


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## Down Panama Way: A Twenty-First-Century Renaissance

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Modern Panama: From Occupation to Crossroads of the Americas.** By Michael L. Conniff and Gene E. Bigler. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 346. \$32.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781108701198.

**The Maritime Landscape of the Isthmus of Panamá.** By James P. Delgado, Tomás Mendizábal, Frederick H. Hanselmann, and Dominique Rissolo. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. Pp. viii + 283. \$84.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780813062877.

**Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal.** By Marixa Lasso. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 344. \$35.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780674984448.

**The Panama Railroad.** By Peter Pyne. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. Pp. 418. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780253052070.

**Esperanza Speaks: Confronting a Century of Global Change in Rural Panamá.** By Gloria Rudolf. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. viii + 195. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781487594695.

**The Singer's Needle: An Undisciplined History of Panamá.** By Ezer Vierba. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. vii + 323. \$30.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780226342450.

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Panama and its history have long attracted interest, before the mid-twentieth century most often tied to various imperial contexts and histories, and thereafter too often in nearly mirror-image decolonizing and nationalist frameworks. However, the post-Cold War and postmodern turns away from both these paradigms have led to renewed interest based on topics and qualities privileged by twenty-first-century scholars and their readers. Foremost among these are Panama's environmental riches and complexity, extraordinary ethnic and racial diversity, and striking but rarely anticipated successes in navigating the waters of our post-Cold War world. Beyond the question of why today's readers may find these six volumes of interest, their authors demonstrate a deep immersion in all things Panamanian, with several among them matching or even exceeding the anthropologist Gloria Rudolf's half century of engagement with her topic. The six volumes span a wide

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variety of disciplinary backgrounds and employ even more radically different chronological frameworks. While Rudolf covers fifty years of change in rural Panama, various scholars from the humanities and social and marine sciences range from a single decade or two (Pyne) to a half century or more (Lasso, Vierba, Conniff and Bigler) or to millennia (Delgado, Mendizábal, Hanselmann, and Rissolo).

Among all the various disciplines represented in these works, only Ezer Vierba's book claims in its subtitle to be "undisciplined" in its uniquely engaging and ambitious reimagining of twentieth-century Panama. Readers might well imagine the subtitle to be no more than a play on words to highlight the deeply Foucauldian issues addressed in his text. However, two striking authorial choices alert readers to the radically diverse strategies that await them. On the copyright page we are told: "This book is a palimpsest of fiction, nonfiction, and other kinds of writing. Any resemblance of fictional characters to real people with similar names is coincidental." Vierba also retains "editor" (not "author") positionality for himself throughout the book when recreating, reimagining, or staging the voices and testimonies of many of his interlocutors (not merely "sources" or "informants"). From the start readers are advised to buckle up for a wild ride, but they can also count on a remarkable series of insights into twentieth-century Panama. This reviewer could only compare the many gems in this text to perhaps the most famous of Central American novels by Miguel Ángel Asturias and Sergio Ramírez, with similar hypnotic, cinematic qualities, products of and reflections on the same sort of neocolonial hall of mirrors.<sup>1</sup>

The work employs three moments of modern Panamanian history. The first reframes the experiences of Panamanians through the lens of the modern state and one of its iconic institutions, the penitentiary. The second reimagines the spectacle of the assassination of President Remón in 1955 from multiple angles, while the third reexamines the dark side of another form of authoritarian populism through the "disappearance" of the liberation theology priest Héctor Gallego in 1971. Far from ending with President Remón's assassination, authoritarian populism would reemerge from within the military with Omar Torrijos, and Vierba shows how these warring historical narratives live on in contemporary memory.

There is a certain geometric logic to the text. The first topic occupies roughly 150 pages, the second 100, and the third 50, with the depths probed in each case roughly corresponding to the number of pages. No amount of descriptive commentary could do justice to the inventiveness of the textual strategies employed or make any less challenging the level of theoretical and historiographic knowledge required of its potential readership. Vierba assumes the persona of various actors and observers of the drama unfolding, inviting his readers to imagine themselves as eyewitnesses to events and, more important, to listen in on their protagonists' own unspoken thoughts. However, at times he adopts a more authorial than editorial or creative fictional pose, with sections or vignettes that effectively summarize and critique the (abundantly cited) historiography and period literature, interspersed among the recreated conversation or event sections. These are aptly titled with headings such as "diaries," "statements given," "notes," "final draft" (more than once), or day and place identifications of the remembered, shared, and much-elaborated-on conversations or experiences. No two readers of Vierba's text will have the same experience or reaction, but all should marvel at the skill with which multiple perspectives on these three inflexion points of twentieth-century Panama are rendered on the page.

Gloria Rudolf's half-century relationship with Esperanza and her now multigenerational family began as a graduate student pursuing a thesis in anthropology in January 1972 and

<sup>1</sup> Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El señor presidente* (1st ed., Mexico City: Costa-Amic, 1946); Sergio Ramírez, *¿Te dio miedo la sangre?* (1st ed., 1977; reissued, Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica de España, Biblioteca Premios Cervantes, 2018).

has continued with numerous research visits since then. Her closest relationship and collaboration may have been with Esperanza, but Esperanza's five children also provide a unique window on the world of the past half century. While many of Rudolf's conversations with Esperanza appear either quoted or in close paraphrasing, the children's testimony is more often described. They have all witnessed profound transformations, but their most visible gains from and motivations for migration are closely tied to educational access and their quite remarkable achievements. As teenagers, all three daughters—Lety, Sophia, and Viviana—began by retracing their mother's youthful path to domestic work in the city. Both sons were city-bound as well, Tony to work in the construction boom in Panama City, and David to spend sixteen years pursuing and achieving, with parental and sibling support, his dream of ordination as a Catholic priest.

This multigenerational experience and conversation allows Rudolf to paint a picture of how an entire community managed a transition from subsistence agriculture to increasing market farming amid both rapid out-migration and educational achievement. Likewise, predominantly female out-migration is joined to a male inheritance preference for owner-operated market farming. Another distinctive element of this study is the attention paid not only to the double-edged sword of military populism in the Torrijos era, but to more recent sales of building lots to waves of foreign retirees as well as urban, professional Panamanians seeking a (second) home in the mountainous countryside. In comparison to the study of the same time period by Michael Conniff and Gene Bigler, Rudolf paints a far more complex human portrait, with inequality increasing even while the service-sector-dominant popular classes gradually improve their lot through multiple strategies, all tied to rural-to-urban migration and access to higher levels of education.

The hotly debated ideas about the unrivaled authenticity of testimonial literature, or of academics somehow being able to offer unmediated versions of subaltern voices, have lost much of their luster in recent times. Esperanza and her extended family indeed speak, and close attention is given to their memories and retrospective views on their own lives in Panama's past half century. Rudolf accompanies her multivoice text with fourteen textual inserts under the title "A Wider Lens," each painting a picture of larger forces and events shaping the time periods and familial choices. The words, images, and recollections all present many of the same difficulties of interpretation and ideology that have long bedeviled the discipline in the study of archival documents. Whether searching for more reliable, factual, event-based narratives of the older style, as with Peter Pyne's work, or more recent postcolonial or postmodern interrogations of silencing and ideological projections inscribed in both narratives of events and landscapes themselves, as in the works by Marixa Lasso and Vierba, there is no escaping authorial agency no matter how much one may seek to displace or share interpretive authority.

In *Modern Panama: From Occupation to Crossroads of the Americas* Michael Conniff and Gene Bigler provide a detailed analysis of Panama's undeniable success over the past three decades compared to its neighbors and, in fact, much of the rest of the world. Whereas Rudolf's focus was on rural folk, their voices and experiences, this study is decidedly national and urban, focusing in detail on elite politics, macroeconomic strategies, bureaucratic infighting and diplomacy, all driven by the successful transfer to Panamanian authorities of operational control of the canal and its expansion. After an introductory chapter and one on the 1980s and the US invasion that overthrew the Noriega regime, the following seven chapters provide an administration-by-administration narrative of each of the six presidents from 1990 to 2018 (Endara, Pérez Balladares, Moscoso, Torrijos, Martinelli, and Varela), concluding with a decidedly nontraditional chapter

outlining a hypothetical “Fourteen-Day Tour of Panama” that would best demonstrate the recent successes.

The authors open with a straw man of sorts, contrasting their own highly detailed recounting of Panama’s many successes with the typically alarmist forecast by Reagan-era ideologues sounding the alarm about the nation’s supposed incapacity to manage the operation of the canal.<sup>2</sup> A far better comparison or measuring stick is the book by Andrew Zimbalist and John Weeks, which the authors discuss, assessing Panama’s then current state and prospects following the US invasion in 1989.<sup>3</sup> Both texts represent detailed research into the historical trajectory of Panama at similar moments of simultaneously local and global upheaval, with all of the uncertainties inherent to such moments of profound transformation. This text reflects a moment at the high tide of globalization and the growth of the trans-Pacific shipping trade, prior to both the global pandemic and US-China open conflict. Both calamities cast a long shadow over what may seem a rather rosy projection of Panama’s enviable recent past into an increasingly uncertain future. Such a close reading of the literature and commentary generated by and about each administration offers great detail on both state initiatives and local actors. However, any such event-driven and “insider” view of local politics and policy formation can also work against a longer-term structural analysis of the potential weaknesses or challenges for this rightly celebrated turn-of-the-century adaptation.

The authors convincingly document the bases for the many recent successes that Panama’s regional neighbors have long and ruefully recognized.<sup>4</sup> That they have been tied to the spectacular success of the canal administration and trade growth is equally clear throughout. That virtually none of those neighbors have been able to copy that policy success highlights even more the unique role of the canal, trade and finance capital, and the predominance of the service economy.

Given such stark dichotomies between Panama and its neighbors, this reviewer is left to wonder how local political actors were able to avoid so many of the pitfalls of the era. If all the neighbors have struggled with spiraling income inequality and unemployment, drug cartel violence, and the rise of authoritarian populist leaders (of the Right or Left prior to taking power, but remarkably similar thereafter), how did Panama’s political elites defy the odds? How Panama’s growing revenue base avoided becoming embroiled in similar polarization processes spawned by graft, influence peddling, money laundering, and class and regional income inequalities remains something of a mystery.

While the old adage “a rising tide lifts all boats” may well account for much of this, readers are too often left to wonder why elite consensus proved so durable in Panama. Not all of its neighbors were simply sinking ships or uniquely vulnerable to demagogues and drug traffickers. What roles were played by factors such as the weight of the service economy in the labor market; the lack of any powerful union movement or public sector institutions targeted for “market reforms” and downsizing; or the rapid aging of the population without the so-called luxury pensions of the public sector weighing on state finances? Few clues await the reader as to the basis of the well-documented elite consensus over several decades.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Falcoff, *Panama’s Canal: What Happens When the United States Gives a Small Country What It Wants* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew S. Zimbalist and John Weeks, *Panama at the Crossroads: Economic Development and Political Change in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> World Bank data show how rapidly both Panama and Costa Rica have distanced themselves from their neighbors in terms of GDP per capita. From 2000 to 2021, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua have all languished in the \$1,000 to \$5,000 range (in current US dollars), while Costa Rica increased from \$3,789 to \$12,508, and Panama grew even faster, from \$4,060 to \$14,516. See Macrotrends, <https://www.macrotrends.net>.

Both this study and Rudolf's make very clear that the educational, health, and in some cases even housing gains have been substantial for both urban and rural lower classes, no longer only for the middle classes and the Panama City hinterland. However, the impact of these gains on any lessening of income inequality, and the role in the nation's economy of tax avoidance, money parking, and laundering, have been far less impressive or visible. The authors engage most directly with this mixed bag of rapid and polarizing economic growth in a brief section ("Lopsided Economic Growth Continued," 256–260). They show how the country rapidly advanced in terms of macroeconomic indicators while falling behind in both income inequality and human development indices, despite major gains in health indicators and educational attainment, just as Rudolf had earlier documented from her own angle of vision, from the ground up.

Conniff and Bigler document the dramatic expansion of canal activities, trade, and revenue in Panama in the past two decades, alongside the continued dominance of the country's service sector (both formal and informal) and the decline of agriculture amid rapid rural-to-urban migration. The outcomes have been similar, if far less politically polarizing in the short term, to those witnessed in both Costa Rica and the United States. However, exploring or explaining Panama's own logic of inequality generation is not one of the text's strengths. Even when dealing in passing with highly specific issues, such as drug trafficking, policy initiatives are occasionally noted but without explaining how it was that Panama, itself the site of innumerable money-laundering and fiscal-paradise scandals, was successful in pushing much of the drug trade transshipment industry to the North.

The winner of multiple Latin American history book prizes, Marixa Lasso's study of what the canal construction era "erased," or perhaps first buried and then learned to forget, is a deeply researched and powerfully written work firmly situated within the post-modern turn of this generation's historians. It reveals, unearths, and uncovers with a vengeance a modernity erased in order to deny its very existence in the service of the American and Zonian construct of "tropical world backwardness." Its remarkable documentary contributions begin with the interrogation of an overwhelming and suspicious silence about what once was. It then moves on to analyze the ideological project of Western and US imperial versions of modernity and its circumscribed historical memory. This can best be thought of as a long, continuous process of learning to forget rather than remembering Panama's pre-canal history, environment, or urban landscapes hidden under regrown vegetation or beneath the flooded terrain of the Canal Zone engineering design.

*Erased* opens with a brief introduction to the literature on imperial reinventions of colonial realities and histories, leaving more detailed discussions of the theoretical approach to particular events or episodes that follow. The body of the work revolves around two basic questions. First, what sort of pre-canal Panamanian modernity existed along the soon-to-be-transformed transisthmian route; how was it largely destroyed and abandoned by particular choices made in building and administering the canal, and how much ideological effort has it taken since then not to recognize either the full documentary record or the physical and human remains of that earlier society? Second, what was the complex process by which an imperial/colonial ideological construct came to dominate, one that required pre-canal Panama to fit neatly within the Progressive-era dichotomy of civilization versus tropical backwardness, whether in the minds of US imperial authorities or their Panamanian interlocutors?

This latter focus is full of complexity, showing how crudely racist imperialists and social-reform Progressives often shared the same deeply held values firmly set on a common pedestal of "Western civilization," one that somehow did not include Panama or Latin America. Likewise, Panamanian authorities are often portrayed as opposing their nation's reduction to a blank slate being brought into the modern world by the canal project and US oversight. The author rescues from obscurity several of the most inventive defenses of Panamanian republican status, rights, and authority penned by Eusebio Morales, all within

a highly diplomatic and legalist tradition that may well resonate with today's readership, but proved essentially powerless in the face of a resurgent racialized imperialism in the aftermath of World War I. However, these defenses came to employ some of the same civilizational arguments, double-edged swords that would eventually contribute to the process of erasure once the canal became operational and everyone had been invited to "move on" from struggles over sovereignty or authority over supposedly no longer existing spaces and people to the more pressing concerns of trade, taxation, and profit. The author's closing epilogue personalizes the story by recreating her own and others' emotive relationship with and memories of traveling across the transisthmian corridor of the old Canal Zone, first as a child and eventually as the researcher and soon-to-be author of *Erased*.

While this fascinating study sheds brilliant new light on key issues of history and memory, it leaves in place many of the shadows of local Panamanian political history, as with so many other neighboring histories, not just of Colombia but Central America as well. The key issue that is never fully or satisfyingly developed has to do with the enigma of the region's extraordinary role in broad Afro-American political enfranchisement in the early nineteenth century, so quickly turning toward a repressive anti-Black backlash by the end of the century, a process central to the success of the colonial and imperial ideological construct being analyzed throughout this study. Far from any simple acquiescence to segregationist US demands, once the American canal project began in earnest, this was a process with deep local roots throughout the region as well.

There is no little irony here given that the author's earlier study of race and republicanism in Independence-era Colombia is a key source in the remarkable research on Colombia (and Panama as part of the nation prior to 1903) so central to the recent historiography on Afro-Latin America and its precocious political advances. The long overdue recognition in the English-language literature of the mid-nineteenth-century achievements of radical republicanism championed by Afro-Latin Americans is owed largely to the work of James Sanders, who placed Colombia at its very center. However, Sanders offered equally detailed analyses of the defeat and decline of these forces after the 1860s and 1870s, pointing out that as early as the Colombian civil war of 1860–1863 the government of Panama requested that Black Liberal army troops from the Cauca River valley not be allowed to transit through Panama for fear of radical contagion among the local Black population.<sup>5</sup>

Given such early local expressions of racial unease and distrust of Black political ambitions, it seems even more surprising that Lasso spends more time exploring the ways in which US officials mocked and dismissed "black republicanism" (65–68) than the transformation of Panamanian Liberalism toward the sort of anti-Black policies that would be required in order to facilitate the destruction of the towns presumably most identified with that very same Black political expression. There is perhaps well-deserved praise for Liberal Party politicians such as Justo Arosemena, Eusebio Morales, and Carlos Mendoza, who often criticized and resisted the segregationist and exclusionary policies insisted on by US authorities. However, that is but one part of the story. No mention is made of the fact that Mendoza, the first and only African American Liberal Party leader to become president, was forced in 1910 out after only six months in office, no doubt owing

<sup>5</sup> Marixa Lasso, *Myths of Harmony: Race and Republicanism during the Age of Revolution, Colombia, 1795–1831* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); James E. Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race, and Class in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); James E. Sanders, *Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). The reference to Cauca's Black troops is from James E. Sanders, "Citizens of a Free People: Popular Liberalism and Race in Nineteenth-Century Southwestern Colombia," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (2004): 301–2n109. See also Jason McGraw, *The Work of Recognition: Caribbean Colombia and the Postemancipation Struggle for Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).



largely to US segregationist opposition. Moreover, no major Liberal leader under the three administrations of Belisario Porras (1912–1924) publicly challenged rising anti-Black racism.

The lack of any mention of the longer-term context in which the capitulation of local white and mestizo Liberal authorities to imperial segregationist ideology made political sense seems even more inexplicable the closer one gets to the US canal construction era. Lasso fails to mention the public hangings of African American Liberal military figures in Colón in 1885, most notable among them the city's most visible Liberal leader Pedro Prestán, falsely accused of burning down the city and executed despite the constitutional ban on capital punishment. Ignoring these events, part of yet another Colombian civil war, well before the Conservative victory in the War of a Thousand Days or Panama's independence-era fighting of 1903, not to mention the canal construction phase or its subsequent segregationist imperial mandates two or three decades further off in the future, makes it difficult to offer any local context for what amounted to something akin to a slow but steady Black banishment from politics (62–72). It would come as little surprise, then, that the two Panamanian elite members of the land commission, charged with resolving conflicts through indemnification once the canal was being built, would mount such an ineffective defense of the mostly Black displaced residents (171n47).

The two works with the briefest and broadest time frames are a good bit harder to do justice to in few words, not to mention this reviewer's more limited knowledge of the underlying material. Peter Pyne has produced a text of over four hundred pages on the building and operation of the Panama Railroad in the 1850s and 1860s, while James Delgado and his colleagues survey Panama's maritime landscape from pre-Columbian times to the present in a profusely documented (and illustrated) study.

Pyne's is another half-century-long labor of love, begun in the early 1970s when he was a graduate student. It appears in the *Railroads Past and Present* series recently acquired by Indiana University Press, with a foreword by fellow historian Aims McGuinness. No doubt the most interesting sections for most readers will be those on the cosmopolitan laborers who built the railroad and their fate. However, Pyne also provides detailed analyses of the immense engineering challenges of the initial construction phase, particularly on the Atlantic side, the many twists and turns of the financing and commercial operations of the line in both New York and Panama itself, and the increasingly conflictive relations between the railroad concessionaires and the Panamanian and Colombian authorities. These were owing to both the rapid decline of the line's commercial fortunes following its heyday from its completion in the mid-1850s to the opening of the US intercontinental railroad in 1869, and to the firm's monopolizing of economic activities that Panamanians had hoped to benefit from far more directly.

In the author's lengthy chapters on the labor force, his gaze is fixed most firmly on the Irish contingent, fully 21 percent of the roughly 17,500 workers involved (chapters 11 and 12). He is able to provide an extraordinary level of detail on the 3,300 or so Irish-born workers who had been living in the United States, recruited mainly from New York City, New England, and New Orleans, as well as the 360 who came directly from Cork, Ireland, some 130 from its poorhouse (391). His ability to mine the newspaper sources in so many disparate sites is remarkable and testifies to many decades of patient archival work. The estimates of mortality (chapter 10, 358–359) among the various laboring groups are another example of fine-grained research and original findings. He estimates a horrific mortality rate of 28 percent for the Irish, during or shortly after their time on the isthmus in the early 1850s, higher but not radically different from the mortality levels of the other laborer groups, with only the Chinese faring much worse.

Whereas Lasso's insights are those of today's research generation into the silencing power of imperial ideologies and their agents, rediscovering sources on those towns,

trails, and rail lines buried under water or tropical vegetation, Pyne deploys more traditional historiographic tools that are often strikingly refreshing. Whether in the chapters on laborers or those exploring investor and host-government relations and intrigue, Pyne repeatedly distinguishes documentary-grounded sources from often-repeated opinions lacking credible sources or claims made by participants at the time. Pyne is willing to engage in well-informed conjecture or extrapolation, using a whole range of documentation, but he often shows how many biased or popular opinions had no firm basis in fact or even in any statement or document by a participant in or contemporary of the events being referred to. In addition to his painstaking work on the labor force, Pyne debunks the often-repeated claims of a Wild West–style vigilante justice at the hands of the Isthmian Guard (453–458), traceable to the popular journalistic styles of many a would-be bestseller in the travel/adventure genre of the time. He also provides commentary on the intrigue involved in the financing and engineering aspects of the construction phase during its most trying times (134–140), often purposefully misrepresented by those involved in such behind-the-scenes dealmaking. The best of documentary, archival history shows its traditional strengths, revealing where many an errant canonical interpretation came from, at times with as little clothing as the proverbial emperor.

*The Maritime Landscape of the Isthmus of Panamá*, by James P. Delgado, Tomás Mendizábal, Frederick H. Hanselmann, and Dominique Rissolo, is not only the most chronologically ambitious of the works under review but also the only rival of *The Singer's Needle* by Vierba in the variety of disciplines employed. Traditional land-based archaeology, its more novel maritime version with both shipwreck and flooded settlements, familiar from the works by Pyne and Lasso, and documentation from published work and the Archivo de Indias in Seville all have their place in this magnificently illustrated study. Both the University of Florida Press and the authors are to be praised: the former for supporting the inclusion of no less than eighty-one illustrations, and the latter for employing a novel approach to the captions for many of the images. Rather than limiting themselves to brief titles for each image and referring to them within the text or in footnotes that most readers will never find or read, they provide more extensive commentary.

The volume opens with a brief introduction followed by a chapter on pre-Columbian settlement patterns and maritime landscape use, and two on the early sixteenth-century contact and conquest era. The next three focus on the silver-dominated colonial era and the attacks on that trade, followed by individual chapters on the California Gold Rush and Panama railroad era, the French canal project years, and the US canal era. A conclusion summarizes many of the preceding arguments, followed by brief remarks on the Guna history of resistance and autonomy and on twenty-first-century challenges, of sea rise in particular, for that unique aspect of Panama's maritime landscape and history, the Guna Yala (the archipelago of San Blas).

In addition to detailed analyses of archaeological sites and research of many kinds, the authors show how a maritime landscape model or orientation implies a novel perspective. Such a worldview informs not only the authors' work, but more importantly, that of all those inhabitants of what today is Panama who have conceived of their homelands as either defined by the seas and its creatures that border it, or by the interoceanic transit trade uniquely dominant in providing their basic livelihoods.

The most detailed firsthand descriptions are of the colonial-era shipwreck and settlement sites, some of which the authors have been directly involved in studying. The chapters on more recent times are less dependent on excavation and site studies and rely much more on the historical literature. As with the earlier chapters, they are as engagingly written as they are beautifully illustrated, covering an immense literature concisely and suggesting long-term continuities in the aims of this maritime landscaping enterprise. However, as the authors put it, "the return of the Americans" after 1903 marked the most



powerful transformation of the isthmus since the arrival of the Spanish, overwhelming those continuities on a scale and order of magnitude that became gargantuan.

The recent achievements celebrated by the authors notwithstanding, one senses a good deal of frustration and disappointment with the fits and starts of otherwise promising projects. This reviewer's favorite mordant commentary refers to the Porto Bello site: "Some of these interventions were carried out by the Tourism Institute, which managed to construct a parking lot on the ruins of the Concepción nuns' convent and the Museo del Cristo Negro in the San Juan de Dios hospital church (the museum has since closed)" (64, 66). Beyond the frustrations, the authors are quick to point out that Panama, unlike its neighbors to the north, has at least recognized the importance of its sites and taken steps in the right direction.

The authors are well aware of the importance of both silver and the Spanish colonial heritage in contemporary support for excavation work, whether motivated by imagined future tourism revenues or more prosaic historical preservation concerns. Marine archaeologists may be overjoyed to find ceramics, pearl jewelry, or iron goods from swords to nails, but the selling of projects worthy of public funding, just as with the private treasure-recovery industry, depends to some large extent on the romance and intrigue associated with colonial Spanish grandeur rather than recovering mundane if ancient items.

Without any similarly grand historical cachet, such as Spain of the Conquest and the Armada, my own disappointments regarding Afro-Central American historical preservation have been far more predictable: to find a part of the ruins of the Dominican monastery in Amatitlán, Guatemala, home to the iconic Thomas Gage, behind the barbed wire of a tomato field; and the slave quarters of the Jesuit sugar plantation on the other side of town (Rincón de los Negros) planted in corn by its owners. Even the discovery of ivory personal items as trade goods from West Africa beneath the slave-built fort of Omoa in Honduras has failed to generate any public funding for research on the scale it deserves. However, maritime archaeology has had at least one slave-based success story just north of the Caribbean border of Costa Rica and Panama off Punta Cahuita, generating both site excavations and a remarkable historical reconstruction of the shipwreck of Danish slavers and the lives of the survivors.<sup>6</sup> With the recent publication of important new works on the rebel slave communities of early colonial Panama, one can only hope that there, too, site studies will eventually come to include greater interest in African American communities, whether long buried under soil or silt or defined out of existence by erasure or willful neglect.<sup>7</sup> The best traditions of terrestrial as well as maritime archaeology have long focused on mapping human interactions, often using trade networks and the social structures evidenced by such remains. However, the "monumental" bias of both official and popular pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial architectural legacies has led us to venerate above all else the remains of stone buildings, with less interest in those whose lives were spent in wooden or earthen dwellings and spaces. Panama is uniquely positioned to help us move beyond that monumentalist bias.

All the authors of these six studies echo in some fashion the idea most clearly expressed by Conniff and Bigler. Panama has again become a regional standout and an endlessly fascinating place to live, work in, and study from virtually any disciplinary angle, or from several at the same time. Few anticipated this path as the Cold War era came to an end, and since then few turn-of-the-century nations have been as fortunate and

<sup>6</sup> The site has been studied by Professor Lynn Harris and the Maritime Studies Program at East Carolina University, while Russell Lohse follows the survivors of the shipwreck in *Africans into Creoles: Slavery, Ethnicity, and Identity in Colonial Costa Rica* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Robert C. Schwaller, ed., *African Maroons in Sixteenth-Century Panama: A History in Documents* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021); Jean-Pierre Tardieu, *Cimarrones de Panamá: La forja de una identidad afroamericana en el siglo XVI* (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2009).

resourceful. The uncommonly abundant historical knowledge being generated in and on Panama today constitutes both a renaissance of interest and a valuable resource, whatever the future may hold.

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