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**THE PAN AMERICAN HIGHWAY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LATIN AMERICAN INTEGRATION**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

with an emphasis in LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO STUDIES

by

Rosa Elena Ficek

June 2014

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Abstract

The Pan American Highway: An Ethnography of Latin American Integration

Rosa Elena Ficek

This dissertation approaches Latin American integration through the Pan American Highway. While integration, the process by which communities are imagined and social collectivities take shape, has often been understood as a regional economic and political process, this dissertation uses ethnographic insights to understand how people's lived experiences on the Pan American Highway inform integration at national, regional, and hemispheric scales. Based on fieldwork in eastern Panama, the only location where the highway has yet to be completed, as well as archival research in Panama and the United States, this study traces mobility practices along the highway: the migrations, displacements, travels, and everyday commutes it facilitates, and also the planning, construction and maintenance activities that make the highway possible. Engaging postcolonial studies, science and technology studies, and the anthropology of mobility, this dissertation charts how the highway creates connections between people and landscapes, enables the movement of tangible and intangible things, and produces encounters across difference that nonetheless create common, if unequal, ground. Understanding integration through the Pan American Highway offers a way to make sense of the multiple and competing dreams and desires that, through movements and encounters, create uneven forms of togetherness.

By arguing that large-scale modern projects such as the highway may be traced through their linkages to other projects operating at other scales (such as nation-building projects) in order to understand their power and lively heterogeneity, and by arguing that connections and movements across the Americas must always be situated within a material landscape (that is, by arguing that social processes in Latin America cannot be understood as culture exclusive of nature), this dissertation contributes to understandings of modernity and coloniality in America, and of how these configurations—best illustrated by the idea of a smooth, straight road to progress—may change, just as the movements, surfaces, and landscapes of the Pan American Highway are also in constant and lively transformation.

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At the University of California, Santa Cruz, Hugh Raffles was the first to say yes to the highway and helped bring this unwieldy project to life. Anna Tsing offered guidance through the project's ups and downs, sharing in the excitement of figuring things out. Lisa Rofel, Mark Anderson, and Andrew Matthews read multiple versions and contributed insights that helped develop the argument and ethnography. I am also

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Preface

How does Latin America become? A strange question for anthropology to ask. What can a discipline grounded in local specificities possibly contribute to understandings of something as enormous as a world region (also dream-utopia, and institutionalized area of study)? These times of crisis—as they are often characterized in popular and academic discourse—cast doubt over the future of capitalism and modernity, along with their institutions and categories, calling for an understanding of the new social formations being assembled out of heterogeneous encounters and disjunctures. They call for an understanding of emerging worlds. And anthropology, with its attention to race, exchange, nature, myth, bodies and body politics, is well positioned to offer insights about the patterns of power shaping new ways of being and belonging at multiple scales. The question is how—how to use anthropological insights grounded in the small and specific to tell a story about big changes.

I address these questions through an ethnography of the Pan American Highway in eastern Panama, in a place called Darien. Considered ethnographically and historically, the Pan American Highway helps explain how modern Latin America took shape, as well as how current transformations (glossed as neoliberalism and globalization) are changing the region's shape, experience and possibilities.

The Pan American Highway conjured dreams of Latin American solidarity and cooperation in the wake of the region's independence from Europe. Redefining boundaries, the highway helped create political and economic ties *within* rather than across the Atlantic with external European powers, and in this sense could be

considered a project of decolonization. But paradoxically, the highway was also an imperial project driven by the United States' drive for hemispheric hegemony, and the discourses of civilization and development that came attached to that effort. The Pan American Highway seems even stranger when considered in relation to the nation-building projects through which sections of the highway were constructed. In eastern Panama, where the ethnography for this dissertation is based, highway construction was funded and supervised by the United States and built by a North American company, yet the highway was also part of the nationalist Panamanian government's quest to modernize and decolonize. How do these contradictions give shape to forms of belonging in Latin America, both historically and in the present conjuncture? And how do the people who plan, build, and use the highway enact and negotiate the multiple and competing dreams caught up in its promise of integration?

The Pan American Highway linked Panama's eastern frontier—the borderlands between Panama and Colombia, and between North and South America—to Panama City, the economic and political center of power. This, too, is part of the highway's puzzle. Highway migration precipitated encounters between different races, different agricultural practices, and different ways of life. Yet, the highway did not erase these differences through assimilation. How can the highway bring together both practices of crafting sameness and of recognizing difference?

These are the questions that drive this dissertation. In answering them, I seek to understand the highway and its project of togetherness through the familiar lenses of race, citizenship, and political economy. But I also take up lenses that, if familiar

to anthropologists are not often utilized together, for reasons that will become clear in subsequent pages: place and mobility. It is through mobility that the highway enables communities (places, after all) to be imagined and enacted. It creates connections between people and landscapes, enables the movement of tangible and intangible things, and produces encounters across difference that nonetheless create common, if unequal, ground. I refer to this process as *integration*, and in integration lies this dissertation's contribution: a way to make sense of the multiple and competing dreams that, through movements and encounters, create uneven forms of togetherness.

In broad strokes, this dissertation engages anthropology of mobility and place, postcolonial studies, science and technology studies, and Latin American studies. These interlocutors offer perspectives on region-making that help understand integration and the Pan American Highway. Mass media such as television, books and radio have been good for thinking about how technologies—including roads—transform experiences of space and time and help create imagined communities. In his study of nationalism, Benedict Anderson shows how the circulation of print media in capitalist contexts can both agglomerate and differentiate groups of people based on their language.¹ As he explains in the European case, linguistic diversity was at once an obstacle to nationalism that print media could overcome by homogenizing vernaculars, and also a way for publishers to find new markets made possible by linguistic diversity. In contemporary Latin America, communications scholar Jesús

¹ Anderson (2006).

Martín-Barbero extends these insights to more directly address the cultural politics of capitalism. Shifting analysis away from media messages (up to then often analyzed as ideological domination) Martín-Barbero instead focuses on the “mediations,” that is, the resignifications and cultural appropriations that take place through everyday life and that constitute identities and communities. He argues that, rather than a purely commercial or ideological manipulation, mass media is a cultural phenomenon through which people create meaning in their lives, albeit within a hegemonic system.² This perspective informs my approach to the Pan American Highway; I consider not only the ideological conflicts that shape the highway, but also how quotidian, everyday engagements with the highway have the power to shape integration.

The approach to region-making and integration put forth in this dissertation also draws from the insights of *longue-durée* histories and Latin American postcolonial thought. Fernand Braudel’s work has been foundational for thinking about the large-scale social patterns that shape worlds.³ *The Mediterranean* shows how political events undertaken by authoritative human actors (what could perhaps be called History) are but a small part of the more-than-human rhythms and cycles that conform a region, set in motion through things such as trade routes, migrations, climates, and geographical formations like deserts and mountains.

² Martín-Barbero (1987).

³ Braudel (1996).

Longue durée histories inform world-systems theory, which in turn informs much of what can be termed Latin American postcolonial thought today.⁴ The concept of Americanness, as developed by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and world-systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein, helps clarify some of these connections.⁵ They argue that the Americas played a key role in making the capitalist world economy that began to emerge in the sixteenth century by geographically expanding the size of the (Eurocentric) world and offering a space to test methods of labor control in various systems of production (plantations and so on). Americanness is an essential element of modernity that contributed four things to the world system: *Coloniality*, a pervasive pattern of power that arranges societies into a hierarchy with Europeans at the top and non-Europeans at the bottom, and creates rules of interaction between social sectors and between states. *Ethnicity*, they argue, emerged as a social boundary-maker that justified forms of labor control within this hierarchy, but that also led to political upheavals, rebellions, and resistances. Americanness also contributed formal *racism* to the world-system, which emerged as a way to reinforce colonial hierarchies in the face of these challenges to colonial order. Finally, with the New World came also a celebration and reification of *newness* and all that is modern. And in this obsession with the new, historical depth was sacrificed (which is why Braudel is so important).

⁴ “Latin American postcolonial thought” is an expansive category that refers to the dialogues that examine coloniality and power in Latin America. It is not meant to subsume this body of thought under other intellectual traditions, but rather to point out the connections between Latin American postcolonial thought and other traditions, such as Anglophone Caribbean discourse and subaltern studies in south Asia.

⁵ Quijano and Wallerstein (1992).

In Quijano and Wallerstein's account Americanness began with peripheral dependency, yet their understanding of the region refuses to be limited to political economy, and extends to consider how economy, race and ethnicity (heterogeneity), and yes, even dreams come to be entwined in the making of the Americas. The colonial division of labor organized human heterogeneity along ethnic lines. The liveliness of this heterogeneity constantly threatened to undo these social hierarchies through manifold forms of opposition and resistance, leading to institutionalized racism, and showing how capitalism and racialization are related. This instability—stemming from the contradiction between colonial hierarchies and lively heterogeneity—constitutes Americanness's potential. Quijano and Wallerstein see a future where the divergent trajectories of the United States and Latin America (divergences that they suggest are the result of different attitudes towards the incorporation of Indians into colonial society) can help solve each other's problems by combining the U.S.'s utopia of equality and individual liberty with the Latin American utopia of reciprocity, solidarity and direct democracy. Americanness, then, is also the dream of breaking with the hierarchies of racism and dependency, social orderings that themselves were constructed to harness the power of this heterogeneity made lively by global encounters. America's constitutive heterogeneity is its nightmare but also the messy ingredients for a different kind of dream.

The relevance of this intervention for understanding integration in Latin America lies in its discussion of the pervasive colonial patterns of power that characterize the region, and in how this is done in a way that acknowledges the

divergent but related histories of the United States and Latin America. As a project that works to organize racial and ethnic difference, that works through relationships of dependency, and that configures relationships between the U.S. and Latin America in specific ways, the Pan American Highway's place in the history of Americanness is easy to discern. And as a modern project—as a concrete thing in the world—the highway presents the opportunity to understand the patterns that shape Americanness on the ground, and how these on-the-ground practices shape forms of belonging that negotiate the borders and hierarchies of coloniality (and its underside, modernity⁶), and that determine America's place in the world.

A turn, now, from thinking big *longue durées* and world systems to thinking small—to ethnography, and the nuts and bolts of the *how*. Insights from science and technology studies show how modern projects are made up of connections and negotiations among more-than-human actors. *Aramis*, Bruno Latour's study of a failed mass transport system in Paris, helps think of modern projects beyond the conventional comparison of what a project sets out to do versus how it turns out in reality. It shows how projects can be understood by tracing the way actors connect through networks and how through these relations, projects happen.⁷ Latour positions modern projects not as stable coherent objects but as processes of constant connection and negotiation. Timothy Mitchell's work on Egyptian techno-politics also shows how projects come about through the work of humans and nonhumans, but emphasizes the interruptions and unintended happenings that tend to get erased, along

⁶ For a history of this concept see Mignolo (2011).

⁷ Latour (1996).

with nonhumans, from expert accounts.⁸ This openness to contingency, and the attunement to power in postcolonial settings, carries over to my study of the Pan American Highway.

Place and mobility,⁹ two of the central focuses of this dissertation, are often framed as mutually exclusive categories. Part of the problem has to do with how there is not much room for *place* in the anthropology of globalization. Marc Augé's idea of non-places illustrates this quite well: airports, supermarkets and highways are historyless and temporary sites of transit characterized by anonymous encounters with words and texts.¹⁰ The globalized compressions of space and time create spaces defined by movement but these conceptual compressions also crush out possibilities to analyze place. But the problem goes deeper than debates over globalization to anthropology itself, with its Malinowskian legacy of intensive stays in nonmetropolitan field sites. Culture emerges from dwelling in a presumably stable place; travel is something else, not culture, antithetical to place. This is precisely the set of persistent associations James Clifford works to complicate in *Routes*. Like Augé, Clifford insists on the importance of movement for understanding the modern world, but in a way that refuses to sacrifice history, and that aims to understand

⁸ Mitchell (2002).

⁹ Throughout this dissertation I refer to movement and mobility somewhat interchangeably, though the two terms have valences that are worth teasing out: While mobility is a convenient keyword—it carries well across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and transport history—mobility as “the ability to move” holds with it connotations about universal rights that do not work well with anthropological agendas to decenter Western modernity. The less loaded term “movement” avoids some of this.

¹⁰ Augé (1995).

culture and movement together—what he calls dwelling-in-travel.¹¹ Place and mobility are not mutually exclusive, after all. Culture is made through movement as much as through dwelling-in-place. And a key aspect of this culture-making is that it is produced and sustained through encounter, rather than from eternally stable, essential elements.

Engseng Ho links mobility to the crafting of what he calls “social collectivity,” which is similar to my use of imagined community or region to think about Latin America through the Pan American Highway. In *The Graves of Tarim*, Ho follows itineraries of places (a geography of diaspora) and itineraries of people through time (genealogies, lineages) to show how a society is made by movements across the Indian Ocean.¹² Critical of the teleology of progress reintroduced by the anthropology of mobility, Ho eschews the speed and compression of globalization in favor of the slow, long-term expansions of diasporic mobility, describing a rich and multi-layered seascape composed of different threads of mobility that include traveling texts, ways of life, rituals, pilgrimages, trade routes, wars, and kinship ties. Ho’s *longue durée* approach allows him to understand non-Western mobility by showing how this diaspora exceeds the presence of colonialism and capitalism in this seascape. The diaspora he studies contends with empires and states that seek to fracture it, as well as the diaspora’s own distinct projects of crafting social collectivity. This bi-focal attention to internal divisions and external rivalries transfers well to the Latin American situation in which the Pan American Highway raises

¹¹ Clifford (1997:2).

¹² Ho (2006).

questions about difference and solidarity both within the region (and within nations), and between Latin America and the United States.

Finally, Tim Ingold's concept of wayfaring also contributes to the perspective on mobility and place-making put forth in this dissertation. Like Clifford and Ho, Ingold sees places as defined by movement. He distinguishes between two types of movement: Wayfaring refers to movements through and with the world; it involves active engagement with the surrounding environment. In contrast, transport involves the movement of people and goods from point to point in such a way that the things in motion remain unaffected by the travel—they “barely skim the surface of the world.”¹³ Attention to the ways movement involves engagement with the world underneath, over, and all around a pathway offers a way to approach integration on the Pan American Highway as a more-than-human process.

The research methods of this study draw from archival and ethnographic sources. During the summers of 2005 and 2008 I accessed documents pertaining to the hemispheric Pan American Highway project at the Columbus Memorial Library of the Organization of American States' central office in Washington, D.C., as well as at the United States Library of Congress. These repositories primarily yielded maps, tourist guides, and the reports of the Pan American Highway Congresses held roughly every four years for the better part of the twentieth century. I also consulted archival resources in Panama that more directly related to the history of the Pan American Highway in eastern Panama and the province of Darien. I read the yearly reports of

¹³ Ingold (2011:150).

the Ministry of Public Works, partly located in the Ministry's archives and partly located at the National Archives; the library at the Ministry of Foreign Relations holds documents about the environmental controversy that prevented the highway from being completed to Colombia; the National Library's newspaper archive provided press coverage of the highway's construction that revealed attitudes about Darien's integration. I consulted these Panamanian archives at the same time I conducted fieldwork in Darien, traveling often between my rented home in Darien and the capital city. Between archival research and fieldwork, I spent 30 months in Panama and Darien, from 2008 to 2011.

Ethnographies of Darien are few, histories even more rare.¹⁴ Of the highway and the transformations it brought about, a paragraph here and there, mostly written in the 1970s and 1980s—that is, mostly written at the beginning of the colonization process that brought migrants to Darien along the highway, changing the social order. To understand this process I conducted oral histories of migration and community formation. These 55 interviews on the history of 21 roadside communities usually began by inquiring about a person or family's migration story and usually ended with a discussion of the recent changes they perceive in the region. All persons interviewed were located through personal references. They usually involved a leisurely afternoon visit (usually Sundays, when people were likely to be home and

¹⁴ Ethnographic sketches include Heckadon Moreno, Herrera and Pastor Núñez (1982), Pastor Núñez (1998), Sarmiento Chia (1985); Méndez (1979) offers a picture of mid-twentieth century Darien written by a local intellectual; see also the monographs by Kane (1994), Torres de Araúz (1975), Wali (1989). Historical works on Darien (the Panamanian side) include Castellero Calvo (1987) and García Casares (2008).

not working at the farm) on the front porch or the occasional lunch invitation. Interviews with a single person were rare—inevitably family members and neighbors wandered over, listened for a while, interjected, shared a story or two, raised questions, and came and went as they got on with their business. In this way, even though most families deferred to the father when initially approached, over the course of the interview the voices of women and younger generations were also heard. Many times, and fortuitously, my inquiries into family or community histories turned out to be also histories of highway construction—many of the men who worked building the highway in the 1970s were the first to claim lands and settle the area; in this way, the study also includes interviews with construction workers.

When not researching local history I documented mobility practices along the highway. Ample time was spent riding in local minibuses and taxis, observing and conversing with drivers and other passengers. Sometimes fieldwork took place as I was on my way to an interview, or an event to which I had been invited. But often, the ride itself was the point—many days were spent meeting the minibus early in the day, staying with the driver through the morning, lunching, and then taking a few more trips in the afternoon until the driver decided to call it a day. I also documented mobility between Darien and Panama City. This route is plied by a different kind of vehicle: the *diablos rojos* (red devils), former U.S. school buses that have been modified and vividly painted for collective transport. Trips to the archives in the city afforded excuses to ride the bus, or get rides from local folk, and critically, allowed for the observation of highway checkpoints (and here, too, I spent many hours,

watching and asking things of guards, inspectors, and immigration officials). Checkpoints were not the only obstacles to mobility I encountered—the frequent roadblocks by communities demanding things from the government (teachers, aqueducts, collective lands) and the yearly floods that suspended communication between Darien and Panama City also formed part of the study. From the time I arrived in Darien in November 2008 to the highway rehabilitation project's completion in April 2009, when the deteriorated Pan American Highway was paved with asphalt, I was able to observe roadwork. Because many laborers came from local communities, I was able to gather accounts of the work from the perspective of workers themselves, as well as from the engineers who were involved in the sustainable development project of which the highway's rehabilitation was a part. Informal conversations were the key mode of engagement here. Several days shadowing a dump truck driver as he went back and forth between quarry and road construction site also shed light on the mechanics—and politics—of integration by directing my attention to the relationship between workers and supervisors, and to the intricacies of building a highway out of—and with—the surrounding environment.

Institutional collaborations also enhanced my understanding of Darien and the highway. The Centro de Gestión Local (CEGEL), an umbrella organization, was working at the time of fieldwork to promote locally-controlled tourism in indigenous and afrodescendent communities, most of which are located on Darien's rivers, and invited me to workshops helping local organizations create and maintain hiking trails and other touristic attractions. While not directly related to the highway the folks at

the CEGEL and the events it hosted helped me understand Darien beyond the highway settlers' point of view. I realized it was impossible to understand the highway without understanding the rivers beyond. From April to June 2010, and August to October 2011, I traveled Darien's rivers (mostly the Tuira and Chucunaque) as a volunteer for the Programa VIDA-ACNUR, an effort by the Vicariate of Darien and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees to improve the lives of Colombian refugees in Darien through activities ranging from a bilingual education program to start-up money for small businesses (restaurants, usually), to donations of volleyballs and team jerseys. It should be said that for a U.S. citizen such as myself, access to these parts of Darien is limited—the highway checkpoints lead you to river checkpoints, and rarely are non-Darienitas allowed to go past the end of the road. And yet, without these experiences my conclusions about the highway would not have been the same.

This dissertation organizes what I learned from the field and the archives in roughly chronological order, though the time periods covered in each chapter often overlap. Neither do the chapters treat discrete sections of the highway individually; rather, each chapter should be considered a particular enactment of the highway brought about by a particular set of actors, events and discourses. And each chapter links the big with the small, the hemispheric with the always-local. Sometimes this is done by tracing the *articulations* of the highway project (showing, for instance, how activities on the highway inform both national and hemispheric integration); sometimes these linkages are achieved through *resonances* (e.g., highway

colonization in eastern Panama resonates with other forest frontiers in Central America and Amazonia; the tripartite racial order in Darien, a legacy of colonial structures, has variants across the Americas).

Chapter 1, *The Pan American Highway*, traces the emergence of this hemispheric project through the Pan American Highway Congresses, gatherings of engineers and diplomats charged with coordinating and advancing highway efforts, and through this history, puts forth a theory of integration based on movement, connection, and encounters across difference. After outlining the conflicts between Latin American and U.S. interests that shaped the highway, the chapter suggests the highway and other modern projects can be understood by tracing the articulations that draw together heterogeneous elements into an assemblage—the subsequent chapters trace how the hemispheric highway project articulated with a nation-building project in order to get constructed, and illustrate with ethnography and history the ways integration works.

Chapter 2, *The Darien Highway*, shows how the Pan American Highway linked with the 1970s Panamanian nation-building project that pursued state-led modernization in an idiom of conquest. For planners, engineers, and other technical experts, the Darien Highway would integrate the Darien frontier into a Panamanian order of things characterized by mestizo cattle culture and pastures as far as the eye could see. However, the articulations of the Panamanian nation-building vision with the imperial interests the U.S. pursued through the very same road construction project led to the highway's undoing. Cattle—brought into this history as the agents

of highway conquest—also presented the threat of foot and mouth disease to livestock industries in Central and North America, and prevented the highway from being completed. Integration, understood in this time and place as the domestication of wilderness, works through ideas of human mastery over nature but proves itself vulnerable to interruptions effected by the very actors it seeks to recruit and subsume.

Chapter 3, *The Main Street*, begins to trace the effects of the incomplete highway as it was abandoned by the state and later, in the 2000s, taken up by an ambitious development project that sought to promote private property and governability in Darien, all of which would be made possible by a rehabilitated highway whose surface was finally paved with asphalt. For development planners and other state actors, the vision of integration had shifted from a highway landscape of pastures and farms to one of foreign-owned teak plantations and large ranches owned by powerful people. The timeline of progress of which the road is a concrete manifestation casts aside colonos who learned in the days of abandonment to challenge their marginalization by traveling on the highway regardless of its deteriorated and muddy conditions. However, by insisting the highway is their Main Street, colonos challenge the notion of integration as the extraction of resources, drawing attention to their subaltern histories of struggle that constitute the underside of highway development and integration. Paying attention to the surface of the highway, like the colonos do, points to other histories—human and more—that operate alongside (and entangled with) the timeline of progress but that refuse to be erased by the smooth silences of a modern road.

Chapter 4, *Riverways and the Highway*, addresses racial differences the highway's integration project set out to overcome. It shows how it is impossible to understand the highway without understanding the rivers beyond—that is, without understanding the forms of difference (which are about race and ways of life) that enable and support the highway as it works to create Panamanian citizens out of indigenous and afrodescendent Darienitas. The highway created a racialized and spatialized order of things that segregated Darienitas on the rivers from mestizo colonos on the highways; however, the lively histories of migration and seasonal movements in Darien shows how this order is constantly undermined by troubling easy distinctions between Highway Darien and River Darien.

Chapter 5 on the Internal Routes continues to trace the effects of the unfinished highway by showing how the differences between colonos, Darienitas and Colombians is worked out along the highway itself, among roadside residents, construction workers, and everyday local travelers who ride the minibuses of Darien's Internal Routes. Difference is negotiated through movement itself; integration needs to be understood not at abstract, international borderlines but along the borders that are the routes themselves—the highway. Always engaged with the material landscape, colonos learned to navigate the road as if it were a river, suggesting how they managed to make Darien a little more Panamanian but also how Darien managed to make colonos a little more Darienita. Attention to the conflicts and negotiations involved in movement itself shows how the highway's project of integration can be reoriented in unexpected directions.

Chapter 6, the Ruta Panama-Darién, follows the Pan American Highway as it articulates with a hemispheric security project that involves the United States and Latin American governments in a hemispheric war on drugs. This integration, in which illicit circulations work alongside free trade, works in the tensions generated by the need to reduce barriers to trade on the one hand, and the need for states to control these movements, on the other hand. Integration, understood through Darién's local history but also through the hemispheric history of trade liberalization over the past thirty years, produces both undocumented migration and illegal drug trades; however, it cannot control these flows, only play a part in redirecting them.

Altogether, these chapters show how integration works through heterogeneous projects that are open to contingency, interruption, and subject to constant negotiation, and vulnerable to interruptions that can overthrow its modern objectives. By arguing that large-scale modern projects such as the highway may be traced through their linkages to other projects operating at other scales in order to understand their terrible power and lively heterogeneity, and by arguing that connections and movements across the Americas must always be situated within a material landscape (that is, by arguing that social processes in Latin America cannot be understood as culture exclusive of nature), this dissertation contributes to understandings of modernity and coloniality in America, and of how these configurations—best illustrated by the idea of a smooth, straight road to progress—may change, just as the movements, surfaces, and landscapes of the Pan American Highway are also in constant and lively transformation.

1. La Panamericana – The Pan American Highway

America Latin America Our América Latinoamerica The Americas El Continente North South Central Peripheral Here There Neither. Navigational coordinates incommensurable: Yemayá, ocean. Pachamama, earth. Guadalupe wrapped in stars. On edge, at the edge, great movements destabilize the order of the larga noche de los quinientos años.

The geobody changes shape, redrawing borders, redirecting dreams, calling into question what is known about America, how these things are known, and what is to be done. Transitions to democracy at the end of the twentieth century signaled, finally, the beginning of a new era of autonomy, cooperation, equality, and justice. Utopia again a possibility.

At the same time, everything seems to be coming undone. Multicultural movements rattle the continent, de-mixing nations once homogenized by mestizaje. Privatization and deregulation dismantle the legacies of state-led modernization. Regional alliances challenge agendas formulated in Washington. Migrants displaced by free trade organize across borders to redefine citizenship. International boundaries become war zones.

Formerly self-evident bodies—Latin America, (the United States of) America—fall apart with the irruption of new subjectivities, new actors, and new territories that trouble the once-familiar categories of nation, region, and continent. Amidst disintegration of the modern social worlds constituted during the twentieth

century, new worlds take shape, assembling fragments and residues, connecting across difference, arranging heterogeneity in ways, it is hoped, that avoid the conjoined violences of coloniality and modernity that have structured the Americas for long enough. The stakes could not be higher. These new worlds, and the ways they are assembled—their integration—are the decisive sites of political struggle for Latin/America in the twenty-first century.

New ways of creating togetherness must critically examine the relationship between emergent worlds and previous political formations. To eschew understanding of modern integrationist projects—precisely at the moment they are coming undone—runs the risk of ignoring the power of colonial entanglements that continue to inform contemporary inequities. Often thought of as useless, outdated, or defunct pursuits that never fully realized, old projects of American togetherness leave their mark on landscapes and imaginations, structuring life in significant but perhaps unnoticed ways. And they may still prove useful in building the worlds that will come.

Imagining Community Through the Pan American Highway

The transformation of European colonies into American republics had a profound impact on the world. These revolutions and their aftermaths created the first models of modern nation-states, unleashing a form of togetherness that would structure diverse forms of life in unprecedented and enduring ways. But there is another story that emerged from these wars of independence—another way of

imagining community—that for the most part has been forgotten. Revolutionary creoles conjured an *American* consciousness that cut across the administrative divides created by imperial Spain. Americans were a new kind of being, and they needed a new kind of world. This other mode of imagining community could have led to something else, perhaps a continental political formation, but for many reasons it took the route of nation-states. However, despite having been pushed aside by nation-states, that possibility of a *something else* continues to shape understandings of belonging and of the region's place in the world.

Dreams of integrating the Americas found expression in the Pan American Highway, a project to link the Americas with a road stretching from Argentina to Alaska that captured the imaginations of political leaders, engineers, and potential motorists. Built over the course of the twentieth century, the Panamericana promised to overcome the geographical vastness that had played a role in impeding earlier attempts to unite the Americas, and, along the way, bridge differences of material wealth, political orientation and race. Prior to the highway, travels within and especially between countries were arduous journeys that took months and involved any combination of mule trails, steamships, rivers, wagon roads, and hanging bridges. By enabling communication across territories in a way previously not viable, the Pan American Highway made America thinkable and knowable in a new way. A modern way. It reduced travel times and ushered in new forms of public transport, forged connections between growing urban centers and rural areas, and connected political centers internationally by linking fragmented national road networks to each other,

thus promising to fulfill the dream of continental unity first expressed in anti-colonial struggles for independence. The highway restructured time and space in its process of creating an imagined community of hemispheric proportions.

Imagined communities are made possible by movement and difference. Movement—such as the circulation of newspapers, the oral travels of a verse, or the migration of people—establishes avenues of communication that lead people to locate themselves within a shared space and time.¹ Movements and the encounters they produce create new forms of consciousness. In the early nineteenth century, the circuit of political conversations in salons and other spaces of elite socialization, where manuscripts, books and letters were read out loud and discussed, fashioned a collective American patriotic sentiment that demanded greater political power. As the war escalated and temporary forms of self-government were established, leaders seeking legitimation through propaganda sent out official proclamations, broadsheets, manifestos, and letters directed at those whose political orientations might be different. These traveling documents connected American cities across long distances.² Their circulation was sustained, as in the case of salons, by networks of kinship and friendship that allowed writings and news to be passed along from place to place. Later, insurgent troops marched through cities, haciendas, villages, deserts, mountains, forests, and rivers. These movements, and the resulting encounters across geographic, racial, and class divides, also contributed to the formation of this new

¹ Anderson (2006). For evaluations of Anderson's work in the Latin American context see Castro-Klarén and Chasteen (2003) and Miller (2006).

² See Guerra (2003:4), who notes in the discourse of independence the frequent references to *América*, in contrast to the rare use of *nation*.

American subject distinct from Europe.³

The Pan American Highway promised to build on these foundational movements of people and ideas across space, constituting the infrastructure of an imagined community that, if fragmented into modern nationalisms, also continued to dream of something bigger. The highway's extensive and transnational network of roads worked to shape this imagined community precisely through movement and communication. Yet movement by itself is not enough to imagine a community, let alone bring it into being. Movements inevitably create encounters and negotiations across difference. Imagined communities must work with this heterogeneity, arranging disparate peoples into a common timeline and delimiting a shared space in which both collective history and daily rhythms unfold. Imagined communities are produced through the work of integration—of moving, connecting, but also creating order out of the heterogeneity encountered.

The years spanning the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth century, when the Pan American Highway project took shape and force, were a critical time whose transformations would have consequences far into the future. In the throes of formation, American states consolidated power and cultivated nationalisms within a complex landscape of heterogeneity that required grappling with the threat of European empire (or the promise of European collaboration, particularly British), the beginnings of U.S. expansion, internal ideological

³ Based on Castro-Klarén (2003), who describes this new subjectivity as “a sense of a shared and restricted life experience lived on a commonly possessed territory and within a set of trans-temporal and trans-individual cultural parameters” (32).

differences, as well as the possibility of subaltern uprisings. Relations within and between states were characterized by great uncertainty over what direction the organization of the Americas would take, who and what would be included, and under what terms.

All of these concerns, which arise out of the problems of connecting across difference to build an imagined American community, found expression in the Pan American Highway and debates over its planning, construction and use. The appeal was undeniable: in contrast to the horizontal, outward-oriented lines of railways swiftly transporting sugar, bananas, beef, tin, copper and more to ports and then shipped overseas—an image of open veins bleeding the continent dry—the idea of a longitudinal highway linking the Americas to each other, making them more cohesive, promised a lifeline to civilization infused with the prosperity and democracy worthy of a new world. At the same time, the project provoked among Latin Americans concerns over the unequal relationships a better and more direct connection to the United States could imply.

Highway Dreams

The Pan American Highway project was a world in and of itself, complete with official Congresses where engineers from all over the Americas met regularly every four years between 1925 and 1991, with an executive branch instituted in

1954.⁴ Mexico and South American governments constructed their sections of the highway primarily during the 1930s and 1940s, and Central American governments constructed their sections of the highway in collaboration with the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, though construction continues to this day.⁵



Figure 1. 1927 map of Pan American Highway for members of U.S. Congress⁶

⁴ Approximately every four years. There was a ten-year gap between 1941 and 1951 because of the war. The archival trail goes cold in 1991.

⁵ Canada was not part of early conversations about the Pan American Highway and was incorporated into the highway system with the Alaska Highway built during World War II.

⁶ Anesi (1938).

From its beginning, the idea of a road integrating the Americas was tied up in an emergent system of regional organization dominated by the United States. A Pan American Railroad was first officially proposed in 1890 at the first International American Conference, a diplomatic meeting convened in Washington by the United States and which would later evolve into the Pan American Union and then the Organization of American States. José Martí, the Cuban intellectual and independence fighter who chronicled the conference for an Argentinean newspaper, warned readers of the threat this new closeness could represent. “Never, in America” he wrote, “has there been a matter requiring more good judgment or more vigilance, or demanding a clearer and more thorough examination, than the invitation which the powerful United States (glutted with unscalable merchandise and determined to extend its dominions in America) is sending to the less powerful American nations (bound by free and useful commerce to the European nations) for purposes of arranging an alliance against Europe and cutting off transactions with the rest of the world.”⁷

The International American Conference and subsequent meetings in this tradition were an extension of efforts to expand U.S. capital, and thus the conference discussed hemispheric infrastructure in addition to arbitration and standardization. But there was more to it than trade. Though an American identity—as it was formulated by the United States—depended on the expulsion of European powers from Latin American markets, the Pan Americanism that developed at the end of the

⁷ José Martí, “The Washington Pan-American Congress,” *La Nación*, 19-20 Dec. 1889, in Foner (1975).

nineteenth century also embraced a civilizing mission, revealing assumptions about Latin American inferiority that justified U.S. hegemony. Influenced by racist and Darwinian theories of the time, U.S. Americans began to see themselves as responsible for the uplift of backward and decadent Latin Americans. In this way, the U.S. positioned Latin Americans as potential equals but also racially different. The two world wars of the first half of the twentieth century imbued in Pan Americanism a discourse of peace and interdependence that drew from the groundwork laid by the Monroe Doctrine and its insistence on security on a hemispheric scale, meaning security and access to Latin American resources enforced by U.S. military and naval power.⁸ The road project, which was reconfigured as the Pan American Highway at the fifth International American Conference of 1923, embodied the tensions generated by Pan Americanism and competing hemispheric designs.⁹ Pan Americanism, as it was formulated in the United States, positioned the highway as the extension and culmination of the Bolivarian dream, creating a common history for all the Americas.¹⁰ Pan Americanism also attempted to reconfigure space, imagining a closed American neighborhood characterized by middle-class, white, Christian, suburban prosperity and its close relationship to U.S. car culture, roads, and related

⁸ See Berger (1993), Gilderhus (1986), Coates (2014), Murphy (2005).

⁹ An international committee continued to work on the Pan American Railway at the same time that the Pan American Highway idea took off; eventually, but not soon, people lost interest in the railway project. The conference was very controversial—the US pursued economic agreements beneficial to the US, while Latin Americans opposed an exclusively commercial purpose for the Pan American Union, and wanted to create structures for multilateral political governance (Inman 1924).

¹⁰ See, for example, the address by Harold M. Randall, Chairman of the Inter-American Economic and Social Council, at a 1958 meeting: Permanent Executive Committee of the Pan American Highway Congress, *3rd meeting, Washington, D.C., 1958, Final Act and Appendices*, page 36, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

industries.¹¹ The highway promised to make this dream of hemispheric modernity a reality, facilitating contact across nations and races, allowing people not just to trade, but to travel and through these travels, come to know a common history and a common geography.

Many Latin Americans—unable to ignore the history of U.S. westward expansion and genocide, and the territorial gains of the U.S. after the Mexican-American War and the Spanish-American War—were skeptical of Pan Americanism and imagined a hemispheric community in ways that rejected U.S. dominance. The image from a 1938 *New York Times* article titled “Tomorrow’s Roads,” about a proposed superhighway system that would connect with the Pan American Highway, illustrates how in U.S. imaginations highways were linked to conquest, territorial expansion, migration, nation-building, and the racial differences underlying these processes.¹² This racialized and movement-based dream of hemispheric progress leveraged the Pan American Highway to convey to Latin Americans the United States’ technological and cultural superiority.¹³

¹¹ Berger (1993), Spellacy (2006).

¹² Crider, John H., “Tomorrow’s Roads,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1938, p. 159. The caption reads: “Emigrants crossing Western plains in covered-wagon days, and an architect’s conception of a great motor speedway from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”

¹³ Part of what Salvatore (2006) calls imperial mechanics.

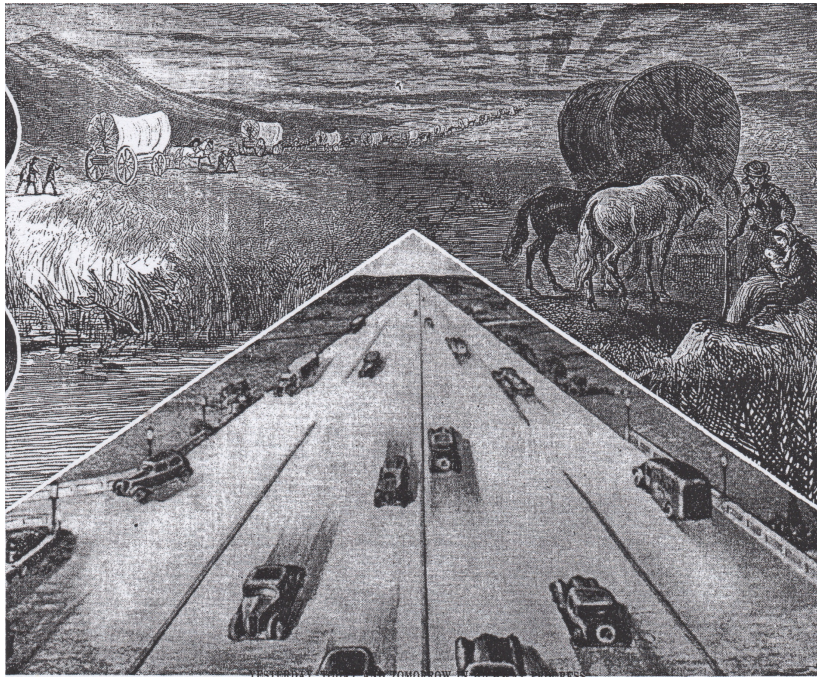


Figure 2. Roads and coloniality in the United States

The first Pan American Highway Congress—meetings where engineers and experts would go about making the highway idea a reality—had been scheduled to be held in Argentina in 1925. Not to be outdone, the United States quickly called a preliminary conference the year before, inviting delegates from Latin America to the United States for “a mammoth educational highway machinery demonstration” that included tours of auto manufacturing centers, government highway testing and experiment stations, roundtables on highway administration, and a caravan through Washington and nine other states in the south and Midwest.¹⁴ In their accounts of the educational tour, as in subsequent Pan American Highway Congresses, Latin

¹⁴ Highway Education Board, *Highways of Friendship* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 1924), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

American engineers expressed the desire to learn of technological innovations, but stressed that technical knowledge should be exchanged among all countries.¹⁵ In that spirit, delegates to Pan American Highway Congresses of the 1920s circulated technical papers on what even the U.S. delegates conceded were “the most advanced methods of road building and of road policies which could be found anywhere.”¹⁶ In addition to reports on legislation and financing, Peru spoke of road conscription, Uruguay about the challenges of road-building with a low population, Argentina about wood-surfaced city roads, and Ecuador about remaking the routes of ancient Inca roads.

The U.S., however, continued to push Latin American countries to follow their example. “Without the experience of the United States in the last two decades of highway transportation,” argued one U.S. delegate, “there would be no yardstick with which to measure the future of the Southern and Central Americas.”¹⁷ At the third Pan American Highway Congress held in 1939, U.S. delegates recommended Latin Americans adopt the classificatory and analytical methods utilized by the Bureau of Public Roads. A Peruvian engineer’s words reveal resistance to these imperial

¹⁵ A Peruvian engineer at the 1939 (3rd) Pan American Highway Congress put it this way: “we have discussed a series of factors that surely do not present themselves in other countries: ours is a country special and unique, because of the nature of its territory, its race, its population, etc., and we cannot adopt the solution employed in other parts to resolve analogous problems without a previous adaptation to our environment, which requires special study, our own techniques, a Peruvian technique, as a result of our own observation.” Pan American Highway Congress, *Resoluciones adoptadas por el Tercer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1939), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; see also Anesi (1942).

¹⁶ In the U.S. delegates’ report to U.S. Congress on the second Pan American Highway Congress of 1929 (“Remarks of Hon. Tasker L. Oddie” [HE332.P2 1929] Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.).

¹⁷ Herbert H. Rice, “Report of the Delegates of the United States. Pan American Congress of Highways, Buenos Aires, October 5-16, 1925” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

mechanics: “we have discussed a series of factors that surely do not present themselves in other countries: ours is a country special and unique, because of the nature of its territory, its race, its population, etc., and we cannot adopt the solutions employed in other parts to resolve analogous problems without a previous adaptation to our environment, which requires special study, our own techniques, a Peruvian technique, as a result of our own observation.”¹⁸

The exchange of technological knowledge was a battleground and the Pan American Highway Congresses were the arena. However, the dreams of transportation-based modernity conjured visions that were different but compatible with the coloniality with which the U.S. built its roads and nation. An Argentinean engineer hoped the highway would facilitate immigration to frontier lands and make them productive.¹⁹ More romantically, a Chilean engineer saw in the Pan American Highway’s linking of city to country a way to spiritual and physical uplift, claiming that the excursions would provide great advantages in moral and physical hygiene by replacing the artificial life of big cities.²⁰ A Peruvian engineer promoting road conscription laws praised how roads—particularly roads built through collective labor—lead to nationalism, create moral unity, and extend state power to every corner of the country (particularly those with high indigenous populations), likening the Pan

¹⁸ Pan American Highway Congress, *Resoluciones adoptadas por el Tercer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1939), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ Pan American Highway Congress, *Síntesis de los Trabajos Presentados. Primer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras, Buenos Aires – 1925* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Caraciolo y Plantié, 1927), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Marín Vicuña, *Por los Estados Unidos* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Nascimento, 1925, p.10), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

American Highway to a torrent of water that polishes and smoothes rocks of all sizes and colors into uniform sand.²¹ A Mexican delegate was more blunt: “Mexico understands that to communicate among men is to begin to redeem them of misery and ignorance.”²² As they imagined communities, Pan American Highway engineers grappled with racial and ethnic differences not only between Latin Americans and U.S. Americans, but also between powerful, white, ruling-class Latinos and the indigenous, black and mestizo peoples who constituted the majority of their countries.

The highway’s route was another source of conflict between Latin Americans and the United States. In its early years, the Pan American Highway had been conceptualized as a single road that—given the general absence of highways fit for motor vehicles in Latin America during the 1920s—would be mostly new. Several maps circulated showing possible routes, but no official route had been decided. By 1929, Mexico and El Salvador had begun constructing parts of the highway, and Guatemala and Nicaragua had requested international assistance with surveys.²³ Pan American Highway construction had begun despite no one being sure about the route, and the issue of coordination became pressing. Bolivian delegates at the 1929 Congress raised the matter of whether technical and administrative solutions should

²¹ Pan American Highway Congress, *Síntesis de los Trabajos Presentados. Primer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras, Buenos Aires – 1925* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Caraciolo y Plantié, 1927), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²² Dirección Nacional de Caminos, *Informe de la Dirección Nacional de Caminos de México al IV Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Mexico, D.F.: Dirección Nacional de Caminos, 1941), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²³ “Preliminary Report on the Pan American Highway prepared by the Executive Committee of the Pan American Confederation for Highway Education for the information of the delegates to the 2nd Pan American Congress of Highways to convene at Rio de Janeiro, August 16-31, 1929,” Vertical File (“Pan American Highway” Folder), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.

be formulated by each country independently or by a centralized entity. With the Pan American Union organizing the Congresses, it was easy to imagine which country might be better to dominate the project and determine its route. Seizing the opportunity to challenge imperial mappings, the Argentineans expressed dissatisfaction with the exclusions that a single longitudinal road would bring about, leading to the reformulation of the Pan American Highway from a single route into a Pan American Highway *System* connecting *all* of the American capitals. While the version of the highway as a single route emphasized North-South connections in which the main categories were the United States and Latin America (thus pointing to their *difference*), the highway as a system emphasized the connection of Latin American countries to each other, in addition to the United States. In the system, each country would make its own roads as part of its national network, and join with other country's roads at international borders; countries would send notice of their highways to the Pan American Union in Washington, which would help in establishing international connection points if the individual country routes did not coincide at the borders.²⁴ Each country, then, could work simultaneously on their national roads and on the Pan American Highway. The United States considered itself exempt from having to identify which roads in its national system would form part of the Pan American Highway, since, engineers reasoned, the U.S. had numerous good-

²⁴ Pan American Highway Congress, *Segundo Congreso Panamericano de Estradas de Rodagem. Boletim Oficial* (Rio de Janeiro, 1929), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

quality roads.²⁵ By refusing to identify a Pan American Highway route within the U.S., engineers and government officials sought to position their highways as an unmarked category, as the invisible standard against which other highways could be measured. Eventually, the entire U.S. interstate highway system would be considered part of the Pan American Highway.



Figure 3. 1942 map of the Pan American Highway printed by Pan American Union²⁶

²⁵ “Preliminary Report on the Pan American Highway prepared by the Executive Committee of the Pan American Confederation for Highway Education for the information of the delegates to the 2nd Pan American Congress of Highways to convene at Rio de Janeiro, August 16-31, 1929,” Vertical File (“Pan American Highway” Folder), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ Catherine Coblenz, *The Pan American Highway* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1942), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States.

Financing was another controversy that dealt with the problems of how to connect across difference and create an imagined hemispheric community. Participants in the 1939 Pan American Highway Congress decided that each country should cover the cost of its portion of the highway, and suggested the creation of a financial entity in which governments would cooperate “on a basis of absolute equality” to obtain funds for construction through credit.²⁷ The Peruvian delegation, with the support of Mexico and others, went further to propose that since the United States would benefit from the Pan American Highway more than other countries because of its automobile industry, it should aid in financing by purchasing bonds issued by Latin American countries.²⁸ The following year, at a meeting among American foreign relations ministers, it was unanimously decided that to fund the Pan American Highway each country would contribute a quota in proportion to its financial capabilities and its projected benefits from the highway. The decision was seen as a form of resistance to the United States’ military and economic power. The Financial Commission’s 1941 report affirms: “While the Panama Canal distinguishes itself as a work executed by a single nation, the Pan American Highway, constructed cooperatively by all the nations of the Western hemisphere, would constitute a practical example of pan American solidarity.”²⁹ In the end, the Pan American Highway was financed through diverse means, including bonds, as was the case in

²⁷ Pan American Highway Congress, *Resoluciones adoptadas por el Tercer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1939), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁸ “Ask U.S. Road Aid in Latin America,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1939, p. 22.

²⁹ Pan American Highway Congress, *IV Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras. Acta Final y Resoluciones* (Mexico: Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1941), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Mexico, bilateral agreements with the United States, as was the case with many Central American countries, and loans from international financial institutions.

Integration

The community of the highway was imagined in uneven fields of power. As the activities of engineers and other delegates at the highway Congresses reveal, The Pan American Highway was a profoundly charismatic but contested project that raised problems that were more than just technical. To integrate the Americas, the highway connected radically different people and places, enabling movements of people, things and ideas between cities and rural areas, among Latin American nations, and between Latin America and the United States. These movements would facilitate encounters with other races, other landscapes, and other forms of organizing social life that, by coming into contact with each other, could bridge differences and create common ground.

Common ground, however, is not equal ground. Dreamers of a Pan American Highway confronted racial differences that informed practices of conquest and assimilation, economic differences that informed relationships of dependency and uneven development, and political differences that informed policies of expansionism and security. The highway did not destroy heterogeneity, as the Peruvian engineer's metaphor of a torrential river smoothing diverse rocks into uniform sand implies. Rather, the highway arranged and organized heterogeneity in uneven and sometimes hierarchical ways. The modern highway needed, for example, the old mule and

wagon trails over which much of the route was constructed, and the indigenous laborers without whom earth would not have moved, and pavement would not have been laid. The highway drew in and relied on diverse forms of labor and power, but subsumed them under a veneer of modernity that appeared to unfold in homogenous time and empty space.

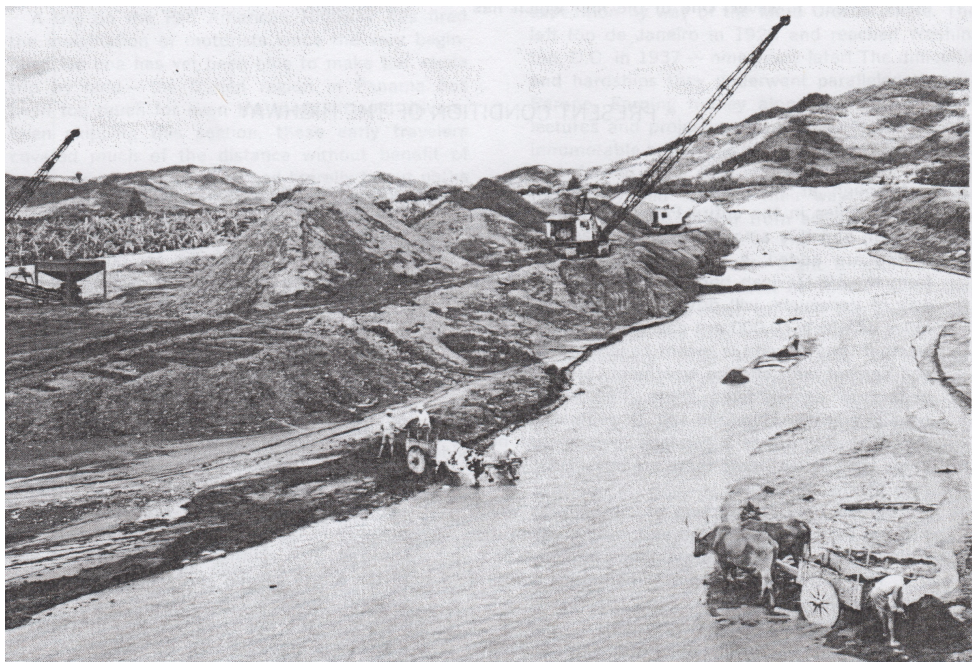


Figure 4. Ox-carts work alongside cranes in Costa Rica³⁰

³⁰ General Secretariat of the Organization of American States, *The Pan American Highway System* (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1971), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.



Figure 5. Road labor in Guatemala



Figure 6. Humans and nonhumans essential to integration³¹

³¹ This and preceding image from Franck and Lanks (1942).

Integration creates an imagined community that relies on movement and difference to create a common, inclusive time and space. This process of inclusion also subordinates, obscures and marginalizes forms of difference that are constitutive of the modernizing project of the highway, but that can also confound, interrupt or redirect this integration. Condorito, a comic book character who originated in Chile and is now read throughout the Americas, helps tell this story. Condorito's job is to paint the line of the Pan American Highway—the line that connects centers and peripheries, that connects across difference and integrates.



Figure 7. “The fumes go to this painter’s head and he thinks he’s the line, Mr. Inspector...”³²

³² Condorito 58, 1970 (accessed at <http://charlucito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

Condorito mediates experiences of modernization precipitated by the highway.³³ He/the line of the highway *is* the mediation, the negotiation not of tradition and modernity, but of the process of assembling an imagined community out of lively heterogeneity. It is not an easy job, but Condorito navigates obstacles and interruptions ingeniously.

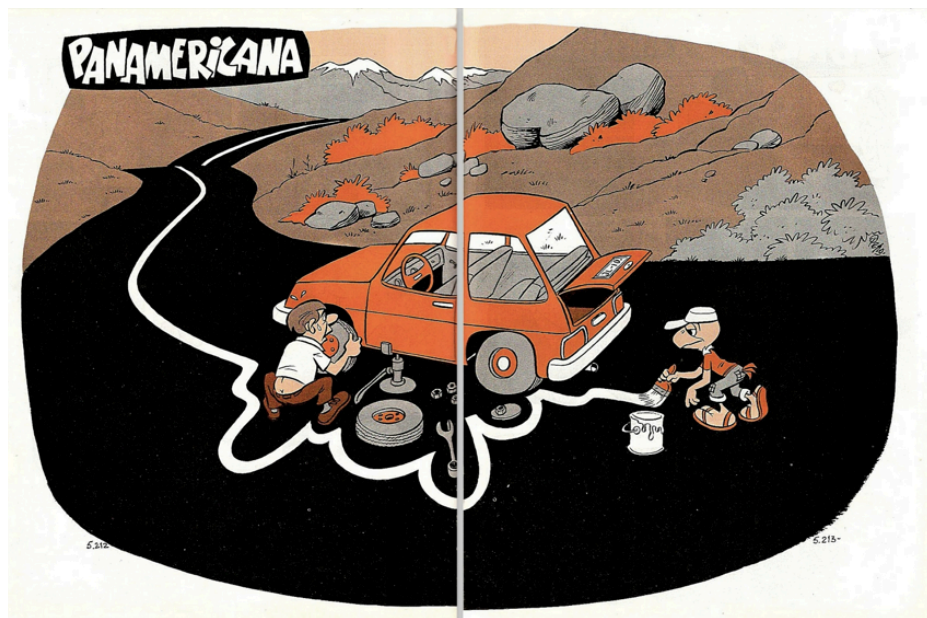


Figure 8. Navigating the obstacles of integration³⁴

Like the highway engineers who constantly negotiated amongst themselves the terms in which the highway would be built and the Americas integrated, Condorito finds his own solutions to painting the line, on his own terms.

³³ Poblete (2009).

³⁴ Condorito 86, 1982 (accessed at <http://charlucito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

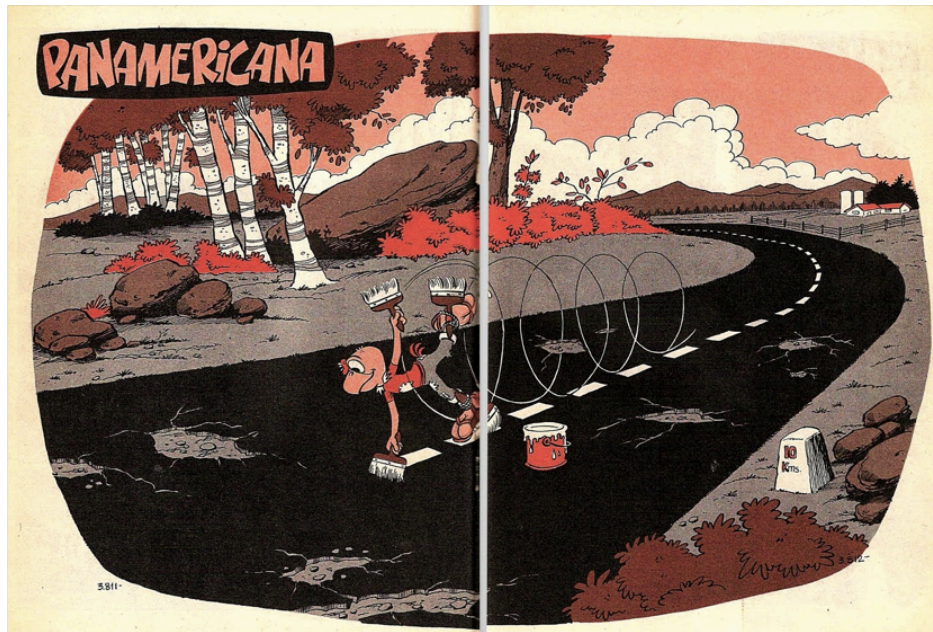


Figure 9. Lively and playful connections³⁵

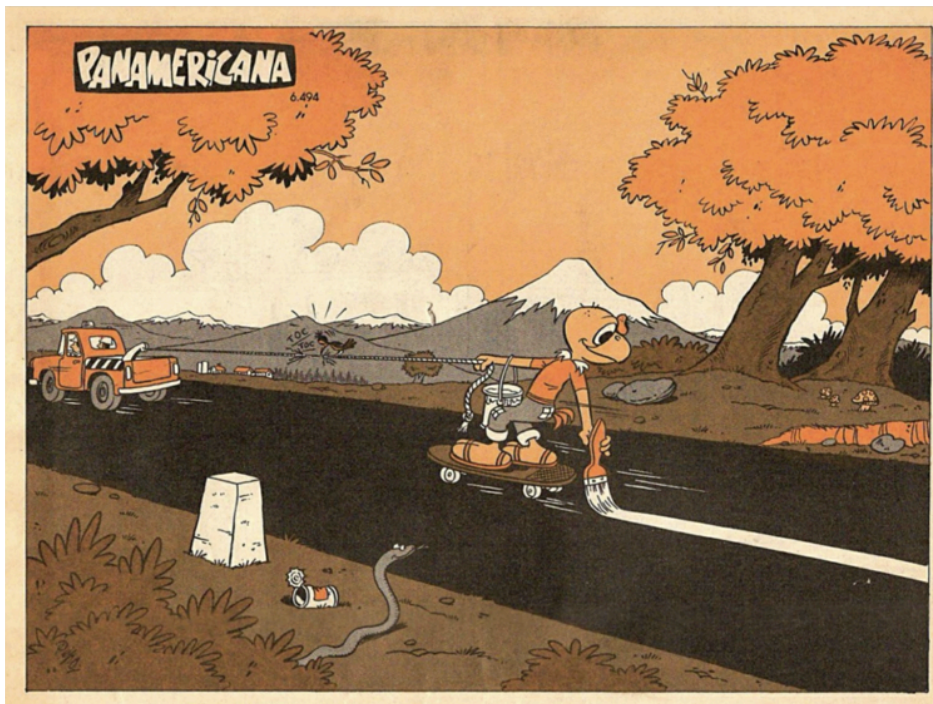


Figure 10. Nature and technology at work³⁶

³⁵ Condorito 64, 1978 (accessed at <http://charlucito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

Condorito paints—connects, integrates—through engagement with the landscape and nonhuman actors whose contributions are essential to but often obscured in discourses of integration that inform the Pan American Highway’s history.

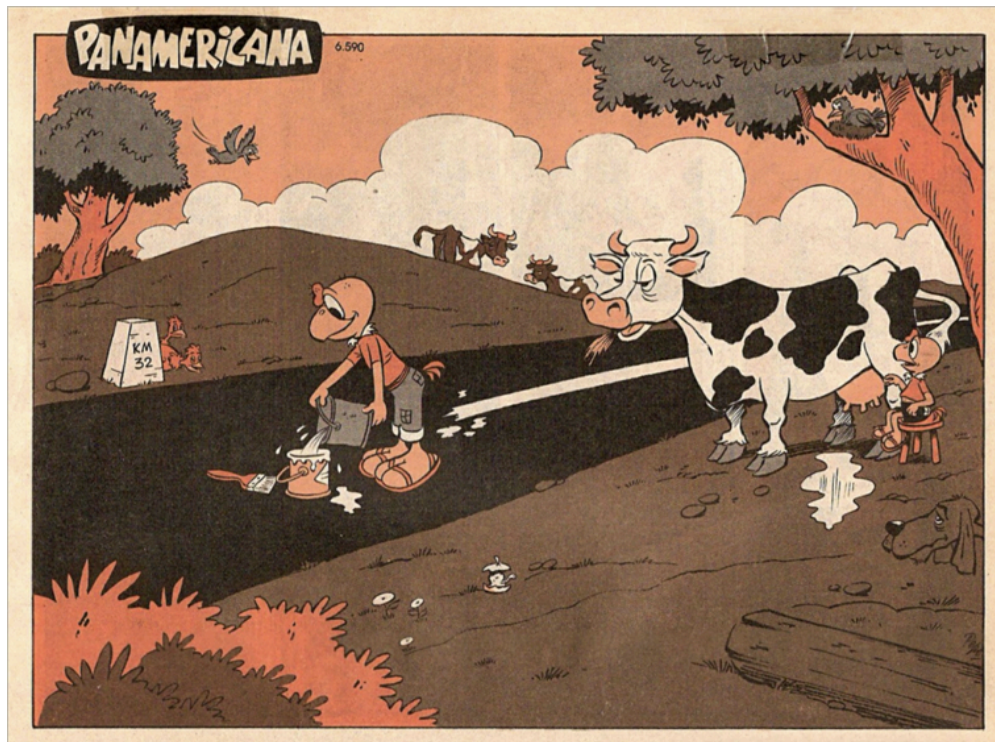


Figure 11. Integration is always embedded in material landscapes³⁷

And often, Condorito stumbles onto surprising scenes that repurpose the line of the highway, reframing or redirecting integration:

³⁶ Condorito 113, 1984 (accessed at <http://charlicito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

³⁷ Condorito 115, 1984 (accessed at <http://charlicito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

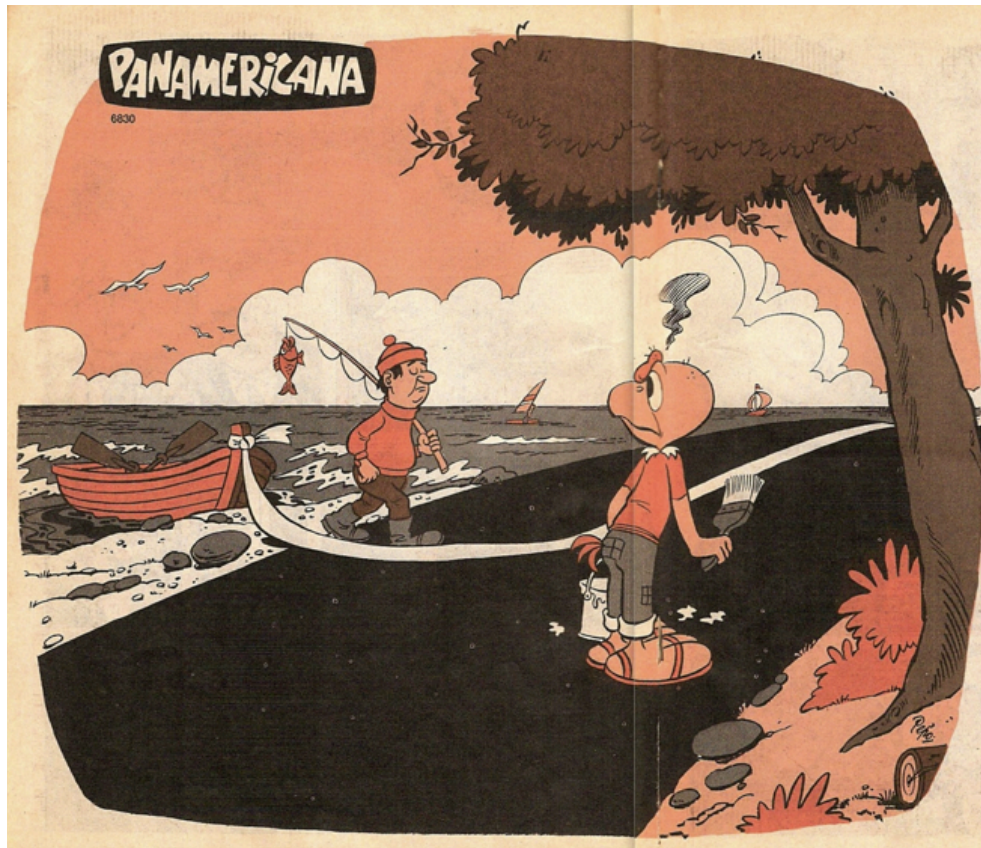


Figure 12. Lines of connectivity are constantly reworked³⁸

Attention to the negotiations involved in the Panamericana's planning, construction and use reveal the highway to be the product of multiple desires and practices that share in common the need—or the practical reality—of connecting across difference and creating common ground. Like the line of the highway, integration is anything but straight forward. The process brings together diverse actors in unequal relations of power. To create an imagined community, the highway subordinated and marginalized people, practices, ideas, objects and other living things

³⁸ Condorito 120, 1985 (accessed at <http://charlicito-condoritoaventurero.com.blogspot.com> on March 22, 2014).

that, though essential to the constitution of this Pan American modernity, were relegated to subaltern positions. However, this heterogeneity is lively—and the things that exceed or interrupt the Pan American Highway can reconstitute integration and its patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

On Modern Projects

This process of using movement to draw together diverse actors and assemble them into an imagined community calls for a reconsideration of modern projects. If a project might seem to be a coherent idea that leads logically to predetermined practices, where everyone is clear on what the project actually is, and whose outcome is already known, this is because of the way modern projects subordinate and exclude elements to craft a single coherent picture. Obstacles and interruptions are considered external. However, the Pan American Highway shows how modern projects are assemblages composed of heterogeneous elements that articulate in ways that change power relations as the project moves from a dream to something put into practice. As the controversies among highway engineers and Condorito's adventures demonstrate, integration on the Pan American Highway is neither a top-down imposition nor a bottom-up construction. It comes about through the articulation of disparate elements that include official actors (such as states, institutions, policies, discourses), diverse subjects (farmers, indians, wage-laborers, passengers, motorists, activists, migrants, and so on), nonhumans who refuse to stay in the background of an inert landscape (such as resources, commodities, diseases, rocks, wheels, logs, humidity), as well as

intangible things like knowledges, memories, affects, intensities, dispositions, orientations, ideas, desires, and dreams.³⁹ The highway project is an articulation of elements brought together through circumstance in contingent and often unexpected ways. Its bits and pieces do not necessarily work well with each other (contestations and interruptions are as much a part of the project as negotiations and compromises) but together they do create effects—integration. Failed projects—how many would characterize the Pan American Highway—are not necessarily ineffective projects.

The highway began as an idea to connect the Americas with a single route. Already at this initial stage the project was heterogeneous, inspiring multiple dreams of integration among engineers, businessmen, and politicians of diverse races and ideologies. This already-contested idea articulated with other projects in order to get built (see the blue arrows in Figure 14). The transformation of the Pan American Highway, a single longitudinal route connecting Latin America to the United States, into a Pan American Highway System connecting all of the countries in the Americas to each other, shows how this project moved from an idea to its planning and construction stages by articulating with the nation-building project that gained importance across the Americas during the twentieth century. This articulation was possible because individual governments were interested in building their own national road networks, irrespective, in a way, of what neighboring countries were doing. The highway became a hemispheric scale-making project that required and helped create comparable units—hence the sizeable amount of time spent in and

³⁹ Bennett (2005).

outside of the Pan American Highway Congresses discussing how to create uniformity across nation-states in technical norms relating to the planning, design, construction and maintenance of roads, and the standardization of road legislation including transit regulations, road signs and highway administration. This was all part of the highway's attempt to create a common time and space, hemispheric, but organized into nation-states that were all more or less comparable to each other, as the following maps illustrate by delimiting the boundaries of nation-states with dashed lines.⁴⁰



⁴⁰ Curiously, in this map Mexico's states are also outlined.

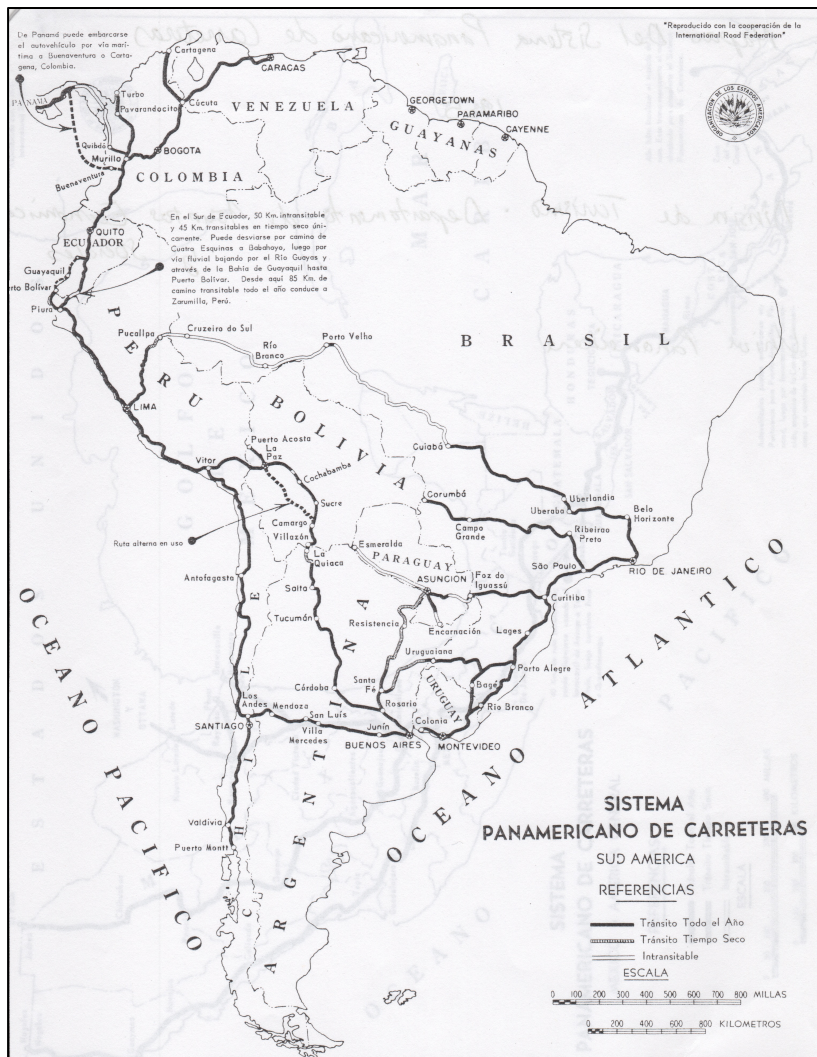


Figure 13. The Pan American Highway System's comparable units, 1955⁴¹

The first and second world wars prompted the Pan American Highway, already articulated to the nation-building project, to articulate with a hemispheric security project. The United States saw it necessary to defend its extraterritorial interests in the Caribbean and Central America and decided to help Central American

⁴¹ Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales, División de Turismo, *Mapas del sistema panamericano de carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Union Panamericana, 1955), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.

countries build their sections of the Pan American Highway up to the Panama Canal, which had to be protected from attack. And so, the portion of the Pan American Highway from Mexico's southern border to the Panama Canal is called the Inter American Highway. While the highway works to produce scalable units with respect to nation-states, it also creates roads that exceed this scheme of comparable national units within a hemispheric system. The Inter American Highway produces other kinds of scales at which forms of togetherness operate, linking Central America together through a discourse of security, but also linking it to the United States.

Early on the highway project also articulated with a travel project—not exclusive to U.S. imaginations—that explored the possibilities of tourism and leisure travel beyond national borders. In the 1950s, engineers, politicians, entrepreneurs, and potential tourists added to the Pan American Highway project the Caribbean Circuit, a scheme to link Florida to Cuba and Mexico's Yucatan peninsula by a network of roads and ferries (see insert in Figure 3). Tourism, at least rhetorically, would contribute to integration by promoting mutual understanding among Anglo and Latin Americans. The travels of tourists—consumers, after all—would also create links that would tie these economies closer together, in not necessarily reciprocal ways. Dreams of traveling the Panamericana persist to this day, and road trips along the length of the highway draw motorists into the assemblage in ways that also transform how integration is understood and enacted.

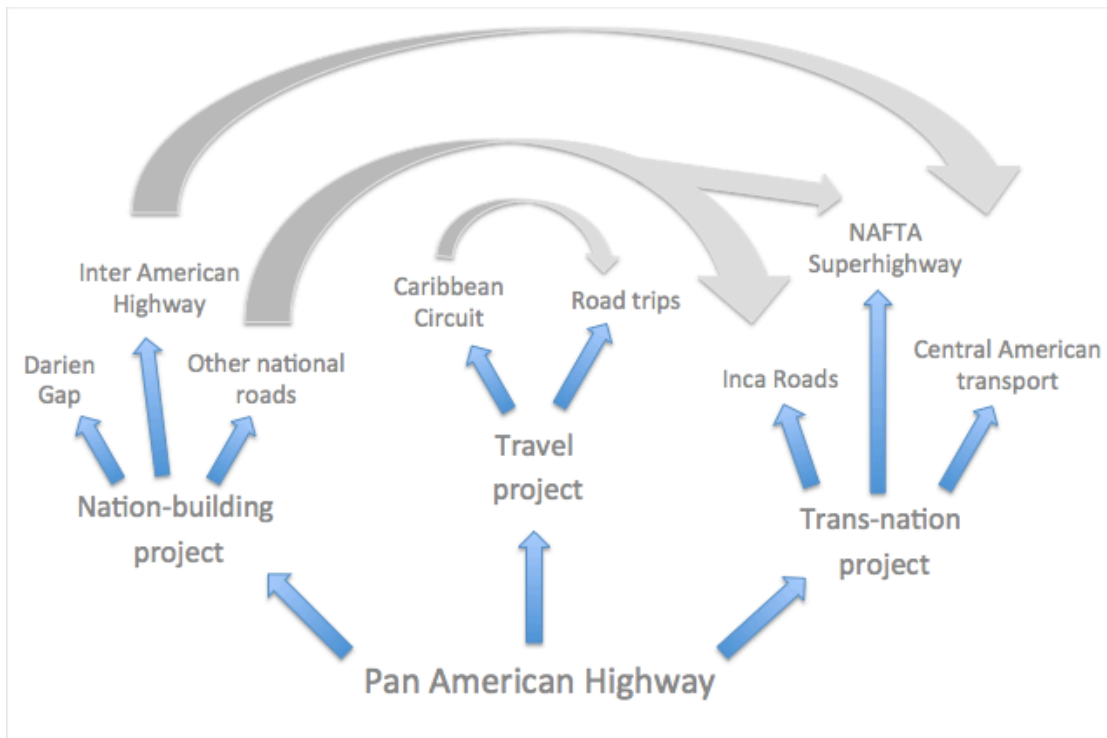


Figure 14. Some Pan American Highway articulations

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the Pan American Highway transformed through articulations yet again, this time with trans-national projects, informed by ideas about globalization and neoliberal restructuring, that create social spaces that exceed national boundaries. These articulations shape the highway in new ways: in Peru the trans-Andean effort to identify and preserve Inca roads literally overlaps with the expansion of the Panamericana into a super-modern, technologically sophisticated privatized road; at the U.S.-Mexico border, NAFTA commodities are freighted in unprecedented volumes against a backdrop of low-intensity warfare among smugglers and law enforcers, spurring dreams and fears of a superhighway connecting Mexico to Canada; in Central America, architects of the

CAFTA-DR trade apparatus work to create a seamless transnational transport space by reducing the obstacles freight truckers face at border crossings. As the grey arrows in the diagram indicate, these trans-national articulations build on and rework forms of integration established through the highway's twentieth-century nation-building projects.

The travel and trans-nation projects with which the highway articulates will be the focus of future work. This dissertation concentrates on the highway's articulation with nation-building, a link that had unprecedented consequences for how the Americas became thinkable and knowable, and that established forms of power that continue to have consequences for living together in an imagined community. By 1955, the highway had been completed except for small sections across mountainous terrain in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Darien, the region encompassing the Panama-Colombia borderlands.⁴² The highway through Darien was almost an afterthought. Colombia focused on roads linking its major cities, but paid little attention to its sparsely populated frontier. Panama was busy working on the Inter American Highway from the Canal across the rest of Central America. An in-between place, highway efforts did not focus on Darien until other, more important places were connected. The irony, however, was that Darien was *the* most important place for the Pan American Highway precisely because it was in between—Darien is the land bridge between North and South America, and, on account of its narrowness, the

⁴² Permanent Executive Committee of the Pan American Highway Congresses, *First Meeting, February 21-28, 1955, Mexico, D.F., Final Act and Working Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1955), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

only place where the highway *must* go through. By the 1960s, Darien had gained notoriety as an impassable jungle. And, as this dissertation demonstrates, the best place to understand movement, connection and integration is the place characterized by the opposite—the Darien Gap.

The door to the seas and key to the universe (Location is Everything)

America is the result of multiple fantasies coming together. Nowhere have these fantasies proliferated, accumulated, and collided with such intensity as in Darien. And nowhere have they so miserably failed.

Darien is the geographical heart of the Americas, a land bridge where continents and oceans meet. The strip of land that rose out of the ocean about three million years ago joined continents and enabled the migration and mingling of species between North and South America. The same narrow piece of land was also a gateway for human migration into South America, at least 11,000 years ago. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its charismatic location incited in European imaginations wild dreams of wealth and power through the extraction of resources, the extension of imperial territoriality, and the control of trade routes. It was a site of firsts, of movements, connections and encounters foundational for constituting América and its place in the emergent world system. Rival imperial powers—French, English and Dutch—vied with tenuous Spanish footholds in what became a landscape of shifting alliances and political intrigue among the local Tule people and the various groups of invaders. Stakes were high; Darien promised access to the glories and

dangers of what lay beyond the edge of the map. It was, in the words of William Paterson, the promoter of a Scottish trading colony in Darien he hoped would rival the East India Company, “the door to the seas and key to the universe.”

A global crossroads constituted by wildly heterogeneous forms of movement and difference, Darien enables the making of worlds. Its appeal for the Pan American Highway project rests on how it is a juncture of movements between not only North and South America, but also between the continent and the Caribbean, and between the Black Atlantic and the Black Pacific—it links America’s peoples. The Pan American Highway worked to arrange these movements to create a hemispheric community. It worked to turn this transit point into a meeting point.

A historian wrote in 1913 that Darien “is probably the most thoroughly surveyed bit of wild land in the world,”⁴³ drawing attention to how the isthmus’ connectivity is essential to imperial and state power, but also pointing to the ways Darien’s world-making promise has repeatedly failed. Darien was home to Santa María la Antigua, the first European settlement on tierra firme, on the continent, but only fourteen years after the city’s founding in 1510 by the conquistador Balboa, the last surviving inhabitants fled west to the new capital, Panama City, because of hunger and fights with indians. The Scottish colony founded in 1698 misjudged its trading capacity, brought too many periwinkle wigs, and died from hunger and fever. Darien was a haven for runaway slaves, resistant indians, and pirates. The gold mines and missions were a disaster. In nineteenth-century canal explorations, tough military

⁴³ Cited in Kane (1994: 5).

men got lost in the forest, ate their shoes and lost their minds by the time they were found. The Pan American Highway through Darien was never finished. The place most essential to hemispheric integration is also the place that most resists.

The problem with Darien with respect to the highway is that it has both too much connectivity and not enough. Darien's lively movements and heterogeneity constitute the raw material of integration, which must arrange these movements, ordering them, legitimizing some, obscuring and marginalizing others—but this same movement and heterogeneity also shows how integration can be undermined, undone, or reconstituted. A borderland in-between space at the interstices of empires and nations, Darien's "excessive" movements and heterogeneity work against integration as much as they help it create unequal arrangements of power. Connections enable but also resist integration. To create a hemispheric community, the highway worked to facilitate movement despite the resistance of connections pulling in other directions. It also worked to bring order to these unruly connections through practices of both legitimation and marginalization that arrange movement and difference into the Pan American Highway and its articulations with the modernizing, nation-building project. The subsequent chapters in this dissertation trace this and its consequences, demonstrating how movement and difference enable integration, but also how the highway's marginalizations undermine integration and lead to unexpected forms of creating community. Altogether, these chapters demonstrate the effects of the Pan American Highway's articulation with Panama's nation-building project, and examine how this convergence necessarily draws into the assemblage a

diverse set of actors that change what constitutes the highway and the way integration is enacted. These Darien chapters examine how the highway attached to a national project to achieve its hemispheric objectives, but also drew in other elements that work with, alongside, and against the integration of the Americas.

I have lived in the monster and know its entrails

The words follow me, as they follow many who by choice or circumstance must navigate the borders of our America. They must have first come to my attention in the 1990s at a high school on a U.S. Army base in San Juan, a terrible and lively place where students and teachers—the majority Puerto Rican, the minority white Americans—awkwardly and not always successfully figured out ways to get along. Somewhere between memorizing Renaissance verses and wandering Borges’s labyrinths, the words crept into our consciousness. And they followed me and took on new meaning as I left the island to continue studies in the United States, marking the beginning of an intellectual inquiry of which this dissertation is a part.

Originally, the words had found their way into a letter penned by José Martí at a rebel Cuban encampment in May 1895, the day before he perished at the hands of Spanish soldiers. The poet, journalist, translator, magazine and newspaper editor, essayist, revolutionary, exile, political theorist, activist, consul for Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay, and stateless migrant had spent the years between 1881 and 1885 in New York, where he worked as a correspondent for Latin American newspapers, and where he conveyed to readers in Mexico, Venezuela, Argentina, and

Guatemala the terrible and lively wonders of Anglo-American U.S. culture. In his words, these were ruinous times.⁴⁴

His writings describe scenes and events of an emergent U.S. modernity made monstrous by racism and industrialized capitalism. He wrote of labor strikes and the Chicago anarchists, of murdered African American leaders, of persecuted Chinese in San Francisco, of Ghost Dancers, Jesse James, Thomas Edison, and Walt Whitman, always attuned to the awesome power of modern technology but also to its failures, effacements, and exclusions.⁴⁵ He described in detail the clean and efficient horrors of the electric chair. Urban transport in New York was another troubling sign of mass modernity: “Like a monster that empties its bowels entirely into the hungry jaws of another monster, that colossal crowd, crushed and compact, mobs the entrances of the trains that moan when they are full, as if tired from the weight.”⁴⁶ The Brooklyn Bridge was a half-stone, half-steel gateway to a new era, albeit with cables “like the teeth of a mammoth that in one bite would be capable of decimating a mountain.”⁴⁷ In contrast to contemporaries like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the Argentinean who hoped rationality and technology would transform barbarism into civilization, Martí rejected such genocidal oppositions and assumed a more cautious and critical position on the machinic mass modernity he observed in the United States.

⁴⁴ In the prologue to Juan Antonio Pérez Bonalde’s *El Poema del Niágara*. See Appendix 2 in Ramos (2001).

⁴⁵ As Lomas (2008) puts it, Martí translated to Latino readers, who primarily viewed the U.S. through the images of shiny new objects in catalogs, the hidden imperial aspects of modernity. For Ramos (2001:166), Martí’s modernist writing was part of “a strategy of legitimation for intellectuals who had become estranged from the utopia of progress and modernity.”

⁴⁶ Cited in Ramos (2001:193).

⁴⁷ Cited in Ramos (2001:168).

Living in the belly of the beast allowed Martí to articulate a counter-discourse to the hemispheric claims of Pan Americanism as well as to the intellectuals who advocated a Hispanic or Latin continental identity affiliated with Spain or France, respectively. *Nuestra América*, as he wrote in the seminal essay of the same title, should reject the imitation of U.S. and European models of governance and instead cultivate knowledge and understanding of local conditions. History should be taught beginning with the Incas, not the Greeks. As he defined the borders of *Nuestra América*, which by spanning from the Bravo to Magellan excluded Anglo America, Martí also worked to bridge the internal borders that divided American nations. Facing the looming threat of U.S. expansion required solidarity among whites, mestizos, blacks and indians within countries as much as it required solidarity among countries. It was, in fact, a double critique—of the violent coupling of modernization and imperial expansion, and of fellow *Americanos*' lack of solidarity with Cuba and Puerto Rico in the context of their imminent annexation to the U.S.⁴⁸ *Nuestra América* was the lonely song of an American without a country.

The complexities of Martí's call for integration set the terms for many debates in what would become Latin American postcolonial thought, which since then has continued to be preoccupied with how Latinos imagine themselves as a community with a history and geography of its own. Martí was not alone in contrasting the materialism of U.S. culture to the spiritual nature of Latin Americans. José Enrique Rodó, the early twentieth-century Uruguayan intellectual, figured our America as

⁴⁸ See Santi (1998).

Ariel, the noble savage of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Rodó celebrated Ariel's reason, spirituality, and refined European sensibilities and disparaged the irrationality, sensuality, and utilitarianism he attributed to Caliban, the other New World native, the mythified cannibal, the one associated with crude, machinic mass modernity. Writing in 1971 out of revolutionary Cuba and inspired by the writings of fellow Caribbeans such as Aimé Césaire, Roberto Fernández Retamar turned this figuration around by rejecting the creole intellectuals who locate themselves on the side of civilization.⁴⁹ Instead of the Europeanized, almost fairy-like Ariel, the symbol of our America would be dark, defiant, unconquerable Caliban—a monster, us.

Nuestra América and Caliban are but a small part of the rich tradition of thought and expression by Latinos in search of America, a tradition that in its scholarly approach tends to focus on the analysis of political and literary texts such as the ones discussed above.⁵⁰ A related line of inquiry examines historical texts and images produced by Europeans about the New World to argue that America was not discovered but invented.⁵¹ Walter Mignolo, for example, explains how the entry of America into European consciousness during the Renaissance required the subordination of indigenous histories and cosmologies. Tracing the consequences of this subordinating, hierarchical power so intrinsic to modernity, he shows how these exclusions were reinscribed under the Creole construction of “Latinidad” during the late nineteenth century, and argues that decolonization in the twenty-first century will

⁴⁹ Fernández Retamar (1974).

⁵⁰ See for example Croce (2010).

⁵¹ O’Gorman (1958), Ardao (1980), Rabasa (1993), Mignolo (2005).

come from the actions of those excluded from “Latin” America—U.S. Latino, indigenous, and afrodescendent actors.⁵² These new possibilities for decolonization have been formulated in relation to widespread social transformations associated with democratization, trade liberalization, and a new kind of leftist opposition. But these developments also point to other possibilities that seek to avoid the violences of modernity and its operative categories (including leftist, if it fails to recognize non-Western politics)—possibilities of building a world where many worlds are possible, as the Zapatistas say. That is, of making space where the epistemologies and ontologies subordinated by coloniality may flourish and provide less terrible options for learning and living.

Many scholars of decolonization emphasize how the problems of our time take on monstrous proportions, like that of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, which would parallel the Pan American Highway in its hemispheric scale; they are also attuned to enormous possibilities, like those presented by the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) or *Abya Yala*, the Guna term many indigenous activists have adopted to refer to the continent.⁵³ Big projects are re-shaping the contours and boundaries of the Americas. And yet, the methods of textual analysis (epistemological, historical, literary texts) present limitations for understanding how these struggles are actually enacted in practice.⁵⁴

⁵² Mignolo (2005).

⁵³ e.g. Mignolo (2005), Castro-Gómez and Medieta (1998).

⁵⁴ De la Campa (2008:443) sustains that as long as postmodern cultural studies remain at the level of textual readings, “we remain bound to a type of textual analysis—literary, historical, and

The Latin American Subaltern Studies group illustrates this disconnect. Their manifesto insists on a common regional history (creole mestizo hegemony, revolutions) and opens with an account of regional changes (democratization, globalization, transnationalization of culture and mass media) that present new forms of political thought and action. The manifesto calls for a reconsideration of pre-national, precolombian, and colonial territorializations—imagined communities—and for the consideration of emergent forms of organizing territories and borders.⁵⁵ However, the studies included in *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* focus on governability and citizenship framed either within individual states or a globalized world more generally.

The problem, then, can be expressed as the need to address and understand hemispheric claims as they are situated in a changing world but from a perspective that moves beyond the textual to account for the lived textures of lived experience.⁵⁶ Ethnographic studies of social movements in Latin America provide sophisticated accounts of politics, culture and power but fall short of demonstrating how these machinations are relevant to the construction of communities imagined and enacted beyond the confines of local and national scales. The Pan American Highway bridges this analytical disconnect. A concrete project, composed of ideas, texts, memories but also the circulations of people and goods, not to mention the more-than-human

epistemological—that calls for little if any exploration of the forms of technomediatic culture and everyday experiences.”

⁵⁵ In Castro-Gómez and Medieta (1998).

⁵⁶ Achuar (1998) points out this gap wondering why no one has theorized free trade agreements, given how globalization has transformed borders and given how North Americans are eager to label Latin America postcolonial.

landscapes it constitutes, the road itself asks for more—its materiality, its feeling,⁵⁷ demands an ethnographic attention able to trace the relationship between on-the-ground negotiations of difference and the imaginative, large-scale qualities of a hemispheric community.

Transnational studies of migration between Latin America and the U.S. offer innovative methodologies for understanding the agency of people who must navigate highly unequal fields of power as they create and maintain communities that exceed the boundaries of a single state territory. While the figures of *Nuestra América*, *Ariel* and *Caliban* define Latin America against, and exclusive of, Anglo America, the figure of the transnational migrant who maintains ties to both home and receiving country, and who works to redefine citizenship on both sides of the border, embodies movements and connections that trouble any categorical distinction between the U.S. and Latin America as mutually exclusive spaces of political action.

This transnational turn has generated intellectual projects that seek to bridge disciplinary boundaries as much as the migrations they follow bridge national ones. New programs of study, such as Hemispheric Studies or combined Latin American and Latino Studies, reject the objectifying knowledge produced by Latin American Studies and its complicity with Cold War agendas and seek to infuse area studies with the anti-racist, anti-colonial imperative of Latino Studies and its origins in the civil rights movement.⁵⁸ This perspective argues that it is impossible to understand Latin America without understanding Latinos in the U.S., and vice versa. However, beyond

⁵⁷ What Larkin (2013) describes as the aesthetics and poetics of infrastructure.

⁵⁸ See introductions to Poblete (2003) and Gutmann et al. (2003).

expanding the geographical area included in the field of study, the analytical difference between a transnational and a hemispheric approach in these new programs has yet to become clear. As with postcolonial studies of Latin America, there is a disconnect between the hemispheric claim of this approach and the cross-border relations that are often understood in bi-national—but not hemispheric—terms.

The desire to understand hemispheric processes and the persistent ways this scale is eclipsed by the national is an old problem in borderlands scholarship. A recent account of U.S.-Mexico borderlands histories traces the legacies of two concepts developed by Herbert Bolton in the early twentieth-century.⁵⁹ Bolton is best known for his Spanish Borderlands idea. Crafted as an alternative to Turnerian ideas of Western expansion, he argued that histories of the United States should account for Spain's imperial legacy in North America, an idea that was eventually subsumed as a regional history of the United States. Bolton's other idea, Greater America, drew from his research on multiple imperial rivalries and argued for a hemispheric history of America. But in contrast to the Spanish Borderlands, Greater America "could not be similarly be cannibalized" by national histories.⁶⁰ Lacking a unifying narrative to hold together fragmented national histories, the hemispheric argument faded. Unable to fit in modern categories, the hemispheric idea remains both inappropriate and

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez and Young (2010)

⁶⁰ Gutiérrez and Young (2010:35) call for widening the borderlands approach: "A much more sustained dialogue is necessary to move historical analysis beyond the simple dichotomies of 'us' versus 'them,' of 'north' versus 'south' . . . The study of the borderlands needs to become much more engaged with the Latin American Spanish-language literature that speaks to the central issues of the borderlands. These include the interaction among cultural groups, comparative systems of racial differentiation, the legacies of imperial rivalries and politics, and the formation of states and their place in a global economic order" (52).

inappropriated.⁶¹

Bolton's forgotten idea haunts contemporary transnational studies, which take the deterritorialization of people and capital as their starting point and trace the emergence of new social formations, but ironically do not theorize the way movement transforms space and place along the way, insights that could extend understanding of how imagined communities are constituted in material landscapes. Transnational studies are all culture and no nature, attentive to emergent forms of citizenship, community organization, ethnicity, exchange, and cultural expression, but theoretically blind to the material ways topographies, seasons and other nonhuman forces inform migration, as if the textured and embodied processes of movement and connection do not matter, only the fact that there is movement in and of itself. Though it highlights the agency of structurally disadvantaged migrants, transnationalism also has its others.

The hemispheric always falls aside, slipping in the disconnect—the gap—between the textual and the empirical (on the Latin American end) and between calls for regional understanding and transnational myopia (on the Latino/U.S. end). And part of the problem is that these powerful categories themselves—Latin American, Latino, and U.S.—persist as both reified terrains of knowledge and locations of enunciation. To grasp the fleshiness of the hemispheric is to question these very categories and their relationship to each other, a questioning that also requires a

⁶¹ See Haraway (1992).

critical reconsideration of the boundaries—between symbolic and material, nature and culture—through which these fields make sense of the world.

This is messy work. It involves immersion in the bloody, slippery viscera of connections and relations that might otherwise assume the smooth, solid shapes that help organize the modern world, shapes like that of an ideal modern highway. Often figured as an “artery for commerce,” the Pan American Highway is much more. It is also the people on the side of the road, the landscapes it transforms, the desires it generates. Assembled out of the wreckage of capitalist and colonialist encounters, the highway brings together the technical, textual, organic, mythic, and political into collectivities that are contradictory and incoherent but that can nonetheless offer possibilities for reconfiguring social life through less violent means.⁶² As Martí reminds us, finding a way through the mess—and *with* the mess—requires caution as much as wonder. But the problem, however, is not a machinic mass modernity located outside, beyond the limits of Nuestra América. Rather, concerns must turn inwards, to the terrible and lively technologies that create and confound boundaries of difference, shaping lives for better and for worse—to our highway, our monster.

⁶² See Haraway (1992).

2. La Carretera de Darién – The Darien Highway

Where the Pan American Highway articulates with the Panamanian nation-building project, and where the highway also requires collaborations of an international character, creating connections between Latin American nature and U.S. environmentalists that ultimately lead to the highway's failure to bridge North and South America, leaving an unfinished road that stopped midway through the Darien forest.

The section of the Pan American Highway in Darien, Panama's easternmost province, began to take form in the 1950s when the Pan American Highway Congress in collaboration with the Panamanian government began to send technical expeditions to the region to determine a route to Colombia. To aid in the process, the Highway Congress designated a Darien Sub-Committee composed of Panamanian, Colombian and U.S. engineers that from its office in Panama City sent teams of experts to determine a route through the forest. These explorations and surveys were funded in a most extraordinary and unprecedented way: every member state of the Organization of American States was expected to pay a quota for the completion of the Darien Highway—that is, for the completion of a road they had nothing to do with—and pay they did, for the sake of the Pan American Highway and its dream of integration.¹

¹ Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria presentada a la honorable asamblea nacional en sus sesiones ordinarias por el Arq. José B. Cárdenas, Ministro de Obras Públicas* (Panama: Gobierno Nacional, 1964), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

By the time a route was selected and the necessary surveys completed it was the 1970s and the military government of the time took up the highway project as part of a scheme for national modernization. This modernization effort, which sought to strengthen the link between nation and state, required the physical connection of geographically and socially marginal regions to Panama City, the center of political and economic power. The government called it the Conquest of Darien. And this conquest would be brought about through a project called the Desarrollo Integral de Darién—the Integral Development of Darien—which would build the Pan American Highway, promote colonization of the region, and establish social and agricultural programs that would altogether domesticate the wilderness that was Darien. As a nationalist project of modernization expressed in an explicit idiom of conquest, the Darien Highway lays bare the intimate relationship between integration and colonialist patterns of power, patterns that rely on modern ideas about human mastery over nature. As this history of road construction shows, however, mastery over nature and Darien’s integration was only partially achieved, at best.

The Darien Highway requires a consideration of both transnational connections and local encounters in the forests of Darien. The integration and Conquest of Darien depended on regional differences and inequalities within the Panamanian territory. But the highway’s construction also depended on transnational trade relationships that connected cattle-raising in Central America to beef consumers in the United States, on the political support and technical knowledge produced by the Organization of American States, on funding from international credit agencies

and bilateral treaties, and on the subsequent money, technical assistance, and supervision of the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. National integration turned out to be not so national, after all. Nationalist, anti-imperialist highway builders not only collaborated with empire but also reproduced some of the very colonial forms that had created a situation of underdevelopment in the first place. Meanwhile, people in Darien participated and contributed to the highway's construction without necessarily supporting the same development agenda. There were multiple visions at play, and multiple purposes to which the highway was put.

The articulation of integration, modernization and conquest that converged with the Darien Highway project inspired all too familiar visions of a road to progress plowing through the frontier wilderness, intrepid settlers following in its wake. As such, it is easy to criticize the highway as a modernization project applied to a colonized society but formulated and planned in the metropole, executed by implicitly white and modern conquerors bent on the transformation of passive tropical natives and nature. However, the relations between the people, plants and animals involved in building the Darien Highway make a case for arguing that integration and development projects do not arrive fully formed from external sites of power. Instead, such projects are formed by encounters and negotiations every step of the way, negotiations that make them vulnerable to unintended and coincidental effects that change the workings of integration itself.

How Cattle Keep People Moving, 1700s-1960s

Darien came to exist as a twentieth-century frontier to be conquered only in contrast to hegemonic sites of political-economic life and national identity in Panama. The country's destiny has historically been defined by the relationship between its transit geography tied to the Canal and, in counterpoint, an area called "the Interior" (Figure 1). During the colonial era, the transit zone was frequented by mule trains that trekked back and forth across the isthmus transporting gold and silver to Spain and European goods to the colonies. The exhaustion of mines on the isthmus and Panama's political and economic decline in the 18th century left rural colonists politically and economically isolated. They turned to subsistence, combining settlers crops and agricultural techniques with the introduction of cattle and rice.² While several families purchased and amassed large estates, most of what is now the interior was communal land designated by local municipal authorities for swidden agriculture and timber extraction but not for permanent cultivation or occupation. This tradition, with origins in medieval Castile, based ownership on what people could extract from the land, rather than the land itself.³ Labor and its products mattered more than holding exclusive and individual title to land.

² Gudeman (1978).

³ On the other hand, the crown retained "tierras baldías o realengas," forests resistant to European colonization (the Caribbean and Darien) until 1821 when with independence property was transferred to the Colombian government. On changing property regimes in the Azuero region see Heckadon Moreno (2009). Gudeman (1978) describes a similar situation in Veraguas where peasants were able to rent land from owners with the stipulation they plant pasture grass when they left.

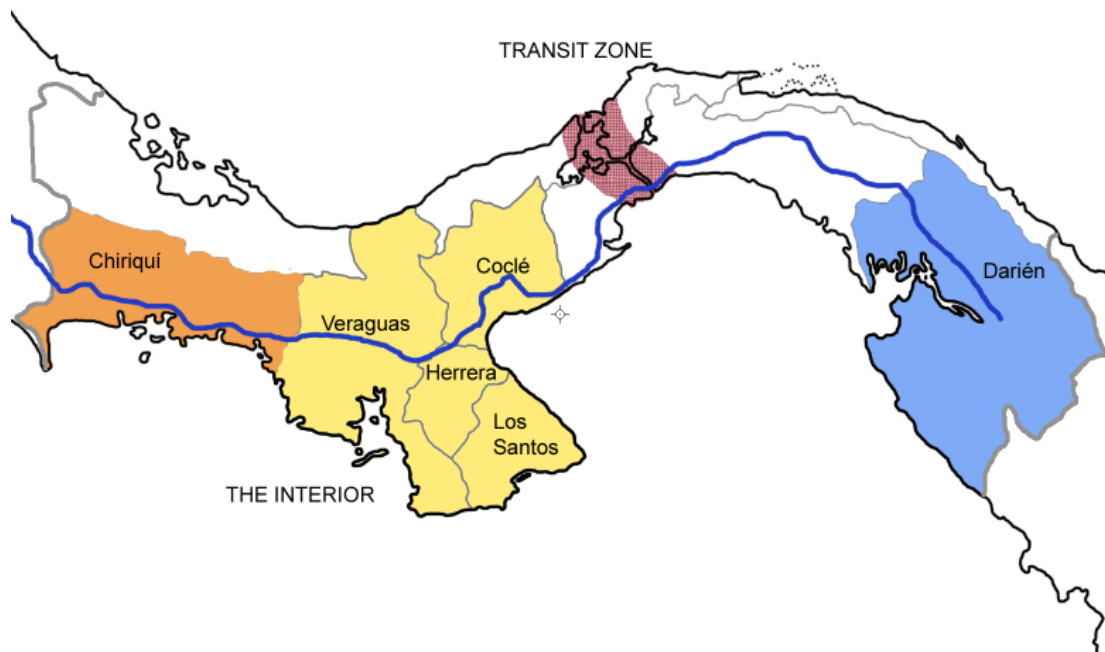


Figure 15. Chiriquí, the Interior provinces, the transit zone, and Darién

Like Spanish settlers, colonial cattle occupied and lived off the land without owning it. Pre-colonial indigenous peoples had been clearing forests for agriculture long before the sixteenth century, and Europeans encountered not virgin forests but agricultural lands and savannahs seemingly ready for the taking.⁴ The custom of allowing large numbers of loosely herded cattle to range over extensive areas had developed in Spain's central plains during the twelfth century and expanded southwards through the Iberian peninsula as part of the Reconquest.⁵ A similar pattern emerged in Panama as elsewhere in the Americas. Livestock constituted an advancing frontier, going along wherever Spaniards went looking for gold. As the

⁴ What territory neither cattle nor Spaniards occupied reverted back to forests that survived until the twentieth century. See Bennett (1968).

⁵ Bishko (1952).

herds grew, they occupied territory far more effectively than the meagerly numbered Spanish settlers—even the locations of towns were selected by carefully considering the site’s potential for sustaining livestock.⁶ Cattle were the foot soldiers of empire.⁷

In contrast to cattle estates in the area surrounding the capital city, which were privately owned by elite families, communal savannahs in the interior were divided into grazing sites which could only be occupied by a discrete number of people; grazing rights could be inherited as long as the livestock remained directly on site, but the rights could also be transferred if the owner sold the cattle—usually the herd was sold along with the livestock grazing rights.⁸ Thus, from early on, cattle and the rights to *use, occupy* and *extract* from land were articulated through traditional and legal structures.

Many peasants had cattle, especially in the Azuero peninsula where the climate and ecology was not conducive to agriculture. Few however, considered themselves ganaderos, a title applied to the few who had over one hundred head of cattle.⁹ Most ganaderos were wealthy urban cowboys who purchased steers from peasants by way of intermediaries and controlled the commercial slaughter and sale of beef. In contrast, most nineteenth century peasant herds did not exceed numbers of forty and were mainly a source of subsistence and savings rather than a source of

⁶ Heckadon Moreno (2009:70).

⁷ I borrow this phrase from Rose (2004), where she traces the links between cattle and conquest from its beginnings in ancient Europe to colonial Australia. In the colonial Americas a similar situation existed in so far as livestock often functioned as proxy settlers; their numbers and hardiness enabled the Spanish to occupy and claim large amounts of territory, and these patterns in many ways have been reproduced in nineteenth and twentieth century frontiers throughout North, Central and South America.

⁸ Heckadon Moreno (2009:49).

⁹ Heckadon Moreno (2009:20). *Ganaderos* can be understood as “cattlemen.”

money and, much less, profit.¹⁰ Out of this life and these peasant-cattle relationships emerged a cattle culture that in the mid-twentieth century would be institutionalized through folklore as the epitome of “deep Panama.”¹¹ Interioranos, people from the interior provinces—and in particular from Azuero—became the most Panamanian Panamanians.

Upon Panama’s separation from Colombia liberal reforms focused on assimilating peasants into national society by extending voting rights, improving infrastructure, and promoting public health, leading to a population explosion that intensified pressure on natural resources.¹² In the Azuero region, where children customarily inherited land rights in equal parts, the population increase led on one hand to ever-smaller parcels, and on the other hand, to shorter fallow periods, which diminished productivity and increased ecological degradation.¹³

Closer ties to the state and transformations in agrarian society from a subsistence orientation towards a market economy took on greater intensity after World War II. The Pan American Highway was completed to the Interior in the late 1950s and finished finally in 1967, with immediate effects. Products from the Interior, namely rice, cattle and sugar cane, became accessible to the Canal Zone and the growing cities of Colon and Panama City at both ends of the Canal. These new

¹⁰ Heckadon Moreno (2009:78).

¹¹ Interioranos came to be linked to national identity as part of an elite nationalist project in the early twentieth century (Szok 2001). For the place of interioranos in relation to other discourses of national identity in late twentieth century Panama, see Porras (2005).

¹² Heckadon Moreno (2009:94).

¹³ Heckadon Moreno (2009:137).

linkages with national and international market economies made peasants more dependent on cash.¹⁴

This emergent cattle complex, which would eventually link together the interior and the Darien frontier, depended not only on a modern highway system but on restructuring biopower at the level of species. Ever receptive to existing and potential beef consumers, ganaderos introduced innovations in breeding practices and pasture grasses. People who migrated to Panama City and Colon to work on the canal increased the demand for beef internally.¹⁵ Ganaderos also cultivated links with external beef markets, beginning with the Canal Zone. To entice North Americans to purchase their beef, ganaderos set out to improve beef quality by crossing their thin, tough criollo cattle with cebú (*Bos indicus*), and planting “improved grasses” from Africa, namely faragua (*Hyparrhenia rufa*).¹⁶ Faragua slowed the regeneration of forest cover, and allowed cattle to leave the dryer savannahs to other ecological regions.¹⁷ It finally made market-oriented cattle raising economically viable in western Panama, along with the Inter-American Highway.¹⁸ As it became cheaper to

¹⁴ See Gudeman (1978) on the encounters of subsistence and market-oriented economies in Veraguas during this time period.

¹⁵ Heckadon Moreno (2009:109) notes that in 1898 Panama consumed 24,000 cattle annually. By 1967, 148,000 were consumed and in 1976, 240,000.

¹⁶ Heckadon Moreno (2009:50, 110-111). Pasture grasses had quietly been transforming communal lands into enclosed property since their introduction in the 1870s (see Parsons 1972). The discovery of gold in California, the subsequent construction of the Panama Railway, the arrival of foreign workers for the French Canal, and the growth of Panama City and Colon caused booms in demand for beef. In order to meet this demand, interioranos tried to expand their herds but were limited by the ecological capacity of the savannahs as well as the lack of roads to the capital. Herds were finally able to expand when wealthy businessmen introduced pará grass in the 1870s and 1880s. The need to protect this planted African grass from other people’s cattle led to the enclosures of land with barbed wire fences and the beginning of the end of the communal land system.

¹⁷ Heckadon Moreno (1982:23).

¹⁸ Bennett (1968:62).

transport livestock over agricultural products, and as credit practices favored cattle-raising, cattle were perceived by peasants as the most economically-viable option.¹⁹

Modernized cattle, modernized grass, and modernized money, whose connections from the interior to the rest of Panama and beyond were mediated by the Pan American Highway, transformed the way land was used and the people's rights to use it. Peasants called these innovations *la fiebre de la paja y el alambre*²⁰—the grass and wire fever. Grass tasty to cattle combined with barbed wire led to the expansion of cattle territory and eventually to the dispossession of interiorano peasants from the land they worked. These occurrences paralleled processes throughout Central America during this time; in the United States, increased demand for cheap, processed meats and the establishment of a U.S. beef quota on imports transformed traditional ranching practices into more modern beef businesses through new forms of pasture management based on African grasses, fertilizers and herbicides, through credit practices that favored ranching over agriculture, and through improvements in transport infrastructure. This cattle complex, which reconceptualized cattle as an instrument for making money profit, was directly linked to deforestation.²¹

Global forces combined with national liberal policies, then, clinched the destruction of the communal land system in rural Panama and led to the conquest and colonization of Darien. Once the Panama Canal drove up the price of land the state

¹⁹ Heckadon Moreno (1982:40).

²⁰ Heckadon Moreno (2009:111).

²¹ On the linkages between Latin American cattle, deforestation, and beef production for international markets see DeWalt 1982, Martinson 1974, Myers 1981, Nations and Nigh 1978.

began to expropriate communal lands held municipally and sell them to individuals and companies.²² Uncultivated lands, usually forests close to towns and vital to swidden agriculture, were sold.²³ People could purchase their land from the state if they could prove it was under direct cultivation—which was difficult if the parcel was under a system of shifting agriculture and field rotation. River areas where homes and gardens were located were easier to claim in this way, as well as pasture lands. But communal savannahs were a different story because their status as “cultivated” was ambiguous. Wealthy ganaderos backed by their political connections enclosed thousands of hectares of savannahs with fences beginning in the 1910s and intensifying in the 1920s, claiming that because their cattle grazed there, it was theirs—never mind the peasants who also used those grazing lands.²⁴ Peasants also participated in the enclosure movement. In cases where landowners had withdrawn or abandoned land rented to peasants for a fee, people competed for land basing their claims on how long a person had worked the land, whether it had been seeded, or fenced. Fences, however, required the cattle to be fed and the pastures of “improved grass” to be maintained, which in turn required money—money peasants did not have.²⁵

The basis of land claims shifted: what mattered now was not only occupation and extraction from land, but the *permanence* of the activity. The new system undermined swidden rotations, and privileged intensive plantation agriculture and

²² Heckadon Moreno (2009:95).

²³ Heckadon Moreno (2009:130).

²⁴ Heckadon Moreno (2009:129).

²⁵ Gudeman (1978).

livestock pastures. In effect, peasants were forced out of beef production, left without the land and money necessary to sustain cattle, but with a cattle culture that associated livestock with prestige, prosperity, and cultural continuity.

The agrarian problem that emerged in the 1950s and that paved the way to the Conquest of Darien, then, was the result of a number of factors: an increased demand for beef due to the canal and urbanization, an increase in population, the expropriation and enclosure of communal lands, the encounters of subsistence and market economies, and the modernization of the beef industry. Peasants now considered land private property²⁶ but still practiced swidden agriculture for food. Without their traditional communal lands, they began migrating first within the Interior and then beyond, in search of uncultivated forests (the only thing left available for them) to plant parcels of rice, corn and beans for personal consumption. The difficult access to these sites made anything beyond subsistence impossible. Agriculture became associated with poverty, lack of land, and migration. For money, peasants set their hopes on cattle. The peasants turned to a life on the move, migrating with the seasons in search of food and money.

It was a veritable exodus from the Interior. Peasants migrated to forests around the Canal area, to the Caribbean coast, and then to Darien, leaving behind them a trail of environmental destruction—or productive land, depending on which way you look at it. The colonization of unused national lands (*tierras baldías*) took on a pattern that repeated itself many times over: peasants would move to free land, use

²⁶ In this context private property means land—whether titled or secured through use-rights—that is held by an individual person.

fire to clear the forest and plant crops for food. After a year or two the quality of the soil would decrease, since additional land for cultivation, allowing for a sufficiently long fallow period, was not available. All that was left to do was plant pasture grass for cattle. But the need for money for food and the increasing population of the newly-settled area would prompt the concentration of land into fewer and fewer hands, those of ganaderos and speculators. Landless again, peasants would move on to another location and do it all over again.²⁷ State-sponsored colonization and deforestation in Panama was part of a broader trend across Latin America during the middle part of the twentieth century, whereby forest frontiers in Central America and the Amazon were targeted for integration and development by modernizing governments that officially and unofficially encouraged tropical colonization.²⁸

Revolution and Reform, 1960s-1970s

Carlos Santiago's migration from the Interior to Darien, which he recounted to me through interviews and conversation, is similar to many settlers' experiences in his circuitous, staged route and his frequent contact with government authorities throughout his life as a migrant and settler (or *colono*, as they are referred to in Panama): "I went to Colon [province] when I was about 30 years old. In Colon because of a land problem, they put me in jail. By order of a landowner." He was already a migrant searching for land clear on the other side of Panama, on the Caribbean coast. He was literally thrown into politics, in this beginning.

²⁷ Heckadon Moreno (1982:28-29).

²⁸ See Hecht and Cockburn (1990) and Faber (1992).

“But in that moment there went to the jail a man named Omar Torrijos. What are you doing here? asked Torrijos. You’re not from here. You’re peasants. Well, that’s right. There were fourteen of us. Then it was my turn to speak: Look, there were some lands over there that were unused, some very big forests. And what were there were huge snakes. There were tigras, there was a bunch of stuff—it really wasn’t producing anything. Well, we went in there. Then the animals left. You know that when you fire a rifle shot, the tigre leaves. We have more than ten years working there, but now since there is pasture and a lot of plantain, a lot of yuca and corn planted, everything, a man showed up there called Luis Arauz who says he is the owner of those lands. And he denounced us because we had invaded those lands. Because in those times the law was very soft for them, for the landowners. And so they had us tied up there, in jail. And like that, I told him the story.”

Santiago was one among many peasants who went looking for somewhere to cultivate, whether national lands or those already claimed by the wealthy and powerful. Such was the scene in the 1950s and 1960s in Panama, before the revolution. Trouble brewed in the form of class conflict. As they searched for land to occupy, people challenged the power of the oligarchy, which controlled national politics, commerce, as well as most of the good land. There were land invasions, strikes at the banana and sugar plantations, strikes in the city, peasant insurrections and government repression. Military official Omar Torrijos, trained in anti-insurgency, was among those sent out to subdue rural uprisings. Santiago must have been nervous.

“Well, the man [Torrijos] lowered his head, and when he lifted it, he said to the guard: Hey you, write down everything I’m going to say. One of these days this custom here in Panama has to disappear. Unused lands are good for nothing. It is okay that we have to keep and respect the montes [forest]. But we also have to eat... So you say you have plantains and everything, eh? And after a while he went out and left. But before leaving, he told us: I’ll see you around, one of these days.”

Maybe the image of corn stalks growing tall and plantain groves heavy with fruit struck a chord. Maybe he saw the peasants’ sun-weathered faces and hands rough from working in the fields and was reminded of people from home. Maybe the contrast between them—all of them—and the slick landowners with their refined manners and their exotic tastes made him uneasy.

“After about eight days they let us go from the jail. And we went to where we worked. The man that put us in jail didn’t go back there, but every once in a while he’d send us a message. That we should watch out because he was Luis Arauz. So what? I’m Carlos Alberto Santiago. And the other one was Julio Bermudez, and the other was Mario Tuñon, the other—well. So a few months went by, and then there was the coup. The government that had us in jail collapsed.”

Santiago laughed as if the political defeat of the ruling class had been a personal triumph. Maybe it was. The year was 1968, and revolution bubbled everywhere in Latin America. In Panama, the hegemony of the oligarchy was in crisis. The National Guard took power by force, and by December 1969 General

Torrijos assumed leadership over the state apparatus.²⁹ He was a modernizer. Throughout the 1970s, the Revolutionary Process, as it was called, targeted agrarian, social and political structures. It infused institutional reforms and development projects—including the Darien Highway—with a nationalist-populist ideology whose ultimate goal was the “liberation and independence of Panama.”³⁰ Concretely, this meant combating underdevelopment by encouraging the cultivation of capitalist relations both in terms of circulation and production, which finally enabled a middle class to accumulate and grow.³¹ On one hand, Panama’s role as global transport hub was enhanced through canal-oriented services, new treaties, the creation of a free trade zone and financial center. On the other hand, the state pursued the development of agricultural and livestock production, ideally for export.³² For the revolutionary politics of the time, allowing fallow, unproductive land, to just sit there would be tantamount to a crime.

“Some police came looking for us. But then they told us we weren’t going to jail, but that the Comandante Torrijos had sent for us to speak with us. Fine. We went, we obeyed. Some of us, the fear showed. Others went content because they said, well, if I go to jail they have to give me food anyhow.” Santiago laughed. The joke was still funny in 2011 when he told me the story. “And that’s how they started to invent the peasant organizations. There were planned settlements, agrarian

²⁹ On the internal crisis within the oligarchy and the series of events pertaining to the coup, see Díaz Herrera (1981), Manduley (1980), and Priestley (1986).

³⁰ Partido Revolucionario Democrático (n.d.).

³¹ On economic restructurings under the Torrijos regime and their effects on class structure in Panama, see Priestley (1986) and Gandásegui (1987).

³² Priestly (1986:28).

associations, all of that. So us, instead of going to jail, they said: well, all of you are going to Panama City. Torrijos told an engineer: Take them there, and give them three months of training. They've already been in jail, they took the land by force. Now they'll go to the countryside and teach the peasants.”

Santiago ended up working for the government (it is not like he could really say no, when the soldiers came knocking on his door), helping invaders like himself establish claims to land. Not only would peasant claims be legitimized by the state rather than criminalized, but they would also receive technical assistance, seeds, materials, and farming tools.³³ Agriculture and livestock development in the times of revolution drew from old modes of land tenure, based on both labor (the “improvements” made to the land) and permanent occupation. But there were key differences. While land was once worked for subsistence, now (ideally) it was worked to extract resources for capitalist markets. Communal land no longer existed, only private property. And it was all intensified, rationalized, modernized (ideally), and for the glory of the nation (ideally). In retrospect, the Agrarian Reform was moderate, at best. It did not directly challenge rural economic structures; instead, it focused on “underutilized land.”

“I’m retired from the Agrarian Reform. I worked there for 30 years. I went to Colon and then they took me to Panama, and then this Torrijos ordered that the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development be transferred to Veraguas.

³³ On the changes in political structure during the Torrijos regime see Jaen (1981).

Because the countryside is where it was needed—people who know about agriculture. Engineers, agronomists, a series of employees arrived.”

Torrijos forged unprecedented alliances in the history of the nation—and indeed, for the very purpose of building a modernized, multicultural, capitalist nation-state. In the early years, he garnered the support of professionals, leftists, and labor activists, who were appointed key posts in the state administrative apparatus. It was a “revolution from above” that centralized power while extending its reach through technocrats in the service of development.³⁴ At the same time, Torrijos understood the danger of workers, students, peasants, and other marginalized groups and systematically worked to depoliticize potential radicals, and repoliticize them as privileged revolutionary subjects like Santiago. He established clientelist relationships through political favors and concessions rather than outright repression. Racially and ethnically, the nation was reconfigured through corporatist multiculturalism that created Panamanians out of West Indian and indigenous peoples.³⁵ The nation would be made not through *mestizaje*, but through co-optation and the reification of difference. As a marginal space—neither transit zone nor interior, full of Panama’s Others—Darien was a central site of nation-building.

“So after five years in Veraguas, I was transferred here to Darien, in 1976. Here in Darien there was nothing. A lot of unproductive land. I worked very hard

³⁴ On the role of technocrats in Torrijos’ government, see Díaz Herrera (1981) and Priestley (1986:6).

³⁵ Horton (2006:838). For articulations of multiculturalist policy straight from the horse’s mouth, see Partido Revolucionario Democrático (n.d.).

here with the peasants getting information to later make their property titles. I stayed here. I took a piece of land for myself, another for my wife, and here I stayed.”

Darien was key in Torrijos’ quest to integrate Panama, which meant solving the agrarian problem while at the same time creating a strong nation-state. With “the colonization of the jungles” as official motto and development policy, the revolutionary government encouraged Interioranos to settle places like Darien, far away from the center of power where, among other things, people might get ideas about uprising.³⁶ Colonization was the alternative to deeper structural changes that would reduce inequalities.

The Conquest of Darien

The Conquest of Darien began officially as a policy created in 1971.³⁷ The government sent expert planners—agronomists, engineers, social scientists—to Darien to mine the region for information about people, land, and social structures. It was a region vast in size but sparsely populated, for the modernizers full of unknown riches and unknown potential. Through these knowledge-making practices, experts and technocrats created problems for development and colonization to solve. These highway planners *made* Darien into a frontier to be conquered.

³⁶ On the support given to colonos by the military, including medical attention and visits from cistern trucks, see Heckadon Moreno (2009:145-7).

³⁷ Dirección General de Planificación y Administración, *Informe del Darién: Aspectos Críticos de una Provincia Marginada*, (Panama: Departamento de Planificación, 1972), Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Panama City, Panama.

According to experts, both nature in Darien and its human inhabitants resisted development.³⁸ The Conquest of Darien targeted both the forest and the people who lived there. Darien's natural resources were wasted by implicitly lazy locals.³⁹ Timber, gold, and oil could not just sit there—it had to be extracted and inserted into capitalist circuits of circulation. Plantains and other agricultural products had to be cultivated and extracted rationally. There were no cattle, a sign of civilization. Even wild animals were a waste if they were left alone—they were better off as protein for human consumption.

These views, modernist in their desire for Darienitas to use resources rationally (that is, according to a Western capitalist logic), sought to transform Darien through its integration. Darienitas posed three obstacles to integration: their questionable nationality, their mobility, and their self-sufficiency. Darien's inhabitants were a problem because they lived in Panamanian territory but were not very Panamanian, at least according to metropolitans. Darienitas, the descendents of colonial slaves, shared more historical, cultural and kinship ties with people in the

³⁸ A series of official reports documented Darien's underdevelopment and eventually led to the government's collaboration with the Organization of American States on the "Integrated Development Project of Darien": Dirección General de Planificación y Administración de la Presidencia, *Informe del Darién: Aspectos Críticos de una Provincia Marginada* (Panama: Departamento de Planificación, 1972); Dirección General de Planificación y Administración de la Presidencia, *El Darién: Realidad y acciones para su desarrollo* (Panama: Departamento de Planificación, 1972); Ministerio de Planificación y Política Económica, Organización de Estados Americanos, *Situación actual, prospectiva y propuesta de acción para la región oriental de Panamá (Darién)* (Panama: Ministerio de Planificación y Política Económica, 1977); Programa de Desarrollo Regional, Unidad Técnica del Proyecto Panamá-Darien, *Proyecto de desarrollo integrado de la región oriental de Panamá-Darien* (Washington, D.C.: Secretaría General de la Organización de los Estados Americanos, 1978); all of which are located in the Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Panama City, Panama.

³⁹ Local accounts, in counterpoint, detail boom and bust cycles of rubber, gold, plantains, and other natural resources that have been linking Darien's regional economy to national and international markets throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; see Méndez (1979).

Colombian Pacific region than with anyone else on the isthmus of Panama. Indigenous Guna, Emberá and Wounan were not quite Panamanian because they—or their immediate ancestors—had migrated into Darien from Colombia. And the first wave of colonos who settled Darien, beginning in the 1950s, before the highway was built, hailed from Chiriquí, Panama's western frontier with Costa Rica, a region known for its independent spirit and secessionist tendencies.

Mobility in Darien was a problem because Darienitas, Guna, Emberá and Wounan migrated and traded freely back and forth across the Panama-Colombia border. Colombians migrated seasonally to Darien in search of dollars, often working as loggers or peons on farms. Often, they stayed in Darien and intermarried with local women and established families, or even migrated to Panama City. There was a brisk trade in cross-border contraband. In fact, people recall that in those days, no habia frontera—there was no border. Colombian migration was especially problematic for experts because, even though they recognized the migrants' important economic roles as laborers, intermediaries in timber and plantain extraction, rice and corn farmers, their marked nationalism resisted Panamanian nationalization campaigns.⁴⁰ Colombian migration also generated tensions with some Darienitas, who denounced

⁴⁰ Dirección General de Planificación y Administración de la Presidencia, *El Darién: Realidad y acciones para su desarrollo* (Panama: Departamento de Planificación, 1972), Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Panama City, Panama.

them in local newspapers with incendiary language as thieves, sexual predators, vagrants, and generally up to no good.⁴¹

Mobility was also a problem because of the transitory or impermanent nature of people's land occupation. Emberá and Wounaan lived dispersed along the rivers and practiced shifting agriculture. Every few years, they would move to a new location. Darienitas did not hold the same concept of private property that had emerged elsewhere in Panama.⁴² Among Chiricanos who had begun to migrate to Darien in the 1950s and 1960s from western Panama, their lack of capital prevented them from implanting modernized livestock methods, which in turn favored the emergence of large land holdings owned by few, and transformed colonos into what a government official called "itinerant agents of natural resource destruction."⁴³ The presence of Chiricanos also strained relationships among social groups, whose discrepant interests were generally antagonistic. Mobile, migrant Darien dwellers became problems whose resistance to private property, seemingly disorderly movements and supposed lack of affective ties to the land signified illegibility to the state. The Darien Gap made more sense in Spanish, as El Tapón de Darien—a plug, a dense knot of migratory lines resistant to development and national integration.

⁴¹ The newspaper collection in Panama's National Library holds several issues of a local Darien newspaper from the 1950s that convey these sentiments. The notebook where I wrote down the name of the newspaper and took notes is lost.

⁴² See Méndez (1979).

⁴³ Dirección General de Planificación y Administración de la Presidencia, *Informe del Darién: Aspectos Críticos de una Provincia Marginada* (Panama: Departamento de Planificación, 1972), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

Highway planners took Darien's autonomy, the way people lived their lives without interference and without expecting much from the state, and called it marginality.⁴⁴ Social relationships among people fending for themselves independently from the state, and their general mistrust and lack of faith in the government, their lack of schools and hygiene, were converted into a structural obstacle for progress in the form of agricultural development. Marginality also implied isolation, which makes little sense considering Darien's long history of people and other living things traveling in, out, and through Darien. Darien connects two continents and two oceans. It has historically been entangled in far-reaching webs of migration, displacement, extraction, and exchange. But for integration, these social relationships had to be reorganized.

In order to integrate to the nation and the Americas, Panama's frontier had to be linked socially, economically, and politically to the rest of the country. Forgotten, abandoned Darien became the most important piece of the puzzle. It was Panama's largest province, and contained vast amount of natural resources that could be rationally extracted and put into capitalist circulation—if only those resources could be accessed. It was full of indians that needed to be turned into citizens. Darien was also the frontier safety valve. Because of its size, its forests, low population, it could take in all the landless migrants from the interior. The colonos, in turn, would make

⁴⁴ The conceptualization of Darien as an autonomous space is confirmed by Horton (2006:837), who describes a parallel situation for the Guna in San Blas. 20th century top-down nationalism was hindered in Panama by its economic, political and military dependence on the United States, and by its concentration of political and economic power in the trans-isthmian zone. Horton suggests these things, both structural and geopolitical, eased “integrationist” pressures in Gunas and facilitated their autonomy into the 1960s. I argue that the same held true for the rest of Darien, for both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, even though they did not achieve political autonomy during this time.

Darien more Panamanian and more civilized and put the land to work under proper agricultural production. Darien was the answer to agrarian reform. It had “free”, “unproductive” land for colonos to take without the state having to expropriate land from big landowners, which angered Panama’s powerful cattlemen cartel.⁴⁵



Figure 16. Road system in Panama with Darien Highway as dotted line, 1976⁴⁶

The highway was the means by which all of this would happen. It would integrate this remote, forgotten frontier and truly make it a part of Panama, encouraging Darien’s participation in the market economy, and increasing the state’s control over its territory. By transporting resources *out* and colonos *in* to the province, a highway would solve problems both within Darien and nationally. Colonos were encouraged to settle in Darien, nurturing dreams of becoming ganaderos even if they had never owned a piece of land before. They would bring to Darien cattle and their

⁴⁵ On the political influence of the National Association of Ganaderos, see Heckadon Moreno (2009).

⁴⁶ Ministerio de Obras Publicas, *Memoria 1975-1976* (Panamá: Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia, 1976), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

cattle-centered culture, making Darien more Panamanian and drawing the province into beef economies. The vision, at least according to the Minister of Planification in 1972, was to turn Panama into one huge pasture, from border to border.⁴⁷ The Darien Highway, one of many production roads build in Panama during this time, would facilitate the rational extraction of resources *out*, whether in the form of beef or agricultural products.

This vision of a nationally integrated Darien by way of highway dovetailed with the Organization of American States' plan to close the Darien Gap in the Pan American Highway and bring integrated development to the region (the project was literally called the Integrated Development Project for Darien). Neither project—the national integration of Panama and hemispheric integration of the Americas—was possible without the other. Torrijos needed international support to build this costly highway, not to mention the highway plans and measurements possessed by the Pan American Highway Congress' Darien Sub-Committee. And Pan American Highway proponents at the OAS needed the Panamanian state's collaboration to pave the Darien Gap. It worked out quite well, actually. The Darien Highway's symbolic unification of the Americas resonated with Torrijos' efforts to internationalize Panamanian causes—the re-negotiation of the Panama Canal Treaty and the construction of the Pan American Highway—as pan-American and Third World anti-imperialist concerns.

⁴⁷ Heckadon Moreno (2009:148).

The Darien Highway also articulated Panama's national integration with U.S. visions of development in Latin America. In order to pay for the highway's construction, Panama obtained loans from the Inter-American Development Bank and the Export Import Bank (\$15 from million each), while the United States agreed to cover two thirds of the cost for completing the Darien Highway.⁴⁸ With these transactions in place, the United States was able to supervise the entire construction process. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and previously the Bureau of Public Roads, had already established a presence in Panama with the construction of the Pan American Highway through Central America up to the Panama Canal.⁴⁹ When it came time to build the Darien Highway, the U.S. administrative structure and political precedents were already in place. For the U.S. Congress and FHWA bureaucrats, Darien would be brought into the twentieth century by a road to progress. Funding the highway was a gesture of benevolence and goodwill, which barely veiled their ideological interests in political stability in Panama and the possibility of gaining economic returns from the venture.⁵⁰ Investment through development was a way to pacify poor Latin Americans, promote the privatization of

⁴⁸ The Federal Highway Act of 1970 authorized the US to participate in the construction of the Pan American Highway through Darien with \$100,000, two-thirds the cost of survey and construction. See: United States General Accounting Office, *Linking the Americas: Progress and Problems of the Darien Gap Highway* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁹ The Inter American Highway is the section of the Pan American Highway that connects the United States to the Panama Canal. The U.S. government built the highway through Central America during World War II as a means for the national defense of the United States, including the Panama Canal, from attacks.

⁵⁰ United States Congress, *Darien Gap Highway hearing before the Subcommittee on Roads of the Committee on Public Works* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

property and participation in capitalist economies, and combat communism, which altogether would funnel more money towards the United States. Nothing good would happen without transportation first. It was transportation, in the form of a modern (American) highway, what would bring development to the economy, the social order, and the political order of Panama.⁵¹

In offices in Washington, Panama, and Colombia, bureaucrats and engineers made phone calls, formed committees, and prepared for conquest. Meanwhile, in Darien, people, plants and animals continued to travel in, out, and through the highwayless forest.

The American Company

Highway construction was divided into discrete projects that were contracted out to different companies. The first section, from Cañazas to Canglón, was built by the Morrison-Knudsen Company from 1973 to 1977. When asked, colonos involved in the highway's construction insist that there was *nothing there* when the road first came through. Nada. But there must have been *someone*, or *something* there. Otherwise, what was the point of conquest? While some colonos who subsequently settled along the highway had no direct contact with Darienitas, other people *were*, in fact, *there*—along the coast, and along the rivers. The location of the American company's base camp was already peopled by Emberá and Wounaan. It was also

⁵¹ United States Congress, *Darien Gap Highway hearing before the Subcommittee on Roads of the Committee on Public Works* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

occupied by a wealthy logger and legislator who owned most of the land that is today Santa Fe, the center of highway activity in the 1970s, in those days a farm. He would bring in workers in the summertime when it was dry, Darienitas from the villages and Colombians, too. We made our own roads, the loggers would tell me, all the way from here (what is now Santa Fe) to the Chucunaque river. The entire area was crossed with logging trails made by the men to get to the trees, which would be cut down, dragged and trucked to Santa Fe, floated down the river, and shipped to Panama. Then the mahogany would be made into furniture and displayed in the glass windows of city shops before making its way to upper-class living rooms, where it can still be found today.

The American company no doubt was attracted to the same transport networks the loggers and indigenous inhabitants used. The wide open pasture where they set up, as well, could have been a welcoming space that stood out in contrast to the discourses of dangerous, diseased Central American jungles that were prevalent among North Americans during this time.⁵² From here, in the middle of Darien, the company built the highway in two directions—one way towards Panama, and the other way towards Colombia.

⁵² On North American discourse on the tropics and the role of the Canal Zone in making Panama emblematic of Latin American jungles, see Frenkel (1996).

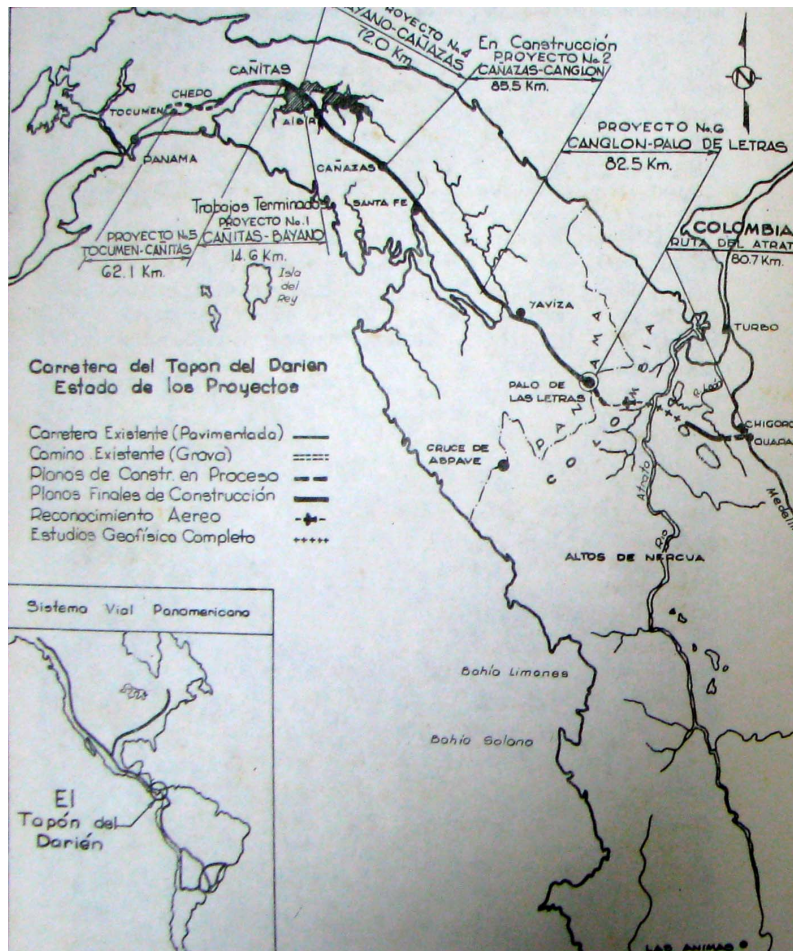


Figure 17. The Darien Gap Highway Projects. The Emkay built Project No. 2, Cañazas-Canglón⁵³

People called it the Emkay, or sometimes just the gringos or los americanos. No one had ever seen anything like it. Modern equipment that had never been used in Panama before, and that has not been used in Darien since those days. A factory for making cement tubes for the drainage system, right there at the camp. Machines that would rinse the gravel extracted from the quarry so that it would come out clean,

⁵³ Ministerio de Obras Publicas, “Una obra americanista”: *La Carretera Panamericana a traves del Tapón del Darién* (Panamá: Gobierno Nacional, 1975), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

without dirt, before being scattered on the road. That road the gringos made turned out *nice!* The Emkay made the highway like a pool table, one man recalled. Wide and smooth. Even. And the bridges? They were the best bridges ever, all eighteen of them. Yes, the Americans left a very beautiful highway.

The organization of the camp reflected a North American social order based on segregations between civilization and forests, and between white and non-white people, whose precedent had already been set in the Canal Zone.⁵⁴ In the words of one Darienita company worker, the camp was divided into *sectors*. The gringos had two separate areas, one with houses for the top supervisors and another for the mid-level managers. Each lived in their own sector, each with their own laundry and restaurant. The workers had seven barracks, just for them—long structures with a good zinc roof. Inside, two rows of metal bunk beds slept two hundred people. Each barrack had bathrooms, complete with toilets, faucets and showers. Very well made, very secure. Each person, upon arrival, received a badge and a set of sheets, blankets and pillows marked with their unique assigned number. That way, one man explained to me, the cholito (offensive term for an indigenous man) who did the washing could return everything to the correct person. The restaurant served individual meals packed in boxes for workers at the camp. For the crews working farther away, the manager would pack the lunch boxes into other bigger boxes and load them onto a pickup

⁵⁴ The Emkay camp resembled organization in the Canal Zone, with manicured, suburban-like gardens and lawns positioned to oppose the dangerous forest and spatially arranged racial segregations between Americans and canal workers.

truck to take over to the construction site. These are the kinds of things Panamanian workers noticed.



Figure 18. The Emkay Camp in Santa Fe, Panamanian flag flying high⁵⁵



Figure 19. Former Emkay building in 2008, now part of the Ministry of Health's hospital facilities

⁵⁵ Ministerio de Obras Publicas, *Memoria 1974-1975* (Panamá: Instituto Geografico Nacional Tommy Guardia, 1975), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

The company worked twenty-four hours a day. The day shift would work until six or so at night, sometimes later. Then the night shift would come in, working by the light of lamps right set up right on the road on the part where they were going to work. *Illuminated like a stadium* was the metaphor one former worker used to describe it to me. I imagine the bright white light flooding over the construction site, for the moment holding at bay the thick darkness of the forest. The hum of generators must have been loud and the lights very bright, in comparison to the small kerosene lamps normally used in Darien at that time. The bugs must have been going crazy.

The spatial and temporal order of the Emkay camp, its hygienic facilities and nutritional regimes, in contrast to the jungle disorder that inhabited the North American imagination, signified safety not only from disease, but tropical people, climate, and whatever may lie beyond in the forest.⁵⁶ Yet the order was marred by extramural activities. Everybody ate at the restaurant, whether they were employees of the company or not. Kids would show up, attracted by the Kool Aid. Anyone could just go in, take a box of food, sit down and eat calmly, without paying a nickel. The campsite swarmed with informal vendors selling clothes, booze, and other items for consumption. Workers would take company pickups to go shoot deer that did not know better than to stay away from the cut of the road, and afterwards spent the night eating fried meat and drinking cane liquor. Of course, this was not *disorder* but a different *kind* of order, as alien to the Americans as the camp's organization was to

⁵⁶ On the parallel discourse on disease and tropical danger created in the Canal Zone, see Frenkel (1996:330).

the Panamanian workers. Two men reminisced about the temporary camp set up as the road was going through Metetí:

“There were three large barracks there. I was stationed there when I worked at night. There were more than five hundred people.”

“That’s right. And the curious thing about all of this is that with all those people, there were just two police! They were just there, like nothing!”

“Yes well only to earn their wages, that’s all.”

“And with the people, there wasn’t any trouble. None of that.”

“Yes, there wasn’t even a jail.”

“There was just a little shack, badly made.”

“And that was there for them to sleep, not to jail anybody! There were just two police, despite the huge number of people everywhere.”

The story, relayed to me by Darienitas, came out amidst bursts of raucous laughter. Like it was the funniest thing in the world.

Racial segregations between Panamanian laborers and American supervisors were also shaken up in these encounters across difference precipitated by the highway. The workers came from all over Panama. Local labor was sparse but people came attracted by the good wages: Darienita loggers, some of the Chiricanos who had settled in the Iglesias area. The company also brought workers from Panama City and the Interior. As far as he knows, however, William Taylor was the only one from

Bocas del Toro, located on the western Caribbean coast of Panama, where people spoke English.

“I came to Darien on September 17, 1973 because I signed a contract with the Morrison [the “Em” in the Emkay] in the office in Panama. When I got there the first day there were seven operators that arrived. There since well I was the only negrito and I didn’t know any of the other operators, they came talking, and this and that. And me, quiet over there because I didn’t know any of those operators that came. Well, when we get there, we got off the airplane and I saw the tall gringo, he was called Anderson. Anderson came next to where they were, he said, downdey estahan lows owperahdownres? [Where are the operators?] Says one, here we are. He said, mowntah en my pickup [get in my pickup]!” Taylor imitated for me the way the man stumbled over Spanish with his funny accent, enjoying the story.

“You know that they [the other operators] are white faces. They got in front. I got in the back. We got to the office, each one brought his letter and things that he had to turn in at the office. Then the gringo comes and says: Okay, mowntah en my pickup. Vaz ha-ya ah ha-sir la prueybah. [Okay, get in my pickup. You’re going up there to do the test.] Okay. We went to where Samuel Gonzalez was filling over a drain. Well, all the operators they were talking this and this and this. But it seems that they talked and made an agreement to send the negrito first, to see what happens. Since I do know that I’m a machine operator, it didn’t scare me. At once I climbed into the machine. I asked if the machine was good with water, fuel and oil. I spoke in English. He told me yes. Well— pam! I started the machine, accelerated and zup zup,

and I did just one trip with the bulldozer, went and dumped rocks on the drain and came back. And the gringo tells me: come on down, come on down. You speak English perfectly and had me struggling with this language! He says, okay, you sit next to ME in MY PICKUP!

“There it was. I had it made. Okay. At once the people started to comment. They said hey but the negrito does speak English perfectly and is the ‘terpreter now! And from there on, well, anything they wanted, run to Taylor. And that was how I started with the gringos.”

If the Darien Highway and its North American collaborators illuminated the advance of the road’s construction like a beacon of progress through the darkness—if this was the arena of conquest—what went on at the construction sites and camps also overthrew the order that conquest was meant to establish. Who sat in the front of the pickup and who climbed in the back, the sectors, the numbers—this was certainly not the existing Panamanian social order. It was not entirely the U. S. American one, either. Encountering the regional histories of Panama and the specificities of Darien, the Emkay had to set aside, on occasion, the sectorized organization of life to have Taylor double as interpreter. The project’s heterogeneity arose out of necessity and coincidence.

To make the highway, first a trail would be hacked with a machete, and large trees chainsawed down. Then two tractors would lead the way, clearing the trees and other growth. It was Taylor and a man people call Guaymí who drove the tractors and went knocking down those trees (*tirando esos montes*). Unlikely nation-builders,

unlikely agents of conquest: a black Anglophone Bocatoreño and a man whose nickname implies indigenous features.

Taylor: “I went ahead. That was in 1973. I did the clearing on this side. From the Lara bridge to Cañazas. In ’74 I finished the side to Cañazas. And then the next year when the dry season began, I got up to Sansoncito [in the opposite direction]. Then, in ’76 I got to Canglón.”



Figure 20. The caption reads: “In the previously unviolated immensity of Darien, we now hear the symphony of perforators, of huge mechanical shovels and the echo of motors.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Ministerio de Obras Publicas, “Una obra americanista”: *La Carretera Panamericana a traves del Tapón del Darién* (Panamá: Gobierno Nacional, 1975), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.



Figure 21. Official photograph from Ministry of Public Works, 1975⁵⁸

The Ministry of Public Works reports work hard to portray the orderly advance of civilization with images of machines fighting forest, perforated rock faces, well-dressed engineers in hardhats, and wide, straight roads. Aside from the occasional anonymous worker seen from the back, racialized and regionalized labor is excluded from the story of national integration. Excluded also were interpretations expressed from within Darien—in their own way, contributions to the Darien Highway. Taylor’s account confirmed stories I had heard from farmers who lived near the highway: “In one year yes those people planted soooooome rice! When we came out along the trail, they had planted rice from there in Metetí up to Sansoncito. Since it was fifteen meters on each side, it was thirty meters wide. They planted rice, uuuuuu when we came back to go in the summer, yes they had managed to clean that

⁵⁸ Ministerio de Obras Publicas, *Memoria 1975* (Panamá: Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia, 1976), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

to plant rice. Uuuuu! Because you know when those machines come out, no one else is going to go in with machines until the next summer, so they managed different parcels. Different people. Patches, they planted. Since it is forest cleared with bulldozer, the land clean.”

For all the Panamanian and United States governments might have wanted to impose with the Darien Highway a conquest of white, modern civilization over the frontier wilderness, things did not quite work out as expected. Road work had to be timed with the seasons, avoiding the rains, the company fit its camp into the landscape’s existing transport networks and available wage laborers, and even rice plants and the highway overlapped, for a while. Conquest was inconsistent and vulnerable to other sorts of projects.

Natural Interruptions and the Unfinished Highway

The strangeness of a North American company building a road for the national integration of an anti-imperialist Latin American state brought about contradictions that, in the end, would be the Darien Highway’s undoing. The far-reaching collaborations encountered opposition within empire. The Sierra Club, better known for its environmental advocacy *within* the United States, sued the FHWA for not complying with the National Environmental Policy Act. There had been no proper environmental impact statement. The Sierra Club argued that “construction of the road would ultimately result in the destruction of one of the last wild areas and last

primitive cultures in the Western hemisphere.”⁵⁹ The destruction of Darien—their logic went—would be a loss for the *entire world*, not just Panama, and because it was *everybody’s* problem, United States citizens would also be negatively impacted. This represents yet another vision of the Conquest of Darien, one that included human and nonhuman forest dwellers but in the idiom of conservation rather than, and opposed to, development. Integration along the Darien Highway would symbolically unite the Americas and link frontier to capital city, but also to a hemispheric node of political influence located in Washington, D.C., where literally the *nature* of this conquest would be contested. Integration pulled in several different directions at once.

The Sierra Club’s lawsuit succeeded in obtaining a court injunction prohibiting the FHWA from continuing the project and finishing the Pan American Highway.⁶⁰ For the first time, the National Environmental Policy Act was applied to activities funded by the U.S. and carried out beyond its borders.⁶¹ Even more peculiar was that U.S. environmental policy was applied in Panama not to protect the forest, but to protect indigenous people and cattle. In the quest to influence the U.S. government, amidst all the strategizing among lobbyists and lawyers, in the search for

⁵⁹ Moss, Coan and Muñoz (1976:41).

⁶⁰ In October 1975 the U.S. District Court of Columbia issued a preliminary injunction prohibiting the Federal Highway Administration from funding, contracting, and constructing the Darien Gap Highway until it completed an environmental impact statement, in keeping with the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act. See: United States Federal Highway Administration, *Final Environmental Impact Statement-Darien Gap Highway-Tocumen, Panama to Rio Leon, Colombia* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration, 1976), Archivo Histórico, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Panama City, Panama.

⁶¹ See Klick (1994).

supporters, and efforts to present a convincing argument, the Sierra Club found an unexpected ally.

From the racialized groups that inhabited Darien, it was indigenous people who became the stars of the show, from an international perspective. And from the thousands of plant and animal species in Darien, including endangered jaguars, pumas, and caimans, *cattle* became the species most intensely debated. The objects of national integration (indigenous people) and the vehicles of national integration (the cattle) became the very reason the Darien Highway was never completed.

The Sierra Club managed to rally opposition to the Pan American Highway through appeals to the U.S. cattle industry.⁶² Hoof and mouth disease, the highly contagious virus that had previously caused huge livestock losses in South America and Europe, threatened North America, which was able to remain disease-free. But the construction of a highway linking North and South America could facilitate the spread of hoof and mouth disease to Panama and the United States. The cattle complex that had emerged over the course of the twentieth century in Panama, that included commercial ties with the United States and folkloric importance for Panamanian identity—the network of connections that was both the very reason and means by which Darien would be conquered by highway—brought about the project's demise.

⁶² Darien Gap 1973-80, Foreign Country Files, Sierra Club International Program Records, folder 25, BANC MSS 71/290, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

The lawsuit delayed progress on the highway for two years, which gave time for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to begin to implement hoof and mouth control programs in both Colombia and Panama.⁶³ In Darien, cattle were under quarantine. Colonos who settled along the partially finished highway could bring cattle in, but strict controls prevented cattle or beef products to be exported out of Darien. However, the puzzle pieces did not quite fit together. To begin with, there was not a great number of livestock in Darien at that time, only about five thousand.⁶⁴ And the cattle certainly were not creatures native to the tropical forest that conservationists wanted to save in the first place. The cattle actually *ate* the forest, in the sense that colonos claimed land, displacing black and indigenous and Darienitas, and converted primary forest into cattle pastures. In the end, the goals of conservation and development were complicit insofar as the United States was able to exert political influence on what was a Panamanian project of national integration, and insofar as the interests of the civilizing agents of conquest, the cattle (and their ganadero and U.S. rancher allies), were protected.

The FHWA eventually got the green light to continue with highway construction that was already underway in 1975.⁶⁵ However, two things happened

⁶³ Quarantine and inspection zones were established in both Panama and Colombia. For a brief history see: Ministerio de Obras Publicas y Transporte, *Carretera del Tapon Del Darien, XVI Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Bogota: Colombia, 1991), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁴ “Estudios del Darién Vol. 2. Estudios Ganadero 1976,” Biblioteca, Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas, Panama City, Panama.

⁶⁵ In December 1975 the court order was modified to allow U.S. participation in contracts awarded prior to the injunction date, which permitted the Morrison-Knudsen to complete its contract for the highway up to Canglón but no farther. The FHWA presented to the court its environmental impact statement in July 1976, but three days earlier the Sierra Club and others requested the extension of the

that prevented the Pan American Highway from ever being finished. Inflation during the delays had caused construction costs to double in price. And the controversial Panama Canal treaty negotiated between Panama's General Torrijos and President Carter, in which the U.S. agreed to return the canal to Panama by the year 2000, made Congress reluctant to give further aid to Panama.⁶⁶

The convergent but discrepant interests that created and ultimately blocked the highway call into question the singularity of development and the nature of integration. Highway builders—including grass-eating cattle, generals, bulldozer operators, lawmakers in Washington, peasants caught up in nationalist politics, and deer standing too close to the road, among others—contribute to a history shaped by inadvertent, unintentional encounters and coincidences as much as through careful planning. The highway was built in part by Americans for Panamanian nationalist modernizers, but it is *not* a Western construct, much less the simple application of development in the abstract, a scheme formulated somewhere outside of Darien. Neither was it a situation where the forces of modern civilization acted upon passive tropical nature and natives. Even the seasonal rains played a role, altering the nature of the project itself.

original injunction. In September 1976 the court suspended all participation of the FHWA in studies or construction of the highway.

⁶⁶ For a U.S. account of the Darien Highway court injunction, see: United States General Accounting Office, *Linking the Americas: Progress and Problems of the Darien Gap Highway* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. A contrasting account of the same story from a Colombian perspective is presented in: Ministerio de Obras Publicas y Transporte, *Carretera del Tapon Del Darien, XVI Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Bogota: Colombia, 1991), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Without funding, the prospects for the completion of the Pan American Highway dimmed and Darien was forgotten. Engineers abandoned the road and it was left to decay and fall apart in the tropical sun and rain. Conservationists were content that no further highway construction would take down more forest, and shifted their attention to other parts of the world. For the U.S. government, development through direct investments in infrastructure ceded way to covert warfare through the support of right-wing dictators. Latin America remained fractured. Meanwhile, in Darien, incoming colonos continued to dream about cattle, together transforming the landscape, replacing forest with pastures. The highway project went unfulfilled, but notwithstanding, it managed to effect changes in the social geography and landscape of Darien, creating for people new relationships with Panama City and fracturing relationships with neighboring Colombia. Along the unfinished highway, integration kept on working.

3. La Calle Principal – The Main Street

Where the highway moves commodities easily but not colonos, showing how integration excludes, but also where nonhuman actors in the highway assemblage contribute to these dis/connections, showing how integration is both lively and deadly, and opening up the highway's story of progress to other kinds of histories.

“The Pan American Highway is called the Main Street. Now it's okay, but not suitable for transport.” Lenín and I were leaning against the storefront of the new mini supermarket in town, waiting. More and more people gathered at the bus stop a few feet away, arranging themselves within the angled lines of shade cast by the mid-morning sun against the corrugated metal roof.

“How are you, *comadre*?”

A woman with long gray-streaked hair pulled back in a scrunchy had been standing, absently staring at the road. She turned around in surprise to look at her friend sitting on the bench. “Oh, hi. I'm just going to the bank. I didn't see you sitting there.” She turned to a teenaged girl who had just walked up from the *minisuper* behind, glancing at the bag of potato chips in her hand. “You've gotten fat. Just like your father.” Lenín's head shook silently, perhaps laughing or sympathizing with the girl. Maybe both. Despite the town's recent growth (there was even a bank now) everybody still knew everybody else, and second generation colonos, those who had been born in Darien or migrated here very young, were not immune to the observant

gazes and gossip characteristic of a small rural town that emerged in large part thanks to extensive family and godparenthood networks. The road was a place to see and be seen, a far cry from the anonymity and placenessness a supermodern highway implies, and certainly contrary to popular perceptions of Darien as an uncivilized wilderness at the edges of what is properly Panamanian. Main Street, indeed. And judging from the steady traffic that rolled along the dark asphalt of the road's surface, it certainly seemed *okay*.

At the bus stop, two men conversed in Emberá while a young man hunched over his phone, composing a text message. Finally a minibus rolled up. The bachata music blaring inside stopped as the driver's assistant slid open the door. "Santa Fe," he announced. One by one, people scrambled on while the assistant heaved sacks and other parcels up on to the metal rack on top. "Should we get on?" I asked, looking at Lenín. "Nah, that one's too crowded. And it doesn't have air conditioning. Let's take the next one." The door slid shut, the bachata resumed, the minibus pulled away.

We would catch the next one, no problem. Local buses circulated every thirty minutes, while Panama City-bound buses passed by every hour. It was December 2008 and the comings and goings of people on buses, taxis, trucks, bicycles, horses and on foot—not to mention the clouds of dust, smell of exhaust, roar of engines, squeaky brakes, and generous honking of horns—were all part of the bustling scene in front of the new *minisuper* in Metetí, the region's fastest growing town. The combination bakery, butchery, hardware store and grocery store had caused a sensation that year, and everyone was eager to peruse its seven aisles, red plastic

shopping basket in hand. At the checkout counter, the Chinese proprietor handed out calendars for loyal customers to put up on the walls of their homes, offering clients the choice of baby Jesus, fuzzy kittens or the Taiwan urban skyline at night. Outside, women along the sidewalk selling lottery tickets made brisk business helping people select numbers based on birthdays, anniversaries, or last night's dream. Greetings of *que hay* and *compa* punctuated the generalized noise of cars constantly driving up or away as the cluster of buildings and parking lots arranged around the highway teemed with movement.

The lively scene underscored how people were now connected to Panama and the rest of the world in ways differently than before, and not just through text messages sent from Nokias or the cachet of having a Chinese minisuper. For over two decades, the highway and the colono communities that formed along its margins were abandoned by the state, during which time the unfinished road (whose gravel base layer had been left exposed and never paved with asphalt) deteriorated beyond recognition. In recent years, however, the government and private parties had been investing in Metetí in optimistic anticipation of this frontier road's rehabilitation, part of a larger regional development scheme in the works since the late 1990s. Holes were being patched, lunar surfaces bulldozed smooth, asphalt and cement laid down in a flurry of activity that culminated in the road's completion in 2009.¹ Finally, the road was fit for cars, and not just tractors and four wheel drives! Finally, people could travel on pavement, and not mud and gravel! The new surface signaled that this was

¹ The existing road was fixed, but not extended in length.

no longer an isolated, desolate frontier (as colonos often recall the old days), but rather a lifeline that drew government services, created business opportunities, and brought now-necessary commodities like disposable diapers, cooking gas and processed meat products.

No wonder the material conditions of the road are the object of intense noticing, commentary, and care, even more so because it is something people interact with every single day. “Oh, so you’re here studying the road? Well tell me this: when are they going to fix those bad spots over by the bridge, for good?” There are places where the holes and unevenness never seem to go away. Or the morning radio announcer, outraged: “Last night another child was hit by a car. Until when, people, will you realize that just because the road is smooth now you can’t go at excessive speeds?” The lifeline also brings death. And often, this lifeline connection to Panama serves as an uncomfortable reminder of colonos’ position in relation to nation and state. “It’s embarrassing to get off the bus [in Panama City]. We arrive covered in dust [from the road]. I have to take a change of clothes along.” The Pan American Highway is called the Main Street. Now it’s okay, but not suitable for transport.

Despite being finally paved with asphalt between 2004 and 2009, the highway continues to cast doubt on the viability of development and the coherent nature of integrationist projects. The rehabilitated highway has brought government offices and services to the region, decreasing the need for people to travel to the capital city, and also increasing sociability within the region and between the region and the rest of the country. The road has also brought wealthy ranchers and foreign-owned teak

companies that displace colonos by purchasing their land, a situation that resonates with other sites of agricultural transition throughout Latin America. Amidst these changes, it has become evident to colonos that the highway transports people and resources in discrepant ways. The capitalist interests invested in repairing and maintaining the highway present significant challenges for survival in Darien; colonos make sense of these challenges by insisting that the Pan American Highway is their Main Street—a lived place, as opposed to merely a site of resource extraction, informed by histories that arise out of local encounters with development and that from this position put forth other kinds of views.

Lively and Deadly

Modernity's backbone is a timeline that assumes to be universal. It orders the world in relation to two opposite poles: the modern and the archaic, the future and the past. Modernization and development projects are attempts to bring everyone onto the same timeline. Modern projects slide you forward along the timeline. When modern projects fail, you slide backwards. And this is its trick. It tries to force (with institutions, policies, violence, desire) the heterogeneous liveliness of the world onto a single universal timeline, with only forward or backward motion allowed.²

² Anthropology as a modern science also does this trick. In *Time and the Other* Johannes Fabian (2002) shows us how disciplinary conventions often place “research subjects” in a time other than the time of anthropological discourse—what he calls the denial of coevalness—with the effect of universalizing Western progress. Historian of knowledge Mignolo shows us how this trick came about. He traces how the idea of “time” came to be coupled with notions of history, progress and development, arguing that “‘time’ as it is conceived today is a fundamental piece of the coloniality and Western civilization imaginary that gives support, in part, to both they myth of history and the myth of

Roads in their ideal Western form—smooth asphalt, associations with speed, mobility and freedom, their uninterrupted linearity—lend themselves almost naturally to positivist and modernist accounts of the world and how it should be. Roads are bound to dreams of progress, uninterrupted and continuous, traveling towards a determined end point. The road in Darien, however, did not advance in a straight line, nor in uniform increments, but in ebbs and jumps. The better life the highway had promised in the 1970s as it was being constructed —economic stability, educated children, a cement house, perhaps a few cows—faded over the next thirty years as the highway’s surface deteriorated, only to return at the opening of the twenty-first century when investment interests reinvigorated by neoliberal possibilities swooped upon Darien. Colonos have experienced progress—and the road—as something inconsistent, uneven, nonlinear.

Taking a cue from colonos’ attention to the surface of the highway, this chapter puts forth an approach attuned to the the assemblages formed among the highway, colonos, and more-than-human elements of the surrounding environment. Finished or not, the road is lively. The surface is subject to climatic, human, vegetative, mechanical, hydrological and animal interventions that alter its physical properties. At the same time, demands are made of the road to be smooth enough to be transitable (or for snakes, absorbent enough to be a source of heat), so that repairs to the surface are necessary. The cycles of deterioration and repair seem to repeat endlessly, over seasons and years. Progress as a smooth, straight road towards a better

science. As such, and for these reasons, it was and continues to be a major factor in the making of colonial and imperial differences” (Mignolo 2011:171).

life does not very well account for a regional history characterized by displacements, continued environmental destruction, and persistent marginality.

The highway in Darien comes about not only through the work of engineers, laborers, and heavy machinery, but through the sun and rain that beats down on the pavement, the wheels that churn up mud as they scale the miniature hills and valleys of the roadway, the drunks that pass out in the middle of the street, the cows that under cover of early morning mist wander into the way of fast-moving vehicles, even the crazy dog over by the rice mill that tries to bite passing cars. The road is not a finished object that springs forth ready-made into the world.³ It comes into being through unequal and mutable relations. Attention to the highway's surface reveals how this is not *only* a history of development (and its failures). There are multiple histories at work, and this multiplicity opens up a space that loosens that powerful association of roads with progress.

By insisting the Pan American Highway is called the Main Street, colonos criticize the destruction and alienation of development policies that facilitate the movement of resources out of Darien and express the implicit desire to have a road that better serves local needs. Caught up in the lively sociality of the landscape, the Main Street is produced by other histories that are linked to but do not necessarily contribute to the self-reproduction of capital and the dreams of progress attached to the highway, that do not necessarily follow the logic of development. These other histories, defined against the empty, homogenous time of capitalism, subsumed yet

³ See Ingold (2011).

essential to it, live in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “intimate and plural relationships to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality.”⁴ Modern projects obscure these other rhythms, but cannot erase them entirely. They can become apparent, and redirect our way of thinking and doing modern projects. What we have, then, is not one universal timeline but rather multiple histories articulated to each other in uneven fields of power.

The Main Street is informed by the history of progress and capitalist development in eastern Panama, but it also comes about through other kinds histories, like that of the rain and humidity that work together to create giant holes in the road, or like that of agricultural products that rotted on the side of the road when buyers from the city failed to come, and turned into the highway dust that coats colonos’ bodies and marks them as marginal subjects—histories that are not outside of progress, but that are not histories of progress, either. These other histories show how projects create things that are always falling apart—heterogeneous parts work not necessarily in collaboration with each other, not necessarily consistently. In other words, modern projects are neither singular nor linear, but rather made up of bits and pieces, processes, dispositions, inclinations, coincidences and divergences. Attention to these other histories and their relationship to modern projects offer a way to seek out options not outside of the road to progress, but that are more attentive to the other temporalities that operate alongside and in relation to the road to progress.

⁴ Chakrabarty (2007:66).

The Main Street is a space of ambivalence for colonos caught between dreams of progress and the frustrations of abandonment, between the comforts of modernity and unsustainable livelihoods. The highway brought a degree of prosperity and ease: the bank, complete with ATM machine and security guard; not one, but three competing cell phone service providers; frequent and faster trips to the city and beyond. But it also ruined things. Pastures and teak plantations replace forest along the roadside. Pesticides seep into the streams, while out of people's back yards clouds of smoke billow up into the air from heaps of burning plastic trash. Despite the rehabilitated highway, Darien continues to be Panama's poorest province, according to official statistics. Some things never change. National television portrays a Darien full of starving, bloated-belly children and, for comic relief, hillbillies bumbling about in canoes (not on roads), stereotypes that persist in spite of the massive amounts of development money poured into the province. Social transformations work in tandem with persistent inequalities. The highway brings life and it also brings death, whether swift and spectacular like a transit accident or a result of the slow structural violences of everyday life in Darien. It destroys and creates, connects and marginalizes. From a Main Street perspective progress is nonlinear, patchy and recursive, not because development works unevenly, but because the timeline of progress is never absolute.

Produced by colonist desires and frustrations, by the forces of terrain and climate, by pragmatic movements along an unfinished road always falling apart—the Main Street helps to disentangle roads from progress, drawing attention to histories

otherwise subsumed, forms of sociality emerge amidst landscapes damaged by development, and the ambivalences of life on a road to progress that is also not. Explicit alternatives to progress—in this context—have not been articulated, whether through social movements, activism, or other kinds of politics. Though often dissatisfied and disheartened, colonos continue to want comforts and commodities associated with modernity, and participate in projects of capitalist development. The Main Street, and other in-between spaces of ambivalence, are what what there is to work with.

We have it all.

In Darien there's nothing left.

“Metetí is the center of everything. You find everything here. And it is going to keep growing.” Optimistic sentiments like this, imparted to me by a rancher who supplements his income by driving a taxi, are echoed by many other town residents, and convey a sense of how much things have changed. Metetí grew from a handful of lonely huts, pastures and cornfields into the most important town in the province, according to residents. The new surface of the highway, along with the establishment of state institutions and new businesses along its sides, contributed to a rise in the town's regional importance. The rehabilitated highway seems to confirm that Darien has finally been integrated to Panama, or at least, well on its way. Cell phones, satellite dishes, and imported commodities—all products of the new road—

contributed to a sense of connection with the rest of Panama and with the rest of the world.

Colonos are acutely aware of how far they have come, and how much they stand to gain from this arrangement. Arturo García, Lenín's father, put it this way: "Everything used to be done in Panama City. Then, we the first Chiricanos arrived here finally, those that were the first colonizers here in Darien. There was no Development Bank, National Bank, nothing. There was no complete school, either, only up to third year. Metetí came to be peopled finally from '86 to now. Here education is now complete. From pre-kinder to university. We have the National Bank, the National Police, we have the National Environmental Authority, we have the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development. We have the Commission for the Eradication of the Screwworm, which has to do with the prevention of hoof and mouth disease, so that it won't cross over here to Panama. We have the post office. We have several institutions. You see? Everything leads to people migrating over here. There is ease for many things. Especially for studies and economic transactions. This bank over here is constant movement. That bank doesn't stop! Your small savings, and everything, it's there. And there are some who are saving a lot. They are cattle ranchers... Melo [a feed and farm supply corporation] now has a branch here. Several businesses come here to sell products for consumption, food items, and they sell also clothes, shoes, boots, wire, staples for the fields, the farms. Everything, everything is here. And the insecticides, herbicides, fumigation equipment, construction equipment, all of that is available here. Sales, all of that."

The presence of state institutions, the new street, and new businesses are positive changes. They make life easier because they no longer have to travel to Panama City to obtain, for example, a permit or to cash a check. People from other roadside communities now travel to Metetí rather than the capital city to see about getting a loan, shop for clothes, or buy farm supplies, and a selection of restaurants, stores, and hotels—as well as abundant taxis—make these excursions easier and more convenient than ever before. There are local hospitals and health centers so that the sick no longer have to travel to the city. Transporting goods like cattle and timber is easier on the new and improved road. The journey to the capital, which in the past took up to eighteen hours depending on the collaboration of the road, the vehicle, and the weather, now takes four hours by private vehicle, six by bus.

In the eyes of colonos, this is indeed progress. But this sense of “we have it all” is tempered by an equally powerful sentiment: “In Darien, there is nothing left.” They point to the bald hills and dry streams, the domesticated sight of pastures extending from the roadside far into the distance. Not without a sense of irony, colonos point out that even through the road brought a lot of things to Darien, it was too late. Despite having been fixed, the road maintains Darien marginal to national culture and politics, all the while exposing the region to predatory outsiders. Whereas *colonos* were once the primary predators, now their exploits get told as stories of loss and destruction, like this one recounted to me by Lenín’s father’s sister’s husband, who came to Darien in 1954:

“If you ask me how Darien was thirty years ago, well I would simply say that it was a province full of forests. Full of wild animals. And nowadays that can’t be found. And now there are people here would want to see a paca, a tapir, and to see it they will have to go to one of those zoos. And in that time it was very common. I hunted. I also feel guilty that today it has finished, because we killed them too. But yes, Darien was a very forested region, full of forests in all parts... Logging was where the damage to the rivers came from. They would cut all of that timber along the riverbanks. And now you can see there along the Chucunaque river how everything has been eroding, no? And, well, the damage man makes, no? So Darien was like that. The timber, they took it already. I mean, there is timber [presently] but what truly had value, they took it all... We used to find herds of wild pigs. Enormous herds, one hundred, two hundred pigs. They didn’t fear people. They weren’t used to that. And it was easy to kill a forest animal. The fauna was very rich. It was beautiful. Well, everything has run out. Everything has run out... And here, well, we have seen that ranching people have arrived, with a lot of economic power, and they are displacing the peasant. They have bought a great deal of land and all of a sudden the first year they have taken down up to 150, 200 hectares of forest. And they burn it in the dry season, and at once plant improved grass. They don’t even plant a little corn or rice plant. No, no, nothing. Here in reality everything has run out.”

It is easy to tell a story of deforestation, resource extraction and alienation in Darien. Colonos’ ambivalences, however, are harder to deal with because it requires looking at what modern stories reveal but also what they conceal. These

ambivalences are the product of their history with the road. Caught between progress and other kinds of histories, the Main Street that incites colonos to notice, travel on, and talk about the surface of the road asks to be understood as the convergence of multiple timelines, of which progress is only one among many.

Disorderly Timelines

To chart the road's construction history is one way to call into question the linearity of progress. Contrary to popular assumptions about the march of progress and the expansion of civilization, perhaps best illustrated to North Americans with the image of westward bound pioneers, steadily advancing, conquering the wilderness in fulfillment of their manifest destiny, this highway was both built out of order and settled out of order.

Construction of the Darien Highway was divided into discrete projects that were built out of sequence (Figure 22).⁵ For example, a person traveling from Panama City eastward in 1972 would encounter an isolated strip of road (well, the beginnings of a road) that did not *go* anywhere. The highway consisted of nonlinear, fragmented pieces of road surrounded by forest.

⁵ Based on the yearly reports (*Memorias*) of Panama's Ministry of Public Works located at the Archivo Nacional and Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Publicas, Panama City, Panama. Other projects were not illustrated in this image because I could not determine start or end dates (the information was either not included in the *Memorias* or those volumes are not present in the collections I consulted): an access road was built to Yaviza around 1985; asphalt pavement from Chepo to Aguacate was laid in 1994 and 1995; the rehabilitation from Aguacate to Cañitas was 66% done in 1997; the rehabilitation from Cañitas to Bayano was 41% done in 1997.

Colonist settlement patterns mirrored the nonsequential order of the road. For those in transit in the 1970s, the route into Darien involved travel by truck, horse, and foot over an inconstant surface that was sometimes concrete, sometimes dirt trail, sometimes gravel, and sometimes forest. As one migrant recalled, “The street was pure trail. Trail, trail... they arrived here from Panama, well, there was a part where they arrived in car but from there on they came on foot or horse with all of their belongings.” Maximino Vargas’s trajectory illustrates these erratic movements (Figure 23). From the province of Los Santos (A) in western Panama, he and his family went first to Bayano (B). After being displaced by the hydroelectric dam conceived as a complement to the Pan American Highway development plan, they backtracked west to Cañitas (C) and finally east to Punuloso (D). In their final migration to Punuloso, they walked over uneven surfaces in anything but a straight line: “There was a part with no road. We had to go from Cañazas around in the forest with only a trail, because they were just making the first clearings for the highway. And I traveled that part from Cañazas over here, mud up to *here* [he pointed to his knee]. And my wife was pregnant with my second son. And stuck, stuck in the mud. We crossed in over an hour, walking.”

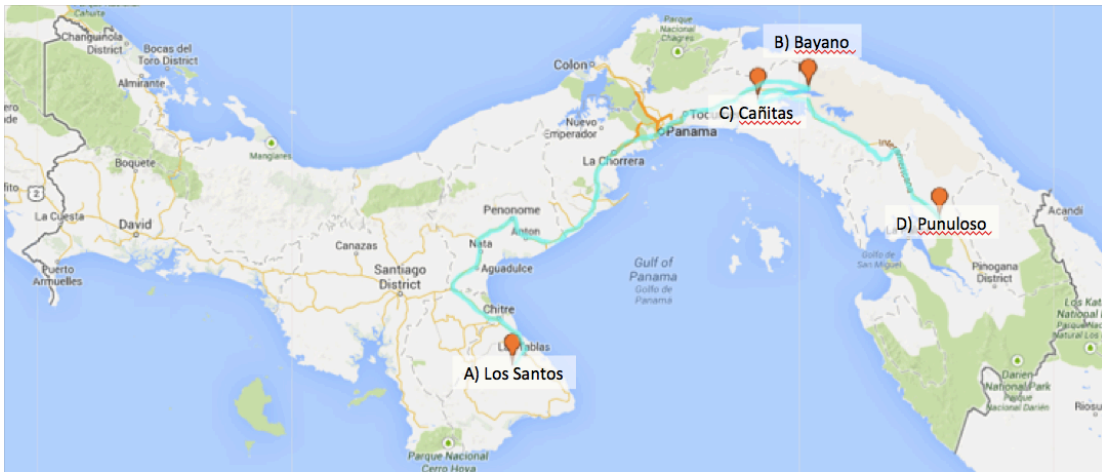


Figure 23. Maximino Vargas' migration route

Abandoned

The sense of hope and expectation that the highway's initial construction inspired soon crumbled along with the road itself. The pathway had been cleared; terracing, drainage and bridges built—the road was ready and waiting for asphalt pavement and for the final section to be built to the Colombian border. But progress did not march steadily on, and the frontier was abandoned amidst political turmoil and changes in the structure of development during the 1980s and 1990s. During the 1970s the state had financed nationalist development through funds lent by international banks but by 1981 Panama was unable to pay even the interest payments, and this combined with the government's budget deficit, rising oil prices, and later the United States' economic sanctions meant to destabilize General Noriega's regime created an economic crisis in Panama that was only worsened by the structural adjustment measures encouraged by the World Bank, International

Monetary Fund, Inter-American Development Bank, and U.S. AID.⁶ Times were difficult. Money was scarce and repression abundant. No one cared about developing Darien anymore.

The Ministry of Public Works explains that the highway deteriorated because builders abandoned the road with its base layer exposed, which was quickly worn out by logging trucks and agricultural machinery (note that these two things are not within the average colono's budget), because the government lacked equipment to maintain the road, and because the soil itself has a low bearing capacity and to top it off is also susceptible to humidity.⁷ The road fell apart not only because of people and machines but also because of Darien's geography and climate, and the unfinished surface of the highway itself. Logs, rocks and water played key roles in the highway's deterioration and the construction of Darien as an isolated, difficult, inaccessible place.

Colono accounts of the bad road days emphasize their desire to move and be connected, not just to Panama but also to locations within the province. People traveled their Main Street—more often on foot or horse than in truck—to go buy milk for the baby or assist a religious ceremony. If they got stuck in the mud they would sleep on the side of the road or find shelter in a schoolhouse, or anywhere, waiting for help to arrive to pull out the truck. “This here was a soup. It was pure mud, pure natural dirt, from here on up,” recalls one person. In notoriously bad spots

⁶ Barry et al (1995: 57-58).

⁷ Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Informe de la Carretera de Darien* (Panama: Ministerio de Obras Públicas, 1997), Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Publicas, Panama City, Panama.

enterprising individuals established tractor services to drag vehicles, people and merchandise through the mud. Buses would make passengers walk across muddy parts so the empty buses could make it through, although that was always a big maybe. Truckers carrying produce had to unload, try to drive across, carry over the fruit, and load it back onto the truck. Bunches of plantains weren't too difficult to move this way, but fragile, smaller fruit like avocados often spoiled with the delays and jostling. The sick and injured would be carried down the road in hammocks and in extreme cases the police would lend a helicopter to fly someone to the hospital in Panama City. Despite the difficulties—the highway was neither okay nor suitable for transport—people used it regardless of its condition, adding their own feet to the mix of trucks, rocks and water that constituted the road and created an affective space where hope and frustrations mingled with the road's surface itself. Abandoned, colonos maintained the road themselves as best they could, donating labor, tools and machinery to repair surfaces themselves.

The movement of resources along the highway also inspired affective engagements with the road. In the early days of the highway, government agricultural policy favored food crops over exports.⁸ As one woman who settled in Darien put it, “Torrijos *gave value* to things, even a pepper or culantro [a common cooking herb], which weren't worth anything before.” In the late 1970s, the state installed purchasing stations in Darien and began to take out agricultural products on the highway before it was even finished, drivers weaving around the machinery

⁸ Zimbalist and Weeks (1991).

constructing the road.⁹ Private buyers called intermediaries also began to arrive in trucks from Panama City, even more so after the road was inaugurated in 1981. Colono farmers recall what happened with stories laced with melodrama but also spiked with sheepish humor and a hint of anger:

The boom in agriculture and new highway generated high spirits among colonists, who planted hectares and hectares of rice, corn, beans, ñame and plantains. As harvest time neared, intermediaries would come to Darien and tell farmers they would come on a certain day to buy an agreed amount of product. Optimistic, the farmers would hire peons (other colonos) to harvest the food and carefully arrange it on the side of the road for pickup. In those days the highway was lined on both sides with piles and piles of food, the embodiment of months of very hard work.

And then the wait. The specified day would come, and the farmer would stand by the side of the road, peering expectantly into the point on the horizon where the truck might appear coming down the road. Nothing. On the second day, more of the same. Waiting, wondering. Maybe the intermediary drove past while the farmer was having lunch, or after he had gone to bed. But why didn't he call or send word? Nervous glances at the piles of food, rapidly decaying in the heat and humidity. Soon it would be spoiled. In the next few days, desperation. Should the farmer wait and see if anyone else by chance drives past and wants to buy his food? The other option would be to give it away to neighbors before it was completely inedible. Sometimes, with luck, a different intermediary would drive past and purchase the food. Of course

⁹ Sarmiento Chia (1985:72).

the intermediaries set the price painfully low. The farmers had to acquiesce. There was no one else to sell to. But even then, the roadside dealings could be dangerous. After the excitement of loading up a truck that *finally* arrived, the intermediary could refuse to pay, promising to return at a later date. And what could the farmer do, if it was already loaded onto the truck? The intermediary might never come back.

Declining food prices in Panama, state neglect of highway maintenance, and increasing disillusionment among colonos were related to the broader economic crisis in Panama during the 1980s. Even when intermediaries did take food from Darien to Panama City, at the wholesale market no one would buy it because no one had any money. Intermediaries began to make fewer trips, and the plantains on the highway kept rotting away. At least in Darien people had food, if not money to buy things like oil and salt. They could always kill a chicken, if need be, something that city people could not do. But colonos became discouraged. Why harvest if the food would go to waste? The money gained wouldn't even cover the cost of getting the food out of the field and bringing it to the road. In time, they felt that anything beyond subsistence agriculture was untenable. The possibilities for progress collapsed along with the road's originally smooth surface.

Cattle continued to be an alluring option for colonos but their economic limitations, as well as government constraints on livestock raising, ruined people's plans. Baltazar Cordoba, who arrived to Darien in 1981, dedicated thirty years to cultivating ñame but what he really wants to be is a cattle rancher: "I came here to—you know that Santeños we always like to make pastures and raise cattle. When I got

here, I took down ten hectares of forest and spread grass. And the government didn't let us raise cattle, so I had to turn to agriculture. If I had been able to raise cattle at the time I came here, I would have two thousand by now. But they didn't let us." While most colonos, especially from Los Santos province, aspired to be ranchers and even cleared pastures and planted grass in anticipation of their new status, few were able to make a living from this activity, especially after the quarantine set in.¹⁰ The presence of hoof and mouth disease in Colombia that prevented the Pan American Highway from being completed also limited livestock movements in and out of Darien. Established in 1974, a control zone covering the entire province prevented the importation of new livestock, and prevented the exportation of cattle, pigs, and animal products out of the region. Unfulfilled cattle dreams became another source of road-related frustration.

The piles of food gone to waste on the road, the pastures eagerly prepared for cattle that could not come, and the difficulties colonos faced using a highway destroyed by wheels, heat, water, and neglect—this was a world in deterioration, where the progress of the road disintegrated along with the dirt and ground up rocks of the highway's unfinished surface. The colonos that settled on the highway found that they were on a road to nowhere, isolated. But in their insistent movements and life in Darien, colonos pursued integration *anyway*. They visited each other, made

¹⁰ In the early 1970s Hernández (1970) interviewed ten colonists with cattle but found very few with herds with over thirty. Torres de Arauz (1975) counted 329 cattle in colonist settlements. On cattle before colonists arrived, see Paganini's (1970) account of a large Darienita-owned ranch in El Real, and Méndez (1979:255-7) on how early 20th century Darienitas had to get rid of their herds because of an ordinance requiring animals to be fenced. They could afford neither barbed wire nor sending them to pasture.

trips to town and even the capital city, took to the road on foot in the absence of cars or buses. People made their own road with the passage of bodies along the route, with their own donated labor, tools and machinery to repair surfaces as best they could, and with protests organized to remind the government that they were, in fact, there—and in conjunction with the forces of terrain and climate. These social forces and movements contribute to the highway's ongoing formation. In contrast to an ideal modern road, already built before the ribbon cut of the inauguration ceremony, the highway in Darien continues to be shaped by the people who use it and the environment that surrounds it. By trudging through the mud, sleeping on the side of the road, or tending to the gravel, people enacted and co-produced their own integration. The connections to national politics and economy that this process facilitated are shaped by arrangements of humans and nonhumans that constitute the landscape of the highway as much as official designs.

Rehabilitated

The looting that took place in Panama City during the 1989 U.S. invasion was nothing compared to what happened in Darien afterwards. Redemocratization created new frontiers for capitalism. Successive governments continued to extend structural adjustment measures that reduced spending in public services, privatized state-owned agencies, cut trade tariffs, and promoted export production rather than domestic agriculture—the primary form of livelihood for colonos. The state's decreased support for farmers and equitable land distribution led to a decline in food production

and even more migration from rural areas to cities and frontier zones.¹¹ The ruination of Darien accelerated, contributing first to the road's further deterioration and then to its rehabilitation.

Despite the difficulties that living in Darien presented for colonos, new migrants continued to arrive. After purchasing land, or more frequently, the rights to use the land (by this time most prime roadside land had already been claimed, so newcomers usually purchased from established colonists), migrants would clear the land and plant, as customary. But the prices for food were plummeting. People began to plant less for sale and more for personal consumption. And because subsistence was insufficient to cover their needs, colonists began to turn towards entrepreneurship and wage labor. With the gradual easing of the livestock quarantine, ranching, for those who had accumulated enough capital to purchase cattle, was attractive as a less costly, less time-consuming, and more prestigious activity however small the scale might have been. Logging represented yet another source of income for colonos, who in the process of clearing fields for agriculture or pasture were careful not to damage mahogany, cedro (*Cedrela odorata* and *Bombacopsis quinatum*) and other kinds of trees they could sell.

Given their use of fire to clear land, enthusiasm for ranching, and pragmatic though small-scale logging, it was easy for colonos to be targeted as forest destroyers. They certainly played a part; yet other actors contributed even more directly to the ruination of Darien and of the road. The end of U.S. economic sanctions led to a

¹¹ Barry et al. (1995) and Weeks (1985).

construction boom in Panama, which led to an increase in demand for timber. Corporations and enterprising individuals turned attention to Darien's trees. In contrast to the longer history of Colombian lumberjacks working in the region, as well as colonists who cleared forest for agriculture or livestock, these new loggers worked primarily through concessions granted by the state and indigenous authorities.¹² While colonists moved over the deteriorated highway barely, giant trailer trucks seemed to have substantially trouble transporting loads and loads of timber, further reducing the forest and ruining the road.

Newspaper headlines during this time announced the dire situation: "Extreme poverty is called Darien," "Darien, a dead end alley," "The forgotten province of Darien," "The unjust isolation of Darien," "Darien: without paths, or roads."¹³ Press coverage detected and diffused the sense among roadside settlers that the highway's deplorable condition was linked to social ills, portraying Darien as a land forgotten by progress. Meanwhile, roadside residents, which included colonos but also indigenous and Afro-Darienitas, began to organize protests and roadblocks to draw national

¹² The main species extracted were caoba (*Swietenia macrophylla*), cedro amargo (*Cedrela odorata*) and cativo (*Prioria copaifera*); between 1982 and 1987, 96% of logging activity nationwide was located in Darien (ANCON 2010). On logging corporations in the Bayano area west of Darien province but historically part of the Darien region, see Wali (1989).

¹³ Translations are my own: "La pobreza extrema se llama Darién," *Panamá América*, August 21, 2002 (accessed on July 30, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/358093-la-pobreza--extrema-se-llama-darien>); Isabel Castro, "Darién: sin caminos, ni carreteras," *Panamá América*, December 26, 1999 (accessed on July 30, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/305617-darien:-sin-caminos,-ni-carreteras>); Geraldine Emiliani, "Darién, un callejón sin salida," *Panamá América*, August 5, 2005 (accessed on July 20, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/507353-darien,-un-callejon-sin-salida>); Ginela C. Escala, "El injusto aislamiento de Darién," *Panamá América*, September 25, 1999 (accessed on July 30, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/300238-injusto-aislamiento-de-darien>); Ginela C. Escala, "La olvidada provincial de Darién," *Panamá América*, December 4, 20004 (accessed on July 30, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/481575-la-olvidada-provincia-de-darien>).

attention to the bad state of the road. One Afro-Darienita from the end of the road at Yaviza, who had been elected legislator in the mid-1990s, recalls: “Since I had [logging] equipment, in the rainy season I would support the community and the agriculturalists. With my machinery I would fix the bad spots, push them with my tractor, pulled people out and all that... Afterwards there was another legislator, but people went on fighting, fighting. They sent letters to the government, even protested on the road. We would make committees to take out rocks and throw them in the bad spots, so the government would see that it was a very important thing for us.” Community-organized protests clamored for a better road all over highway Darien.

By 1998 the government attended to pressures with a presidential decree establishing a \$125.7 million program for the “sustainable development” and “good governance” of Darien that concluded in 2010. The region would no longer be abandoned. The centerpiece of the program was the paving of the Pan American Highway. Additionally, the program intended to promote land titling, sustainable production, basic services like potable water and electricity, the strengthening of institutions like the National Environmental Authority—all designed to complement the asphalted highway, and counteract the disorder attributed to colonization since the 1970s. Funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, the program aimed to gain and solidify control over a territory and the people and resources that live there, and

to shape lives according to a capitalist logic consistent with state ideology, multinational companies, and financial institutions.¹⁴

The project encountered so many delays and problems that colonos felt as if the highway would never be fixed. People kept close tabs on the progress of the road, as work crews and machinery labored in front of their houses, and as they traveled on local minibuses along the road while it was still under construction, always noticing and commenting. They knew the amount of money invested, the names of the companies doing the work, the location of quarries and the quality of the material, staying informed partly because of the many local road construction laborers who spread news and knowledge throughout roadside communities.



Figure 24. Entering quarry located on a local farm, 2008

¹⁴ For comparative perspective, see Horton (2007) on “pro-poor,” “pro-indigenous” development policies across Central America.



Figure 25. Colono truck driver observes remains of accident in quarry that cost a man's life



Figure 26. Compacting the road while two children and a horse walk through

But even before roadwork had concluded the effects of the highway's rehabilitation could already be perceived, in particular with respect to the intensification of lumber and cattle moving along the road. Progress had gotten ahead of itself, again. Colonos are careful, though, about how they represent Darien to the rest of the world. Invested in imparting to me his love for Darien, Lenín gave me a CD with the Panamanian Institute of Tourism's "Master Plan." We got to talking and he insinuated, mysteriously, that there have been negative changes in Darien. He had an opinion about some of these things, he said. I prodded. Reluctantly, he told me. For one thing, the rivers are dried up. Another thing that is happening is that there are many foreigners buying land. He left it at that.

Other colonos are more vociferous about the changing power of the road. They circulate stories about the teak plantations that now line the highway and extend hectares and hectares beyond. Foreigners, they say, buy land because of the tax breaks and other government incentives promoting what is officially called "reforestation." The teak plantations are good, they say, because the lumber is of good quality. They provide employment to local communities, too. But then the stories turn ominous. The foreigners lure colonos with offerings of money. For a tract of land for which a colonist paid, say, two hundred dollars fifteen or twenty years ago, the tequero will offer ten thousand dollars. Enchanted by the possibility of upgrading their house from wooden boards to cement blocks, or of buying a pickup truck, the colono accedes. It happens all the time. They move to the city with their money. But in time, the colonos who sell their land return, empty-handed. With

nothing. They end up working as peons on a teak plantation, possibly on the very land that used to be theirs.

There is more. Because the teak trees are not native, because they are exotic, they damage the land. The teak is too hot, people say. The leaves have acid. You can see the effects. There can be no other species there, no birds, or any other kind of animal. Take a look at any plantation, at the lower part—all clean. Nothing else grows there. If you plant a teak tree it makes a great subterranean root and then another tree will come up, and so on. The teak sterilizes the land. After it's harvested, nothing else will grow there, for who knows how long. There are laws restricting the extraction and transport of timber, but caravans of trucks carrying thousands of logs are not uncommon.¹⁵ And no one claims to know anything about that. What they do know is that it damages the road, as well as the roadside land where those trees grow. It is difficult to disentangle colono descriptions of the teak trees from what very well could be a description of the new system of extractive capitalism itself.

On their part, teak companies take the position that since the land is already ruined, they might as well move in for the kill. One company's website bluntly explains: "When it is planted on previously deforested land which has become burned-out cow pasture of little or no value to nature or humanity, a tree farm is

¹⁵ The National Environmental Authority (ANAM) reported in 2012 that during the rainy season an average of three trucks per day transport lumber, while during the dry season there may be up to thirty per day ("El Darién panameño: Entre el abandono y la solución," *Panamá América*, August 17, 2012, accessed on July 30, 2013 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/1201459-el-darien-panameno-el-abandono-y-la-solucion-militar>).

clearly a better alternative than leaving the land to the weeds.”¹⁶ This point of view obscures the capitalist relations that ruined the land in the first place. It also makes a case against life-sustaining assemblages (figured as weeds, in this case), in favor of alienated monoculture.

Alongside logging, ranching has continued to expand, encouraged by the low interest rates offered by banks, the prestige attached to this activity, and the less labor it requires in comparison to agriculture (which for the most part is done without machinery or expensive tools). Ranching is now the most lucrative activity in Darien, and growth rates are at least four times greater than the national average.¹⁷ Afro-Darienitas kept small numbers of unenclosed livestock since at least the nineteenth century. Early colonos (those with the means) also practiced extensive forms of ranching, following a traditional distribution of one cow per hectare. But the form of ranching that has currently taken hold of the region is more intensive, and complemented with the use of pesticides, vaccines, and nutritional supplements.

Rather than order Darien, as the sustainable development project set out to do by rehabilitating the highway and implementing other measures to promote what is called good governance and market integration, the resurfaced road mixed everything up. Areas that agronomists determined were good for pasture remain untitled, while those suitable for agriculture, forest use, and permanent cultivations are dedicated to

¹⁶ From United Nature’s website, accessed May 21, 2013 at <http://unitednature.com/invest2/index.php?lang=en&load=RkFRcyAuOiA=&tpl=faqs.txt>.

¹⁷ Panama’s National Conservation Association calculates the growth rate between 2004 and 2008 at 8.1%, four times greater than the national average (ANCON 2010). The Sustainable Development Program of Darien 2011 report indicates growth rates ten times the national average (Rodrigo Coloane and Zuleyka Moreno, Informe de Terminación de Proyecto, 2011, Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible, Banco de Desarrollo Interamericano).

pasture.¹⁸ The ironies of this progress are not lost on colonos. Before, they produced agriculture but the road was intransitable so it went to waste. Now the road is paved, but everyone has forgotten about agriculture, no doubt encouraged by the state's shift away from domestic agriculture to exportable commodities. The road progress is not only disorderly and contradictory—it also seems to loop back on itself, repeating old patterns of displacement, colonization, displacement, and colonization. Land titles promoted by the sustainable development program contributed to the expansion of teak and ranching and the concentration of land into fewer hands, prompting people to seek out new lands, further expanding the agricultural frontier. The development program claims to have reduced poverty, but the protection and sustainable use of natural resources is dubious. Pastures and plantations continue to extend over the landscape, conflicts over land are increasing, land titling failed in the sense that colonos are not proprietors for long before the ranchers and tequeros come with money in hand. Intense land speculation has made small agriculture unviable, and land prices have quintupled between 2008 and 2011.¹⁹ The rehabilitated highway generated instability along with new economic activities.

Meanwhile, the state increased its presence in the region. The significance of this feat cannot be underemphasized. Darien has resisted western forms of rule since the sixteenth century, when indigenous groups, runaway slaves and pirates formed alliances to drive the Spaniards out more or less for good, save for tenuous footholds

¹⁸ Rodrigo Coloane and Zuleyka Moreno, Informe de Terminación de Proyecto, 2011, p.15, Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible, Banco de Desarrollo Interamericano.

¹⁹ OTSCORP (2011).

near gold deposits. Subsequent attempts to conquer Darien, on the part of Colombians, Panamanians, and North Americans, among other imperial powers, have failed miserably—until now. The asphalted highway brought offices to house state agencies that link people in Darien to the new order taking shape in now democratic Panama. Banks draw people into the market economy by giving loans (cattle-related activities get the best rates) and encouraging the circulation of cash. The epic lines that form at the ATM machine outside the bank are visible from the highway; to speed things along, those waiting in line who are more familiar with the machines help out by conducting transactions for those less familiar with plastic cards, secret codes, and flashing words on screens. Offices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development and the National Environmental Authority regulate how people engage the environment, identifying resources and determining which ones may be exploited for monetary gain or conserved, and dictating appropriate modes of land use. Health centers and the new hospital seek to control biopower by dispensing medicine and birth control. Schools teach children how to read and write but also socialize them into Panamanian citizens. The border police and transit authority literally control the movements of people and resources at checkpoints along the only road in and out of the region.

For colonos bureaucratic and state control has advanced, but unevenly.²⁰ For example, the National Environmental Authority expects people to obtain a permit

²⁰ Contrast to Horton (2007) who found that in the roadside Guna community of Ipetí, indigenous leaders strategically contain and limit the power of development project personnel by controlling their interactions with the community, in large part because of political structures particular to Guna.

before clearing land with fire, yet deforestation continues. The asphalted highway brought new kinds of connections to state and market, some purposefully controlled, some purposefully uncontrolled—inconsistent like the highway’s surface that continues to be repaired but also continues to deteriorate. Progress, since the partial construction of the highway during the 1970s, did not advance steadily into the frontier, but rather through erratic ebbs and jumps. In its early days, the highway was good though unfinished. Progress screeched to a halt and then seemed to reverse during the 1980s when Darien was abandoned and isolated, when food wasted away along the roadside and cattle were not allowed to move along the ever-worsening surface of the highway. Then, the possibility for sustainable development prompted a jump. Though the long awaited asphalted highway was now able to better transport commodities like rice and corn, domestic agriculture has been abandoned. Instead, lumber and cattle move along the road with relative ease. In contrast, local government offices reduce the need for people to travel in and out of the region. Colonists may be able to ride to Panama City now in buses rather than wading through mud, and in five hours instead of ten or more, but they’re also stuck insofar as many are caught in a repeating pattern of displacement and colonization, stuck with limited prospects of class mobility, and stuck with state and international institutions and projects that put forth a vision of a world in which capitalist-friendly development is the only option. Through their affective relations with the highway, colonists express dissatisfaction but also lingering hope. At the same time, they

continue to get on with their lives on the road that they have made. Other histories unfold.

Critical Points and Polvarín

Despite the challenges of living in a landscape plied by capitalist-friendly development projects, colonos integrate themselves in their own way, giving the highway a meaning and social location different from what state and development planners might have expected. The mud-trapped trucks, the wasted piles of food, the hours of delays, the doubts about whether things will ever get better—these experiences are an inherent part of the road. Alongside the work of nature and engineers, colonos shaped the highway with the passage of feet, wheels and hooves, and with the memories and expectations congealed into the roadway itself, contributing to the affective power of the Main Street that continues to compel colonos to pay attention to its material conditions.

Difficulties in mobility have continued to the present, despite the repairs made to the highway and its pavement with asphalt. These difficulties are more than metaphorical. Not only must colonos contend with the structural violences of state power and sustainable development; they must also contend with a highway surface that continues to change. Giant holes appear seemingly overnight, sections collapse into rubble, and level terrains turn mountainous.

Changes in the road often come about independently of the designs of state officials, development planners, and colonos. Rough patches called *pasos malos* or

puntos críticos, critical points (colonos have adopted the parlance of the Ministry of Public Works) command attention of Main Street residents. “There are critical points in all of the communities,” explained one taxi driver. The small Toyota rattled over uneven surface as the other passenger, also headed to the lasso competition that day, leaned over to add, not without a sense of humor, “This has many names. Awful, horrible, rocky. In reparation.”

The driver continued: “They’re called critical points because they are very dangerous. Because if you don’t know the road, you come at a high speed, uuuuuuuuuuuuu!” He gestured with his hand, shaking it back and forth. “You lose control and it could flip over. There are always accidents. In the critical point going to Yaviza, on the hill, there have been five accidents this year. One person died. He crashed with a light post. Another girl broke her leg.”

Everybody knows the location of these critical points, and of their associated dangers and inconveniences. Critical points constitute the texture of colonos’ everyday comings and goings, in contrast to intermediaries or truckers, who with their huge tires, four wheel drives, and high-clearance vehicles are less affected by uneven road. From a Main Street perspective, though, the critical points incite colonos to monitor, comment, and inspect the yearly cycles of deterioration and repair of parts of the road that collapse over streams or otherwise unstable soil. Holes persistently appear even after the highway was asphalted and colonos, on their part, persistently pay attention to their recurrent appearances and unsuccessful government efforts to fix them for good. While critical points contribute to colono’s sense of

marginality in relation to nation and state, they also increase sociability by prompting people who live and travel in Darien to regularly inquire about the condition of particular critical points. A key feature of the Main Street, critical points produce and maintain social relations distinct from those of capitalist development projects in Darien, and indeed, these relations are produced by the intersection of capitalist and other kinds of histories.



Figure 27. Critical point, 2011

Polvarín, highway dust stirred up by wind or passing vehicles, also illustrates the affective power of a road that is shaped by both human and nonhuman forces. Like critical points, polvarín is a constant source of concern. “Ayy el polvarín!”

women exclaim when a gust of wind catches them walking down the street. As one minibus driver put it, “Polvarín is dirt but it’s like flour, very fine. It’s more sensitive, and it lifts up with the breeze. It can be lifted up by anything. It could be your foot, it could be the tire of a car.” Polvarín illustrates how subtle and responsive the colonist-road-environment relationship is. “People complain because it bothers. It makes people sick because dead frogs, snakes, and all those things turn into dirt, and then you breathe it in. It also bothers because you’re wearing clothes and they get all dirty. It gets in here, in your ear.” He wiggled his finger in his ear.

“Ohh, and in your hair, too, right?” I asked, thinking about how women riding in buses often cover their heads with scarves or a cap.

“Yes, that’s why people complain. I used to drive the minibus to Yaviza and uuuuufffff, people would tell me I should install air conditioning. The problem is not that the dirt comes inside. It’s that it already has dirt inside.” He laughed. “Which is a much worse problem altogether.”

Critical points and polvarín are produced by the history of capitalism in eastern Panama but by other histories as well. Engaged in the more than human social lives that come together along this route in and out of the region, the road helps see beyond the modern dream of reshaping the underdeveloped, non-modern world into something resembling the West, and its smooth, straight roads. For colonos, the road—unfinished, abandoned, decayed, rehabilitated, and crumbling again—has been their experience of progress, unstable, recursive and ambiguous, but there are also

other trajectories, other actors that collaborate and interfere with each other in diverse ways, giving shape to a road to progress that is also much more.

Things are not all that bad, especially compared to the old days. Colonos (for now) stand to gain much from the state, the market economy, and national culture. They have a paved road and bustling town in a central location that was not too long ago the middle of nowhere. At the same time, it is clear that not all people are equal in relation to the highway. Integration benefits some more than others. It creates new social and political hierarchies in Darien, new relationships to the state and economies, and new ways of living and moving. The only road in and out of the province connects people to the city and the world but also pulls them into a landscape of difference.

Right now it's okay, but not suitable for transport

Attention to the surface of the Pan American Highway loosens the powerful association of roads and progress. It creates an opening called the Main Street—a space co-produced by colonos and their surrounding environment, in dialogue with and indeed essential to projects of capitalist development formulated at national and transnational levels. The Main Street is a space between “we have it all” and “there’s nothing left,” between the alienation of private property and plantations and the increased sociality facilitated by the rehabilitated road, between the cycles of desire and frustration and the necessary everyday practices of simply getting on with things, of venturing a trip to the capital city even if it means getting stuck in the mud, of

monitoring the state of critical points, of brushing off the dust that never really goes away.

People for whom the highway is the Main Street—who have things to do along the road, as opposed to those who speed past on a quest to get in and get out of Darien as soon as possible—breathe the dust, feel the warmth of the asphalt that penetrates the soles of their shoes, glimpse a bus approaching from the distance through ripples of heat that rise up from the road, run over snakes, throw trash out windows, swerve around holes or rattle through them. These are affective and material relations not with a finished object, but rather with something continually in transformation. The road is composed of intersecting histories that nonetheless, through the constant transformation of the highway's surface, open up critical yet ambivalent positions—right now it's okay, but not suitable for transport. On the Main Street, colonos are both critical of modernity and enchanted by dreams of progress, and this indeterminacy, I argue, creates space to question assumptions about modernity and its alternatives.

In its critical ambivalence, Lenin's statement—the Pan American Highway is called the Main Street. Now it's okay, but not suitable for transport—points to the multiplicity of the road and the projects caught up with it. Despite the dust and rough spots, the asphalted highway moves along cattle, lumber and agricultural products with relative ease. Within the broader context of sustainable development, though, the highway is not suitable for transport in the sense that colonos are aware of the ruination of Darien directly related to these movements, even though they themselves

participate in this ruination. Neither is the highway entirely suitable for the transport of people, who compared to commodities travel with more difficulty. For colonos, the rehabilitated highway is insufficient for solving their transportation problems as well as the marginality of living in a place to which development projects gravitate.

For development planners, however, the highway is more than sufficient. Its dimensions were designed to hold large volumes of vehicles crossing daily through an international thoroughfare—the Pan American Highway dream of linking the Americas by road. In the wake of this failure (or perhaps despite those plans), Panamanian development planners wanted a highway smaller in scale and designed to facilitate the extraction of resources out of the region. For development purposes, the highway was wrong from the start, the Inter-American Development Bank complained in a 1998 loan proposal: “The highway is over-dimensioned both for current and projected traffic; 20 years after it was built, traffic on the 100 km stretch from Agua Fria to Yaviza amounts to only 400 vehicles per day, and is less than 200 on the Metetí-Yaviza section. The road is built to a capacity of more than 2,000 vehicles per day.”²¹ Something less ambitious would have sufficed for the road to fulfill its purpose, according to development. Planners invest in a road that has to work just enough to move along what is necessary for development—commodities and capital. The Main Street, from this perspective, is irrelevant, which is what I take Lenin to protest when he insists the highway is “okay but not suitable for transport.”

²¹ Inter-American Development Bank, Panama-Darien Sustainable Development Program (PN-0016), Project Document, 2002, p. 2. (accessed on July 23, 2013, at <http://www.iadb.org/en/projects/project-description-title,1303.html?id=pn0116>).

Both the Pan American Highway and the resource extraction road put forth projects for the construction of modernities. The Main Street throws into relief the incompatibility of the highway with local needs, but it also feeds dreams of alternatives (like becoming prosperous with dairy cows, the latest craze among colonos) that could set straight the path to progress. Moreover, although the Main Street is an expression of local knowledge erased by the projects of modernity (e.g. colono experiences of abandonment), it also obscures the knowledges and histories that are other to colonos—those of indigenous and afro-daríenitas.

The Pan American Highway/Main Street is an assemblage shaped by the recursive, uneven, and nonlinear temporality of progress as well as other movements and rhythms (the holes, the polvarín, the snakes) that carry on despite—and at times simply alongside or independently of—the designs of development. While arguments demonstrating how the colonial encounters that produce modernities have a built-in potential to articulate alternatives are a starting point for thinking about how to build a world that eschews the violences and erasures of modernity, these arguments speak of alternatives that always seem to be in potential or prescriptive, like the deferred promises of progress itself. Spaces like the Main Street are what there is—spaces where dreams of modernity persist yet so do doubts about the sustainability of progress as well as a nagging sense of implication in the forms of life and sociality destroyed in the process, spaces caught between progress as it does not work and alternatives so uncertain they are barely imaginable. Rather than search for alternative roads, colonos look at the holes in the road they already have. While dreams of

altermodernities do important theoretical and practical work, in their absence things like the mud and dust of the Main Street help show how progress is neither linear nor absolute, but rather, like the road, constantly under transformation, generating in repetitions and recursions spaces for other kinds of histories to come about.

4. Darién Acuático y Darién Carretera – Riverways and the Highway

Where, recognizing that the highway cannot be understood without understanding the rivers, the rivers prove to be essential to the highway if also marginal to it, and capable of disrupting the hierarchical order of movement and difference highway construction and colonization works to establish.

Though partly unfinished, the highway nonetheless brought about changes in the landscape—a landscape that is not merely scenery, representation or inert background but something alive with beings, things, and objects whose location and movements constitute a place called Darien. While Darien has always been made up of connections within the region and to other parts of the world, the nature of these connections changed with the construction of the highway, and these changes carry implications for the social location and relationships of its inhabitants. As part of a national integration project, the highway did more than make resources accessible or extend state power. It also reoriented ways of belonging that are expressed through the politics of race, ethnicity, and citizenship, pointing to the ways integration necessarily involves selective inclusion and exclusion. While other chapters in this dissertation focus on the world of the colonists—the highway area—this chapter takes a step back to consider the riverine world that lies beyond but also intersects with the road. The highway and the forms of integration it brought about can only be understood within this broader context. In contrast to studies that focus on identity

politics and social movements to make sense of belonging in regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism, this chapter contributes to an understanding of the politics of race and place through the lens of everyday movement and transportation.

To consider this landscape, then, and the shifts in people's networks and orientations that speak to the highway's project of integration and state formation, this chapter could begin with statistics about the region's population and demographics, or with a map demarcating villages, towns and political-administrative features, or with an overview of the different ecological regions within Darien, but it will not. It begins with a view that is neither a bird's eye view from above, nor a view of things from below. Instead, it begins on a trail up a mountain that is not enormous but high enough to get a good, out of breath look at things.

Highway Darien, Aquatic Darien, and the Three Dariens

Magno Méndez identifies as Afro-Darienita and when we met he was working at the Centro de Gestión Local Darién y Comarcas, an umbrella organization promoting community-based development, on a regional tourism project that aimed to expand infrastructure for visitors such as hiking trails and informational signs at historic sites. He was hoping I could lead some language workshops targeted at receiving English-speaking visitors. To see some of the work the organization and communities had accomplished thus far, he took me to a Wounaan village on the Sabanas river where a mountain trail was being maintained as a tourist attraction. During the steep climb to the top Magno and our Wounaan guide Adriano began their

orientation, explaining the landscape that unfolded as we hiked higher and higher.

The history lesson began:

“Before the highway, this site was utilized by people from Santa Fe. During low tide, they would come down the Sabanas and from here reach La Palma [the district capital]. It also used to be a collection center for Melo [a Panamanian corporation]. Loggers would tie the timber into rafts and float them down the river, and from here ship them to Panama City. After that the Panama Canal Company came to see if they could build a canal through Darien. When the community that lives here now formed— Adriano, when was that?”

“We came, oh, in the 1970s. From the other side of the Gulf [of San Miguel].”

“That’s right. When the community formed, they found the old buses and structures that the company left behind, and that’s what we’re going to see up here.”

Routes. The mapping began with routes.

Once we reached the lookout point near the top, we took in the panoramic view of the village and river down below, north towards the Pan American Highway and the Chucunaque river basin, and south towards the Gulf of San Miguel. “It was on one of these mountains where Vasco Núñez de Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean,” Magno mused. “According to the legend. Because they say he came from the Chucunaque and climbed one of these mountains we can see here. I imagine it could be that one.” He pointed northwest.

We all took turns peering through binoculars. Magno pointed out corn fields that looked like brown splotches against the green, the red roof of a schoolhouse

down by the road, the two white towers of the electric plant nearby, the highway and how it has so few curves, the distant shadowy spot where the Chucunaque river originates. The mapping of Darien that day represented perspectives other than, say, government maps, but it did track back and forth between vernacular and official views. Shifting towards the latter kind of view, Magno began to explain the landscape through a racial categorization that is key to understanding access to land as well as political inclusion at regional and national levels:

“Here we have Three Dariens.”

The Three Dariens refers to the consensus today that there are three main groups of people in Darien, each with an associated geographical location: indigenous people along the rivers, blacks along the coast, and whites/mestizos along the highway. I was expecting Magno to reproduce the tripartite mapping of ethnicity onto place so prevalent in descriptions of the region.¹ But something else happened instead.

Magno held up his index finger, counting: “Land Darien. The electric lines follow the highway all the way to Yaviza, and in the other direction, too. This is all highway Darien. Up to Yaviza.” Magno held up a second finger: “Aquatic Darien. Over here on this side, we can see aquatic Darien. Even though Yaviza is practically aquatic, because most people move aquatically. The trucks go there, but the rest of the movement, everything is by water.” And now for Darien number three. He held

¹ Anthropologists’ descriptions of Darien make similar ethnic mappings (i.e. Kane 1994:xv, 111-13, Velasquez-Runk 2009:460).

up a third finger. “—Eh—“ Magno trailed off, having only enumerated two Dariens: highway and aquatic. This understanding of landscape seemed to conflict with the Three Dariens that he began to describe before interrupting himself. We continued on, inspecting rusty bus carcasses and imagining where they went and who they carried, and conjecturing how this infrastructure now in ruins might have led—in an alternate history—to the opening of a second inter-oceanic canal, this one blasted open with atomic bombs.²

But I was confused, not only by how such destruction could possibly be justified. I was also confused by Magno’s zoning of Darien. One social order, based on movements and their infrastructure, had interrupted another based on race rooted in place. Is Darien best understood through the three racial categories and their geographical associations, or is it better understood through terrestrial and aquatic forms of movement?

I would say both. Darien historically has been constituted by movement. Centuries of migrations and displacements in the region demonstrate that people are always moving and through these movements making claims to territory, claims that are intrinsically linked to particular forms of infrastructure. As in the adjoining Colombian Pacific region so well documented by anthropologists and geographers, rivers in Darien have been a primary means of human transportation and important sites of habitation.³ Waterways—including river networks, floods, and tidal

² On the atomic canal project see Lindsay-Poland (2003).

³ See West (1957) for the importance of rivers and their description as “the highways” of the Colombian Pacific. And for a more recent study, Oslender (2002).

rhythms—structure not only movements but also everyday social activities.⁴ As in nearby Pacific regions, life in Darien has been patterned by an aquatic logic. The riverways organized life, sustaining social, kinship, and trade relations both within Darien and with neighboring Colombia.

The highway changed things. Without replacing the centrality of rivers to Darienita lifeways, the highway fractured social relationships within Darien and with Colombia, and created new, more direct connections with Panama. By producing ethnic categories consistent with the state's regime of multicultural citizenship, the highway enabled new forms of integration to Panama, a process that seeks to strengthen ties between frontier and state, and weaken ties between the frontier and the *other* side. The highway and the colonos who came with it became associated with the “new ways”—new property regimes, new relationships with the state, new privileges and inequalities too— while the riverways became associated with the “old ways” of black and indigenous communities, characterized by what some might call abandonment while others might call autonomy.⁵ While the distinction between the new ways of the highway and the old ways of the rivers is necessary to mark this substantive change in social order, I do not wish to imply that one replaced the other. The highway did not erase or render obsolete the riverways. It transformed old relations and also made new ones.

⁴ See Oslender (2002:90-92), who describes how the aquatic space in black communities of the Colombian Pacific region is “the underlying spatial ordering logic of everyday social interactions.”

⁵ See Kane (1994) for a discussion of this new (highway)-old (rivers) distinction.

Both riverways and the highway hold Darien together and emplace it in the world. And both ways of organizing life show that routes and roots are implicated in people's ability to move and forge social networks, and in ways of belonging to place, region and nation. What is different about the highway is that after it was built a social order called the Three Dariens could be discerned, and the gradual emergence of this geography points to a process of integration in which shifting forms of racialization and ethnicization play a fundamental part. This new order of things may have come about after the highway was constructed, but both the riverways and the highway *created and support* it.

The interrelated practices of moving, claiming territory, and crafting ethnic identities—necessarily guided by these infrastructures—also undermine the order of the Three Dariens. While the Three Dariens might seem to have been constructed by a convergence of political economic ideology (neoliberalism) and a citizenship regime (multiculturalism), the boundary-crossing mixtures of everyday life along Darien's rivers and highway point to an excess that cannot be contained by the categorical rigidity of the Three Dariens.⁶ Forms of belonging—relationships with place and history—are shaped by multiple categorical systems that include but cannot be subsumed to state categorizations.⁷ The tensions between mixture and categorization that manifest in Darien remind us about other ways worlds are made—

⁶ This intervention follows the spirit of de la Cadena's (2010) project to consider difference without confining it to categories of identity or other western modes of knowing the world (i.e. political economy and cultural politics).

⁷ See de Vidas and Hoffman (2012)'s insightful analysis of the disjuncture between official, national, and emic systems of racial classification in Mexico and Colombia.

engaged with but not defined by neoliberal multiculturalism—that include formalized avenues of democratic participation but also exceed them. The rivers and road interfere with the Three Dariens, revealing connections to state and nation that are only partial. The relations that exceed these partial connections, which are discernible by keeping infrastructures of movement within the analytical frame normally dominated by perspectives centered on political economy and cultural rights, are the subject of this chapter.

The Mythic Origins of Darien and Latin America

The Three Dariens resonates with other mythic representations of Latin American people whereby national or even Latin American origins (and futures) are understood through the co-mingling or mixture of black Africans, indigenous Americans, and white Europeans. In the mural below, for example, the three Dariens are represented by three kneeling figures, from left to right: a black Darienita man, a white-mestizo colono in straw hat typical of those from the Interior, and an indigenous woman who could be Emberá or Wounaan.⁸

⁸ The painting, made in the early 1990s, according to a nun at the Yaviza church where it is located, represents Darien's three ethnicities supplicating to Jesus (the brown man in the center carrying the plantains) and God to intercede on their behalf and improve the local economy. According to the nun the painting was meant to create consciousness among people that were being swindled when they sold their plantains to buyers and intermediaries from Panama City.



Figure 28: The three Dariens painted in a Catholic church mural

The idea that Latin Americans are composed of complex encounters among indians, blacks and whites has become a master trope over what Norman Whitten calls the “longue durée of tripartite racial fixity” that originated in the fifteenth century and has historically been mobilized politically to sort out questions of race and national inclusion.⁹ Mestizaje and multiculturalism are but the most recent discourses in this long history of racialization as it has been linked to the granting of citizenship and rights vis a vis the state.¹⁰ During most of the twentieth century,

⁹ Whitten (2007).

¹⁰ In making a place for the racial mixtures that mestizaje indexes, colonial legal categories, represented for instance in casta paintings, continue to inform post-colonial racial formations. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that figures such as Simon Bolívar and José Martí used a discourse of mestizaje to promote a Latin American ontology distinct from Spain and the United

mestizaje meant unity and progress. Along with modernization, educational and hygienic campaigns and other assimilationist policies, mestizaje glorified an indian past, called for a whitened, “improved” race, and often masked or ignored blackness.¹¹ Discourses of mestizaje aimed to integrate non-whites, be it through people’s incorporation into capitalist markets, the extension of rights and privileges to certain groups, or through de-indianization by way of acculturation and an emphasis on class-based politics that turned indians and blacks into peasants.¹²

Despite the appeal of utopian visions where race does not matter because we are all one people, mestizaje nonetheless privileged the figure of the whitened mestizo as an unmarked category, employing rhetoric of inclusion while simultaneously excluding non-mestizos, without solving problems of inequality and

States, leaving a lasting imprint on Latin American civilization (Miller 2004:3-15). During nation-building efforts in the early- to mid-twentieth century, intellectual and political leaders throughout the region celebrated the racial hybridity that Europeans and North Americans deplored, emphasized the energy and vitality such mixture supposedly generated, and elevated the product of that mixture—mestizos—to an idealized national subject that both marked Latin America as distinct from other parts of the world and would lead to a civilized and modern post-colonial future.

¹¹ Two caveats: Firstly, mestizaje did not work in the same way everywhere. Variation existed in terms of which “foundational races” and combinations were emphasized; Mexican mestizaje, for example, emphasized Spanish-Indian hybridity, while many Caribbean nations acknowledged African legacies, at least at the level of “culture”. Mallon (1992), moreover, compares several cases where mestizaje projects had varying degrees of success. In Mexico mestizaje as a unifying and hegemonic discourse of national inclusion was much more successful than in Peru, where it quickly came to signify domination, while in contrast, Bolivian intellectuals positioned Indianness at the center of a counterhegemonic political movement. Secondly, mestizaje is not a unitary discourse. Mallon (1996) makes a distinction between official and counterhegemonic mestizaje, while Chaves and Zambrano (2006:7) make a similar point in sustaining that even within a single national context there can be a multiplicity of mestizajes, including official policies, intellectual constructions of idealized subjects, and subaltern racial or cultural mixtures.

¹² The prominence of integration in mestizaje gets picked up in academic writing as well. For example, Miller (2004:3) refers to mestizaje as “a complex racial ontology that diffused or subsumed racial, linguistic, and performative differences under the banner of multiracial or multiethnic unity that translated into an *integrated* and *integrative* ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ [italics mine].” Wade (2010:33-34) also refers specifically to “integration” in his writing on race and ethnicity in Latin America in relation to assimilationist policies and attitudes.

racial discrimination.¹³ These contradictions were not lost on Latin American intellectuals, who towards the end of the twentieth century put forth multiculturalism as a new discourse of national belonging. Contrary to *mestizaje*, multiculturalism involves the celebration of diversity, the acceptance of ethnic rights to difference, and politics based on cultural identity instead of class.¹⁴ It has been associated with democratization, neoliberal economic reforms, globalization, and identity-based social movements that encompass grassroots, national, regional, and global trends since the late 1980s.¹⁵ While the limits and possibilities of multicultural politics have been widely debated,¹⁶ the discourse is generally perceived to at least potentially rectify the long legacies of institutionalized racism embodied by the figure of the *mestizo*, emphasizing cultural difference and de-mixing rather than racial mixture or civilizational sameness.

¹³ See Miller (2004) for an overview of critiques of *mestizaje* that began to be articulated in the late twentieth-century.

¹⁴ See Alvarez et al. (1998) and Hooker (2005).

¹⁵ For a nuanced account of these shifts, see Greene (2006). This multicultural ethic has been institutionalized prominently in legislation that to varying degrees concedes special rights to ethnic groups, for instance Colombia's 1991 constitutional reforms that granted cultural and territorial rights to afrodescendent communities. For contrasting explanations of multicultural reforms that focus on indigenous politics, see Van Cott (2000), Hale (2002), Stocks (2005) and Yashar (2005). In counterpoint to indigenous politics, Hooker (2005) provides an incisive evaluation of black politics in Latin America.

¹⁶ For discussions of the limits and possibilities of multiculturalism, see Hale (2002) and (2006) on neoliberal subject formation, and Wade (2010:142) on the progressive and empowering ways multiculturalism can challenge state projects. Recent studies of multiculturalism and social movements such as these reveal that, like *mestizaje*, multiculturalism does not exist solely in its top-down official version but functions in multiple ways and through diverse actors who may be at cross-purposes.

	Mestizaje	Multiculturalism
Time Frame	Roughly mid 20 th century	Late 1980s to present
Economic Paradigm	Modernization State-led development	Neoliberalism Infrastructure by and for capital
Political Model	State-centered authority	Traditional authority recognized
State Projects	Educational, hygienic Incorporation into capitalist markets	Social services reduced Further expansion of capitalism
Racial discourse	Whitening through assimilation, acculturation (de-indianization)	Recognition and celebration of ethnic difference (re-indianization)
Actors	Peasants, labor unions	Indigenous people, Afrodescendants, etc.
Political mobilizations	Class-based	Identity-based
Organizations	Federations Cooperatives	Social movements NGOs
Agenda	Reduction of inequality through greater participation in capitalist markets	Cultural and environmental preservation or stewardship, individual maximization of profit

Figure 29. Ideologies of National Exclusion in Latin America¹⁷

While multiculturalism may seem to undo the work of mestizaje, the two are not all that different. Both multiculturalism and mestizaje in their official manifestations seek to speak for and control difference.¹⁸ Both have mapped culture and race onto place, producing spatialized orderings of state categories and “ideal types” that facilitate state control of diversity through selective inclusion and

¹⁷ This comparison draws from Alvarez et al. (1998), Greene (2006), Yashar (2005), and Van Cott (2000).

¹⁸ This point is expounded by Wade (2010: 139). Hale (2002: 491) similarly argues that multiculturalism “is the mestizaje discourse for a new millennium, offering a parallel mix of opportunity and peril.” Racism, discrimination and exclusion persist under multicultural models; for example, Anderson (2009:25) describes how in Honduras the rhetoric of multiculturalism exists alongside the lived reality of oppression and exclusion that black Garifuna face.

exclusion.¹⁹ The terms in which difference is negotiated and understood may have changed, but multiculturalism, like *mestizaje*, is a discourse of integration seeking to locate categories of people in particular places and control the kinds of relationships people have with the state and with each other.²⁰ They share concern with people's *place* in the nation.

In contemporary Latin America, discourses of *mestizaje* continue to work alongside more recent multicultural politics, and Darien is no exception. Here there have been, of course, blacks, indians, whites and mestizos—as well as many other categories used to distinguish people by phenotype and cultural practices—since at least the colonial encounters of the sixteenth century. As Spanish-speakers whose origins could be traced to colonial society, Darienitas descended from African slaves and runaways were granted citizenship rights alongside whites and white-indian mestizos, and to the exclusion of Anglophone blacks (West Indians, or Antillanos) as well as other non-whites who settled in the country during the construction of the canal and afterwards. Torrijos' nationalist-populist regime of the 1970s departed from this model and promoted a corporatist multiculturalism that extended rights to indigenous subjects in addition to blacks and mestizos; in Darien this new discourse manifested in the formation of indigenous semi-autonomous reserves, or *comarcas*.

¹⁹ Greene (2006:280) makes this point for multiculturalism, while in the case of *mestizaje* the emplacement of racialized groups has been documented in Mexico (Poole 2004) and Peru (Orlove 1993).

²⁰ Consistent with my claim, Jackson and Warren (2005:555) cite examples in Ecuador and Guatemala where indigenous social movements' efforts towards self-determination do not involve secessionist politics; integration is not incompatible with multiculturalism.

Figure 30. Glossary of ethnic and racial terms:

Afro-Darienita:	person from Darien who claims and values African ancestry as part of ethnic identity
Antillano:	person descended of West Indians who settled in Panama as Canal laborers in the early twentieth century
Chiricano/a:	from the province of Chiriquí on Panama's western border with Costa Rica
Chocoano/a:	from Colombia's Chocó department contiguous with the Panamanian Darien
Chocoe:	refers to Emberá and Wounaan, highlighting their Colombian origins
Colono:	person from either the Interior or Chiriquí province who colonizes Panama's frontiers, Darien included
Darienita:	a person from Darien; refers primarily to libres/Afro-Darientas, secondarily to Emberá and Wounaan, and occasionally to colonos
Emberá:	person belonging to the Emberá indigenous ethnic group
Herrerano/a:	from the province of Herrera; considered part of Panama's Interior
Interiorano/a:	from the Azuero peninsula in western Panama, including the provinces of Los Santos, Herrera, Coclé and Veraguas; Panama's folkloric homeland, defined in opposition to the Canal's transit zone; mestizaje and whitening implied
Guna:	person belonging to the Guna ethnic group
Latino/a:	refers to those whose primary language is Spanish
Libre:	person who traces ancestry to colonial African slaves and runaways
Santeño/a:	from the province of Los Santos, part of the Interior
Veraguense:	from the province of Veraguas, part of the Interior
Wounaan:	person belonging to the Wounaan ethnic group

This shift to multiculturalism coincided—and is linked to—highway construction in the 1970s and its rehabilitation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. During this time, roughly a span of thirty years, multiculturalism did not replace mestizo nationalism as much as it added new subjects, redefining politics in

the process. Black Darienitas were affected by the shift as well; by the close of the twentieth century some began to identify as Afro-Darienitas. While mestizaje had worked to mask their blackness in favor of Latin-ness, now many value a place-specific blackness rooted in colonial displacements and this too is linked to the political possibilities afforded by the development project that rehabilitated the highway at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as this chapter explains in subsequent sections. Meanwhile, colonos from Western Panama, including both Chiriquí and the Interior provinces, extended their own kind of mestizo-nationalist politics as their settlements and communities extended over the territory the highway opened up, and continue to influence regional configurations of power.

The way people in Darien route and root offers a counterpoint, on one hand, to African diaspora studies that emphasize the way black identities are created out of historical movements and migrations, and on the other hand, to the frequent representation of indigenous peoples as attached to ancestral territories that predate contemporary nation-states.²¹ Many blacks trace their origins in Darien to Spanish colonial slavery; their more or less permanent occupation of Darien predates many contemporary indigenous people who have migrated into Darien from Colombia more recently.²² In this way, more migratory indigenous people are routed, while

²¹ See Greene's (2007:338-342) criticism of the way scholarship "routes" black American identities while "rooting" indigenous identities.

²² I am primarily referring to Emberá and Wounaan migration into Darien, which has been going on for centuries. I do not mean to imply that indigenous groups—Guna included—are new to Darien. Indigenous presence has been documented by Europeans beginning with sixteenth century colonial reports, but what I *do* want to emphasize is the mobility of indigenous people (through dispersed settlement patterns, migrations, and displacements) and how this contrasts to the relatively sedentary

black people are rooted. Enter into these circumstances the colonos who came on the highway, themselves both rooted (to mythical nationalist origins) and routed (by repeated migrations), and post-highway Darien becomes a politically-charged site where livelihoods and ways of life are at stake.

The redefinition of indigenous, black and mestizo politics cannot be disentangled from the highway's history of construction and rehabilitation. The introduction of a new form of movement—terrestrial—changed the terms in which difference was negotiated and understood. The transition was evident by the time the highway was finally paved with asphalt in 2009, if not earlier. In this new Darien, structured by both the riverways *and* the highway, a new order of things could now be perceived: the three Dariens. White-mestizos on the highway, indigenous people along the rivers, and Afrodarientas downriver along the coast. Categories congealed and came to be associated with specific places, becoming common sense. These categories and their emplacement were compatible with the state's discourse of multiculturalism, but they were not an invention or product of the state. Neither were they the product of neoliberal policies that arose in the 1990s and continue to the present. They were the result of complex shifts in relationships both social and spatial. And they are mixed up in a state project of integration that affects relations within Darien, with Colombia, and with Panama. Along with new ways of conceptualizing and negotiating difference, new political possibilities presented themselves based both on mestizo nationalism and ethnic rights, politics that are

black communities in Darien—at least from a Western perspective that identifies villages and towns with roots but is often blind to mobile peoples' ties to territory.

informed and disrupted by the ways people move about and place themselves, route and root. Through their shifting engagements with rivers and the road, people in Darien created new ways of relating with state and territory, drawing some people and places closer, and pushing others farther apart.

In other words, the Three Dariens coincides with a historical moment in Panama characterized by multiculturalist discourses of citizenship and neoliberal restructurings, but the riverways and highway that produced this arrangement suggest that geographies of power—always about race—exceed the analytical limits of “identity” and “economic ideology” that are often employed to grapple with the complexities of inclusion and integration in contemporary Latin America. The flexibility and fluidity of racial formations pose problems for describing the processes by which groups come to establish belonging and exclusion. Magno’s slip from Three Dariens to aquatic and highway Darien is illustrative. He automatically began his orientation to regional geography with congealed identities—the Three Dariens—but just as automatically slipped into an alternate geography understood through pathways of movement. Identity was not enough. Instead of assuming a group’s self identification is natural, invented, or imposed, I concur with authors who see identity as a *positioning* informed by meaning-full and historical practices, patterns of social relations, and landscapes.²³ The politics of national inclusion and exclusion are more than a matter of identity; rather, they are a matter of how people are connected or disconnected, what patterns these networks take, and the relation of these social

²³ Fernandes (2011), Gordillo and Hirsch (2003) and Li (2000).

geographies to national boundaries both conceptual and material. As Magno's slip suggests, the riverways and the highway shape belonging alongside categories of black, indigenous and white-mestizo.

Darien presents a second difficulty for thinking about the politics of difference in postcolonial Latin America. Although often achievements such as collective land rights are worked out through interactions between ethnic organizations and state institutions, these politics are not limited to officialized avenues; neither are these forms of belonging expressed only through social movements.²⁴ While studies of social movements consider how people make identity-based claims either within or without the state, Magno's slip suggests that other *movements*, such as those structured by riverine and terrestrial routes, can offer insight into processes of inclusion and belonging that are both within and outside the state. In other words, tracing networks and movements is another way to think about how people are related to nation and state, partially, unevenly, ambiguously.

A third problem has to do with how multiculturalism is often understood in conjuncture with neoliberalism and the related problem of how, through these political processes, identity can become essentialized and culture can become a thing or resource, something available for consumption or a set of traits that may be

²⁴ Of particular relevance here are studies that analyze the centrality of territory and place-making practices and how these are linked to black identity in the Colombian Pacific (i.e. Grueso et al. 1998, Escobar 2008, Oslender 2002), because of the region's shared colonial and 19th century history with Darien. These studies are useful for understanding the politics of space and place as they articulate with ethnicity, but their framework is limiting insofar as it focuses on formal social movements.

possessed or lost.²⁵ Darien offers an alternative perspective on the emergence of ethnicities and their place in the nation because multiculturalist discourses in Panama gained prominence in the 1970s, well before the neoliberal reforms associated with the 1990s and after. The emergence of multicultural ethnicities has been attributed to the openings enabled by individualist, market-oriented policies, but the situation in Darien suggests that these formations cannot be fully explained by economic policies, state ideology, or elite interests.²⁶ Instead, what happens on the riverways and highway imply that spatialized relations, movements, and routes are important if overlooked factors in the emergence of racial formations.

A final problem with a multiculturalism perspective is the distinction between race and ethnicity that often serves to exclude afrodescendants from the analysis of ethnic politics and the obtainment of collective rights. This stems from an assumption that aligns ethnicity with indigenous people and race with black people, despite the historical function of “indian” as a racial category, and despite the risk of foregoing anti-racist discourses in favor of ethnic rights.²⁷ These analytical segregations are moreover compounded by the way whites and mestizos are excluded from discussions about multiculturalism and cultural rights, due in part to how they have

²⁵ See Yudice (2003) on the dilemmas of “culture as a resource” in neoliberal contexts.

²⁶ I build on Hale (2006:35), who argues that neoliberal reforms encompass not only economic policies but also a political project of legitimacy and governance with ideological dimensions. Also useful is Beverley’s (2001:57) discussion of how heterogeneity does not require market liberalism, but is a necessary and internal aspect of identity.

²⁷ This argument is elaborated in Hooker (2005) and Greene (2007). Wade (2010) expresses a similar discontent with the clear-cut distinction between blacks-race and indians-ethnicity and likewise calls for an analytical framework that avoids such problematic dichotomies. Anderson’s (2009) study of Garifuna activists in Honduras who have gained rights and recognition based on their “Indian-like” status is an example of scholarship that seeks to complicate distinctions between being black and being Indian.

historically been constructed as unmarked categories with privileges. In short, identity—whether approached through the oppositional politics of social movements or through the ambivalent affordances of neoliberal projects—can offer only a limited perspective on integration and the selective inclusion of groups into the nation-state. Other aspects of power are neglected, shaped but not determined by state and neoliberal projects. This power, always uneven, can be understood through the rivers and highway that produced and undermine the Three Dariens, a place-based social order with implications for national inclusion and integration.

Place is central to formations of race and ethnicity, and emplacements are always political.²⁸ Inspired by Magno's refusal to reduce Darien's racial heterogeneity to three overdetermined categories while still acknowledging the power of these categories, the present analysis of Darien's social geography as it has been transformed by the highway acknowledges and engages the broader national and Latin American climate in which multiculturalism is a viable idiom for expressing and advancing subaltern or minority rights, but does not limit or enshrine racial formations in a single form (e.g. Afrodescendent, white-mestizo, indigenous). Rather, it takes up Magno's implication that regional power configurations are not only about race but about movement and place as well. In other words, pathways like rivers and highways that structure people's lifeworlds are political in that they are sites where social power can be redefined.²⁹ Approaching the question of difference in national

²⁸ For a discussion of the geography of race and ethnicity see Wade (2010:13-17).

²⁹ For example, Grueso et al. (1998) explains how in Pacific Colombia river lifeworlds become political through the work of black activists. This definition of the political, consistent with Alvarez et

belonging from the perspective of the pathways people take (the riverways and the highway) emphasizes the geographical orientations of social relationships and networks, offering a way to approach belonging through multiple forms that exceed the identity categories legitimized by multicultural politics. Multiculturalism often accepts difference along with segregation; in contrast, a highway and aquatic perspective approaches difference as process, as practices of encounter, exchange, negotiation, conflict and reciprocity.³⁰ Yet there cannot be one without the other. It is impossible to understand integration in Darien without accounting for how ethnic and racial formations are linked to highway-related construction, migration, and landscape transformation, and it is impossible to understand the highway without understanding the riverways in Darien. In short, how racial formations in Darien emerged, what they say about national belonging, and how these may transform or be transformed is a matter of roots—ethnogenesis and territorialization—and routes—including orientations, movements, changing networks and relationships.³¹

Afro-Darienita, indígena, colono. How and why did these place-specific formations emerge? What can these categories tell us about national inclusion and exclusion? How may they transform or be transformed? Focusing on the present

al. (1998) avoids debates whether multicultural identities are shaped “from above” or “from below” and instead opens up a space to think about the complex interactions between state, local, and transnational forces.

³⁰ This distinction between the Three Dariens mode of understanding and the “highway and aquatic” mode of understanding can be likened to García Canclini’s (2004:15) distinction between multiculturalism and interculturality, which is centered on relationships and exchanges. This chapter tries to hold onto both.

³¹ On roots/routes see Gilroy (1995) and Clifford (1997); the argument put forward here is in part a response to Greene’s (2007:340) contention that “the roots/routes metaphor has rarely been invoked to explain the politics and profiles of indigenous peoples.”

neoliberal multicultural sensibility but keeping in mind the *longue durée* of racial fixity, these questions are a matter of what Latin America is supposed to *be*, just as much as they are a matter of Panamanian nationhood and Darien's place in the world.

The destiny of life here in Darien, before

Later that day, Magno took me to see an old friend of his called Camilo. We found him that late Saturday afternoon in his wooden house up on poles, Emberá style. Inside, we stepped over thick orange extension cords that snaked in every direction across the floor, over to where Camilo was lying in a hammock watching a large black television set on top of a wooden table with DVDs strewn about. "Is that real honey or something else?" Magno asked, pointing to a large bottle labeled MIEL full of amber liquid that was also on the table. "I need something to clean my blood [para limpiar la sangre]. My knee's been hurting." Camilo's wife showed up in time to hear Magno's complaint and started teasing him. "Jo! You're getting old!" said the lady with the wrinkled face. Between laughs Magno managed to explain a little about their relationship: "When I was a boy we used to live right over here in a house nearby, with my mother. Since I never met my father, as the eldest son I had to take care of my brothers, and I would come over to Camilo's all the time and he would give me ñame and other things. And so we have this familiarity. This man is like my father. And she is like a second mother to me."

We pulled up a couple of seats from an assortment of plastic store-bought chairs and homemade wooden benches and got ready for the story. One of the three

boys who were constantly coming in and out of the house turned down the volume of the television, and I took out my recorder and notebook.

“So how was this over here peopled?” I asked.

“Well, over here, before, life was different from now. Very different. We before—at least those of us who are Darienitas, who were born here and were raised here—we lived in a different way. That is, our fathers raised us differently from this time. In that system—because before the Darienita didn’t eat beef, didn’t eat meat that way, with chemicals. It was only meat from the forest because there was a looooooot of abundance. You wouldn’t buy fish, like right now that you can buy it by the highway. You went to the river with your boat, and you would bring fish and that is what you ate. There was nothing of a highway.” Camilo’s house was located near Santa Fe, where the American company had set up camp during the years of highway construction. He had worked for them, too, operating heavy machinery.

“How many families lived here before the highway?” I asked.

“At least like this like my race there were only four houses,” replied Camilo.

“Before there were only indígenas. Of the indigenous race,” Magno clarified.

Camilo nodded in agreement. “But the houses were far from each other. An uncle of mine lived up over there, and we lived on a stream on this side. And another one lived over here farther down. That was all. What were the Latin people well it was in the summer when loggers would take out timber. Then they would go, and we would remain by ourselves. And like that was the destiny of life here in Darien, before... Uuuuuu, there were no people here! You could even count them! And

people would say, hey, take some land. Because you here in the future are going to live as if this was a city store, all boxed up. But since one wasn't thinking too much about those things and... one was incredulous. I did not believe. But where are those people going to come from? Eh? Along the highway a friend of mine said he would take land. They said people were coming from Panama. They said that if you were from here, to take a good lot. Make a trail [to mark the circumference of the lot], and well. And possibly you could even sell, people said... Who is going to buy land?"

"Because we have sooooo much here," Magno responded sarcastically. Everyone laughed.

Camilo continued, "And then after the company left, around there sometimes one would go hunting and one would see these people from the Interior that were making smoke in the trees. And one, well, would be surprised because one sees—you would go softly, softly when you see a man sitting there. Who is it? In there, in the forest over there! And then one could see well and—"

"There's people!" Magno interjected.

"People! And one would go there and say hey what are you doing over here? And then, oh, I'm here to take land around here to work. And how are you going to take out that load? Where are you going to take that product? He says over here, I'll walk. And that was how people started extending, going into the forest over there inside. And today there is no land, no forests. And look today how there are all kinds of people."

"There's a mondongo, a mixture," Magno joked.

Fictive kinship ties between “my race” and “Latin people”, the centrality of the river as a site of dispersed settlement and source of food, the introduction of new ideas about land, property and agriculture, incredulous first encounters with colonos insistent on traveling by land instead of water—Camilo’s account is a glimpse of life in Darien, before, and the changes brought about by the highway and the coming of colonos from western Panama. Implicit in Camilo’s story is the geographical aspect of this transformation, the ways different peoples lived in different parts of Darien, and how these forms of settlement were patterned by waterways. He described the *destiny of life in Darien*, meaning the fate and future of life, but also the *destination*, the course, the route life took.

The destiny of life in Darien, before, was governed by the rivers. Rivers and coastal routes linked pre-highway inhabitants to each other and to Colombia. Panama, including Darien, was once a part of Colombia, and this historical connection continues to affect the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Panama. After declaring independence from Spain in 1821, Panama joined the Republic of Gran Colombia as a department or state, only to separate and again declare independence in 1903. Because of its proximity with Colombia and distance from Panama City, Darien has historically manifested close ties to its neighboring nation, in ways that are influenced but are also beyond the politics of separation and independence.

Libres, meaning “free ones”, have long lived along Darien’s waterways in towns and villages created in many cases by Spanish colonial military and missionary efforts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Libres are the descendents of

colonial-era slaves and maroons, and are arguably Darien's most traditional inhabitants.³² Darien as a historical region exceeds the province boundaries created by the contemporary Panamanian state, and through colonial forms of occupation, resource extraction, and administration, extends to include much of what is today northwestern, Pacific Colombia. There people also have identified as libres, and the category, it has been argued, cannot be reduced to a kind of black opposed to white and indian.³³ Moreover, with its legacy of self-liberation and cimarronaje (run-awayism), the category of libre could be considered a New World identity distinct from "African."³⁴

Libres are aquatic and over time have incorporated different groups of people into their aquatic ways of life. In colonial times, when Panama was still part of

³² Garcia Casares (2008) provides a wealth of information about colonial Darien's population, military activities, and Catholic missions, including the founding of towns and demographic information of their occupants. From these numbers it is clear that slaves, maroons, and freed slaves outnumbered Spaniards and indigenous people—at least in towns and villages (always along rivers) where colonial officials, priests, and other functionaries counted people. Much of colonial Darien, however, was beyond Spanish control and occupation, and indigenous peoples here probably vastly outnumbered Spaniards and slaves, freed slaves, and maroons.

³³ Wade (1999) attributes the origin of "libre" to the colonial racial taxonomy; Restrepo (2002:99) emphasizes how within a polyphony of identities, "libre" does not simply equate "black", but "has a particular meaning in a complex articulation inside a deeply woven set of categories" (cited in Escobar 2008); Hoffmann (2002) emphasizes the plurality and relationality of the memories that inform understandings of libres. Alternatively, Panamanian anthropologist Reina Torres de Arauz (1975) classifies libres as Darien's "black mestizo group" or "afro-colonial". While these categorizations are consistent with discourses of mestizaje in Panama prominent during much of the 20th century, I prefer to use "libre" to describe Darien's pre-highway Afrodescendent peoples precisely because the term resists hegemonic classifications.

³⁴ Drawing from the work of Mintz and Price, Whitten and Torres (1998:21) argue that this idea of self-liberation is a key feature in the development of African diaspora awareness and evokes a new sense of belonging that varies considerably across the Americas in terms of attachment to an African homeland. Whitten and Torres point out, for instance, that participants of black culture in the Colombian department of Chocó identify as libres, while farther south in the Colombian and Ecuadorean Pacific lowlands, black people reject ideas of dispersal from an African homeland and instead consider these riverine and coastal areas their homeland, emphasizing the establishment of their own communities in their own territory. In Central America, Anderson also (2009) found among Honduras Garifuna a search for an origin of blackness outside of Africa.

Colombia, libres settled around gold mines and cohabited alongside slaves until the abolition of slavery in 1851, when libres (including the newly-freed slaves) began spreading longitudinally along river banks, living by agriculture and fishing.³⁵ Also beginning in the nineteenth century, libres began to absorb Antillanos, English-speaking West Indian migrants who had been concentrated in the Panama Canal area, and who were attracted to Darien by work along the rivers in plantations and mining for gold.³⁶ A grandmother in Yaviza called Elisa Benavides, a talented storyteller and dancer of traditional black dances particular to Darien, came from the Panama Canal area when she was a young girl, along with her mother and father. She told me the story of how they came, and what happened afterwards:

“A man from here in Darién went over there to where we were living and picked up people who liked to work. And so he chose my father and brought him over here. And then my father went to get my mother and I because I was an infant. And not long after, in 1936 my father got in trouble here and landed in jail and I fought for life along with my mother. Well, that is why I was raised here in Yaviza.”

Elisa both embodied and conveyed to me the complexities of being libre and being Darienita, and the complexities of historical waves of displacements and migrations that have brought people along many routes to Darien. She explained how, in the days before the highway— “Yaviza la vieja” she calls those days— libres took in Antillanos like her mother and father, and then also Chocoanos, migrants from the Chocó department in Colombia who went to Darien looking to make American

³⁵ Oslender (2002:92).

³⁶ Mendez (1979:176-77).

money, mostly as peons and loggers.³⁷ Elisa is full of stories about those days, when Darien and Colombia were closer, more intimate:

“Before, *before*, we here would celebrate for Colombians their Twentieth of July [Colombian independence day] as if it was a Third of November [Panamanian independence day]. The father of our children? Colombian. No? Well, we married here with foreigners. To live better, it was with the Colombians. Yes because our countrymen were lazy, vagabonds that didn’t work, didn’t give anything to women. Well then, we would look for Colombians because they came here to work, and if they married here then life was different because then they were married with a Panamanian, and then they had a different *consideration*. Back then. Through Panamanian women they could get their identification card, and with that card they could go to Panama, they could go anywhere. Well. And here the Twentieth of July was like a Third of November. It was very beautiful. Because those children of those Colombians, they were the children of Darién. The father of my children, Colombian. I had eighteen children and raised twelve. The father of my daughter’s children, Colombian. And really, I tell you, rare is a woman with a child that doesn’t belong to a Colombian.”

Indigenous migration also contributed to the social networks that held Darien together and linked it with Colombia, networks sustained through clientelistic relationships, fictive kinship, and economic activities organized and mediated by the

³⁷ On mid-twentieth century Colombian migration to Darien see Torales (1979). Mendez (1979:178-79) mentions how Chocoanos were exploited in mining, logging and banana activities alike, on account of their undocumented status, while the novel *Los Clandestinos* (Candanedo 1949) offers a fictionalized account of Chocoano loggers in Darien during the 1940s.

rivers. Darien has been populated by many native American peoples for thousands of years, but of greatest concern here, in this highway-related discussion, are Emberá and Wounaan.³⁸ Like Chocoanos, indigenous migrants from Colombia followed the rivers into Darien and like libres, settled along its banks.³⁹ Emberá migration into Darien began in the eighteenth century; Wounaan began to arrive in the 1940s.⁴⁰ By the 1960s, at the same time the first colonos were gaining footholds in Darien, Emberá and Wounaan occupied all of the major rivers in the region. This migration into Panama has been attributed to game depletion, Spanish colonial aggression, diseases, state violence, economic incentives, and the call of friends and relatives in newly-established river sectors.⁴¹ Emberá and Wounaan settlement patterns followed the logic of the river, although differently than libres, who kept farms along river banks but resided in villages and towns. They lived in semi-circular plots facing the river and spread out at least a river bend apart. As families grew and children formed

³⁸ In addition to Emberá and Wounaan, Darien is home to indigenous Guna and Ngäbe; however, this chapter limits itself to a discussion of Emberá and Wounaan because at the level of province, they are the most implicated by highway-related politics and conflicts.

³⁹ Emberá expansion into Darien from Colombia began in the late eighteenth century as they occupied rivers abandoned by Guna who had fled from the Spanish into Darien's remote headwaters. Teodoro Mendez (1979:122-3) writes that Spanish political-military strategy was clearly directed toward the pacification, extermination, and removal of the Guna population from Darien. Nevertheless, frustrated by repeated unsuccessful colonization attempts, particularly in comparison to other New World regions, a *real cedula* in 1789 ordered the Spanish to abandon and dismantle their forts so the Indians could not take control of them. From then on, the native character of the region would change. Darien's forests would return to Indian control, but this time by Emberá and Wounaan, who by the end of the eighteenth century were taking migratory routes along the Tuira, Balsas and Jaqué rivers, and along the Pacific coast into the Sambú valley (Herlihy 1986:78-80).

⁴⁰ Herlihy (2003).

⁴¹ According to Torres de Arauz (1975:137), Emberá and Wounaan have participated in several migratory waves from the Atrato and San Juan river systems in Colombia into Darien, which she attributes to Spanish persecution, diseases, and warfare with other indigenous groups. Herlihy (1986) notes that in the 1980s indigenous Colombians were attracted to Darien by the sale of firearms in Darien.

households of their own, sectors of more than twenty related households would form along a river (but not laterally into the forest). Over time, there would not be enough free land for newly-weds to settle and they would relocate to another part of the river or an adjacent river valley.⁴² Rivers organize settlement patterns and ways of identifying such that people identify not only by the river but the sector they live in.⁴³ Moreover, rivers organize indigenous landscape and cosmology, providing a point of reference in relation to which spatial directions (including other-worldly ones) are defined.⁴⁴ These migratory patterns have been tempered by the process of sedentarization into villages that began in the 1950s and the subsequent formation of reserves, but life nonetheless remains governed by the rivers.⁴⁵

⁴² This river migration is described in detail in Herlihy's (1986) study of Emberá and Wounaan cultural geography in the twentieth century, where he emphasizes that they are not nomadic or even semi-nomadic, as relocations only happen after eight to twelve years or more, and it takes much effort to build a new house (87).

⁴³ Herlihy (1986:111-116).

⁴⁴ Velasquez Runk (2009:459).

⁴⁵ Herlihy (1986) documents the process of village formation in relation to the state, which came about from a combination of factors. Older Emberá and Wounaan generations, having over their lifetime experienced increasing contact with non-Indians, recognized the need for Spanish reading and writing skills in order to better do business with the merchants who purchased plantains and sold them manufactured goods, exchanges in which they were often robbed or taken advantage of. They also saw the benefit of being able to read legal documents and apply for land possessions and titles when dealing with Darienitas and colonos who claimed indigenous lands for themselves (162). Christian missionaries, who both in Darien and Colombia had been working with Emberá and Wounaan to alphabetize their languages and also teach them Spanish (with the complicity of the government), also encouraged them to agglomerate into villages in hopes to acquire educational and medical resources from the government and stave off black and colono incursions (165-6). The need for education in Spanish as a form of economic and geographical defense, then, contributed to village formation. Torres de Arauz (1975:285) and Kane (1994) suggest that villagization was a defensive strategy. Four communities formed in the 1950s, seventeen in the 1960s, and there were fifty-three by 1983 (Herlihy 1986:161).

The Torrijos government also supported the movement for indigenous community formation and the establishment of a reserve as a vehicle towards development and integration into national society. Torrijos himself visited indigenous territories in Darien and promised schools and medical attention to each community, if they continued to settle into villages and play a familiar political game (Herlihy 1986:163). The first official Emberá-Wounaan leader was appointed by Torrijos and toured Darien along with a San Blas Guna leader (the Guna had already been successful in obtaining a

In addition to structuring life, settlement patterns, and migrations, Darien's riverways provided the infrastructure for regional economic activities. Along the river margins Emberá and Wounaan practiced both subsistence and commercial agriculture, keeping household gardens and plantations that fed the rest of the country.⁴⁶ These trade relations kept Darien's indigenous inhabitants in frequent—but careful—contact with libres. Once a week plantains, bananas and other food commodities would be transported in long canoes down the river to ports towns like Yaviza, Sambu, and Balsas where libre entrepreneurs bought the fruit and sold in turn consumer goods such as soap, salt, and kerosene. Libres and Chocoanos, on their part, relied on the riverways for timber extraction, floating down logs to collection centers and sawmills before shipping the timber to Panama City. Chocoanos often found work as peons on large indigenous-owned plantain groves, and trade linked Emberá in Darien to entrepreneurs all the way from Buenaventura, Quibdó, and other distant urban centers in Colombia.⁴⁷ Ships would come from Colombia along the

reserve—see Howe 1998) expounding the benefits of village life and elected indigenous leaders in the Guna model, and after a series of indigenous congresses held in Darien, village settlement was formally adopted as a strategy in 1970, and the Comarca Emberá-Wounaan was finally created in 1983 (170-3). In total, four indigenous comarcas have been established in Panama: Comarca Guna Yala just north of Darien in 1953, Comarca Emberá-Wounaan in eastern Darien in 1983, Comarca Madundandí in northwestern Darien in 1996, Comarca Ngäbe in western Panama in 1997, and the Guna Comarca Wargandí in northeastern Darien in 2000.

⁴⁶ This anthropogenic landscape contrasts to state-promoted rhetoric that characterized Darien as a vast, unclaimed, unproductive territory fit for colonization. Geographer Herlihy (1986:43) writes, “the lands along the lower and mid-reaches of most of Darién’s rivers have been farmed repeatedly since before Spanish Conquest. In these areas especially along river margins and extending outward for a distance of a day’s walking distance, *rastrojo* regrowth is prevalent. These river margins have been cut-over and reforested so many times that structurally they are quite variable and distinct from forests found in more remote and headwater areas.”

⁴⁷ Reported by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1960:108) cited in Torres de Arauz (1969:38).

coast and up the rivers selling manufactured goods and buying forest products in return.

The rivers also held together inter-ethnic relations. Emberá frequently asked libre Darienitas to be godparents to their children, thus extending indigenous-black relations beyond economic to the realm of kinship and patronage. For example, Elisa recalls how some Darienita families offered their names, as god-parents, to indigenous people: “Before, *anybody* could come to Darien. Beginning with the indians. The indians you see here, not all of them are from Darien. They’re foreigners. But here they were taken in as if they were children. Many people here, like the Ayala, the Martinez, the Alvarado, they took the indians when they came to town and gave them their surname. From Yaviza to the indian villages was a long way up the river. But the indians started to come to town, as far as I can remember, beginning with the politics [electoral campaigns] of Arnulfo Arias [in the 1940s], and they started coming down, coming into town.”

The indians, according to Elisa, are also children of Darien. While Antillanos and Chocoanos were incorporated into the family of mother Darien through intermarriage, indigenous people became Darienitas through patronage and godparenthood. Camilo and Magno’s father-son relationship also illustrates the extent of fictive kinship relations between libres and indigenous people. In any case, relative to other groups, libres dominated regional trade and politics and were able to benefit from the educational, health, and other services provided by the government, however meager. In contrast to Emberá and Wounaan, whose primary language was not

Spanish and who, as Elisa mentions, are often perceived as foreigners, libres in the days before the highway had closer ties to the state as Panamanian citizens. Libres followed a political organization consistent with the system instituted in the rest of the republic, with districts and smaller units called corregimientos, with their corresponding authorities, a municipal government, and elected representatives. As agriculturalists they cultivated plantains and tubers along the river margins for easy transport, but also occupied positions in the local government, with resource extraction companies, or as independent traders or merchants. In other words, libres occupied a privileged position in Darien, serving as intermediaries between indigenous people (and also early colonos) on one hand, and economic centers and government agencies on the other hand.⁴⁸ This pre-highway social order was not without tensions. For example, Señora Elisa expresses the latent tensions between libres and indigenous people in her description of changing intermarriage prohibitions and indigenous “respect” for libres:

“And now? Ay ay ay. Indians married with libres, and libres married with indians. Ay, that is a singular mixture. That’s now, recently. Before? Nah. Where? No libre would go near an indian woman. Uuuuu, the cholos [indians] would kill him. No indian would approach a libre woman and disrespect her. When? Ay! They respected libres a lot. But now, beeeeeeh, que va [something like ‘well then’, a common expression in Panama]!”

⁴⁸ Wade (1995:345) describes a comparable situation in Colombia, where blacks and Indians maintain well-defined ethnic boundaries but “group relations are mediated by intermarriage, compadrazgo (godparenthood), and vertical economic networks.”

The extent that rivers organized life affected even the first white-mestizo colonos from Western Panama, the Chiricanos, who started coming to Darien before the highway was actually built. Aquatic Darien was the only Darien. The first colonos came into Darien's social scene as subordinate to and dependent on libres, insofar as they had little political or economic power and were not plugged into Darien-Colombia networks through kinship, and only marginally through trade.

The first wave of Chiricano colonos came from the district of Gualaca in Chiriquí. According to interviews with the remaining founders, as they are called, the story goes something like this: What happened was that an adverturous man (others say he had gotten into trouble with the law, and that is why he went to Darien) spent a few years on the Iglesias river and then went home to Chiriquí with the news: "The land there is *good!* There is a *looooooot* of land. *Free!*" Upon hearing the news, another man from Gualaca went to Darien in 1955 to inspect. He remained for about eight or fifteen days, then went back to Chiriquí with the news: it was a very good place. There was plenty of land. He took thirteen families back to Darien with him, kin and compadres. This was in 1955 or 1956.

The first colono families started migrating to the Iglesias river beginning in 1955, thirteen families or so, and for sheer survival had to adapt to the waterways.⁴⁹ Attracted by stories of good, free land—montaña, untouched forest—the Chiricanos were very organized when it came to claim their farmlands. They measured eight hundred meters of riverfront (at that time), and hacked out a loop of trail by machete on either side of the river:

⁴⁹ There were other colonies elsewhere, though they did not grow to the level of regional importance that highway-area colonies enjoy today. Torres de Arauz (1975:329) describes three colonies of people from the Azuero peninsula (the Interior), located in the Chepigana and Setegantí area, named Nuevo Paritilla, Caramunio, and Nuevo Paraíso. In the lower Sambú river near Boca Sábalo was a colony with mixed population from Chiriquí and Azuero, and in the Rio Congo area there were also small colono settlements.

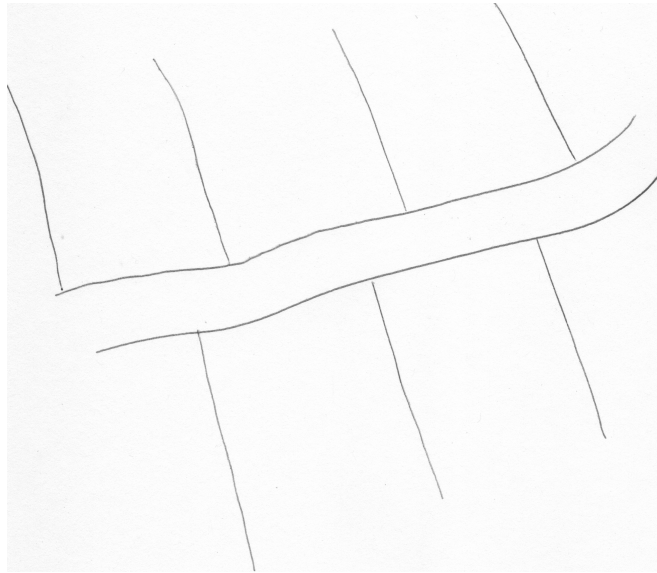


Figure 31: Colono drawing of river and “picas,” perpendicular trails cut to mark the limits of a claim

Every farm had access to water, and in this way the small Chiricano colony resembled older settlements in Darien— they even formed residential sectors along the rivers, similar to Emberá and Wounaan. They spread from the first site of colonization in a strikingly similar pattern as indigenous Darienites, as they grew in numbers, to other nearby sites with promising rivers and streams.⁵⁰

To complement subsistence agriculture by selling rice and corn at La Palma, the local capital, or even in Panama City colonos relied on aquatic infrastructures of mobility—though perhaps no one really anticipated how difficult it would be to carry the sacks on foot (few people had horses in the early days) to the port where they would load everything onto canoes, wait for the tide to take them to the Sabanas river

⁵⁰ Hernandez (1970) lists the small settlements in places that came to be called Quimba, Iglesia Arriba, Bijagual, Metetí, Agua Caliente, Quebrada del Pescado, Quebrada Nicanor and Aruza. These are all rivers and streams, and these settlements were more like sectors than villages or communities.

and from there navigate the choppy waters across the gulf of San Miguel and to La Palma, where Darienitas were not really interested in buying rice and corn in large quantities and where the government buying station was short-lived. The journey from La Palma to Panama City was a vertiginous ride over the rough Pacific Ocean in rickety wooden cargo boats, where colonos perched on barrels or sat on the floor, fighting off the nausea. Coming from a land of mountains and streams but no navigable rivers and much less oceans, Chiricanos were not exactly seafaring people. But live and move along the rivers they did. Some even enjoyed piloting the boats.

The transition from river to residential sector to community in a place called Metetí set the precedent in many ways for the reorientation of much of Darien from life on the river to life on the road. The first few settlers of Darien's future biggest town were attracted by good hunting and an old logging trail that led to the Chucunaque river.⁵¹ In 1964 a group of six families came to Metetí from Iglesias, and then

Some families came together, the parents with their children. In other cases the men came by themselves, built a cane and palm frond house and readied the field for planting, and only then sent for their wives and children. Some left their women and children to make a new family in Darien. Victorio Gonzalez, one of the founders of Metetí, came because a compadre went to Chiriquí and promised him work—he would pay for food, transportation, everything, until Victorio got established. Victorio agreed, and worked on his compadre's farm. Around the month of March, near the end of the dry season, the compadre told Victorio: "There is a piece of land over there. You can straighten that out and cut the growth that's there and make your world. You'll be independent after you harvest. In the meantime, I'll help you. That was in 1957. And that was how, little by little, through communal work-sharing and land-loaning institutions like "a medias" (half and half), people started coming to Darien from Chiriquí.

⁵¹ By one account, the path from Iglesias to the Chucunaque (specifically to a place called El Martirio) was actually a road made by a company that dug wells and erected towers looking for oil, and then became a logging road.

more and more people. Darienitas thought the Chiricanos were strange for living so far from existing towns, from important rivers and so far from the sea.⁵² Yet the colonos persevered along streams that inconveniently dried up in the summer, encouraged by rumors of the highway and occasional sightings of workers taking measurements and sticking little red flags in the ground. Once the highway was built, however, Metetí started to become a colono *community*. Around 1979 two farmers donated land to the National Guard, a hospital, and the Catholic church.⁵³ The government placed a little schoolhouse across from the church, and these things combined—hospital, church, school and highway nearby—attracted more colonos from nearby sectors who bought lots from the Chiricanos who had originally claimed those lands, and built their own houses. They usually kept their farms, and so families had two houses—one at the farm, which could be kilometers away, and one in the town, and this resembles both libre and indigenous community-farm arrangements in which place of residence and place of agriculture (where a second house might be located) are distinct from one another. Far, far away from family in Chiriquí, life was lonely in such a strange new land, but the formation of the Metetí community marked the beginning of a change in life not only for colonos but for all of Darien.

Life in Darien before the highway was a whole other world, an aquatic world, peopled by libres, indigenous people, and Chiricano colonos, among others. The rivers held this world together and linked it closely to Colombia, less so to Panama. This, however, does not mean that Darien was not connected to other parts of the

⁵² According to Sarmiento Chia (1985:70).

⁵³ Sarmiento Chia (1985:64).

world. Aquatic Darien was shared by libres, Chocoanos, Emberá, Wounaan, Guna, Chiricanos, Venezuelans, Peruvians, Chinese, a handful of Europeans, and North Americans even (buying rubber and plantains).⁵⁴ Yet this world was not quite Panama. Darien was not so much isolated as tied into networks that only partially connected to Panama or bypassed it altogether. The rivers held both symbolic and material importance and functioned as central points of reference for expressions of belonging and relatedness—recall how Emberá and Wounaan identify by which river they are from, while through river-mediated kinship ties with migrants, libres controlled who could become “children of Darien.” Once the highway was built, it too became an important point of reference for sorting out belonging and inclusion, this time at the level of province and nation.

A Change in Orientation from River to Road

It was not until 1981 that the Darien Highway was officially inaugurated, yet colonos from the Interior started showing up along the road before it even materialized. Metetí came to be peopled by not just Chiricanos but people from Los Santos, Herrera and Veraguas. With the barrage of people not just in the Metetí area but all over the new Darien Highway, colonos practiced two kinds of land claims. Existing Chiricanos re-oriented themselves to the highway as farms were divided and sold in lots that now faced the road instead of the river. In places that had not yet been occupied by colonos, parcels and farms were claimed by hacking out a narrow path

⁵⁴ See Mendez (1979) on Darien’s prominent families and nationalities during the mid-twentieth century.

around the perimeter with a machete—likewise, facing the highway. The destiny of life in Darien had changed.

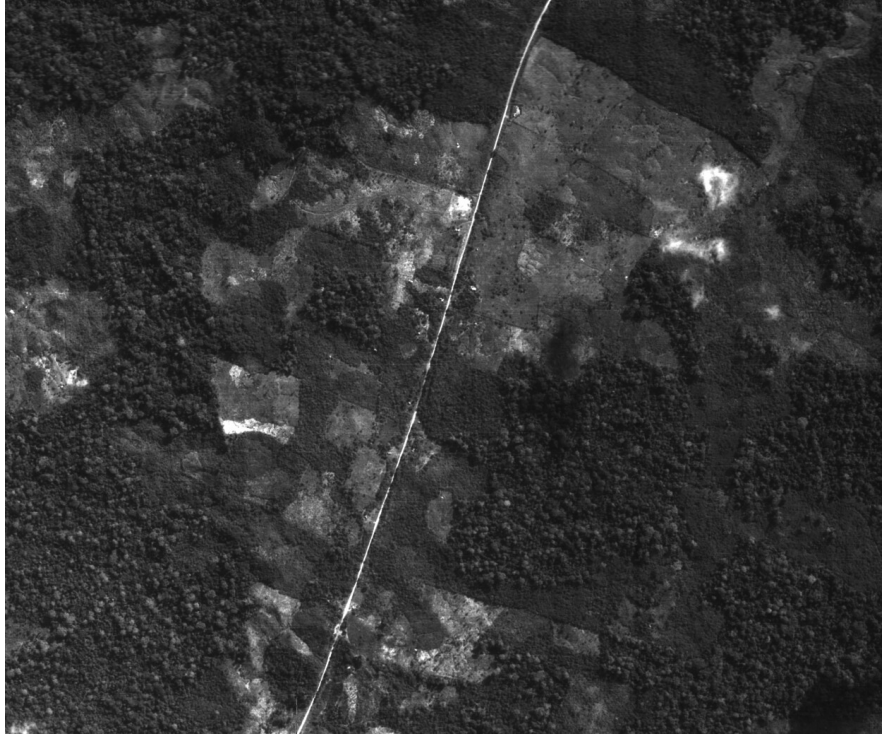


Figure 32: Aerial photograph of highway and land claims, 1987⁵⁵

Maximino Vargas' migration story illustrates some of the new ways that came to characterize an emergent highway Darien quite different from aquatic Darien. His and his family's routes were of a different kind, routes that insisted on being terrestrial even before the highway was finished and took them into Darien often by foot on trails, pathways and the unfinished highway. These routes taken by Maximino and other colonos who settled along the highway represent a departure from

⁵⁵ Darien, Rollo 1, Foto 135, Instituto Geográfico Tommy Guardia, Panama City, Panama.

waterways in that they created closer links to the nation (as embodied by Interioranos) and state (though the formation of officially recognized communities and the formalization of land claims). Maximino's and other colonos' stories show, however, that these migratory routes and networks were not determined by the state but neither were they enacted in a spontaneous or irrational manner—family mattered, and affect, in the enactment of these terrestrial routes. In short, through these land migrations, colonos came to belong to Darien by creating a distinctive highway space, and made Darien belong more to Panama through the maintenance and extension of kinship and clientelistic relationships that forged a network of relations oriented differently than aquatic Darien. In contrast to indigenous and libre Darienitas, who were often intimately related to Colombia, colonos were able to draw Panama closer because of their previous experiences with the state and their privileged status as “authentic” white-mestizo Panamanians.

Maximino began his account by identifying himself according to province of origin, a practice many colonos continue despite having lived many years or having been born in Darien, illustrating one way colonos and by extension highway Darien maintain close connections to the rest of Panama. “I'm Santeño but we were living in Bayano before coming to Darien. The Bayano [hydroelectric dam] project took us out of just up there where the bridge is now, around '74, '75. There was still no highway. Because of that we went to Cañitas.” The hydroelectric dam built on the Bayano river created an artificial lake and displaced colonos, Emberá and Guna in order to supply electricity to a growing Panama City. The government relocated people to new sites

along the new highway's route; many took up the offer, but many, Maximino's family included, resisted the relocation and instead went off on their own, migrating and colonizing all over again.⁵⁶

“My father had a cousin who was a supervisor in the Ministry of Public Works in Santa Fe. He told him, cousin! There is a lot of free land over there! Go because I'm going to put you on a piece of land. My father had two families, is the thing. He had my mother, and he had another woman. But he had them on different lots. Well, when we left Bayano to Cañitas he made us a house and put the other woman in a house behind where we lived. But he had us on the same farm. And so, my father he had no peace. Because my mother had a very strong character.

“One day I told him, father, I'm sorry but we can't take this anymore. Because one day, either you or my mother are going to appear dead. And for us that would be terrible. I'm leaving with my mother, I told him that time. And he said, no señor! The one who has to leave is *me*. You stay here with your mother. Well, that was when he came over here to Darien, in 1977.

“Father would visit us. And it was difficult. Sometimes he had to come walking. But he would visit us every month. And he would always try to convince us to follow him. That he already had some lands there for us. We became enthused and in 1979 we decided to come. We all came over here. My uncles, my aunts, the whole big family. They all went following my father like a herd of wild pigs.”

⁵⁶ See Wali's (1989) study of the Bayano hydroelectric dam project and its impact on colonos and indigenous people who lived in the flood area.

Colono migration was a family affair. For the most part the state promoted colonization without directing the migratory flow. But herds of wild pigs, to borrow Maximino's metaphor, don't go tearing through the forest blindly. They follow the one that leads the way. Colonos followed an uncle, brother, cousin, father, or compadre who was already situated in Darien and who would help them settle in. Kinship networks worked alongside government encouragement. Moreover, just because colonization along the Darien highway followed no predetermined government plan,⁵⁷ does not mean colonos did not plan themselves. From the Interior, trips were organized in which a car load of men from the same neighborhood and mostly related to each other would go for a week or ten days to Darien to explore the possibility of relocating, and possibly strike a deal with someone already established to trade their labor for food and housing until they themselves were able to build a home and farm. The decision to migrate came usually after careful consideration of household finances, time of year, and planting seasons.⁵⁸ Structured by family relations, these migration practices and plans contributed to colono manifestations of belonging in terms of home province as well as nation.

Most colonos, Maximino included, remember the exact date they arrived in Darien, something that reflects the careful thought put into migration that is often framed as irrational and spontaneous.⁵⁹ Maximino continued, "I had thought, well,

⁵⁷ The few government-planned settlements, called asentamientos campesinos, were short-lived experiments in individually-held land on cooperative farms; most colonos preferred to live and farm on their own terms.

⁵⁸ Of course there are always run away unexpectedly to Darien or come "to aventurar."

⁵⁹ See Heckadon Moreno (2009).

it's pretty rough here and here I am working on someone else's land—because my father had already sold his farm when he went to Darien. And I thought, to stay here and work what's not mine...no man! So one day I said—I had recently gotten together with my woman—I said: well Chelita, if you want to follow me then get ready because we're leaving *today* for Darien. On a fourth of March. Well, I tell you that I headed out at night. At nine at night I left. And we arrived here to my father's at two in the morning. A brother in law came with me, with my sister and a girl they had and a young nephew of his. And me with the woman with a baby. We came hey I tell you at two in the morning the next day.”

Outside of the Iglesias-Metetí area occupied by Chiricanos, land along the highway was claimed first by Emkay company workers.⁶⁰ Many of the work crews that led the way for the road—Taylor the machine operator included—being the first people with the idea of occupying those particular lands since anyone can remember, marked off tracts of land and if they were lucky, or if they sent a family member to look after it and secure the claim, managed to return after their years of road-building to work agriculture in Darien. And so colonos who arrived subsequent to the highway's construction, in the 1980s and after, had to purchase their land or at least their rights to that piece of land—there was always someone ahead of the pack, usually with political connections, either selling his land or taking it upon himself to organize and settle the new people. The colonos came in droves, in the mid-1980s and 1990s extending past the end of the paved road in Canglón, along the dirt trail

⁶⁰ In the Sansoncito, Sanson, Canglón area—up to the end of the road in those days, after which there was only a dirt trail to Yaviza, transitable only during the dry season.

that led to the old colonial garrison-turned-port town of Yaviza, so that by the close of the century, everything along the Pan American Highway from Panama City to its terminus in Yaviza was peopled in a new kind of way.

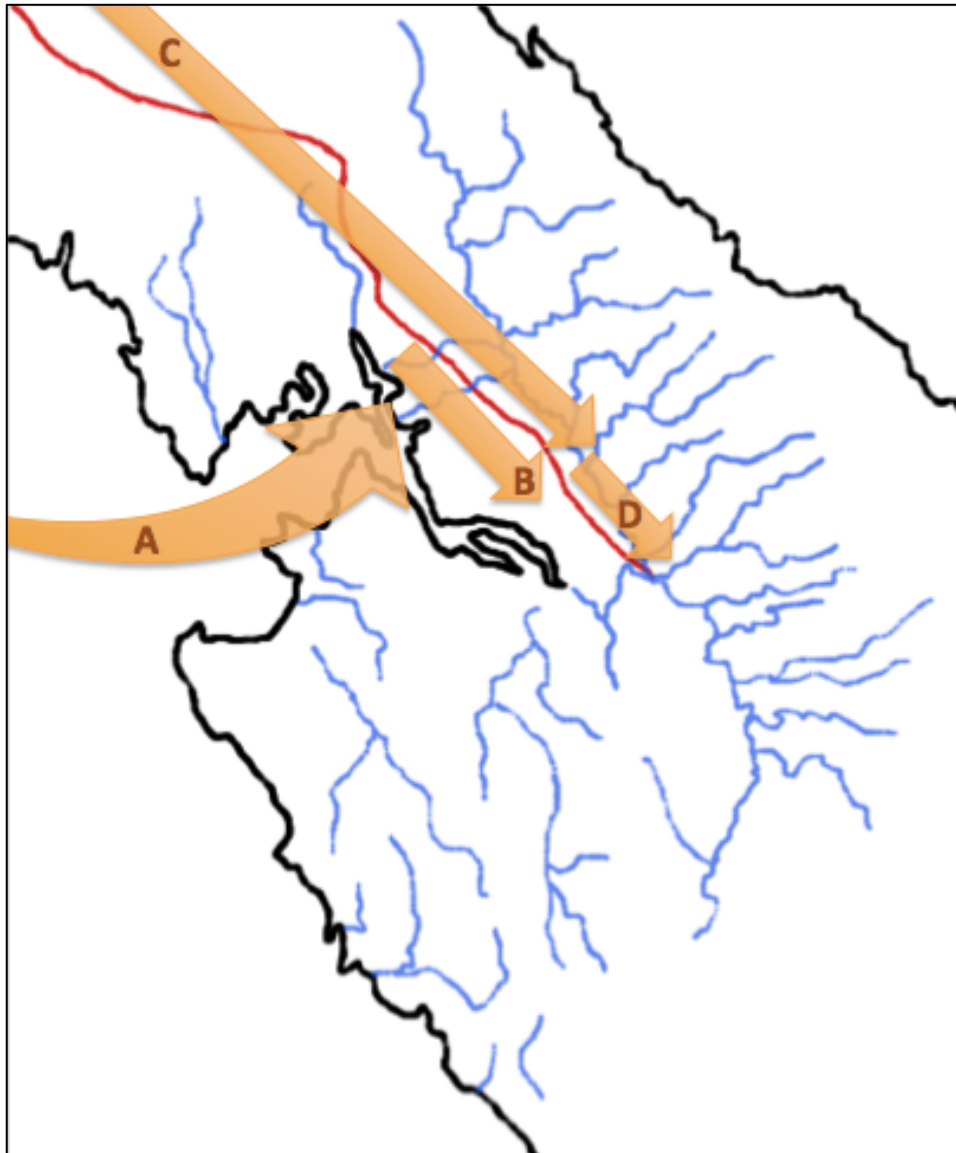


Figure 33. Waves of colonization in Highway Darien: A) Trajectory of Chiricano sectors that formed in the 1950s and 1960s, B) Highway worker claims during the 1970s, C) Migration from Interior beginning in 1980s, D) Highway communities formed in 1990s and 2000s from an area formerly known as La Cueva del Zorro at the end of the road.

The highway came to string dispersed farms together into clusters of homes, schools, churches and little general stores—new colono settlements that in their history of migrations and struggle to become *communities* share a highway identity that occupies a specific place within Darien and within Panama. The clustering happened, as can be expected, along family and provincial affiliations. But nobody came with the idea of creating a town or village formally, one that had certain kinds of relationships with the government.⁶¹ The process unfolded (and continues) as populations grew over generations and from continued in-migration, and when things like schools and regular access to water became pressing needs. Elsewhere in Darien Emberá and Wounaan had been negotiating indigenous villages with at least a small school, and libres already had a relatively privileged relationship, however distant, to the state, which granted them schools (if only a few) and health centers (few), and other government services—in short, everything that colonos had to fight for. And these struggles in effect reoriented Darien towards the highway and towards Panama.

Colonos think of their community formations as a history of struggle not only because they were the most recent migrant group in the region. They were settling in an area without pre-existing state infrastructure, and without easy access to rivers that served black and indigenous Darienitas. (The highway was purposefully routed to avoid crossing major rivers as much as possible.) Moreover, because of their previous experiences with state power in the Interior as well as colonization fronts elsewhere in Panama, colonos expected the state to be present and help. This expectation had

⁶¹ The improvisational nature of roadside communities can be noted in their layout—a loose cluster of houses and services, without a discernible center other than the highway.

been cultivated by the Torrijos government during the 1970s through agricultural purchasing stations, subsidies, and technical assistance. Territorial expansion accelerated in the 1980s, at the same time the state contended with a severe economic crisis. Colonos demanded the government pay attention to them not only because of the crisis context but also in fulfillment of promises made before.

In collective memory, achievements such as electric power, potable water, and schools (and the political complicity, or at least recognition, that these public services encode) are the markers of a real community. Schools were usually the first focal point of collective action. To serve the growing and expanding highway population, potential communities needed their own schools separate from existing ones, which often required of small children daily treks by foot over long distances.⁶² Upon identifying the need, parents would form committees and select a lot in a central location that would be donated by a colono for the schoolhouse. Collaboratively, the parents would build a one or two-room structure out of wooden boards, cane, and palm fronds, and by hand craft the chairs and desks to put inside. They would collect a quota of about two dollars from each family to send committee leaders to the Ministry of Education in Panama City and request that the government send a

⁶² Often people want to “break away” from an established community and form their own, creating bad feelings. These differences can arise over access to resources like water or education. San Vicente broke away from Nicanor, for example, over water. According to the residents of both communities I interviewed, Nicanor didn’t want to share its water, and would turn off the valve to San Vicente, which depended on the uptake controlled by Nicanor; a group approached the Ministry of Health with the problem but the ministry was unwilling to help because San Vicente was considered a part of Nicanor. The only way to get government help was to break away and form a separate community. Once a new community breaks away and establishes itself, then it can start pulling in more government allocations to *it* rather than the old community. Santa Librada, Bijao, and Nuevo Progreso also broke away from Totumo, in their case all at the same time, to get their own school located in Santa Librada, on the highway.

teacher, arguing that they already had the school built and ready, and showing a list of all the students with age and year that would be benefited. In some cases the petition for a teacher would be presented through a local representative. Eventually, once a teacher was appointed and sent and the school was up and running, with more petitions the government would eventually send assistance to build a school out of cement blocks.

Access to water has consistently been another point of struggle for colono communities in formation. Like rivers, the highway is a medium for transportation and lifeline but unlike rivers, the highway does not bring water on its own. The highway crossed many streams but they invariably dried up during the dry months of summer, and wells often created conflicts among neighbors. Another committee would be formed, this time to request a water uptake and rural aqueduct from the Ministry of Health. Meanwhile, people would hold fundraisers like raffles and buffets to purchase the tank, pump, pipes, and cement needed for the work. It was never guaranteed that the government, burdened by the economic crisis, would supply all or even part of the materials—beyond approving the project and sending a technical consultant—and colonos would each contribute a quota of labor-days to build the uptake amongst themselves. In a more extreme mobilization for water, recounted to me by a participant, people in one community blocked the highway with logs for two days and didn't let anyone pass (well, there were not many cars anyway, in 1985) until the Minister came in an airplane that landed right on the highway to listen and finally

give them water.⁶³ Electrification followed a similar pattern of committee forming, fundraising, and politicking.

Beyond the obvious ways water, electricity and schools make life easier for colonos these achievements and the organizing and collaborating they required make *communities* in a very Panamanian way. Community formation is related to political savvy. For example, Santa Librada was able to successfully negotiate a school because the president of the committee at that time had experience in leadership and a sense of how to interact with the government. He had been president of a government-planned agrarian colony in western Panama; after migrating the outskirts of Panama City he managed to obtain a school in yet another community, years before settling in Darien. As he put it, “In other places people don’t have success, and why? They don’t know the workings of the government. Not in depth, but I *do* know how governments work. The government helps you but when you already have something formed in the community that they can contribute a grain of sand to. But we have to begin, to make a base so the government knows that [a school] will be useful for the community. And know that the government doesn’t spend much money [on us].”

⁶³ Access to water continues to be a big problem among Darien’s highway communities, presently. Old aqueducts and water uptakes have deteriorated and malfunctioned, and in many communities during the summer the stream dries anyway. During the dry months the government sends in large tank trucks that slowly cruise up and down the highway, distributing water to colonos who keep for that purpose large plastic barrels lined up along the road. As of the time of writing, the aqueduct project meant to bring water to highway communities permanently has not yet been finished, and is years past its projected completion date.

To get these very basic utilities, colonos have to be able to form committees, write letters and approach and speak with bureaucrats and government officials—things that require knowledge and skill, and a willingness to create and cultivate clientelistic ties with the state—and a certain idea of what kind of relationship they, as colonos in Darien, should have with the state in the first place, a relationship based on their inclusion in the nation as mestizo Interioranos, but also a relationship that required territory to be organized into scalable units for integration. In contrast to libres and Emberá and Wounaan, whose towns and reserves were already linked to the state political apparatus albeit in different ways (libres through a discourse of mestizaje reaching back to colonial origins and indigenas through their multiculturally-recognized ethnicity), colono stakes in forging connections with the state were different. As newcomers they sought government recognition of their settlements through the obtainment of services, on the basis of their racial and ethnic status as Interioranos, which conferred to them privileges as officially authentic, original Panamanians—something that, despite their citizenship, black and indigenous Darienitas did not possess, on the basis of their subordinate position in the national racial hierarchy.

Nowadays the signs of progress for colono communities have expanded to include “projects” that further strengthen ties to the state and nation, like the University of Panama campus in Darien, NGO offices, a regional hospital under construction, and an airport that is not really for civilian use but that colonos are proud of anyway. Projects give small frontier settlements a sense of grandeur. They

mean the government is paying (at least a little bit of) attention to them, that they are not abandoned, that they are part of the nation. Real communities with signs of progress and development projects—concentrated along the highway—confirm for colonos a distinctive position within Darien in the Panamanian scheme of things.

The Pan American Highway transformed the social and natural organization of life even beyond the immediate highway area. The emergence and growth of highway Darien substantially affected aquatic Darien. Historically, rivers linked libre and indigenous lifeways within Darien and to Colombia— but to Panama only secondarily. As the following section will explain, the highway changed this orientation by directly connecting Darien to Panama and in its truncated, unfinished form, negating connection to Colombia. Socially, the highway fractured relationships *within* Darien and worked as a counter-current to transborder kinship and exchange networks with Colombia. Incoming colonos wrested away political and economic power from libres and concentrated their efforts into bringing government services to the highway area, where they had settled. Meanwhile, Emberá and Wounaan cultivated ties with the state and mobilized identity politics based on their indigeneity to gain collective land rights contingent on their transition from dispersed settlements to nucleated villages. These reorientations fundamentally transformed the region's social and natural landscape by carving out three idealized ethnic spaces: colonos in communities along the highway, Afro-Darienitas in port and coastal towns, and Emberá and Wounaan in reservation villages along the rivers.

Territorial Claims in Multicultural Panama

The construction of the highway into Darien sparked a set of territorial claims that led to the emergence of identities that were attached to place in ways differently than before. Territorial claims assert identity and local control over resources, and redefine people's relationship to the state.⁶⁴ These claims cannot be separated from the meanings attached to places, from the social networks that sustain these claims, and from the ways and pathways people use to move around—all of which are political strategies for making claims to territory. In Darien, these claims are conversant with ongoing nationalist projects that have constructed mestizo, black, and indigenous people in ways that respond to the consequences of colonial and postcolonial relationships. By claiming territory, people in Darien take an active part in their integration to multicultural, developing Panama, re-rooting, re-routing. The process of integration created segregations, fractured old relationships, and altered the power dynamics and social hierarchies of the region.

The Three Dariens was produced by the highway and is indicative of Darien's integration to Panama. It signifies a new order of things and people. Even colonos recognize that before, things were substantially different. One man who settled near the very end of the highway recalled that in the 1980s, "it was like a *tuti-fruti* [fruit punch]. There was a bit of everything! Peruvians, Nicaraguans, Colombians, Chiricanos, Santeños, Herreranos. Not like now." This heterogeneity, rather than

⁶⁴ See Offen (2003:47-8).

being erased, has been reformulated in such a way that highway Darien is *perceived* as a homogenous zone occupied by people from the Interior

One way colonos claimed territory and made the highway area was through land claims based on use and permanent occupation. It might seem strange that highway colonos had to *purchase* land, when Darien was supposedly full of *free* land—but land-grabbing itself was highly organized and followed discernible stages as waves of colonos arrived. The riverine sectors colonized by the first wave of Chiricanos and which were later bisected by the highway were divided into relatively few and relatively large holdings. In those days people would make trails around a piece of land to mark off what they thought they could work, which was the same thing as taking as much as they liked; legally, a person could claim rights (*derechos posesorios*) over national lands as long as those lands were worked and showed some form of improvement, which meant clearing the forest and planting something, even if it was just grass, and even if the cattle meant to eat the grass were nonexistent.⁶⁵ In Darien, when a person has this kind of right over land—not a land *title*, which is different—that person is “posesionado.” It involves reporting the land claim (*denunciar la posesión*) to the appropriate government office, demonstrating that it has been “improved”, and receiving in return a document establishing ownership of anything extractable but not of the land itself. It can be transferred from one person to another. Of course, clearing enormous tracts of land requires capital to pay day

⁶⁵ “Improvements” were generally consistent with government developmentalist policies that privileged cattle ranching and extensive monocultures, and were blind to other forms of agricultural production.

laborers, seeds and other costs; as a result only the wealthiest colonos, with the right kind of social and political networks, were able to grab as much as they possibly could.⁶⁶ This is how some people ended up with two thousand hectares and others with twenty. After the highway when more people started arriving, colonos with huge possessions saw the opportunity to make more money and sold to the newcomers. Where Maximo settled, for example, his father purchased land from a Chiricano who already held rights to it (*estaba ya posesionado*, as colonos say) and then worked as a middleman for other colonos interested in migrating to the area, selecting lots for them and negotiating the purchase from the original owner.

Colonos did more than just take land that according to them and the state belonged to no one. They transformed the nature, economy, and politics of the highway area, altering existing understandings of land rights and transforming the relationship between people, place, and state. Territorial claims, then, include individual land claims but also processes of community formation and the diffusion of Interiorano cattle culture. Colono claims were made possible through the drawing and maintenance of property perimeter trails, grass planting, and the dream of cattle more often than the animals themselves—along with a legal apparatus that recognized

⁶⁶ Hernández (1970) reports that many colonos expected that just by marking off the perimeter of a piece of land—regardless of whether it was too large for the colono to cultivate—this was enough to establish their rights over that land. It was clear from interviews conducted during fieldwork that the easiest way colonos to eventually gain property rights was to insert themselves into the cattle complex—cutting down forest extensively, even if no food was planted, only pasture grass, gave colonos rights over that land. The powerful and wealthy had the advantage, however, and often just took the land illegally with the complicity or blind eye of the state, and usually with substantial transfers of money. As one Chiricano colono who had been in Darien since 1957 complained, “Rich people just buy it from the state. Who knows how they do it. Land with untouched forests. The Arosemenas have 4,000 hectares of *forest*. How did they title all of those lands? And they did it back before the highway. They must have titled it from an airplane, no?”

and legitimized forms of agricultural production and property compatible with capitalist development. As illustrated by Maximino's migration story, colono territorial claims were also facilitated by political connections and kinship networks that roughly coincided with colonos' town or place of origin. In other words, by having settled along the highway, away from major rivers, access to the aquatic networks that linked black and indigenous Darienitas to each other and to Colombia was limited. As a result, colonos leveraged the highway and the dream of development it embodied—along with their knowledge of government workings, officially folkloric cattle culture and aspirations to participate in the national economy— to place them in a privileged position in relation to non-colono communities.

A significant factor that backed colono territorial claims is their subject position as Interioranos. "Interioranos" have been constructed as the privileged subjects of the Panamanian nation in ways that respond to the politics of other racial and ethnic groups in Panama. During the beginning and middle years of the twentieth century white elites pursued a project of mestizaje that responded to the political threat of colonial blacks and the later influx of black Anglophone West Indians working on the Panama Canal. White elites, faced with their minority status (in terms of numbers) and the international image of Panama as a predominantly black, English-speaking nation, became obsessed with the Azuero peninsula in western Panama, also referred to as the Interior. Nation-builders romanticized the colonial heritage and traditions of the Interior through history, art, literature, music and

monuments, constructing a myth of mestizaje that excluded and disenfranchised immigrant groups that had migrated to Panama more recently because of the labor requirements of the Canal. In contrast to libres, Emberá and Wounaan, who because of their race, historical migrations, displacements, and ties to Colombia were of questionable Panamanianness, Interiorano ways of life became enshrined as national folklore that Interioranos became celebrated as whitened, mestizo, originally authentic Panamanians.⁶⁷

Present-day colonos in Darien, most of whom identify as Interioranos, continue to live this legacy as the embodiment of traditional Panama, and much of their power in the process of colonization and territorial claims come from their ideological status as light-skinned mestizos whose love for cattle and peasant ways dovetailed with the revolutionary government's project of frontier conquest and nationalist development during the 1970s, and continue to dovetail to a certain extent, with current discourses of development based on private property. Colonos, in sum, make a territorial claim of the highway area through their agricultural and ranching practices, through their insistence on needing public services such as schools, the consolidation of communities, possessing land, the cultivation and strategic use of relationships with government officials, and a range of cattle-culture practices including vaccination parties, lasso and other rodeo-type competitions, performing, dancing and listening to típico music (a genre associated with Interioranos), sending for traditional clothing items and hats all the way from the Interior, just to name a

⁶⁷ On elite liberal nostalgia and the construction of Interioranos as folkloric mestizos, see Szok (2001).

few. In this way, highway Darien resembles other parts of Panama, especially its western provinces.

Colono territorial claims do not critique the myth of the mestizo Panamanian nation but rather dovetail with this discourse to extend national territory into this frontier. Indigenous and black territorial claims, however, do present a challenge to mestizaje by asserting that the relationship between state and society acknowledge not only difference but also social inequalities informed by colonial histories.⁶⁸ While for colonos a reorientation to the highway was necessary as a means to obtain sustenance and security through the cultivation of land, and also as way to ensure the continuation of their clientelistic ties to the state, for black and indigenous Darienitas the highway—and the integration and development associated with it—presented a loss of autonomy but also new political opportunities for challenging institutional racism and marginality in a multicultural context where citizenship could be redefined.

Indigenous routes and relationships responded to the highway, the influx of colonos, and revolutionary development policies in a complex set of adjustments that affected their way of living, moving, and organizing. Emberá and Wounaan, with their villagization initiative and establishment of reserves, had been assuming a defensive posture towards colonos for quite some time, and their transition to village life predates the highway. Increased reliance on manufactured commercial products,

⁶⁸ On the political implications of territorial claims put forth by Colombian Afrodescendants in the Pacific region, who have been successful in obtaining collective property rights and thus asserting within the national space a different conception of belonging, see Offen (2003).

increased contacts and collaborations with the state and Panamanian merchants, colono incursions into Darien, and the influence of missionaries bent on civilizing paved the way for Emberá and Wounaan to leave behind dispersed ways of life, to adopt *other* forms of political action, to recognize and seek strength in numbers that could only be counted if they were sedentary and visible to the state—and eventually to aspire to establishing an official homeland in the form of reserves.⁶⁹ As a result, Emberá and Wounaan transitioned from living dispersed along rivers, absent formal political structure beyond the family level, to living in nucleated villages in official Emberá-Wounaan reserves and establishing new kinds of leaders and caciques that mediate political power at the levels of community and reserve. The highway was not the direct or only reason indigenous territorial claims took the shape of reserves (and reserves are not the only form of territorial claim being made). Other factors contributed to this transition, including inter-ethnic collaborations with Guna, who had already been successful in establishing their own reserve, and the political opening created by the populist government in the 1970s that put into practice a corporate multiculturalism receptive to a discourse of rights based on ethnic difference. This new citizenship regime and new sense of fixed territory, however, emerged not by coincidence over a period of intense highway colonization and forms part of the new social geography discernible as the highway's aftermath.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ See Herlihy (1986) for a more detailed account of the factors that led to the formation of villages and eventually reserves.

⁷⁰ For a comparative perspective of citizenship regimes in Latin America, in particular reference to indigenous peoples, see Yashar (2005).

In effect, the highway drew Emberá and Wounaan closer to Panama, both literally and figuratively. They have learned to navigate the highway and the political links to Panama offered and structured by this new route—without leaving aside aquatic ways of being. The change is more than the clothes they wear and the food they eat, or the mere presence of a school in their village. It affects the kind of life they face and the ways they move (the flows of things) in relation to the rest of Panama and to other people in Darien. The changes have led to new forms of political representation, for instance the Emberá and Wounaan Congresses, governing bodies directed by an elected Cacique General. Through this new political model, the highway connection facilitated engagements with the state. It has also led to connections with other indigenous organizations throughout Panama, leading to interethnic collaborations and solidarity in challenging state-mediated capitalist enterprises, such as mines.

On the other hand, land has become a point of contention. The concentration of people into reserve villages limited accessibility to agricultural land and this, combined with the land-grabbing precipitated by the highway has changed attitudes towards property. While approximately half of the Emberá-Wounaan population lives in the reserve, where land is held collectively, the remaining population continues to struggle for non-reserve collective land titles in order to fend off colono and black

incursions.⁷¹ In new highway-oriented Darien, land titles, whether individual or collective, promise stability and prosperity.

Trade relations also shifted in this reorientation. Plantain routes changed; instead of long canoe journeys to libre towns and then on to Panama City by boat, now plantains reach city markets through feeder roads that connect river communities to the Pan American Highway where buyers await. In this way, libre towns are bypassed, with the exception of Yaviza, from where plantains are loaded onto trucks and carried overland to the capital city.⁷² The highway has also created more direct access to markets for indigenous artisans. Again, this is related to highway colonization—the reduction of territory prompted Emberá and Wounaan to explore different livelihood activities such as basketry and wood-carving.⁷³ With the highway, indigenous political, educational, and commercial routes link more directly to centers of state power in Panama City,⁷⁴ new centers of indigenous power in Darien and the capital city, and bypass local positions of mediation and patronage traditionally held by libres and later taken up by colonos.

⁷¹ On land struggles in Darien and the broader Panamanian context of neoliberal multiculturalism see Velásquez Runk (2012); Torres de Arauz (1969:76) documented indigenous aspirations to obtain land titles as early as the 1960s.

⁷² Herlihy (1986: 154) reports that six feeder roads existed in 1983: 1. Cañazas-Alto Congo, 2. Santa Fe, 3. Puerto Lara, 4. Arretí, 5. Metetí-Punto Zuimba [sic- Puerto Quimba], and 6. Lajas Blancas. He documents the altered trade routes in Lajas Blancas on the Chucunaque and on the Tuquesa.

⁷³ Velásquez Runk et. al (2007).

⁷⁴ Kane (1994) makes this point; she sees this as a legacy of Torrijos and puts it in terms of a reserve in exchange for political support. Indigenous territorial claims are not assimilation or acculturation through mestizaje, but a seeking out of ways to belong and participate in the nation despite the long history of institutionalized discrimination and racism that frustrate clamors for greater equality.

Libres, on their part, had long dominated regional politics and trade networks, and were posed to gain the most from the highway. The highway would pass through or nearby many libre towns and connect with feeder roads the ones that were farther away. Darien—the Darien that had lived on abandoned by every type of government since colonial times—would finally be closer to Panama. Businesses could grow, as could government services. It was their destiny.⁷⁵

With the emergence of highway Darien, however, libres lost territory and regional power. They used to have plenty of land—at least in hindsight. Their claims in the days before the highway followed logic different from that of colono enthusiasm for possessions, and were based on traditional forms of occupation centered on matrilineal families that were respected despite lacking legal basis. Like other Panamanians, libres could solicit from the government a permit for the temporary agricultural use of what were technically public lands, which involved complicated paperwork and fees, as did the process of transferring or selling that right to a third party. But since there were so few people in Darien before the influx of colonos, hardly anyone bothered with any of it.⁷⁶ Indifference towards the laws, and the fact that laws themselves seemed to impede legal permanent occupation of national lands, contributed to a conception of Darienitas as rootless, with little ties to

⁷⁵ Documents for Darien's regional development from the 1970s outlined detailed plans for promoting commercial agriculture and development in areas most densely populated, most of which were black communities. See Organización de los Estados Americanos, *Proyecto de desarrollo integrado de la region oriental de Panama-Darien* (Washington, D.C.: Secretaría General de la Organización de los Estados Americanos, 1978), Biblioteca Especializada Ing. Lopez Fabrega, Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Panama City, Panama.

⁷⁶ Méndez (1979:321) notes that the Chiari administration (1960-1964) offered land titles to peasants at no cost, but in Darien no one bothered and not a single land title was emitted.

the land. Libres often considered legal land ownership or possessory rights mechanisms that would restrict their autonomy by limiting the possibilities of cultivating parcels where and how they wanted.⁷⁷ Ideologically speaking, however, their disregard for the permanent occupation of lands specifically for market-oriented agricultural *production* (remember that libres and their ancestors had lived in Darien for centuries) signified a lack of civilization and made their dispossession justifiable. After the highway brought the colonos, libres learned they had lost much of their land and that it had never been theirs in the first place. It belonged, now, to people willing to fill out paperwork and visit government offices, the same people who preferred to plant pasture grass and aspired to be ranchers more than agriculturalists.

In addition to losing a large part of their territory, libres lost political and economic power to both indigenous Darienitas and colonos. Emberá and Wounaan gained political recognition and territorial rights based on their indigeneity, and began organizing politically, selling their agricultural products and purchasing manufactured items with less mediation by libres. Meanwhile, colonos, whose land-grabbing was supported by the government in order to civilize Darien with authentic Panamanianness and open up territory amenable to capitalist market relations, depended less and less on libre positions of regional power and also cultivated relations directly with Panama City.

⁷⁷ Méndez (1979:322-4) describes libre agriculturalists as transhumants whose total control over where, when and how land was used would be limited by land titles.

Libres became painfully aware of their new, unfavorable, social location in Darien after the highway, and often cite the reduced territory to which they have been relegated. Their mestizo blackness (based on colonial history and language) excluded them, in the early days of the highway, from the kind of identity politics and territorial claims made by Emberá and Wounaan, and from the cattle-driven, nationalist “economic progress” associated with colonos. Caught between a highway that was meant for them but taken over by colonos, indigenous reserves, and a border with Colombia that started to matter more, libres had to figure out how to orient towards the highway before everything was lost. The rehabilitation of the highway in the early 2000s, which involved filling holes and paving the gravel and dirt surface with asphalt, created new opportunities to engage with highway Darien and the rest of Panama.

The highway’s pavement was part of a development program funded by the Inter-American Development Bank that combined an aggressive land titling campaign with the rehabilitation of the transport system. Similar to the support for black and indigenous territorial rights that has been noted in other neoliberal contexts in Central America,⁷⁸ the program also funded and supported civil society organizations, among which several advanced a specifically libre agenda. Influenced on the one hand by the neoliberal apparatus for sustainable development that arrived in Darien, and on the other by Afro-descendent movements in the Caribbean and elsewhere in Latin America, some activists and community leaders came to focus

⁷⁸ See Hale (2011).

their efforts on black culture and ethnicity. *Afro-Darienita* emerged as a category for non-indigenous, non-colono natives of Darien.

The categories of Afro-Darienita and libre share in common an awareness of the histories of slavery and cimarronage that have shaped blackness regionally. Afro-Darienita—a form of identification that is still very much emergent—differs from the category of libre in the way it explicitly acknowledges blackness and positions itself as a Panamanian ethnicity. (In contrast, the category of libre exceeds the boundaries of the nation-state.) Afro-Darienita presents a double re-vindication of both being black Panamanian and being Darienita, from the frontier. It is worth noting that they identify as *Afro-Darienita*, not *Afro-Panamanian*. While the two categories are not mutually exclusive, Afro-Darientas put forth a *regional* identity that seems to me to be an invocation of the distinctly historical and aquatic specificities of Darien. Panama's census, for example, quantifies what they call the "afro population" into three ethnic categories: negro(a) colonial, negro(a) antillano(a), and negro, plus two indeterminate categories (other and undeclared). The category of Afro-Darienita (and libre, for that matter) might fall under "negro colonial" but also exceeds this construct in its place-based specificity. It also contrasts with the blanket term Afro-Panamanian that emerged at the end of the twentieth century and has been dominated in political usage by Antillanos, without foreclosing on the possibility of inter-black alliances.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This new identity marks a significant departure from previous constructions of blackness in Panama. Craft (2008) explains some of this history: In the times when mestizaje was the dominant nationalist ideology, roughly during the first half of the twentieth century, the nation-builders who had become obsessed with the purportedly Spanish traditions of the Interior attempted to erase the blackness of Spanish-speaking Afro-Colonials by classifying them as mestizos in the national census and

By positioning themselves as an ethnicity comparable to, for example, Emberá or Interioranos—especially considering the way practices such as dance, music and art are valued nationally as multicultural markers of “culture” and “tradition”— Afro-Darienitas maintain a distinct regional identity while also participating in the broader movement in Panama that seeks public recognition and valorization of blackness. For example, Magno and colleagues, along with school teachers and other community leaders, actively promote local participation in nationwide celebrations of blackness—such as the Month of Black Ethnicity held each May—by preparing public festivities in Darien. Afro-Darienita is also a transnational and diasporic form of identification— transnational in that people participate enthusiastically in black Caribbean popular culture (a broader trend throughout Panama), and diasporic in that Afro-Darienita activists cultivate a Black Atlantic sensibility and have been influenced by negritude movements in Cuba, Brazil and other parts of the Americas.

emphasizing their “Latin” culture. On their part, Afro-Colonials expressed cultural nationalism through Congo, a performative tradition associated with Carnival practiced by the descendents of runaway enslaved Africans. Meanwhile, English-speaking West Indians who worked in the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone were discursively distanced from Afro-Colonials and placed in a category of blackness that was perceived to threaten Panamanian nationalism, and were even denied citizenship rights in the 1940s. Part of this animosity towards West Indians stemmed from their ambivalent positions within the Canal Zone and within Panama. Jim Crow policies in the Canal Zone segregated *all* Panamanians as “black”, regardless of ethnicity, and in this way contradicted Panamanian racial hierarchies. At the same time, West Indians in the Canal Zone were privileged to a certain extent because they spoke English and made more money than Panamanians outside of the Canal Zone. Blackness became polarized. Afro-Colonials—libres in Darien included—were constructed as an assimilated ethnicity, while West Indians were an inassimilable race. Riots that led to the dismantling of the Canal Zone, and the U.S. invasion in 1989, resulted in terrible violence and deaths among both Afro-Colonials and Panamanian West Indians, and Craft argues that these anti-colonial nationalist struggles paved the way for reconciliation. Both groups have now come to represent Panamanian black ethnicity, as publicly recognized with the first celebration of The Day of Black Ethnicity in 2000, and the first Afro-Panamanian festival in 2006.

In the face of changes precipitated by the highway, Afro-Darienitas make territorial claims of Darien through the maintenance of a cultural center in Yaviza, folkloric dance groups, and the promotion of tourism that the re-paved highway is expected to bring. In their tourism efforts Afro-Darienitas seek out alliances with indigenous communities in Darien to develop hiking trails and directories of hotels and restaurants as a form “sustainable development.” Organizers—like Magno—have also posted colorful informational signs in Afro-Darienita towns and among old colonial ruins that remind people of their long occupation of the region and speak an idiom of cultural validation and rescue. Their territorial claims respond to the increased political and economic power of colonos from the Interior and indigenous Darienites. It is a way to retain citizenship rights extended to them under the assimilationist discourse of mestizaje, in a new context where the citizenship regime has shifted towards a multicultural discourse. At stake is being “lost” in this shift—in crafting this form of identification, Afro-Darienitas stand to gain visibility locally, nationally, and globally.

The process of integration that produced the Three Dariens took place over a period of time characterized by official discourses of multiculturalism. Just as multiculturalism did not erase the work of mestizaje but reconfigured ways of belonging such that, for example, indigenous Darienites became a multicultural ethnicity in Panama, highway Darien did not replace aquatic Darien, but rather reconfigured relationships within the region, between Darien and Panama, and between Darien and Colombia. In recognizing ethnic difference, state policy provided

differential treatment to colonos, Emberá and Wounaan, and Afro-Darientas, reinforcing ethnic and geographical segregations.⁸⁰ As in other colonization fronts in Latin America, integration is an inherently racializing process; it makes opportunities and advantages available to different groups of people, and reproduces national hierarchies of discrimination.⁸¹ Yet integration did not simply replicate the dominant, national order. Darien was not assimilated or converted into the Interior, not even in the highway area. Rather, the highway introduced a new order of things that sits alongside aquatic Darien. Neither did state policy alone produce this new social reconfiguration. Routes—in the form of kinship networks, political connections, migrations, traveling ideas, and pan-ethnic affiliations—also played a significant part in the emergence identities that are ethnic in the multicultural sense but that cannot be entirely differentiated from earlier racial identities. Together, the rivers and the road enabled territorial claims that gradually congealed into “three Dariens.” However, the rivers and road coexist uneasily, and the territorial claims that inscribe race and ethnicity onto place produce tensions that undermine what might otherwise be considered an established order of things.

⁸⁰ Horton (2006) makes this same point in the case of Bayano in the 1970s and 1980s, where a hydroelectric dam project (see Wali 1989) displaced colonos, Guna, and Emberá. The Bayano region is technically outside of Darien province proper, but in my view is a part of Darien, shaped by the same histories and migrations. Like other parts of Darien, Bayano was integrated by the highway, the influx of colonos from the Interior, and ranching and logging activities. When the area was flooded for the dam, the state relocation of Guna, Emberá and colonos into distinct, separate communities reinforced patterns of ethnic residential segregation that are characteristic of integration in Darien.

⁸¹ Whitten (1974) describes in Ecuador a comparable colonization front where “novel socio-political and economic arrangements” emerged; similar to Darien, blacks dominated regional brokerage positions but with the arrival of mestizo colonists began to be excluded from administrative and commercial positions. However, my research does not concur with Whitten’s conclusions about how colonization transposes white ethnic values into the frontier—colonos in Darien might have brought along their values and ways of doing things, but they did not entirely impose their ways onto the rest of Darien.

Tensions, Underminings and Possibilities

Thinking difference through riverways and the highway offers a way to think through what Charles Hale has called “the straightjacket of rights tied to particular cultural identities, bounded in a particular geographic space.”⁸² Migrations, translocal collaborations, trade relations, family networks, and other connections across space that might produce and rely on constructs such as the Three Dariens but also exceed the homogenizing reductions of neoliberal multiculturalism. It is worth bearing in mind that neoliberal subject formation is not absolute, and that identity and rights are only part of the story. The tensions between rigidified categories on one hand, and disorderly mixtures on the other hand point to other ways of crafting belonging and exclusion that persist despite the arrival of the state, multiculturalism, and neoliberal development in Darien. While Magno described pre-highway Darien as a *mondongo*, a *colono* who settled *after* the highway was built *also* described encounters across difference, though his choice metaphor was a *tuti-fruti*. Heterogeneity persists alongside categories congealed by neoliberal multiculturalism. This troublesome persistence, or excess, can be detected in inter-ethnic interests, land conflicts, and seasonal migrations that manifest along the rivers and the highway.

The March 2009 patron saint’s celebration in Yaviza, a town encoded as “black”, is illustrative of practices that cross the boundaries of the Three Dariens. I had been walking to mass with Señora Elisa when I struck up a conversation with a Colombian nun herding people towards the open-air shelter when the ceremony

⁸² Hale (2011:204).

would be held. “The fiesta is not so much about religion,” she said. “You’ll see, there will only be maybe four people at mass.” She explained that there was a lot of political campaigning because of the upcoming elections in May. The political parties were trying to win over voters by playing music and passing out free alcohol. “Because of this, too, the entire Emberá population has arrived, from the Tuira, Chucunaque and Chico rivers. And many also are already established here in Yaviza, because of the school. They’ve congregated for the fiesta. It was announced on the radio. They come to see the politicians, to see if they can make their petitions. The politicians send canoes to their communities. Gratuitous transport.”

An exuberantly happy man approached; he was introduced to me as an Emberá organizer, and he made sure to inform me “that this was *the first time in history* that there will be an Emberá party.” As part of Yaviza’s patron saint festivities, there would be a dance held with a live band playing típico, a kind of music and dance associated with colonos and national mestizo cattle culture. What was historic was that the dance was created by and for Emberás. Two nights later the fiesta was in full swing: the well-equipped stage featured an indigenous band and singer making the music associated with colonos and national popular culture; off to one side people dispensed Styrofoam cups of sancocho, the hearty stew often served at típico parties; the dance floor crowded with couples, mostly indigenous but also some Latinos as well as mixed Latino-Emberá couples. Leaving the scene, I saw more Emberá coming in the opposite direction, women stylish in parumas (the

lengths of cloth wrapped around their lower halves as skirts), jewelry, and maquiladora-made shirts.

For the Emberá organizer, the convergence of political campaigns and participation in national popular culture was a historic moment. The events of those days seemed to confirm their integration to the nation through electoral politics and also cultural consumption, even though it was set against the backdrop of a religious celebration that was a marker of libre or Afro-Darienita pride and love for homeland. Afro-Darienitas, however, took a more cautious stance in relation to the convergence of culture and politics during the celebration. Two nights before, soon after my first encounter with the happy Emberá organizer, I had stopped along the street to say hello to Magno and inadvertently interrupted a conversation he was having with a respected local schoolteacher and intellectual about the lack of organization in the community. “What is occurring right now with this celebration is not about culture, or tradition. It is politics,” he had been saying. Even though both indigenous and Afro-Darienitas have been incorporated into the nation through discourses of neoliberal multiculturalism, their politics take very different routes and generate discrepant kinds of preoccupations.

The Emberá party cannot be explained by mere cross-ethnic interest or a desire to win favors from elected politicians in exchange for votes. What might be explained as a form of neoliberal multiculturalism invested in maintaining the Three Dariens – indigenous citizens exercising their right to difference by partaking in a musical event that grants them status as separate-but-equal— actually takes a strange

route that crosses the boundaries of the Three Dariens, beginning with Emberá traveling from the rivers to “black” Yaviza, their partaking in mestizo culture, the dancing couples of mixed ethnicity, and ending with a sense of unease among some Afro-Darienitas about the way their traditional celebration was being repurposed. Interethnic interest both undermined and reinforced segregations. This is one—but not the only—consequence of integration.



Figure 34: “Welcome to Darien. Happy and friendly people.”

This sign along the highway is another example of interethnic collaboration that complicates the segregations of the integrated Three Dariens. Afro-Darienita and indigenous organizers working to develop tourism, Magno included, placed the sign

along the Pan American Highway at the entrance to the province in 2010. Though now faded by the sun, the Welcome to Darien sign is impossible to miss when entering the province by highway and dominates the roadside landscape in size and color. It repeats the welcome extended to travelers by the state-built arch over the highway, but with a difference. The sign prominently features Afro-Darienitas by displaying a folkloric dance group in full attire, gives a nod to indigenous Darienitas with the inclusion of an Emberá girl in traditional dress, and completely excludes any reference to colonos.⁸³ Afro-Darienitas waited for the highway but the highway never came to their communities. In response, they found a way to come to the highway—colono territory—asserting their presence with unsubtle signs. River Darien makes a place itself on the highway, claiming territory—claiming all of Darien, in fact—, disrupting the Three Dariens and pointing to future possibilities of black and indigenous alliances.

It is probably no surprise that land also constitutes a point of contention that disrupts the Three Dariens. The process of integration that produced this order creates and maintains boundaries not only within Darien, but also between Darien as a Panamanian space and Colombia. In conversations with indigenous and Afro-Darienitas, people would sometimes comment that *before, there was no border* (antes, no había frontera). Now, however, the category of foreigner (extranjero) has

⁸³ Afro-Darienita-colono relations are not characterized by violence, but they do not quite love each other either. One of the Afro-Darienita cultural center posters reads: “Between the black group and the immigrant peasant group from the west of the country (colonos) there exists a smaller degree of friendly, commercial, or ritual kinship relations [in comparison to indians]. There are few marriages between the two groups. There exist interests and cultural prejudices that generate light friction and little mutual trust between both groups.”

gained new currency. Señora Elisa, when telling me about the children of Darien and how in the old days Colombian holidays were celebrated, reflected on the change: “Here, anyone who wanted to could arrive and settle down. Now the foreigner is treated *badly*.” Currently the term “foreigner” in Darien carries the stigma of undocumented migration and consequently, of illegitimate land claims.

Chocoanos, the aquatic migrants from Colombia’s Choco province, have had a presence in Darien for at least sixty years but the Three Dariens render them invisible and out of place, especially along the highway. As I inquired about the origins of roadside communities, no colono ever mentioned Chocoanos except in whispers, even though they also lived in the area that the highway eventually passed through and contributed to the making of this place. Chocoanos have been erased from colono highway claims, but much to the consternation and resentment of colonos, Chocoanos are still there, living along the road. Despite not fitting into the order of the Three Dariens, Chocoanos nonetheless persist. The highway is full of Colombians.

Colono neighbors of Jaime Santander, a Chocoano who has lived in Darien for fifty-nine years, since the age of fourteen, whispered to me how “those people over there, they took a lot of land, and they’re not even Panamanian.” Meanwhile, Jaime continues to live out his life, now dedicating his time to baking bread in his little country store instead of farming, which he did before, and logging, which is what brought him to Darien in the first place. His adult son, who had been born of a union in Colombia, helps out in the roadside bakery. In contrast to Jaime he speaks

with a thick Chocoano accent; he had recently returned after being detained by Migración for not having papers. Jaime continues to mourn the passing of his libre wife (the baking is good because it distracts him, his son explained), with whom he set down roots along the highway before there was even a highway. I do not think they are going anywhere. Often, river Darien upsets highway Darien, precisely because they occupy a shared space.

Land conflicts, however, often turn violent when the Three Dariens don't stay in place. (Another way to say this is that the Three Dariens never did stay in place at all.) Parts of River Darien have been settled by Interioranos, albeit to a lesser extent than in the highway area, and their presence has generated trouble. For example, in Sambú, part of the Comarca Emberá-Wounaan, indigenous residents have been trying for years to remove colonos that, according to them, do not belong there. The colonos resist relocation, arguing that because they had settled in the area before the formation of the reserve in 1983, they had a right to remain on those lands. In March 2011, sixty-five colono families were displaced from their lands—to which they held possessory rights—in a violent encounter that resulted in bodily injuries, destroyed farms and agricultural fields, and lost, wandering livestock.⁸⁴ The conflict continues to simmer. A May 2013 televised interview of one of the displaced colonos and his

⁸⁴ “Sigue la tensión en Sambú, Darién,” TVN Noticias, Panama City, Panama (accessed on September 5, 2013 at http://www.tvn-2.com/noticias/noticias_detalle.asp?id=57737).

lawyer lays bare some of the rhetorical strategies used to undermine the order of the Three Dariens:⁸⁵

The colono, a Chiricano, explained to the news reporter: “We are the true corregimiento [a political-administrative unit] of Sambú. Sambú has more than one hundred years... We were given the name colonos because there were only afros [here]. The indígenas didn’t—there was only a certain number of indians. They were very few indígenas, true Chocoos. And now they are not Chocoos, now they are, eh, Colombians—I mean, eh...

“Emberá,” suggested the lawyer.

The colono nodded in agreement. “Emberá-Wounaan. Which in that time did not exist.”

The lawyer continued: “It gives the impression that it is a matter of a little republic inside the republic of Panama. I think that all of the citizens of this country within the national territory should submit themselves to the law and to the decision of the tribunals.”

The colono tried to authenticate their land claims by rooting colonos to a hundred year old history, implicitly colonial. He also tried to de-legitimize indigenous territorial claims by highlighting their Colombianness, drawing attention to their migratory routes, and even invoking “Chocoe,” an outdated term used to lump

⁸⁵ “Denuncian intención de desalojo de colonos en Sambú,” Telemetro (video clip), April 23, 2013, Panama City, Panama (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://video.telemetro.com/video/Denuncian-intenci%25C3%25B3n-de-desalojo-de-colonos-en-Samb%25C3%25BA/7405e6d7f76ab721b8b72a708acb9757>).

together Emberá and Wounaan into a single category. In this case, claims to rights based on ethnicity—indigenous claims—threaten colono privileges. In the interview, the colono deployed a nationalistic rhetoric to undermine the rights and order that the multicultural Three Dariens promises.

Conflicts also arise when River Darien comes to Highway Darien. The Comarca Emberá-Wounaan only holds a little over half of the population in the region; the remaining outliers struggle for collective land rights, resulting in protests but also on occasion confrontations that cost people their lives. For years now conflicts have broken out in the vicinity of Arimae, an indigenous community located on the highway. Some colonos and Afro-Darienitas have opposed the recognition of collective indigenous lands outside of reserves, invading lands occupied by Emberá and Wounaan. In response, Arimae residents often block the highway. Men, women and children crowd the street along with rocks, tree trunks, chains, and burning tires while the the elected community leader directs the event through a megaphone. The idea is to disrupt the lifeline along which people and commercial goods move in and out of the area. Before the roadblock, the organizers notify the police and local radio station of their intentions. Then the radio will announce the protest, including its start time and estimated duration, so that people may be aware of what they will encounter on the road. Traffic stops. Cars and trucks line up on both sides of the roadblock, unable to deliver foodstuffs to stores, cattle to auctions or slaughterhouses, and other kinds of business. Passengers and drivers roll down the windows, turn up the music volume, and make themselves comfortable for a long wait. Those riding public

transport must get off the bus once it reaches the roadblock, walk through the protest, and board another bus waiting on the other side. In colono towns, people comment the delays and inconveniences. Aside from pedestrians, no one can pass except for ambulances and other medical emergencies. Often, the goal is to enter dialogue directly with a government official from Panama City (they refuse to deal with Darien's elected representatives), and mediated by the Catholic bishop of Darien, though negotiations are often inconclusive.⁸⁶

The emergence of highway Darien might have precipitated interethnic territorial conflicts, but the highway reorientation also enabled pan-indigenous organizing at the national level. To influence government approval of new reserve lands in the 1990s, indigenous groups blocked transport along the Pan American Highway while the National Coordinator of Indigenous Peoples of Panama (CONAPIP) petitioned the national legislature, eventually leading to the establishment of a reserve for Bayano Guna just west of Darien province in 1996, and a reserve for Ngäbe in western Panama in 1997.⁸⁷ More recently, in 2012, roadblocks were organized throughout the country to challenge government plans for a copper mine and hydroelectric dam in Ngäbe-Buglé lands in western Panama. Despite internationally condemned police repression that resulted in several deaths,

⁸⁶ For some press accounts see José Arica, "Culpan a Milanés de conflict agrario," *La Prensa*, August 2, 2003 (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://mensual.prensa.com/mensual/contenido/2003/08/02/hoy/portada/1168038.html>); Isabel Castro, "Reabren vía Interamericana en Darién," *La Prensa*, July 26, 2011 (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://www.prensa.com/uhora/reabren-interamericana-en-darien/13461>); Isabel Castro, "Nadie atendió a emberás en Arimae," *La Prensa*, November 15, 2011 (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://www.prensa.com/impreso/nadie-atendio-emberas-en-arimae/39726>).

⁸⁷ Herlihy (2003).

indigenous Darienites also joined in, blocking the Pan American Highway in Darien as a gesture of solidarity with indigenous communities clear on the other side of the country.⁸⁸ While the multicultural rights may indeed limit political participation nationally by constraining indigenous authority to the local level, as has been documented in other Latin American contexts,⁸⁹ indigenous organizers in Darien have been able to use the highway (yes, by blocking it at times) to enter into dialogue with the state more directly and lobby for collective land rights, as well as bypass the state and forge pan-indigenous alliances. Neoliberal agendas indeed often complement the extension of territorial rights by enabling the emergence of ethnic identities, but it cannot fully control them.

Rivers and the highway also destabilize the order of the Three Dariens by structuring seasonal migrations. Some Emberá and Wounaan families, for example, relocate from their villages to towns like Yaviza or Metetí during the school year so that their children may continue their education beyond the basic years offered in their villages. Emberá and Wounaan also migrate to Panama City, along with Afro-Darienitas, and on the highway—especially since its rehabilitation in 2008—the trip can be made easily and frequently. Afro-Darienitas return to their hometowns from the city for annual patron saint festivals, Christmas and Easter. These festive days

⁸⁸ Ortiz and Reyes (2012), and Rodríguez (2012). Yalena Ortiz and Getzalette Reyes, “Indígenas aseguran que no se vendieron; piden el cese de protestas,” *La Prensa*, March 30, 2012 (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://www.prensa.com/uhora/locales/indigenas-aseguran-que-no-se-vendieron-piden-el-cese-de-protestas/77493>); Gabriel Rodríguez, “FIDH condena la represión de las protestas indígenas en Panamá,” *La Prensa*, February 8, 2012 (accessed on September 5, 2013 at <http://www.prensa.com/uhora/mundo/fidh-condena-la-represion-de-las-protestas-indigenas-en-panama/63521>).

⁸⁹ Hale (2011).

bring busloads of people from the city who take the road into Darien and then rivers to go home. The streets fill with people and noise, lined with stands selling t-shirts, caps, belts, movies, toys, hair accessories, watches and more, and makeshift food stalls smoking with the smell of fried fish and grilled meats. Music blares from enormous speakers. People dance in the street, stumble in and out of cantinas, make and lose money at the cockfights, and cheer for their team at soccer and basketball tournaments. Meanwhile, these same festive days empty colono towns of the majority of their inhabitants, who return if only for a few days to the Interior. The highway turns into a series of ghost towns, sad and lonely for those without the means to travel.

People just do not seem to stay put, and this undermines the idealization of the Three Dariens and the private-property, permanent occupation land regime it puts forth. Seasonal migrations aside, *everyone* in Darien has been classified, at one point or another, as transhumant. In contrast to European understandings of transhumance which usually refer to the seasonal migrations of livestock, transhumance in this context refers to the ability and affinity for picking up and moving, a kind of inconstancy that often gets criticized as lack of ties to the land—rootlessness. Many colonos sell their land, picking up and moving to a new location if a better opportunity presents itself, while indigenous and Afro-Darienitas carry the stigma of being unsettled, or being flexible in choosing and relocating their sites of residence and agriculture.

The rivers and the highway structure the movements of diverse resettlements, territorial extensions, and seasonal migrations. In the present climate of neoliberal multiculturalism in Panama, these routes generate rooting practices that seek rights and privileges from the state, without foreclosing on the ever-present possibilities of re-routing—not only in terms of relocating or migrating again, but also in terms of altering or reconstituting identities. Attention to these movements *in addition* to activities that are more recognized as political, such as roadblocks or petitions for a school, help us see how claims to distinct areas of Darien (roots), and the avenues through which these are possible (routes), shape and also interfere with each other. The categories of the Three Dariens, and the politicization of different groups of people since the building of the Pan American Highway, cannot be understood without taking into account the trajectories that both produce but destabilize this geography. Put differently, when Magno looked out onto the landscape that day on the mountain, he saw two systems of ethno-racial classification at work simultaneously. It is this perspective, I have argued, that allows us to account for practices of belonging and exclusion that cannot be subsumed by the categories produced by neoliberal multiculturalisms.

A history student at the University of Panama familiar with Darien practically laughed at me when I expressed my intention of obtaining census information and maps to make better sense of the region's population—"It's no use. People move around too much," he said. And in many ways it is true.

5. Rutas Internas – Internal Routes

Where colonos and non-colonos travel up and down the highway in minibuses, showing how borders are routes that produce difference along the way, and where the highway's entanglements with the landscape require drivers to navigate the road as if it were a river, connecting colonos to Darienita lifeways through movement itself.

Darien seems to reject certain forms of settlement. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Darien's charismatic location incited among rival European empires wild dreams of wealth and power through the extraction of resources, the extension of imperial territoriality, and the control of trade routes. In effect, however, this bridge acted more like a barrier. Its tropical forests, uneven topography, and fiercely autonomous inhabitants rejected European efforts at permanent settlement, and the handful of colonies established over the years were quickly abandoned. Colonization failed spectacularly. By the eighteenth century, Darien was a wilderness inhabited by unruly indians, former slaves, and outlaws. Nineteenth century expeditions in search of a canal route ended in disaster and death for French and American explorers. Twentieth century development efforts failed as well, after the Pan American Highway project was abandoned in 1977. In the current context of neoliberal governance, Darien lies in an "empty space of capitalism"—that is, a place

unimportant to Central America's newly globalized economy.¹ For related reasons many colonists continue to cycle through patterns of migration and displacement, contributing to an image of them as inconstant itinerants, contributing to an idea that Darien is settled with difficulty (by whom, though, is always a question).

Wilderness, gap, frontier, empty space—the grandiose plans that have tried to make Darien into a colonial, national, or capitalist *place* run into trouble here, working partially or tenuously at best. And yet, “the Darien Gap,” as the roadless space between Panama and Colombia is called in popular English-speaking media, does not make much sense when we think of the profuse histories and relations that characterize this historically global crossroads. The Spanish-language version, “el Tapón del Darién” (the Darien Plug), is slightly better. It acknowledges that there is something *there*, yet positions that *there* as an obstacle to progress. A more fitting epithet would be “el Nudo de Darién” (the Darien Knot), a phrase used in the 1960s by Panamanian anthropologist Reina Torres de Arauz as she led expeditions in search for the best route along which to build the Pan American Highway from Panama to Colombia.

This chapter takes up the idea that Darien is a knot—that is, constituted by pathways, or routes. I focus on Darien's internal routes, the local minibus service that links highway communities to each other, in order to rethink place not as a static destination but as a convergence and accumulation of movements always situated within a landscape, always becoming. The daily movement of buses and passengers

¹ Hale (2011).

along the internal routes constitutes Highway Darien by defining a space in many ways distinct from River Darien. While Chapter 4 discusses how ethnic and racial differences among colonos, indians and blacks are produced by migrations along the rivers and highway, this chapter considers how this difference—between colono and Darienita, Highway Darien and River Darien—is negotiated by colonos as they move along the road.

Movements along the internal routes create a collective space and time for colonos. Through practices of remembering, knowing and communicating in and around the buses that travel up and down the highway, they imagine a community exclusive of indigenous Darienitas, Afro-Darienitas, and Colombians. However, colono migration has not replicated the world of the Interior, and Panamanians often perceive colono culture in Darien to be impure, at the edge of what is properly Panamanian. Colonos have not quite Panamanianized Darien; they have become almost-Darienitas. Boundaries *and* indeterminacy, along with a lived sense of place, characterize this history.

Darien's internal routes inform larger questions about difference, sameness, and shared space. What happens after migrants settle in a new place? How do migrants negotiate their environment, structural, ideological, and natural? How do they change their new surroundings, and how do their new surroundings change them? What forms of interaction and survival take shape along the way? These questions have provoked a rethinking of political and social domains, including the

nation-state, where issues of citizenship, belonging, exclusion, and racism are at stake.

Studies of globalization, migration, and diaspora have addressed these questions through their response to what could be called the frontier paradigm, which assumes cultures are homogenous, and posits assimilation as the primary model for cultural change. From this perspective, regions or places are defined by what lies inside or outside an enclosure. Scholars such as James Clifford, in contrast, focus on the routes that transgress these enclosures.² They argue that culture is created through encounters across difference rather than through imperial expansions. In this borderlands paradigm, which includes work on contact zones and transnational networks, movement constitutes (rather than extends) cultural meaning. However, this approach tends to assume that separation and travel precede encounter, and that the action, or meaning-making, takes place at the “end points” of movement, whether a point of origin or a destination. Sites of encounter like museums take analytical precedence over the movements that constituted those places to begin with. Rather than focus on how routes produce meaning in contact zones, my analysis focuses on how routes produce meaning all along the way. I argue for a shift in perspective from the end points or results of connection, to the processes that occur *during* movement itself.

This shift implies a reformulation of place. Rather than define places by their edges, borders, or contact zones, I suggest we think of places as messy bundles of

² Clifford (1997).

routes.³ These routes do not connect points across abstract space—they move *through* and *with* the landscape.⁴ Routes define a place not with a line around its perimeter but by producing areas of intensity through accumulating lines of movement. Situated in the landscape in such a way, routes are assemblages. As colono navigation practices along the internal routes will illustrate, more-than-human agencies play a role in shaping the routes that constitute place. Also critical to this reformulation of place is the multiplicity of routes—places are not constituted by a single line of movement but rather by many travels, migrations, and displacements that do not necessarily follow the same spatial orientation. In Darien, for example, colono migratory routes integrated Darien to Panama, but their internal routes also integrated colonos to the local landscape. Darien might have become a little more Panamanian, but colonos also became a little more Darienita. These routes, however, do not produce hybridity or assimilation. Colonos rarely identify as Darienita, opting more often to identify by home province, and neither do they cultivate an identity distinct from other Interioranos living throughout Panama. Rather, there is simultaneity.

Despite their indeterminacy, places constituted by routes—knots—do have boundaries. In a space shared by different social groups, who gets included, who gets excluded, and how everyone gets along will always be points of contention and negotiation. Colono internal routes constitute Highway Darien to the exclusion of

³ This reformulation builds on the work of Tim Ingold, who argues that places “are delimited by movement, not by the outer limits of movement” (2011:149). See also Mol and Law’s (1994) notion of fluid space as distinct from regions and networks.

⁴ Ingold (2011) makes this point when drawing a distinction between wayfaring *through* a landscape and transportation from “point A” to “point B”; landscape archaeologist Bender (2002:104) also reminds us that “human interventions are not done so much *to* the landscape as *with* the landscape.”

Darienitas and Colombians, and these relations are informed by regimes of inequality that operate at larger scales. But how to address power and difference if places are defined not only by the structures that determine insides and outsides, but by multiple forms of movement? Attention to the ways routes accumulate offer one point of entry. Highway Darien is composed of the movements of colonos and Darienitas through the landscape, over time. Although these routes may converge and accumulate, the circulation of colonos along the internal routes—routes upon routes—amplifies colono memories while obscuring Darienita memories. In other words, memories are the traces that past routes leave in the landscape, and these are activated or deactivated in ways that highlight the relationship between movement, knowledge, and its transmission through space and time.⁵ Dependent on repetition and accumulation, the inequalities that characterize Darien are continually reconstituted as bodies move up and down the highway along the internal routes.

Movement, Knowledge, and Memory

“Can you grab that for me?” Zeferino asked in an unmistakable Santeño intonation. He pressed the brake pedal and maneuvered the minibus to the side of the road, where his wife stood holding out a plastic shopping bag containing a few oranges and a tamal. From my passenger seat I leaned out the window as the vehicle slowed, took the bag, and put it in the space between the two front seats. “That’s my farm, right back over there” he pointed, as we sped away. “I came here with nothing,

⁵ On the relationship between performing, remembering and knowing place, see Basso (1996).

and now I have a house, fifty beasts, *and* my own chiva. This route is a good one,” he said, referring to the passenger service he offered to the communities between Metetí and Yaviza.

An unofficial symbol of the nation, *chivas* are minibuses that provide local transportation to rural populations in Panama.⁶ In Darien, chivas careen up and down the highway connecting colono communities to each other. All together, these are called the *rutas internas*, or internal routes. Colonos take chivas to go to work or school, run errands, buy things at the store, visit someone, or go to church or a party. Chivas on the internal routes are for getting around, not to get in or get out of Darien (there are other buses for that, on what is called the Panama-Darien route). Taking turns with the other chivas in the transport cooperative, Zeferino drives from Metetí to Yaviza and back four or five times a day, stopping to pick up passengers wherever they may be found along the road.

⁶ Chivas were first used in the 1950s in Panama City. Sociologist Raúl Leis has suggested that their name comes from the mid-century Indian bus drivers who placed images of Shiva on their buses (Educa Panamá, “Los Diablos Rojos, Cultura Panameña Popula,” Ministerio de Educación, 2013, accessed November 15, 2013 at <http://www.educapanama.edu.pa/articulos/los-diablos-rojos-cultura-paname%C3%B1-popular-rodante>).

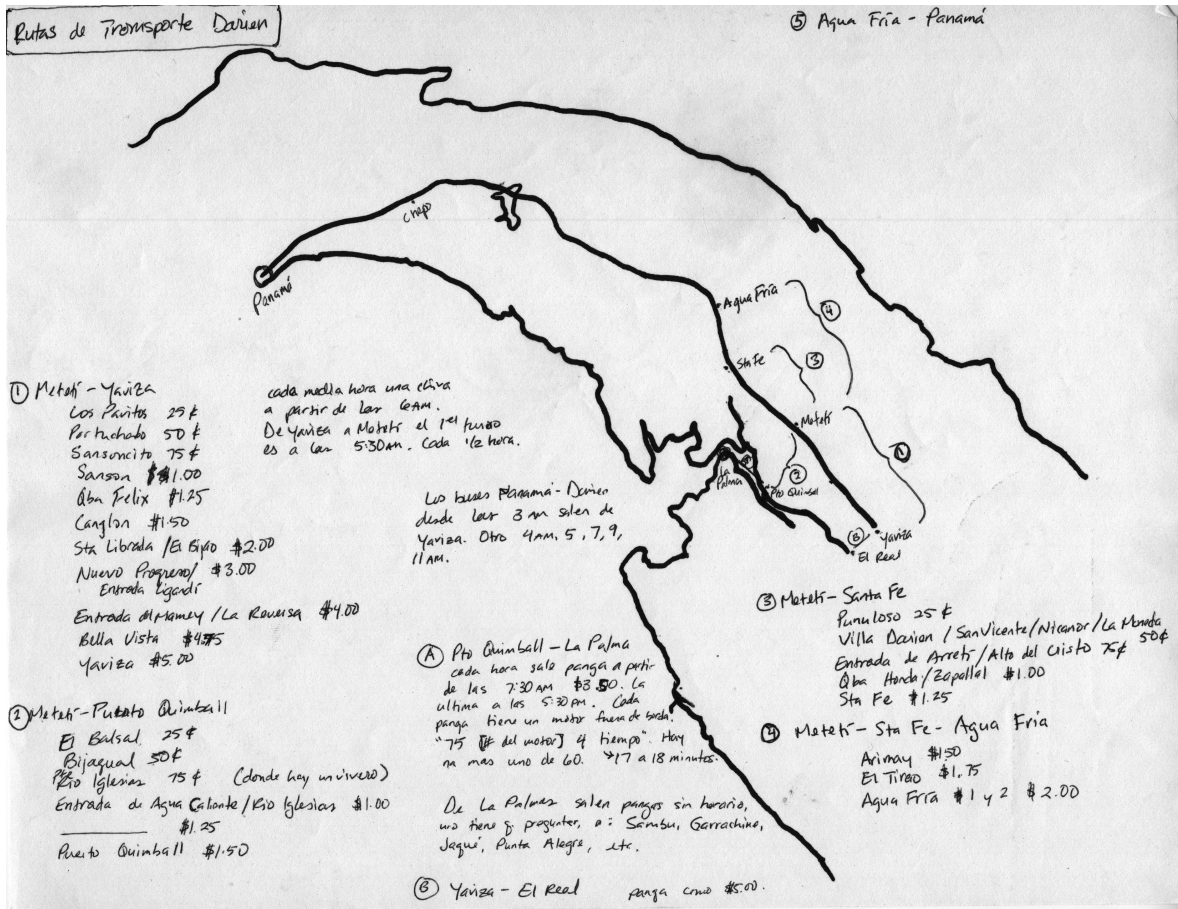


Figure 34. Internal Routes, drawn in collaboration with chiva drivers

Through these movements, chivas create a collective sense of space and time among colonos. The constant accelerations and stops—you always want to be on the lookout for more passengers—let people sitting inside actually see what goes on outside. Unlike automobile travel on an expressway, or railway travel for that matter, where the landscape outside melts into a kaleidoscopic blur that constantly escapes the passengers' gaze, chivas mediate a different relationship to the landscape, one

characterized by familiarity rather than distance.⁷ Passengers are able to take good, long looks through the windows at the numerous and unpredictable stops, and even in between stops, the chivas do not travel so fast that passengers cannot take in the view. Through these windows, visual apprehension of the landscape reaffirms the presence and expansion of colonos and their cattle culture. Placidly grazing cattle, brightly painted wooden or cement houses, and the ubiquitous banners announcing colono dances, cantaderas (oral poetry competitions), and matanzas (meat parties to celebrate a special occasion) are familiar sights. Place names like Nuevo Bijao and Santa Librada, and storefront or restaurant signs like “Brisas de Tonosí” hearken back to the communities in the Interior from which colonos migrated, and illustrate how colono territorial claims are visibly inscribed along the road.

The sights are familiar not only because they belong to a shared cultural repertoire among colonos. They are familiar also because the colonos know exactly to whom the fields belong to, who is adding a room to their house, and whose birthday the matanza that Sunday will celebrate. Chivas facilitate this knowledge, this awareness, by physically moving colonos up and down the road, and by keeping them in touch with one another. This form of communication is notable, considering colono migration patterns—people rarely come to Darien without beforehand having a relative or friend already established, but people migrate into Darien from at least five other provinces, and countless districts and towns. While immediate neighbors may be connected through kinship or *compadrazgo* networks, and may generally hail

⁷ On the blurred and distant landscapes of railway travel see Schivelbusch (1980).

from the same town or district of origin, people farther down the road, or in the next community over, or in the one after that, could come from a completely different place, with a completely different social network. The internal routes hold migrant communities with different geographical origins together, stringing along networks of relations, putting them into communication with each other.

This happens through more than visual signs—colonos enact and inhabit a “Highway Darien” feeling by actually riding around, socializing not just between communities, but also inside the moving vehicle. “Did you hear about the accident last night?” Zeferino turned for a second to glance meaningfully at his secretary. On busy days the secretary, usually a boy or young man, helps the driver by collecting fare, giving change, helping passengers with packages, opening and shutting the sliding side door, looking out for new passengers outside, and calling out the destination at the bus stops.

“What? What happened?” Bolívar, who was born in Darien but whose parents came from Chiriquí, was intrigued.

“Chemo Gutierrez drove his car into a ditch. Had to pull it out with a tractor.”

Another man’s voice chimed in from a few seats back: “We were playing pool together at the cantina last night. He won a lot of money... You know how he is.”

“Well, he’s going to need that money now” someone else added.

“I’m done with drinking. Fed up. Haven’t had a pint since New Year’s.” Zeferino shook his head, resigned.

Suddenly—“Aguanta aguanta aguanta aguanta aguanta! [Hold on!]” The secretary spotted a woman waiting under the shade of a tree. Bodies lurched forward as Zeferino applied the brakes. As soon as the woman climbed on she greeted everyone with a general “buenas.” She spotted a friend near the back and plopped down next to her with a “And your tooth?” and the chatter continued until one of them reached her destination. Stories, news, and gossip circulate along the internal routes as people get on and off. They provide an important service beyond transport, considering the distances otherwise and by other means of travel (i.e., by foot, bicycle or horse), and considering the cost of telephone minutes. While a ten minute mobile call costs as much as \$1 at the time of writing (and considering a day of labor pays \$6), that same \$1 yields 30-40 minutes of time in a chiva, and opportunities to communicate with many more people during that time. Chivas create an imagined community out of the scattered villages and houses along the highway, and out of colonos hailing from different provinces and hometowns, by putting the communities in communication with each other.



Figure 35. Chiva and other street happenings on an afternoon in 2011

Chivas are intimate spaces. During rush hour Zeferino really packs them in. Intentionally or not, bodies press and brush against each other. Smells of shampoo, sweat, and breath intermingle. “Mami, give me the chichi,” someone will invariably say to the woman standing in the aisle struggling to keep her balance while holding a baby. And the baby will be passed down, changing hands until it reaches the lap of whomever made the request. This intimacy and familiarity contribute to the flexibility of routes and schedules, as chivas routinely take detours to accommodate elderly passengers, make deliveries, and run other kinds of errands on behalf of colonos. The movement, the bodies swaying in unison, the music, the gossip, the scenery sliding

past, altogether create for colonos a space and time familiar in its irregularity, familiar in the sense of being amongst family and friends, that creates, to its own rhythm, a shared experience of colonos-in-Darien.

I traveled frequently on the internal routes, sometimes out of necessity to reach particular locations, and oftentimes just to go along for the ride, meeting the driver early in the morning at the bus terminal, and remaining with the chiva as it drove back and forth until the late afternoon, when the internal routes cease to operate. On these rides, Zeferino and Bolívar would often see things outside that triggered memories that percolated up in no particular order, in no particular relation to each other. They told me about a tunnel in a mountain near Bella Vista that has a wooden door with a big lock on it that no one can break, from colonial times, made by Spaniards. They think it has an exit somewhere nearby. But who knows what's inside—weapons, even gold maybe. On the Filo del Tallo mountains the United States put up pyramids—radars—years ago, but they are no longer functioning. Well, the U.S. is no longer in the area. It pulled out (of Darien? Of the Canal Zone? Of Panama?), but at night sometimes you can still see the lights up there. We cross a river and Bolívar teaches me a saying: *el que toma sopa de guanuco no se va del Darién*. Whoever eats guanuco soup, made of a fish said to be ugly but tasty, will not leave Darien. Darién es un crisol de razas, a kaleidoscope of races. Sansón is a community from the Interior. Santeños and Herreranos. Chiricanos, too. Zeferino remembers how he used to go from his house to school on the highway, riding a bike. They both reminisced about having to wear “sandal” when they were young, a rustic

kind of shoe with a thick sole that no one really liked to wear. Over here, Zeferino pointed, I used to hunt for parrots.

Though disparate, historical, anachronistic, mysterious and mundane, they follow the line of the internal routes that collect, accumulate and string along memories, affects, and knowledges. These are not random associations. These stories tell of where they come from and who they are, and how colonos locate themselves in the histories of empire, nation and region. Moving prompts remembering through the bodily reproduction of routes, creating new memories, making place in what would otherwise be an unfamiliar land with unfamiliar people. The internal routes give form and order to colonos' world—their place in region, nation, and globe—not by delimiting perimeters but by moving up and down the road, creating a collective space and time, calling up histories accumulated in the landscape that, if not always verbally articulated, nonetheless find expression through the daily passage of bodies that sway and jostle together as they move up and down the road.

Borders are Routes

“Chava!” The chiva was careening down the road, and it slowed only slightly as it passed a young indigenous man waiting at the bus stop. Bolívar dangled his body out the open door, yelling “Chava! You going to Yaviza?” (Chava, “friend” in Emberá, is a term used by colonos to refer to or address indigenous Darienites.) It didn't help that the chiva was in motion and the young man was jogging along trying to keep up. “Yaviza!” yelled Bolívar. “I'm going to have to talk to him in Emberá so

he understands,” he muttered to no one in particular. The vehicle slowed enough so the young man could hoist himself up and inside. He sat near the back, next to a window—inside but not *of* the internal routes, colono space-time.

Highway Darien is a messy bundle of routes that produce a space colonos can call home. However, it is not a bubble or enclave; its borders are not located along edges or perimeters, but rather built into the route itself. Those who are “other” to colonists face segregations, exclusions and erasures even as they travel upon the same internal routes, whether they live along the highway or rely on highway to get to the rivers and other kinds of homes. These exclusions may be informed by histories, discourses and pre-existing prejudices, but they are enacted and brought to life as different kinds of people move up and down the road, through the daily interactions, aggressions and slights. The road, not their communities, is where colonos most often encounter their others, those on their way to River Darien. Difference is produced along the way.



Figure 36. Inside a Darien chiva. Much thought goes into ornamentation: religious images and prayers for protection, purple fluff for a little glamour, pine tree air fresheners for the comfort of passengers, and a miniature hammock in blue and white, the colors of Veraguas, a province of the Interior.

Borders also manifest outside the chiva, along the landscape of communities the internal routes string along. What to *call* a community, how to define it in relation to others, is often a source of contention, precisely because Highway Darien is composed of routes that are not only different, but unequal. Consider three contrasting accounts of how one village called Zapallal got its name.

According to Magno Mendez, the afro-Darienita who works to promote locally-controlled tourism in river communities, the land that came to be called Zapallal was worked—made habitable—by his family:

See how things are? We used to live there, and we don't own it. Like the school in Zapallal. You know that my uncle Manuel opened up those

lands. All of that was jungle. Then he went and knocked down all those trees to plant rice and corn. But he went to Colombia. And he stayed there, and the lands stayed here. Then the people [colonos] came, invaded, and finally segregated a piece for the school.

The schoolteacher at Zapallal, a woman who migrated to Darien from Chiriquí, has a different version of events, one that she keeps typed up at the school but that she recounted to me from memory the day I visited her home:

The history begins with the first dweller that came here, Mr. Jaime Santander, a Colombian. He came here with his family. Then came Mr. Armando Cabrera, who is indigenous. Now the story really begins. The community had three names. It goes like this: when they opened up the trail to make the road, there was no name for this community. Then Armando Cabrera, who is Emberá, killed a cow. He took the carcass and put it over there at the entrance. Then, when the trucks would come, the first ones, the driver would ask, “Where should I drop you off?” “At the cow’s head.” That’s why this community was called Cabeza de Vaca [Cow Head]. After that, when there were more people [colonos] here, the community began with an evangelist. He had a church here and named the community Pueblo de Dios [People of God]. That was the second name. Then a teacher came here from Herrera. A few of them wanted to make a stew one day, but there weren’t any vegetables around. He said, “We’re going to name this place Zapallal, you hear, because there isn’t a single zapallo [squash] to be found here.” And that’s the name we have today.

So far, so good. Several beginnings. The first, a black Colombian family and an indigenous man (did he not have a family?). This is not a real beginning though—no name for the place, at least no name appropriate or substantial enough to be considered a “stop” along the internal routes. The real beginning begins when Armando Cabrera placed a cow’s head along the side of the road (but why would he do such a strange thing?). Then again, the schoolteacher seems to imply, this was not a real real beginning. The cattle evident in the landscape are a start, then the

evangelists brought them a step closer with the introduction of God. The final act of establishing the community was the making of a stew, a social event where food is prepared often collectively and shared among family, neighbors, and friends. Like the stews they make in the Interior, but with a difference—no zapallos. According to this version, the name of this community shaped by indigenous, Colombian and colonists routes, marks two forms of difference—the difference between the Interior, with presumably abundant zapallos, and Darien, with its lack of zapallos; and the difference that was erased, that of Magno’s uncle Manuel, Jaime Santander, and Armando Cabrera. Cattle, God, and vegetables, for the colono schoolteacher, made the community. The chiva driver needs you to tell him *where* you want to get off—a name, understandable, legible: Zapallal, not “over there where Magno’s uncle Manuel used to live.”

Amilcar Santiago, who lives in the next town over, offered a different version of events:

The town’s true name was put by a cholo named Cholo Cabrera. The name he put was Cabeza de Vaca. Why? Cholo Cabrera had—back over there where there is a school, over there—some cows. In those days [he chuckles] some people [colonos] arrived there and put up a sign that said “People of God.” Religious people. And they didn’t get along with Cholo Cabrera. They were the worst of enemies. One day Cholo Cabrera got up, killed a cow, skinned it, put a stake right there in its head and put it there by the road. Then he took some ink (he had seen the other sign that said People of God) and wrote at the entrance to the town, “People... [he paused for dramatic effect] *of the Devil.*”

Santiago is a skillful storyteller and he gave us time to have a laugh. Then:

It was only six, seven years ago that they changed the name to Zapallal because there came also some other people from the Interior that planted a

lot of zapallo in there. One day, around three in the afternoon, the hardest working transporter around here, who was named Enrique Hernandez (he died) came on his tractor from Panama City. He found some huge piles of zapallo there by the road. He asked the people, “Well then, what do you plan to do with this zapallal [field of squash]? And they said, “That’s the name we’re going to put here. Zapallal.

For Santiago, the first name of the community is Cabeza de Vaca—a gruesome expression of the often bitter conflicts over land brought about by the influx of colonos on the highway. Silva and Magno point to how these other histories of movement might be obscured but not destroyed by the internal routes, their repetitions, layerings, and activations of memory, their requirements of place-names. The contrasting origin stories of Zapallal make clear the stakes in naming a place so that it is a part of the internal routes—inclusion and exclusion, the production of borders and difference. The borders are made through struggles over what to call this site, out of the necessity of having to tell the chiva driver *something* to identify your stop along the internal routes, to place it among the other communities. Difference is produced through movement—Magno’s uncle who went away, the evangelists that subsequently came, then other colonos, the chiva and truck drivers absolutely essential to the stories. Borders did not exist (in the same way) before these different actors embarked on their movements; they came about along the way.

Tensions over who gets to belong on Highway Darien also manifested in 2008 and 2009 as the final section of the highway was being rehabilitated and paved. The company contracted to do the work was Colombian, and colonos weren’t too happy about this. Because of the contentious history of Panama’s separation from Colombia (the history of the Panama Canal), nationalist sentiments are often defined against

their former state. In Darien, the mistrust of Colombians is compounded by the history of undocumented migration from Chocó, and by incidents in which the FARC guerrilla has kidnapped colonos for ransom.

Zeferino was carefully steering the chiva through a huge pile of softball-sized rocks. Nearby, men in orange vests moved machines and tools around, tending to the road. A dump truck had just added its contents to the pile of gravel and the driver, a colono, got out and came to the chiva. Zeferino leand out of his driver's side window and the two chatted in hushed tones.

Meanwhile, Bolívar nudged me conspirationally. "You see that guy over there?" He pointed to a light-skinned man in a black cap and sunglasses, holding a clipboard. Colombian, and in charge. "That's the engineer. We call him El Zorro."

"How come?"

"Oh, I don't know... it's just a little name we have for him."

Zeferino's gossip session over, he continued the slow and careful traverse through the construction site. No one seemed to mind the unplanned stop, but Bolívar was getting worked up, seeing the roadwork. "The amount of material they've thrown on it. They even put cement on it. Do you understand? Cement!" He shook his head in disbelief. I looked over at Zeferino and he was vigorously nodding.

"Cement?" I repeat.

"Cement. See, first they put a base." Bolívar gestured toward the gravel visible through the window. "Then they put a plastic mesh. Like those cyclone fences, just like that. But instead of a metal fence, they put a plastic one, on the road.

Then they mix dirt with cement and throw it on. People say it's unnecessary. They do so many things like that to the road." He stopped to give a passenger change and let him off the chiva. "People complain. Why are they putting cement? Why did they put that plastic mesh? Cement! And it wouldn't be more than fifteen days of rain, and it would go back to how you see it now. They would just keep putting layers and layers. Sometimes it seems illogical, doesn't it?

"Oh! And just so you know," Zeferino added, "that money for the road is money lent by the Inter-American Development Bank. That means we Panamanians have to pay that money back, no? In taxes. So that means that they have to be checking the quality of that road. The Ministry of Public Works as much as that bank."



Figure 37. The controversial cement, 2009

Difference is built into the road itself. The presence of Colombian road engineers traveling up and down the highway, checking it, building it, activates an acute nationalism among colonos. Machinery operators, truck drivers, and work crews, comprised mostly of colonos, give Colombian engineers a hard time, if not through outright challenges to their authority, through gossip, feet dragging, and other “weapons of the weak.” One engineer put it this way: “The problem is that they [the colonos] are peasants, not workers. That’s why it’s so difficult... That and the fact that there is nothing to do around here.” Chief engineers keep quitting, he told me. One lasted a week, and one lasted just one day. “I didn’t come here to civilize these people,” he said before leaving. At least, that’s what people say. Word gets around, you know.

Borders—in this case between Panamanian and Colombian, national and foreign—take shape through the encounters of people in transit, tracing routes with the movements of chivas, trucks and machinery. If colono time-space is not an enclave, neither is it a hybrid third space. Borders come about from the convergence of different kinds of routes, and the tensions and negotiations that ensue.

Navigating the Highway

After two years on Darien’s road, driving to unfamiliar locations without someone accompanying me was still difficult. *Go to Bijao and talk to Mario Pimentel. Tell him I sent you.* I drove, searching for the green house across the street from the coconut palm, somewhere between the bridge and the “Hermanos Rodríguez” store.

Uh oh—the entrance to the quarry. I went too far. Turn around, drive back. Where’s that palm tree? Went too far again. Turn back. How is it possible to get lost on the only road around?

Driving, you don’t see things—houses, side streets, stores, other buildings—until you’re right there in front and already driving past. If you drive too slowly people think there’s something wrong. But driving at normal speed, say, 40 miles per hour at least, is too fast. Once you spot people sitting in a porch, people who can give you directions to where you need to go, you’ve already driven past. Slamming the brakes is just as uncool as slowly creeping past.

Looking down the road, it is hard for me to see things other than the long straight line of yellow-gray road, a not-too-tall mess of green on either side, and big sky above. From this vantage point you can see the occasional cement bus stop, and in places without water big plastic barrels along the road waiting for the cistern truck (that’s one way to know there are homes nearby). The landscape is recalcitrant. Blurs, things hidden. It makes you think there’s nothing there, just flat grassy fields or rolling hills, glimpses of hammocks under mango trees, once in a while a school. Nothing, really. But of course, there are hundreds of houses facing the highway in some places three-deep, full of people inside, with yards full of chickens and dogs, and pastures, and somewhere back beyond what you can see from the road, fields planted with ñame, rice, yuca, corn, and what remains of forest. Local knowledge is necessary, but it’s not enough for someone to simply tell you. Instructions like “go to the green house across from the coconut palm” do limited good.

Reading the highway is impossible. It's more about sensing— I think that house was right... over... here. Yes. Buenas, Señora Emilia, I came to visit. Scholars have noted how modern projects use the landscape to give ruling ideas their form, naturalizing them as part of the topography.⁸ The *rutas internas*, however, are not readable in this way, showing how technology and culture are not superimposed on a terrain without frictions, contestations, and other sorts of input. Colonos often describe the road as a *cut*, invoking memories of how it was not too long ago—walls of tangled green on either side, deer and other wildlife wandering into the open road only to become targets for hunters. Edenic romanticizations aside, the cut of the road could be “read” as a symbol of nationalist export-based development ideas prevalent at the time, with its artificial straightness, straight to the point: get to the resources, get them out. But the way people speak of the road emphasize its unnaturalness. They make sure to note its straightness, can tell you precisely where along the route you will encounter one of the few curves, know where each and every bridge is located. The meanings and effects of the road are better understood as the co-production of human and nonhuman assemblages. Meaning is not inscribed into the landscape—rather it accumulates and layers through the passage of bodies always moving *with* the surrounding environment, whether through collaboration, conflict, or something else.

⁸ Schama (1995:17); see also Rollins (1995) on how the German *Autobahn* came to be considered a successful embodiment of Nazi ideology in large part because of its environmentally-conscious landscaping—the curves and lines of the highways were carefully designed to fit and hug the terrain, blending in with the lay of the land all the better with native plants strategically placed along its edges and median.

It was inside chivas and taxis where I learned the most about the internal routes and the ways colonists come to belong to an unfamiliar land. Moving along with others, I learned to deal with the dust from the road by avoiding black clothing and wearing a cap to cover my hair, to pay attention to rough spots—the critical points—and their condition on any given day, to talk about them. (How’s that bad spot over in Canglón? Oh, I was there yesterday. It’s pretty bad. Trucks only. Wait a couple of days to see if it dries a bit.) With chiva drivers, improvised games where I had to memorize community boundaries and recognize their landmarks. More important were landmarks such as bus stops, access trails, trees, rivers, schools, cantinas, churches, exceptionally large houses. With Lenín, I learned to make sure he sat next to a window, in case he had to throw up from the motion sickness that inevitably churned his stomach.

“...you know, near that church on the hill.”

“What hill?”

“The hill that divides San Vicente from La Moneda.”

“Huh?”

“The hills. Don’t you feel them?” A sigh. “I’ll show you. There’s a few more coming up.”

Some scribbling.

In contrast to the modern fantasy of a uniform highway that does not require local knowledge to travel, the rutas internas are composed of daily movements that

creat local knowledge and memory. A Highway Darien kind of feeling comes about, on the internal routes, through sensations, impressions, techniques, and habits.

From a frontier perspective, colonists civilized Darien by claiming private property, founding communities, planting rice and corn, and making cattle pastures on either side of the highway. But they have also incorporated themselves into the regional landscape, though perhaps in ways they never expected. Like navigating a river, navigating the highway in Darien requires a particular kind of knowledge. Not anyone can be a motorist and steer a canoe or boat through Darien's rivers. Motorists need to know about the river underneath the surface of the water to prevent the canoe from running into sand or flipping over. This knowledge is only acquired through practice, by navigating the river over and over again, not for days, but for weeks, months, even years. Because the currents and contours of the river are constantly changing, river navigation requires not only years of knowledge, but constant travel as well. Only by repeatedly traveling on the river, without allowing too much time to go by in between, can the motorist be successful.

Likewise, driving on the highway without ruining a car or truck, and without taking too much time, is difficult. The highway is full of holes ranging from small to enormous. There are parts with asphalt, there are parts with gravel and dirt, and there are parts that look like the moon. When it rains, there are parts deep with mud. As new holes are patched up and repaired, other ones appear. The surface of the highway, and its transibility, constantly changes. A driver needs to know this. A successful driver, one who makes it through without bursting a tire, getting stuck in

mud, or scraping the bottom of the vehicle, is not an occasional driver. Like the river, the highway requires the motorist to know the bumps along the way, and know how they constantly change.

Subject to environmental and climatic forces, the highway is not an isolated route but rather embedded in a landscape dense with histories and relations. Colonists might like to think of themselves as distinct from those who live beyond the highway area, indigenous and afro Darienites, for whom rivers structure daily life. But the assemblages that hold Darien together as a region require colonists to notice and know things in ways similar to their riverine counterparts. Colonists come to belong to an unfamiliar place, whether they want to or not, by the way the *move* through the landscape. Through routes, Darien has claimed the *colonists*, drawing them into a world where even roads must be navigated like rivers. In contrast to state development planners, who through the Pan American Highway attempted to shape Darien into a resource extraction frontier, the bodies moving through the region's dense forest of relations produce other kinds of places, linked to, but not entirely absorbed by capitalist and colonialist designs.

The internal routes help to understand places as messy bundles of routes. Anthropologists continue to work to de-center the notion of cultures as bounded wholes with discrete territories in favor of transnational frameworks that foreground encounters across difference and hybrid formations that transgress borders. And yet, often the focus is on the encounters that occur either where a route begins or where it

ends. From this perspective, places are defined by their edges and borders. Instead, I have argued for a shift in attention away from beginning and end points, and away from the boundaries of movement, to the in-between—to the practices of movement itself. This is anthropology on the road (and I mean this both figuratively and literally), an anthropology of what happens along the way.

This approach prompts a reconceptualization of place. Place is constituted by multiple forms of movement. These are not movements through abstract space, nor are they movements simply *across* a terrain. Rather, they are movements through landscape that necessarily engage the surrounding environment. Routes cannot be disentangled from the terrain through which they travel, and together these messy assemblages make and unmake place.

6. Ruta Panama-Darién – The Panama-Darien Route

Where highway checkpoints control mobility by redirecting unofficial movements away from the highway and into the forest and waters, showing how the Panamanian state works to maintain categories of difference between citizen and foreigner while it also exploits the ambiguity of this differentiation, and showing how integration is imbricated with national discourses of security, they articulate with a hemispheric drug war project.

States are fundamentally concerned with the control of movement. Mobile populations are often the targets of state projects of sedentarization.¹ States monopolize the legitimate means of movement through national territory through identification cards, passports, and other kinds of documentation.² The movements of migrants and vagrants are often considered a threat to national stability and order, revealing how liberal discourses of mobility as a universal freedom actually depend on citizenship.³ The management of mobility is central to state efforts to create and maintain social order. In Darien, people who chose to move in and out of the region along the highway—in private vehicles, taxis, or large buses that transport passengers along what is called the Ruta Panama-Darién, connecting the bus terminal in Panama

¹ Scott (1998).

² Torpey (2000).

³ Cresswell (2006).

City to the end of the road at Yaviza—routinely encounter state power at checkpoints that inspect the legitimacy of vehicles and passengers moving through.

Checkpoints are technologies of state control. They perform a key function of the state because legitimate movement through national territory depends on the classification of that which moves—as citizen or non-citizen, documented or undocumented migrant, threat or non-threat, here to stay or just passing through. Mobility, belonging, and the securities that states promise implicate one another. Subjects are shaped in transit. Often located at international political boundaries but also distributed along transit routes to and from such boundaries, checkpoints are where ideas about who gets to belong, who does not belong, and how they should be treated are applied. Borders manifest as people and things move *through*.

If checkpoints are where state power over mobility becomes the most apparent, they also reveal the vulnerability of the state. State actors cannot possibly know and see everything, and often work to produce official knowledge through intransparent negotiations.⁴ States are often assumed to work by “seeing” and controlling, by creating a grid of legibility in which actors may be easily located.⁵ But the checkpoints located along the Ruta Panama-Darién show how states can also work by not-seeing, not-knowing, and not-controlling. Rather than establish security and certainty—a grid of legibility—checkpoints and related policing activities produce uncertainty and insecurity, suggesting that state power works through indeterminate, unstable categories and that what is unknown may be just as relevant

⁴ Matthews (2011).

⁵ Scott (1998).

to this power as what is known. While they might seem to be a concentration of state power, checkpoints in effect distribute bordering processes (e.g. distinguishing between citizens and noncitizens) and diffuse state (and state-like) power beyond the specific location of the checkpoint—in the case of Darien, beyond the highway. Checkpoints do not prevent or allow for mobility as much as they determine a mobile body's *route*. They do not restrict movements; they redirect them. The state sees some movements while rendering other movements invisible—sometimes because of its inability to see, sometimes because of its unwillingness to see.

The regimes of legibility that states produce also have an underside of *illegibility*. By establishing checkpoints in Darien and redirecting illegitimate movements away from the highway and into the forest and waters beyond, the state plays a part in creating spaces of illegibility that are just as essential to state and state-like power as the grids of legibility that map out official knowledge. In Darien, illegibility is not always produced by the state's lack of local knowledge—in fact, the state often relies on knowledge produced through connections precisely with spaces of illegibility, the forests and waters beyond the highway. In other words, state actors along the highway checkpoints create a grid of legibility by classifying people with ambiguous categories, and sometimes by displaying ignorance or performing a lack of local knowledge. Meanwhile, the forest beyond the highway's grid of legibility allows state and state-like actors to work through and with—not without—local knowledge. The two are interconnected.



Figure 38. Highway checkpoint in Darien

Making the Border

For a long time the limits of Darien province, marking the border between Panama and Colombia, mattered more in the papers and maps of government official but not so much in practice. That is to say, the idea of the border was more important to the state, and more easily manipulated, than the ways the border was actually crossed. Panama's separation from Colombia in 1903 caused border disputes that were not resolved until 1924, but these disputes took place in the world of international diplomacy, not in the forests of Darien.⁶ What customs agents might have called smuggling for Darienitas was simply trade; what migration officials

⁶ See Méndez (1979:159-174).

might have called illegal immigration for the border people would have been merely a job-related relocation. The border was so unimportant for Darienitas and the Panamanian state that no official inscription of the border as a border had materialized (trails across the mountains were just that—trails) until 1957, when a group of explorers from the Darien Sub-Committee of the Pan American Highway Congress, charged with determining possible routes for the highway, erected a cement marker at one of the mountain passes in anticipation of the international thoroughfare they hoped would soon be constructed. The highway helped materialize the border, but not much. Things, of course, would have been different if the highway had been completed.



Figure 39. On the Panama-Colombia border, circa 1957. After sixteen months of exploration in Darien and the adjoining Colombian area, two possible routes for the highway were selected. The southern route would pass through El Cruce de Espavé, where the headwaters of the Balsas and Juradó rivers almost meet, also known as the Arrastradero de Piraguas because indigenous Darienitas had made a wide, smooth trail of mud, bridged in places with logs, over which they pushed their canoes from one side to the other.⁷

In the 1980s, during Noriega's military rule, Darien remained a stateless, illegible space. Noriega, as everybody knew, had connections to drug cartels in Colombia and Darien's forests were convenient cover for drug-trade related activities. (It is no coincidence that Noriega himself has family in Darien and spent childhood summers there.) An indeterminate border was produced and maintained by the state as a space where the distinction between legal and illegal activities was difficult to make. The border began to matter for Panamanians in the 1990s when the war in Colombia brought displaced people into Darien and also groups of men with guns. The U.S. also worried and drew up plans for military intervention in response to the presence of drug traffickers and other armed groups in Darien, but remained only contingency plans.⁸

Excerpt from fieldnotes recounting conversation with colono family who lives on the highway:

In the 1990s you would see them going through. One night she and her husband saw a Colombian man crossing through their back yard, and Genaro called out, "who goes there?" And the guy said "don't turn me in, I come from Colombia." And Genaro suggested taking the road would be easier. Many women, too, Mireya told me, many Colombian women coming through, with their feet all swollen from walking and walking.

⁷ Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras, Comité Directivo Permanente, *Report of the Darien Subcommittee, August 1957, VII Pan American Highway Congress, Panama City, Panama* (Panama: 1957), Archivo Nacional, Panama City, Panama.

⁸ Gledhill (1999:206).

Changes in hemispheric political economy associated with the liberalization of trade and the U.S.'s post-9/11 discourse of security, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the War on Drugs and the War on Terror, would make the international border in Darien matter in a new way.

Excerpt from interview with colono about Darien in the 1980s, that wandered to other topics:

The moment came, well, that they found it necessary to invade us. And the army that the Panamanian Defense Forces had when Noriega was in Panama was an army that was actually formed by the Americans. It is an army formed by the Americans. And they would send them to take courses in Israel, paid for by the American government. What that means is that it was an army made by the Americans and therefore I think they knew what they had in Panama, no? It was a small army but very dangerous. Very dangerous.

Panama had abolished its army in 1990 by popular referendum, soon after the United States invaded to overthrow Noriega. However, in 2008 part of the Panamanian police “declared independence” (their words) and created the National Border Protection Service, known by its Spanish acronym as Senafront (Servicio Nacional de Fronteras). It was a controversial move declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Justice and denounced by civil society organizations.⁹ Many Panamanians understand the new border guards to be unofficial soldiers, sentiments that are stirred every November during independence day festivities when Senafront takes part in the parade in camouflage gear and face paint.¹⁰ But despite protestations,

⁹ “Temen que SENAFRONT viole derechos humanos en el país,” *Panamá América*, November 26, 2008 (accessed on January 23, 2014 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/718584-temen-que-senafront-viole-derechos-humanos-el-pais->)

¹⁰ “Con el Senafront se creó un ejército,” *La Prensa*, November 6, 2012 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.prensa.com/impreso/panorama/%C2%B4con-el-senafront-se-creo-un-ejercito%C2%B4/135505>).

thousands of uniformed men and women with automatic rifles have been sent to Darien.

Since 2008 a militarized landscape has emerged along the *highway* rather than along the international political border: checkpoints, sandbags, barricades, observation towers, trenches, mysterious trucks carrying mysterious cargo, surveillance equipment, radars, radios, helicopters, a military airport. Giant groups of men and women in olive green disturbing the peace of early morning Darien as they sweat through their public exercise routine. State technologies of surveillance and control over mobility have concentrated along the highway—the border has now become more apparent with the checkpoints. Beyond the highway is still a largely illegible forest. The classification of people and things as legal or illegal happens mostly along the highway.¹¹ The boundary between Panamanian and Colombian, citizen and noncitizen, threat or nonthreat, is enacted and negotiated on the highway, not at the international boundary line. Routes are borders.

This border enforcement strategy of militarization and an emphasis on security is consistent with drug-war policies being implemented at the U.S.-Mexico border (which themselves had a precedent in Colombian drug-war policies). Similar, too, is the way security projects at both borders rely on natural barriers—the desert in the U.S., the forest in Darien—that in effect provide alternate, illegible routes of movement as an alternative to the highway. However, this strategy operates within a

¹¹ Trouillot (2001) notes that what is important is not the border line but the technologies that create and enforce differences; see also (Tawil-Souri 2012) on how, in Israel-Palestine, the operative border is not between *territories* but between Jewish and Arab *people*.

context of free trade, which complicates security by requiring infrastructure, decentralized government, and streamlined border crossings.¹² The relationships between democracy, security, neoliberalism and the drug trade are complex, to say the least, calling for an understanding of mobility that takes into account local configurations of difference in Darien as well as national border enforcement policies and how these are linked to discourses and practices of hemispheric security.

How the State Sees

Excerpt from interview with two Senafront guards at a Darien checkpoint:

On controlling movement in one direction, from Panama to Darien-

Guard #1: Well, we verify the vehicles, to make sure the vehicles' documents are in order as much as the drivers'. Apart from controlling the vehicles, we have security with people so that no one goes over there [referring to Darien beyond the highway]. Vigilance. Why? Because first of all, we have to give security to the main installation here. Because from here on out [to Panama], security is taking people going out there [beyond the highway]. The first have to consult with us. What are you going to do? Where are you going? With whom will you speak?

On controlling movement in other direction, from Darien to Panama-

Guard #2: There are several units. We are the security of the installation. We are watching over everything around here. Now, most of the work we do is check vehicles that travel from Panama to Darien, and from Darien to Panama. Sometimes subversive people travel, people without documents, and things like that.

Checkpoints enable mobility for those who are able to be located on the state's classificatory grid—that is, for those who can successfully perform a legitimate identity. Legality must be produced. As a migration official and Senafront guard who work at one of the checkpoints in Darien explained to me in an interview,

¹² see Heyman (2008) on the tensions between the logics of securitization and globalization in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border.

identification documents, physical appearance, and language or accent produce legality and allow for mobility.¹³ They work with a basic classificatory scheme that, above all, differentiates between citizen and foreigner (*extranjero*).

Excerpt from interview with Senafront guard and Migration official at a checkpoint:

Me: How do you recognize foreigners?

Migration official: You can tell. Say, their way of dressing, eh, physical features, the way they speak. Yes, because they arrive all mistreated, the skin, their hair long, beards, because they don't come from the city. They come from over here, the mountain. The mountain's abuse is visible. You can tell. And usually they're kind of nervous.

Guard: And the accent. At least in this case the Colombian speaks very differently than the Panamanian. We already know who they are.

Migration: Peruvians, Ecuadoreans... they're dirty, all mistreated.

Guard: Physically worn out, from walking a certain amount of time.

Migration: Many of those people, they bring an idea from Colombia—I mean, the coyote that takes them there tells them one thing, and then the reality is something else.

Me: What do they tell them?

Migration: Well, that this over here is easy to get into, that, I don't know. They rob them on the trail, they take everything away from them and toss them over this way. So then many of those people when they arrive here they don't want to walk anymore. For example. If they are headed to the United States, they arrive here and they don't want to go on. They're all messed up. Those people want to get caught and deported back to their country because they see things weren't as easy as they thought. They're tired.

The category of “foreigner” is ambiguous, and in conversations with checkpoint workers as well as with colonos, foreigner could mean a Colombian, South American of any nationality (migrant), subversive, drug trafficker, bandit, guerrilla, insurgent,

¹³ see also Heyman (2008), Alvarez (2006) and Chu (2010).

terrorist, or narcoterrorist. The language that Panamanian newspapers use to report Senafront-related events in Darien likewise uses these terms interchangeably. The ambiguity of this category works not *in spite* of the state's project of legibility but alongside other forms of state power. This ambiguity diffuses and multiplies state opportunities to classify and sanction mobility. Foreigner is a powerful category because it is so vague.

The ambiguity of the foreigner category allows the state to more effectively control mobility, but it can also show the knowledge limitations of state actors. Precisely because of the ambiguity of foreigner, the checkpoint guards often had trouble classifying people who were neither Panamanian citizens or residents, nor foreigners who entered Panama without official authorization—people, for instance, like me. Many, especially the new ones (and there are always new ones being recruited), had never seen a passport before, and don't know where to locate the name, date of birth, and other information they need to write down. Sometimes they read very slowly, fumble with their pens, write laboriously. Sometimes it is faster to write down the information on a sheet of paper *for* them.

Excerpt from fieldnotes on taking the bus from Panama to Darien:

At the first stop the guard made everybody get out of the bus, ID in hand, and people sighed but did it anyway, and quickly. As I step out the guard says *tienes tu identificación?* I nod. Once everybody's out he peers inside, just there from the doorway, and then says, ok, everybody can go back in. He asks me for my ID. I give him my passport, and he sits down at a table, looking through it. He asks me if I'm with the Peace Corps. I explain what I'm doing. He didn't press the issue, just leafed through the passport for a while. Then I got back on. People were annoyed at having to wait for me. At the second stop it was different. The driver's secretary got out and told the guard there were *two*. The guard steps inside partly, looks around at people's faces, and asks me if I'm with the Peace Corps. I just say no, and he asks

the bus in general, are there foreigners here? No one says anything. How many did you say there were? he asks the secretary. Two. The kid won't look at me. The guard looks around again, then goes away and the bus continues. At the next stop the guard gets on the bus and asks people to show their identification from where they were sitting. I flash my passport, just the front. Ok. He leaves.

On the other hand, sometimes state power is performed not through its *inability* to access local knowledge, but through the deliberate disregard of local knowledge. For example, I routinely traveled through one of the highway's checkpoints at least three times a week. The guards knew me but played dumb, repeating the same questions over and over again, never simply waving me past like they did with colonos. And of course, they are notorious in the highway communities for playing dumb with them as well, but in a different way. Their standard answer when armed confrontations occur is "nothing happened here." Again, ambiguity and uncertainty—it could be a way to avoid admission of not really knowing what happened, or it could be a way to withhold knowledge from local communities. It is hard to tell, and this is a fundamental effect of the checkpoints and state power in Darien.

In any case, guards playing dumb (whether they're really pretending or not) show that they must perform—as state actors—as much as the people moving through the checkpoints must perform. At checkpoints, bodies, identification documents and stories (where you're from, where you're going, and why) are compared. If they match up without contradiction, then legibility has been performed successfully.¹⁴ Reversing the gaze reveals that guards themselves are ambiguously

¹⁴ Alvarez (2006) and Chu (2010).

classified. They are not soldiers, Senafront maintains, but they certainly look like soldiers, are trained as soldiers, and act like soldiers. They are responsible for protecting Panamanian territory yet they wear camouflage uniforms that once belonged to the U.S. Army and they are trained by the U.S. Department of Defense and also the Colombian government, and they use equipment supplied by the U.S. and European governments.¹⁵ Story and body do not correspond.

In a permanent “state of exception,” checkpoints and borders are spaces between states, where people’s rights are suspended though they are still subject to laws.¹⁶ If in Darien borders are enacted at highway checkpoints and not at the abstract international boundary line, and if these checkpoints are distributed along the highway between Darien and Panama City, then rights themselves are suspended all along the way. Checkpoints distribute and diffuse state power over mobility as they suspend people’s rights, since people must constantly prove who they are. If everyone is always potentially a foreigner (and more so the less your body-document-story

¹⁵ “Senafront recibirá equipos,” *Panamá América*, July 28, 2010 (accessed on January 23, 2014 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/945864-senafront-recibira-equipos->); “Senafront cuenta con nueva base operativa en Puerto Obaldía,” *La Prensa*, October 25, 2011 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.prensa.com/impreso/senafront-cuenta-con-nueva-base-operativa-en-puerto-obaldia/34915>); “Panama and Colombia Seal Joint Security Assistance,” *Diálogo*, April 12, 2012 (accessed on January 25, 2014 at http://dialogo-americas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2012/04/12/feature-ex-3038); “Francia apoyará educación de miembros del Senafront de Panamá,” September 25, 2012 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.prensa.com/uhora/locales/francia-apoyara-educacion-de-miembros-del-senafront-de-panama/126087>); “Senafront sigue modelo de Policía de Colombia que ha tenido éxito en la lucha antiterrorista,” *Panamá América*, January 18, 2013 (accessed on January 23, 2014 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/1416424-senafront-sigue-modelo-policia-colombia-que-ha-tenido-exito-la-lucha-antiterrorista>); “Militarización y aumento del gasto van de la mano,” *La Prensa*, November 8, 2012 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.prensa.com/impreso/panorama/militarizacion-y-aumento-del-gasto-van-de-la-mano/135938>).

¹⁶ Alvarez (2006).

matches an idealized model of Panamanian citizen, which in Darien is quite complicated), then there is no state guarantee of safety, protection or mobility.¹⁷ Instead, there is uncertainty and ambiguity. Rather than create security, the dispersion of state power through checkpoints along the highway creates insecurity.

How the State Does Not See

Excerpt from interview with a checkpoint guard:

The routine here is to verify foreigners, most of all in the Yaviza area to see if they're not Colombian, or part of the—or how we call them, well, guerrilleros pues. Who might infiltrate and travel through here going to Panama. What happens is that sometimes they avoid the checkpoints. They take a vehicle and get off before the checkpoint and go into the mountain. They cross [go around]. And then take another vehicle, like that. They do that.

The checkpoints along the highway do not stop movement as much as they redirect it. And by redirecting this movement into the mountains, forests and waters, the state produces spaces of obscurity that allow for articulations between legal and illegal practices. In other words, spaces of illegibility are produced by checkpoints redirecting flows.

In many ways, Darien parallels the U.S.-Mexico border in terms of how moving bodies make their way across national boundaries and the kinds of spaces these movements create. On the U.S.-Mexico border, since the 1990s, the federal government has increasingly heightened security in the crossing areas near urban ports of entry (international checkpoints at Tijuana, El Paso, Laredo, etc.) This

¹⁷ This affects Darienitas and colonos unevenly. Because of their kinship and migration ties to Colombia, Darienitas are more suspect than colonos. Foreigners are okay as long as they have a residency visa (which requires a lot of money, institutional connections and bureaucratic know-how) and travel in a company vehicle (teak companies, road construction and aqueduct companies).

strategy, called Prevention Through Deterrence, has shifted undocumented migration away from urban ports to remote areas like Arizona's desert, where environmental conditions make crossing more difficult. The difficult crossing acts like a filter, attracting the young and strong—young and strong enough to survive the desert, young and strong enough to support and contribute to the undocumented labor force that supports the U.S. economy. Prevention Through Deterrence (not really prevention but sorting and redirection), surveillance technologies, and Border Patrol practices, all modeled on low-intensity strategies first designed to suppress Third World “insurgents” have increasingly militarized the border area.¹⁸

Something similar has happened in Darien. The heightening of security since the 1990s, concentrated along the highway area but not exclusive to it (Senafrent also patrols the forest and waters beyond the highway), has shifted smuggling to remote areas in the forest, the mountains and along the coast. And, like at the U.S.-Mexico border, the strategies employed by the guards are modeled on low-intensity warfare directed against the enemies of democracy as it is defined by capitalism.

These zones of deterrence—desert in Arizona, forest in Darien—and tightened border security do not deter flows as much as they push them off the grid of legibility, which creates space for legal-illegal articulations. Gledhill's work on “unspeakable connections” shows how border militarization, drug wars, free trade, and migration are inextricably linked: “U.S. behavior suggests that the drugs issue provides a convenient pretext for ensuring Mexico's compliance on other issues of

¹⁸ De León (2012:478) and Heyman (2012).

vital U.S. interest, the NAFTA and immigration policy. If U.S. official agencies continue to be ‘economical with the truth’ as far as their real knowledge of the private economic activities of powerful Mexicans are concerned, this would, after all, be a pattern of behavior with precedent in the Panamanian case.”¹⁹ In Panama, the U.S. government was aware of Noriega’s connections with Colombian drug traders but collaborated with him—and paid him—for a long time anyway.²⁰ A similar situation emerged in Colombia in the 1990s, where right-wing paramilitaries were allowed to profit from the cocaine business without much interference from the government, suggesting that counter-insurgency is more important than the anti-drug agenda and that the drug trade is the underside and product of trade liberalization.²¹

In short, controlling drugs is not as important as controlling migration and creating the right conditions for capitalism in the neoliberal model. The drug trade and free trade work well together, though in sometimes unexpected ways. For example, neoliberal reforms in Mexico caused massive unemployment and left many people with little choice but to seek out income through drug trafficking.²² And the business of drugs and the business of free trade work in surprisingly similar ways—descriptions of drug organizations as flexible transnational networks sound very much like descriptions of legitimate businesses under the neoliberal model.²³ The reduction of barriers to legal trade also reduces barriers to illegal trade, and

¹⁹ Gledhill (1999:215-6).

²⁰ Scranton (1991).

²¹ Gledhill (1999:217), Gootenberg (2009), and Mercille (2011).

²² Mercille (2011).

²³ See for example Dudley (2010).

infrastructures like highways but also forests and deserts play an instrumental role in these activities.

Like in Mexico and Colombia, legal-illegal activities articulate in Darien. Many Darienitas recall that during the Noriega years armed groups from Colombia would come to towns when there were parties (like patron saint festivals) and have a good time at the cantinas while the guards pretended nothing was happening. One man who worked spraying for malaria in remote upriver communities recalled how guards and guerrillas would greet each other with slaps on the back and sit down together to play dominos. Many former soldiers and police who worked under Noriega are now in Senafront, suggesting the possibility that the unspeakable connections of earlier eras are being reworked currently. Senafront guards have been found to participate in drug trafficking.²⁴ In 2013, the groundwork laid during the Noriega years became even more obvious: One of the groups that operates in Darien is the FARC's 57th Front, who are said to toll smugglers for access to their routes through the forest. One of the Front's new leaders, who replaced his predecessor killed in a battle, is "El Pana"—"The Panamanian"—a Darienita who also happens to be a former guard in Noriega's Defense Force.²⁵ But while it might be tempting to assume black and indigenous Darienitas are more involved with drug trade activities

²⁴ "Formulan cargos a miembro del Senafront," *La Prensa*, December 24, 2013 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.prensa.com/uhora/locales/fiscalia-formulacion-cargos-agente-del-senafront/249683>).

²⁵ "Alias 'Pana', jefe del frente 57 de las Farc," *El Tiempo*, September 30, 2013 (accessed on January 26, 2014 at http://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/alias-pana-jefe-del-frente-57-de-las-farc_13093458-4); "El Pana' visita Yaviza, con cooperación del Senafront," *Panamá América*, October 4, 2013 (accessed on January 23, 2014 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/1651531-el-pana-visita-yaviza-cooperacion-del-senafront->).

than colonos, on account of their family and historical ties to Colombia, this is not always the case. Among colonos stories circulate about local politician who lived along the highway—one of Darien’s elected representatives and a wealthy colono with lots of land—caused a scandal several years ago when he was convicted of drug trafficking and is currently imprisoned in the U.S.

Despite the end of the Cold War, powerful ideologies about counter-insurgency persist. In popular discourse, Senafront discourse, and colono discourse, the culprits are always “the guerrilla” even though there are many other groups and complicities involved. It is notable that for the most part Panamanian newspaper coverage of incidents in Darien report Senafront “triumphs” against guerrilla, or otherwise call them irregulars, subversives, or a number of different names, but rarely—if ever—mention right-wing paramilitaries and other drug trade organizations that are known to be active in the borderlands area. For colonos, I am not sure if the difference even matters. Foreigners are foreigners. But certainly for the state I do think it matters, and this disjuncture—a matter of knowledge—is dangerous.

Rumors about how politics in Panama are entangled with politics in Colombia are illustrative of the atmosphere of uncertainty. In 2013, Senafront guards in Darien found an agenda (calendar and personal organizer) they claim belongs to someone from the FARC. The agenda, reported the press, details meetings between the FARC and the PRD, one of Panama’s principal political parties, and the opposition to the current government. According to the hand-written notes in the agenda, photographs of which appeared in newspapers, the PRD met with the FARC because of their

shared anti-capitalist interests (the PRD claims to be a socialist party), and talked about sending PRD political dissidents to Colombia until the current government steps down.²⁶ Stories such as these, whether rumor or factual, shows how for people involved with Darien, the “state,” just like the “guerrilla” or the broader category of “foreigner,” is not just one thing.

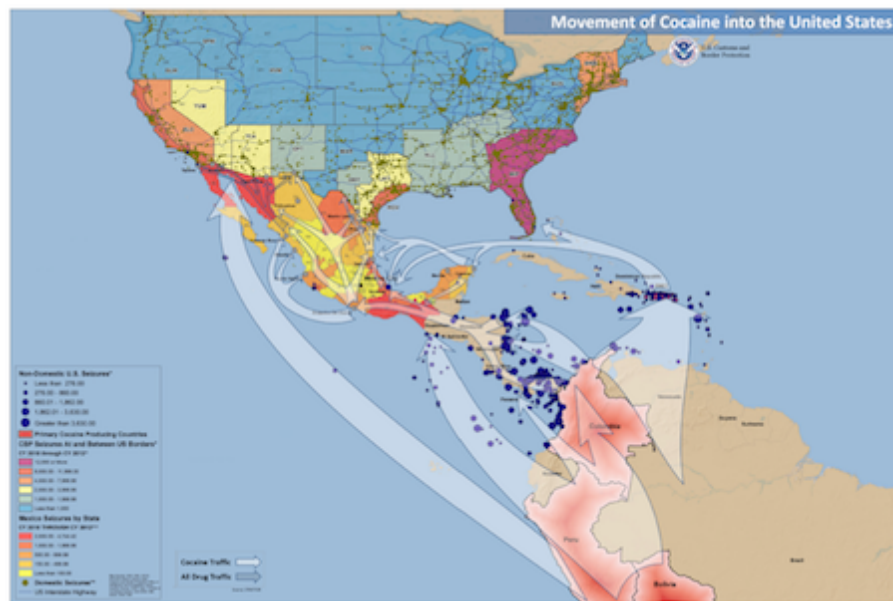


Figure 40. Cocaine routes²⁷

In many ways, the highway checkpoints make no sense. Studies and reports have indicated that a negligible amount of drugs (according to one study, less than 1%) that reach the U.S. pass overland through Darien. Most drugs are transported

²⁶ “La agenda de un guerrillero y sus vínculos con el PRD,” *Panamá América*, October 14, 2013 (accessed on January 29, 2014 at <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/notas/1655650-la-agenda-un-guerrillero-y-sus-vinculos-el-prd->).

²⁷ Image from “Cuban Drug Policy and Bilateral Counternarcotics Efforts,” *Just the Facts*, June 17, 2013 (accessed on January 25, 2014 at <http://justf.org/taxonomy/term/51>).

along the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.²⁸ The FARC is weakening and reports claim there are no formal cartels operating in Panama.²⁹ Highway drug smuggling is simply not that big a deal. So why so many checkpoints? Why so many men with guns? And what are the consequences?

Militarization has not brought order to Darien, as Senafront suggests. Militarization has re-zoned the region. The checkpoints have zoned highway Darien as legible, and River Darien (beyond the highway) as illegible, a zone of deterrence that could also be understood as a zone of refuge. This contributes to a bordering effect that is less concerned with the boundary between Panama and Colombia and is more concerned with the borders between Panama and Darien—hence the checkpoints on the highway connecting the two, along the Ruta Panama-Darien.

With the highway securitized, the drug flows are not stopped but rather redirected, fragmented, and diffused into other routes. In 2013, Senafront claimed “success” in pushing Colombians out of Darien. Soon after, El Pana made headlines as a new FARC leader. Senafront claims drug seizures have increased, while an independent report claims the contrary.³⁰ So what is it exactly that militarization has

²⁸ “Latin America and the Caribbean: Illicit Drug Trafficking and U.S. Counterdrug Programs,” Congressional Research Service, May 12, 2011 (accessed on January 24, 2014 at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41215.pdf>); United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment,” September 2012 (accessed on February 18, 2014 at <http://www.unodc.org/toc/en/reports/TOCTACentralAmerica-Caribbean.html>); Dudley (2010).

²⁹ “Martinelli Assures the FARC Controlled 25% of Panamanian Jungle,” *Diálogo*, July 8, 2013 (accessed on January 25, 2014 at http://dialogo-americas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2013/07/08/feature-ex-4279).

³⁰ William Kinney and Thomas Abbot, “Corrupt Militarization and the Threat to Panamanian Democracy,” Council on Hemispheric Affairs, October 7, 2013 (accessed on January 20, 2014 at <http://www.coha.org/corrupt-militarization-and-the-threat-to-panamanian-democracy/>).

succeeded in doing? From a business perspective, there are a lot of profits to be made, both through legitimate investments in Darien (like teak plantations) that require the security of a legible grid, and illegitimate activities (like the drug trade) that require zones of illegibility.³¹ State actors do not need to see everything in order to further their business interests. Zones of obscurity are important as they not only provide cover for legal-illegal articulations, but also provide a potential justification for military interventions against people who might be found to work against capitalist projects. The precedent already exists in Mexico near the U.S. border, where the government justifies the systematic persecution of activists and political dissidents with false drug trafficking charges.

Just as militarization has redirected, fragmented, and diffused drug flows, militarization has also redirected, fragmented, and diffused the state's power to know and see. The state sees through non-legible means, creating ambiguity regarding where state power begins and ends. Senafront guards say the FARC recruits Darienitas. Not to fall behind, Senafront has also been recruiting youth, especially indigenous youth. Senafront advertises on the radio with promises of scholarships, an education, a professional career, benefits for the family and excellent salaries. ¡Unete ya! Join now! In recruiting soldiers from the local population, the state's power to see is diffused through intricate networks of family relations. Just as there is ambiguity and uncertainty with respect to the identity of foreigners, there is ambiguity and uncertainty with respect to where and when the state is at work, seeing things,

³¹ To complicate things even further, African palm plantations are appearing in Darien. In Pacific Colombia, African palm plantations are associated with paramilitaries.

knowing things. Just as any Darienita could potentially be a narcoterrorist, anyone could potentially be an agent of the state. Families, relationships—kinship itself—is caught up in the state’s apparatus of knowledge and power, which works through indeterminacy and the unknown. The state itself is illegible. And it produces legible grids that work alongside—and depend on—zones of obscurity.

In my view, and in the current context, militarization produces terror in Darien much more than any Colombian would care to do, and reveals how the state regards Darien as a region—as always a potential threat, full of not-quite-citizens, and thus potentially subject to abuses. The state produces terror, ambiguity and uncertainty, for example, through its “demobilization” campaign. In 2009, posters and banners began to appear along the highway and at river ports, exhorting people to “demobilize.” The propaganda seems ridiculously out of place, is the general sentiment I gathered from people in Darien. The magnitude of people in Colombia targeted for demobilization is great, but in Darien the numbers are negligible. What would demobilization mean, anyway? To deny an armed group of men a few of your chickens, even when they pay for them? A helicopter dropped demobilization flyers over the school in Jaqué, a coastal community very close to Colombia, suggesting the extent to which Darienita youth are criminalized by the state just for being Darienita.³² A bright red “Wanted” banner creates the feeling that Darien is a wild west.

³² Recounted to me by NGO worker who saw the helicopter drop the flyers.



Figure 41. Demobilization flyer. It is unclear whether the graphic designer forgot to remove references to the Colombian government’s demobilization program or whether this ambiguity is deliberate.



Figure 42. Wanted

The radio campaigns backfired. Among with the Join now! advertisements Senafront had announced on the radio that the guerilla was going into communities. A letter soon arrived at the radio station. No one knows who delivered it, but somehow it made its way to the receptionist. The conflict is internal between us and our government, the letter said. We don't want problems with Panama because there will be consequences. The radio advertisements were suspended at once.³³ Events such as these in Darien often stir up old fears among colonos, fueled by memories of the days in the 1990s when kidnappings were more frequent.

Through Senafront, the state distributes bordering technologies throughout the highway area, and these bordering technologies create effects beyond their immediate location. In its efforts to control mobility, the state requires people to locate themselves on a grid of legibility—yet by spreading Senafront through Darien's kinship networks, and by creating out of the forest a zone of deterrence that is also a zone of obscurity that covers unspeakable connections, the state itself works through illegibility. In a context where identities are uncertain, the border militarization's most solid achievement has been to produce insecurity.

³³ Recounted to me by someone who worked at the radio station.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation takes the Pan American Highway as a lens through which to understand Latin American integration in a space made complex by competing ideas about Americanness. Integration in this context refers to the process by which communities are imagined and enacted, a process that creates connections between people and places, enables the movement of tangible and intangible things, and produces encounters across difference. A technology of integration, the highway connected radically different people and places, enabling movements and encounters with other races, other landscapes, and other forms of organizing social life that, by coming into contact with each other and figuring out ways to get along or get on with things, could bridge differences and create common ground.

The making of common ground—whether it is something pursued or something that just happens—must inevitably deal with inequalities that can only be understood in relation to the colonial histories of the Americas, histories that produce forms of difference that continue to shape, in terrible and lively ways, the Americas in the twenty-first century. Pan American Highway actors such as engineers and migrants had to make sense of differences understood in terms of race, citizenship, and underdevelopment, among others. However, the modernity the highway would bring—a modernity dreamt in both national and hemispheric scales—did not integrate through assimilation and the destruction of difference. Rather, by

articulating with other projects and actors, the highway makes itself vulnerable to the very heterogeneity it seeks to organize.

Projects of Latin American integration have worked to craft social belonging through inwards and outwards-looking efforts, at least from the point of view of states—which continue to be important social units, if not the only ones at play. Of outward-looking efforts, political appeals to integration are perhaps the oldest and flimsiest, characterized by rhetorical calls for Latin American unity and often criticized as romantic and outdated Bolivarian dreams. The ambitious and improbable dream of the Pan American Highway fits well here. And yet, while nineteenth and twentieth-century efforts to politically unify groups if not all of the Latin American states boast but modest accomplishments, these dreams currently find expression in projects such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), established in 2010 and designed as an alternative to the Organization of American States, and a challenge to U.S. regional hegemony. The dream of Latin American political unity—or at least solidarity—turns out not to be so outdated, after all. Closely linked to political projects of cooperation are efforts at economic integration. Trade agreements and blocs have a long and lively history in the Americas, and it is easy to see here, too, how the Pan American Highway plays a role in these schemes that range in size from regional agreements like the Central American Common Market in its 1960s heyday to ALBA, the trade agreement between Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and other countries imagined as an alternative to the U.S.-proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Inwards-looking projects of integration have historically sought to overcome the social barriers of race and class differences. The problem of creating imagined community out of diverse people who were brought together in often-violent encounters and who had been organized by persistent colonial hierarchies came to be addressed in Latin America through a model of mestizo citizenship, later reformulated as multicultural citizenship. Meanwhile, projects of modernization and development seek to reduce economic inequalities that threaten social cohesion. While anthropologists, historians, and sociologists have focused on race and inequality, economists and political scientists have traditionally focused on trade blocs and political alliances. Integration is understood through an intellectual division of labor—as if ideas about race, for example, have nothing to do with development or political cooperation.

Ethnography of the Pan American Highway presents the opportunity to trace how multiple discourses of integration come together—and interfere with each other—through a single project. The highway cuts across inward and outward-looking projects, showing how integration works across and through multiple scales. This is one of the concluding points of this dissertation. The highway, for instance, works at the scale of nation-state but also at the scale of empire. Chapter 2 of this dissertation, on the highway's construction in Darien, shows how it is impossible to understand Panama's 1970s nation-building project without considering the power of U.S. empire while Chapter 6 on checkpoints shows how U.S. ideas about hemispheric security projects are linked to national security in Panama. Empire and states can

work together but also against each other. Rather than begin with ready-made scales, the highway shows how scales are created.

A second contribution of this dissertation lies in its attention to subaltern histories that shape integration but are erased from the highway's story of progress. Attention to the bumps in the Main Street of Chapter 3 and the riverways of Chapter 4 makes it possible to notice a world where the community-imagining projects migrants, road workers and Darienitas, among other actors, work alongside and in dialogue with the integrationist discourses of powerful institutions. Working with these subaltern histories allows for an account of the highway that remains open to the contingencies, convergences and accidents that make the highway lively. This dissertation works to hold both the deadliness of a road to progress and the liveliness of the highway's multiple histories within the frame of analysis. It would be easy to tell an epic story of the highway, whether told as the advancement of civilization, as a state-centered story of collaboration, or a heroic journey from Alaska to Argentina. This dissertation sets out to destabilize this kind of epic by working through fragments, incomplete archives, and views from the underside.

A third contribution concerns nature. Whether approached through political economy or social movements, integration in Latin America is understood as a cultural process, by and for humans. And yet, formulations of American togetherness often gesture towards the region's geography—its continent-ness, its physical distinctiveness from Europe, Asia and Africa—as a justification for integration. This dissertation brings in nature to discussions of integration, not as inert resources or

geographical determinism but as another aspect of Americanness that needs to be understood. The cattle in Chapter 2, the highway dust and holes of Chapter 3, the rivers in Chapter 4, and the landscapes of Chapter 5 show how the highway is anything but human-made. Including more-than-human highway histories complements my efforts to include subaltern perspectives, which, altogether, aim to open up modern categories (nature and culture, river and road, Latin America and the United States, race and economy) to show the lively connections and encounters, not always intentional, that constitute integration.

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