before the official Panamanian delegation arrived in Washington, D.C.) a U.S.-Panama Treaty granting the U.S. a "Panamá Canal Zone," ten miles wide across the center of the Isthmus, to be governed by the United States "as if it were sovereign..." in perpetuity". A treaty that no Panamanian ever signed laid the basis for the "hate" part of the Panamá-U.S. relationship. Ninety-five years later, this ominous treaty was annulled and new reasonable treaties were put into place. Panamá again was sovereign in all of its territory, taking

**Girls dance in an Independence Day parade.**

control of the Panama Canal. Thus, the Panamá-U.S. relationship swung back to its “love” part ...and Panamá’s third independence. To the credit of the non-violent tradition of the Panamanian people, the first two independences were achieved through intelligent negotiation without spilling one drop of blood. In the third and final independence, shooting started from the U.S. side.

#### EFFORTS AT REFORM OR REVISION OF TREATIES

Since the very beginning of the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty, the Panamanian people objected to the one-sided document and began their national struggle to reform the treaty and the Panamá-U.S. relationship. On the U.S. side, the Canal Zone government was assigned to the U.S. military with an Army General appointed governor of the area, making the relationship that much more difficult. The Panama Canal Zone became the perfect colony. The United States owned all lands; no private businesses were allowed, all employees were U.S. government-employed, who lived in government housing, shopped in government commissaries, were educated in government schools, went to government theaters, and learned to live behind protective high chain link fences, psychologically isolating them from Panamá and its citizens. Jobs for U.S. citizens in the Canal Zone were inherited from generation to generation so that these people no longer felt the United States was “home.” Nor did these Zonians feel Panamá was home either; they were colonialists in the full sense of the word. The Canal Zone’s salary system had gold and silver levels: U.S. citizens were gold, and Panamanians were silver, earning much lower pay for equal work, thereby becoming second-class citizens in their own country. These disparities reinforced the hate part of the relationship between the United States and Panamá.

Panamá’s efforts to negotiate changes to the 1903 Treaty continued, but it was not until 1936 that then-Panamanian President Harmodio Arias achieved



**Above: Demonstration by the opposition group Cruzada Civilista on Calle 50 in May 1989; Right: High school students protest at the January 9, 1964, uprising against U.S. control of the Panama Canal, a day that is now known as “Martyr’s Day” because 22 Panamanians (and four U.S. soldiers) were killed in the ensuing riots.**

some adjustments to the treaties. The next adjustments took place in 1955 when both countries had military men as presidents: José Antonio Remón and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In 1960 President Lyndon Johnson, in order to relieve tensions between the two countries, gave the order to fly the Panamanian flag next to the Stars and Stripes in the U.S.-governed Canal Zone.

#### THE 1964 CRISIS

In a fury, “Zonians” rejected the Johnson order and even took down U.S. flagpoles to avoid flying the Panamanian flag. This exacerbated the resentment of all Panamanians towards the “Zonians” and the United States.

Finally, after Zonians had refused to comply with the presidential order for four entire years, a small group of Panamanian National Institute high school students marched toward Balboa High

School in the Canal Zone to raise the Panamanian flag on the empty flagpole next to the U.S. flag. The high school students, intending to carry out the U.S. President’s order, were attacked by “Zonians” in full view of Canal Zone policemen. Their Panamá flag was torn to shreds; The students ran for their lives back to “the border,” the Panamanian side of the zone. The news spread like wildfire and thousands of Panamanians gathered at “the border,” and the Canal Zone governor ordered the U.S. Army to the border. Shooting erupted against largely unarmed Panamanians. The casualty count was lopsided: 21 people were killed on the Panamanian side, while on the U.S. side, four U.S. Army personnel lost their lives. Panamanian President Roberto F. Chiari—responding to the outcry of his people—took the dramatic step of severing diplomatic relations with the United States. This marked a first in Latin America, since even in





the case of Cuba, it had been the United States that broke with Cuba, not the other way around.

Chiari called on Miguel J. Moreno, a prestigious political adversary, who would become Panamanian Ambassador to the Organization of American States, to firmly present Panamá's denunciations of the U.S. attack.

An agreement, the Moreno-Bunker document, was finally reached, completely changing the relationship between the two countries. Instead of the revisionist doctrine stubbornly held onto by the United States in regard to the 1903 one-sided treaty, the agreement called for the start of negotiations of a completely new Panamá-U.S. treaty, which would mark the beginning of a new relationship.

#### A NEW RELATIONSHIP— PLUSES AND MINUSES

Unbeknownst to Panamá and Panamanians, a Georgia peanut farmer named Jimmy Carter, who had become the U.S. Democratic presidential candidate, had prioritized the fixing of "the Panamá prob-

lem" to prove that the United States—the world power—could negotiate face-to-face with a small and weak county, thus guaranteeing the safety of a world-class asset, the Panama Canal. It also helped that the U.S. Defense Department had decided earlier that the Panama Canal was militarily indefensible. That meant that the security of the Canal depended on peace in Panamá and the maintenance of Canal neutrality in regards to Canal shipping access. All of these pluses became vital to the final outcome of the new Panamá-U.S. negotiations.

The minus part, however, is that Panamá was then ruled by Gen. Omar Torrijos, Panamá's first military dictator. Carter—supposedly the "human rights president"—was put in the position of negotiating with a military dictator, a situation that was very disturbing to Panamá's democrats (myself included). Under the Torrijos dictatorship, many of Panamá's civic opposition members of all political and ideological persuasions were arrested and forcefully exiled from their country, an act expressly prohibited the

Panamanian Constitution, to say nothing of disappearances and serious allegations of persecution and murder.

After the 1964 riots, Panamá endured 13 years of frustrating negotiations with consecutive U.S. governments. Finally, the Torrijos-Carter Treaties were signed and submitted for legislative approval of both countries. In a very hostile environment, President Carter personally campaigned for U.S. Senate approval. Opposition to Carter stubbornly repeated "the Canal is ours, we built it, and we will not permit that it be given away" mantra. The Senate vote-counting came down to single digits, which was not going to be made any easier with Panamanian political exiles walking the halls of the Senate, describing the horrors committed by the Torrijos regime. To whitewash the uncomfortable facts about the dictatorship, Carter got Torrijos to agree to the return of all political exiles. The brief period in which the Torrijos dictatorship put on a gentler face—for Washington's benefit—is known as the "democratic Spring" (*veranillo democrático*) amongst Panamanians.

In Washington the strategy worked, and the Torrijos-Carter Treaties were confirmed by a one vote margin in the Senate. In Panamá, however, they went to referendum in the absence of political parties or a free press, and were "approved" by 67 percent of the population in a 96 percent turnout.

The treaties called for the transfer of the Canal to Panamá in 22 years (at 12 noon Dec. 31, 1999), which then seemed like an eternal wait...but the date finally arrived.

#### THE NORIEGA YEARS

Meanwhile the so-called "democratic spring" came to a screeching halt in the early 1980s. General Omar Torrijos died in a plane crash in 1981, and after much infighting within the Panamanian military, Manuel Antonio Noriega became the strongman-in-charge. Noriega had run the G-2 Intelligence under Torrijos, who in military circles referred to Noriega as "my gangster." Noriega had been a CIA asset from the age of 18. His



longtime CIA handler Nestor Sánchez was given a Defense Department contract when he retired because of his ties to Noriega. Noriega openly dealt with the Colombian drug mafias and handled the government's budget as his personal petty cash. Under Noriega, Panamá was rapidly becoming the first country in the world controlled by the drug mafias.

In 1986, a member of Noriega's High Command broke with him when Noriega reneged on a promise to award him an ambassadorship and publicly confessed all the sins of the military brass, ranging from the murder of opposition leaders and stealing elections, among other crimes. The newspaper *La Prensa* published these revelations and the public outcry gave birth to the *Cruzada Civilista* (Civilian Crusade)—which paralyzed the country, including shutting down the banks. Noriega lost all capability to govern and turned aggressively violent against the Panamanian people.

By the next year (1987) with the Panamanian people protesting daily in the streets, what to do with Noriega became a major U.S. dilemma. An inter-agency crisis team on Panamá was in total disarray. The CIA continued supporting Noriega, stating "he is our SOB;" the DEA protected him with statistics of drug interdiction in Panamá (actually becoming Noriega's "enforcer" whose tactic with drug runners was "you don't



the CIA (as a former CIA director, Bush knew of the Noriega-CIA relationship). The invasion was extremely costly in lives and property, but Noriega was arrested, tried and convicted in a U.S. court for drug trafficking; after serving 17 years in prison in the United States and four years in France for money laundering,

egy. Fortunately, Panamá had recently held a presidential election won by the opposition (and annulled by Noriega), so Panamá had a legitimately elected civilian government in place which took office after the invasion. Since democracy had been Panamá's traditional political system, and dictatorship had only been a once-only prolonged parenthesis, the country immediately went back to its democratic roots and normalized relations with the United States.

Because Noriega had been considered to be supported by the United States (again "hate"), the invasion to take him out was considered a liberation by the majority of the Panamanian people (a swing to the "love" part of the Panamá-U.S. relationship). Polling shows Panamá today as the most pro-U.S. country in the hemisphere.

## When the Panama Canal was turned over to Panamanians, many believed that Panamá would probably not be capable of managing it.

pay, I hand you over to the DEA.)" Strangely, the State Department was the hawk and the Defense Department was the dove. The White House was at a loss...until Noriega made the mistake of killing a U.S. soldier.

As a result, in 1989, President George H. W. Bush decided to invade Panamá, taking Noriega out without informing

he now sits in a Panamanian jail under a 20-year sentence for the murder of many Panamanians. The Panamanian military was decimated by the U.S. invasion and Panamá approved a constitutional amendment, declaring itself a demilitarized and neutral nation.

The United States carried out the invasion with an almost immediate exit strat-

### THE CANAL TURNOVER

Throughout the years leading up to the turnover, a plan to employ Panamanians in executive positions at the canal and as canal pilots was seriously imple-



**Left: Views of a visit to the construction site of the locks in the Pacific section of the expansion of the Panama Canal. The photo was taken on August 13, 2012; Right: An overview of the locks.**

mented in an effort to make the turnover imperceptible to canal clients (the world's shipping industry). At the beginning of the transition, the Canal Administrator was American and the sub-Administrator Panamanian. The Board of Directors was made up of five Americans and four Panamanians with a U.S. chairperson. Gradually, proportions shifted to the point when the administrator was Panamanian (Gilberto Guardia F.) and Panamanians held a majority of the board. Finally, the old U.S. Canal Commission was dissolved and replaced by the newly formed Panama Canal Authority (an autonomous agency of the Panamá government).

Since Panamá had to create legislation for the canal, with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), representatives of all sectors of Panamanian society participated in the initiation of a national consensus. All political parties (government and

opposition) participated, achieving consensus agreements to include the Panama Canal in the Constitution. Legislation was created to guarantee the independence of the canal organization to protect it from political interests. Consensus agreements with regards to zoning of the Panama Canal Zone were also achieved, as on December 31, 1999, the geography of Panama City would duplicate in size.

Panamanians are known for their political differences, but throughout the consensus process, they came together as a people of one nation. The general feeling was "we won't allow anyone to play politics with *our* Canal."

#### THE RESULTS

When the world superpower transfers a major international asset to a small young country, the obvious generalized feeling is one of zero credibility. When the canal was turned over to Panamani-

ans, much of the world opinion believed that Panamá most probably would not be capable of managing it.

Zero credibility was a major problem, but at the same time a major opportunity. If Panamá did it right, it would surprise the world and positive opinion would have an exponential impact.

That is exactly what has happened: the canal transfer was imperceptible to world shipping. The canal organization shifted from a military bureaucracy to an efficient profit-centered autonomous government organization. Under U.S. administration, the canal had only one objective: passing ships from one ocean to another. Under Panamanian administration, by contrast, the Canal Authority has permitted the development of four world-class Ports, the modernization of the Panamá Canal Railroad, the development of tourism and many other complementary activities.



The Panama Canal Authority has launched a self-financed widening expansion project worth US\$5.5 billion, to be inaugurated in 2014-2015. This expansion will allow the transit of much larger ships (known to canal users as “post Panamax”). A majority of the Panamanian people approved this expansion in a national referendum.

Many U.S. high level government officials of both Democratic and Republican administrations have visited the Panamá-owned canal and have publicly declared that it's running better than ever.

Not too long ago a good friend from New York came to visit me. It was his first visit to Panamá. As I took him around the city sights, he was constantly exclaiming “I never expected this!” Then I said “now I'm going to take you to see something that will make you very proud to be an American, and makes me very proud to be a Panamanian.”

I gave him a tour of the Panama Canal; he saw the organization, the widening project, and how the original engineering still works wonders. When we were driving away, he became very emotional, declaring “you were so right: I feel so proud... as you do. You know, this has to be the most successful peaceful foreign policy achievement in the history of the U.S...it's a shame the great majority of Americans don't even know about it.”

**Roberto Eisenmann** is the founder of the Panamanian daily *La Prensa*. A 1986 Nieman Fellow at Harvard, he was honored with a lifetime achievement award by *Fundación Fórum de Periodistas por la Libertad de Expresión e Información of Panamá* for his continued commitment to freedom of expression and information. After his Nieman fellowship, Eisenmann was exiled from Panamá a second time due to reprisals from the Noriega regime.

# A Hidden Dictator

## The Invasion of Panamá BY FERNANDO BERGUIDO

ON SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1989, FOUR U.S. military officials decided to go for dinner at the Marriott Hotel in Panama City. One of them never came back.

For more than two years, political instability had swept the country. Protesters marched against the dictatorship in the capital and other cities. When ex-colonel Roberto Díaz Herrera accused the dictator, General Manuel Noriega, of drug trafficking and the murder of the popular doctor and guerrilla fighter Hugo Spadafora, his declarations became the spark for the formation of a pacific united front for the return to democracy. Popular protests kept up through the May 1989 elections, arbitrarily annulled by the government after its candidates lost 2 to 1 to the opposition.

Economically, Panamanians were experiencing the worst crisis in our history, and diplomatic relations with the United States were at a historic low point. At the time, Noriega had also been accused of drug trafficking and money laundering by U.S. criminal prosecutors in Miami and Tampa. That same year, on two separate occasions, groups of Panamanian officials had tried to overthrow the general through military uprisings, but they failed both times.

Following the pleasant dinner at the Marriott, U.S. Marine captain Richard Haddad was driving the Chevrolet Impala back to their headquarters at Fort Clayton. Army Captain Barry Rainwater, sat by his side. In the back seat were Navy Lieutenant Michael Wilson and Marine First Lieutenant Robert Paz. The car was stopped at a roadblock set up by the Panamanian military near the Avenida de los Mártires (Avenue of the Martyrs) on the border between Panama City and the old Canal Zone. To avoid being detained by Panamanian Defense Force soldiers, Haddad stepped on the gas of the Impala



Above: Monsignor Laboa greets women; Right: Demonstration by University of Panamá students, professors and staff against General Manuel Antonio Noriega as part of the *Cruzada Civilista*, July 1, 1987

to make an escape. He took a wrong turn. That landed him near the Panamanian military headquarters in El Chorrillo, where Panamanian soldiers opened fire. A bullet from an AK-47 hit the back of the vehicle and penetrated Paz's neck. A second bullet had struck Captain Haddad in the foot, but he kept on driving. The Impala reached the Canal Zone in only a few minutes, carrying a bleeding and wounded passenger in the back seat and the wounded man at the wheel. When they got to Hospital Gorgas, Paz was already dead.

Without knowing it, these four men had changed the course of Panamanian history. The death of a Marine first lieutenant provided the excuse for the U.S. government to occupy the country by force. On December 15, the day prior to the incident, Noriega had himself named Chief of Government. The same legislative assembly that granted him that post had declared a “state of war” between the





United States and Panamá. In Washington, on the night of the death of second lieutenant Paz, the White House lamented the incident, but described it as an isolated event that would not lead to military retaliation. The statement was a trap to catch the Panamanians off guard.

On Sunday, December 17, after a Christmas party with his family, President George H.W. Bush met secretly with Secretary of State James Baker, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and Vice President Dan Quayle. At the end of the meeting, Bush ordered the invasion. While the last strategic details were being put in place, the decision was kept totally secret. On December 19, the mobilization of troops began. More than 27,000 soldiers took part. Military action began at 1 in the morning on Wednesday the 20th.

All throughout 1989, we Panama-

nians heard constant rumors about an impending U.S. military action against Noriega. Although a military invasion (in the old U.S. imperialist parlance) seemed improbable, the threats, uprisings and confidential meetings that preceded the decision lent a certain weight to these speculations about some type of use of force. For the United States, the situation with Noriega had become untenable. Behind the scenes, as the Panamanian military, opposition leaders and U.S. officials had tried to reach a “negotiated” solution to the political crisis, there was always one key player: Archbishop José Sebastián Laboa.

Laboa had been Papal Nuncio, the Vatican’s ambassador in Panamá, for more than six years, an unusually long time for a career diplomat. I’d met him in my university days during anti-military protests. His sympathy for the

pro-democracy movements was unprecedented among diplomats and especially so for a Papal Nuncio.

My friendship with him grew even stronger as I began to practice law. An intelligent and astute man, Laboa was a consummate diplomat, skilled in the strategies and subtleties of his career, although he could also quickly turn into a frank and direct interlocutor. In Panamá, he took on the cause of democracy as his own. By 1998, the nuncio had included me in the circle of friends who had breakfast with him every morning in his residence. His terrace was a space where leaders of the Cruzada Civilista, a loose anti-Noriega coalition of business, professional and church organizations, would encounter political opposition leaders. Guillermo Endara, the presidential candidate who had won the subsequently annulled elections in May, was



one of those guests in December 1989. Some of the most conspicuous opposition leaders became refugees or “guests” in the nunciature.

Every December, the nuncio used to spend a Christmas vacation in San Sebastián with his family. The year 1989 had been a particularly intense one for Laboa, who was constantly being called upon by different groups to help find a political and diplomatic way out of the crisis. The night Laboa left for Spain, Endara, the head of the political opposition, approached him, asking: “Monsignor, if the invasion comes, what are we to do?”

The nuncio, a man of medium build, hugged the huge Endara, telling him, “Don’t worry; if something happens, I’ll come back right away.” And he kept his promise. The minute the news reached Spain, Laboa began to organize his return. It was not easy. All commercial flights had been suspended, and civilian airports in Panamá had been shut down on orders of the U.S. military. Laboa traveled from San Sebastián to Madrid, where he took a flight to Miami. There he was taken to the military base in Homestead, Florida, where he boarded a military plane, arriving back in Panamá on December 23.

Laboa landed in a transformed country under U.S. military occupation. His last guest, Guillermo Endara, had been sworn in as the president of Panamá, managing to set up a civilian government in the midst of chaos and a power vacuum. U.S. troops had not been able to take Manuel Antonio Noriega prisoner. He was nowhere to be found. The United States had offered a million dollar reward to anyone who turned him in or gave information leading to his capture.

On the afternoon of December 23, I talked with Laboa by phone. Christmas was rapidly approaching. He told me about his odyssey to get back to Panamá and then said he wanted to ask me for a favor. Before he said a word, I asked in a joking way, referring to Noriega, “And Santa Claus hasn’t come calling?” I

**Demonstrator’s sign reads: “This is not democracy; my name is Panama.”**

always liked to tease him about the quantity and diversity of guests he took in.

He didn't find the question very funny. He answered with a peeved tone, "How could such a thing even occur to you? This would be the last place on earth Noriega would ever come." He was annoyed because just before his departure to Spain, the relations between the Panamanian church and the dictator had hit rock bottom, so much so that the nuncio had ceased all communication with the military. Yet I kept on teasing the nuncio despite his annoyance. "Well, if he calls, tell him to come over because this time there's a reward. Can you imagine what the church could do with a million dollars?"

Changing the subject, he asked, "Can you stop by tomorrow?" Recently arrived, Laboa was already immersed in his next diplomatic task to help get the new government recognized.

Most of the world's governments denounced the U.S. military invasion. Thus, no Latin American or European government had established diplomatic relations with the new Panamanian government. In my opinion, there was a shameful double standard. While a military dictatorship was in place, even when elections were annulled, when the worst abuses were committed against common citizens, almost all of the democratic governments in the region kept a complicit silence. When the dictatorship was finally overthrown and it was clear that the United States would pull out its troops and that a legitimately elected government—which had clearly won the May elections—would be installed, it was only then that the rest of Latin America decided to break off diplomatic relations. Of course, the armed invasion was a legitimate cause for repudiation by the international community. But instead of suspending relations with the aggressor, the United States, these nations punished their fellow Latin American country, Panamá, the victim, just at the moment when it sought to establish a civilian and democratically elected government. In this context of international repudiation, Laboa received a telephone call from the

new foreign minister, Julio Linares. Linares' task was urgent: to explain the origin and position of the new government to the international community. And Laboa had a brilliant idea.

The nuncio was the dean of the diplomatic corps and therefore was able to convoke the rest of the ambassadors to a meeting on December 24 in the nunciature. Once they were assembled, Linares would arrive as an invited guest, thus enabling the first diplomatic contact between the diplomatic community and the new government.

"Can you accompany me tomorrow and help me prepare?" he asked me. There would be twenty ambassadors arriving the next day and he only could count on his secretary and two nuns to get ready.

To get to the nunciature, I had to get across the city filled with military posts and civilian blockades (massive looting had occurred and residential neighborhoods had erected barricades, cutting off traffic at innumerable points throughout the city). When I arrived, Laboa was very tense. The residence was filled with people, and some who had collaborated with the military regime had shown up to ask for refuge. Panamá's Archbishop Marcos G. McGrath, outspoken anti-Noriega priest Father Javier Villanueva and the leader

of Mario Rognoni, a man close to Noriega. Tribaldos and Rognoni had gone to school together. Rognoni insisted on talking to Laboa, saying it was very important.

Noriega was asking for refuge. He put it as a condition that the nuncio personally get him in the embassy car. Laboa knew that as long as Noriega was still a fugitive, he might be able to flee to the mountains and form some sort of counter-offensive. Another risk was the possibility—at least we thought so then—that he could encounter some U.S. troops and engage in armed combat, perhaps even passing into history as an anti-Yankee martyr.

Laboa accepted sending the car, but instead of going himself, he sent Father Villanueva dressed up as nuncio. Meanwhile, the ambassadors had begun to arrive, and we asked them to park their cars outside the wall of the nunciature. We saw the car arrive, driven by Laboa's secretary Joseph Spiteri, with Father Villanueva in the passenger seat. I had no idea that Noriega was hiding in the back seat. He was immediately taken upstairs to the same guestroom that Guillermo Endara had occupied only two weeks before.

Only a few minutes had gone by when U.S. troops laid siege to the nunciature. I was still at the door when trucks filled with soldiers ready for combat surround-

## These nations punished their fellow Latin American country, Panamá, instead of the aggressor.

of the Cruzada Civilista, César Tribaldos, were already there. The minute I arrived, the nuncio asked me to receive the ambassadors and invite them to a salon on the first floor. When most of them had arrived, I received the new foreign minister.

But just before Julio Linares arrived, another guest came in. In the midst of all the preparation for the meeting, César Tribaldos had answered the telephone. The person on the other end of the line asked to talk to the nuncio, but did not want to say who was calling. Tribaldos, however, recognized the voice. It was that

ed the residence. Two helicopters flew overhead. A U.S. military official gave an order: "Nobody comes in; nobody comes out of this place." (Later, we were screened and allowed to leave).

The moment was surreal. Inside the building, the accredited diplomatic corps was engaging in an informal and unauthorized meeting with the new foreign minister. The ambassador and Linares had no idea Noriega was upstairs. And suddenly, all of us inside had come under siege by the U.S. Army because the church had offered protection to





**Members of the anti-riot squad of Panamá's Defense Forces beat up Cruzada Civilista demonstrators during the struggle against the government of Manuel Antonio Noriega.**

Panamá's most wanted fugitive, the very man who had persecuted many of us just a short time earlier.

Tribaldos, one of the leaders of the Cruzada Civilista, was one of those. He protested the decision to shelter Noriega. "I went up to [Laboa's] office at the very moment he was communicating his decision to give Noriega asylum to the Vatican. That showed me that he had made the decision without consulting his superiors. He explained his decision was a measure to avoid the formation of pro-Noriega guerrillas groups and to end the political crisis that could cause many deaths. Nevertheless, I took advantage of the privacy of his office to question why he had received this assassin Noriega, who had caused so many deaths, disappearances, beheadings and the evil that had engulfed our country and so many people...it was the first time we had ever argued and he responded to each and every question: 'It's a matter of Christian charity; just as

I opened my doors to you, when I protected you from your persecutors, he also has that right...he also is the son of God... because this is the house of God, you see... this is what we call Christian charity.' It wasn't until then that I managed to calm myself and accept his position."

Most Panamanians did not agree with Laboa's decision. The public wanted to see the former dictator in jail, punished or dead. A few days later, Laboa called, asking me to come. I had not returned to the nunciature because it was so heavily guarded by U.S. troops and getting in and out was very difficult. Laboa didn't want to talk over the phone.

When I arrived at the nuncio's residence, military officials ordered me to go to the San Agustín School, which was serving as a headquarters, to get permission to go inside. No one moved inside; everything was quiet. The tranquility was broken by the noise of rock music heard at a distance (U.S. commanders decided

to blare rock music at the nunciature 24 hours a day as part of the psychological war against Noriega, who had then been inside for four days). When I got to San Agustín, I was finally taken to the office of General Mark Cisneros, commander of the operations. "I am a friend of the nuncio," I explained. "He's asked me to come to talk about something important." I was granted permission.

The trajectory between San Agustín and the Vatican's embassy felt interminable, even though it was only a couple of city blocks away. Soldiers hovered everywhere, armed and pointing their weapons at the nunciature. I felt their eyes on me; the racket of the rock music grew more intense. When I got to the door facing the Avenida Balboa, soldiers checked me for the third time and let me through. Some nuns let me in and went to look for Laboa. At the threshold of the guestroom, a small person in shorts gazed out with curiosity. It was Noriega. He wanted to see who had

come inside. It was the first time I had seen him in person. There he stood, the former belligerent and defiant dictator, who until the week before had believed himself the master of Panamá and all its inhabitants, all powerful and immune to punishment, macabre and unscrupulous, trembling beside the door to his bedroom. He looked at me and scurried inside.

Linares and Laboa, both experts in international law, knew that there was no easy solution. After a conversation with the nuncio, it became clear to me that Laboa recognized the extent of Noriega's crimes and saw that they should not meet with impunity. The government could ask the Vatican to turn over Noriega on charges of non-political crimes, but the new government didn't have security forces and had no control over the prisons; there was no way of guaranteeing to the Vatican Noriega's physical wellbeing or the possibility of a fair trial. In addition, both Endara and Linares knew that Noriega's former subordinates in the jails might let him escape or foment a rebellion. Perhaps the solution was to ask the Vatican to turn Noriega over to the United States to try him for drug trafficking in Florida.

This suggestion clashed with both the Church's longstanding tradition of offering refuge to the persecuted and the diplomatic tradition of political asylum. And how could the Vatican surrender an asylum seeker to a foreign occupying force? Moreover, the Panamanian constitution clearly spells out that the government cannot turn over its citizens for extradition. Occupying U.S. forces might be able to enter the nunciature and take out Noriega by force. But this would be an unacceptable breach of the extraterritorial right of embassies, and the United States was not about to take such an action. So it seemed that Noriega could remain in the embassy for months or even years.

Archbishop Laboa and I talked about the complicated situation for two hours. Before I left, the archbishop wrote out a handwritten note to Foreign Minister Linares. I put the note in an envelope and slipped it into my pocket. I knew what

was inside, but I will carry the nature of the contents to my grave. However, I can say this much: Laboa suggested a course of action.

Afterwards, I tried to meet with Foreign Minister Linares to attempt to break the impasse. Outside the walls of the nunciature, the public was growing more and more restless and angry. A great march was being planned to demand that the Vatican hand over Noriega to the Panamanian government. The music din was unbearable. When I crossed the street, one of the soldiers brought me back to General Cisneros, who looked me in the eyes and asked me in Spanish in the style of a most friendly interrogation, "Is there something you want to tell me? Or is there something I need to know?" I told him no, but he kept questioning. He wanted to know what was going on inside the house, why I had visited the archbishop. I avoided giving him details. Finally, in the face of his insistence, something occurred to me, "Yes, there is one thing. The music. You know something, General? The loudspeakers are facing the wrong way." They were aimed at the part of the residence on the corner of Avenida Balboa and Vía Italia, precisely at the bedrooms of the nuncio and his secretary. "I think we can change the position to the other side of the house," he replied. Cisneros immediately understood what I was trying to tell him. He let me go.

I went on to see Linares. I don't know how persuasive my conversation was with the minister or the effect of Laboa's personal letter. What is certain is that Noriega's status was not resolved until five days later. On January 2, 1990, a great march demanding that Noriega be surrendered reached the outer limit of the nunciature surrounded by the U.S. soldiers.

Inside the house—I learned later—a frightened Noriega, apprehensive that the crowds could break through the military barriers and enter the residence in a furious rage, tried to get reassurance from the nuncio that the U.S. soldiers would not permit the protesters to get in. The archbishop answered, "Don't fool yourself, they [the soldiers] aren't there

to protect you, they are outside to make sure you don't escape."

"But if all these people force their way inside, you'll protect me, right, Monsignor?" insisted Noriega. Laboa told me that if the mobs got inside, they would most certainly hang them both, Noriega and himself. And he added, "I have dedicated my life to Jesus Christ, and I am willing to give my life for him, but not for you." Before then, Laboa and Noriega had talked extensively about the former dictator's future, about the possibility—in the best of cases—that he would spend months or even years in the nunciature, as the Peruvian APRA political party leader Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre had once done in the Colombian Embassy in Lima. And they also discussed the worst of cases, namely that a mob would enter the nunciature and drag him through the streets of Panamá. Thus, bit by bit, he began convincing Noriega that perhaps the best option would be to turn himself over of his own free will to the U.S. forces who, after all, would guarantee that he left alive and that he would receive a fair and impartial trial in Florida. The nuncio would not expel him nor would he oblige him to give himself up. It was Noriega's decision.

On January 3, 1990, ten days after he had arrived hidden in a blanket in the back seat of a car to the nunciature, Manuel Antonio Noriega surrendered to the U.S. Army, which turned him over to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to stand trial in Miami.

On September 16, 1992, Noriega was sentenced to prison in Miami on drug and racketeering charges. Extradited to France in 2010 to answer money laundering charges, he returned to Panamá in December 2011. He is now serving a 20-year sentence in El Renacer Prison for crimes committed during the dictatorship.

*Fernando Berguido is a former publisher and editor of La Prensa, a past president of Transparency International-Panamá, and a member of the Truth Commission of his country. This article is an excerpt from his forthcoming memoir.*

# A Tale of Two Flags

The Last Hurdle **BY JORGE RITTER**

**WHEN IN 1995 PRESIDENT ERNESTO PÉREZ** Balladares appointed me to head the commission responsible for the transition of the Panama Canal from U.S. to Panamanian hands, it never crossed my mind that yet another negotiation—unexpected at the time—loomed on the horizon, over an issue that had been at the center of U.S.-Panamá relations for an entire century: flags.

It had been 18 years since President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos had signed a treaty recognizing Panamá's full sovereignty over the canal by the end of the century, thus ending 75 years of confrontations. A new special federal agency, the Panama Canal Commission, was then to take over the operation of the canal for 20 years. Both countries engaged immediately in pursuing a seamless transition, a bi-national Board of Directors (five Americans and four Panamanians) was appointed to gradually transfer responsibilities once held by Americans to Panamanian personnel. Everything seemed to be on track and moving smoothly until a last minute glitch emerged.

The original U.S.-Panamá treaty was signed just 15 days after Panamá's independence from Colombia. The United States was granted sovereign rights over a 50-mile-long, ten-mile-wide stretch of land known as the Panama Canal Zone:

in perpetuity the use, occupation and control of a zone of land and land under water for the construction maintenance, operation, sanitation and protection of [the] Canal...and all the rights, power and authority within the zone which the United States would possess and exercise if it were the sovereign of the territory within which said lands and waters are located to the entire exclusion of the exercise by the Republic of Panama of any such sovereign rights, power or

authority (Articles II and III of the Hay-Bunau Varilla treaty).

Panamá grew economically as an independent nation during the following decades. However, the treaty laid out that in the part of the Panamanian territory that was the Canal Zone only the U.S. flag should be flown. Citizens symbolically placed small Panamanian flags in the area, but they were unable to raise one on a flagpole until President Dwight Eisenhower authorized flying both flags on one location at the border that separated Panama City from the Canal Zone.

Nonetheless, discontent kept growing among Panamanian citizens, while Congress, the military and Zonians, as residents of the Panama Canal Zone were known, strongly opposed further changes. Eventually, on the advice of the State Department, President John F. Kennedy and President Roberto F. Chiari agreed that the Panamanian flag should be flown alongside with the U.S. flag in all non-military sites within the Canal Zone. An executive order was issued to this effect, but Zonians refused to comply. Their defiance was supported by outraged lawmakers and encouraged by a district court ruling in the Canal Zone stating that "the flying of two national flags side by side in a disputed territory for an undeclared purpose is a position of weakness that can lead but to further misunderstanding and discord" (Doyle v. Fleming). Clearly, Panamanians were not the only ones irked over the flag issue; the Zonians too felt that their sovereignty was in jeopardy. To make things worse they allowed the two flags to be raised in one isolated location, ignoring an order issued by the Canal Zone governor to the effect that neither flag should be raised.

On January 9, 1964, a group of high school students from the Instituto Nacional—located on the very street that used

to separate Panama City from the Canal Zone—decided to cross over with a Panamanian flag demanding that it be raised in Balboa High School where, in violation of the executive order, only the U.S. flag was flying. School authorities and students turned them down; the Panamanian flag was torn, words led to pushing and shoving. The news about the torn flag spread like wildfire and riots broke out. By midafternoon hundreds of outraged Panamanians tried to storm into the Canal Zone, throwing stones and other objects. The Canal Zone Police and later the U.S. Army fired live bullets back. Twenty-two Panamanians were killed and more than 500 injured. President Chiari severed diplomatic relations with the United States, and Panamá thus became the only Latin American country to do so, to this date.

Three months later, President Lyndon Johnson agreed to negotiate a new treaty. Diplomatic relations were re-established, but it was more than 14 years before a new agreement could be reached. By dismantling the Canal Zone, the Torrijos-Carter treaty settled the flag issue once and for all. Not surprisingly, a full article (VII) of the treaty was devoted to the subject:

The entire territory of the Republic of Panama, including the areas the use of which the Republic of Panama makes available to the United States of America pursuant to this Treaty and related agreements, shall be under the flag of the Republic of Panama, and consequently such flag always shall occupy the position of honor.







**Left: Raising the Panamanian flag in commemoration of January 9; Right: A mural honors the high school students who demanded the return of sovereignty of the Panama Canal Zone. High school student leader Ascanio Arosemena was one of the Panamanians who died on January 9, 1964, now known as the Day of the Martyrs.**

But the treaty had to pass constitutional requirements in both countries: approval by two thirds of the U.S. Senate and a national referendum in Panamá. Advocates of the treaty in Panamá campaigned on a very effective slogan, more like a magic mantra: “only one territory, only one flag.” By a margin of 2 to 1 Panamanians approved the referendum. The vote was much closer in the U.S. Senate: only one more vote than the required 67.

The Torrijos-Carter treaty called for a 20-year transition period. During this time a constitutional amendment was drafted, as well as laws and regulations for the canal to operate properly when transferred to Panamá. Under the leadership of the chairman of the board of directors, Joe Reeder (1995-1998), at the time Under Secretary of the Army, the United States fully and enthusiastically cooperated with Panamá in making preparations. As head of the Panamanian team, and later as the board's vice-chairman, I believe we honored our mission statement, truly living up to our motto, *One Team One Mission*.

During the transition period (1979-1999), both flags flew side by side in all public buildings and government facilities, including military bases. This showed there was a joint administration of the operation and defense of the canal, and eventually the canal would be handed over to Panamá as had been happening gradually with the military bases. The treaty specified the day and hour in which the handover would take place, putting

an end to a century-long special relationship, both fruitful and tumultuous: noon, Panamá time, December 31, 1999.

But as the day approached and celebrations were planned, flags again took the center of a new and final negotiation. It had to do with the ceremony marking the end of the treaty and of the U.S. military presence in Panamá. On behalf of the Panamanian members of the Board of Directors of the Panama Canal Commission, I proposed what I thought was a very simple ceremony. In fact we never imagined it would trigger a controversy at a time when Panamanians and Americans alike were congratulating themselves on the success of the transition. To symbolize the ending of the U.S. administration and the beginning of the Panamanian one, it seemed only natural that the U.S. flag be lowered and the Panamanian flag be raised in its place in front of the Panama Canal's administration building. To our surprise the proposal was vehemently rejected by U.S. members of the board and by diplomatic and military officials. They feared that it could be regarded as surrendering rather than a celebration, followed by booing and mocking by the large crowd expected to attend. I argued that that the mood would not be one of revenge, let alone mockery, but one of friendship and gratitude. The response was no.

We then tried, just hours before the ceremony was to take place, another suggestion to overcome the apparent impasse: the U.S. flag was to be lowered

and the Panamanian flag raised simultaneously. That way there would be no risk of booing, and the timing would also quite accurately reflect what was occurring at the moment, the end of the U.S. administration and the beginning of the Panamanian one. The response was still no.

Since the treaty was still in effect, U.S. officials had the last word. They decided that the U.S. flag would be lowered the day before, never to be raised again. So at 5 p.m. on December 30, 1999, the flag was lowered in a sober and solemn ceremony attended only by diplomatic and military personnel, and of course by the Panamanian board members and high-ranking executives of both countries serving at the Panama Canal Commission.

The following morning, for the first time in almost a hundred years, the Panamanian flag flew alone in the canal area. It was the end of an era of peaks and valleys, friendship and controversy, prosperity and mourning. A tale of two flags with a happy ending when the slogan became real and achieved the dream of several generations: Only one territory, only one flag.

***Jorge Ritter** is a Panamanian lawyer, writer, columnist and lecturer. He served as Ambassador to the UN, Minister of Justice and Minister of Foreign Affairs. As Minister for Canal Affairs and member of the Board of Directors of the Panama Canal Commission he was intimately involved in the process of transferring the Canal to Panamá.*



# Who Remembers Panamá?

Returning the Canal **BY DON BOHNING**

**THERE WAS A TIME, MANY DECADES AGO, WHEN** the Isthmian country of Panamá—dividing the Americas—made near daily headlines from Canada to Argentina. Most of the attention focused on the Panama Canal, one of the world's greatest engineering feats; a project begun in 1904 and completed in 1914 by the U.S. Corps of Engineers.

As the Panama Canal prepares for a major expansion with its third set of locks in 2014, it's worth looking back at its history and an unusual connection with U.S. actor John Wayne.

From 1821, Panamá had been a part of the union of Latin American countries called Republic of Gran Colombia. Early in the 20th century, after Colombia rejected U.S. plans to build a canal across the Isthmus of Panamá, the United States supported a revolution that led to the independence of Panamá in 1903.

French businessman Philippe Bunau-Varilla was authorized by Panamá's new government to negotiate a treaty with the United States. The Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty gave the United States authority to build a canal through Panamá, a project begun by the French in 1881 but later abandoned.

Completion of the canal meant that ships going from the Atlantic to the Pacific no longer had to travel the 8,000 miles to get from one ocean to the other by going around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America.

The terms of the original U.S.-Panamá agreement provided for perpetual control of a zone five miles wide on either side of the canal.

News accounts at the time noted that division of the country into two parts by the U.S. territory of the Canal Zone would create tension. Residents of the

Canal Zone were essentially U. S. citizens and West Indians who worked in the Zone or on the canal itself.

Indeed, anti-American riots occurred in the 1960s, creating pressure on the U.S. and Panamanian governments for cooperative action in resolving the situation.

U.S. President Jimmy Carter eventually signed a treaty in 1977 which agreed to return 60 percent of the Canal Zone to Panamá in 1979. From 1979 to 1999 a bi-national canal commission ran the canal with a U.S. leader the first decade, and a Panamanian administrator for the second decade.

The canal and remaining territory of the Canal Zone were returned to Panamá on December 31, 1999. By 1976, more than nine out of every ten canal employees were Panamanian, helping to make the transition to full Panamanian control much easier.



**Left: Miraflores locks of the Panama Canal; Above: A Panama Canal Authority (ACP) worker extending cables at the Miraflores locks. September 7 commemorates the anniversary of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties in which the Canal was passed over to Panamanian control.**

The 1977 treaty also established the Canal as a neutral international waterway that guaranteed safe passage to any vessel, even in time of war. Since the 1999 transfer of control, the United States and Panamá jointly shared the duties of defending the canal.

Robert Dockery, the executive assistant to the chief of staff for the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations at the time of the canal transfer agreement, and now a Florida resident, remembers the event well.

Dockery noted in an email: “The two treaties were signed in the fall of 1977 and the Senate gave its advice and consent to ratification in the spring of 1978. The treaty concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal and the Panama Canal Treaty were approved after 38 days of continuous debate on the Sen-

ate floor, making this effort the second longest treaty debate in the nation’s history [bested only by the Versailles Treaty because it extended from one Congress to the next]. As the principal Senate staffer on the agreements, I was on the Senate for all 38 days, preceded by several weeks of Committee hearings during which testimony was received from more than 100 witnesses.

“On June 16, 1978, some 4,000 guests attended the ceremony in Panama City providing for the deliverance of ‘the instruments of ratification, of the two Panama Canal Treaties...’

I was one of those guests. It was a joyous event. Later in the day both [Jimmy] Carter and [Omar] Torrijos [Panama’s military leader at the time] spoke to a large gathering in downtown Panama City [I think the exact location is called Plaza Cinco de Mayo].

“One of my clearest recollections regarding the treaties goes back to a Senate delegation visit to Panama following the signing of the treaties. The delegation was invited to Contadora Island [where the treaties had been negotiated] by then leader of Panama, General Omar Torrijos. During the visit at a luncheon session with Torrijos, he announced there would be a special guest ... someone well known to the American delegation. Sure enough, when the time came, the special guest was none other than John Wayne. He and Torrijos had known each other for sometime. [As I recall, Wayne owned property in Panama]. Anyway, Torrijos then spoke to the visiting Senators. And in the course of his remarks Wayne went out of his way to say how much he disagreed with the views of Ronald Reagan about the Panama issue. In short, Wayne encouraged the Senators to approve the treaties and disregard the views of people like Reagan. Later on, as I recall, Wayne sent a letter to every Senator expressing his support for the Canal agreements.

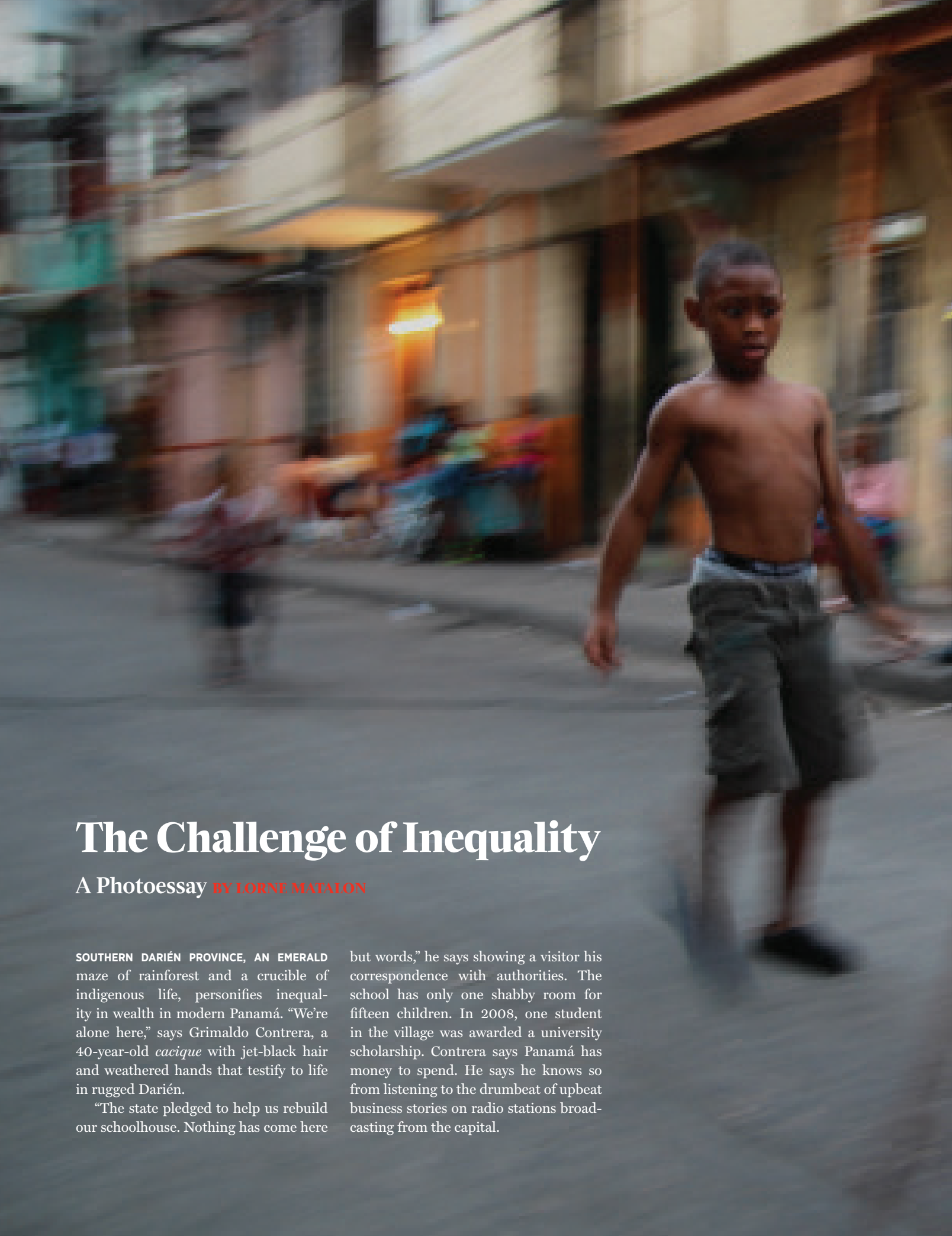
“Wayne’s support was obviously a big help. And even more important was the support of the Dept. of Defense, whose witnesses repeatedly made the point that the U.S. security interests in the Canal required open access to the waterway [as provided in the Neutrality Treaty] rather than ownership of the Canal.

“Also, let me make the point that approval of the Panama Treaties was in very large part a bipartisan effort, thanks to the cooperation between then Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd [D-W.V.] and then Minority Leader Howard Baker [R.TENN].

“The Canal treaties entered into force at noon, December 31, 1999. They are a testament to the ability of a great and powerful nation to treat a much smaller, less powerful nation with justice, dignity and respect. Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos deserve a standing ovation,” Dockery concluded.

*Don Bohning is the former foreign editor of the Miami Herald and a longtime reporter in Latin America.*





# The Challenge of Inequality

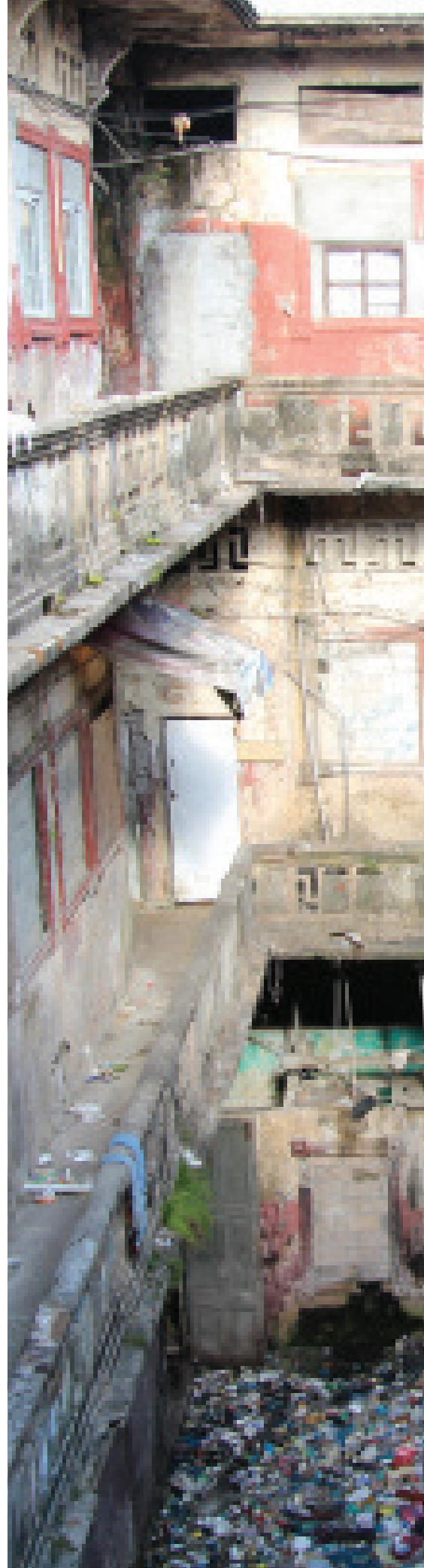
A Photoessay **BY LORNE MATALON**

SOUTHERN DARIÉN PROVINCE, AN EMERALD maze of rainforest and a crucible of indigenous life, personifies inequality in wealth in modern Panamá. “We’re alone here,” says Grimaldo Contrera, a 40-year-old *cacique* with jet-black hair and weathered hands that testify to life in rugged Darién.

“The state pledged to help us rebuild our schoolhouse. Nothing has come here

but words,” he says showing a visitor his correspondence with authorities. The school has only one shabby room for fifteen children. In 2008, one student in the village was awarded a university scholarship. Contrera says Panamá has money to spend. He says he knows so from listening to the drumbeat of upbeat business stories on radio stations broadcasting from the capital.







Yet, Panama's education system is ranked 62nd out of 65 countries by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an inter-governmental agency. In villages like Contrera's, in the urban slums and the coastal islands, the potential for upward mobility is frozen without a decent school. The United Nations says 32 percent of the country's 3.6 million people live in poverty.

The question isn't always one of resources. The country is indeed growing by leaps and bounds—an average of nine percent annually for the last six years. Yet, President Ricardo Martinelli continues to face withering accusations of corruption. Low-income Panamanians widely believe funds that could be earmarked for education and social programs are going elsewhere.

The government instituted \$100 monthly payments to citizens over the age of 70 who don't receive a pension. The government says 85,000 people are enrolled in the program. In Panamá, one hundred dollars is equal to about 25 percent of the country's minimum wage, or 14 percent of its per capita GDP. Critics say that's a meager payout given Panamá's wealth.

From the perspective of Panama City, the country's potential to provide for all its citizens would seem limitless. Nests of construction cranes tower over creeping urban sprawl, and the canal is going through a major expansion.

"We're blessed," says Captain Felipe Joseph, a lanky 54-year-old tugboat pilot on the Panama Canal. A lawyer and un-

**Far left (top):** Contrera family children swimming; their family wants to educate them in a better schoolhouse; **Far left (middle):** Armed Border Police cross tributary of Río Pirre on patrol looking for Colombian insurgents in Darién Province. Panamá has spent a lot of money on these patrols and the border with Colombia is far more secure than it was in 2009 when Martinelli took office; **Far left (bottom):** Rundown school house, El Real, Darién; **Left:** The Wilcox building, once a symbol of wealth in Colón, is now condemned. About 100 squatters live here.

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## PANAMÁ: CROSSROADS OF THE AMERICAS

Counter-clockwise from top left: Captain Felipe Joseph, Panama Canal tugboat pilot, at Miraflores locks; modern skyline contrasts with working-class apartment blocks; electrician Miguel Marandola in the tunnel for the new Panama City Metro; the first man-made islands in Latin America will boast 138 luxurious properties.





ion leader, he represented canal workers as a member of the transition team that negotiated with the United States on the canal handover.

Speaking of the canal's new locks set to open in 2015 he says, "New locks will mean more money for Panamá and from there the idea is to make sure that profits go to improve the country."

Add to that economic palette the Zona Libre in Colón, the largest free zone in the Americas, an official currency of the U.S. dollar, an ambitious infrastructure expansion and the benefit of a strategic location at the intersection of two oceans and two continents.

Crewman Gabriel Simons asks "With everything this country has, with so few people, how on earth are there poor people here?"

Manuel Avila, a grizzled 60-year-old *taxista* in Colón asks the same question.

To make a living, he painted his car yellow and bought a removable rooftop taxi light.

"They (the politicians) have no idea what daily life is really like if you don't have money," he says. "This country has what it needs to fix things but not the will."

Roberto Brenes, head of the Panama Stock Exchange, says members of the business community, factions of organized labor and activists for the poor share a measure of disdain for the current administration.

The business sector is increasingly agitated over allegations of corruption. The poor point to the allegations as examples of money diverted to entrenched special interests at the expense of social improvement.

"We have a First World business sector with good workers who make us competitive," he says. "But we have a Third World political class. They have historically protected their own interests without really thinking of society in general."

"As we get closer to the end of his term (in 2014)" says Brenes of Martinelli's administration, "you'll see criticism mount."

At a high society wedding, one guest who did not want his name used, said, "Every president does something to get







PHOTOS BY LORNE MATALON



richer. But at least this president is doing something that will last,” referring to infrastructure improvement. “I am certain if you ask everyone here about Martinelli and the economy of Panamá, you’ll find most people back him.”

A family friend said the wedding cost upwards of US \$200,000. The men and women serving the food on this night said they made four dollars an hour.

***Lorne Matalon** is a contributor to the Fronteras Desk, an NPR initiative examining politics, demographics and the economy along the US-Mexico border. He is the former Mexico and Central America correspondent for The World, produced by the BBC World Service and NPR member station WGBH, Boston.*

**Clockwise from top left: The Panama Canal looking toward the Pacific near the site of the new locks; bride at high-society wedding, Panama City; a welder ekes out a living in the informal economy; foreign money has triggered a real estate boom. Shown is the facade of a building in downtown Casco Viejo, increasingly gentrified at expense of longtime, poorer residents.**









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# ETHNIC DIVERSITY

The territory that became the nation of Panamá was founded in ethnic diversity, as many indigenous tribes inhabited the area. With the building of the Panama Canal and the rise of the country as a commercial hub, immigrants from many parts of the world came to establish new lives and businesses. Here is a look at some of that ethnic diversity.

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# Panamanian Culture

A Hot Hybrid **BY MARÍA MERCEDES DE CORRÓ**

**PANAMANIAN CULTURE HAS ROOTS IN AT LEAST** three continents. It's a heterogeneous culture, embracing elements from various communities that coexist peacefully, if noisily, within one of the smallest countries in Latin America, both in terms of land mass and in population. It is the result of a blending process that has been going on for five centuries, a hybrid that keeps evolving. Singling out the primary ingredients of this blend seems like a good way to decode it.

## GENES DON'T LIE

In the year 2000, the Instituto del ADN y del Genoma Humano de la Universidad de Panamá (University of Panamá's Institute of DNA and the Human Genome) did a study to determine what percentage each ethnic group had contributed to the genetic pool in the 500 years since the *conquistadores* disembarked. The researchers came up with a composition that is 39.4 percent indigenous Indian, 31.2 percent Caucasian, and 29.4 percent black. The most salient characteristics in Panamanian popular culture, as observed today, can be traced to these groups.

The footprints of the *conquistadores* (Spanish Caucasian) are the most obvious in Panamá's popular culture. Indigenous dialects are spoken among the Guna, Ngabe, Emberá and Wounan Indian groups—which number fewer than 200,000—but Spanish is the undisputed lingua franca. Besides their language, Spaniards imported their religion. In a 2012 national survey, 69.9 percent of the total population declared itself Catholic, followed by 16.4 percent evangelicals and 2.5 percent Adventists. At a personal level, Panamanians might be pragmatic, even flexible, but they respect the Church and its representatives and follow the rituals: family life follows the sequence from one sacrament

to the other, with boys and girls expected to move from baptism and communion to confirmation and wedding. Regional festivities—the *patronales*—have a large pagan component, including binge drinking and dancing, but they center on a locally venerated saint honored with flowers, gifts and processions before the partying. Even the greatest national and eagerly awaited yearly celebration—the *carnaval*—is held preceding Lent.

The national dance, *el tamborito*, is of Spanish ancestry (although with obvious influence from native Indian dances), as is the much admired *pollera*. An off-the-shoulder top with a full skirt embellished with embroidery, lace and ribbons, the *pollera* is a tropical adaptation of the dresses that Spanish women wore in

the Ngabe women, as well as in their art crafts: the *molas* of the Gunas, textiles which use the technique of reverse application; the *chaquiras* (beaded jewelry) and the *chácaras* (string bags) of the Ngabe, and even in the baskets woven by the Emberá.

The presence of corn in the local diet can also be tracked to the native ancestors, who not only ate it, but drank it in the form of an alcoholic beverage called *chicha fuerte*. Whether in the form of *chicheme*, *tortilla*, *torreja*, *bollo*, *buñuelo* or *tamal*, Panamanians of all social classes enjoy corn products and eat it as much as Europeans do potatoes.

To the Afro colonials—descendants of slaves who were imported to work in the colonies—and the Afro-Antillean-

**Panamanian culture is a heterogeneous one, the result of a blending process that has been going on for five centuries: a hybrid that has kept evolving. DNA and genome research have made it possible to track this evolution scientifically.**

the 15th and 16th centuries. One of the traditional dishes, *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken), is a humble cousin of the Valencian paella. Then there is the siesta, not so common anymore due to the distance between home and workplace, but still something of a Spanish legacy.

Panamanian popular culture, as expressed in the way people dress, paint their homes and promote their businesses, is colorful. And the love of color is a trait which might, at least partly, be attributed to its Indian heritage. Bright colors are used profusely and artistically in the clothing of the Guna and

Caribbean people who came to work in the canal—Panamanian culture owes a natural feel for music that makes dancing the national sport; and a way with drums and other percussion instruments that mark the beat at parties and resound in the parades celebrating the November holidays.

The genome study did not find traces of Asian, Middle Eastern or Arab genes, which could be explained by the inbreeding that has characterized these communities, but they certainly are ingredients in the abstraction called Panamanian culture.





**Clockwise from top: Celebrating Carnival in the streets; a Chinese woman; girl with elaborate hairdo; Afro-Antillean gastronomic fare at the Santa María de Antigua University; a Muslim woman.**



Asians started coming in during the times of the construction of the trans-isthmian railway (1850's) and then during the excavation of the Panama Canal. The presence of the Chinese immigrant as shopkeeper is so common that grocery stores are called *chinos* or *chinitos*, depending on the size of the establishment. Chinese restaurants flourish even in the small rural towns; and the Cantonese, in particular, have so influenced the gastronomic habits of the locals that chow mein, fried rice, sweet and sour pork and even chicken feet are generally popular; and the "dim sum" on Sundays is a family tradition for some.

The presence and influence of Jews from Europe and especially the Middle East is also noticeable well beyond the men wearing their "kipas" as they walk to the synagogue on Friday nights. Some local restaurants serve pita bread, "quibes" and "falafels." This closely tight community is small in numbers, but very influential in economic terms, indeed often stereotyped as rich merchants because of their extensive commercial activity.

#### LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION

Panamá's location between the two oceans and the two subcontinents makes it a natural bridge for the interchanging of goods. Its history, in this regard, goes back to the fairs of Portobello and all the way to the Zona Libre de Colón, the second largest free trade zone in the region. People arrived, stayed or passed by in different times in history—the colonization, the gold rush, the world wars, the construction of the railroad and of the Canal—leaving behind words, uses, customs; and especially goods. Despite always-present protectionist groups, Panamanians have enjoyed access to goods from all over the world, from Irish linen to Italian luxury goods to Japanese televisions. Panamá's unique geographic position has put it in contact with many cultures, but paradoxically it has also made it a loner in the region, culturally and economically. These differences could also help to understand Panamanian culture.

The Panama Canal Zone, a special U.S. territory that disappeared when the Canal reverted to Panamanian sovereignty, has been described as the fifth frontier (the others being Costa Rica, Colombia, the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea). Panamanians saw the United States as their natural destination for studies, travel and leisure, and hopefully for business as well. Interactions with Costa Rica, on the other hand, were less common than expected, considering its geographical proximity. Likewise, the cultural influence of Mexico, palpable in Central America from Guatemala to San José, is less obvious in Panamá in terms of music, food or decoration.

Panamanians do not consider themselves South Americans either. Unlike the nations in Bolívar's dream—Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela—Panamanians until recently favored baseball, rather than football, as the national sport, a preference that reveals the cultural nexus to the Caribbean.

As in Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic, coconut, plantains and yucca are a big part of the local diet. And tropical music—salsa, merengue, plena and reggaeton—is not only the one most heard at local parties, but also the genre in which local musicians thrive.

Yet it would be a mistake to think of Panamá as a place where women wear sandals and sundresses and men relax in Hawaiian shirts or *guayaberas*. Not so. Panamá has two climates: a natural one that is as hot and humid as can be; and an artificial one. Many Panamanians live, work, shop and dine in acclimatized spaces, where temperature emulates a Floridian winter season. Therefore, it is coat and tie for bankers and lawyers, and twin sets or suits for the ladies. Construction is also Miami style, with an abundance of glass and steel in the financial sector and plenty of concrete in residential areas. In the capital city, the modern high rises coexist with clothes drying on the balconies, especially in poor neighborhoods, and the holes in the street pavement.

As for Panamanian society, let's start

by saying it is matriarchal. The mother, the grandmother and even the godmother have important roles. The week previous to Mother's Day, which is celebrated on December 8, marks the peak of the holiday season in terms of sales. The men, though, are especially privileged, for the women tend to them.

The local popular heroes are the boxers—world champions from Ismael Laguna to Roberto *mano de piedra* Durán—as well as baseball players like Mariano Rivera, salsa composers such as Rubén Blades and singer Pedrito Altamiranda, who have captured the essence of Panamanian society in their lyrics.

Racism, which should be most improbable in a society where it is very difficult to draw the line between the black, mestizo and creole populations, does still exist. Panamá has nearly three million inhabitants, with close to a million living in or just outside Panama City. Part of the urban elite, which is a powerful minority, is composed of Panamanians of Spanish, but also of Italian and Greek, origins. Whiter than the rest, they're called *rabiblanco*s. Then there are the *interioranos*, *mestizos* (Spanish and native American mix) who live in rural areas; and people referred to pejoratively as *cholos*, namely Indians who have left the *comarcas* and adopted Western styles. The *mulatos* (white and black mix) are a big group and the most recognized victims of racism. Racism is, in fact, a part of Panamanian culture, but tolerance is as well. It is tolerance that allows a heterogeneous population with different, sometimes opposing beliefs, varied tastes and looks to cohabit happily and peacefully in a small, colorful, noisy territory.

*María Mercedes de Corró has worked for La Prensa since 1995. She has written for various publications, including Revista Década, Cordialidad, Banco del Istmo and Banco General. In 2009 she published a biography entitled Hasta la última gota: Gabriel Lewis Galindo. She has a B.A. from Goucher College in Economics.*

# Muslims and Jews in Panamá

## Building Communities Through Commerce **BY EBRAHIM ASVAT**

**THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN PANAMÁ, UNDER-**stood as a group that maintains its cultural and religious traditions, became rooted in the second half of the 20th century. It includes very distinct groups: Indian Muslims (my own ancestry); Arab immigrants from Lebanon; and Muslims of Palestinian and Jordanian origin.

These three communities are active predominantly in commerce, where they have been known to interact extensively and in good fashion. This peaceful coexistence and interaction extend well beyond the confines of the Muslim community. They apply as well to the two most successful business ethnic groups in Panamá, the Jewish and Arab communities, whose trading and commercial activities in many cases intersect. Both Jewish and Hindu employers once provided goods and services to Arab businessmen in Colombia. Then these Arab businessmen settled in the Colón Free Zone during the late '60s in order to manage their own business transactions.

Frequent joint investments among Jewish and Arab businessmen in the financial, commercial or services sector are a legacy of the ancient Silk Road that marked trade activity between Europe and Asia—which helps explain the harmony and respect between these groups.

Muslims have migrated to Panamá for centuries, but a defined Muslim community is more recently. In the early 1900s, some immigrants of Arab origin came to Panamá, but they mingled with the Panamanian population and lost their religious identity.

Establishing a community requires the presence of women and children. The early Muslim immigrants arrived alone and failed to start families with religious unity. They intermarried; which is why many Christian families have Muslim last names such as Purcalt, Sayyed, Hassan, Shaik, Ali or Malek.

The first wave of immigration from the

Indian subcontinent occurred when Bengali Muslims reached Panamanian shores in the 1920s. Unlike migrants to Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname, who left Calcutta and Madras as a result of the British Empire's Indentured Labor Laws dating from 1837, the Bengalis who came to Panamá did speak English as their primary language and worked mainly as street vendors. Other Muslim Indians trickled in circa 1925-30, for the most part Punjabis, Bengalis, and Gujaratis.

My grandfather was among those early Gujaratis. He immigrated to Panamá in 1929, following his brother Ismail Asvat who, after seeing a flyer in Bombay advertising Brazil, jumped onto a ship and sailed across the Indian and the Atlantic oceans. From Brazil, he sailed on to the Caribbean and then Panamá. Before his arrival, the only Indian immigrants in Panamá were the Bengali Muslims and one or two Pashuns from what is today Pakistan.

It was not until the 1950s that my parents came to Panamá. This is also the period in our history when Muslim women—mostly from the south of Gujarat—began immigrating. Thus the majority of Muslim Panamanians today come from this western state of India, followed closely by a substantial Muslim community in Colón, mostly of Lebanese descent, later joined by Palestinians and Jordanians, who began to form a community in the early 90s.

As more and more Indian Muslims came to Panamá, several organizations sought to bring them together. According to the Public Registry, the oldest association was *Misión Islam*, established in 1946, that brought together the Bengali Muslims and some West Indians. The Association of Indian and Pakistani Muslims of Panama was formed in the 50s to meet the religious needs of the community—the establishment of a place of worship (especially for religious festivals such as Eid ul Fitr and Eid ul Adha), adequate

burial facilities according to Islamic rules, and religious instruction to children. In 1975 it was renamed the Sunni Muslim Religious Association of Panamá, and it is still active today. Today, immigrants from Gujarat and neighboring Sindh, now in Pakistan—communities that have been pioneers of trade for centuries in India, Africa and the Middle East—stand out in the Panamanian commercial sector.

The second largest Muslim community in Panamá, in the city of Colón, is predominantly composed of Arab immigrants from Lebanon. Lebanese businessmen had immigrated in significant numbers to West Africa, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras and Colombia. Many of these Lebanese Muslim traders who marketed products in Colombia began to establish businesses in the Colón Free Zone in the second half of the 60s. This prosperous and well-respected community built a mosque, an Arab country club and a school in that city and the Islamic Cultural Center of Colón in 1981.

The third Muslim community, of Palestinian and Jordanian origin, is scattered throughout the country, with mosques and religious centers in Penonome, Chan-



**Joint investments among Jews and Arab businessmen are common.**

guinola, Chitre, Santiago and David.

Panamá's Jews are drawn predominantly from the Middle East, where Aleppo was a key player in the Silk Road. The Arabs arrived mostly from Lebanon, a country that has seen significant emigration of businessmen to West Africa, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras and Panamá.

Paralleling the tradition of the Silk Road, these groups of migrants to Panamá (Indian Muslims, Arab Muslims, and Middle Eastern Jews) share common commercial aspirations that have transcended their religious and cultural differences. After the 1989 American invasion of Panamá to overthrow Manuel Noriega's dictatorship, chaos reigned in the city of Colón for a few days because of a lack of police units. Members of the Arab community took it upon themselves to safeguard the shops and warehouses owned by Jews and Hindus from plunder and pillage.

Brutally divisive events—the formation of the State of Israel and the partition of India—have threatened peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East and Muslims and Hindus in South Asia. In Panamá, nevertheless, powerful interests and opportunities sustain the collaborative relationship among these different ethnic/religious groups.

Rather, in the New World, these three groups share equal footing, disarming tensions created by the tumultuous events of the last century in the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East. They have not wanted to move the political conflicts of their homelands to Panamá. In an intensely interconnected age, threats to this status quo could come from external sources. But for now, the Silk Road tradition is alive and well in Panamá.

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# The Distortion of History

## A Form of Genocide **BY ARYSTEIDES TURPANA**

**PANAMÁ WAS ALREADY INHABITED 11,000** years ago. Its history, nonetheless, is written from two perspectives: that of archaeologists and of historians. The British archaeologist Richard Cooke found classic stone tools used as spearheads and butcher knives from that early era in Laka Alajuela in Colón and Sarigua in Herrera. However, conventional historians begin the history of Panamá in 1501, when it was "discovered" by the Spaniard Rodrigo Galván de Bastidas.

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once asked sarcastically, "Are native peoples blind?" After all they lived by the Pacific Ocean, which allegedly had to be "discovered" by the Spanish. What in reality was discovered was the official Panamá only, the Panamá that is celebrated by the government with liquor and festivities, commemorating the date of September 25, 1513, when a Spanish adventurer first saw the Pacific Ocean (some say he arrived on September 26).

Actually, it was Bab Giakwa (known as Panquiaco in the Spanish dialect of Panamá), a man from the Dule (Guna) nation, who told Vasco Núñez de Balboa, on whose ship Galván sailed, about the Pacific Ocean, an ocean that our fellow Guna knew intimately from his childhood. Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas writes that Bab Giakwa, dismayed because the Spaniards were displacing native peoples from their lands in their lust for gold, offered to guide them to the Pacific Ocean, "the southern sea." Las Casas adds that Vasco Núñez had written to his admiral that he had hanged 30 native chiefs and was ready to hang anyone else who got in the way of the Spaniards' goals; by doing so, he was demonstrating his service to God and the Spanish crown

(Bartolomé de las Casas: *Historia de las Indias*. T.III. Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1986. Pp.154-157).

Balboa himself admits that he portrayed his arrival to the Pacific Ocean in a January 20, 1513, letter to the King of Spain in a false and hypocritical way, saying that the native peoples had been treated very well and had told him about great quantities of gold.

In general, the Panamanian *ladino* historian interprets history from a very Hispanic point of view. There are indeed exceptions, such as Ana Elena Porras, Roberto de La Guardia, Jorge Kam, Francisco Herrera, Celestino Araúz y Bernal Castillo. But on the whole, as the poet and essayist Roque Javier Laurenza points out, Panamanian history is written by "clumsy novelists."

As Isidro A. Beluche recommends:

Children, youth and adults of Panamá must acquaint themselves with the social institutions, cultural ways and the great deeds of the inhabitants of the isthmus before the arrival of the peninsular invaders, so that they will be able to understand the indigenous soul and to make sure that the written measures consecrated in our Constitution and the laws being developed or already promulgated in regards to indigenist policy (articles 94, 95 and 96 of the Constitution) be carried out in practice. (Isidro A. Beluche, "Interpretación de la historia nacional y americana," in *Memoria del Primer Congreso*, April 18-22, 1956.)

This First [Indigenous] Congress, at which Beluche spoke, resolved in part "to ask the Education Ministry to name a commission to revise the programs and texts of Panamanian and [Latin] American history to adapt





The sign reads, “86 Years of the 1925 Kuna Revolution; a people that loses its tradition loses its soul.”

them to a genuinely American point of view, that interprets indigenous sentiment in the study of the process of the Spanish invasion and domination of America and especially in the isthmus of Panamá.” The Congress also resolved to “ask the government of Panamá to honor the forefathers of the indigenous race who tenaciously resisted the conquerors, so that these figures can stimulate our people to defend American and national sovereignty against any attempt at meddling in continental affairs [sic] through force or the intervention of foreign governments in our hemisphere.”

Twenty-five years later, in the Declaration of San José entitled “UNESCO and the Struggle Against Ethnocide,” in point 4, the international organization stressed: “Since the European invasion, the Indian peoples of America have seen their history denied or distorted, despite

their great contributions to the progress of mankind, which has led to the negation of their very existence. We reject this unacceptable representation.”

Diana Candanedo (Solidarity Committee with the Guaymi people); Bernardo Jaén (from the Regional Coordinating Body of the Indian People of Central America) and Doris Rojas from the Universidad de Panamá all signed the declaration on behalf of Panamá.

Through the work of Las Casas, the three-volume *Historia de las Indias*, we can determine that our history as generally written by ladinos is a fraud and totally lacks appreciation both for the indigenous people and for the intelligence of humanity. The point of view of many of these Hispano-centric writers might even be considered unconstitutional, since article 81 of the Panamanian Constitution reads, “The national culture

is composed of the artistic, philosophical and scientific manifestations produced by Panamanians throughout all time. The state will promote, develop and protect this cultural patrimony.”

As we have seen, the first Panamanian lived around 11,000 years ago. To say otherwise, to create a different type of false memory, is an act of cultural genocide. We are all Bab Giakwa, who as a boy saw the oceans, both the Atlantic and the Pacific, from the highest point of Demar Dake Yala, “the hill that overlooks both seas.” In any decent country, Bab Giakwa, the Panamanian who discovered the Pacific—the sea of the South—would be declared a hero of the motherland by the National Assembly.

*Arysteides Turpana is a Panamanian professor, writer and poet of Guna origin.*

# Encounters with Guna Celebrations

A Photoessay **BY JAMES HOWE**

IN 1681, AN INJURED PIRATE NAMED LIONEL Wafer spent several months in the Darién region of eastern Panamá recuperating with the local Indians, who, he noted, gathered occasionally to enjoy a fermented corn drink. Wafer's carefully neutral account of these parties, published in 1699, was not echoed by later observers. Most of them were appalled by what they saw, and in the early 20th century, missionaries and government officials tried, unsuccessfully, to impose prohibition.

simple booze-ups, marked a girl's coming of age; that celebrants drank and toasted each other with great solemnity; and that between times the abstemious Guna did not touch alcohol at all.

My wife June and I first experienced these feasts for ourselves in 1970, three centuries after Wafer, when we spent a year in an island community. As a graduate student in anthropology, I had been sent to study local politics, but—like many other fieldworkers—I found I could not ignore major events just because they lay

whole day in elaborate preparations—making flutes and rattles, weaving hammock ropes, and painting designs on balsawood boards—before settling in to several days of revelry. Village elders invariably complained afterwards of celebrants' misbehavior, but stern and completely sober watchmen were always on the lookout for out-of-bounds actions.

Over the next four decades, I drank at several *chicha* celebrations but took no more photographs. A few images were published and exhibited, but the original negatives, most of them exposed in low light, languished in a drawer until digital scanning and editing rescued them in the new century.

In 2011, the revived photographs were exhibited in Panamá at the Museo del Canal Interoceánico, with the approval of the original villages and the official sponsorship of the Guna Cultural Congress. The large Guna crowd at the opening of the exhibit seemed every bit as pleased to see themselves on the museum walls as we were to display them.

By then, the Guna were photographing the celebrations for themselves. Two years before the exhibit, at a feast that occurred during a visit back to our field site, June sat with with an old friend from almost forty years before. As I stood nearby watching, marveling at the durability of Guna tradition, I wondered whether I might be allowed to bring out my camera. A moment later I realized that many of the younger people in the room were already snapping pictures on their digital phones and cameras.

*James Howe is emeritus Professor of Anthropology at MIT and author of several books on Guna culture and history. He thanks William Morse Editions of Boston for rescuing and printing the photographs.*

## Anthropologist James Howe and his wife June experienced *chicha* celebrations among the Guna Indians over four decades.

By then the Indians, known today as the Guna or Kuna, had moved out onto small inshore islands along the Caribbean coast, where, among other things, they carried on holding the same celebrations as the ones in Wafer's day. What their indignant critics did not understand is that these events, by no means

outside my chosen topic. In the case of the Guna, that meant drinking parties.

One celebration in particular we observed close up, sponsored by a close friend named Charlie Hernández. It started with his anxiously gathering fish, game, bananas and money for his daughter's rite of passage. When villagers cooked cane juice for the dark brew known in Spanish as *chicha fuerte*, June helped fan the fire. Two weeks later, when the *chicha* had reached maturity and June's friends had outfitted her for the occasion in native dress, we joined in several days of drinking, singing and dancing, while the presiding ritualists, called "flutemen," performed a long esoteric chant celebrating Charlie's daughter's passage to adulthood.

In other ceremonies that year, June and I were encouraged to participate and even to take photographs, so long as they did not include obviously intoxicated women. In the longer of the two types of ceremony, men and women spent a



June Howe with friends, 1970.





Above: At a ceremony in honor of a young girl, senior relatives, all of whom are wearing identical outfits, drink in unison, while other women look on. Below: Two dancers wearing pelican bone necklaces blow smoke from long cigars, taking the lighted ends into their mouths. The smoke converts into invisible cane beer or *chicha fuerte* for spirits in the room, who would otherwise be jealous of human enjoyment.



Clockwise from top left: Brewing a cauldron of nourishing corn drink to supplement and moderate the effects of the *chicha fuerte*; women dance in a circle, wearing the feather headdresses belonging to the ritualists who preside over the ceremonies; senior men enjoy themselves during the ceremonies; women fan a fire to cook sugar cane juice that will ferment into *chicha fuerte*.







Clockwise from top left: A group of Guna volunteers and specialists chant and drink as they weave ropes for a ceremonial hammock; enthusiastic young women serve *chicha fuerte* to the next group of drinkers; senior men toast others before draining their cups of *chicha fuerte*; June Howe enjoys a welcoming drink at a friend's kitchen during fieldwork.







# The Chinese of Panamá Also Have a Story to Tell...

BY RAMÓN A. MON

**PANAMÁ'S CHINESE IMMIGRANTS ARRIVED 159** years ago after a hellish journey from their homeland. Hired by the Panama Railroad Company, the company in charge of the construction of the railway that would link, for the first time, the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, the group of 705 Chinese arrived aboard the "Sea Witch" of the Holland and Aspinwall line on March 30, 1854. Sailing from Shantou (China), 11 passengers had died during the 61-day trip. These ships were called "floating hells" because of the inhumane conditions of the journey. Later, many of these workers died of tropical diseases and various committed suicide, but the few Chinese who survived made up a solid group that marked the beginning of a migratory flow which would be uninterrupted throughout our history as a nation.

The story of this first group of Chinese workers has been studied in detail. Panamanian, U.S. and Latin American historians have looked into the large number of suicides among the Chinese laborers that alarmed the directors of the Railway Company as much as the Panamanian community in general. Environmental causes such as tropical diseases (malaria, yellow fever) sometimes led to despair. However, miserable living conditions, the inability to communicate in their own language, the radical change in the customs and meals, as well as the lack of opium, fostered an attitude prone to depression and suicide. Historical studies show that when the directors of the Railway Company in New York learned about the cost of the opium distributed daily to the Chinese, which had been promised in their contracts, they abruptly suspended the supply, worsening the emotional situation of these immigrants. Similar

self-destructive circumstances have been described in Chinese communities in Peru's Chincha Islands, where guano was mined, and in Cuba's sugar plantations.

The first Chinese immigrants became a *sui generis* class of workers. Many of them were consigned at the ports and enticed by misleading promises; others wanted to escape their situation of poverty and social marginalization at home. Among them were individuals with gambling debts or addiction to opium. Few knew for sure the place and the work that awaited them in foreign lands. However, all came from a much more developed society and from a civilization with knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. These factors guaranteed a good working performance and the possibility of upward labor mobility, compared to the performance of blacks brought to the Antilles. As recorded in their hiring and payroll records, the Railway Company paid \$ 109.00 to labor recruiters for each Chinese brought to Panamá.

Men came alone. Some of their contracts expressly prohibited them from bringing their families, but as soon as they managed to save enough money, they would indeed bring the wife, children and other relatives. It often happened that immigrants formed a new family in Panamá and kept the other one in China; and in some cases the Chinese family emigrated and lived with the new Panamanian family, wives included.

Of the Chinese who survived the subhuman conditions in which they worked for the Trans-Isthmian Railroad, many were exchanged for black Jamaicans, and \$17.77 was paid for each Chinese man brought to work on the sugar plantations of Jamaica. As many as 197 Chinese were exchanged at this rate; the remain-



ing few stayed in the country. However, this small group began working as shift laborers or in service activities so successfully that the future Republic of Panamá decided to enact laws of exclusion and immigration restrictions against the Chinese, some of which are still in force. Today's convoluted immigration laws, which restrict immigration from the People's Republic of China (as well as several other countries ranging from Cuba to the United Arab Emirates), only encourage human trafficking. Immigrants from Taiwan, on the other hand, have easy access to permanent residence because of diplomatic treaties.

The waves of Chinese migration corresponded to large construction projects that were carried out in the Isthmus of Panamá during the last two centuries,





Clockwise from top left: the Chinatown gate in Panama City; New Year's celebrations; Ramón Mon's father, around 1927; Mon's family before his birth.



such as the Trans-Isthmian Railroad and the French and American Canal. World War II also attracted a large number of immigrants to our country, since it was an obligatory transit point for troops and warships going from one front to the other, and also because of the accompanying economic boom.

The post-World War II Chinese community lived principally in the port cities of Panamá and Colón, many going into business or activities within the Panama Canal, while others became accountants, doctors, engineers or engaged in services such as grocery stores, restaurants and laundry shops. The process of assimilation was facilitated through mixed marriages, the adoption of Christianity, and active participation in the educational, social and political activities of the country.

children who were born into the Panamanian nationality, obtained either through *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis*, that is, the law of the place of birth or the right of blood, i.e. descent.

As the Chinese left Chinatown, located in the area next to the Public Market in the Old Quarter of Panama City, they began forgetting their language and customs. However, Chinese of the first and second generations formed Beneficence Associations according to their district of origin in China, and tried hard not to lose their cultural ties, just as they began to lose their ethnographic or ethnological ties. Confucian precepts such as the importance of education, respect for the family hierarchy and filial love remain valid among Chinese descendants without their really being aware

commercial ties with Panamá; the PRC being the second user of the Panama Canal, while the two main ports of Panamá are handled by Chinese-funded enterprises: Evergreen (Taiwan) in the Atlantic Ocean at Colón, and Hutchinson-Whampoa (PRC) in the Pacific Ocean, at Balboa.

To say that the Chinese immigrants have succeeded in integrating into the Panamanian community does not mean that they have done so easily, or without any effort or unpleasantness. This process demands an enormous psychological effort, which has a price. The psychological transformations that take place include denial, suppression and repression of some basic feelings. As every immigrant in this world, the Chinese individual tends to eliminate nostalgia for the homeland, for the family and friends left behind. This repression must take place to avoid feelings of melancholy that would endanger their adaptive process. Sometimes people seem to be extremely tolerant and patient in face of the aggressiveness of the surrounding medium, by suppressing anger or envy.

However, for new immigrants who decide to adopt this country as their new home, the process of integration, particularly for their children, will be made easier by institutions such as the Chinese-Panamanian Cultural Center. There, they will be able to gain an education while becoming familiar with the Panamanian culture and integrate without having to give up their language, traditions and customs.

And so the story of the Chinese in Panamá is one that will continue to have new and exciting chapters. The challenges that lay ahead may be familiar or unknown, but historians will continue to follow and document these transitions of the generations to arrive.

**Ramón A. Mon** is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst. He earned a Master of Oriental Studies of El Colegio de México and has worked, from a clinical perspective, on immigration conflicts especially of Chinese in Latin America. Contact: [ramon0643@gmail.com](mailto:ramon0643@gmail.com)

## Those studying Chinese immigration to Panamá have noted that the circumstances these immigrants face have been unchanged since 1904.

Despite their concentration in these cities, the Chinese were not limited geographically. In a country as small as ours, with barely 30,000 square miles, the Chinese have been moving all over it since the last century, from the Darién jungle to our border with Costa Rica. Already in 1876 a French engineer, Armand Reclus, found in the Darién province Chinese mixed with runaway African slaves, native Indians and white people.

The relative acceptance of the Chinese by the lower classes in Panamá and measures by the Panamanian government against these immigrants promoted mixed marriages, and assimilation was speeded up; in addition, many needed "marriages of convenience" as a way of solving immigration problems. In 1941, during the presidency of Arnulfo Arias, businesses of Chinese residents who were not nationalized were confiscated. Many Chinese got married then and/or transferred their businesses to their wives or

that these are and were traditional values of the Chinese transmitted unconsciously through identification with their parents and ancestors.

Those who have studied Chinese immigration to Panamá have noted that the circumstances and the social and political problems these immigrants face have been unchanged since 1904.

Today, although the Chinese in Panamá have kept their political allegiances, whether to the Taiwanese nationalist government or to the political order of the People's Republic of China, they generally do not air their political conflicts publicly. There are newspapers of both ideological orientations, as well as known groups for either affiliation. The Republic of Panamá is one of the few nations to hold diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (Taiwan), while at the same time maintaining an Office of Trade Relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Both nations have strong com-



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# CULTURE

Panamá's lively culture includes a strong literary tradition, innovative contemporary art, and, of course, many types of music. Here are just a few glimpses of the country's cultural scene.

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# Panama City

A Pandora's Box for Contemporary Art **BY ADRIENNE SAMOS**

ON MAY 8, 2003, THE BAY OF PANAMÁ SUDDENLY turned red. The Coca-Cola factory had spilled a massive amount of non-toxic red chemical dye and was eventually fined \$300,000 for its negligence. Before the culprit confessed, some people feared a catastrophe of biblical proportions, while a few others believed it to be an artwork by one of the artists participating in ciudadMULTIPLEcity. The one-month international urban art event curated by Gerardo Mosquera and me had just concluded two weeks before. “The Red Bay was my favorite piece,” someone remarked. Another enthusiastic spectator described it as “a powerful visual metaphor for rampant corruption and political crimes.” The year 2013 marks the tenth

anniversary of ciudadMULTIPLEcity, and people still ask me about the inspired author of that work. “The uninvited and unwitting artist was Coke,” I reply.

Although none of the participants of ciudadMULTIPLEcity went as far as changing the color of the ocean, this stupendously mistaken attribution goes to show to what extent our megaproject constituted an exceptional experience in Panamá. We invited twelve artists from abroad (including Francis Alÿs, Ghada Amer, Cildo Meireles, Gu Xiong, Yoan Capote, Jesús Palomino, the collective artway of thinking) and three Panamanians (Gustavo Araujo, Brooke Alfaro, and Humberto Vélez) to create works capable of making a direct impact on the people

in the streets. To conceive their works, the foreign artists visited our small but intricate metropolis for a week or two, returning in March 2003 to carry them out. All the works were conceived as hybrid experiments, fusing diverse contemporary genres, such as video, photography, happening, installation, sculpture, painting, performance, conceptual art, participatory art and community work.

The project was inspired by Panama City’s social, cultural and physical character. The city was not merely the site of the event; it was its muse and protagonist. Most of the casual onlookers who came into contact with one or more of the works probably never got to know about the whole project, may not even





**Left:** In Donna Conlon's video *Urban Phantoms* (2004), Panamá City's skyline is the backdrop and model for the construction of a new city from garbage; **Above:** Glass Ridge, digital C-print photograph from Donna Conlon's *Synthetic Landscape* series, 2007.

have felt that they were experiencing art, but that is beside the point. Our challenge was to transcend the art world and engage ordinary citizens, not with mere spectacle or conventional public art, but with experimental artistic practices.

The strategic shape and geographic location of Panamá made it a global city before globalization. It bridged the waters of the world and the lands of the Americas centuries before the canal was built. Gate to the world, our city has become the embodiment of transit and movement. Panamá City's history can be traced back to Panamá Viejo (Old Panamá), the first European capital founded on the American mainland. Built in 1519 and sacked by pirates in 1671, it was rebuilt just a mile further west. Both the ruins of the first city and the historic quarter of the actual city are World Heritage sites. Restricted to the south by the ocean and to the north by the former Canal Zone (until 2000 a U.S. military enclave, a country within

another), Panamá was forced to expand along a narrow strip and grow upwards to such an extreme that it has become one of the tallest cities in the world. A huge ethnic and cultural diversity has given it a uniquely rich profile, though its chaotic modernity goes hand in hand with the poverty of most of its people.

All of the works in ciudadMULTIPLEcity underwent important changes during their interactions with the city. To me, this malleable, embryonic potential is one of the real measures of significant public art. Take, for instance, Brooke Alfaro's multimedia performance *Nine*. The artist worked for over a year with two rival gangs in Barraza, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. He persuaded them to interpret a song (each gang separately) by the popular singer and ex-gangster El Roockie; Alfaro then choreographed and filmed them. The two videos were projected side by side on the facade of a building in Barraza, with

the community as the main spectator. The crowd's reaction was intensely moving. It became viscerally evident to all of us—family, neighbors, visitors, and the gang members (who watched the whole show in hiding)—that the work was being charged with new meanings. Alfaro's intention was to symbolically unite these mortal enemies through art, but the community behaved like the screaming, ecstatic fans of rock stars, precisely *because* of the performers' bigger-than-life status as powerful gangsters.

The most significant factor leading to the realization of ciudadMULTIPLEcity was the emerging local art scene. Young artists were already scrutinizing the city and working within conspicuously urban languages that thrive on close encounters with the unpredictable and fractured street life. Many of these artists do not even belong to an artistic tradition; they come from the digital world of computers, of video and photography; others work in



**Pilar Moreno's *Cuentos chinos* (2009) is a series of ink-and-watercolors that play with certain aspects of Panama City: its construction frenzy and its unique multicultural eccentricities.**

advertising, graphic design, architecture, engineering. The vast majority lives in the capital, a deliriously expanding city of services, a communications axis, and a key commercial and banking center. Consequently, the strong demand for technologically savvy professionals has strengthened the local academic offer in these fields, leaving the poor level of art education even farther behind.

Most of these artists—as well as a whole

array of students, volunteers, intellectuals and professionals in various fields—actively participated in carrying out ciudadMULTIPLEcity, a truly collective effort that included close to one hundred collaborators. In other words, the event hooked onto a cultural evolution already taking place locally, thus encouraging existing efforts towards a more innovative, critical and socially relevant art.

Although no other experimental urban

art project of similar scale and daring has been attempted in Panamá (and rarely elsewhere), a continuous output of artworks motivated by the city's dynamics keeps emerging, as well as collective urban projects curated by artists, such as *Exposed to the Public Eye* (2004) and *Bus Stop* (2009), and remarkable exhibitions, such as the VIII Panama Art Biennial (2008), which focused on the deep social, historical, and urban issues surrounding Panamá's former Canal Zone, a colonial phantom that still lingers in our collective psyche.

Perhaps no artist has delved into Panamá City's cultural ethos more intensely than Humberto Vélez, particularly about the idiosyncrasies of popular urban classes. Although he has gone far beyond its borders, Panamá still remains at the heart of his research. With *La Banda de Mi Hogar*, the project he conceived for ciudadMULTIPLEcity—a popular brass-and-percussion band that paraded at the “wrong” times and the “wrong” places—he began to develop a worldwide artistic corpus that he calls “aesthetics of collaboration.” Vélez's unique participatory performances center on the ways communities relate to their corporal, psychic, and geographical territories by creating their own aesthetics and appropriating public spaces.

Another salient body of work is that of Donna Conlon, an American biologist-turned-artist who decided to make Panamá her home decades ago. No wonder. This concrete emporium, plastered with billboards and besieged by an uncontrolled frenzy of demolition and construction, is spectacularly flanked by nature. One can go in minutes from the urban center to one of the world's richest areas of biodiversity, and in less than two hours from one ocean to the other. In her video performances, photographs and three-dimensional projects, Conlon highlights the shifting character of beauty and coexistence by working at the threshold where nature and humans relate, and transform, in meaningful ways. Her photographic series titled *Synthetic Landscapes* captures outlandish but real urban environments: a concrete “peninsula” ensued from industrial



waste, green “mountain ridges” of recycled soda bottles, a shimmering “lake” of glass and bottle caps...

Conlon has also co-created many video performances with artist Jonathan Harker, most notably the ongoing (*Video*) *Games* series, which show their hands playing uncanny board games by self-made rules symbolizing power struggles between diverse social actors. The chips are made of debris from the myriad construction sites in Panama City, the current victim of fierce speculation that has destroyed much of its architectural heritage.

Equal parts video and conceptual artist, performer, draftsman, photographer, and writer, Harker has gravitated mainly around Panamanian social dynamics in order to expose and subvert conventional wisdom. Other important multimedia artists working within distinctly Panamanian urban poetics include Pilar Moreno, Abner Benaim, Ramón Zafarani, Darién Montañez, and Enrique Castro, as well as photographer José Castrellón, whose portraits and landscapes capture extraordinary personal ways in which a collective sensibility is made manifest.

Artists have always contributed to the understanding and reinvention of the public and cultural life of all cities, not only by exposing disturbing truths and provoking dissent, but also by pointing towards profound, imaginative, unpredictable and exciting new ways of living our shared urban spaces. Panama City is privileged to be the dark muse of incisive creators. However, the real burden of effective social change should not be theirs. This daunting task lies beyond the limits of art and belongs to every one of us.

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# The Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá

## Developing Panamanian Cultural Identity

BY ANGELES RAMOS BAQUERO

A PANAMANIAN CHILD VISITING THE MUSEO DEL Canal Interoceánico de Panamá—the Canal Museum—might be fascinated to learn how a slice of watermelon started a riot that left 18 dead in 1856. She might react with pride that this was the first citizen insurrection against the U.S. presence in Panamá. The incident started when Jack Olivier, a drunk U.S. soldier, refused to pay for a five-cent slice of watermelon from José Manuel Luna, a Panamanian vendor.

If the child is lucky, she'll have a guide just about her age—part of the museum's program in training young guides (see the charming video of child guides at <http://www.museodelcanal.com>).

On the other hand, the person fascinated by the documentation of the so-called Watermelon War might not be a child at all. She might be a historian, researching the museum's ample archives.

The Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá opened to the public, including school groups, tourists and researchers, in September 1997. As a museum, we acknowledged the Panamanians' leading role in their own history, seeking to strengthen cultural identity to prepare the nation for the full administration of the Panama Canal at the end of 1999.

Our first step was to reach out to the community to ask for assistance in building up a material foundation to support our mission. An ad in a newspaper brought us an unexpectedly large response that enabled us to begin building a collection. This response was all the more impressive considering that many people had lost faith in the capacity of museums to protect the nation's heritage,

after years of watching how other cultural institutions in the country had fallen into a state of neglect.

In the process of building the collection we have also tried to rebuild the public's trust by establishing the best professional practices, abiding by international guidelines, and helping to train a new generation of museum professionals deeply committed to the ethics of museum practice.

Our efforts resulted in a change of heart among the citizens that became evident by the phenomenal growth of the collection. In 1997, the museum inaugurated its exhibition halls with a collection of 420 objects; since then, the collection has grown up to 16,000 objects—ranging from dresses to photographs to ship models.

These objects are more than just objects. They seek to reinforce the museum's mission as a permanent, non-profit institution for the service of the community and its development. Through careful selection, these objects and materials related to the history, construction, technology and operation of the Panama Canal are a tool to collect, preserve, safeguard, disseminate and carry out research on related topics. They are a way of disseminating information and offering testimonies on the Panama Canal history to educate the public.

### THE EXHIBITION: PANAMÁ, LEADING ITS HISTORY

Putting together the permanent exhibit proved to be an exploration not only of triumphs but also of the darker, more tragic moments of the national past. In terms of script and graphic design, the



project pioneered a new narrative of Panamá's history. At the core of the exhibition was this conviction: no history of the Panama Canal could ignore the country's rich history.

We articulate this interpretation by reflecting our diversity. The exhibit establishes the importance of the original indigenous communities in our history and cultural identity. It reflects on the importance of the Spaniards' first assessments for the possibility of a canal in the 16th century, the establishment of the earliest commercial routes, and frequent threats by other countries aspiring to control the territory, all of which very much shaped our destiny.

The tumultuous gold rush times witnessed the tensions and struggles between Panamanians and Americans, as highlighted by the watermelon slice incident, a historical landmark for the Panamá's relationship with the United States.

The construction of the inter-oceanic railroad and the massive Chinese immigration that had such a huge impact in our demographic and culture, the French effort to build the canal, and Panamá's independence from Colombia are still the subjects of heated debates among scholars, and the museum has become an important resource for explorations of these and other topics.

The museum considers the complexities of the social implications of the construction of the canal by the Americans, the engineering challenges, the scientific discoveries, the massive West Indian immigration. The racial segregation of the Canal Zone and its social impact are also featured, with the museum rescuing crucial testimonies of this cultural heritage.

The West Indies' strong contribution to the Panamanian identity is a driving force of our culture. The collection of postcards donated to the museum by Charles Muller was registered in 2011 in the Memory of the World by UNESCO, entitled "Silver Men: West Indian Labourers at the Panama Canal." It is the first Panamanian documentation to obtain this designation. This exhibit con-



tributes to the preservation and conservation of the history of West Indies workers in the construction of the canal.

Researchers in the U.S. National Archives (NARA) discovered almost ten hours of original film from the 1920s to 1930s featuring the construction sites, laborers, Panamá's cities and landscape. These images now are shown at the Museo del Canal, along with the collection of objects illustrating everyday life in the Canal Zone.

Museum exhibits also interpret the daunting engineering challenges faced

during the construction of the canal and the strong influence that the American way of life in the Canal Zone had on the Panamanian culture. The museum considers the perspectives of people of different nationalities and backgrounds, including Panamanians and people from the United States who lived in the Zone, known as "Zonians." One member of this community is Mrs. Estelle Davison Crews, born in the Canal Zone at the Gorgas Hospital in 1947 and now living in New Scotland, Canada. Over the past five years, she has donated to the muse-





**Clockwise from left: Children enjoy an old-fashioned victrola in temporary exhibition “Vision of a Collector of the XXI Century,” 2006; “Paul Gauguin, Panamá’s Dream,” 2012; permanent exhibit “Everyday life in the Canal Zone,” 2010.**

um 458 pieces about her life in the Canal Zone, ranging from her baptismal dress to her high school class ring.

The exhibit devoted to Panama’s vindication to the right over the canal and its territory provides an ongoing exchange of testimonies and perspectives that gave a voice to a generation. The input of the community and oral history has played a key role in developing the museum’s approach to these complex issues.

The Panama Canal expansion that began in 2007 presented the museum with a new challenge: how to document

this historical event to allow for the future interpretation of this history.

During the past fifteen years, the museum has served its mission with a broad range of activities: building its collection, establishing permanent exhibits, organizing temporary and traveling exhibits and promoting educational and cultural activities.

A number of temporary exhibits have enabled the Museo to address a wide range of topics, including collaborations with community groups. Others offer opportunities to interpret specific issues

through private collections donated to the museum. The Ricardo Gago Salinero Canal Collection is an extraordinary example of such a partnership, enabling the museum to organize various important exhibitions such as “Pasajes Panameños” and “Su Donación es Nuestra Exhibición” in 2010, and “Un Coleccionista del Siglo XXI” in 2006 with a book project with the same title in 2012. During the past 15 years Gago Salinero donated 4,000 pieces to the museum collection.

Through more than 305 temporary



exhibitions, the museum stimulates a deeper insight into less known historical events, such as the failed Scottish Colony in Darién and the story of the Japanese engineer Akira Aoyama. In 2009, the museum opened the first exhibit of *molos*, textiles produced by the Guna indigenous people in Panamá, loaned by the Jose Felix Llopis Foundation. The temporary exposition “Paul Gauguin, el Sueño de Panamá” opened in December 2012. This exposition came to the museum through the generosity of institutions such as the Musée d’Orsay, Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Bibliothèque, Collection Jacques Doucet (INHA), Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Société de Géographie de Paris, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Reims, Musée départemental Maurice Denis de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and the Manchester Art Gallery, as well as private collectors from France and Mexico.

The museum cultivates a strong relationship with the regional museum community, which allows us to develop a richer perspective on issues and present our audience with a global perspective. The Museo is not just a reflection of historical scholarship but has become an influence in its own right in reshaping how historians tell Panamanian history.

... the Museo del Canal Interoceánico became my classroom for the study of Panama’s past.

Aims McGuinness,  
*Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush*,  
Cornell University Press, 2008.

... the brilliant Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá illuminated my perspective on the canal in numerous ways.

Julie Greene,  
*The Canal Builders: Making American’s Empire at the Panama Canal*,  
Penguin Group Incorporated. 2009.

The Museo del Canal has also had an impact on the international community. It led to the development of the Honduras Museum for the National Identity, and created, in a joint venture with the Smithsonian Institution, the *Panamani-an Passages* temporary exhibit in Washington D.C., in 2009, which honors Panamanian cultural heritage and the process by which Panamanians have reclaimed their own history.

Until the 1980s, the history of the Panama Canal had more often than not been told by non-Panamanians. The canal was portrayed as if it existed somehow apart from the Panamanian nation; as if Panamanians were only passive witnesses to their own history.

Too often, historians of the canal have ignored or only reluctantly acknowledged that Panamá has been a sovereign nation with its own government, culture, and history. The only importance given to the country was the assessment of





**Left:** Permanent exhibit shows “Daily Life in the Canal Zone.” **Right:** School children from central provinces visiting the exhibitions as part of the Sponsors Project to bring children from all over the country to the museum, 2007.

its geographical position, the narrowest point in the Western Hemisphere between the Atlantic and Pacific.

During the construction years of the canal, between 1904 and 1914, U.S. newspapers often promoted the effort as a symbol of the United States’ mission to bring civilization and prosperity to the rest of the hemisphere and to the world. The traditional historical studies only considered the most conspicuous individuals, describing them as civilization heroes. The importance of the canal workers was relegated to the margins and the Panamanian nation was ignored. As Julie Green noted in *The Canal Builders* (pp. 361-363):

... during the world’s fair in San Francisco, two great themes were notably absent. The first was the role played by the Republic of Panama... another remarkable absence at the fair was the

workingmen and workingwomen who actually built the canal.

This U.S.-centered historical approach only began to change in the late 1980s, with the work of authors such as Michael L. Conniff, Peter Szok, Thomas L. Pearcy and Aims McGuinness.

But by then the misplaced emphasis had already implanted in many Panamanians a deep necessity to search and vindicate their national identity, and, to others, it brought a sense of inadequacy felt until the return of the canal to Panamá on December 31, 1999.

Meanwhile, in the country itself, many Panamanians felt estranged from the canal. The Canal Zone that denied Panamanians access to the waterway that ran through the center of their nation also functioned as a barrier that prevented them from claiming their own past.

Through the Museo del Canal’s commitment to working with different communities inside and outside Panamá, its relevant collections have made that vision totally obsolete. From a museum that literally began with no collection of its own, the Museo has become a place where Panamanians can find a voice of their own.

*Angeles Ramos Baquero is the Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá. During her tenure, the Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá became an active member of the local chapter of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution. Ramos Baquero received a Ph.D. in Art History at the University of Seville, Spain, and a Master’s Degree in Art History, University of Navarra, Spain.*

# The Panamanian Novel

## History as Magnificent Fiction **BY BERNA BURRELL**

**PUEBLOS PERDIDOS, THE NOVEL WHICH EARNED** Gil B. Tejeira Panamá's Miró Literary Prize for 1963, tells the story of Gatún Lake, at the time the largest artificial reservoir in the world, through which ships sail from the sets of locks at one end of the Panama Canal to the locks on the other side, for 23 miles. The vast, watery landscape swallowed whole mountains that then became islands; towns and villages which had sprung into being at the edge of the transoceanic railway were plunged into its depths. Divers tell, in hushed whispers, that the church bells still toll, grieving for those who died whilst building the greatest marvel of the modern world.

The Panamanian novel, as a whole, is rooted in history, with the Panama Canal often as its cornerstone. At the same time, it belongs "to the great, unexpected and mythical world of Hispanic literature." The novel—in Panamá and beyond—has proved its staying power as a literary genre at a time when its disappearance was all but a foregone conclusion. Ranging from historical novels to psychological thrillers, the Panamanian novel is at once very Latin American and influenced by its special geography and history.

When other novelists created works that went beyond local affairs and matters of their lands, in our case, the subject matters of the Panamanian Fatherland and the Canal, above all others, continued to be a perennial treasure trove and marked our literary output insofar as it was a core issue of our economy and our centennial struggle for national sovereignty.

The issue of the canal as a central motivator turned into a proud asset for a country that is today considered to have a privileged economy. The canal is a total presence and functions seamlessly, as the colossal prodigy it still is.

By now, the Panamanian novel has ceased to sail only through the Canal. It

is different, more cosmopolitan, psychological, with new subjects and intent. But before getting to today's novels, let's take a brief look at the history of the genre in Panamá.

During the Colonial and early Republican eras, Latin American fiction was forced to take a back seat, given the torrential hyperbole of reality. Clearly influenced by the 18th Enlightenment century, Panamá's first literary expressions were patriotic hymns and odes to the Fatherland. Even later, during the age of Romanticism, there was no room for romantic themes; the wounds inflicted by the struggles for independence had yet to heal, and resentment ran deep against the cruel treatment of the native peoples and the ignominious slavery of black people; with few exceptions, these were the sources of our literature.

In March 1821, the first printing press arrived in Panamá. Although many believe that the first truly isthmian literary generation was born during that century, Rodrigo Miró, father of Panamanian literature's historiography, cites the discovery of some 18th century manuscripts penned by Panamanians as early as 1638. Yet, despite some novelistic attempts, the essay and poetic form dominated until the 19th century.

The 1870 novel *María* by Colombian Jorge Isaac was widely read in Panamá. As well, the construction of the canal by the French in the late 19th century promised not only material wealth, but cultural prosperity: more readers became available for a literary production by better educated writers, often influenced by the movement started by Rubén Darío, the universal Nicaraguan.

However, the all too brief influence of French language and culture was as doomed as De Lesseps' dream of a transoceanic pathway. In 1888, *Mélida*, by



Panamanian Jeremías Jaen, was published in New York. In 1889, the construction of the French canal ground to a halt. In 1903, just as hopes for the canal were being revived, Panamanian writer Julio Ardila published the novel *Josefina* in installments. Miró points out that "the reader is made aware of the lack of true and intimate coexistence between the local population and foreigners. The presence of strangers is purely a matter of existing within the same confines." This work, as Miró indicates, is "the starting point of the Panamanian novel."

In 1913, Ricardo Miró publishes, also in feuilleton format, *Las noches de Babel*, and later the novel *Flor de María*, but literary production continued to be relatively scarce. In 1940, Panamá welcomes the important historical novel by Octavio Méndez P., *El tesoro del Dabaibe*, in





A Guna Indian shows how molas with their fanciful themes are made. The Panamanian novel is influenced by the country's special geography and history.

which Vasco Núñez de Balboa is turned into legend; Another important work from this period is *Crisol*, in which José Isaac Fábrega defines the country as a racial melting pot, and a new hope after the financial disappointment resulting from the utopian canal.

Authors turned to their roots for answers, and the new literature was inspired by the country and its people, as penned by such writers as José María Sánchez Borbón and Mario Augusto Rodríguez, Ramón H. Jurado, Carlos Francisco Changmarín, Julio B. Sosa and Gil Blas Tejeira.

The Panama Canal became a cornerstone of Panamanian literature, with *Luna verde* by Joaquín Beleño, a Canal Zone journeyman and mason who suffered the injustices depicted in his novel. It was the trailblazer for the stark issues of the day.

In the early 1940s, the novel acquired a prominent place in the Panamanian literary scene, in no small part because the country's foremost literary award—the Ricardo Miró Prize—was established in 1942. That period produced *El cabecilla*, by José Agustín Cajar Escala, awarded the first Miró. The novel deals with the conflicts arising in the countryside; it describes everyday problems caused by the social inequalities between peasants and landowners. Other important works include *San Cristóbal* (which earned an award from the Ministry of Education in 1943) and *Desertores* by Ramón H. Jurado, winner of the second Miró Prize, which fictionalizes the everyday life in the country's sugar mills.

Rogelio Sinán's *Plenilunio* is a psychological thriller which, besides winning the Miró of 1943, gained further

acclaim overseas with the award for the best foreign book from Chile's Pen Club in 1947. The Master, a title justly deserved by Sinán, penned many works in diverse genres, including prize-winning short stories. In one of these collections, Sinán traces something akin to the history of Panamá through the development of Taboga, which rises out of the sea, right in front of our metropolis.

In 1951, *Puente del mundo* won the Miró. Its author, Renato Ozores, also wrote *Playa Honda*, a novel perfectly capturing the reality of the nation's capital.

A short time later, in 1957, Guillermo Sánchez Borbón wins the Miró under the pseudonym Tristán Solarte, with *El ahogado*, a novel in the best style of psychological thrillers, which places him on the forefront of Panamanian writers. In the context of a portrait of life in the banana plantations, Solarte recreates the legend of the excruciating divine punishment suffered by a woman whose infant child dies whilst she commits adultery, known as “La Tulivieja” or the “woman in mourning.”

Dimas L. Pitty's *Estación de navegantes*—Miró Prize, 1974—draws a fair picture of the U.S. presence in the country since the creation of the Canal Zone, with vivid imagery of the uncouth dregs of humanity on which the plot is based. Intricately structured, and divided into parts by a chronicle well suited to the noise and crowds, days and nights of Panama City, the work uses contemporary techniques and language.

This approach continues with Ernesto Endara's *Tic tac*, which took the first Miró Prize of 1992; the author has won Miró Prizes for several other genres another eleven times. He also wrote *Pantalones cortos*, 1997, and *Pantalones largos*, 1998; two novels about a young man's experiences in his beloved hometown, Panama City. The subject matter's apparent simplicity does not detract from the author's mature critique of “a society that subsists



on the fragility of the family and the misfortunes of the mother/father,” an ever increasing occurrence in our society.

Rafael Pernet y Morales, in his populist and emblematic *Loma ardiente y vestida de sol*, creates a raw narrative about Panama City that is relevant to any poverty-ridden place in Latin America. Justo Arroyo, another recipient of multiple Miró Prizes, is well-known for his novels *Dedos*, *Dejando atrás el hombre de celofán*, *Capricornio en gris*, *Semana sin viernes* and *Réquiem para un duende*.

Our literature lacks its fair share of novels by female authors, save for some exceptions. To wit, Luisa Aguilera Patiño, *El secreto de Antatura*, Miró Prize 1953; Acracia Sarasqueta de Smith, Miró Prize 1962 for *El guerrero*, also author of *Una dama de primera*, which Rodrigo Miró once recommended to me: “you should read it, it is very interesting, the characters are very well fleshed out, and she describes and narrates each situa-

the unjust treatment and repression of women; underneath the plot and ever present is the yearning for the Panamá of old, with scenarios and circumstances which remind us of provincial morality and customs.

Rosa María Britton is one of Panamá’s most prolific and widely read female authors. Hers is the persona of the born storyteller. Her boundless joy and delightful way of weaving stories brings us works which constantly surpass themselves, capturing a vast readership; among them, *El ataúd de uso* is perhaps her best, as it tells a story we believe we knew but which grows before our eyes, tears itself from our grasp and becomes something entirely new.

Another writer whose work and presence are essential to any review of Panamanian literature is Gloria Guardia, a member of the Panamanian Academy of Language; essayist, critic and *racconteur*. Her novels, some of which have been

for *El último juego*, the first part of the *Maramargo* trilogy, whose second and third parts, *Lobos al anochecer* and *El Jardín de las cenizas*, were published in 2006 and 2011, respectively.

*Manosanta* by Rafael Ruiloba, a strong novel with noteworthy content, is one of the best to be published in present-day Panamá. Juan David Morgan, a serious, scholarly writer whose *nom de plume* is Jorge Thomas, gifts us with *Con ardientes fulgores de Gloria*, a timely, well documented *oeuvre* about ourselves, our history and destiny. His *El caballo de oro* is a well-crafted account of the construction of the first Trans-isthmean railway. Among this writer’s works not dealing with Panamanian topics, *El Silencio de Gaudí* stands out. It reflects a surprising side of our religion, endowing it with a privileged position for this day and age of scant miracles.

I have claimed in this article that the Panamanian novel portrays history as “magnificent fiction” because a large portion of the genre has been based on the circumstances of our geography and events which, both yesterday and today, could be overwhelming and seemed impossible to recreate. However, for better or worse, and notwithstanding the scars which remain from our past and human condition, our history has also imbued our liberal arts with a permanent nuance of hyperbole and surprise; of intensity and magic, which, at the end of the day, summarizes this literary genre, especially as it pertains to the Hispanic world.

**Berna Burrell** is a Panamanian novelist and literary critic. Her latest novel is *La envidia es color de arsénico*, 2005. She is a member of the Panamanian Academy of Language.

**Ana Amado**, who translated this article, was part of the five-person team that translated the *Panama Canal Operations Manual*. Besides writing the main cover story for *La Prensa’s* weekly food edition, she writes a Sunday column which she says strives to be like William Safire channeling the Tower of Babel.

**In the cosmos of universal literature, the strength of the Spanish-American novel stands out as an example of great evolution, richness, technical innovation and sustained productivity. Panamanian literature belongs to this great, exceptional and mythical world of Spanish-American literature. That is indeed a geographical and cultural gift, but it also is and will continue to be the greatest challenge for the identity of Panamanian literature, especially the novel.**

tion quite tastefully.” Yolanda Camarano de Sucre is another woman novelist with *La Doña del Paz*, Miró Prize 1966, and *Los Capelli*, which garnered the award the following year. Both works set forth, in a picturesque and realistic manner, how foreigners see Panamá and Panamanians.

Isis Tejeira deserves a special mention for her novel *Sin fecha fija*, which excels in its use of narrative to denounce

reprinted several times and translated into English, Italian, Macedonian and Russian, depict our history boldly. Starting from *Tiniebla blanca*, 1961, winner of a gold medal from the Society of Spanish and Hispanic American Writers, the following have earned awards: 1966, Miró Prize for *Despertar sin raíces*, a tandem win with her essay *Orígenes del Modernismo*. In 1976, she received the Central American Prize for Novels in Costa Rica



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# BIODIVERSITY

As a strategic land bridge between North and South America, Panamá provides a rich laboratory for scientists to examine changes in biodiversity. It is home to the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and the Biomuseo, Frank Gehry's first building in Latin America.

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# A Century of the Smithsonian Institution on the Isthmus of Panamá

Discovering Tropical Diversity **BY IRA RUBINOFF**

THE AVERAGE VISITOR TO PANAMÁ MIGHT NOT be attracted to a site that hosts a hundred species of cockroaches and 41 species of snakes. But Barro Colorado is a mecca for scientists interested in biodiversity.

The island, a field station of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), is a reserve that reflects Panamá's special geological history as a strategic land bridge between North and South America. The country in general and Barro Colorado in particular provide a rich laboratory for scientists to examine changes in biodiversity. Understanding the ecology and evolution of the diversity of life on our planet remains a key scientific endeavor of our time. The STRI—using its first Panamanian lowland field station as a base—has expanded its research to the Andean mountains to the Amazon and even the African savannah.

Today, STRI is a platform for long-term research on biodiversity, ecosystems and impacts of environmental change. Global climate systems and life on the planet have always been in flux. It is essential that we provide policy makers with long-term data on the dynamic changes of forests and marine systems around the globe to distinguish the components of global change that can be ascribed to planetary processes from those caused by human activity.

And now these investigations are no longer just the territory of biologists; the current widening and expansion of the Panama Canal and ongoing construction of a third set of locks has provided an opportunity for remarkable cooperation between the Panama Canal Authority and paleontologists. Recognizing that the canal's expansion required removing the forest that covered many known fossil deposits along the canal's

banks, the Panama Canal Authority has joined with STRI in a comprehensive "salvage paleontology" project. Scientists from STRI, the University of Florida and several institutions in Colombia and Venezuela, with support from the Panama Canal Authority and the United States' National Science Foundation, have worked in front of the bulldozers to extract the wealth of fossils ranging from the teeth of extinct species of sharks to the remains of extinct horses, turtles, rhinoceroses, manatees, etc. It will require decades and the work of many paleontologists to describe and analyze this fossil abundance.

The seeds for all this research were sown back in 1910, just a few years after Panamanian independence from Colombia. The Smithsonian Institution, a scientific and cultural trust of the United States, was asked to perform a biological inventory of the Panama Canal Zone. It immediately began to organize a group of scientists to do the survey. It wasn't long before the government of Panamá asked the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution to extend this survey over all of the provinces of the newly formed Republic. Thus began a long and scientifically fruitful collaboration between these two nations.

Survey results took several years to be published because of their complexity and detail. Many of the scientists involved continued their interest in Panamanian natural history over the longer term, returning frequently for additional fieldwork and collecting expeditions. Then as now, if scientists turned their back on an important study site, it was likely to be converted into a strip mall or, in the case of the Panama Canal Zone, into a government commissary or U.S. military base.

Hence, scientists—including Thomas Barbour, the director of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard—wanted a permanent and protected area. They petitioned the governor of the Canal Zone to set aside a permanent biological reserve where the flora and fauna would be safe for scientific study. Governor James J. Morrow agreed, and set aside the largest island in Gatún Lake, Barro Colorado Island (BCI), formed by the damming of the Chagres River to establish the main fresh-water body facilitating the inter-oceanic passage of marine commerce. This 3,700-acre island became the workshop for much of the research performed in the New World tropics in the early 20th century. As the fauna and flora became better known through research, scientists began to study the behavior and ecology of the island's biota. These studies attracted more and more scientists from around the world until BCI was sometime referred to as the mecca for biologists.





With World War II underway, the important research on BCI faced a possible threat. The scientific community worried that since the Island's reserve status depended upon a decree of the governor of the Canal Zone (usually a major general in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) some military purpose might seem imperative and the island's status could be converted into something more appropriate to the war effort. To ensure that the island wasn't turned into a bombing range or golf course, the U.S. Congress in 1940 created the Canal Zone Biological Area (CZBA) as a separate governmental agency to be administered by a board of directors made up of prominent scientists, including the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. The CZBA struggled throughout the war since the Congress argued that the research on biodiversity (a term not yet coined) was not sufficiently relevant to the war effort to warrant any financial appropriations.

**THE BIRTH OF THE SMITHSONIAN TROPICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE**  
Immediately following World War II, many small government agencies formed during the war were either eliminated if they no longer had a purpose or were incorporated into larger organizations. The CZBA officially became a bureau of the

Smithsonian Institution in 1946 under a government reorganization act signed by President Harry Truman. Barro Colorado Island is an enormously diverse tropical habitat: 5 species of primates; 5 species of cats; 6 species of opossums; 74 species of bats; 384 species of birds; 33 species of frogs and toads; 23 species of lizards, 41 species of snakes; more than 400 species of ants including 28 species of army ants; 100 species of cockroaches; between 500-600 species of butterflies, perhaps 2,000 species of moths and tens of thousands of other insects, many not yet described. Moreover, there are some 1500 species of plants for all of these animals to nest in, hide in, feed on, and generally interact in an ever dynamic ecosystem—the details of which generations of scientists have endeavored to understand with increasing precision. In addition, there are unknown thousands of fungi, bacteria and viruses that catalyze the exchange of nutrients, regulate decomposition and generally help the ecosystem function.

Barro Colorado Island is an excellent example of one important type of tropical ecosystem—a lowland seasonal forest. However, tropical biologists are concerned with all the diverse habitats of the world's tropics. The Smithsonian's scientists in Panamá began to expand their investigations off the island; to

the Atlantic and Pacific coasts and their many archipelagos, to the highlands of Chiriquí Province, the vast, hardly explored forests of Darien; to the Andes of Colombia and Ecuador; to the Amazon of Perú and Brazil; and to the rainforests of Asia, the savannahs of Africa or the highlands of Papua New Guinea. This increased geographic scope prompted the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents to approve a name change in 1966, calling its branch the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) to reflect its broadened research scope, no longer confined to BCI, the Canal Zone or even the Isthmus of Panama.

Of course, the public and the scientific community expect much more of biodiversity than lists of the organisms found in the area. And modern science has provided a much broader understanding of the economic, health, and ecosystem values of much of this diversity. In some cases, we realize that an ecosystem may be dependent upon a “keystone” species—one whose removal may lead to the collapse of many others. A cascading “domino effect” may occur whereby the removal of a key fig tree species may result in the extinction of certain mammals, birds, insects and other organisms dependent upon that single species to sustain them through the food scarcity of the dry sea-



**Left:** Aerial photograph of Barro Colorado Island. In the Panama Canal Treaty of 1974, the Island and the adjacent mainland peninsulas were declared to be a “Nature Monument” (an area set aside for strict scientific purposes) under the terms of the Western Hemisphere Convention for the Protection of Flora and Fauna; **Middle:** Aerial view of the research facilities on Barro Colorado Island including dormitories, dining hall, seminar rooms and laboratories; **Right:** The little red and blue frog is an example of a transexual species that changes its sex over the course of its lifetime.



Construction crane in an Atlantic Coast forest reserve facilitating convenient access to the canopy of a rainforest for studies of insect biodiversity and plant physiology.

son. Research at STRI helped overturn the conventional wisdom that the tropics are dominated by stable communities of highly co-adapted organisms. Large-scale forest plots, first pioneered on Barro Colorado Island in 1980, allow long-term examination of processes that shape tropical forests. These monitoring plots have now been established at 47 sites in 21 countries, enabling forest scientists to make a census of 4.5 million trees of 8,500 species and for the first time allowing comparisons of both tropical and temperate forests with measurements taken using identical protocols. Data from these plots have resulted in almost 1,000 scientific publications and have been crucial in shaping our ideas about the origins and maintenance of biodiversity.

Progress has also been made in evaluating the “ecosystem services” of a rainforest. The Panama Canal is arguably one of the most important watersheds on this planet with some 5 percent of world commerce dependent upon it. The watershed plays four critical roles: providing the basic supply of fresh water for the canal; that of a sponge, absorbing excess water in the rainy season and releasing it more slowly during the dry season when a scarcity of water could limit the draught requirement of ships passing through the canal; the potable water supply for the port cities of Colón and Panama City; and the generation of hydroelectric power. During the rainy season, the forested watersheds slow runoff, preventing catastrophic canal-threatening floods, erosion and costly sedimentation of the Alajuela and Gatún Lakes.

STRI research has informed the Panama Canal Authority on how to reforest with native species, identifying native species of trees such as those in the genus *Clusia* which effectively control soil erosion while at the same time using only a small amount of water for their own respiration in comparison to species such as teak (*Tectona*) or mahogany (*Swietenia*). As carbon has become a tradable commodity, STRI research has contributed to methodologies for measuring the carbon content of different forest and for assessing whether



these values are increasing or decreasing.

STRI investigations have not been limited to documenting the diversity of living plants and animals but also serve to describe the extinct biota. These studies contribute to our understanding of past diversity and the geological and climate changes that have contributed to the shaping of the Western Hemisphere and how these changes affect the rest of the planet in diverse ways.

The rise of the Isthmus of Panamá occurred about 3.5 million years ago, facilitating the migration of South American organisms northward and North American organisms southward. Most South American animal species became extinct; in the North, large groups of mammals such as elephants, camels, horses, rhinos also ceased to exist—a process aided perhaps by the arrival of humans at least 13,000 years ago, who with their stone tools and fire were able to change the complexion of the Western Hemisphere.

The completion of the land bridge had another impact with global consequences. It cut off the warm, westward flowing equatorial current, deflecting it northward, facilitating conditions capable of supporting human habitation of Western Europe. At the same time the Gulf Stream may have moved enough moisture northward to promote glaciations in North America and, in some views, also providing the arid conditions in Africa that possibly contributed to our hominid ancestors descending from trees and becoming biped hunter-gathers leading to modern man. The Isthmus of Panamá changed the world in many ways and continues to do so today.

As mentioned above, paleontologists are working literally in front of the bulldozers to recover the past. Another aspect of STRI's biodiversity research relates to the shipping from around the world that passes through the canal. This movement often enables exotic species to invade new geographic areas, either as organisms trapped in ballast tanks or as the growth of organisms that constitute the fouling attached to the bottoms of ships and barges.

Concern about the exchange of life between the Atlantic and Pacific peaked in the 1960s when exploration about the use of nuclear devices in constructing harbors and canals led to numerous studies by marine biologists (this author included). The research analyzed the possible consequences of allowing organisms long isolated in one ocean to freely invade another where they were not adapted to prey, predators and oceanic conditions. The question of whether the presence of exotic species in areas where they might not be controlled by their usual limiting predators and/or diseases contributed to the decision not to construct a canal at sea level but rather to maintain the fresh water barrier of Gatún Lake. Now STRI scientists are able to distinguish native and invasive species using molecular genetics technology, eliminating some of the guesswork about whether a new species truly represented a new arrival or was only a previously undiscovered resident.

Biological diversity in Panamá, as in many places, is threatened by over fishing, clearing of forests for agriculture especially cattle rearing, coastal recreation, urban development and pollution in the form of fertilizers and pesticides of all types. The diversity of Panamá's coral reefs is being affected by runoff from the land, ocean warming, acidification and a series of recently identified diseases, some of whose origins are still unclear to science.

On land, amphibians, especially high-altitude species, are facing serious danger and even extinction because of the spread of a fungal disease. The fungus, *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*, apparently causes electrolyte imbalance

and heart stoppage in vulnerable species. STRI is working with Panamanian and North American organizations to get protected populations of frogs and toads into laboratory culture for eventual release back into nature when a means of dealing with the infection is developed.

The Republic of Panamá and especially the National Authority for Natural Resources (ANAM) has used STRI research to decide where to establish protected areas. Our research contributed to establishing the national parks of Soberanía, Bocas del Toro, Campana, Coiba and others. In recent years, STRI—with support from the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Health, many universities, the private sector and think tanks, has begun to explore the rich biological diversity of these national parks for the first ecologically guided program for bio-prospecting—seeking natural products which may have pharmaceutical properties. The long process of “drug discovery” is proceeding with STRI cooperation in both the marine and terrestrial habitats of Panamá.

Biodiversity is complicated, sometimes poorly understood and even occasionally reviled by people who believe that having seen “one redwood” they have seen them all. It is important that STRI shares the knowledge it has gained about biodiversity with others. Many of our facilities are open to the public and have programs designed for teacher training to integrate with and augment the science curricula of the Ministry of Education of Panamá.

**STRI's marine laboratory in Bocas del Toro provides scientists with access to the rich mangrove and coral reef diversity of Panamá's Caribbean shores.**





As we look to the future of STRI in Panamá, we see an opportunity to build on the innovations that have emerged from this Institute in the last fifty years. A number of STRI “firsts” in the science and in the tropics make this ambition appear reasonable. We were the first to employ construction cranes to examine the biodiversity of organisms associated with the canopy of forest trees and to study the photosynthetic processes at this difficult to access interface between the biosphere and atmosphere. Barro Colorado Island also broke ground in remotely monitoring animal behavior using automated telemetry systems. And our work on cryptic female choice in insects and birds and sex change over the course of the lives of many reef fishes have helped explain the evolutionary significance of sex. These are just a few examples of our innovation, invention and intellectual leadership.

We are now poised to explore the value of becoming a “stand alone” graduate university. As it is, we currently provided hundred of fellowships to students at all levels from more than 40 nations every year. Many students pursue their doctoral thesis work here and even more their post-doctoral studies. It seems less than efficient for students of tropical science to need to spend a year of their graduate work in Chicago, New York or Montreal before beginning their dissertation on research questions that need to be pursued in the tropics. Why not provide the full university experience in a location where the partnership between the Republic of Panamá and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute already provides the background, facilities and intellectual experience to effectively train the next generation of tropical scientists?

***Ira Rubinoff** was Director of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute from 1974 until 2008. He is currently at STRI as Director Emeritus and Senior Scientist. He received a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1964.*



## Building the Biomuseo

Frank Gehry's First Building in Latin America

BY DARIÉN MONTAÑEZ

PANAMA CITY, THE FIRST CITY IN THE WESTERN Hemisphere to be founded on the Pacific Coast, is today a vibrant, busy tropical metropolis. Panama City is a place of contrasts. Its towering skyscrapers—including the tallest in Latin America—line the Bay of Panama, a little over a mile from the tropical rainforests of our National Parks. While new towers are constantly rising on the eastern reaches of the waterfront—Paitilla and Punta Pacífica—something far

more compelling is taking shape at the west end of the city. The Amador Peninsula, tucked between the Old Quarter and the Panama Canal, is now the home of the Biomuseo, a new natural history museum that tells the story of how Panamá changed the world. This extraordinary tale will be housed in an extraordinary new building designed by Frank Gehry.

Although Gehry had visited Panamá many times—his wife, Berta, is

**Above: A mockup of the Biomuseo;  
Below: Constructing the Biomuseo**

Panamanian—he had never designed a project in Latin America. His acclaimed Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, in Spain, opened to the public in October 1997. The following years saw the city of Bilbao morph from an obscure industrial city into a world-famous cultural destination, with Gehry's Guggenheim identified as the main catalyst of this change. This success story became a well-documented case study to show the benefits of high-visibility cultural buildings, and many governments—including Panamá's—became interested in replicating this “Bilbao effect.” At the Bilbao opening were Rodrigo Eisenmann and his wife Chabelita, a cousin of Berta Gehry's, and they approached Gehry with a suggestion to design a museum for Panama City. After returning to Panamá, Eisenmann, his cousin Roberto Eisenmann, and a number of Panamanians established the nonprofit foundation, Fundación Amador, and began lobbying for the project; in 2001, they secured government funds to build the Biomuseo.

The scientific content of the museum, the exhibits that would tell the story, and the building that would house the exhibits were developed in a series of workshops in Panamá and the United States, where Gehry Partners' team of architects was joined by scientists from the University of Panama and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, exhibit designers from Bruce Mau Design, and landscape designer Edwina von Gal. The outcome of this iterative, collaborative design process is a museum where architecture, landscape and exhibitions blend to become a synthetic whole. In the Biomuseo, form and content will be understood and experienced by a visitor as one intertwined narrative.

The design of the building and exhibits were guided by three principles:

**1. To Educate:** Biomuseo is, first, a place for learning. Through the museum, Panamá gains a profound opportunity to imprint its collective scientific under-

standing upon its cultural and natural landscapes. The exhibition design seeks to create museum experiences that encourage and permit rich, varied and accessible opportunities to understand what natural science makes possible.

**2. To Network:** Panamá is the museum, the Biomuseo is the interchange. In every exhibit area, and with every message, the purpose is to focus attention, energy and intelligence out and across the whole country. The Biomuseo is a network hub, a place where visitors can orient themselves to the wealth of natural and cultural assets across Panamá.

**3. To Declare:** The three primary goals of the project are interdependent. No two can succeed in the long term without the third. This is most critically the case for its declarative purposes. The building, its exhibitions, its park setting and its operating program must combine to produce a very special celebratory effect. The project must be a landmark, broadcasting an image of the best of Panamá far beyond its Amador setting on the city's waterfront. It must express a new sensibility, a new valuation of Panamá's ancestral layers and a new national spirit.

The history of the Isthmus of Panamá, a so-called “bridge of life” between continents, peoples and ideas, is a story of connections made and connections broken. This story is told in the Biomuseo's eight galleries, each of which embodies one chapter of this tale. A visit to the Biomuseo is designed as a journey, with spaces structured to accommodate different group sizes and levels of engagement. Each gallery is anchored by a “Device of Wonder”: a large-scale, visually engaging element that is the artistic representation of the basic scientific idea of the space. The Devices of Wonder turn the visitor into a more active participant in the search for answers: they pull the visitor towards information, rather than pushing information at the visitor.

The visit begins at the Gallery of Biodiversity, a sloping hallway that introduces the concepts developed further on: what is biodiversity, what are its benefits, and

what is happening to it today. From there we pass to Panamarama, a triple-height projection space with screens all around that presents an audiovisual journey through Panamá's diverse natural landscapes. The third gallery is called Building the Bridge, where we learn about the geological processes that, over millions of years, caused the Isthmus of Panamá to rise from the bottom of the ocean.

Three million years ago, Panamá first connected North America and South America and allowed two very different faunas to meet. Worlds Collide, the fourth gallery, represents the Great American Biotic Interchange, with 97 full-size sculptures of animals that crossed the Isthmus in both directions. These range in size from a shrew and a frog that measure a few inches to the 8-foot-tall Cuvier's mastodon and the 13-foot Hermit Ground Sloth.

Among the most recent migrants to use this land bridge to cross from North America into South America were humans. Our gallery The Human Path tells the story of human presence in Panamá, from the first Paleoindians who arrived 13,000 years ago to the present. From there we move to Oceans Divided, which is the oceanic counterpart to the Building the Bridge story. When the two halves of the continent came together, Panamá joined two land masses and separated what used to be a single tropical ocean into two. Today, the Caribbean and the Pacific are very different, and in this gallery we'll learn how Panamá created these differences. The seventh gallery is The Living Web, which presents the tropical rainforest as the environment where biodiversity reaches its apex. A giant sculpture—part animal, part plant—fills the space and shows how all living organisms are connected by a web of interdependent relationships, including symbiosis, predation and parasitism. The final gallery, Panamá Is the Museum, reminds the visitor that everything they've seen is a symbol, and that the real museum is outside: the country itself.

The Biomuseo sits on a 7.5-acre site at the tip of Amador Peninsula, at the



mouth of the Panama Canal. The museum building occupies the middle of a botanical park that will be free to the public, becoming a contribution that the Biomuseo makes to Panama City's public park system. The park is organized in thematic areas that expand on the topics presented by the galleries and complements them with larger, living exhibits, including Plants from the North and South, Ethnobotany, and the Butterfly Forest. These zones are anchored by a shaded pavilion that provides a place to sit down and study the surroundings, but the space also includes giant planters filled with flowers, a frog pond and a grotto overgrown with epiphytes and mosses.

Panamá builds a lot, and it builds fast, but constructing a world-class building has been a big challenge. The Biomuseo is by far the most complicated project ever built in the region, with a set of construction drawings that is reaching 20,000 sheets, and it requires materials and construction systems that are not usually employed in the country. The project has thus served to train hundreds of local contractors and dozens of local construction companies. The going has been tough, facing fundraising and construction problems, but local support has grown steadily, especially in the last few years. In December 2009 we launched our Friends of Biomuseo program, and to this date we have almost 700 members: the largest membership program of all the museums in Panama City. After twelve years of hard work, we are fast approaching the finish line: Biomuseo will open to the public this year.

We are particularly interested in establishing a close connection between the Biomuseo and the Panamanian school system. Our plan is ambitious: we want to host 40,000 schoolchildren every year through our educational programs, which aim to strengthen the links between Panamanian museums and schools. To accomplish this goal, our education department has spent more than a year working with the Ministry of Education on teacher workshops and



Construction workers put together the elaborate roof of the Biomuseo.

materials to assure that the student visits to the museum are closely connected to the national standards. The visits will focus on the science that produced the content, promoting critical thinking and awareness of our cultural and natural heritage.

The Biomuseo celebrates Panamá for its biological and cultural diversity, and a celebration is definitely due. We are busy wrapping up construction and instal-

lation, as well as planning a series of opening ceremonies that will span over a whole month. So, if you're thinking of visiting Panamá, 2013 is definitely a good time to come. Come to the Biomuseo, learn how Panamá changed the world three million years ago, and how you can change it today.

***Darién Montañez*** is the Coordinator of Exhibit Production for the Biomuseo.



# Degreening Panamá

Growth and Environment **BY LINA VEGA ABAD AND RAISA BANFIELD**

PANAMÁ IS IN THE NEWS. ALTHOUGH IT'S A small country of only 75 square kilometers, it's a place where many want to invest, do business, work and live. The reason: an astonishing economic growth rate that reached 10 percent in the second trimester of 2012. And that's in the midst of an economic crisis across almost the entire planet.

At the same time that Panamá's economy is expanding, its natural resources are being attacked relentlessly. Yet the economic value of the country's rich biodiversity, under threat from this continued exploitation of natural resources, is thus far unknown.

The assault on Panamá's natural environment began in the 1990s, with the construction of infrastructure megaprojects such as the northern and southern expressways leading into Panama City. It didn't matter that the megaprojects cut through parks, isolated animal and bird species, dried up rivers or destroyed forests. Under the current administration of President Ricardo Martinelli, systematic and relentless destruction of natural resources has reached unprecedented levels.

Panamá's geographical location—albeit in one of the most biodiverse regions of the planet—has determined its local economic model. From the historic Camino de Cruces, along which the Spanish colonial powers sent all the wealth to Europe after having extracted it from the earth starting in the 15th century, to the railroad of the “gold rush years,” and finally to the interoceanic canal now undergoing a major expansion, the country's location had ever determined its economy, which currently focuses on financial services and international transport of merchandise. The concept of sustainable development seems to be a mystery to the country's main economic actors.

At present, with the expansion of the Panama Canal advancing full steam ahead, the entire country seems to be under major construction. Projects range from state-sponsored infrastructure such as the Panama City metro, highways, hospitals, airports and markets to private investments such as unsystematic, runaway building of residential and hotel projects, the construction of hydroelectric plants and numerous open pit mining projects.

Both local and international market forces have found a strong ally—an accomplice even—in the present government. The system of resource protection initiated with the 1998 General Environmental Law and the creation of the National Environmental Authority (known by its Spanish acronym as ANAM), has effectively been dismantled.

The only exception is the canal. Shielded from political whims by constitutional mechanisms and a culture that values professional merit, the administration of the waterway maintains a program of protection of water sources for an obvious reason: if there is no water, the canal does not function. However, not everything is rose-colored in terms of the canal: the deforestation and pollution that affect the rest of the country are steadily advancing in its direction.

## THREATENED BIODIVERSITY

Panamá is a paradise of biodiversity; it is no coincidence that the Smithsonian Institute for Tropical Investigations has flourished here since 1910. Generations of scientists from around the world have come to Panamá to study its rich and varied wildlife.

According to ANAM's most recent National Report on Biodiversity (*Informe Nacional de Biodiversidad 2010*), Panamá ranks 28th worldwide in terms of biological diversity—and 10th in the

world in relation to its size— with more vertebrate animals than anywhere else in Central America or the Caribbean and a greater number of bird species than in the United States and Canada combined. As surprising as it sounds, Panamá has 21 times more plant species per square kilometer than Brazil.

The other side of the coin is the grave problem of erosion and deterioration of soil. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Panamá's soil is one of the most degraded in Latin America. Moreover, almost all of its water sources have problems of sedimentation and pollution, severely affecting the productive capacity of its regions. In Panamá, the earth is producing less and less.

Another tragedy is the irreparable process of the destruction of forests. Some 175,000 acres of the 19 million that make up the Panamanian territory are deforested every year, producing a chain of destruction that includes unique species of plants and animals.

Among the most affected species are mangroves, in areas that are highly coveted by developers for marinas, ports, golf courses and seaside hotels. Although Panamá signed the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 1989 and hosts five spots categorized as “wetlands of international importance” (the Panama Bay; the Gulf of Montijo in Veraguas Province; San San Pond Sak in Bocas del Toro Province; Patiño Point in Darién Province and Damani Guariviria in the Gnobé Bugle region), their present status is quite critical. In the last 40 years, more than half the mangrove swamps have been destroyed, particularly along the Pacific Coast.

The Martinelli government, it seems, respects no legal protection. If a law has to be changed, it is changed. If it is necessary to suspend a protection guaranteed by law, the Supreme Court of Justice is



utilized to make the change. And this legislative bulldozing has direct, negative effects on Panamá's natural resources.

Take the example of fishing. Legislative changes and regulations about it as enacted by the Panamanian Water Resources Authority have had a dire effect on coastal marine resources. Fishing yields suffered a 20.7 percent decline in the second trimester of 2012 and 22 percent in the first half of the year.

#### DESTRUCTIVE DEVELOPMENT

While fishing and agricultural production are in decline in Panamá, gold and copper mining is on the rise. Gold has been Panamá's number one export item since 2011, when large-scale open pit mining began, in the heart of Mesoamerica's corridor of biodiversity. Panamá's Chamber of Mining is forcefully promoting extractive activity in twelve gold and copper sites without taking into account the ensuing environmental problems.

Mining has already provoked social

conflicts, especially in the indigenous areas in the eastern part of Chiriquí province, which has the largest unexploited copper deposit in the world. Mining this area would cause irreversible damage to the zone's lands and rivers, directly affecting more than 160,000 Gnome indigenous peoples, and infringing on the Coiba National Park, which had been declared Patrimony of Humanity by UNESCO.

In Panamá's central region, a mining project threatens the headwaters of the rivers and springs for more than 230,000 inhabitants of the region—a heavily agricultural one where water sources already show high levels of sediments and contamination from pesticides and agrochemical products.

Energy generation is another source of grave socio-environmental conflict. The energy market, like those in many other countries in Latin America, has been opened to private companies. The state offers water concessions for the genera-

tion of electricity without planning, thus failing to protect the basins and ignoring the water needs of the general population, let alone the huge demand in the agricultural or tourism sectors. Almost all the waterways are designated for the production of electric energy.

Panamá provides a clear case of the disproportional exploitation of a natural resource. Bocas del Toro, one of the poorest provinces in the country, produces 42 percent of Panamá's energy, while its population consumes less than 1 percent. Panama City, home to around 30 percent of Panamá's population, consumes more than 60 percent of the energy generated in the country, without any norms to regulate consumption, stimulate efficiency or reduce waste.

Buildings on the beach demand around-the-clock air conditioning to avoid physical deterioration; at the same time, regulations that encourage energy-efficient designs are lacking. Eventually, their excessive energy consumption



Views of Petaquilla, a gold-mining complex. Panamá must realize that the economy of a nation should always take environmental effects into account.

ends up taxing rural communities and their natural resources.

Panama City—and in reality the entire country—is growing rapidly without bounds or clear norms. The market, with the famous building boom and accompanying speculation, establishes the parameters—or lack thereof. Land use change—the most important cause of emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> in Latin America—creates the constant loss of green zones, public spaces and urban forests in the metropolitan area. Without active and determined citizen participation, this urban malaise cannot be stopped.

In addition, Panamá still lacks a policy on climate change that will help us adapt to the changes in temperature, soil and weather patterns. We simply deal with these changes when there is a crisis and don't think about how they could be prevented or prepared for.

The consequences of ecosystem destruction, added to the lack of preventive measures in the face of increasingly

intense rains, are more serious every year. At the end of last November, floods exacerbated by the destruction of mangroves and construction in vulnerable areas left 5,000 people displaced and several dead, with substantial economic damage to the city of Colón and areas west of the capital. Water swept away everything in its path.

The environmental picture could be improved with the reinstatement of the ANAM, along with the ecological policies developed during several previous Panamanian administrations. Panamá needs a serious and coherent environmental policy in keeping with the vulnerability and richness of our environment.

Panamá has the potential to be a regional model of environmental sustainability because of its great natural resources, its geographic location and the strength of its service sector. But it must strengthen clean industries and reject those which abuse its natural resources and leave serious environmental externalities. Panamá must realize that the

economy of a nation should always take environmental effects into account.

***Lina Vega Abad** is a lawyer and journalist. She has worked at La Prensa de Panamá since 1999, where she has served as an editor of various sections, including opinion, city, politics, news and the investigative unit. She is presently a columnist and coordinator of a Citizen Journalism program. She founded the Center for Environmental Impact and is now a member of its board. She was the former director of the Panamanian chapter of Transparency International.*

***Raisa G. Banfield** is an architect and an environmental activist. She hosts a weekly television show *Cuidando El Planeta 3* (Taking Care of the Planet 3). Founding director of the Center for Environmental Impact, she presently directs the organization *Panamá Sostenible* (Sustainable Panamá) to promote alternatives to practices that damage the environment.*



## Anarchic Jesters: Political Resistance Through Art

A REVIEW BY LARRY ROHTER

### Brazilian Art under Dictatorship

by Claudia Calirman  
(Duke University Press,  
2012, 232 pp.)

Discussions of cultural resistance to the dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 tend to focus on two different centers of creative protest. One is the group of musicians affiliated with the Tropicalista movement, especially Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso, both of whom are today global cultural figures. The other is the conceptual and performance artist Hélio Oiticica, who invented the term “Tropicália” but died young, at the age of 42, in 1980, just as his renown was beginning to spread beyond Brazil.

In *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship*, Claudia Calirman, a Brazilian-born assistant professor of Art History at the City University of New York, broadens our scope considerably by examining the work of three other visual artists who challenged right-wing military rule in ways that were both original and playful. Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio and Cildo Meireles worked in different media, but shared a similar sensibility and approach: “They abandoned traditional forms

such as painting and sculpture in favor of ephemeral actions and interventions,” she writes, thereby “challenging the dictatorship while at the same time staying beneath its radar.”

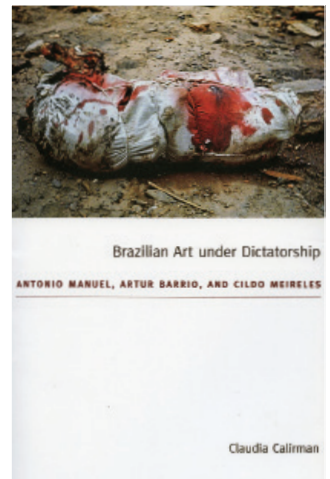
The key word here is “ephemeral.” By avoiding traditional forms, Brazilian artists not only saved money on materials, an important consideration in a country that was then largely poor, but also lowered the risk that the military government and its extensive apparatus of censorship and repression would be able to seize, or even locate or identify, the works that were being created in opposition to the dictatorship. And by producing portable works that were not meant to last, artists could also work outside the structure of museums, galleries and exhibitions like the São Paulo Biennial, all of which were closely watched by censors.

The cover image of *Brazilian Art under Dictatorship* offers an especially powerful example of this approach. It portrays one of Artur Barrio’s so-called “bloody bundles,” which he created out of a mixture of “garbage, urine, raw meat, spit, saliva, tampons and toilet paper” and dumped in public places. An associate would then photograph or

film the disgusted reaction of passersby and, eventually, the police. “Viewers were meant to perceive these gruesome bundles as lacerated and bleeding human body parts, perhaps even the remains of people tortured by the dictatorship,” Calirman explains, or criminals killed by the official death squads that flourished at the time in Brazil’s large cities.

Cildo Meireles, probably now the most commercially successful of the three artists examined here, took a more sly and subtle approach. In one of his best-known “insertions,” which took place in 1970 at the peak of political repression, he took Coca-Cola bottles, used a silkscreen to engrave anti-American and anti-government messages on them, and then sent them back into circulation, with the messages becoming legible when the bottles were re-filled. In a similar project with banknotes, he stamped political slogans and the names of political prisoners on the backs of bills, making the military regime livid with anger but also showing its impotence. “In today’s terms it can be compared to the actions of Internet hackers,” Calirman writes.

The most durable of the works the three artists created



is probably Antonio Manuel’s signature 1969 piece “Soy loco por ti,” discussed at length in Calirman’s book, which recently was voted book of the year by the Association for Latin American Art. With a title derived from one of Gilberto Gil’s songs, the installation, made of a mixture of wood, cloth, plastic and rope, consists of a blood-red map of South America on a black background, with a grass bed underneath the painted map. Censors didn’t like the color scheme, which they saw as advocating Communism and anarchism, but the image became an enduring and popular one, cited repeatedly up until this day. Antonio Manuel, on the other hand, quickly moved on to experiment with other forms,

including using his own body or the molds of newspaper front pages, to create less permanent works.

Calirman takes pains to show that the subversive cultural expressions that the three artists personified did not exist in isolation, but were in dialogue with other cross-currents in Brazilian life and culture. One example is the 1928 “Manifesto Antropofágico,” which argued that since the default setting of

shocking and transgressive, But “the Brazilian interpretation of body art,” Calirman explains, may have seemed less of a rupture with the past because it “stressed the Dionysian associations of the body through its incorporation of *Carnaval* festivities,” one of the most quintessentially Brazilian public activities, and “[the *Carnava*l’s] liberating behavior.” Manuel was also evoking the destruction or degradation of the

by submitting “a handwritten manifesto against the salon’s rules and its jury.” He was outfoxed, however: “When his manifesto was accepted by the jury in the drawing category, Barrio was furious.”

But perhaps the most absurd and revealing of such colorful anecdotes has to do with the fate of Manuel’s “Soy loco por ti.” It was purchased by a Brazilian bank, but when, after two months, “the new owners arrived to pick up the

anarchic jesters, and much of the mainstream public was unaware of their attempts at transgression.” But today their work, or at least the part that proved not to be ephemeral, is highly collectible—Meireles’ tampered-with Coke bottles, for instance. And some of the photo credits indicate that other works have ended up at the Inhotim Center of Contemporary Art outside Belo Horizonte, a new and internationally celebrated museum which accepts only the best and most significant of modern Brazilian art.

Calirman, who was a 2008-09 Lehmann Visiting Scholar at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, takes a measured view, being careful not to overstate claims to the importance of what these three artists achieved. “It is impossible to measure the success or failure of their actions,” she writes. “Likewise it is impossible to deny these endeavors’ value as part of a crucial historical moment in Brazil.” At the very least, the works of Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles and others discussed here demonstrate that “there was in fact robust artistic production during the dictatorship.” Shouldn’t that be enough?

*Larry Rohter is the author of Brazil on the Rise. He was a correspondent in Brazil for 14 years, for The New York Times and Newsweek. He is now a cultural reporter for The New York Times, specializing in international arts.*

## The subversive cultural expressions the three artists—Antonio Manuel, Cildo Meireles and Hélio Oiticica—personified were in dialogue with other cross-currents in Brazilian life and culture during the country’s dictatorship.

Brazilian artists is to “devour European culture, digest it, and transform it into something Brazilian,” the natural mode of Brazilian culture is “cultural cannibalism.” In Barrio’s case, she notes affinities between his style and that of the acclaimed Cinema Novo movement of the early 1960s, since both “favored the aesthetics and narratives of poverty” and proudly embraced a “DIY” style in opposition to the culture-as-industry approach of reigning centers of global cultural power.

One particularly compelling insight has to do with parallels between Antonio Manuel’s work and the international style known as “body art,” which emerged around the same time. Outside Brazil, that style was viewed as

bodies of political prisoners and criminals through torture, she notes, but he was able to do so in a metaphorical way that would not draw additional official ire.

Calirman’s book also contains some amusing, little-known factual nuggets. Who knew, for example, that the experimental composer John Cage, the leading global exponent of using aleatory elements in artistic creation, “appeared incognito” at the Apocalipopótese, a series of Happening-like events held in Rio de Janeiro in mid-1968, conceived by Hélio Oiticica and featuring work by Antonio Manuel? And it’s hard not to laugh when Artur Barrio, in an effort to be provocative, attempts to qualify for an exhibition in Rio in 1970

work, it had rotted” and “was now emitting a bad odor.” The artist himself, Calirman reports, “was nonplussed, deeming it ‘South America itself exhaling its own smell of decomposition.’ The bank paid for the installation but decided not to keep it since it did not know how to restore and preserve it.” As the Brazilians themselves like to say, “Só no Brasil,” or “Only in Brazil.”

From more than 40 years remove, what can we say about the disputatious works these three artists produced and of the moment in which they flourished? Ironies abound. As Calirman notes, “at the end of the day, the government dismissed them as insignificant and irrelevant, no more than

# Drugs, Immigration and Juan Gabriel

A REVIEW BY MARCELA TURATI

**Midnight in Mexico: A Reporter's Journey Through a Country's Descent into Darkness.** By Alfredo Corchado (Penguin Press, 2013, 304 pp.)

In Mexico, the tradition goes, your heart will always remain where your umbilical cord was buried. This place will always be your magnetic pole. Your safe-haven. Your home. As far away as you may go, you will always return to that place.

Sometimes a blessing and other times a dangerous curse, this belief helps drive the well-known and courageous Mexican-American reporter Alfredo Corchado, who has covered Mexico for *The Dallas Morning News* for almost twenty years. This man bears the tattoo of Mexico on his soul ever since lack of opportunity led his family to migrate north to work in the harvests. Corchado—whose umbilical cord is indeed buried in Mexico—is deeply rooted in the country; and that attachment keeps him at his job even after warnings that he could be the next target for a dangerous group of drug traffickers angry with his journalistic revelations.

Corchado begins *Midnight in Mexico* by describing this threat. This is not simply one more book of the many that have been written about drug trafficking; it is the story of the spell cast over this persistent journalist who is obsessed with investigating,

understanding and publishing stories about what is going on in his birthplace, always hoping that the country will get on the right track. But his exhaustive reporting leads him to encounter rotting structures of extreme corruption, poverty and impunity and to come face-to-face with the entanglements of the complex relations between Mexico and the United States.

As a reader, many times I paused exasperated because I wanted to ask the author, “Aren’t you afraid? Why do you mention the names of relatives and friends? What happens if this book falls into the hands of the enemies who are after you? What if it stirs up old resentments?” Maybe it’s because of my paranoia as a Mexican reporter; perhaps it’s because of our fatalism in the face of the cartels, perhaps because of my own inexperience in covering drug trafficking, but sometimes I feel that Corchado is invoking a curse on himself by recounting what he knows about those that no one dare name.

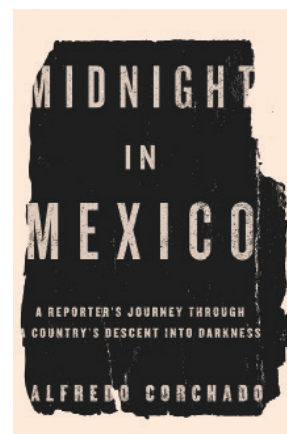
Yet, he felt—and feels—that he had no other option than to dig deeply into this hell to find explanations. “I had been determined not to focus on drugs or crime but cover other real-life issues: immigration, education, the economy, entertainment. I would try to help bridge my two countries. But we had all unwittingly become crime

reporters, covering *la nota roja*—‘the red note,’ as the beat is known in Mexico,” he explains.

His extensive knowledge of Mexico makes Corchado an excellent guide to this netherworld where legality and illegality coexist. As he observes the scene, he begins to realize—and lets the readers know—about the murderous shadows emerging over time, about the parallel government incubated by the drug market. He offers meaningful explanations about the insistent violence that has overtaken Mexico since 2006 and that never lets up because poor and excluded youth are always ready to seek opportunities by enlisting in these new armies.

Corchado, a 2009 Nieman Fellow 2009 who has won both the Maria Moors Cabot and Lovejoy Awards, introduces us to a cast of characters: politicians who may or may not be dirty, citizens committed to improving their country, migrants who embrace the American dream, U.S. secret agents infiltrated among drug traffickers, journalists who have been silenced, small-scale traffickers, money launderers, lawyers with dubious reputations, U.S. embassy officials and people who are doomed to be assassinated....

After receiving a warning that he could be dead within 24 hours, Corchado dwells on his own past and those of



his ancestors to try to explain today's Mexico. We return to the childhood of this migrant worker, who, although in the country legally, always feared being stopped by the immigration authorities. We accompany him through his adolescence on the border as he watches Ciudad Juárez expand with assembly plants that gave work to thousands without providing them with basic services for a dignified life. He later witnesses citizens demonstrating for democracy, the signing of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, the arrival of the long-announced political transition, disenchantment and the period of the “war on drugs.” He is a first-hand witness to the swelling violence, including the horrific murder of women in Juárez in which he discovers police involvement.

In both Corchado's life and reporting, the entangled and tense relationship between his homeland and



his adopted country is always a co-dependent one of love and hate for many historical reasons: among them, since the beginning of the last century, the U.S. need for cheap farm labor, a fact that benefited the Corchado family. In World War II, the United States also needed to provide morphine to its soldiers and even militarily protected Mexico's poppy fields, which had a boomerang effect after the prohibition on drugs went into effect with repressive military operations carried out to enforce it—which only resulted in the expansion of drug cartels to other places.

Corchado—honest, brave and sometimes reckless—puts his cards on the table. He tells us about his fears, feelings,

that” and on and on. He once had to escape hidden in the trunk of a car after he and his girlfriend Angela Kocherga, also a reporter, obtained a film showing hitmen questioning a man about to be executed. Another time, in a Texas bar, he received a warning from a stranger that he shouldn't snoop around in a place where the drug cartel Zetas could cut off his head.

“You have stopped being a reporter. You are part of the story now. You are so close now that you can't even distinguish the lines, and it's putting you and everyone close to you in danger,” Kocherga once complained, worried about his destiny and his stubbornness in refusing to leave Mexico.

The book is also a fasci-

Corchado is aware, though, that his U.S. citizenship does not provide blanket protection. The threats lead him to face himself and at several points, he questions the life he has chosen and that which he could have led. If he is endangering his own family, his loved ones, even his sources, he begins to feel toxic. He begins to distrust those around him. Just to know that he is on a hit list makes him feel sad and isolated. But at the same time, he feels that he cannot stop reporting on Mexico because, for him, it is more than just covering the news; it is personal.

“All I know is that I need to find out what's going on. I need to be sure. Otherwise I will always wonder whether

of immigration authorities, a fellow countryman, a *pochó*, a Mexican-American who belongs to two countries.

The critical look—both an outside gaze and a closeup look—at a Mexico that doesn't quite manage to get on track is moving and at the same time uncomfortable. We hear these voices, like that of his mother who “In her mind, [knew] life in Mexico was over. Something was wrong—*había un mal*—in Mexico. Mal, *maldición*, a damning.”

“Mexico needs time,” her brother would tell Corchado's mother. She'd respond that the country would empty out if things didn't change, as she watched other neighbors head north.

Juárez, the city that gave them stability and granted their dreams when the family invested their savings in the successful “Freddy's” café across the border in El Paso embodies this contradiction. The promised land for thousands of workers, a pioneer in the struggle for democracy, an experiment in the Free Trade Agreement between two countries, it also was one of the first communities to face the difficulties of moving between two parallel governments, the legal and the illegal. Now his Ciudad Juárez is a war zone where so many are killed that the morgue runs out of space.

With his gaze trained to see these two worlds, Corchado narrates intimate episodes of the help the United States gave Presidente Felipe Calderón to wage his war on drug traffickers, his meeting with President Bush, agreements between the ambassadors of Mexico and

## As a son of the border, Alfredo Corchado instinctively sees the two worlds of Mexico and the United States at the same time.

doubts, motives and attachments, as well as quite a bit about his journalistic tricks and sources.

“I'd told him [a friend] how covering narcos hadn't become an obsession, but a necessity,” he explains in a chapter in which he questions his addiction to covering the most difficult stories.

When this Durango native discovers information about Mafia-style pacts among drug traffickers or corrupt politicians or police who make up the armed forces for drug cartels, he keeps on asking until the replies he receives could be taken as threats: “Don't make problems for yourself,” “Be careful,” “Better to forget

nating lesson in journalism. Corchado leads us through the process of finding information, verifying it, documenting it, developing sources and getting interviews. He shows us how he reports on this underworld where drug traffickers, money launderers, spies, protected witnesses and infiltrated agents all operate clandestinely. And everyone is double-dealing.

As a Mexican journalist, I'm struck by the immunity that a U.S. passport grants foreign journalists. It's almost totally opposite to the situation of Mexican journalists, where no one cares if we receive threats and no one is about to dash to the rescue either.

everything I grew up believing is a fucking lie,” he says when asked why he persists.

As a Mexican, I am sometimes amazed and sometimes appalled to listen to the U.S. versions of what is happening in my country, and to contrast those statements with the facts that Corchado provides.

Another of the book's subplots demonstrates how permeable the border is, allowing people, merchandise, drugs, arms and drug traffickers to easily pass from one side to the other. *Midnight in Mexico* is much more than a mere logbook by a reporter forced by circumstances to cover drug trafficking; it is also the history of a migrant fearful

the United States, petitions for arms and aid, and of the conditions imposed on this aid, as well as the guaranteed protection offered to Calderón in exchange for his stance on drugs, a protection which appears continues to this day.

But the symbiotic relationship between the United States and Mexico is not limited to drug politics. Corchado, with longing for his homeland, recreates an atmosphere that blends music, sounds, tastes, tacos, the songs of Juan Gabriel, the shots of tequila, the landscapes and the facts of history that forged the identity of the author.

*Midnight in Mexico* becomes a journey in search of hopeful change that never arrives. It is a song of nostalgia for the democracy for which many struggled. As the author writes, “This book, *Midnight in Mexico*, is about searching for a flickering light during the darkest night and believing in the promise of a new day.”

**Marcela Turati** is a Mexican reporter for *Proceso* magazine. Turati, who received the Harvard Nieman Foundation’s 2013 Louis M. Lyons Award for Conscience and Integrity is the author of the book *Fuego Cruzado: las víctimas atrapadas en la guerra del narco* (“*Cross-fire: Victims Trapped in the Narco-War*”). She is also co-founder of *Periodistas de a Pie*, a network dedicated to training and protecting Mexican journalists.

# Mythical Beasts of the Colombian Violence: Leviathan and the Billy Goat

A REVIEW BY PAOLO VIGNOLO

## Violencia pública en Colombia.

By Marco Palacios.  
(Bogotá, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2012, 218 pp.)

Another book about violence in Colombia? At first glance, it would seem superfluous to add one more title to the already extensive bibliography that spans the “violontology” dating from the 1960s and 1980s up to an endless number of recent studies on the armed conflict. Moreover, Colombia moved abruptly from the denial of the existence of a low-intensity conflict during the Uribe government to a rhetoric of post-conflict under the Santos administration: until just a few months ago the conflict seemed to have left the public agenda.

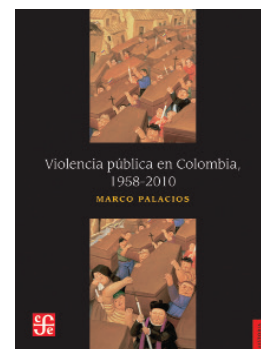
However, this is precisely why this book by Marco Palacios is important—even necessary. Conceived as an “interpretive synthesis in historical perspective,” it places the unresolved knots of Colombia’s past at the center of the debate: concentration of land ownership in large estates, continuities between colonial-era contraband and contemporary illegal trafficking, issues of domestic agricultural colonization and the persistence of clientelism in the nodes of the power network.

In contrast to the tendency of present-day historiogra-

phy to focus on case studies and local situations, Palacios still dares to present a wide-ranging narrative of what has transpired in Colombia during the past six decades.

A powerful metaphor recurs throughout the book, like Ariadne’s thread that permits readers to orient themselves in the labyrinth of the Colombian conflict: that of the “imaginary Leviathan.” Palacios writes, “The monster that Colombians face is not Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan, which requires that all be equal before it, but an imaginary Leviathan, precisely because this environment of equality does not exist nor has ever existed in Colombia.”

What is at stake is the question of the legitimacy of the Colombian state and its corollaries, control of territory and monopoly of the use of force. If from the beginning of the Republic the dominant classes adopted the Anglo-Saxon political myth of Leviathan as their own, their practices have reflected more those of *The Billy Goat*. In that work, Juan Rodríguez Freile, a Bogotá writer contemporary with Hobbes, “relates archetypal situations of a conquered society already in the process of colonization. A society forged by parasites who make their living from the exploitation of indigenous people and black slaves



brought from Africa, whom they have subjugated culturally and politically, basing their domination on a fictional theory of state and a faraway king” (p. 38).

Since then, Colombian public violence has fed on the struggles between these two mythical monsters: an imported Leviathan and a creole Billy Goat. “The central point of reference,” continues Palacios, “is the national state as seen in a double tension: first, that of the *raison d’état* ‘reason of state,’ baroque and colonial in nature, and that of rule of law, the functioning of which is prefigured in 1819-1821; second, [the tense] functioning of the Colombian state (1958-2010), with its flagrant deficit of legitimacy and sovereignty throughout the national territory and in the international system” (p. 21).

In this fashion, Palacios moves beyond the interminable debates about a weak state—failed or the verge of collapsing. The comparison

of the Billy Goat with the Leviathan gives a literary-philosophical platform to his theory about “three countries”: 1) “islands of legitimacy” in the metropolitan areas, where two-thirds of the population live today under the protection of Leviathan; 2) scarcely populated colonized zones where the agricultural countryside frontier continues to exist under the control of the illegal armed actors, equivalent to the Hobbesian state of nature; and 3) the rest of Colombia, “a country in the middle,” made up of small municipalities caught between forced urbanization and negotiation with actors outside the law: the kingdom of the Billy Goat.

The crux of the book involves the dynamics of the armed confrontation between the dominant classes and their allies, on the one hand, and the guerrilla elite on the other. Instead of thinking about the state and social aspects of the nation and the world as dichotomies, but rather as organic and continuous, Palacios manages to systematically connect domestic events with international geopolitics. The ups and downs on the battlefronts related to the difficult Colombian geography, for example, are analyzed in terms of changes in the trafficking routes of arms, drugs and other contraband that connect the country with the United States and Europe.

Likewise, the statistical study of official police reports reveals a new terminology starting in 2002: “narco-terrorists,” incomprehensible if one does not associate the term with the global appear-

ance of the post 9/11 “war on terror.” The fictitious Leviathan of domestic policy is thus inserted into the hemispheric hegemony of the United States, “Leviathan of the unsheathed sword” (p. 191).

Although the pages devoted to a comparison between Colombia and Mexico are but echoes of previous works by the author, the strength of the book is undoubtedly the global extension of his narrative, based on rigorous treatment of the empirical material at his disposition.

Another thesis already developed in Palacios’ previous works also reappears: Colombia is practically unique among Latin American countries because it has not experienced populism, whether leftist or right-wing. The movements that could be described as populist—such as those voiced by Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and even Álvaro Uribe, as well as certain drug traffickers—have given in to internal contradictions or repression/cooptation of its members. The “oligarchical republic” never let go of the reins of power based on a liberal representative model oiled by a capillary system of favors and privileges, in which legalistic-civic traditions coexist with the systematic use of political assassination and arbitrary confiscation of property. Because of this, direct election of mayors has become a knot in the war: the armed control of the electoral machinery in the regions has managed to prevail over the fleeting emergence of charismatic leaders. An expanding clientelistic system has replaced the absence of a populist program, in the

economic as well as the political realm, marking the victory of the Billy Goat state over the Leviathan one.

Deep knowledge of the material and lucid, sharp-edged prose help Palacios to examine the motives and logic of each of the actors, tearing to pieces all the rhetoric constructed along the dichotomy of heroes and villains. The chapter dedicated to the viewpoint of the guerrillas, for example, is a relentless balance of the historical failure of revolutionary projects in Colombia. There we find the origins of the contradictions in which the FARC guerrillas find themselves tangled today, with their Marxist-Leninist project ending up in bed with both the ruthless capitalism of drug trafficking and the classist agrarian establishment.

At the same time, he also deeply questions the role played by the armed forces, from their multiple connections with paramilitarism to the chilling practice of assassinating peasants in cold blood, only to present them later as guerrillas killed in combat. This practice has been documented since 1950 and today is known by the euphemism of “false positives.” But his most polemic and forceful arguments emerge at the margin of his central argument: for example, the term *pax uribista* (Uribe’s peace), whose striking definition we find relegated to a footnote: “We understand here by ‘pax uribista’ the combination of the Policy of Democratic Security with the practices of parapolitics” (p. 62).

Among the plethora of actors (guerrillas, paramili-

tary formations, state security forces, drug cartels, criminal gangs, political cliques) that come and go from the scene in a dizzy succession of traumatic events, it is not always possible to find a balanced narrative. The space dedicated to M-19, for example, compared to other guerrilla formations, does not take into account the decisive influence that this movement had on Colombian society, despite its relative political weakness. In the same way, implicit pacts between the military brass and the oligarchy perhaps deserve a more explicit analysis. These are mere details in the face of the eloquence of a text a little more than 200 pages long that manages to present the main pieces of the Colombian puzzle, articulating them in an intelligent and all-embracing overview.

Maintaining an academic tone, the author takes seriously the challenge of providing documented alternatives to the wave of media narratives that are rewriting the country’s recent history: television series such as “Pablo Escobar el Patrón del Mal,” fictionalized biographies of drug lords and former kidnapping victims, movies about military operations. Marco Palacios offers an unspecialized audience a comprehensive vision of the Colombian armed conflict, in an attempt similar to (although in a different medium) to *Violentología*, Stephen Ferry’s photographic opus with texts by Gonzalo Sánchez (reviewed in the Winter 2013 issue of *ReVista* by Boris Muñoz).

The last chapter examines each peace process individu-



# MAKING A DIFFERENCE

ally, from the first conversations with the guerrillas in 1982 to the negotiations with the paramilitaries between 2003 and 2006, stressing that the cycle of violence-elections-violence generates windows for dialogue that are no longer than four years, the duration of a presidential term. Rather than formulate policies to recover national sovereignty, legitimacy and the monopoly over force—the Leviathan model—“presidents openly used dialogues to relegitimize the political system, expand their own electoral bases and to provide more opportunities for clientelism” (p. 141), as in the Billy Goat model.

Although the epilogue does not provide specific solutions, it does generate expectations about what will be the next attempt to achieve peace. A few months after the book’s publication, President Juan Manuel Santos announced negotiations with the FARC, now underway. Hopefully, this book will allow us to sort out the mythic monsters of the Leviathan and the Billy Goat to arrive finally at a dignified rule of law worthy of the name.

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## Hasta Luego, Not Goodbye

BY ISABEL H. EVANS

WHEN I FIRST EXCITEDLY TOLD Harvard friends and classmates that I would be studying abroad in Buenos Aires during my fall 2012 semester, I did not quite get the upbeat “bon voyage!” I was expecting. Reactions were mostly negative. They ranged from: “How could you ever think to leave Harvard for a semester?” to “You can do that during the summer,” and finally the brutal, “The only people that go abroad during the year hate school or have no friends.” Almost every student seemed to think studying abroad during term time

is, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, a waste.

Harvard’s Office of International Education website offers statistics that reflect this overall aversion. The most recent numbers, from the 2010-2011 school year, show that only 141 out of Harvard’s roughly 6,400 students went abroad during the year. More do venture forth in summer, but the total of students engaging in international experiences is still strikingly low. Even including summer, only 598 students had an experience abroad. With this discour-

agement, I feared perhaps my choice to go to Argentina might be a bad one. I said a gloomy, “Hasta luego” to all.

However, now that I have completed my fall semester in Buenos Aires and am back on campus, I am convinced that more Harvard students need to study internationally, especially during term time. The negative reaction and culture that surrounds studying abroad at Harvard is close-minded and shallow. Harvard students tend to get so obsessed with the Harvard world that they begin to have no interest in exploring the



Left: Izzy Evans in a Paraguayan market with Meg Pierce; Right: A student group poses in Quilombo, Brazil. Izzy Evans is in front row, second on the left.

outside one. For such an international and diverse school, it seems wrong that so few of us stray outside our comfort zones.

Of course, my time abroad was not perfect, and there were moments when I yearned for the sound of the Lowell bells instead of the incessant reggaeton blasting from the streets outside my window. But my experience taught me so many things in just a few months that I never would have learned in the classroom. Seeing thousands of Argentines banging pots and pans on the streets in opposition to President Cristina Kirchner showed me a protest movement very different from Occupy Wall Street. On a trip to Paraguay with my program, we visited a torture chamber created by dictator Alfredo Stroessner to hold anyone suspected of communist

beliefs during Operation Condor. Listening to an old prisoner and touring the grounds where countless people had suffered taught me much more about the importance of democracy and freedom than any Gen Ed ever could.

Living in a completely different culture and having no choice but to speak Spanish was both challenging and stimulating. I became stronger because of the difficult days when I could not communicate with my host family no matter how hard I tried. When our conversations did flow easily, I became aware of politics and problems I had never known about before. By living there for a few months, rather than a few weeks, I became deeply immersed and came to consider the city a home.

Studying abroad during

the school year is the only way to combat the epidemic of FOMO (“fear of missing out”) that plagues this campus. Many students I talked to stressed that they were afraid to go abroad. They were nervous they would miss something gigantic or would be forgotten because of their absence. This is an irrational obstacle. Leaving for a semester does not mean leaving forever. We do not have to be at every event, go to every party, or be in every Harvard-Yale Instagram photo.

Going away is perhaps not for everyone. You may have a job or too many requirements or you may have taken a gap year and thought that was enough. Or you just don’t like to travel, which is perfectly understandable with the state of airplane food today. But

more of us should still be taking the chance to do something off the beaten path. Back at school now, I feel I have a very necessary perspective. I think less about all of my little Harvard complaints (Lamont café sandwiches, for example) and instead am excited to embrace all the opportunities that our school offers.

*Isabel “Izzy” Evans is a junior at Harvard living in Adams House. She is an English concentrator pursuing the honors track. For her fall 2012 semester, she studied abroad in Buenos Aires with the SIT: Southern Cone program.*

A longer version appeared in the Harvard Crimson on January 24, 2013

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## The Canal and Beyond

On May 3, 2009, pro-business supermarket magnate and New York Yankees fan Ricardo Martinelli defeated equally pro-business former housing minister Balbina Herrera for President of Panamá by 22 points. Clearly, the majority of Panamanians thought that the proper business of Panamá was business. And in 2009, as today, business in Panamá centered on the Panama Canal.

The contemporary importance of the Panama Canal to world trade and Panamanian economic development is impossible to dispute. Panamá's unique geographical location and historical position show how various economic and political themes replay themselves over and over through time.

U.S. "exploitation" occurred in two steps in 1903-04: first when the United States strong-armed a better agreement than it could have obtained through voluntary negotiations, and then when it effectively separated the Canal Zone from the Panamanian economy. Active intervention in Panamanian politics soon faded, perhaps for the best, given America's inability to keep its own peculiar racial attitudes out of its foreign policy. Passive acquiescence in Panamanian authoritarianism became the norm.

The canal itself, however, would not be handed over until 1999, and the Neutrality Treaty provided the United States with a pretext to call off the handover should anything go seriously wrong. U.S. opponents of the handover doubted Panamanian ability to manage the canal for there was little in mid-century Panamá to reassure outsiders. Corruption ran rampant; parties existed essentially as patronage devices.

Ultimately, the United States did intervene by removing Manuel Noriega by force. Noriega had been useful for Washington's foreign policy; this led him to miscalculate his worth to the United States. Noriega very well might have survived had he not made it clear that he intended to use the Panama Canal for political purposes.

The 1989 U.S. invasion could by itself no more create democracy in Panamá than had interventions in 1904, 1912, 1918, 1921, and 1925. Fortunately, a critical mass of the Panamanian electorate no longer felt obliged to follow traditional politics. Noriega transformed Panamá in spite of himself, breaking traditional patronage networks in order to advance his own personal power. In the process, a broad-based coalition of Panamanians mobilized against the dictator. After 1989, democratic candidates needed to gain the support of a suspicious electorate not obliged to any party machine. A large bloc of swing voters emerged, enabling the creation of a democracy in which a winning coalition could not simply rely on transferring wealth from the losers. The regime change of 1989 succeeded because there were already enough Panamanians convinced that electoral democracy was in their best interest. In 2006 Panamanians evinced enough faith in their government to vote overwhelmingly in favor of expanding the Panama Canal.

The Panama Canal is now better managed than ever before. Simultaneously, Panamá is more strongly positioned to capitalize on the canal than ever before. While Panamá still suffers from a relatively high level of corruption, the nation is better educated and more democratically governed than at any other time. Panamanians have reasons for optimism going ahead. The continuing growth of the Chinese economy stimulated a wave of new eastbound exports through the canal, from Brazilian soya to (astonishingly) U.S. coal.

U.S. imperialism was not particularly successful in terms of benefitting Panamanians. The modern, negotiated "empire by invitation" that re-placed the old system after 1989 appears to have been far more successful than the older version ever was. Rather than act as an imperial power, the United States now implicitly guarantees Panamanian security through the Neutrality Treaty and economic prosperity through the dollar and the U.S.-Panama Free Trade Agreement. In return, Panamá adheres to the norms of democratic rule and professional management of the canal, which also happen to be in the country's own best interest.

In all likelihood, the new relationship between Panamá and the United States, centered as ever around the Panama Canal, will be healthier and more stable for both nations in the decades ahead.

*Noel Maurer, an associate professor at Harvard Business School, is the author of The Big Ditch: How America Took, Built, Ran, and Ultimately Gave Away the Panama Canal, co-authored with Carlos Yu.*



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