Creating Wild Darién: Centuries of Darién’s Imaginative Geography and its Lasting Effects

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Abstract
Images, maps, and written texts together may constitute an imaginative geography and provide poignant evidence for how space can be socially constructed. In this article, I demonstrate the imaginative geography of wild Darién and discuss its effects. I analyze centuries of maps, images, and other texts to illustrate the taken-for-granted representation of Darién as a rich, dangerous, and backward place. I discuss how beginning in the mid-twentieth century that imaginary facilitated outside interventions in the region that persist today – from infrastructure modernization to land grabbing. These results seek to further Latin American historiographies within political ecologies.
Keywords: imaginative geography, land grabbing, Darién, Panama

Introduction
If an image is worth a thousand words, what of its combination with maps and written texts? Using a post-structural gaze, many scholars have analyzed diverse texts as social constructions. Such textual analyses of images and maps complement those of written texts, revealing the power of the visual in representation.

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Among the rich literature analyzing imagery, several prominent works stand out to scholars of Latin America, including: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Pratt 1992), *Reading National Geographic* (Lutz and Collins 1993), and the edited volume *In Search of the Rain Forest* (Slater 2004). In each, the authors demonstrated the powerful combination of visual and written texts in the creation of everyday representations of space and place. In *Imperial Eyes* Mary Louise Pratt (1992) examines the writings of adventurers and scientists, noting how the colonial and imperial perspectives in their words were underscored by images. The cover of the book’s first edition provided a memorable image of a western expedition member being carried upslope, his chair secured to the back of an indigenous person by a tumpline. The line drawings of this era were replaced with exquisite photographs in *Reading National Geographic*. Authors Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) deconstructed the photographs, designs, and texts of the popular, yellow-bordered magazine. They focused on the portrayal of non-western peoples, using interviews with editors and readers to examine how the magazine perpetuates the othering of people and places outside of a middle-class United States. How a land cover type has been represented was the topic of Candace Slater’s (2004) edited book *In Search of the Rain Forest*. In that work, contributors reflected on how images and texts of conservation campaigns, advertisements, and animated movies, among others, obscured the diversity, politics, and multi-scalar interactions of geographically dispersed rainforests.

In a parallel vein, critical cartography and historical geography have taken on the representations of places via the cartographic texts of maps. For Latin Americanists, Jordana Dym and Karl Offen’s (2011) edited volume *Mapping Latin America* offers a key work that reveals the stories behind specific maps, and in so doing show how maps work and do work. Spanning the region geographically and temporally, each contributor analyzes a prominent map, including sixteenth century indigenous maps, independence maps of new nations, and modern, urban maps. That compilation owes much to Brian Harley’s works exploring power through the deconstruction of maps (1989), and scrutinizing both indigenous and European cartographies of the colonial encounter in the Americas (1992). Since Harley’s contributions, a rich literature has deconstructed Latin American cartographies, including maps imbricated in nationalist histories of Mexico (Craib 2004), indigenous cartography (Mundy 2000), and counter or participatory maps (Sletto 2009).

Together, diverse texts – including images and maps as texts – can demonstrate a pervasive representation of space known as an imaginative geography. Edward Said coined the term in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. He illustrated how Europeans constructed a representation of the Orient, creating an essentialized, oriental other. This representation is both cultural and political (Driver 1992), helping to define Europe in the process. The struggle for geography, Said noted (1994: 7), is “not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.” As David Harvey (1973: 298) stated about the related term geographical imaginations, people need to ask “what produced them and what they serve to produce.”

Since Said’s work, a number of scholars have described imaginative geographies (e.g., Gregory 1995), and increasingly have focused on their political and environmental impacts. This results in analyses that, implicitly, are political ecologies, linking imaginative geographies not simply to imperialist representations but also to power’s mediation of
human-environment relations (Zimmerer and Bassett 2003). Such imaginative geographies of political ecology include how the edenic narrative of Amazonia sets it up as a place in need of outside intervention (Slater 2002), and how the tropics were constructed under colonialism (Frenkel 1996; Driver and Yeoh 2000). Yet, scholars also are questioning the totalizing perspective of imaginative geographies, demonstrating alternative geographies (Chang and Lim 2004; Cumbers and Routledge 2004). These, too, include political ecologies, such as how an Indian alliance mobilized alternative representations in political engagement (McFarlane 2004) or a call to produce alternative imaginative geographies for climate justice (Dawson 2013).

Eastern Panama’s Darién region, as well as Colombia’s northwest region of the same name, has a persistent imaginative geography. Even recent works cannot seem to resist it. In The Monkey’s Bridge, a book about Central American biogeography, author David Rains Wallace repeatedly invokes the vernacular image of Darién. The following passage is a particularly telling example:

Crossing Darién along the Atrato or Chucunaque today could be as difficult and dangerous as in Dampier’s [a seventeenth-century buccaneer] or Strain’s [a nineteenth-century explorer] time. Its malignant historical reputation remains justified to some extent: it’s the nearest thing left in Central America to the “green hell” that swallowed Strain and company. (Rains Wallace 1997: 39)

Yet, rather than leaving that characterization to colonial and canal explorers, the author brings it to the present, continuing:

Even a short hike there brings a sense of envelopment, especially in what remains of the primary forest, under the sixty-meter canopy of hundreds of tree species so festooned with epiphytes and lianas as to be sometimes indistinguishable as separate organisms. The forest itself is not particularly dangerous to anyone who is adequately equipped and guided, but real malignancies lurk. Darién is the only Central American region where yellow fever and drug-resistant \textit{falciparum} malaria occur: their carrier mosquitoes breed in water that accumulates everywhere in the rainy season. Colombian guerrillas control the hinterland, and have a reputation for murdering travelers and kidnapping local people for slave labor. (Rains Wallace 1997: 39-40)

In this article, I examine Darién’s imaginative geography and discuss its sociopolitical effects. I use a discursive analysis of maps, images, and writings in four different eras to illustrate the taken-for-granted representation of Darién as a rich, dangerous, and backward place. This imaginative geography results in a normalization of a discourse that the region, like Amazonia (Slater 2000), is never sufficient unto itself, thereby provoking intervention. I show how in the last half of the twentieth century that pervasive representation facilitated taming narratives for the region via development, which were so successful that they later spurred conservation activities. Yet the pervasive representation of wild Darién persists, continuing to justify intervention by outsiders such as land grabbers. I conclude by encouraging the questioning of geographic simplifications, and situating the writing of Latin America’s histories within specific political ecologies.
Darién

Eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia historically have been known as Darién, but that definition has changed over time. Carl Sauer (1966: 252) attributed the word to a bastardization of “Tanela,” a name retained by an Urabá area river in the region of early Spanish colonial exploration, just east of the modern Panama and Colombia border. In the colonial era, Darién referred to most of the isthmus and later to the region east of Panama City into northwestern Colombia. With Panama’s 1922 law that created Darién Province, Darién was redefined domestically by a provincial boundary. This political definition conflicts with the environmental literature, in which Darién typically refers to the northern part of the Darién-Chocó biogeographic region, that is, the easternmost area of high rainfall in Panama’s Darién Province extending into northwestern Colombia (Gentry 1992). However, in Panama officials and scientists alike tend to confound biogeographic “Darién” with “Darién Province.” Here, I use Darién (in Spanish orthography) to refer to Panama’s portion of the historic region of eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia, generally identified as eastward from the town of Chepo, about an hour east of Panama City. This is in many ways how people in Panama City think of Darién, a geography recently specified by highway signs near Tocumen International Airport: an arrow indicating east to Darién and an arrow pointing back west to downtown Panama City. However, once the Guna’ comarca, now Comarca Gunayala, was finalized in 1953, that area became separate administratively from the rest of eastern Panama.

A Curious Darién Gap: Ambiguous Prehistory

Maps illustrating the archaeological sites of Panama and northwestern Colombia were presented during a three-day conference on the art and archaeology of Central America and Colombia held in January 2015 (Figure 1). The images presented were from Google Earth, geographic information systems (GIS), or even line drawings. Panama’s sigmoid shape is obvious, rising in the northwest and lowering as it melds into South America in the southeast. The unpredictable lines of natural features were easily contrasted with points or short, straight lines calling out archaeological sites. In the eastern third of the country a sole point calls out Cana with no other archaeological sites indicated: Darién’s archaeological gap. The absence of indicated archaeological sites on these maps underscores the region’s ambiguous prehistory, emphasizing Darién’s reputation as a relatively people-less place, or, erroneously, solely as a region of transit, and opens it to be claimed.

The formation of the isthmian land bridge between North and South America has resulted in its biogeographic fame, as well as surprisingly ambiguous human history. Sedimentation filled much of the isthmus by three million years ago (Coates 1997), allowing the mixing of flora and fauna between north and south. The resulting Darién is a region known for its biogeography, and its identification on maps as a worldwide conservation hotspot (e.g., Myers 2000). Panama and Colombia’s Darién roughly corresponds with the archeological area known as Gran Darién, which extends east to Colombia’s Atrato and Sinú rivers and west to Panama Bay (Cooke and Sánchez Herrera 2004b).
In recent archaeological work on the Isthmo-Colombian region, eastern Panama remains a curious gap, as no significant archaeological sites have been located there (see Figure 1) (Cooke 1997). “We have to ask ourselves, are we looking at the evidence of absence or the absence of evidence?” inquired archaeologist Warwick Bray (in Howe 2001b: 58) about the nonexistence of a gold style named for eastern Panama, but in a remark that could hold true for most of the region’s archaeology. Much like the twentieth-century developers and adventurers I will address later, archaeologists likewise have begun to refer to this area as the Darién Gap.

Archaeologists acknowledge the area’s early inhabitation, rejecting the persistent notion that people simply migrated through Darién. Scant archaeological work and observations reveal much evidence of human occupation (Cansari, Castaneda, and Harp 1993; Cooke 1973, 1998; Cruxent 1957; Howe 2001b; Linne 1929; Verrill 1933). Early habitation additionally has been revealed by a 3,800-year history of land clearing and maize cultivation at Cana, in easternmost Darién Province. Phytolith and pollen data indicate a rapid regeneration of the forest, suggesting abandonment of the area about 350 years ago: scientists correlate this forest regeneration with the rapid decline of isthmic indigenous populations due to Spanish colonization (Bush and Colinvaux 1994; Piperno 1994). In conversations and at conferences archaeologists concur that Darién sites have not been found because the ground surveys, particularly in forests regenerated since Spanish colonization, have not been done.
Estimates of the number of indigenous residents on the isthmus at the beginning of the colonial era range from 200,000 to 2,000,000; however, their identity remains uncertain (Cooke and Sánchez Herrera 2004a). In the eastern isthmus, Spanish documented indigenous residents as peaceful “Cueva,” who, unlike those east of the Gulf of Urabá, did not use poison darts (Sauer 1966: 257). Researchers have noted numerous ambiguities regarding Cueva, their relationship with current isthmian indigenous populations, and the unlikelihood that they were a specific ethnic group (Cooke n.d.; Cooke and Sánchez Herrera 2004b; Howe 1977; Loewen 1954; Romoli 1987; Sauer 1966), although the limited linguistic evidence suggests they may have belonged to the Chocó language family (Loewen 1954; Romoli 1987), or spoken a lingua franca of it (Cooke n.d.). However, it is clear that by 1535 Cueva were exterminated by the Spanish (Romoli 1987).

The ambiguous prehistory of Darién allows it to be something of an empty slate. Unlike other areas where archaeological finds are testament to previous residents, or pre-Columbian populations are linked to modern ones, in Darién the blank space on a map represents the limited archaeological record as well as relationships of enigmatic Cueva to modern populations. In Panama’s east that ambiguity results in a privileging of Spanish colonial histories, and provides the foundation for the imaginative geographies that are layered upon it.

**Claiming Violent and Rich Darién**

In his statue in Panama City, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa gazes out onto the Pacific, his outstretched right arm holds a sword, the other a flag, and he stands prominently on a globe sustained on the backs of individuals representing the four races of the world (Figure 2). Erected on the avenue that bears Balboa’s name, this monument to the Spaniard’s “discovery” of the South Sea concisely reveals the dominant historical narrative of the colonial era. It is characterized by claiming territory while searching for gold, the related subjugation of indigenous populations, and the subsequent control over people and resources afforded by the providence of geography. The colonial era initiated a narrative about Darién violence and riches, establishing a reputation of the region that persists to this day. As a history of gold in the region noted: “For gold men have lied, cheated, killed and endured inconceivable hardships. Despite or maybe because of this innate tendency to bring out the worst in mankind, gold has been instrumental in shaping history. The Darién region of Panama is a prime example” (Jungersen and Jungersen 1946: 74).
Darién was at the center of early New World mainland exploration, of *Tierra Firme*. Although the Spanish arrived in the eastern isthmus in 1501, it was not until 1504 that Juan de la Cosa voyaged to Colombia’s easternmost coast, and then followed the trail of gold west (Sauer 1966). In modern Colombia’s Urabá region, de la Cosa heard of the indigenous town of Darién led by chief Cémaco, traveled there and sacked it. Two years later Spaniard Alonso de Hojeda returned, but moved west on account of the poison dart-wielding indigenous peoples. It was near there, in modern Colombia, that the Spanish established the first mainland colony in 1509, naming it Santa María la Antigua de Darién. Panama’s Darién, west of the Gulf of Urabá/Darién, was known as the *Castilla del Oro*, the Golden Castile for its proverbial riches (Anderson 1911). Darién soon came to mean the Isthmus of Panama, particularly eastern Panama and neighboring northern Colombia.
Given the current absence of gold artifacts from this region, it is ironic that gold played such an important role in its exploration. The Spanish fought over their claims in Tierra Firme, and former stowaway Balboa won control of Santa María la Antigua in 1511. Spain then named him interim governor of the province of Darién, and Balboa began searching for the source of gold objects that he was removing, while purportedly befriending and killing indigenous peoples. Spain denied his 1513 request for men and military provisions to continue his quest, and King Ferdinand instead named Pedrarias Dávila as governor, a man infamous for his brutality towards indigenous inhabitants (Sauer 1966). Balboa persisted, and began a journey inland from the Caribbean coastal town of Careta (in modern Panama). Crossing the isthmus near the mouth of the Tuira River he saw the “South Sea,” becoming the first European to view the Pacific Ocean.5

Balboa’s “discovery” of the Pacific synthesizes Panama’s origin story and identity. The Spaniard alludes to the region’s riches, its past as a site of pre-Columbian gold and its present as one of transit. Even though Panama would not be independent until 1903, the sighting of the South Sea was crucial for the future country’s canal. Yet, as Panamanian historian Ana Elena Porras (2005) has noted, Balboa concomitantly ties the country to esteemed Spanish heritage and its identity as a place of movement and commerce. However, Balboa also suggests indigenous subjugation. Theodore De Bry’s 1594 engraving of Balboa’s war hounds executing indigenous peoples popularized images of Spanish savagery.6 Panama’s foremost historian has called the indigenous massacres hallucinating (Castillero Calvo 1994). The extent of the massacres is indicated by Spaniards’ 1515 westward exploration, in search of slaves as Dávila killed “rebellious” indigenous people in Darién (Sauer 1966).

With the Pacific sighted, the locus of Spanish interest moved there. In 1519, the same year that he had Balboa killed, Dávila founded the town of Panama on the Pacific coast, and Santa María was ordered abandoned. Cueva extermination by 1535 opened up the region for indigenous Guna, Emberá, Wounaan, and escaped black slaves (cimarrones), westward migration throughout the eastern isthmus. By the time Fernández de Oviedo’s multi-volume work Historia General y Natural de las Indias (published in 1535 and 1547) informed Spanish speakers about the marvelous plants, animals, and people in the isthmus, eastern Panama had long been losing population to Panama City.

The importance of the isthmus as a transit route meant that the Spanish still sought to pacify indigenous populations. Figure 3, from 1671, illustrates both these points, with Tierra Firme’s geography underscored by lines radiating around the labels for the North and South Seas. Tranquil indigenous peoples frame the map, seated in positions that are anything but hostile. To help achieve that ideal, Spaniards developed centers of power and imperial administration called reducciones in eastern Panama, which were important for access to Panama’s gold (Gallup-Díaz 2002). Buccaneers sought to control eastern Panama’s Cana mine, opened in 1665 and referred to by William Dampier as “the richest gold mine ever yet found in America” (in Anderson 1911: 17). Spanish moved Cana’s gold with other loot and income from Mexico and South America via Panama’s Pacific port of Panama City, across the overland mule route (Camino Real and Camino de las Cruces), and out to Spain via the Caribbean port of Portobelo. Vulnerability at numerous places along the route meant that Panama was primed for piracy.
In 1680 two English buccaneers, William Dampier and Lionel Wafer, were stranded in Darién after an unsuccessful attack on El Real, and their subsequent books (published in 1697 and 1699, respectively) informed an English-speaking public about the geography and riches of the isthmus to which only Spanish speakers had been privy. The map included in Wafer’s book, unlike the map from decades earlier shown in Figure 3, noted the location of eastern Panama’s gold, labeling one river “The Gold R. & Mines.” His account scandalized English readers by detailing indigenous blood-letting and corporeal punishments, as well as providing almost inviting illustrations of nose rings, tobacco smoking meeting houses, and scantily clothed women among the Guna of the day.

Noting the weak Spanish presence in the region, Scottish leaders interviewed Wafer and began plans for a Darién colony. The Scots established the colony of New Edinburgh in 1698 on a cove of the Caribbean coast of Darién (in what is now Panama’s Comarca Gunayala). “And it was from Alliston perhaps, or Wafer, that Paterson [Scots colony founder] first heard of Darien, the green and beautiful country on the northern coast of Panama where the earth yielded fruit without cultivation, where noble, naked
Indians knew the secrets of unmined gold, and where lush mountain valleys led to the Pacific sea” (Prebble 2000: 12). William Paterson, the colony’s founder, penned the words in 1701 that encapsulated the international interest in the isthmus: “thus these doors of the seas, and the keys of the universe, would ... be capable of enabling their possessors to give laws to both oceans, and to become the arbiters of the commercial world ...” (Mack 1944: 84). However, a Scottish colonist’s description of local flora alludes to their forthcoming problems: “this place affords legion of monstrous Plants enough to confound all the Methods of Botany ever hitherto thought upon” (Russell in Hart 1929: 68). Within two years illness, death, corruption, Spanish attacks, and inadequate supplies overcame the Scottish colony. The venture nearly bankrupted Scotland and underscored Darién’s fame as an exotic, pestilence-filled land.

With waning Spanish colonial control, the iconic reputation of eastern Panama became further entrenched. In the mid-1700s the Cana mines were closed while Spaniards retreated from Guna rebellions and, in 1790, the Spaniards removed all garrisons except Yaviza (Mack 1944). Darién increasingly became known as a wilderness.

Darién’s colonial era was replete with narratives of riches and violence. Early exploration highlighted the killing of indigenous peoples (both intentionally and as a result of diseases) and their gold taken. Through this, Darién explorer Vasco Nuñez de Balboa is elevated as a hero: sighting the Pacific Ocean that would be integral to a future canal and embodying cherished Spanish heritage. As the locus of colonial activity moved west to the overland isthmian transit route around Panama City, Darién lost prominence, but gained “pristine” forests. In the late seventeenth century, Darién narratives of riches and violence again intermingled with buccaneer Wafer’s and Dampier’s English accounts. Yet their words inspired the Scots colony, the failure of which foreshadowed the travails of future canal explorers.

### Dangerous Darién Revealed by Canal Quests

Appended to his 1860 book on the French interoceanic canal route, unabashedly subtitled “canalization for colonization,” Athanase Airiau’s maps illustrate various benefits of a canal through Darién. The main canal route map shows a straight, sea level canal cut from Caledonia on the Caribbean coast to just north of the Lara River, northwest of the Pacific’s Gulf of San Miguel (Figure 4). The canal appears markedly level as it passes through the continental divide’s San Blas Mountains, an effect emphasized by the surrounding shading of mountainous topography. Below the map are four profile diagrams, illustrating the easy path through the purported pass in Darién when compared to the other potential routes in Panama, Nicaragua, and Mexico. In the lower left is a related, smaller version of the map in Figure 5. It is an overhead oblique view, with a new city mid-route denoted by a maroon octagon, nested within a similarly shaped expanse of green. Four sailing vessels are displayed in different stages of their canal crossing, with another six successfully moving through the Gulf and its bordering green hills on route to the Pacific. As with Scotland and other nations that noted the importance of Panama’s geography for commerce, explorers developed an interest in eastern Panama as a locus for a canal. Yet their actual surveying often was limited, repeating, as Airiau’s purported
mountain pass did, errors of geographical falsification or simplification. From the colonial era to long past independence, a number of quests to establish a canal route went awry in Darién, bolstering the region’s reputation as an unpredictable, dangerous place.

Figure 4: Oblique view of the planned octagonal city mid-route of the French canal. Althanase Airiau, Plan géographique a vol d’oiseau de la ville des fermes et du canal interoceanique [Geographical plan as the crow flies of the city farms and the interoceanic canal]. Folded map, in Canal interocéanique par l’Isthme du Darien, Nouvelle-Grenade (Amérique du Sud.) Canalisation par la colonisation (Paris, 1860). Courtesy of Yale University Library.

After five years journeying the famed naturalist Alexander von Humboldt assessed the merits and pitfalls of nine potential canal routes from British Columbia to Patagonia in his 1811 Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain. His first-hand knowledge of the Americas meant that his chapter on “the problem of communication between the two seas” was considered authoritative, in spite of his lack of experience in the prominent routes of Panama, Nicaragua, and northern Colombia (von Humboldt 1811). His and subsequent opinions inspired governments to embrace engineering as a means to overcome geography and secure quick passage between the Atlantic and Pacific.
The importance of an isthmian canal route grew with the California Gold Rush beginning in 1848. For gold prospectors a US overland route was treacherous and time-consuming, and the ship route via Cape Horn required at least eight months. A route that traversed Panama - a ship from the east coast of the US to Panama’s Caribbean coast city of Colón, then overland to Panama City, and via ship again to the US west coast - took a quick month (Mack 1944; Montañez 2004).

Soon English, French, United States, and Nuevo Granadian canal pursuits focused on eastern Panama. Irish doctor Edward Cullen went to the region in 1850, and claimed that there was a low pass in the continental divide (Cullen 1853). He thus purportedly found another Darién gap, one that made eastern Panama a popular site for canal exploration. But, as engineer Lionel Gisborne noted, the area’s difficulty had renown:

The reasons generally given for this lack of knowledge [about the Isthmus of Darien] is the difficulty of visiting the country, the climate, the incessant
rains, and the savage state of the Indian tribes—all combining to render the entry difficult, and the return more so. To these must be added the usual obstructions of an unexplored district, such as impenetrable woods, swamps, rivers, mountains, snakes, wild beasts, &c &c. (Gisborne 1853:3)

But Gisborne perpetuated Cullen's error, which arose as Peter Dana (2011: 135) recently put it “from a process influenced by incompetence, self-deception, and promotional zeal.” In that era of Suez Canal planning and construction, a low pass through Darién allowed engineers to contemplate a similar sea-level canal.

In 1854, three parties descended almost simultaneously upon eastern Panama, and by the end of the expeditions ten of the men had died (Mack 1944). Guna killed three of the British party, and seven of the US expedition succumbed to starvation by following the torturously winding Chucunaque River, which parallels rather than crosses the isthmus (Balf 2003). The US expedition, under the leadership of the ironically named Lieutenant Strain, was a prominent story serialized in Harper's Monthly Magazine in 1855.10 Nuevo Granada's famed cartographer Agustín Codazzi's hazy, curtailed trip of four days accentuated the inhospitable reputation of the area (Pérez Rancel 2002). These stories seemed to reinforce a need to modernize the region via a canal, lest such tales of nature dominating culture persist.

More canal exploration ensued. Historian Mack (1944: 259) noted that the Airiau book and map (1860), shown above, illustrated Darién as “a smiling open country almost as flat as Holland, dotted with prosperous farms and orchards and traversed by a broad, straight artificial waterway.” It was the US Navy Commanders Selfridge and Lull who did the first serious geographical study of eastern Panama in 1870 (Selfridge 1874). Beginning in 1876 another French expedition, led by Lucien Wyse and Armand Reclus, explored the region twice. They traveled into the abandoned mines at Cana, and suffered deaths of two of their crew before determining that a sea-level canal in the region was impossible (Wyse 1886). The mortal dangers experienced in the region's canal expeditions were reinforced by the new technology of photos and the older one of etchings, adding dark, foreboding forest images to Darién's largely verbal imagery of wilderness (Figure 6).

Having documented Darién's geographical impediments, canal endeavors moved west. In 1879 Ferdinand De Lesseup, the French backer of the Suez Canal, initiated a sea-level canal effort in central Panama's historic transit and railroad route. The French venture fostered notions of a separate identity while Panama was one of Colombia's nine departments: Panamanians consider it a critical juncture in their history. In 1903, after a series of bizarre negotiations, the United States took advantage of independence-seeking Panamanians and fomented independence from Colombia (Mack 1944; McCullogh 1977). In return the United States obtained a 10-mile wide swath across the center of the new country that would contain the canal and belong to the United States into perpetuity (subsequently curtailed to 1999 as a result of the Panama Canal Treaty) (see also Lasso in this issue of JL-4G). Beginning in 1914 with the Canal operating in the center of the country Darién was relegated, once again, to the periphery.
Taming Darién via Modernization

“In La Capitana, near Chepo, begin the separate world of Darién.” So read the caption of an illustration, based on a photo, of a plaid-shirts man and bespectacled woman apparently talking to a bare-breasted Emberá or Wounaan woman and her barefoot children (Figure 7). The couple stands beside their Volkswagen beetle, leaning back to gaze at the family. On their other side is a bilingual road sign proclaiming “End of the Pan American Highway: Here begins the Darien Gap.” The illustration is in the 1960 book *El Mito del Darién* (The Myth of Darién), which offers the solution of the Pan American Highway to the problem of Darién’s isolation (March 1960). The publication was part of a public relations effort to promote the Pan American Highway, integral to which was changing the characterization of Darién indigenous peoples from wild to retiring. Just as with March’s book, this era of eastern Panama’s history focused on taming the region via development. Infrastructure investments were part of these plans, and their relative success meant that later, at the turn of the twentieth century, taming also would come in a wave of conservation and new forms of development.
By the early 1900s a narrative of neglected Darién was well established. With the downfall of the Spanish empire in the New World, Panama’s independence, and the new canal in the center of the country, eastern Panama again was marginalized. A bishop of the region characterized it as such, compelling its development:

Darién with these foundations, with an excellent climate, veined with navigable rivers, many of them gold bearing, with a fertile soil, with mountains of precious woods, abundant in game, as well as the rivers in fish: with very rich gold mines, with a happy location between two oceans destined to meet there through an Isthmus easy of access, why is it to-day useless to the nation to which it belongs?
This question occurs to anyone and we shall answer in the first place that its very riches were the cause of its decadence and misfortune. The Darién country was a beautiful maiden with a mother who did not appreciate her, and the libertines left her in deplorable conditions. The greed of foreigners and the wicked passions aroused in the natives by them brought to ruin this province destined to have been the richest and happiest; and the very ones who should have tended toward its progress not only by social and religious interest, conspired against it. (Rojas y Arrieta 1929: 104)

The bishop’s words not only invoked the portrayals of a rich Darién, but also cast blame for the region’s “deplorable conditions” on indistinct interests by unspecified foreigners and indigenous peoples. Such characterizations seemed to call for modernization, particularly by Panamanians and those with supposed social and religious interests.

The Pan American Highway was to be one such effort. The Highway originally was conceived to foment closer commercial relations between the United States and the republics of Central and South America (Darién Subcommittee 1965). United States and Latin American governments backed the Highway efforts with surveying carried out in 1929, followed by the inauguration of the first paved section between Texas and Mexico in 1934. Colombia joined the United States and Panama in 1955 to create the Darién Subcommittee of the Pan American Highway Congress, which organized surveys of the area. According to a history of the project, Panamanian engineer Tomás Guardia Sr. coined the term the “Darién Gap” to “give a graphic idea, almost comical, of what Darién represented in the struggle to establish road communication for the Americas” (Darién Subcommittee 1965: 55).

The Darién Gap and its Spanish equivalent, el Tapón de Darién (the Darién stopper) took. Both monikers evoked the region’s geographical imaginary, and implied the need for the region to be filled or tamed. And so the region was conquered in a mid-century modernizing way: by vehicles. In 1960 The Pan American Highway Congress sponsored a Jeep and Land Rover transit (Ross 1961), which was soon followed by other vehicular crossings, including by the US Army in 1961 and 1962 (Darién Subcommittee 1965), Chevy Corvairs in 1961 (Darién Subcommittee 1965; Molano, Ramírez, and Emblin 1996), Land Rover in 1971 (Blashford-Snell n.d.), and motorcycle transit in 1975 (Webb 2003).

In this era more emphasis was given to local indigenous populations, but, curiously, less was noted of black populations that had resided in the region since the early 1500s. One author discounted local residents “historically the Chocos11 have not played any important role and aside from their frequent contact with whites and mestizos have conserved their naturalness and innocence. They are happy and content sons of nature and are gifted with happy ingenuity and are detached from all civilization” (Lutz 1924: 24).

This characterization, however, is reversed in a silent, B grade horror movie *Attack of the Jungle Women*, largely made from ethnographic footage shot in Panama in the late 1950s. In the end of the film, actors, wearing the Emberá, Wounaan, and Guna material culture collections seen in the previous ethnographic footage, attack the US explorers. Then, the film cuts to the US military rescue team that comes across the explorers’ burial site. Even
the author of a 1960 article about the Highway Congress transit of Darién could not resist the implication of danger by the local populace, “packed with incredibly dense vegetation, threaded with rivers and streams, and once thought to harbor head-hunting Indians as well as poisonous snakes” (Ross 1961: 373).

Before the Pan American Highway was extended to its current Darién terminus, the region again became a site of canal dreams. By the 1960s, the Panama Canal had become too small for the enormous ships that sought to traverse it and dreams renewed for a sea-level canal. The US Atomic Energy Commission’s Project Plowshare, which sought peaceful uses of nuclear explosives (such as mining, excavation, and natural gas production), planned for a new canal (Dana 2011; Frenkel 1998; Howe 2002; Kirsch 2005; Lindsay-Poland 2003). Route 17 was essentially the same route as the mid-nineteenth century, only this time more than two-dozen nuclear bombs, each hundreds of times as powerful as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, were being considered for use in excavation (Howe 2002). Eastern Panama became a locus of intense scientific study. Just as the scientific community was expressing heightened concern about a nuclear-excavated canal and its adverse biological effects, the project was cancelled in 1970 (Covich 2015). The final report stated that a sea-level canal was no longer feasible due to environmental dissent and the inevitability of breaking the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which prohibited nuclear explosions that cause radioactive material to cross an international border (Howe 2002).

The late 1960s also marked indigenous village formation in Darién. Emberá and Wounaan initiated villages for schools, so their children would be able to speak with the increasing number of outsiders in their lands (Herlihy 1986). The first village formed in 1953 when its residents built a school, and the Panamanian government appointed a teacher to work there (Herlihy 1986). Missionaries, whose vaccinations, churches, and linguistic activities clustered families together, also encouraged village formation (Velásquez Runk et al. 2007). Panama’s populist dictator Omar Torrijos facilitated village formation and indigenous hierarchical leadership organizations (Herlihy 1986). Both strengthened state control of people, timber, and mining resources at a time when a canal and highway were to allow their access.

The Highway extension from Chepo was initiated in the late 1970s with US funding. Colombia’s hoof and mouth disease became a concern, especially how the forests of eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia – the stopper – provided a natural barrier to it. As a result, a US judge blocked final completion of the connection to South America in 1975 (Howe 2001a; Miller 2014). Once the extension was completed to Yaviza in the mid-1980s, the Darién Gap had been shortened to its current 106-kilometer expanse. Ironically, a Gap crossing became more pedestrian. A hike through the shorted Darién Gap became the mark of a true adventure tourist (Howe 2004). In the popular scientific adventure *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, the book opens with a Gap crossing, symbolizing the author’s readiness for further exploits (Davis 1985).
Conserving Wild Darién

The map shown in Figure 8 is a caricature: yellow-hued deforested areas break up its variable, bright greens of forest or other vegetation. In those yellow pastures, most prominently along the Pan American Highway, white and brown cattle are amassed. Towards the eastern border the trees become canopy emergents, and, near a toucan and an ambiguous feline, people carrying the Colombian flag are helpfully labeled “displaced.” To the north a group straddles the border; these fatigue-clad individuals also carry the Colombian flag, but are marked “guerillas.” A fiberglass skiff plies the waters of the Caribbean coast, a marijuana leaf adorning its flag. Titled “Darién: Lung of Central America” the map was published by Panama’s largest environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), Asociación de Conservación de la Naturaleza de Panamá (ANCON), and succinctly ties the map to the region’s famous forests while summarizing its new pressures. It also externalizes many of those pressures, implying their attribution to Colombian instigators. This latest, and current, period centers on a threatened Darién, and its need for environmental conservation and strengthened governance.


Darién’s modernization became too successful. The Pan American Highway extension meant new logging and agricultural frontiers that extended well into Darién Province. By the 1990s this led to tens of millions of dollars to conserve and develop the region, and, ironically, to pave, or resurface, the highway (Velásquez Runk et al. 2007). These
huge conservation and development investments in Darién coincided with the country’s neoliberal economic and social reforms, which gathered strength after the departure of the United States from the former Canal Zone in 1999 (Velásquez Runk 2012). These investments, as with the ANCON map, carried a subtext: there was a need to strengthen governance over the unruly frontier. For example, in 2003 the US Agency for International Development contributed $6.5 million for a debt-for-nature swap for Darién National Park. The environmental community was surprised, as these were monies they had not sought, but they reasoned that the funds assuaged US guilt for spillover problems in Panama caused by drug eradication efforts in Colombia.

A new Darién narrative began to appear, of a landscape threatened not only by development, but also by drug running, guerrillas, and kidnappers. These accounts reprised the earlier histories, complementing them with the new dangers (e.g., Hart Dyke and Winder 2003; Schaffer Muñoz 2015; Smith 2013; Young Pelton 2003). In one adventurer’s account of his kidnapping, the author proclaimed the Darién Gap is “a place where you can find abandoned Scottish settlements, isolated Indian villages, gun runners and drug gangs, left-wing guerrillas and right-wing death squads. It was a place I was drawn to” (Young Pelton 2003: 66). While these extra-legal activities resulted in sporadic outbursts of violence in the late 1990s, those activities have since become normalized; the continual presence of FARC guerrillas (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) in Darién would seem to testify to this point (e.g., Agence France-Presse 2013; Otero 2002; Polanco 2015). This new narrative of Darien threatened by illegal activities also was invoked in international press about the region (Smith 2013; Schaefer Muñoz 2015). In particular, the difficulty of a Darien Gap crossing for migrants to the United States - from places as far away as Somalia, Nepal, and Cuba - seemed to exoticize the region, through descriptions of how “global migrants brave Panama’s vipers, bats, and bandits” through “the treacherous jungle” (Schaefer Muñoz 2015: 1). This tendency for exaggeration was pronounced when compared to more factual accounts, particularly in the domestic press (Anonymous 2012; Benjamin 2009; Howe 2004).

Not only did authors sensationalize their own or migrants’ exploits over local murders, sackings, rapes, and robberies, but local residents were diminished or disparaged in accounts of the threatened region. In Young Pelton’s version of his and colleagues’ kidnapping by paramilitaries, the adventure journalist is not forthright about the assassination of four Guna men (2003), including leaders (but see the Panamanian press, e.g., Anonymous 2003). Other authors were less direct, portraying indigenous people as belonging to an earlier era, implying their primitiveness. For example: “in this unlogged, unburned zone [between Yaviza and Colombia,] Indians still hunt, fish, and gather products from the forest much as they did when Columbus arrived in the Darién in 1502” (Holz 1980: 164). Tourism guidebooks similarly sensationalized: “you pass through spectacular jungle inhabited by jaguars and mountain lions and Indians who until recently did most of their hunting with blowguns” (Doggett 2004: 358). A June 2000 story in the NGO ANCON’s magazine combines these ideas. Darién’s “ecotourism potential” is demonstrated with a photo of a bare breast and beaded jewelry of an Emberá or Wounaan woman. Yet, non-indigenous peoples frequently were vilified:
Right behind the loggers were settlers - thousands of them - poor people looking to eke out a living by turning into cropland the trampled vegetation left by the loggers. With the mature trees gone, all that was required to create cropland was an axe and a match; after some crackling and sizzling and a lot of smoke, the would-be subsistence farmers had fields for planting. Panamanian law encourages homesteading, and the settlers were very encouraged; they burned and burned and burned. (Doggett 2001: 350, italics in original)

By the mid-2000s neoliberal reforms, international investment (including lifestyle migration and narco-investments), infrastructure development, tourism growth, and legislative changes that fostered land-grabbing throughout the country (Velásquez Runk 2012) were facilitated in eastern Panama by an imaginative geography. The implied stagnancy in the region, such as a Darién shoreline “probably little changed from when Vasco Nuñez de Balboa first saw it” (Smith 2013: 59), seemed to beckon outside intervention. In the last decade residents were approached by foreigners who wanted to buy their land outright (Castro 2009), national news broadcast petroleum deposits (López Guía 2011), Colombian businessmen partially drained, sprayed agrotoxins, and planted rice in the Matusagarati wetlands (Pinilla 2014), investors bought 9,000 hectares of land for by teak plantations (Castro 2013), and both an indigenous leader and logger were killed in a logging conflict (Vega Loo 2012). Even with ongoing indigenous land rights conflicts in Darién (e.g., Redacción de La Prensa 2012), media recently have announced that the electrical connection between the continents would go through the Emberá – Wounaan Comarca (Calderón 2015). The region’s perceived distance – although, remarkably, post-paving it is possible to drive from Panama City to the Darien Gap in four hours – long provided cover for illicit activities. In the 2014 dry season, an election year, a road was built up the Tuira River to the border area of Darién National Park. During the 2015 dry season illegal loggers were at work, and an African oil palm plantation was being planted in the Darién Gap: dugouts full of oil palm seedlings were motored upriver. In more remote areas, “narcoterrorists” illegally, but routinely, mine gold (Chacón 2014).

Yet, alternative geographical imaginations may be possible. With the country’s 2013 indigenous withdrawal, which was spearheaded by Emberá leaders, from the United Nations’ climate change mitigation strategy reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, known as UN-REDD, NGOs are supporting a new slate of projects for Darién (Velásquez Runk n.d.). Projects related to land use planning, indigenous land rights, and environmental governance are just being initiated. Future work may demonstrate how these activities break down centuries of Darién’s imaginative geography.

**Conclusion**

“In a remote corner of the world, a wild place is still intact because of war. In this global village called Earth, there’s one part of town that has everything you could want. The tiny country of Panama has tropical beaches, rain-forest jungles, coffee-growing mountains, and, of course, one humdinger of a canal. It also has one of the world’s most natural, remote, and dangerous wild areas – the Darien jungle.” (Cook 2004: 41)
Wild Darién, the region’s imaginative geography, has persisted over time, underscoring the area as rich, dangerous, and backward. This representation is also remarkably widespread, being perpetuated both internationally and domestically. Yet, as I have shown here, Darién’s imaginative geography results from a surficial and spotty reading of history, particularly colonial histories. Ambiguous, violent indigenous peoples in the early colonial era, conquistador Balboa’s siting of the Pacific and the establishment of Panama’s pacifying Spanish origins, productive gold mines and indigenous rebellion, dangerous plants and treacherous landscapes in canal quests all have contributed to the pervasive representation of wild Darién. In the last half century the vernacular persistence of this imaginary drew attention to modernize and develop the region, to domesticate the frontier.

Ironically, efforts at opening up and developing Darién were so successful that a new narrative was popularized, that of a threatened landscape requiring conservation. Now, though, new threats often are discrete and normalized: insidious and virulent drug, arms, and human trafficking. These, in turn, tacitly mock the adventurer’s Darién Gap, as the famous region is crossed almost daily (Howe 2004). Yet, nostalgia remains for wild Darién, one easily read even in international articles (Smith 2013; Schaefer Muñoz 2015). Such nostalgia precedes even the termination of the original Highway extension:

The Darien is at the point of sunset of an old and traditional way of lifestyles of the people who live there. For anyone who wants to see the Darién as Columbus, Balboa, Drake, Morgan, or forty-niners saw it, the time is now. In these few tens of miles between the end-of-road and the Colombian border there is still a part of the forest relatively untouched and unexploited. (Holz 1980: 164)

Obscuring both people and histories in eastern Panama allows the region to be characterized by Candace Slater’s (2000) transformative potential, never sufficient unto itself. Such potential was evident in the numerous interventions in the region – extension of the Pan-American Highway, sea-level canal plans, village formation, and, most recently, conservation and development activities. The ambiguity of pre-Columbian residents coupled with the characterization of indigenous peoples as stagnant, as they were at the time of Spanish conquistadors, also serves to facilitate and even justify governmental and non-governmental interventions in the region. This year new projects for Darién are attempting to finish up the conservation and development goals from the late twentieth century.

As scholars increasingly emphasize, such imaginative geographies have sociopolitical outcomes (Dawson 2013; McFarlane 2004; Slater 2002; Springer 2011). Darién’s imaginative geography fosters land speculation, including plantations, tourism, narco-investments, and logging. The centuries-old notion of a Darién as a wild and dangerous place allows repeated efforts to tame it, thus privileging outsiders in the process. That has resulted concomitantly in the region’s domestication and normalization of an incipient yet constant violence. I conclude by echoing McFarlane’s admonition to “create and support – while constantly interrogating – alternative geographical imaginations” (McFarlane 2004: 911).
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Notes

1 After orthographic revisions to their language the group now uses the spelling “Guna” instead of the highly published “Kuna.”

2 Once called the “Intermediate Area” between Mesoamerica and Amazonia and Andes cultural regions (Constenla Umaña 1991; Myers 1978), during the 2015 Art and Archaeology of Costa Rica and Colombia conference, scientists repeatedly stated a preference for the term “Isthmo-Colombian” region as per Hoopes and Fonseca 2003.

3 The “Darién” gold style refers to stylized human figures made of gold and used as dangles (Falchetti de Sáenz 2005). However, Darién style pieces largely are from the Sinu region of northcentral Colombia (ibid).

4 With the infill to part of Panama Bay for the Cinta Costera highway, the monument to Balboa is no longer on a tiny piece of land jutting into the Pacific Ocean, but in the new highway’s median. Locals, however, still refer generally to this area as Avenida Balboa.

5 For centuries Balboa’s route remained uncertain. Teodoro Mendez’s knowledge of the region and careful analysis of routes suggested that Balboa viewed the Pacific at or close to Cerro Pechito Parado, between Río Cucunatí and Río Congo, see Mendez 1979. Curiously, six years earlier Waldseemüller’s famous map of 1507 showed a clear Pacific Ocean to the west of the South American continent, but it is unclear how knowledge of the South Sea came to his attention (Hébert 2011).


7 See Lionel Wafer’s map on-line here, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Isthmus_of_Darien_and_Panama.jpg


9 There is much scholarship on the Scot’s Darién colony, see Hart 1929; Howe 1998; Pears 1936; Prebble 2000. A fictionalized account of the colony can be found in Galbraith 2000.

11 An ambiguous term that could refer to Emberá, Wounaan, or both.

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