

NOT A LAUGHING MATTER: CARTOONS, PLEBEIAN HEROES, AND PANAMA'S MILITARY

GOVERNMENT (1968-1989)

By

MIRIAM ELIZABETH VILLANUEVA

Bachelor of Arts, 2010
Texas A&M University-Kingsville
Kingsville, Texas

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction: Behind the cartoon	1
Chapter 1: Interpreting Latin American Comics: An Academic Approach	9
Chapter 2: Plebeian Nationalism and Populist Panama (1968-1989)	32
Chapter 3: Cartooning Justice: Pedro Prestán's Illustrative Vindication	65
Bibliography	103

INTRODUCTION: BEHIND THE CARTOON

A misperception exists that only young audiences read comic books and graphic novels. I caution the reader of this study that the creators of *Pedro Prestán* never intended to make a children's fairytale. Unlike most comics in the U.S., Latin American comics and graphic novels have mature readers. The dark image of the protagonist hanging lifeless over the railroad tracks in Colón, Panama, is anything but humorous.¹ The serious nature of the novel *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas* stems from a Latin American tradition to create illustrated histories that are intended to educate the poor and the working class.² In this case, *Pedro Prestán* narrates the story of a mulatto lawyer who, in 1885, led a movement against an oppressive dictator and an imperialist force that threatened to undermine the rights of the *pueblo* (community). In the climax of the story, the ruthless elite and Yankee Marines accuse him of inciting a battle that left Colón in ashes. After giving Prestán a trial, the villains execute the leader, along with several of his men. The tale ends, though, with other leaders picking up Prestán's mantle and continuing the fight for Panamanian sovereignty. To a reader unfamiliar with the events described in the story, the work portrays a courageous man who died defending his *pueblo*. However, in "picking at the document" like historian Robert Darnton advises, we begin to unravel a thread of messages that reveal how Panamanians conceive their national heroes.³

¹Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena and Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán bajo el furor de las tormentas* (Panama: Ediciones Formato 16, 1986), 86.

²Pedro Rivera, interview by author, July 20, 2011.

³Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 5.

What types of messages exist within the graphic novel that makes it worthy of a historical study? Since the 1990s, scholars of comic literature have found that graphic novels like *Pedro Prestán* provide a space for hegemonic and subversive elements. They see the comic as reflecting both the state and subordinated people's ideologies within its illustrations and text. Thus, academics argue that comics display multiple discourses and can play a role in shaping national identity.⁴ In this study, the theories on comics apply to graphic novels, which are a synonymous type of work. Comic books and graphic novels follow the same themes inherent in the romantic literature that Doris Sommer analyzes. In *Foundational Fictions*, she examines how nineteenth-century writers and statesmen combine narrative fictions with fact to "fill in a history that would help to establish the legitimacy of the emerging nation . . . and direct that history towards a future ideal."⁵ As illustrated histories, comic books and graphic novels also partake in the process of nation-building.

Nationalist studies of the 1990s influenced the field of Latin American comics and graphic novels. In this period, theorists adopted Florencia Mallon's examination of plebeian republicanism, recognizing the subalterns' political participation and contributions to nation-building.⁶ Mallon views nationalism as a contested phenomenon in which plebeian and official ideologies co-exist. Historians Aims McGuinness, Peter Szok, James Howe, and Lok Siu have

⁴For examples of leading works, see Ann Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Héctor D. Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete, eds., *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

⁵Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fiction: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7; Peter A. Szok's work has also examined the role of literature in nation-building in Panama during the early republic. He argues, "modernization and U.S. imperialism revived the 'foundational fictions'" in the twentieth century. Peter A. Szok, "Balboa Meets Anayansi," in *Wolf Tracks: Popular Art and Re-Africanization in Twentieth-Century Panama* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 49.

⁶Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

applied the perspective that subalterns were not peons outside the purview of the state, but rather were actively engaged in the political process.⁷ These scholars show that in Panama's history, the popular sector devised its own conceptions of citizenship and nation. In fact, Panamanian plebeian leaders like Pedro Prestán pursued their own agendas within the political and social framework of their era.

By approaching how local intellectuals and the Panamanian state informed the nationalist messages in the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán*, this study contributes to the historiographical debate. This work uses the popular 1980s graphic novel as a way to understand the cultural and political context of Panama's military period (1968-1989). In 1968, the National Guard overthrew the Republic of Panama and established a populist regime founded on *Torrijismo*, the ideology of General Omar Torrijos. *Torrijismo*, a hybrid form of populism and plebeian republicanism, emphasized *el pueblo* (in this case the popular sector) as the crux of Panamanian identity while casting its enemies (the elite and U.S.) as oligarchical-imperialists. Using *Torrijismo*, the government attempted to co-opt the groups associated with the longstanding tradition of popular republicanism, dating back to the 1856 Watermelon Riot in which locals stood up to unruly North American travelers on their way to California. In downplaying the racial discrimination that plagued the isthmus, *Torrijismo* incorporated the

⁷Aims McGuinness analyzes nineteenth-century popular conceptions of national identity within the context of the 1856 Watermelon Riot, which was a demonstration of plebeian nationalism. Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Peter Szok's book shows how in the mid-to late twentieth-century Panamanian popular art "contests the markers and monuments of official nationalism" and forced the country to reconsider its denial of a black Panamanian culture. Szok, *Wolf Tracks*, 7; Anthropologist James Howe also sees official nationalism as being contested by the Kuna Indian tribe in Panama. The Kuna resisted efforts to assimilate their communities violently resisted the state. James Howe, *A People Who Would Not Kneel: Panama, the United States, and the San Blas Kuna* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998); Lok Siu investigates the diasporic Chinese community in Panama and how they conjured a Panamanian identity. Lok C. D. Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

ethnic majority based on class. To consolidate power, the military regime's intellectuals enacted a cultural revolution to appropriate the figures and events associated with plebeian nationalism. By redefining the movements and leaders as patriots, the state hoped to maintain legitimacy with the populace.

After seeing the regime elevate characters previously ignored in mainstream history, local intellectuals worked at vindicating their heroes like Pedro Prestán. For nearly a century, national memory tainted the image of Prestán whom well-known historians considered an unpatriotic arsonist. Since Prestán, a mulatto, led a group of mostly black soldiers to fight in the Colombian civil war of 1885, the isthmus' early historians considered him incompatible with the Hispanophile project of the state. As a consequence, several efforts to exonerate the leader failed in the early twentieth century. Since the military regime downplayed race, although paradoxically still adhering to *mestizaje* (the mixing of Spanish and Indigenous heritages), scholars worked at portraying Prestán as a nationalist hero who exemplified *Torrijismo* dogma in exchange for the state's recognition of his innocence.⁸ The illustrated biography on Prestán's movement is the culmination of local intentions and state rhetoric, demonstrating that popular art reflects both subversive and hegemonic agendas. I argue that the graphic novel served as a space for Panama's military regime to refashion its pantheon of revolutionary leaders and for subalterns to absolve Prestán in history. Overall, this thesis helps us understand the give-and-take nature of shaping a national identity.

⁸Priestley notes that the government helped curb racism, but he adds that the national discourse still discriminated against blacks and equated national culture with the White-Mestizo region of Azuero. George Priestley and Alberto Barrow, "The Black Movement in Panamá: A Historical and Political Interpretation, 1994-2004," *Souls* 10, no. 3 (1994): 232.

This study does not intend to cover the history of comics in Panama. Nor is this a study of the regime's significance within the larger Latin American trend, in the 1960s and 70s, of populist military regimes like those in Peru and Bolivia. Those topics will be for future research endeavors. As well as presenting a case study on a graphic novel's reflection of national discourse to create a state-approved hero in exchange for the character's exoneration, this work focuses on the National Guard's appropriation of plebeian figures and events to maintain power. To accomplish these objectives, I use oral testimonies conducted with the writer, artist, and editors of *Pedro Prestán*. In order to understand how scholars have interpreted Prestán, I also analyze histories about the leader from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To contextualize Prestán's place within the appropriation of plebeian movements, I look into leading military intellectuals' monographs and articles that reinterpret, via *Torrijismo*, the messages and contributions of popular characters and struggles. When examining those sources, I also research national legislation on new holidays, cultural institutions, and commemorations to show how the government still maintained a *mestizo* ideal but deemphasized race to co-opt the masses and their history.

In addition, I use concepts that Mallon developed such as "cultural revolution" and "plebeian republicanism" to describe the government's appropriation of popular figures. I argue that a cultural revolution occurred throughout the military period. According to Mallon, after a movement achieves hegemony, it can bring about a "cultural revolution" that rearranges the historical messages of subaltern groups to achieve broader influence.⁹ I suggest that to maintain power with the masses, intellectuals associated with the regime led a cultural revolution that redefined national identity as emanating from the popular sector. In addition, I

⁹Mallon, *Peasant and Nation*, 7.

also use plebeian republicanism to describe subaltern conceptions of politics and their ideas on government's role in society.

I organized my study thematically into three chapters. The first chapter discusses trends in Latin American comic historiography. I argue that, because of an emphasis on large comic industries and comic strips, scholars have ignored Panama's rich artistic culture, in particular the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán*. In the 1970s, intellectuals focused their attention on comics of the United States as a hegemonic tool that denigrated the image of Latin American countries while exalting a Western identity. After pioneers legitimized the field, a new generation in the 1980s turned their attention towards Latin American comics. As a result, the younger scholars developed a paradigm that suggested subordinated peoples created cartoons to challenge the state. While some scholars still choose between the two schools of thought, others have recently established a mediation theory that combines both discourses. Contemporary works demonstrate that comics provide spaces that help governments and creators shape nationalist messages. However, these works continue to neglect Panama because it lacks a major comic industry. I demonstrate that Panama does have a graphic history and that *Pedro Prestán* is reflective of the mediation theory. In fact, the graphic novel about Prestán sheds new light on how a populist military regime recognized a comic as a historical work. I suggest that we must avoid paradigms that give industrialized Latin American countries priority when analyzing comics.

Chapter 2 discusses Panama's military period (1968-1989) and its restructuring of national identity. I claim that the military regime adjusted traditional paradigms of nationalism to maintain legitimacy with the popular sector, known for its long tradition of plebeian

republicanism. Studies on the military period traditionally have addressed the populist reforms of the country, contradictory elements of the administration's policies and actions, and the guard's repressive methods.¹⁰ In contrast, this investigation focuses on how the National Guard devised an ideology to co-opt the masses, their patriotic heroes and movements to secure legitimacy and power. The chapter first provides an overview of the contentious history of Panamanian nationalism, beginning with the Colombian period (1821-1903) and the Republican era (1903-1968). I show how white leaders, in fear of the Afro/mestizo majority, devised what Szok has called a xenophilus project to deny the ethnic majority a place in the nation-building process.¹¹ In a continuous fashion, white elites suppressed the contributions of plebeian nationalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I state that the republic's rejection of plebeian republicanism partly explains its fall to the National Guard in 1968. After the military took power, it developed an ideology known as *Torrijismo* that emphasized working-class identity over race as well as anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist themes. Since the military still adhered to *mestizaje*, the new *Torrijismo* project facilitated the guard's incorporation of the masses without recognizing their ethnicity. To retain its alliance with the popular sector, military intellectuals brought about a cultural revolution to redefine, with *Torrijismo*, the messages of plebeian struggles. In creating a pantheon of subaltern heroes, the government

¹⁰For examples of works that deal with populist reforms and the guard's constitutionality, see Steve Ropp, *Panamanian Politics: From Guarded Nation to National Guard* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982); George Priestly, *Military Government and popular participation in Panama: The Torrijos Regime, 1968-1975* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986); Robert Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001). For works that discuss the illegitimacy of the government and violations against human rights, see Carlos Guevara Mann, *Panamanian Militarism: A Historical Interpretation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1996); R.M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez, *In the Time of Tyrants: Panama, 1968-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990); Kevin Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

¹¹Peter A. Szok, *La Última gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth Century Panama* (West Port, CONN: Greenwood Press, 2001), chp.2.

bolstered its image as a popular revolution. This chapter offers a new understanding of how the Guard preserved its hegemony.

Chapter 3 is a case study on one particular plebeian hero, Pedro Prestán. I assert that, to push the government to recognize the mulatto's innocence, local intellectuals repackaged him within the state's paradigm as a Panamanian patriot. This effort resulted in the isthmus' first graphic novel, a book which reflects both the creators and regime's desires to vindicate and elevate Prestán as a freedom fighter. I demonstrate this process by examining the first failed attempt to exonerate Prestán in the Republican period. Because of the Hispanophile discourse, mainstream historians of this period refused to acknowledge Prestán's innocence or contributions to forming a national identity. As a result, individuals who sought a formal vindication for the leader had little success. However, local intellectuals during the military regime utilized the government's appropriation of popular heroes and events to push for Prestán's innocence. On the centennial of Prestán's death, these leaders led a public debate that placed him within *Torrijismo* rhetoric while arguing for his absolution. In response, the military's leading intellectuals commended the effort and recognized Prestán as a patriot rather than an arsonist. The graphic novel, *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas* is the result of this movement. I show that the creators were individuals co-opted in the formative years of the regime; they not only embraced the state's agenda but also felt compelled to clear Prestán's name in the national memory. The chapter demonstrates how the isthmus' only graphic novel provided an outlet for the Guard to create a hero reflective of its rhetoric and for the masses to absolve their leaders in official history. Overall, the graphic novel helped the state maintain power.

1. Interpreting Latin American Comics

“The novel has an advantage over the historical essay: it humanizes.”¹

-Pedro Rivera, *Pedro Prestán Bajo el Furor de las Tormentas*

In 1986, Panamanian academic Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena and Kuna artist Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera published *Pedro Prestán bajo el furor de las tormentas*. They drafted the book without the resources of Latin America’s well-known comic writers and artists. Nevertheless, the monograph’s organization and the writer’s investigation exceeded other works of this genre in Latin America in that it included a greater amount of historical documentation.² With only a few art supplies, Díaz labored a year sketching individual panels. To recreate the historical figure Pedro Prestán, Bethancourt relied on his cinematography and sociology training. The book focuses on events in 1885 when Prestán led a popular movement against Colombian president Rafael Nuñez’s conservative government. The military detained Prestán and several of his troops and hanged them for allegedly burning the city of Colón. In conjunction with the *Grupo Experimental del Cine Universitario* (University Experimental Film Group, GECU), Bethancourt and Díaz created the graphic novel for popular consumption. Despite the novel’s popularity in the 1980s, *Pedro Prestán* remains largely unknown outside of Panama.

¹ Pedro Rivera, quoted in Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena and Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán bajo el furor de las tormentas* (Panamá: Ediciones Formato 16, 1986), 1.

²In 1967, Argentinian comic writer Héctor Oesterheld and artists Alberto Briceño crafted arguably the first biographical graphic novel in the world, Briceño and Oesterheld’s *Vida del Che*. Héctor Oesterheld and Alberto Briceño, *Vida del Che* (Argentina: s.n., 1968). In Mexico, Eduardo (Rius) del Ríos marketed the series *Para Principantes* and other comics on well-known historical figures. Rius, *Cuba para principantes* (México: Grijalbo, 1986). These comic creators utilize citations and bibliographies, but the comic of Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera surpasses them with historically accurate documentation.

Academia and international comic enthusiasts rarely acknowledge countries, such as Panama, that industrialized late. As a consequence, comic historiography ignores novels like *Pedro Prestán* that illustrate interactions between officials and cartoonists. In the case of *Pedro Prestán*, artists and intellectuals created a graphic novel that had nation-building functions. Indeed, Panamanian leaders praised the creators of *Pedro Prestán* for framing the story in the nation's new populist, anti-oligarchical, and anti-imperialistic discourse. On July 6, 1987, the *Ministerio de Educación* applauded *Pedro Prestán's* "socio-historical, Panamanian thought."³ By displaying patriotic themes, the work played a major role in legitimizing the Panamanian government. The authors redefined the interpretation of Prestán's movement to force the regime to vindicate the leader, whose contemporaries had falsely accused him of destroying Colón in 1885. During the military period, the state's populist rhetoric inspired a cultural revolution to appropriate popular leaders like Prestán through a working-class identity rather than race, a move that incorporated many individuals previously excluded from the national agenda. While supportive of the regime's discourse, the graphic novelists also saw the cultural revolution as an opportunity to cast Prestán in a new light. The *Pedro Prestán* novel is exceptional in its origin, government recognition, and its acceptance as a historical study.

The dual nature of *Pedro Prestán*—a graphic novel based on actual historical events—provides an interesting case study of illustrative approaches to history. A recent search concerning the novel, in the online catalog of Panama's *Biblioteca Nacional* yielded subject terms such as *Panama-historia* (history-Panama) rather than World Cat's label, *fiction*.⁴ In

³Ibid.

⁴World Cat, description of *Pedro Prestán bajo el furor de las tormentas*, <http://www.worldcat.org/title/pedro-prestan-bajo-el-furor-de-las-tormentas/oclc/18034607> (accessed November

Comics as History, Joseph Witek examines the role of historically-based U.S. comic books in educating readers about forgotten heroes and problems that form a nation's past.⁵ *Pedro Prestán* follows the conventions Witek identifies in the reinterpretation of history. The writer of *Pedro Prestán* used his two years of research to create a graphic novel that redefines the revolutionary figure's role in Panama's official narrative.⁶ Panamanian intellectuals still consider the work the definitive biography on Prestán.⁷ The author employed the military regime's rhetoric that emphasized working class identity and nationalism over race. The graphic novel bolstered the government's appropriation of subaltern history to project itself as a plebian revolution. In evaluating *Pedro Prestán*, I suggest that Latin American comics and graphic novels also have the ability to reconstruct history.

The literature reviewed in this chapter begins with foundational 1970s studies that view comics as imposed by the state. Scholars apply cultural imperialism theory to focus on the role of the mass media, particularly U.S. comics within underdeveloped societies. Adherents of the cultural imperialism school interpret the comic as an attempt by powerful nations to dominate the political, social, and economic systems of developing countries. This chapter then considers academia's move toward analyzing Latin American counterculture comics. By the 1980s, scholars looked at Latin America's rich comic tradition and developed a different theoretical viewpoint. Counter-culture studies proposed that subordinated peoples play a key role in constructing comic books. The chapter then focuses on the recent interest in mediation theory,

21, 2012); Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá, *descripción of Pedro Prestán bajo el furor de las tormentas*, <http://biblos.binal.ac.pa/cgi-bin/abnetcl/O7023/ID43281279/NT2> (accessed November 21, 2011).

⁵ Joseph Witek, *Comic books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson, MISS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 117.

⁶Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, interview by author, Panama City, July 19, 2011.

⁷Leading Panamanian scholar Alfredo Figueroa Navarro stated that the book "captures the tumultuous climate of the period" and does a great job of narrating Prestán's life. Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, interview by author, Panama City, Panama, July 22, 2011.

a paradigm which views the production of comics as a contested phenomenon. Mediation theorists recognize that the discourse of both the people and the state shape the content of comic books. Scholars now examine the comic and graphic novel's ability to reflect national identity. The graphic novel is synonymous with the comic. However, graphic novels are longer and have more character development. Latin American comic historiography has passed through three stages: cultural imperialism (1970s), counterculture (1980s-1990s), and mediation (1998-present). I review the historiography to reveal the lack of studies on "late industrialization" countries and biographical works like *Pedro Prestán*. While the mediation theorists discounted Panama, the isthmus, nevertheless, developed a comic industry very reflective of the theorists' paradigm. In tracing the field, the chapter helps us understand why *Pedro Prestán* can deepen insights about the mediation approach, especially given the novel's origin, function as a historical work, and acceptance by the Panamanian government.

Cultural Imperialism Theory

In the first half of the twentieth century, intellectuals scrutinized the content and rhetoric of comics. Scholars were worried about the arts influence on children and proposed methods to control comic distribution. Governments passed an array of laws and regulations to restrict comic production and importation. In the 1950s, the United States led the first campaigns against comics, which set off crusades in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Countries like Argentina, Chile, and Brazil closely regulated cartoon publications.⁸ In Mexico, the

⁸For accounts of the censorship and suppression of comic books in Latin America, see Ana Merino, "Oesterheld, The literary voice of Argentine Comics," in *Cartooning in Latin America*, ed. John A. Lent (New Jersey: Hampton Press, INC, 2005), 61-75; and Fernando Reati, "Argentina's Montoneros: Comics, Cartoons, and Images as Political Propaganda in the Underground Guerrilla Press of the 1970s," in *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity*

campaign succeeded in forming La Comisión Calificadora de Publicaciones y Revistas Ilustradas to monitor and censor the industry.⁹ The anti-comic discourse inspired a plethora of scholarship on the negative influences of U.S. comics and editorial cartoons on Latin America. This international interest in comics grew during the 1960s and 1970s. Within popular culture studies, theorists began examining the comic's influence on society with the theory of cultural imperialism. An offshoot of the Frankfurt School, the theory argues that mass culture is "imposed from above on subordinated peoples by outside forces of domination."¹⁰ In 1975, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart first applied the theory to understand how U.S. comic books imported to Latin America negatively affected the region. Dorfman and Mattelart were concerned with how Disney comics forced Western ideology on developing countries. They determined that U.S. comics were an informal method of exerting First World power over the reader. Dorfman and Mattelart's revolutionary concept was the foundation for comic studies in Latin America.

Dorfman and Mattelart applied cultural imperialism theory in *How to Read Donald Duck*.¹¹ The authors discovered the infiltration of Disney comics in the Chilean children comic market. The theory suggests Disney comics, such as *Donald Duck*, embodied United States' societal behaviors and norms. U.S. representations appeared harmless to U.S. intelligentsia because the basic values inherent in the comic coincided with the cultural privileges of the

in Latin/o American Comics, ed. Héctor D. Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 97-110.

⁹Ann Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, & Other Threats to the Nation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 109.

¹⁰Chuck Tatum, "From Sandino to Mafalda: Recent Works on Latin American Popular Culture," *Latin American Research Review* 29, no. 1 (1994): 198.

¹¹Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1975).

country. According to Dorfman and Mattelart, Disney characters represented the values, ideas, and criteria of the U.S. and other advanced capitalist societies. While the Disney comics seemed innocuous in the United States, their ideology became dangerous for developing countries struggling with capitalism. Rather than create specific comic books that reflected the lifestyles and issues of Latin Americans, Disney works continued to ignore the disparities in wealth between U.S. and Latin American readers. Dorfman and Mattelart assert that in downplaying these issues, *Donald Duck* comics discouraged the masses from participating in movements that opposed capitalism.

In addition to pointing out that American comics ignore problems with capitalism, Dorfman and Mattelart demonstrate how Disney comic books denigrated the image of Latin American countries. The series depicted Hispanic peoples as noble savages who lacked the knowledge to create a progressive, modern society. While the comics see Hispanics as naïve and suffering from superficial traits, the U.S. ducks appear as intelligent and benefiting from superior characteristics. Dorfman and Mattelart reveal how the comics project Latin Americans as U.S. subjects. The authors claim the Donald duck family's imperialistic nature demonstrates U.S. aspirations to civilize Latin America. For the authors, these comic books force their Spanish-language readers to think they are socially inferior to Western individuals and in need of U.S. guidance.

Dorfman and Mattelart set the foundation for future comic studies, and, in fact, other academics modeled their research on Dorfman and Mattelart's findings. Numerous scholars produced publications concerning other U.S. cartoons and graphics.¹² These works developed a

¹²For examples on imperialist theory, see Higilio Álvarez Constantino, *La magia de los comics coloniza nuestra cultura* (Mexico City, 1978); Andrés Amorós, *Subliteraturas* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1974); Irene Herner, *Mitos y*

top-down approach to examining comics. Five years after *How to Read Donald Duck*, John J. Johnson modeled his work on Dorfman and Mattelart's examination of Hispanic representations. Johnson's *Latin America in Caricature* examined U.S editorial cartoons from 1880 to 1980 in terms of their portrayals of Latin American peoples and countries.¹³ Johnson argued that U.S. cartoons, like comic books, echoed stereotypes that damage the image of Latin American countries. By tracing how and why U.S. artists created racist images that degrade Latin America while elevating the U.S., Johnson's work contributed to the field.

Johnson points to two basic assumptions that undergirded the images' misperceptions of Latin America. Johnson first addresses the Black Legend, which originated in England and was imported into the New World. The legend depicted Spaniards as decadent, inbred, and backward. The myth stressed that the Spanish maintained authority through strongman policies and countless revolutions. The legend portrayed the Spanish as indolent and morally inept Christians. Since the Spanish colonized Latin America, Johnson states, the U.S. viewed Latin Americans as possessing these traits. He shows that the Black Legend continued to manifest itself in cartoons that have Latin American leaders dressed in military uniforms. In addition, he highlights how these images present the political leaders as being ruthless towards their citizens. Johnson then considers the impact of social Darwinism in the United States. According to Johnson, social Darwinism contributed to distorting images of Latin American people. The author examines nineteenth-century eugenics to explain why editorials characterized Hispanics as children, emasculated, and disfigured. Eugenecists considered Latin

monitos; historietas y fotonovelas en México (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Nueva Imagen, 1979).

¹³John J. Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 22.

Americans as racially inferior to U.S. Caucasians because of the formers' indigenous roots. As a result, U.S. cartoons portrayed Hispanics as ignorant and effeminate. In comparison, the U.S, represented by Uncle Sam, was resilient, strong, and masculine. In reviewing these myths further, Johnson developed Mattelart and Dorfman's analysis, highlighting the factors that demean Latin American governments and their citizens.

The first Latin American studies of comics analyzed how U.S comics exemplified capitalism, the Black Legend, and pseudoscience – how images promoted arbitrary conceptions of Hispanic people. For the pioneering scholars, the story of comics pointed towards the imperialistic motivations of Washington. For decades, the U.S comic dominated the field of Latin America comic studies. During the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship warned that North Americans used comics as a manipulative tool south of the Rio Grande. By the late 1980s, numerous scholars shifted from the cultural imperialism paradigm associated with analyzing the impact of U.S. comics. Instead, the next generation began studying the rich tradition of Latin American comic production. In examining the region's comics, scholars developed a new theory that claimed the masses, not the state, produced comics to challenge governments and present social critiques.

Theorizing Latin American Comics: A Counter-Culture Perspective

In the 1970s, pioneers of Latin American comic studies focused on analyzing the impact of U.S imports on the region's political ideology. However, theorists examined U.S publications without investigating major Latin American comic books. David William Foster, Harold E. Hinds, Charles M. Tatum, Mario Zeledón, and María Pérez-Yglesias noticed the lack of scholarship on

domestic works and production. In the late 1980s, these scholars began to study cartoons and comics from Mexico, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.¹⁴ In doing so, these academics developed a counter-culture theory that challenged the former imperialist paradigm. The counter-culture thesis purports that comic books are a product created for and by the masses. The popular sector asserts its own perceptions on social, political, and economic issues. These scholars refute the assertion of cultural-imperialist theory that comic books subjugate their readers.

The second generation of scholars published studies that focus on the development of cartoons in the region's industrialized countries. Scholars such as Álvaro de Moya, Óscar de Moya, Harold E. Hinds, and Charles M. Tatum published histories of Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. In 1988, Álvaro de Moya concentrated on Brazilian comic strips such as *Mônica* by Maurício de Sousa.¹⁵ De Moya shows that Brazil has had a long history of creating comic books to entertain the public. In other studies, Óscar de Moya produced scholarship on Argentine comics before the military regime's censorship laws. He claimed Argentina had the strongest and most innovative comic industry in the entire region.¹⁶ While these scholars focused on Brazil and Argentina, Hinds and Tatum offered an analysis of Mexican comic books aimed at adult readers. Their book, *Not Just for Children: The Mexican Comic Book in the Late 1960s and 1970s*, examined several popular comics, such as *Kalimán*, *Los supermachos*, and *La familia Burrón*.¹⁷ The scholars reveal how the Latin American comic book was different from U.S. booklets. Unlike U.S. comic series, Latin American pamphlets were inexpensive and printed

¹⁴David William Foster, *From Mafalda to Los Supermachos: Latin American Graphic Humor as Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO.: L. Rienner, 1989); Harold E. Hinds and Charles M. Tatum, *Not Just For Children: The Mexican Comic Book in the Late 1960s and 1970s* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992); Mario Camronero Zeledón and María Pérez-Yglesias, *La historieta crítica latinoamericana* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Fernández-Arce, 1995).

¹⁵Álvaro de Moya, "Comics in Brazil," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 7 (1988): 227-239.

¹⁶Óscar de Moya, "Una visión de la historieta Argentina de los últimos 40 años (1957-1996)," *Signos Universitarios* 15, no. 29 (1998): 165-199.

¹⁷Hinds and Tatum, *Not Just For Children*, 1.

weekly. Latin American comics, like those of Japan, also attracted a variety of social classes, ages, and genders. For scholars, these traits served as evidence that the region's comics required further study. After writing comprehensive works, scholars questioned the first generation's cultural imperialist paradigm. David William Foster's monograph is the definitive history that characterizes the shift in perspective from cultural imperialist to counter-culture theory.

In 1989, Foster published the influential *From Mafalda to Los supermachos: Latin American Graphic Humor as Popular Culture*. The author argued that scholars should avoid Dorfman and Mattelart's cultural imperialist theory for dismissing all comic books because of the "negative self-image" Donald Duck and Superman works promote in the Latin American reader.¹⁸ Instead, Foster wrote that comics serve as a tool for attacking the state and reflecting social issues. He includes a continental sampling of comics, such as Uruguayan Hermenegildo Sábat's book of drawings *Al atroesma con cariño*, Argentine Roberto Fontanarrosa's comic strip *Las aventuras de Indoro Pereyra*, Argentine Joaquín Salvador Lavado's editorial cartoon *Mafalda*, the Argentine illustrated magazine *Superhumor* and its comic strip *Sol de noche*, the Argentine comic strip *Las puertitas del Sr. López*, the Mexican comic book *Los supermachos*, and Peruvian Juan Acevedo's comic strip *¡Hola, cuy!*. Foster demonstrates how artists like Fontanarrosa, who parodied "gauchomania" in Argentina, created comic books outside the purview of the state. Fontanarrosa demystified and denounced Argentina's beliefs. In his

¹⁸Foster, *From Mafalda*, 9.

book, Foster claims that Fontanarrosa named the gaucho in his story *Inodoro*, “toilet,” to make fun of national culture.¹⁹

Foster also evaluates comic strips with more urban themes from Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. In examining Quino’s (pseudonym of Joaquín Salvador Lavado) *Mafalda*, he shows that the protagonist, a middle-class eight-year-old girl, recognizes the shortcomings of Argentina. Foster argues that Quino challenges a notion in Argentina that its location at the “end of the world” prevents poverty, disease, and corruption found in other countries.²⁰ Unlike her two friends who believe Argentina is untroubled, Mafalda has a “raised consciousness” and calls attention to social ills in Argentine society the government refuses to acknowledge.²¹ In examining *Mafalda*, Foster does not view comics as a hegemonic tool, but rather as a venue for subordinated peoples to voice their ideas below the structure of domination. After Foster, other scholars interpreted comics as a counter-culture element opposed to the state. In the 1990s, scholars investigated satirical comic series written by oppressed individuals living in mid-to-late twentieth century authoritarian countries like Argentina, Mexico, Peru, and Chile. This new generation of scholars witnessed how many of these governments suppressed any comic content that refuted the agenda of the state. Right-wing leaders took a particular interest in destroying comic books. In 1970s Argentina, military officers exiled and abducted comic creators who had mobilized a secret organization to publish comic books, strips, and leaflets

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

that attacked leading officials.²² As these events unfolded, scholars conducted interviews with cartoonists and concentrated on the counter-culture nature of comics.²³

Mario Camronero and María Pérez-Yglesias's monograph, *La historieta crítica latinoamericana*, is representative of the field's interest in theorizing counter-culture comics.²⁴ In 1995, the authors sampled works from Mexican Eduardo del Río (Rius), Costa Rican Hugo Díaz (Pancho), and Argentine Joaquín Lavado (Quino). Camronero and Pérez-Yglesias define the comics studied as *historietas críticas* (critical cartoons). For the authors, this type of cartoon demystifies government in order to promote social awareness. In accordance with Foster's paradigm, the authors stress that Rius, Pancho, and Quino engaged in political and social discourse that criticized Argentina, Mexico, and Costa Rica's neglect of impoverished indigenous and peasant communities. For instance, the authors highlight how Rius's *Los supermachos* series, which is set in a rural Mexican village with no electricity, makes a statement about the state's failed promise to modernize the country. The comic also comments on the government's inability to ensure the welfare of peasant families living outside Mexico City. Camronero and Pérez-Yglesias insist that the producers of these types of comics questioned the state's agenda and sought to inspire a social transformation.

Scholars of counter-culture theory shifted the production of comics to the masses. This generation rejected the cultural imperialist's attention to U.S. comics and focused on developing scholarship dedicated to the comic industries in Latin America. As a result, Foster, Camronero and Pérez-Yglesias asserted that comics provided an outlet to challenge the state.

²²Héctor G. Oesterheld, *Oesterheld en primera persona. HGO, su vida y su obra*, v. 1. (Buenos Aires: La Bañadera Del Cómic, 2005), 114.

²³For an example, see José Luis Silva, "Interview: Carlos Vigilo on Mexican Comic Books and Photonovels," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 5 (1986): 196-210.

²⁴Camronero and Pérez-Yglesias, *La historieta*.

The paradigm maintained that comics had a counter-culture nature. For twenty years, the field examined an array of satirical comics and cartoon strips that fit the paradigm. Scholars still use the model in the twenty-first century but have started to transition into a mediation theory that weaves together the counter-culture and cultural imperialism schools of thought.

Mediation Theory: Comics as a Contested Phenomenon

After numerous investigations based on the imperialist and counter-culture theories, in the 1970s through the 1990s, a new cohort of scholars started questioning both approaches. Scholars such as Ann Rubenstein, Juan Poblete, Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste, among others, combined the two opposing paradigms. The academics did not see comics as removed from the masses or the state. The current trend in Latin American comic studies follows a model based on Jesús Martín Barbero’s mediation study.²⁵ Barbero proposed the analysis of comics as a contested space where production and reception of mass media both help form popular culture. According to this theory, cartoon narratives become points of contact between hegemonic domination and subversion.²⁶ Scholars appropriated Barbero’s idea to examine the comic’s role in the process of forming national identity.

In 1998, historian Ann Rubenstein employed the mediation theory to examine comics in post-revolutionary Mexico (1930 to 1970). She warned that scholars searching for counter-hegemonic discourse would fail to find cartoons detached from the government.²⁷ Even though these types of comics oppose the state, by acknowledging official discourse, the works still form an ideology that legitimates the national agenda. In *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other*

²⁵Jesús Martín Barbero, quoted in Fernández and Poblete, *Redrawing the Nation*, 3.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Rubenstein, *Bad Language*, 166.

Threats to the Nation, two types of messages exist: the counter-culture and the hegemonic.²⁸ Rubenstein's book recognizes the opposing camps in Latin American comic studies and shows that both discourses influenced the production of Mexican comics.

Rubenstein notes that the government and the artist are integral to the formation of a comic. For the state, comics are an opportunity to exert its authority by regulating and censoring comic industries. She illustrates how, in Mexico, post-revolutionary leaders created a commission responsible for enforcing the government's restrictions. In placing limitations on content, which varied between pornographic and humorous, political leaders also encouraged comic producers to draw images that mirrored the state's revolutionary rhetoric. The commission failed at eradicating all forms of lewd content but succeeded in pressuring some comic publishers to reflect national discourse. Rubenstein also shows how artists responded to the policy and developed different methods in dealing with the state. Some publishing companies encouraged their artists to echo the ideals of the nation while others continued releasing satirical books like Rius's socialist publications, which denounced the Mexican state. Overall, comic industries worked around the commission's strict measures and published their own ideas concerning the government's definition of household, workplace, gender, and religion. In Rubenstein's study, the state and authors form the content within comic books and helped shape national identity.

Twelve years after Rubenstein, Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Juan Poblete edited a volume dedicated to the comic's role in the "configuration of new states and identities."²⁹ The series incorporated leading figures in comic studies to cover major industrialized countries of

²⁸Ibid., 11.

²⁹Fernández and Poblete, *Redrawing the Nation*, 2.

the Atlantic world. In *Redrawing the Nation: National Identity in Latin/o American Comics*, the editors collected essays that combined Foster, Dorfman, and Mattelart's perspectives and offered a complex analysis of the contributions of governments and artists to the production of comics. Like Rubenstein's work, the volume concerns itself with identifying the counter-culture and hegemonic forces within comic books that shape and distort national identity. Within the series, Poblete, Fernando Reati, and Carla Sagástegui's essays capture the nuances of the comic's mediating role.³⁰

Poblete's "Condorito, Chilean Popular Culture and the Work of Mediation" shows that the comic *Condorito* poked fun at Chilean stereotypes fabricated by the U.S. and reflected a national discourse. In 1949, René Ríos Boettiger created *Condorito*, a bird like one of Disney's Donald Duck characters. His drawing attacked U.S. misrepresentations of Chile in the Disney film *Saludos Amigos* (1942) that cast Chile as a little airplane without enough fuel to cross the Andes.³¹ While responding to the denigrating image of Chile, *Condorito* also reflected Chile's national agenda. In the 1960s, the comic book mirrored President Frei's (1964-1970) idealization of the peasant and countryside as national symbols, an idealization that the government hoped would promote major agrarian reforms. Poblete shows that during Frei's presidency, the artist numerous times cast *Condorito* as an intelligent peasant. In one scene, *Condorito* (as a peasant) even outsmarts an engineer building roads. While the engineer is perplexed with what path the highway should follow, *Condorito* offers his donkey as a solution

³⁰ Poblete, "Condorito, Chilean Popular Culture and the Work of Mediation," in *Redrawing the Nation*, 35-53; Fernando Reati, "Argentina's Montoneros: Comics, Cartoons, and Images as Political Propaganda in the Underground Guerrilla Press of the 1970s," in *Redrawing the Nation*, 97-110; Carla Sagástegui, "Acevedo and His Predecessors," in *Redrawing the Nation*, 131-150..

³¹Poblete, "Condorito," 37.

to find a suitable route, thus proving that countryside knowledge is superior.³² By characterizing the peasant as knowledgeable, the creator helped the state elevate the image of the *campesino*, who before had been considered backward. In using mediation theory, Poblete illustrates how the comic became a space for ridiculing and promoting hegemonic forces.

Employing the method of mediation, Fernando Reati's study on Argentine *Montoneros* is another example of a work that analyzes a group of artists who protested the state while promoting nationalism. Reati reviews how the *Montoneros*, a radical left-wing group that included writers and artists, published controversial material. In 1968, a group of Argentine youth formed the *Montoneros*. The organization reflected Juan Perón's "Third Way" movement, but ascribed to it a "populist-nationalist brand of socialism" that went further left than the leader's ideology.³³ For a brief period, this group participated in politics during Perón's return in 1974-1983, but resorted to armed struggle in 1968-1973 after his wife, Isabel, led a right wing movement that undermined the *Montoneros*. While the organization fully supported Juan Perón, the *Montoneros* rejected his wife and military's authority. Reati shows that the artists in the group mocked national symbols like the country's official mascot for the 1978 World Soccer Cup. The "gauchito" who is kicking a soccer ball and holding a spear became a *Montonero* "gauchito," who instead carries a bomb and a knife.³⁴ They also created comic books like *Clemente* that mocked the leaders of the regime and, at times, idealized Juan Perón. The comics were an interesting case in which artists redefined national symbols to challenge one administration and to elevate a previous one. In applying the mediation theory, Reati reveals that the creators used comics to protest and recognize the state.

³²Poblete, "Condorito," 43.

³³Reati, "Argentina's Montoneros," 99.

³⁴Ibid., 104.

Sagástegui's work, "Acevedo and his predecessors," also demonstrates how comics represented the government while sometimes questioning its authority. Sagástegui focused on Peruvian comics during the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, comic books like *La cadena de oro* (The Golden Chain) was a "starting point" for illustrative reflections of *peruanidad*. *Peruanidad* was a project aimed at incorporating sectors like the indigenous population who the country previously excluded politically, culturally, and economically. In response to this project, the comic book featured a superhero of Amerindian descent who protected Peruvians from thieves. Sagástegui argues that although there is no concrete evidence, the comic creators considered that "all Peruvians should be represented," which mirrored the government's campaign.³⁵ While *La cadena de oro* helped Peru's regime, other comics like *Monos y Monadas* (1978) humorously attacked the state. Sagástegui shows that *Monos Y Monadas* released several issues ridiculing corrupt political alliances and the fissures between leading officials.³⁶ The author provides another example in which comics project and reject official rhetoric, thus shaping a national way of thinking.

Contemporary scholars of Latin American comics have expanded the approach of their predecessors, Dorfman, Mattelart, and Foster. Rubenstein, Fernández, and Poblete understand comics as being both a creation of the state and the ideological forces of the popular class. They have found that comics play an integral role in nation building. Comics have the ability to influence public opinion and address, as counterculture and hegemonic texts, the issues associated with hegemonic forces. However, the field still focuses on major industrialized countries and their comic books. If scholars discuss late industrialized Latin American countries,

³⁵Sagástegui, "Acevedo," 137.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

it is only to describe editorial cartoons. In fact, academia neglects graphic novels and comic books from these places. This is the case with Panama, which, like the larger states, has a strong editorial cartoon industry and a graphic novel reflective of the mediation theory.

Comics and National Identity: Panama

Mediation theory is useful because it sheds insight on the complex nature of comics. Recent studies have shown that comic books are a meeting ground where everyone involved in the comic process, artists and government leaders, exchange ideas on national identity. Although this study agrees with mediation theory's idea of comics as a contested space, it disagrees with theorists' justifications for ignoring late-industrialized countries, such as Panama. Scholars Poblete and Fernández claim that globalizing and urbanizing forces prevented developing countries in the twentieth century from having major publishing industries. This study concedes that late-industrialized countries do not have recognizable comic publishing companies as do Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, but insists that in Panama, at the ground level, artists and writers created comics and graphic novels for local consumption. Panama's long history of editorial cartooning and the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán* function as nation-building tools, demonstrating that the country developed a comic industry very reflective of the mediation school of thought. In fact, this study on Panama's graphic novel *Pedro Prestán* can deepen the insights of the mediation approach when one considers its origin, function as a historical work, and acceptance by a populist military regime.

Fernández and Poblete's theories on urbanization and globalization explain why scholars have ignored Panama and other late-industrialized countries. In their recent work, the authors

argue that given the comics' "urban nature," the art form only emerges in countries with high literacy rates, strong presses, and specialized artists and writers.³⁷ In Latin America, the countries with the earliest urbanizations, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, therefore, developed robust comic industries. Meanwhile, the authors argue that countries in the Andean and Caribbean regions, which urbanized late, did not develop comic industries. Fernández and Poblete believe that by the time late-industrialization countries urbanized, other forms of media, such as television and imported comics, stifled the production of comic books and graphic novels. Instead of developing their own domestic comics, Andean and Caribbean regions imported *manga* from Japan and cartoons from the U.S.

Because of theories on urbanization and globalization, scholars have ignored countries such as Panama. Contrary to the ideas of Fernández and Poblete, Panama has a long history of editorial cartooning. The earliest satirical caricatures date back to the failed French canal project of the 1880s.³⁸ In the twentieth century, Panamanian cartoonists developed their skills and acquired apprentices to produce satirical works. The country's most recognized cartoonists include Eudoro "Lolo" Silvera, Carlos "Chic" Martínez, Fernando Peña Morán, Alfredo "Wilfi" Jiménez, Julio "Rac" Briceño, Joaquín Carrasquilla, and Víctor "Vic" Ramos.³⁹ Unfortunately, few studies exist about Panama's cartooning culture.⁴⁰ Furthermore, no investigations have explored the country's graphic novel, *Pedro Prestán*.

³⁷ Fernández and Poblete, *Redrawing the Nation*, 7.

³⁸Yelena E. Rodríguez, "Diagnóstico de la caricature periodística en Panamá" (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 2003), 24.

³⁹Rodríguez's thesis provides detailed studies on several of the most well known cartoonists. *Ibid.*, 34-55.

⁴⁰For theses on Panamanian cartoonists and cartoons, see Briseida Hernández Bravo, *El lenguaje caricaturesco en la prensa panameña: 1990-2000* (Colón, Panamá: CRU, 2001); Vanesa González, "Análisis de las portadas y las caricaturas de los diarios, *La Estrella de Panamá* y *La Prensa*, dos semanas antes y después de la elecciones del 2 de mayo de 1999" (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 2000); José Alberto González P., "La caricatura frente a la corrupción política" (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 2000); Jennifer Linette Guerra

The influx of comics in Panama between the 1940s and 1960s exposed Panamanians to a variety of cartoons that influenced Panamanians' work. Artist Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera illustrated *Pedro Prestán* because, as a child, he developed a fondness for U.S. and Mexican comics. The artist frequently read major titles from *Marvel* and *Detective Comics* like *Captain America*, *X-Men*, and *Superman*, which motivated him to draw comics throughout his childhood.⁴¹ Díaz's encounters with imported comics provided him a template for drawing the graphic novel, *Pedro Prestán*. Rather than discouraging artists in Panama, imported comics, as in Díaz's case, inspired them. Therefore, at least in this case, in contrast to Fernández and Poblete's argument, globalization facilitated the development of comic books on the isthmus.

The creators' purpose for publishing the graphic novel follows the same complex motivations that mediation theorists analyze. In 1983, Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, professor of sociology at the *Universidad de Panamá*, embarked on a two-year research project of plebian historical figure Pedro Prestán.⁴² The military regime's appropriation of popular movements to maintain legitimacy encouraged investigations of numerous historical figures previously excluded from the official narrative such as Prestán. The government's agenda was to emphasize working-class identity over race and incorporate subaltern heroes and uprisings to consolidate power. The military regime's project shaped Bethancourt's script and Díaz's illustrations. In reflecting the military's message, the graphic novel portrayed Prestán as a plebeian nationalist. Although *Pedro Prestán* aided the state, the creators pursued this project without government funding. Bethancourt and Díaz received no monetary compensation for

Silvera, "Análisis temático de las caricaturas de los diarios panameños del mes de junio de 1996" (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1996); and Anerys Irays and Navalo Thompson, "La historieta como medio de comunicación, 1992" (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1999).

⁴¹Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, interview by author, Panama City, Panama, July 18, 2011.

⁴²Bethancourt, interview by author.

their labor.⁴³ The book also served the interests of the creators who wanted to exonerate the plebeian leader whose contemporaries had falsely portrayed as an unpatriotic arsonist.⁴⁴ Therefore, while they believed in the state's rhetoric, the creators also pursued their own agenda. Similar to comics studied by Fernández and Poblete, the graphic novel provided a space for local artists and producers to interact with the state, thus contributing to the formation of national identity.

In addition to reflecting the mediation approach, Panama's graphic novel presents a unique case in which a populist military regime recognized the work as contributing to Panamanian history.⁴⁵ It is also important to note that the Panamanian government did not censor or restrict the production of the graphic novel. The state played no part in the creative process of *Pedro Prestán* but tacitly allowed the novel's publication. Panama's military government is the only authoritarian regime of the 1970s and 1980s to recognize an illustrated work and encourage its readership. Panama's editorial cartoon history and graphic novel disprove the notion that comics only developed in urbanized environments and that globalization prevented comic production in nations such as Panama. Furthermore, Panama developed a graphic novel very reflective of mediation theory. The interaction between the producers and the state presents another example of how comics play a part in forming national identity. In addition, this case study on the role of the comic highlights a unique event in which a populist military regime acknowledged the political and cultural importance of a comic.

⁴³ Pedro Rivera, interview by the author, Panama City, Panama, July 20, 2012.

⁴⁴ Bethancourt, interview by author.

⁴⁵ Aida Name T. to Rómulo Bethancourt, Departamento de Curriculum Ministerio de Educación approves *Pedro Prestán*.

Conclusion

Since the comic's conception, scholars have debated the artistic work's impact on society. As shown above, beginning with studies in the 1970s, academia turned its attention to how the illustrations in these small *historietas* (comics) reflected state and plebeian discourse. Dorfman and Mattelart's work set the foundation for comic studies with their use of the imperialist theory to examine Latin American representations in U.S. comic books. After Dorfman and Mattelart legitimized scholarship on comics, Foster and his contemporaries shifted their attention towards analyzing the rich history of Latin American books. While developing the first works dedicated to Mexican, Argentine, and Brazilian booklets, the new generation followed a counter-culture paradigm. These authors viewed subalterns as using comics as weapons to challenge their respective governments. For several decades, scholars considered imperialist and counter-culture theories as incompatible with each other. Not until recently have scholars like Rubenstein started combining the two schools of thought with mediation theory. Mediation sees comics as a space for hegemonic domination and subversion.

While mediation theorists have captured two crucial messages in comic books, this work demonstrates that the studies still neglect countries like Panama. Because Panama industrialized late, the literature claims that globalization and urbanization prevented the country from developing its own artistic infrastructure. As this study shows, Panama did indeed produce a graphic novel. As a result of globalization and urbanization, Panamanians pursued similar artistic expressions as seen in early-industrialized countries like Mexico. In fact, the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán* is reflective of the mediation argument. The creators of the work

launched a project that embodied the military regime's populist rhetoric as well as their own agenda. The graphic novel's attention to both discourses helped strengthen the nationalist project of the government that wanted to redefine its heroes as emanating from the popular sector. The success of the comic book and acceptance as a historical study is partly due to the cultural revolution taking place in the country. The cultural revolution started with creation of the *Instituto Nacional de Cultura* (National Institute of Culture, INAC) in 1974, and continued up to the U.S. Invasion in Panama, in 1989. The focus of this study is how the military used the revolution to reformulate nationalism with plebeian leaders like Prestán. In order to understand the political and social climate that shaped the graphic novel, the next chapter will focus on the military regime's appropriation of plebeian figures in its effort to maintain power.

2. Panama's Military Regime (1968-1989): A Plebian Revolution

"This movement did not arise spontaneously . . . it emerged as a solution for the community, which became aware through . . . civic struggles that it could not permit the government to treat it with disrespect." – General Omar Torrijos Herrera¹

On October 11, 1968, the National Guard coup marked a definitive moment in Panama's history. A military-civilian junta removed President Arnulfo Arias and governed for a twenty-one year period. How did the regime stay in power until the United States's "Operation Just Cause" invasion ousted General Manuel Antonio Noriega in 1989? George Priestly and Ricaurte Soler claim the military maintained power with a "Bonapartist" regime.² Similar to what occurred during Peru's post-1968 military government, Panama also engineered a populist regime that created institutions to incorporate peasants, laborers, students, and intellectuals into the national political life.³ The social policy and ministerial positions for the popular sector's leaders helped the new government form an alliance with the masses. Although the regime assimilated new classes, the "revolution from above" never lost control over the power structure.⁴ The state was fundamentally authoritarian, but Priestly argues that while the regime manipulated the polity, General Omar Torrijos Herrera, leader of the Panamanian government, provided a voice for common people previously excluded from politics. Several studies have focused on how the military regime enacted agrarian, labor, and student programs

¹Omar Torrijos, *Papeles del general* (Panamá: Centro de Estudio Torrijistas, 1984), 191.

²Bonapartism is a style of leadership first practiced by Louis Bonaparte or Napoleon III. According to George Priestly, "the central element of Bonapartism is the ability of the leader to 'rise above' all classes and establish some autonomy for the state." George Priestly, *Military Government and Popular Participation in Panama: The Torrijos Regime, 1968-1975* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 4. See also Soler's discussion of "Panama's first bonapartist regime, which emerged in 1968 when the National Guard assumed political responsibility." Ricaurte Soler, *Panamá, nación y oligarquía, 1925-1975* (Panamá: Ediciones de la Revista Tareas Panamá, 1976), 47.

³For discussion of Peru's populist military regime, see David Booth and Bernardo Sorj, *Military Reformism and Social Classes: The Peruvian Experience, 1968-80* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 191.

⁴Priestly, *Military Government*, 5.

to win the support of the popular sector, but they neglect the state's appropriation of plebian republicanism to stay in power.⁵

Florencia Mallon's *Peasant and Nation* defines hegemony in two different ways to examine nineteenth-century Peruvian and Mexican popular political cultures. She first notes that hegemony is a contested phenomenon "redefined at all levels of society."⁶ In order for a movement to achieve hegemony, it needs to co-opt the messages of the masses. Before achieving independence in 1903, Panama also experienced competing forms of nationalism.⁷ For example, when the elite formed the Republic of Panama they ignored patriotism emanating from the popular sector. Peter Szok notes that the republic's intellectuals "attempted to expel the masses from history" with a liberal-Hispanophile project.⁸ The state's ideology deplored plebian struggles not reflective of *mestizaje* (a mix of indigenous and Spanish blood). The republic's racist underpinnings debilitated its ability to govern and foster national unity in the twentieth century. Unlike its predecessors, the military regime created *Torrijismo* (1972-1981), a state ideology that downplayed race and emphasized *yunta pueblo gobierno* (union between people and government) and anti-U.S.-oligarchy discourse. *Torrijismo* facilitated the appropriation of plebeian movements dating back to the 1856 Watermelon Riot up to the 1964 Flag Riots, which will be discussed below. Panama's military regime was a populist

⁵For examples on studies that focus on the military's populist reforms, see Priestly, *Military Government*; Robert C. Harding II, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001); Michael L. Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The Forced Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

⁶Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

⁷Historian Aims McGuinness traces the isthmus' plebeian republicanism to General José Domingo Espinar, a mulatto from the *arrabal* district. Espinar was a member of the Liberal Party who was the first to categorize el pueblo as "men of color and *castas* who earned their living with their hands, in agriculture, as laborers, or as artisans." Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 89, 147.

⁸Peter A. Szok, *La Última gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth Century Panama* (West Port, CONN: Greenwood Press, 2001), 119.

government, that carried out what Mallon calls, a “cultural revolution.”⁹ In this case, the cultural revolution changed and redefined the contributions and struggles of plebeians to maintain the regime.

This study agrees with Priestly and Soler’s “Bonapartist” theory but shows that military intellectuals, to preserve state power, also led an ideological movement that refashioned plebeian struggles. While never abandoning the idea of a culturally homogenous nation-state, the regime emphasized class and patriotic messages in subaltern historical events and figures. In weaving *Torrijismo* into plebeian history, the military forged itself as the defender of popular interests and the slayer of imperialists, just like leaders from the popular movements that preceded it. Appropriation of movements also helped the state attack its enemies, former ruling wealthy families and the United States. This chapter first examines nineteenth-century popular and elite visions for the isthmus and the suppression of plebeian republicanism in the twentieth century. The study illustrates how the oligarchy’s tactics impeded its ability to govern and encouraged opposition against the state. The work then argues that when the military gained political control, it first suppressed, and, then, with its *Torrijismo* reforms, co-opted the masses. I conclude by discussing how the government’s cultural revolution still exuded a *mestizo* identity but deemphasized race with *Torrijismo* to reinterpret the longstanding tradition of plebeian nationalism. As a result, intellectuals created a pantheon of new heroes reflective of the masses. This chapter helps us understand how, to stay in power, Panama’s populist military regime appropriated plebeian nationalists.

⁹Florencia Mallon uses the term “cultural revolution” to refer to when a state redefines the messages of subaltern groups to consolidate power. *Ibid.*, 7.

Liberal Panama (1850 to 1968)

Between 1850 and 1968, Panama's white oligarchy and ethnic population developed contesting visions that impeded one another's interest in forming the state. The ruling families envisioned an isthmus without its largely black, mulatto, and indigenous elements. Even though the ethnic majority devised its own conception of Panamanian nationality, which recognized its status as citizens, white elite leaders adopted different discourses to marginalize the lower class, whom they considered inferior. When white oligarchical families formed the Republic of Panama, they refused to acknowledge plebeian nationalism because it emanated from the masses. This section demonstrates how throughout the Colombian (1821-1903) and the republican (1903-1968) periods, the elite's neglect to incorporate plebian nationalist struggles contributed to the coup in 1968.

In 1821, Panamanians separated from Spain and joined Gran Colombia, which lasted a few years before it changed names three more times throughout the era.¹⁰ According to historian Peter Szok, the small group of elite mercantilist families that dominated politics may have been discouraged from creating their own state in fear of inspiring "another Haiti."¹¹ The Haitian revolution worried elites in regions like Panama where the black and indigenous population exceeded the European minority. As a result, the weak Panamanian oligarchy looked abroad to protect its influence. Even though Panama remained under the authority of Colombia, Panamanians were motivated to reinvigorate the isthmus as a center for trade, as it had been in the Colonial period. Panamanian officials defined themselves, as Szok has written,

¹⁰ According to Szok, Gran Colombia became the Republic of New Granada then, in 1858, the Grandine Confederation; five years later it would become the United States of Colombia. Szok, *Wolf Tracks: Popular Art and Re-Africanization in Twentieth-Century Panama* (Mississippi: University of Mississippi, 2012), 17.

¹¹ A massive slave revolt in Haiti resulted in the elimination of the white population and became the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere. Szok, *La Última*, 19.

as a “Hanseatic country” that imagined Panama to be a place of international commerce dependent on its close encounters with Europeans.¹² Intellectual Justo Arosemena, a leading Panamanian from a prominent family of merchants, articulated that modernizing and westernizing the region would guarantee the creation of a waterway.¹³ While a canal would guarantee modernization, westernization would offer a solution to whiten the isthmus. Influenced by the Enlightenment and later social Darwinism, the elite minority was in no position to open political participation to the burgeoning black and indigenous population. In order to mirror European societies, the isthmus adopted a liberal agenda for civilizing the population.¹⁴

While the elite designed the liberal project to protect its own interests, the constitutional reforms of 1853 guaranteed citizens’ right to a jury trial and habeas corpus, while abolishing slavery and encouraging political participation.¹⁵ The beginnings of the isthmus’s plebeian tradition resulted from these changes. The new stipulations fostered a distinct group of black elected office holders from the *arrabal* (outskirts).¹⁶ These *arrabaleños* (people who live on the outskirts) emerged as a powerful force in local politics and developed a different vision of liberalism for the isthmus. The *arrabaleños* claimed that the Liberal Party represented the interests of *el pueblo* (the community), regardless of race. McGuiness notes that unlike white party members, *arrabaleños* never employed racial terminology and instead used “*el pueblo*” and “citizen” to describe black and indigenous peoples. Contrary to the elite’s

¹²Ibid., 21.

¹³Justo Arosemena, *Escritos de Justo Arosemena*, ed. Ricaurte Soler (Caracas, Mexico: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1982), 356.

¹⁴Szok, *La Última*, 32-33.

¹⁵McGuiness, *Path of Empire*, 95.

¹⁶The *arrabal* is the outer barrio of Santa Ana.

employment of liberalism to whiten the country, *arrabaleños* defined the ideology as ensuring equal participation in government.¹⁷

The liberal *arrabaleños'* notion of fighting for *el pueblo* manifested itself during the nineteenth century in plebian movements. On April 15, 1856, the first plebian resistance movement occurred in La Ciénaga (a neighborhood in Panama City). Panamanians refer to the event as the *Tajada de Sandía* (Watermelon Riot). The struggle started when a black *carretero* (fruit seller), José Manuel Luna, encountered an intoxicated U.S. citizen who refused to pay a person of color for a watermelon slice. When Luna demanded a dime, the traveler revealed a pistol and instigated a fight between U.S. men and *arrabaleños*. The debacle prompted the first U.S. intervention in Panama's history. McGuinness claims that the event revealed *arrabaleños'* determination to defend their rights as citizens, especially against foreigners they perceived as threatening the stability of the isthmus.¹⁸ However, the white elite viewed the fight negatively because the black participants made them anxious about possibilities of a race war. Members of the upper class believed the incident was evidence of the growing power of black liberals.¹⁹

In 1885, thirty years after the Watermelon Riot, mulatto radical liberal Pedro Prestán led the next plebian movement. He protested Colombian President Rafael Nuñez's Regeneration project in the late 1880s, a project that abandoned the liberal 1863 Río Negro constitution, a federalist document that promoted popular participation in politics. Prestán, along with other radical liberals, mobilized a voluntary army in Colón and Panama City of more than 400 men to defend their rights. Prestán's eclectic group of soldiers ranged from black laborers from Jamaica to *mestizos* from the working class neighborhoods of Colón. On March 31, 1885, a

¹⁷McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 96.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 143.

battle between Colombian conservatives and Prestán's liberal forces ended with Colón in flames. After conservatives falsely blamed Prestán and his men for the fire, the court hanged him, with U.S. assistance, on August 18, 1885. Because of the ethnic composition of Prestán's movement, the government interpreted his struggle as a caste war and enacted measures to suppress the political participation of people of African descent.²⁰

Tensions continued to fester, though, and during the Thousand Day's War, which began in 1899 when Victoriano Lorenzo formed another plebian movement. Lorenzo, an Indian from Coclé in North Central Panama, joined Belisario Porras' campaign during the Colombian civil war. Lorenzo recruited an army of indigenous peasants to back Porras' second campaign. By using guerrilla tactics, the Indian *caudillo* succeeded in resisting the Colombians. However, in 1902, aboard the U.S. battleship *Wisconsin*, Panamanian General Benjamín Herrera signed a peace treaty with conservative Colombians. Lorenzo refused to accept the treaty and continued fighting in the mountains of La Trinchera. General Herrera, who had served alongside Lorenzo, ordered the *cacique's* arrest. After giving him a hasty trial on May 15, 1903, the government executed Lorenzo. The *cacique* suffered the same fate as Prestán because Panama's elite circles did not want power transferred to indigenous leaders.²¹ After ending Lorenzo's struggle, Panamanian leaders had suppressed three plebeian struggles for nationalism because the ethnic participants clashed with the Hanseatic ideal hopes for whitening the isthmus.

²⁰Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán: el hombre," in *Pedro Prestán: Cien años después*, ed. Manuel Octavio Sisnett Cano (Panamá: Academia de la Historia, 1985), 65-67; Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán: Héroe colonese," in *Pedro Prestán*, ed. Sisnett, 63-64.

²¹ Thomas L. Percy, *We Answer Only to God: Politics and Military in Panama, 1903-1947* (Albuquerque: university of New Mexico Press, 1998), 30-35.

One year after the Thousand Day's War, Panamanians, with the assistance of the United States, rebelled against Colombia. After Colombia denied the U.S. permission to construct a canal across the isthmus by rejecting the Hay-Herrán Treaty, Panamanians responded with isthmian separation. Panamanians, like their counterparts across the continent, had depended on international powers to ensure Panama's modernizing mission and considered Colombia's actions as hindering the Hanseatic model. However, white Panamanian hopes of westernizing the region with the presence of U.S. and European immigrants proved futile. Instead, Panama became a U.S. protectorate and foreign advisers and specialists manipulated the country's political process and displaced the upper sectors influence in government. While weary of U.S. intervention, the thousands of West Indians and other immigrants working on the interoceanic route also made the elite realize that modernization weakened their position. Rather than whitening the isthmus as officials hoped, West Indians settled Panama and as Szok notes "transformed Panamanian culture, religious life, and language." These unforeseen consequences would be critical to the new republic's formulation of a fresh sense of nationalism that glorified a Hispanic past.²²

In response to the increased black population, the Republic of Panama maintained its liberal ideas, but adopted a *Hispanidad* discourse from other Latin American countries. *Hispanidad* emphasized a Latin American identity of *mestizaje* (a mixing of Spanish and Indigenous blood). The discourse, like the Hanseatic model, rejected a black and indigenous presence on the isthmus. Hispanophile ideas encouraged leading historians, writers, and poets to bury nineteenth-century plebeian contributions to the forging of a Panamanian consciousness. Since black, mulatto, and indigenous individuals engaged in these nationalist

²² Szok, *La Última*, 41, 44.

struggles, the young republic's first historians interpreted the events as riots and caste wars. Historians Juan B. Sosa, Enrique Arce, and Ismael Ortega either discussed the movements as insignificant or cast the revolutionaries as black and indigenous unpatriotic rebels.²³ José Issac Fábrega even argues that these groups could not form a Panamanian identity because they did not understand "the Spanish language or Hispanic culture."²⁴ Instead of creating histories detailing these subaltern contributions, these historians' works focused on Panama's *mestizo* interior and Latin American liberators, such as Nuñez de Balboa.²⁵

The cultural project to bury the black presence manifested itself in the politics of Arnulfo Arias. His mid-twentieth century program, *Panameñismo*, played on the fears circulating through the isthmus that the overwhelming black population would supersede the white minority. *Panameñismo* upheld the superior racial status of the Panamanian *mestizos* and deplored the characteristics of West Indian English speakers. Throughout the period, the political movement ostracized black immigrants, and in 1941, Arias' government stripped West Indians of their citizenship.²⁶ The xenophobic legislation embittered working-class blacks, and the general neglect of the lower class, frustrated the masses. Although the suppression of nineteenth-century movements stifled plebian republicanism in the first years of the republic, popular groups resurfaced in 1925 and 1932 to challenge a tax increase on rental properties.

²³ Historian Ismael Ortega briefly mentions the Tajada de Sandía and states, "the incident is not a U.S. intervention." Ismael Ortega, "El intervencionismo norteamericano en el istmo desde el Tratado Marillano-Bidlack, hasta el 'Incidente de la Tajada de Sandía'" *Tareas* 19 (1936): 66; See also Juan B. Sosa and Enrique Arce's text book that includes a discussion on Prestán, in which the historians wrongfully considered the leader a Haitian because he was black. Juan Bautista Sosa and Enrique José Arce, *Compendio de historia de panamá: Texto adoptado oficialmente para La enseñanza en las escuelas y colegios de la nación* (Panamá: Morales & Rodríguez, 1911), 353.

²⁴In 1956, writer and statesmen, José Issac Fábrega, wrote an article denigrating the black and indigenous population for not upholding mestizo traits. José Issac Fábrega, "Panamá es una nación," *Revista Lotería* 25 (December 1957): 22.

²⁵Szok, *La Última*, 98.

²⁶LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 93-94.

Because of the tax hikes, proprietors raised rents without consulting poor *mestizos* and blacks who lived in apartments in Panama City and in Colón's poor neighborhoods. On October 10 and 11, 1925, The *Federación Syndical de Trabajadores* (Federation of Union Workers) mobilized activists who protested in the streets until the government requested U.S. support to defeat the strike. Eight years after the strike, the depression inspired another tenement protest in the two largest cities. Opposing this movement, President Harmodio Arias used the police to subdue the strike. Although several working-class individuals died during both protests, plebeian groups resurfaced to challenge the state's indifference.²⁷

The black and *mestizo* working class also participated in student movements against the U.S. presence. In 1944, student leaders, many of them black, at the *Instituto Nacional* and *Universidad de Panamá* formed the *Federación de Estudiantes de Panamá* (Student Federation of Panama-FEP). By incorporating large sectors of the country, FEP developed a national discourse similar to that of nineteenth-century popular leaders. On December 12, 1947, students, *El Partido del Pueblo* (the People's Party), *Federación Syndical de Trabajadores* (Federation of Union Workers), the *Asociación de Profesores* (Association of Professors), and peasants, numbering in the thousands, protested against the Filós-Hines Treaty (which would permit the U.S. to stay in military bases created during World War II) and pressured the government to abandon negotiations. Twelve years later, without government support, students led by Floyd Britton mobilized again to plant Panamanian flags in the Canal Zone. In this instance, the state ordered Panamanian police to suppress the movement.²⁸ The 1964 Flag

²⁷Thomas Peary, *We Answer*, 54-55.

²⁸Arturo Guzmán Navarro, "Cronología de las luchas nacionalistas Panameñas" in *75 Años de relaciones entre Panamá y Estados Unidos*, ed. Fuente de Profesionales del P.R.D. (Panamá: Imprenta de la Universidad de Panamá, 1989), 243-244.

Riot marked the last popular protest before the National Guard's coup. Panamanian students from the university and the *Instituto Nacional*, representative of the population, entered the Canal Zone to raise the Panamanian flag. Students from Balboa High School who were Zonians (U.S. citizens living in the Canal Zone) stopped the Panamanians and desecrated the Panamanian flag. Three days of rioting transpired, during which time twenty-four Panamanians died, some of who were from El Chorrillo, an impoverished community of West Indians.²⁹ Even though this movement ended violently as others before it, the mobilization of the students demonstrated that the popular sector still reflected a subaltern form of nationalism. Although the government reacted to the 1964 tragedy by confronting the U.S., the state's history of extinguishing signs of plebeian republicanism marked the end of its power.

Since the Colombian period (1821-1903), the elite feared the isthmus's black and indigenous population. The oligarchy adopted exclusionary policies to protect itself from the growing black presence. The young republic denied popular leaders, such as *arrabaleños*, Prestán, and Lorenzo, a role in constructing a Panamanian national identity. The oligarchy's disregard toward nineteenth-century popular movements inspired the continuation of mass struggles. In the twentieth century, workers and students mobilized to question the republic's exclusionary policies, which weakened the state's ability to rule. After almost a century of suppressing the nineteenth-century plebeian tradition of nationalism and its resurgence between 1925 and 1964, Panama faced a "crisis of hegemony." According to Mario Esteban Carranza, when a government is "incapable of containing social conflict," the military takes its

²⁹LeFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 138-140; Cindy Jaquith, "Why the Panamanian people are fighting for national dignity," in *Panama: the truth about the U.S. invasion* (New York: Pathfinder, 1990), 5-11.

place to pacify the population.³⁰ The elite's unwillingness to co-opt students, workers, and peasants facilitated the emergence of the military regime. In addition, the republic's disregard of nineteenth-century plebeian nationalism also explains, at least in part, the constitutional government's fall to the National Guard in 1968.

The Military Regime: Yunta Pueblo Gobierno (1968-1989)

On 11 October 1968, the National Guard staged a coup that removed third-time president Arnulfo Arias after he threatened to replace officers in the force. Colonels Omar Torrijos and Boris Martínez mobilized a military-civilian junta that displaced the president and his supporters. However, once in power, the officers lacked a clear agenda for governing the nation.³¹ Politicized masses reflecting plebeian republicanism challenged the Guard's unconstitutional coup, not necessarily the displacement of the elite. The officers first tried to subdue popular dissent but realized that the military regime needed the support of the lower and middle classes. In order to consolidate power, the military first envisioned a nationalist campaign centered on the Canal and the Canal Zone and then enacted a *Torrijismo* project aimed at sectors the democratic republic excluded. *Torrijismo* emphasized class over ethnicity, which elevated the popular sector. By demonstrating the Guard's commitment to the masses, *Torrijismo* also cast the elite as *vendepatrias* (sell-outs) and Washington as imperialists. The government suppressed and then, with *Torrijismo*, co-opted plebeian groups. In downplaying the isthmus's history of tumultuous race relations and focusing on class with an anti-oligarchical and anti-imperialistic (U.S.) discourse, the regime consolidated power.

³⁰Mario Esteban Carranza, quoted in Priestly, *Military*, 10.

³¹Guevara, *Panamanian*, 144.

In the tradition of plebeian nationalism, rural, student, and urban groups mobilized to protest Arnulfo Arias' unconstitutional removal and the suspension of the 1946 constitution. Like its predecessors, the Guard used force against the lower and middle classes. Troops first attacked pro-Arnulfistas from the interior. Pro-Arnulfista peasants from the Chiriquí Province formed rebel forces, but when Arias fled the country on October 23, 1968, the military defeated the guerrillas. A few days before, *Universidad de Panamá* students and faculty also denounced the Guard's takeover with a manifesto that Priestly states "called for the speedy return to civilian government."³² In response, the police combated militant students from the *Instituto Nacional* and the *Universidad de Panamá*. The regime jailed or exiled Communist student activists such as student leader Floyd Britton. In November of 1969, troops detained Britton and sent him to the Coiba Island penal facility, where soldiers executed him.³³ According to Priestly, people living in urban settlements like the shantytown San Miguelito also protested the regime with their Movement of National Unification, Development, and Guidance (MUNDO).³⁴ The National Guard also arrested and reported missing Colombian priest, Father Héctor Gallegos, who publicly opposed the regime at his peasant cooperative.³⁵ After committing at least 34 murders that a special commission of the International Commission on Human Rights documented, the military opted for integrating plebeian groups.³⁶

After fighting peasants, students, and the working class, the military presented the coup as a populist revolution. The new 1972 constitution redefined the military's takeover and, on

³²Priestly, *Military*, 26.

³³Organization of American States, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Panama* (Washington, D.C: Organization of American States, 1979), 18.

³⁴Priestly, *Military*, 26.

³⁵Richard M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez Borbón found a source that claims Panamanian intelligence forces threw the popular priest from a helicopter while he was still alive. Richard M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez Borbón, *Time of Tyrants: Panama 1968-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 165-166.

³⁶Organization of American States, *Report*, 15.

paper, legalized the regime. In Article 277, the constitution also recognized Brigadier General Omar Torrijos Herrera, Commander in Chief of the National Guard, as “Maximum Leader of the Panamanian Revolution.”³⁷ In addition to creating a new constitution, on October 11, 1973, legislators passed a law that pronounced the October 11 overthrow as a national day of celebration. The directive also praised the 1972 constitution and considered it the only document in Panama’s history to recognize “*el pueblo*” (community).³⁸ The law and the 1972 constitution provided the opportunity to present the coup in a new light.

Aside from claiming to be revolutionary, the military also found a nationalist cause in the Canal and the Canal Zone. Ever since the Canal opened in 1914, Panamanians had debated the United States’ control of the waterway and military presence in a 553 square mile strip of land. As historian Walter LeFeber notes, throughout Panama’s history, the population saw the United States as “dominating Panama through informal colonialism.”³⁹ In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, students, along with other sectors reflecting plebeian nationalism, protested the enclave dividing the isthmus. In response to the widespread hatred of the canal and its “Yankee” inhabitants, Torrijos and subsequent leaders argued that the military regime revived the nationalist liberation movement of the students and masses to “guarantee future generations the eradication of the fifth frontier.”⁴⁰ In Torrijos speeches with the FEP, he often referred to the military as continuing the sixty-eight year struggle to liberate the country from the “imperialists.”⁴¹ He insisted that the “Panamanian guard, with the population, is better suited

³⁷“The 1972 Constitution,” quoted in Organization of American States, *Report*, 11.

³⁸Republic of Panamá, “Por la cual se decreta el día 12 de Octubre de 1973, día de fiesta nacional,” Resolution No. 17.469, *Gaceta Oficial*, November 11, 1973.

³⁹LeFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 59.

⁴⁰Omar Torrijos, Discurso en Santiago de Cuba, January 12, 1976, in *Papeles*, 177.

⁴¹Omar Torrijos, Discurso en celebración de la semana antiimperialista, in *Papeles*, 33.

to operate the Canal” than the oligarchy and foreigners.⁴² The military officials’ nationalist cause gave the regime a sense of purpose.

The Guard also developed a hybrid form of populism, *Torrijismo*, to integrate the popular sector into the state as well as attack the elite and the United States. Torrijos’ public discourse shaped *Torrijismo*, which borrowed ideas from nineteenth-century *arrabaleños* who represented the *pueblo* (community), not just men of color.⁴³ In a similar fashion, the military regime employed the term “*yunta pueblo gobierno*,” which translated means a “union between government and the people.”⁴⁴ In downplaying race, officials projected class to unify the lower and middle sectors while criminalizing the oligarchy. According to Torrijos, “instead of with the unpatriotic oligarchy, nationalism lies with the masses because they pay with blood to eradicate misery, injustice, and inequality.”⁴⁵ Unlike the patriotic masses, the wealthy became synonymous with exploitation and abusing the people for personal and imperialistic interests. According to José de Jesús Martínez, *Torrijismo* defined the upper class and imperialism as “one and the same.”⁴⁶ In attacking elite leaders as working alongside imperialists, the regime projected itself as the only institution in touch with the needs of the *pueblo*. The National Guard hoped that the discourse would erase any memories of the military suppressing students, peasants, and urban groups. Torrijos insisted that the guard “had ‘divorced’ the oligarchical-imperialists . . . [and] had united in ‘second nuptials’ with the popular sector.”⁴⁷

⁴²Torrijos, *Papeles*, 180.

⁴³McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 96.

⁴⁴Emma Scribner, “The Omar Torrijos regime: Implications for the democratization process in Panama” (master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2003), 50.

⁴⁵Omar Torrijos, “Discurso del general de brigada Omar Torrijos Herrera ante el consejo de seguridad de la O.N.U. reunido en la ciudad de Panamá el 15 de marzo de 1973” *Revista Lotería* 1, no. 305, 306, 308, 309 (1981): 420.

⁴⁶José de Jesús Martínez, *Mi General Torrijos* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Torrijista, 1987), 135

⁴⁷Omar Torrijos, quoted in Martínez, *Mi General*, 42.

By redefining the regime as “serving the *pueblo*,” not just racially acceptable peoples, the discourse made possible the government’s populist projects designed to appease the diverse peasant, urban, student, and intellectual population.⁴⁸

The government first intended to placate the rural elements that had fought on behalf of ex-president Arias and may have formed the ranks of Lorenzo’s army in the Thousand Day’s War (1889-1902). In hopes of redeeming themselves with the rural population, the Guard instituted agrarian reforms that funneled resources to the countryside. Under the National Confederation of Peasant Settlements (CONAC), founded in 1970, the regime brought the peasantry into political life for the first time. CONAC oversaw the development of farming settlements in communities that benefited from government services. As Priestly notes, the program created a general assembly in each settlement that extended limited political participation to peasants.⁴⁹ In addition to CONAC, the Alliance for Progress offered farmers technical and financial assistance for agricultural production. While establishing agricultural reforms and peasant co-ops, Torrijos practiced “Bonapartist” leadership by traveling to the interior to interact with peasants.⁵⁰ The agricultural programs co-opted peasants previously against the state.

While focusing on the interior, the Guard also created legislation and experimental districts to integrate areas opposed to the military coup. Before 1968, individuals from neighborhoods like El Chorrillo staged renters’ strikes to demand better standards of living and affordable rents. Even though these individuals presented their grievances to the republic, the working-class still lacked many utilities. By passing the Directive No. 93, which dictated

⁴⁸Torrijos, *Papeles*, 191.

⁴⁹Priestly, *Military*, 61.

⁵⁰Ibid.

measures to regulate leases, the state demonstrated that it was concerned with the well-being of the urban population.⁵¹ Prior to the law, no procedures existed to ensure that proprietors guaranteed secure housing. Under the regime, new housing legislation prevented landlords from terminating leases and increasing rents without notifying tenants. In July 1969, the regime also created an experimental district out of the San Miguelito community, one of the most impoverished locales in Panama. Priestly states that the special district resulted from the “negative reaction of the San Miguelito religious and lay leaders to the military coup.”⁵² The government began talks to create a district, which gave local leaders an opportunity to participate in politics. In addressing working-class issues of housing and lack of representation, the government pacified citizens who resisted the state.

The state also needed the support of the student population, a group that still remembered the assassination of Floyd Britton. Since protesting for Panamanian control of the canal in the 1940s, student organizations formed a following larger than any other activist group in the nation. In an effort to relate to the youth, Torrijos professed that on one occasion that: “If I did not have my uniform on, I would have been with them [the students].”⁵³ To demonstrate his affinity for students, Torrijos on May 1971, gave the *Federación de Estudiantes de Panamá* (Student Federation of Panama, FEP) the authority of the university. Officials delegated responsibilities to the FEP and provided former leaders with ministerial and sub-ministerial positions. The regime established ties with the FEP, which the state used, in 1971, against radical leftist groups such as the *Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario* (Revolutionary

⁵¹Republic of Panamá, “Dictanse medidas sobre los arrendamientos,” Resolution No. 17.456, *Gaceta Oficial*, October 22, 1973.

⁵² Priestly, *Military*, 36

⁵³Omar Torrijos, “Carta del general Omar Torrijos Herrera al senador Edward Kennedy,” *Revista Lotería* 1 no. 305, 306, 308, 309 (1981): 371.

Student Front, FER). Student leader Jorge Camacho of the FER staged a protest against the regime while FEP welcomed U.S President Jimmy Carter to Panama for the ratification of the 1977 Canal Treaties. The government-backed FEP initiated a riot to suppress the FER, which ended in the death of twenty-one-year-old Camacho and student Démostenes Rodríguez.⁵⁴ The struggle illustrates how the FEP became the right-hand of the administration.⁵⁵

The regime also co-opted black and leftist intellectuals who fought alongside students for the Canal and repudiated the military's coup. Moreover, the Guard legitimized itself with people of color by including black politicians in the administration. Rómulo Escobar Arosemena, a lawyer from Panama City, was a black intellectual who joined the regime as the Minister of Work and Social Welfare and then as rector of the *Universidad de Panamá*. The regime appointed another professor, Juan Materno Vásquez, who was the second black to occupy a cabinet position, as Minister of the Presidency. Materno Vásquez had been involved in the military-civilian junta that overthrew Arias. He served the country again as a Supreme Court justice (1974-1978).⁵⁶ Torrijos also worked closely with leftist professors such as José de Jesús Martínez. When the Guard shut down the Universidad de Panamá, Martínez fled to Europe but later returned from exile and joined the guard as a sergeant. Martínez became one of Torrijos's closest advisers.⁵⁷ Other *Partido del Pueblo* members participated in the government. For several years, the party existed as the only political organization.⁵⁸ In allowing the party to function, the government established good relations with communists.

⁵⁴Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Otorgase indultos conforme lo establece el artículo 179 numeral de la constitución, Resolution No. 22.865, *Gaceta Oficial*, September 8, 1995.

⁵⁵Estudio1Panama, "Doens podría ser el responsable intelectual del asesinato del dirigente izquierdista Camacho," <http://www.estudio1panama.com/?p=14167> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁵⁶Ropp, *Panamanian Politics*, 40.

⁵⁷ Martínez, *Mi General*, 29-43.

⁵⁸Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, Resolution No. 58, *Gaceta Oficial*, March 3, 1969.

Many of these intellectuals and leftists would become associated with the regime and helped tie plebeian struggles to *Torrijismo*.

The 1968 military coup almost divided the isthmus. Numerous groups representing plebeian tradition challenged the National Guard's constitutionality. They questioned the legality of deposing President Arias from office. During its first months in power, the regime practiced violent methods to pacify the masses. After traditional methods of control failed, the regime changed course. *Torrijismo*, which combined anti-imperialist and plebeian discourse, became the new state ideology. The discourse emphasized that the Guard only pursued the interests of the masses. The regime practiced *Torrijismo* by creating institutions that targeted key groups associated with the isthmus's tradition of plebeian republicanism. Officials demonstrated their commitment to Panamanians through educational, agrarian, labor, and political reforms. By extending political participation to individuals formally excluded, the government showed how it differed from the republic. After the administration consolidated power, intellectuals pursued a cultural revolution to solidify the regime's alliance with the masses.

Cultural Revolution: Vindicating Plebeian heroes

The cultural revolution set up the regime as the culmination of the isthmus' longstanding tradition of plebeian movements. Throughout the military period, writers and statesmen carried out a program to reorganize and redefine the messages of plebeian historical movements while ignoring all racial components. Since the government still followed *mestizaje*, intellectuals highlighted issues of class and imperialism (major components of

Torrijismo) within each movement.⁵⁹ In emphasizing these ideas, the state appropriated subaltern history to maintain legitimacy with ethnically diverse groups, such as peasant cooperatives, students, leftist, and laborers. The military's adherence to *mestizaje* and its attention to class and anti-imperialist rhetoric consolidated plebian contributions to Panamanian identity. The state paradoxically still disparaged the isthmus's black culture, yet, to stay in power, appropriated plebian struggles led by the lower class.

The first projects of the *Instituto Nacional de Cultural* (Institute of National Culture) were indicative of how the regime exemplified old vestiges of *mestizaje*. Under Law Number 63, June 1974, President Demetrio B. Lakas (1972 to 1978) established INAC.⁶⁰ The institution oversaw the dissemination of Panamanian culture throughout the country. According to the former director of the INAC, Dr. Diógenes Cedeño Cenci, the institution incorporated people the republic had discriminated against or who never enjoyed the expressions of the country's national culture. Through the INAC, the government encouraged devotion to the state by organizing folk dances, encouraging the publication of poems, histories, plays, and the building of national museums. For example, the INAC built fine arts schools in Chiriquí and visual arts schools in Veraguas and Colón, which encouraged artists to paint and sculpt expressions of Panamanian nationalism.⁶¹ The programs allowed impoverished black and *mestizo* citizens to engage in the national project. Although the INAC had published a limited number of works concerning Afro-Panamanian affairs, it was not until black mobilization in the 1980s that the

⁵⁹While Priestley asserts that the government helped curb racism, he adds that the discourse still discriminated blacks and equated national culture with the white-mestizo region of Azuero. George Priestley and Alberto Barrow, "The Black Movement in Panamá: A Historical and Political Interpretation, 1994-2004, *Souls* 10, no. 3 (1994): 232.

⁶⁰Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se crea el Instituto Nacional de Cultura," Resolution No. 17.622, *Gaceta Oficial*, June 6, 1974.

⁶¹Diógenes Cedeño Cenci, *Omar Torrijos Herrera y su concepción de Panamá como un Estado Docente* (Panamá: Fundación Omar Torrijos, 2000), 21.

institute's focus changed. Indeed, throughout the military period, INAC continued to characterize Panama as having a *mestizo* identity. In the INAC's National Ballet Folkórico, the typical Panamanian dances were from *mestizo* regions such as Los Santos.⁶² The province of Los Santos is synonymous with being *mestizo* and isolated from the immigration of West-Indian laborers. INAC built numerous museums, such as the Museum of Nationality (Museo de la Nacionalidad), in Los Santos.⁶³ The INAC also named museums like the Belisario Porras Museum and Panama City's Museum of Anthropology Reina Torres de Araúz after *mestizo* Panamanians.⁶⁴ Although the regime's mission to promote Panamanian culture improved its image with the masses, the INAC, nevertheless, projected a *mestizo* identity.⁶⁵

Likewise, Panama's national legislature only recognized *mestizo* Panamanians in naming building projects. Legislators named hydroelectric dams, libraries, and highways after notable Panamanians of the republican period, such as Ascancio Villalaz Paz, Ernesto J. Castellero, and Belisario Porras.⁶⁶ The government reinforced a preference for Hispanophile culture by making national historical monuments of Juan Demóstenes Arosemena Normal School and the house of

⁶²Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se fomenta la enseñanza de las expresiones folclóricas tradicionales en las escuelas del país y se dictan otras disposiciones," Resolution No.20.985, *Gaceta Oficial*, January 28, 1988.

⁶³Cedeño, *Omar Torrijos*, 21-22.

⁶⁴Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se da el nombre de museo antropologico Reina Torrez de Arauz al museo del hombre Panameño," Resolution No. 19.784, *Gaceta Oficial*, March 24, 1983; Cedeño, *Omar Torrijos*, 21.

⁶⁵Gerardo Maloney, "Significado de la presencia y contribución del afro antillano a la nación panameña," in *Historia General de Panamá*, ed. Alfredo Castellero Calvo (Panamá: Comité Nacional de Centenario de la República, 2004), 152.

⁶⁶Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se asigna a hidroelectrica construída sobre el río Bayano, el nombre de: (Hidroelectrica Ascancio Villalaz Paz)," Resolution No.19.356, *Gaceta Oficial*, July 7, 1981; Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se da el nombre de Ernesto J. Castellero R., A la biblioteca nacional de panamá," Resolution No. 19.612, *Gaceta Oficial*, July 2, 1981; Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se da la carretera divisa-las tablas-puerto de mensabe el nombre de via presidente Belisario Porras," Resolution No. 19.298, *Gaceta Oficial*, July 13, 1982.

Mateo Iturralde.⁶⁷ Along the same lines, the government commemorated the centennial anniversary of León Antonio Soto's birth.⁶⁸ The legislature and INAC both continued the practice of venerating *mestizo* Panamanian scholars, politicians, and scientists. When and if the government did recognize Afro-Panamanians, their cultural norms were mere additions to the country's national identity.⁶⁹

While INAC and the legislature promoted *mestizaje*, some scholars overtly addressed race as an issue. The Minister of the Presidency, Juan Materno Vásquez, argued against Panamanians' associating themselves with a racial identity. Even though Materno Vásquez was black, he stressed that his family's colonial heritage and racial history made him an ideal Panamanian. Materno Vásquez wrote extensively about the Panamanian identity as being synonymous with *mestizaje*.⁷⁰ His works criticized individuals who claimed to be Afro-Antillean and who did not adopt a *mestizo* consciousness. Materno Vásquez maintained that "self-proclaimed" Afro-Antillean intellectuals were "idealistic, but misguided."⁷¹ He complicated matters when he wrote in *Revista Lotería* that Afro-Antillean intellectuals needed to "set foot in reality and see that their future is in Panama, because Africa does not recognize them."⁷² In making those comments, Materno Vásquez demonstrated how the regime's intellectuals still associated Panamanian identity with speaking Spanish and racial mixing, alienating the English-

⁶⁷Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se declara la escuela normal Juan Demostenes Arosemena monumento histórico nacional," Resolution No. 20.210, *Gaceta Oficial*, December 12, 1984; Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se declara monumento histórico nacional la casa donde nació y vivió el ilustre Panameño Mateo Iturralde," Resolution No. 19.234, *Gaceta Oficial*, December 13, 1980.

⁶⁸Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual conmemora el primer centenario del nacimiento del Panameño León Antonio Soto," Resolution No.17.577, *Gaceta Oficial*, April 10, 1974.

⁶⁹Maloney, "Significado de la presencia," 152.

⁷⁰For an example of his writings, see Juan Materno Vásquez, *Sociedad y Estado en la Nación Panameña* (Panama: Ediciones Olga Elena, 1987).

⁷¹Juan Materno Vásquez, "La nacionalidad panameña: Concepto jurídico y concepto histórico-político," *Revista Nacional de Cultura* 9-10 (1977-78): 93.

⁷²Ibid.

speaking, West Indian population. Even Jamaican scholar Velma Newton agreed with Materno Vásquez. She believed West Indian laborers who immigrated in 1850 never assimilated or recognized themselves as Panamanians.⁷³ Instead of blaming the *mestizaje* discourse, the intellectuals attacked West Indian Panamanians for not embracing the mainstream of isthmian life.⁷⁴ Even though the regime incorporated blacks and indigenous peoples, the country's intellectuals, institutions, and legislation still preferred a Hispanophile ideal of the isthmus.

Because the cultural revolution still deemed *mestizaje* as a crucial element of Panamanian culture, it used *Torrijismo* to revise national history. Intellectuals from the *Universidad de Panamá*, government bureaucracy, and national newspapers like *La Estrella de Panamá* worked at appropriating plebeian movements, which were previously considered caste wars or neglected in mainstream history. Although the essence of nineteenth and twentieth century plebeian struggles like that of Victoriano Lorenzo were always nationalist in nature, the isthmus' early republic had seen them through a racial lens. Unlike the republic's intellectuals, military writers and statesmen interpreted these movements as contributing to the nation's identity by downplaying race in favor of class and anti-oligarchy-U.S discourse. As a result, the subaltern events reflected the military regime's own ideological underpinnings, which helped project the 1968 coup as a popular struggle. In focusing on class, intellectuals elevated plebeians as heroes while casting the elite as traitors. To vilify the United States and strengthen the state's nationalist campaign for the Canal and Canal Zone, the scholars also stressed anti-imperialistic characteristics. Throughout the entire military period, the cultural revolution

⁷³ Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama 1850-1914* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1984), 166.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

shaped each subaltern movement and figure to suit the military's needs, thus presenting a working-class identity.

Since the military formed an alliance with the labor and agrarian sectors, intellectuals traced the nation's consciousness to nineteenth century plebeians the old republic considered unpatriotic. In order to emphasize *Torrijismo's* stance that *el pueblo* safeguarded nationality, the cultural revolution focused on the class composition of participants in the 1856 Watermelon Riot, Pedro Prestán's 1885 rebellion, and Victoriano Lorenzo's 1899-1902 uprising. Sociologist Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, legislator-academic Luis Navas Parajos, and scholar Rolando E. Hernández focused on the working-class *arrabaleños* who fought in the riot to propose that the event marked the first effort for Panamanian independence.⁷⁵ Within these works, intellectuals cast *arrabaleños* as seeking sovereignty before leading officials desired to separate from Colombia. Politician Arturo Guzmán also recognized lower class individuals in Prestán's movement in Colón. He considered it "the only outbreak of socio-political inconformity" when the conservative policies of the 1880s threatened the isthmus' state's rights.⁷⁶ This was the first interpretation that considered *colonenses* nationalists, which republican officials regarded as incompatible with national culture. In addition to casting *arrabaleños* and *colonenses* as Panamanian heroes, statesmen Rómulo Escobar Arosemena, Juan Materno Vásquez, scholar Lola C. Tapia, as well as historians Ricaurte Soler and Alberto

⁷⁵ Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, *Dominio y sociedad en el Panamá Colombiano (1821-1903): Escrutinio sociológico* (Panamá: Impresora Panamá, 1978), 340; Luis Navas Parajos, *El movimiento obrero en Panamá, 1880-1914* (Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1979), 55; Rolando E. Hernández, "Incidente de la tajada de sandía (una experiencia histórica que fundamento nuestra lucha antiimperialista)," *Temas de Nuestra América* no.17 (July 1983): 1.

⁷⁶ Guzmán, "Cronología," 232.

Osorio, recognized Lorenzo “peasant rebels.”⁷⁷ Unlike earlier interpretations of the leader as an Indian villain, intellectuals like Materno Vásquez saw Lorenzo’s struggle as “a symbol of the fight for the nation’s independence.”⁷⁸ By stressing a class identity, the cultural revolution interpreted the movement’s followers as heroes, which boosted the regime’s union with the popular sector.

Intellectuals also interpreted the 1925 renter’s strike and 1947, 1958, and 1964 student movements as nationalist. In the twentieth century, the composition of the masses changed from rural and *arrabal*-based, especially in Colón and Panama City’s poor neighborhoods like El Chorrillo. As a result, intellectuals focused on the proletariat and middle class nature of these events to downplay race. Historians Alexander Cuevas and Everado Tomilson, as well as Materno Vásquez, demonstrate that the protesters in the 1925 renters’ strikes were working-class people from the Colón and Panama City barrios of Chorillo, Marañón, and Calidonia, workers who lived in wooden houses with community bathrooms.⁷⁹ In viewing them as proletariats in the *Sindicato de Trabajadores* (Union of Workers), intellectuals cast the protestors as “spontaneous, disciplined, and [people who] fought with a heroic spirit for Panama.”⁸⁰ Scholar’s also noted the involvement of the popular sector in the student

⁷⁷Rómulo Escobar Bethancourt, *Torrijos: Colonia americana, no!* (Bogotá: C. Valencia Editores, 1981), 66; Materno Vásquez, *Sociedad*, 179; Lola C. de Tapia, “Figuras del proscenio: Victoriano Lorenzo,” *Revista Lotería* no. 187 (June 1971): 61; Ricaurte Soler, Panamá: *Historia de una crisis* (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1989), 34; Alberto Osorio, “Victoriano Lorenzo Panameño insignia,” *Revista Lotería* no. 270-271 (August-September 1978): 96.

⁷⁸Materno, *Sociedad*, 179.

⁷⁹Alexander Cuevas, “El movimiento inquilinario de 1925,” *Revista Lotería* no. 213 (October-November 1973): 76; Everado Tomilson, “Las hueglas inquilinarias de 1925 and 1932,” *Revista Lotería* no. 213 (October-November 1973): 98; Juan Materno Vásquez, *El país por conquistar: La tesis del país integral* (Panamá: Plazas S, 1974), 17.

⁸⁰Tomilson, “La hueglas inquilinarias,” 99.

movements.⁸¹ In particular, Mezquita focuses on the students' class identity to claim that they were heroes for proving that the pueblo can "defeat the oligarchical-imperial alliance" when youth leaders pressured the government to reject the 1947 Filós-Hines treaty.⁸² By emphasizing class over race, intellectuals presented these groups as patriots. The redefinition helped the government unite with the masses.

Given that the writers and statesmen portrayed the popular sectors as patriotic, they cast the oligarchy as traitors and bad natured. According to *Torrijismo*, because the elite's "brains were corrupted by foreign nations" it had "succumbed to political ignorance."⁸³ To attack the military's domestic enemy, intellectuals emphasized the anti-elitist components of nineteenth-century movements. In describing the 1856 Watermelon Riot, Hernández deplores Panamanian Governor Tomás Herrera and official José de Obaldía (leaders in 1856) for "defending the commercial bourgeoisie" and "bending to the interests of foreigners."⁸⁴ The new interpretation of the riot stressed that, by compensating the U.S. for business damaged during the fight, the "humiliating and denigrating" elite belittled the *arrabaleños* nationalist movement.⁸⁵ The revisions expand the anti-oligarchy message with the measures officials took to execute Prestán and Lorenzo. In 1885, Colombian officials hanged Prestán even though the 1863 constitution prohibited the death penalty. In describing the elite's actions, Materno Vásquez and Navas wrote that the upperclass "sacrificed Prestán" and even "applauded his

⁸¹Jorge Conte-Porras, *La rebelión de las esfinges: Historia del movimiento estudiantil panameño* (Panamá: Litho-Impresora, 1978), 129; Rafael Mezquita, "Prologue," in *75 años de relaciones*, 9; Jorge Turner, "Intervenciones norteamericanas en Panamá: Negociaciones y revisiones al tratado Hay-Bunau Varilla," in *75 años de relaciones*, 59; Juan Materno Vásquez, *Sobre el hombre cultural panameño* (Panama: Impresora Panamá, 1971), 112.

⁸²Mezquita, "Prologue," 9.

⁸³Escobar, *Torrijos*, 133.

⁸⁴Hernández, "Incidente de la tajada de sandía," 2.

⁸⁵José Ignacio Ramírez, "La contienda diplomática del incidente de la tajada de sandía a 122 años del hecho histórico," *Revista Lotería* no. 269 (July 1978): 68.

death.”⁸⁶ Soler also depicts the oligarchy as vile for executing Lorenzo to preserve the status quo at the expense of his revolutionary cause.⁸⁷ The scholars use the deaths of the leaders as an example of the oligarchy’s disinterest in the common people’s welfare. The cultural revolution’s portrayal of the ruling class as *vendepatrias* (sell-outs) and malicious helped the military’s argument that it was the only institution representative of the masses.

Moreover, given the turmoil of the twentieth century, intellectuals demonstrated how the previous regime betrayed the masses. Soler argues that the 1925 movement shows that the oligarchy “definitely had an anti-nationalist character.”⁸⁸ Several scholars claimed the former republic worked in solidarity with imperialists.⁸⁹ In the 1925 strike, the elite requested the aid of North Americans to attack non-violent strikers for supporting social reform, which scholars considered unforgivable. In addition, the FEP’s executive council highlighted how, in the 1964 Flag Riot, the oligarchy tactically allowed “imperialist aggression” against students.⁹⁰ In 1964, the fighting between U.S. troops and Panamanians started after Zonians (people living in the Canal Zone) desecrated the Panamanian national flag that *Instituto Nacional* students had planned to hoist up in the Zone. The FEP and Soler interpret the republic’s actions as undignified and a weak endeavor to protect the status quo.⁹¹ The cultural revolution characterized the elite as unpatriotic and disconnected from the *pueblo*, which mirrored the military’s intent to attack its predecessors.

⁸⁶ Materno Vásquez, *Sociedad*, 177; Navas, *Obreros*, 45.

⁸⁷ Soler, *Historia*, 36.

⁸⁸ Soler, *Nación y oligarquía*, 32.

⁸⁹ Tomilson, “La huelgas inquilinarias,” 99; Soler *Historia*, 36-37; Cuevas, “El movimiento,” 76; Miguel A. Candanedo, “Genesis y proyecciones históricas del 9 de enero,” *Imagen: Revista de extensión cultural de la universidad de Panamá* no. 6 (1984): 83; Demetrio Porras, “El movimiento inquilinario,” *Revista Lotería* no. 213 (October-November 1973): 105.

⁹⁰ Federación de Estudiantes Panameños, “Vigencia histórica de la jornada anti oligárquica de mayo de 1958,” *Tareas Panamá* 38 (1977): 11.

⁹¹ Soler, *Historia*, 69; Federación de Estudiantes Panameños., 11.

Intellectuals also took advantage of Washington's involvement in each movement to characterize the U.S. as an imperialist force. During the military period, the regime defined the United States as an imperialist entity that the country needed to eradicate from the isthmus.⁹² Reflecting state rhetoric, intellectuals stressed that the U.S. had imperialistic intentions against nineteenth-century movements. In fact, Hernández depicts the U.S. men in the 1856 Watermelon riot as "an auxiliary group of the filibuster William Walker," not U.S. travelers.⁹³ By associating the men with Walker, Hernández claims the U.S. men attempted to annex Panama. While Hernández tied the U.S. action to filibusters, Materno Vásquez and historian Max Salabarrí Patiño examined the U.S. Marines' actions in suppressing each struggle. Both scholars blame the U.S. Marines for Prestán's death in 1885.⁹⁴ In particular, Salabarría even describes Prestán's hanging as a "scene from the U.S. South, in which a 'sheriff' decides to lynch a man without a fair trial."⁹⁵ By stressing that U.S. filibusters invaded Panama and Marines participated in Prestán's death, the scholars portrayed Washington as imperialistic.

As a result of the numerous U.S. interventions in the twentieth century, intellectuals focused on how soldiers attacked unarmed workers and students. In the 1925 movement, Panamanian president Rodolfo Chiari requested U.S. aid to pacify the workers, and U.S. intervention ended with the death of several protestors. In describing the Marines' actions, Materno Vásquez claims they "recklessly shot and stabbed the protestors with bayonets."⁹⁶ He argued that the violent attack undermined the nationalist spirit of the strikers. In his work, PRD

⁹²Torrijos, *Papeles*, 133.

⁹³William Walker was infamous for his filibustering attempts in Central America in which he declared himself president and was captured and executed. Hernández, "Incidente de la tajada," 1.

⁹⁴Materno, *Sobre el hombre cultural*, 88-89; Max Salabarría Patiño, "Por la reivindicación de Pedro Prestán" *Revista Lotería* no. 264-265 (1978): 118-134.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 130.

⁹⁶Materno, *Sociedad y Estado*, 391.

official Guzmán adds that the suppression of the strike confirmed “the common interests of the anti-nationalist oligarchy and imperialist North Americans.”⁹⁷ Given the nature of the student movements to challenge the U.S. Canal occupation, Materno Vásquez and Conte-Porras made the students martyrs and Zonians neo-colonialists. In particular, Materno Vásquez states that the deaths of eighteen-year-olds Sebastián Tapia, in the 1947 Filós-Hines debate, and Ascancio Arosemena, in the 1964 Flag Riot, are examples of “unjust aggressions” inflicted on children.⁹⁸ While Zonians did act out against students in the 1964 riot, Conte-Porras redefines them as neo-colonialists for “signing the U.S. national anthem” during the fight.⁹⁹ By describing the Marines as murderers and Zonians as imperialists, the scholars demonized the U.S. and those who threatened the legitimacy of the regime during the military period.

In comparison to the military, nineteenth-century plebeians became national liberation fighters against imperialism. Even though the movements were anti-imperialist in nature, intellectuals exaggerated the message to mirror the state’s rhetoric. For Soler and Materno Vásquez, the 1856 Watermelon Riot was a standoff between Panamanians and a foreign power that threatened to deter the country’s national development.¹⁰⁰ The intellectuals made the struggle larger than a fight between a drunken U.S. passenger and a black Panamanian and instead portrayed it as a full-fledged Panamanian effort to defeat Western forces. Materno Vásquez adds that even though Washington tried to suppress the rioters, the event helped form an “anti-imperialist spirit that fostered the next plebeian movements.”¹⁰¹ In discussing the continuation of that fervor, Salabarría claims that Prestán was a patriot for trying to prevent

⁹⁷ Guzman, “Cronología,” 237.

⁹⁸ Materno, *Sobre el hombre cultural*, 112

⁹⁹ Conte-Porras, *La rebelión*, 126.

¹⁰⁰ Soler, *Historia*, 26; Materno, *Sociedad y Estado*, 290

¹⁰¹ Materno, *Sobre el hombre cultural*, 105.

the U.S. from interfering in the isthmus' affairs in 1885. Salabarría uses Prestán's letters to claim that the leader had no personal animosity towards Yankees, but "he could not tolerate their meddling."¹⁰² Although Lorenzo's movement concerned only him and other liberals in the Thousand Day's War, Tapia argues that the Indian general also developed a spirit for national liberation after the U.S. pressured Panamanians and Colombians to sign the U.S.S. Wisconsin Treaty.¹⁰³ The scholarship's portrayal of these leaders and riots as nationalist efforts against imperialism reflected the military's rhetoric to reclaim the canal.

When examining the twentieth-century movements, intellectuals did not find it difficult to characterize students as defending the isthmus from encroaching foreign powers. Conte-Porras published a detailed study on the student movements that dedicates an entire section to the FEP's 1947 *Comité de Defensa de la Soberanía* (Committee of Defending National Sovereignty). To demonstrate the FEP's anti-imperialist nature, he quotes student slogans: "Long live the republic! Down with Imperialism" and "Only Panama governs the Canal Zone."¹⁰⁴ The students were epitomized for their numerous struggles throughout the Republican period, and scholars such as Turner argue that the students were the only Panamanians willing to stand up to "invaders."¹⁰⁵ While all the student movements became heroic gestures of protecting the isthmus, the 1964 Flag Riot garnered the most attention from the state. Realizing that the riot remained fresh in the memories of the students and masses, the military frequently referred to the tragedy and even, in 1970, declared a national holiday commemorating the sixth

¹⁰²Salabarría, "Por la reivindicación," 113..

¹⁰³Tapia "figuras del prosenio," 61.

¹⁰⁴"Conte-Porras, *La rebelión*, chp. 5.

¹⁰⁵Turner, "Intervenciones," 65.

anniversary of the movement.¹⁰⁶ By portraying the students as national liberators for projecting an anti-imperialistic behavior, intellectuals reinforced the similarities between the state and plebeian nationalists.

As the military regime still adhered to *mestizaje* ideals of a Panamanian culture, the cultural revolution utilized *Torrijismo* rhetoric on class identity, anti-elite, and anti-imperialism to vindicate movements previously ignored in Panama's mainstream history. In appropriating the isthmus' plebeian tradition of nationalism, the military appeared as a continuation of the people's century long effort to defend the country from domestic and international forces that threatened the development of the state. In addition to presenting the rule of the National Guard as the culmination of these struggles, the new interpretation of subaltern history contributed to attacking the isthmus' wealthy families and the U.S. Canal occupation. Even though the cultural revolution failed to recognize the ethnicity of the participants, the intellectuals' efforts to redefine the messages of the popular sector created a history, which not only reflected the regime's ideology but that also mirrored plebeian republicanism

Conclusion

In *Mi General Torrijos*, José de Jesús Martínez states that "*Torrijismo* is a search for our nationality . . . which is why we rescue, with the states' will, the historical significance of Victoriano Lorenzo."¹⁰⁷ The Indian general, along with Prestán and events dating back to the 1856 Watermelon Riot up to the 1964 Flag Riot, became a part of a cultural revolution to redefine the origins of Panamanian nationalism. In the words of Torrijos, "to change the social

¹⁰⁶Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por el cual se conmemora el sexto aniversario de la gesta heroica del 9 de enero de 1964," Resolution No. 16.527, *Gaceta Oficial*, January 7, 1970.

¹⁰⁷Martínez, *Mi general*, 136.

structure, without changing the man, is like wearing clean clothes without having taken a bath.”¹⁰⁸ As the general eloquently stated, the military regime not only appealed to the popular sector with social reforms but also redefined historical events to show how popular heroes such as Lorenzo and Prestán contributed to the formation of a national identity.

For almost a century, Panamanian leaders in the Colombian and Republican period suppressed plebeian republicanism and nationalist struggles emanating from the popular sector. As a result of white officials’ disdain for the ethnic majority, especially black Panamanians, Hanseatic and Hispanophile discourses portrayed society as *mestizo*. At the expense of the ethnic population, Panama’s early republic suppressed nineteenth century leaders’ contributions and the continuation of plebeian republicanism in the 1925 renter’s strike and numerous student movements. As a consequence, the elite-controlled republic was too weak to prevent the 1968 National Guard coup. While the Guard never abandoned *mestizaje* ideals, the military started a cultural revolution that successfully appropriated the longstanding tradition of plebeian nationalism on the isthmus. In doing so, the military solidified its alliance with the masses, portrayed itself as a popular revolution, and attacked its enemies. This chapter demonstrates that the new pantheon of Panamanian heroes, along with the regime’s Bonapartist style, helped the state maintain power for a twenty-one year period. The subsequent chapter is a case study on how popular intellectuals pushed the military regime to vindicate and elevate Pedro Prestán as a national hero. In particular, the chapter illustrates how the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán* reflected the government’s *Torrijismo* discourse, which bolstered the association between the regime and the masses.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 135.

Chapter 3: Pedro Prestán's Illustrative Vindication

"I appeal to history, sure she will do me justice, purge the taint that now falls on me and my family, and stigmatize those who sent me to the gallows and obeyed a foreign power's conviction of my guilt." -Pedro Prestán¹

Before U.S. civilians led Prestán to the gallows, he wrote that history would pardon him and punish his executioners. The general's statement addressed how Colombians, on August 18, 1885, falsely charged him with burning down the Atlantic port city of Colón, Panama. Four months prior to his death, Prestán, followed by black laborers from the *barrio Jamaicano* (Jamaican neighborhood), led a liberal uprising in Colón. During a battle among Prestán's forces, Colombian conservative troops, and U.S. Marines, a fire spread throughout Colón and destroyed numerous homes and businesses. U.S. and Colombian officials blamed Prestán and his troops for setting the fire. After Colombian troops arrested him for arson, a Court Marshall convicted and executed the leader. Although Prestán pledged that history would vindicate him, it took a hundred years for Panamanians to recognize his innocence and significance in Panama's national narrative.

For nearly a century, the isthmus was conflicted about how to interpret Prestán and his movement. During the republican period (1903-1968), the elite developed *mestizaje*, which fomented positive portrayals of indigenous-European mixing but also reflected offensive depictions of blacks, as the base of Panamanian nationalism. As a result, nationalist architects had no desire to exonerate mulatto leader Prestán and his ethnically diverse troops. Thus, the republic rejected efforts emanating from the masses to clear Prestán's name. After the

¹Pedro Prestán, quoted in *Pedro Prestán: Cien años después*, ed. Manuel Octavio Sisnett Cano (Panamá: Academia Panameña de la Historia, 1985), 11.

republic collapsed, the new military regime (1968-1989) developed *Torrijismo*, an ideology based on anti-oligarchical and anti-imperialist rhetoric that intellectuals employed to redefine plebeian figures and events. The new pantheon of heroes helped the government portray itself as the culmination of plebeian struggles and attack traditional wealthy families and the United States. Unlike its predecessors, the military regime recognized subaltern contributions, which strengthened its coalition with the popular sector. However, in the 1980s, intellectuals had to push the government to vindicate and elevate Prestán as a state hero. Since the regime discreetly maintained *mestizaje* ideals, intellectuals associated with the popular sector deemphasized Prestán's race and couched his movement as class-oriented and anti-colonialist. The government pardoned Prestán in exchange for intellectuals' transforming him into a leader the regime could incorporate.

Leading Prestán scholar, Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, expanded the themes associated with the restoration of the general with his 1985 graphic novel *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas*. The author worked alongside Kuna artist Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera and published the isthmus' only graphic novel. *Pedro Prestán* is also unique for reflecting the regime's populist nation-building project and popular efforts to vindicate Prestán. The book has an identifiable nationalist subtext that is similar to the novels in Doris Sommer's study. Like Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, the authors of these books were encouraged by the need to "fill in a history that would help to establish the legitimacy of [their respective nations]."² In Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera's case, they were interested in vindicating Prestán and bolstering national identity. While the government played no role in the production of the comic book,

²Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 7.

the creators published a novel that wove *Torrijismo* discourse into the narrative, thus supporting the state.³

Panamanian studies neglect the historiographical debate concerning Prestán and the rare graphic novel depicting him as a compatriot. Since few investigations examine the government's appropriation of plebian movements, this work will contribute a unique case study on how, with the implied permission of the government, intellectuals and a graphic novel reflected subaltern hopes of pardoning one of their heroes as well as shaping the nation's identity. The chapter begins with an overview of Prestán's life and movement so that readers can comprehend the circumstances of his death. After the general's biography, the chapter then moves on to examine the Republic of Panama's negative portrayal of Prestán, which prevented the first vindication movement from succeeding. The study then addresses how the military regime's co-option of plebeian figures facilitated the absolution of Prestán. Because of the 1980s scholars, the isthmus published its first graphic novel, which elevated Prestán as a state-approved nationalist hero and exonerated him. Unlike its predecessors who depicted Prestán as an arsonist and an unpatriotic foreigner, the military characterized the leader as a patriot. In tracing the historiographical debates on Prestán and the graphic novel's use of government rhetoric, this study helps us understand how the populist regime's national ideals influenced the exoneration and popular work concerning Prestán.

Pedro Prestán: The Republican period

In Panama, two interpretations exist about Pedro Prestán's character. The first one sees him as a "man of passion" with a "monstrous dark side" while the second reveres Prestán as a

³Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, interview by author, Panama City, Panama, July 19, 2011.

“savior with a patriotic heart.”⁴ The traditional narrative tainted the memory of Prestán and the black Liberal Party. During the republican period, Panamanian historians claimed Prestán acted for revenge and ordered troops to torch the city of Colón. Republican nationalists based their studies on *mestizaje* discourse that equated national identity with mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage.⁵ Since Prestán was a mulatto, he did not fit the ideal of a national hero; therefore, the republic ignored evidence of his innocence. As a result of *mestizaje’s* offensive depictions of blacks, the first popular effort to vindicate Prestán and his troops failed. This section provides a biographical account on Prestán and traces the events leading up to his death. Then it discusses the popular sector’s unsuccessful attempt to clear Prestán’s name. In forming a national identity, republican intellectuals suppressed Prestán’s contribution in the 1885 Civil War, thus preventing a successful vindication of the general.

A) *Prestán’s Biographical Account*

Prestán was born on May 15, 1852, in Cartagena, Colombia. After Prestán’s father died while working as a mariner, his mother moved the family to Colón, Panama. While in Colón, Prestán labored as a *carretero* (fruit seller) to support his family. Later, Prestán taught elementary students for the San Isabel District. For a short time, his teaching salary allowed him to study law in Cartagena, until he fell into debt. When he returned to Colón, Prestán opened a legal practice specializing in city codes. In Gorgona (a city before the construction of the second Canal), he married María Félix and fathered his only child, América.⁶

⁴Sisnett, *Pedro Prestán*, 15.

⁵Peter Szok’s study on nationalism during the republican period argues that while “Panama was rapidly becoming a more multiethnic society . . . writers [promoted] homogeneity as they championed Hispanidad.” Peter A. Szok, *La Última gaviota: Liberalism and Nostalgia in Early Twentieth-Century Panama* (Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 2001), 100.

⁶Vitta Tejeira Svatos, “Reivindicación histórica de Pedro Prestán” (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1957), 13-14.

During Prestán's lifetime, the Panamanian elite pursued a Hanseatic model that envisioned the isthmus as a Western center for international trade and commerce. Panama's geographic location and colonial history motivated commercial families to pursue modernizing projects, such as a canal. The model's emphasis on Westernizing also shows the traditional elites' disdain for blacks and indigenous peoples on the isthmus. Intellectuals such as Justo Arosemena hoped Westernizing the region would eradicate the presence of black laborers and encourage mass migration of Europeans and North Americans. In order to pursue this model, elite officials adopted a liberal philosophy that emulated that of European countries.⁷

While this project intended to lighten the region, the liberal policies had the opposite effect. In 1853, liberal resolutions that abolished slavery and extended political participation to free men fostered a distinct group of black leaders like Prestán. Along with radical liberals such as Rafael Aizpuru and Benjamín Ruíz, Prestán entered politics between 1870 and 1885.⁸ Plebeian politicians like Prestán, as James E. Sanders claims, "were not stooges, mindless peons, or bullied clients" of the elite, but pursued their own agendas within the larger, Liberal Party.⁹ Black and mulatto Panamanians saw themselves as part of the liberal movement, whether it accepted them or not.¹⁰ Therefore, when Prestán challenged the conservative (1880s) Regeneration, hundreds of black citizens volunteered in his army to preserve their liberties.

During the 1880s, Colombian President Rafael Nuñez's Regeneration project divided Colombia. While muting the voices of the underclass, the conservative model also tried to

⁷ Szok, *La Última*, 21.

⁸ Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán. El hombre," in *Pedro Prestán*, ed. Sisnett, 65-66.

⁹ James E. Sanders, *Contentious Republicans: Popular Politics, Race, and Class in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁰ Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, *Dominio y sociedad en el Panamá colombiano (1821-1903)* (Panamá: Impresora Panamá, 1978), 342.

restore clerical power and the death penalty. The political restraints on blacks under the Regeneration program worried *arrabaleño* citizens (people living on the outskirts). In 1885, Nuñez's intervention in the state of El Santander's electoral process, a direct violation of the Río Negro Constitution (1863-1885), ignited insurrections throughout the region.¹¹ In response to Nuñez's unconstitutional practices, Panamanian radical liberals rallied together to overthrow the conservative government. Between March 16 and March 31, 1885, Prestán led a revolt in Colón with an eclectic group of men while Aizpuru mobilized troops in Panama, City. Prestán associated himself with Afro-Latin Americans, such as Cuban Francisco Peralta, Haitians Leopold Decaille and Antonio Pautricelli, and Jamaican George Davis (Cocobolo). His troops were mostly black railroad and canal laborers and *mestizo* working-class citizens.¹²

The constant fighting in March of 1885 exhausted Prestán's resources. In need of supplies, Prestán ordered a shipment of weapons from a U.S supplier. On March 30, when Prestán and his men tried to pick up the order, U.S agents John Dow and William Connors refused to hand over the consignment. Prestán held agents Dow and Connors, along with U.S consul to Colón Robert Wright, hostage to retrieve his supplies. In exchange for their lives, Consul Wright agreed to release the merchandise. However, the captain of the *U.S Galena*, Theodore Kane, intercepted the goods. After an informant notified Colombian generals of Prestán's predicament, the conservative troops attacked him the following day. On March 31, 1885, the battle ended with most of Colón in flames. Facing defeat, Prestán and sixty men retreated to Portobello and then Cartagena. While Prestán hid in Colombia, U.S Marines and

¹¹Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán: Héroe colónese," *Quincenario Bayano*, January 21, 1985.

¹²Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán y la insurrección armada," in *Pedro Prestán*, ed. Sisnett, 79-81.

entrepreneurs accused him of causing the fire. When Colombian forces arrested Prestán, with U.S support, the government sentenced him to death. On August 18, 1885, U.S and Colombian authorities publicly hanged Prestán over the railroad tracks.¹³

B) *Republican Interpretation and Prestán's First Vindication Attempt*

After Prestán's death, the isthmus's historians debated about how to address his movement in history. When Panama became a republic in 1903, the first educational textbook crucified Prestán. In October of 1911, Juan B. Sosa and Enrique J. Arce published *Compendio de historia de Panamá*.¹⁴ The 322-page text chronicled the history of the country. A writer and statesman, Sosa participated in the Liberal Party and was the province of Veraguas's deputy for the National Assembly.¹⁵ Arce dedicated his career to educating students at the *Instituto Nacional*. The new national discourse on *mestizaje* influenced Sosa and Arce. While the country remained liberal, the elite fomented *mestizaje* with positive portrayals of indigenous-European mixing but also with offensive depictions of blacks.¹⁶ As a result, Sosa and Arce's textbook villainized popular figures like Prestán.

Sosa and Arce portray Prestán as a Haitian conspirator against Colombia.¹⁷ Although Prestán was not Haitian, the description comes from nineteenth-century exaggerated fears of a caste war that happened during the Haitian Revolution.¹⁸ In the early twentieth century, wealthy white men and women continued to think that black individuals were engaged in

¹³Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Semblanza de Pedro Prestán," *Temas América*, in *Pedro Prestán*, ed. Sisnett, 117-119.

¹⁴Juan Bautista Sosa and Enrique José Arce, *Compendio de historia de panamá: Texto adoptado oficialmente para la enseñanza en las escuelas y colegios de la Nación* (Panamá: Morales & Rodríguez, 1911).

¹⁵Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá Ernesto J. Castellero R., *Biografías Panameña*, "Juan Bautista Sosa," <http://www.binal.ac.pa/buscar/!stbios.php> (accessed January 10, 2012).

¹⁶Szok, *La Última*, 106.

¹⁷Sosa and Arce, *Compendio*, 347.

¹⁸Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 88.

politics because of race and class hatred. Therefore, Sosa and Arce depict Prestán and his men as violent and “badly armed, foreign newcomers, and wrongdoers” rather than civic minded Panamanians. In viewing Prestán and black liberals as villains, the authors stress the general battled with a “violent spirit” when fighting against Colombians and U.S. agents.¹⁹ In the section, “Prestán’s End,” the historians also argue that Prestán burned down the city of Colón. The textbook indoctrinated Panamanians to remember Prestán as a black foreigner, instigator of a race war, and an arsonist. Architect, musician, and educator, René Brenes recalls reading the textbook while he attended elementary school in 1940. Brenes maintains, “Sosa and Arce’s version of Prestán’s story was taught everywhere, even at the university level.”²⁰ Young Panamanians learned that Prestán died for threatening the tranquility of the isthmus. For Panamanians like Brenes, the republic polluted Panamanian youth with negative images of Prestán

Julio H. Palacio’s *La guerra civil de 1885* reached broader audiences, non-academic, audiences. The book demonstrates how twentieth-century elite Panamanians disassociated themselves with the Prestán’s movement. Originally published in 1936, Palacio’s monograph also portrays Prestán as a Haitian general with “pernicious foreigners” for troops.”²¹ Palacio insists that every local and foreigner inhabiting the isthmus denounced Prestán’s movement, regardless of the fact that the general fought alongside liberal Panamanian leaders.²² The book agrees with Sosa and Arce’s analysis of the events and reflects a vile image of Prestán for being

¹⁹Sosa and Arce, *Compendio*, 353.

²⁰René Brenes, “Meditación ante la fotografía histórica de un ahorcado,” *Estrella de Panamá*, August 13, 1985.

²¹Julio H. Palacio, *La guerra civil de 1885* (Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Incunables, 1983), 144, quoted in Jorge Conte-Porras, “Pedro Prestán, Un Debate Inconcluso,” *Estrella De Panamá*, July 14, 1985.

²²Ibid.

a mulatto and having black troops. As a result of their prejudice, neither Palacio nor the historians investigated Prestán's innocence. Since Panamanian independence, the republic belittled Prestán's participation in the 1885 Civil War between liberals and conservatives. While mainstream intellectuals maintained their conviction, a few of Prestán's men, a novelist, and a *Universidad de Panamá* student tried to vindicate him.

Antonio C. de Janón, in his book *El General Pedro Prestán y sus victimarios ante la posteridad*, was the first to support Prestán. In 1887, de Janón wrote the monograph based on his role in Prestán's army. De Janón's account revealed a man and movement that differed with the official narrative. The book considers Prestán justified in his act to defend the city against conservative Colombians. De Janón also blames U.S marines for starting the fire.²³ His argument, however, received no attention in Colombia. Forty-eight years later, another soldier, Manuel Antonio Pineda Castillo, published *Pedro Prestán*. Similar to de Janon, Pineda emphasizes that, "North Americans started a fire in all directions."²⁴ Since both soldiers believed North American troops started the fire, De Janón and Pineda defended Prestán's character and movement as a struggle against conservatives. Mainstream historians, though, did not consider the soldiers' accounts as substantial evidence and continued referring to Prestán as an arsonist.

During the 1940s, novelist Gil Blas Tejeira tried to uncover the truth behind Prestán's trial and death. Michael L. Conniff notes that Tejeira and his daughter Otilia advocated for integrating Panamanians of West Indian descent into national discourse and took an interest in

²³Antonio C. de Janón, *El general Pedro Prestán y sus victimarios ante la posteridad* (San José, Costa Rica: Imprenta el Comercio, 1888), 34-35, quoted in Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "El General Pedro Prestán: El hombre y Las Circunstancias," *La Estrella De Panamá*, July 21, 1985.

²⁴Manuel Antonio Pineda Castillo, *Pedro Prestán* (Cartagena, 1935), 233-257, quoted in Bethancourt, "El general Pedro Prestán."

studying black culture on the isthmus.²⁵ Tejeira focused on Prestán and his black troops' contributions to Panamanian history. In 1946, the magazine *Epocas* published Tejeira's interview with Luis Octavio Aguirre. Aguirre fought under General Prestán the day fire engulfed Colón. A Panamanian from Chiriquí province, Aguirre was one of four men still alive to remember Prestán. Aguirre stresses that Prestán did not give orders to burn down Colón.²⁶ The soldier states that local bandits took advantage of the disorder and started the fire to steal. While his memory differs from de Janón's and Pineda's accounts, all three soldiers agree that Prestán was innocent. Moreover, Aguirre remembers Prestán as being "small, strong, and dark" and having a "heart of stone" like a valiant leader, not a Panamanian traitor.²⁷ Tejeira's interview with Aguirre and the other soldiers' accounts shaped the first academic study on Prestán at the *Universidad de Panamá*.

In 1957, *Universidad de Panamá* student Vitta Tejeira Svatos' wrote "Historical Vindication of Pedro Prestán" for her degree. She produced the first scholarship dedicated to Prestán's innocence. The thesis addresses the long span of time it took for a scholar to bring light to the subject and prove his innocence. Tejeira Svatos concludes that Prestán's execution was a U.S attempt to teach Latin Americans not to meddle in its interests. She claims the U.S. suppression of Prestán's movement and manipulation of his trial "trained Washington on how to negotiate the 1903 Hay-Bunau Varilla treaty" against Panama's best interests.²⁸ After extensive archival research, Tejeira Svatos states that the general could not have possibly ordered the fire in Colón. Other than the U.S. businessmen's testimonials in court, she found

²⁵Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 103.

²⁶Gil Blas Tejeira, "Entrevista," *Epocas* no.1 (August 1946): 30-31.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Tejeira Svatos, "Reivindicación histórica de Pedro Prestán," 2.

no evidence that linked Prestán to the crime. Although she produced a revealing account, her work remained unnoticed in the library stacks of the *Universidad de Panamá*.

After Tejeira Svatos' study, Tejeira, in 1962, published the romantic novel, *Pueblos perdidos*, a book about the cities that disappeared between 1850 and 1890 because of the Panama Railroad, Gatún Lake, and the French Canal. He used historical documents in an effort to "rescue the revolutionary mulatto who was sacrificed for politics."²⁹ Tejeira examines Prestán's story through the experiences of couple María de los Angeles and Camile Rostand. Their relationship typifies gender roles in early twentieth century nationalist novels. María embodies the archetype of a Hispanic woman: *mestiza*, impoverished, and seductive. French engineer Camile Rostand, on the other hand, is European, wealthy, and white. The chapter "The Protector" depicts Prestán as the defender of womanhood and virtue when black locals threaten María's chastity.³⁰ Prestán introduces her to Camile, whose character evokes the white purity and civilized manners black Panamanians lacked. Camile removes María from her occupation as a restaurant server because of its "lowly" nature.³¹ María and Camile's child symbolizes the Panamanian nation (*mestizo* and Western) that Prestán is protecting. Between the story of María and Camile's relationship, Tejeira focuses on Prestán's arrest and conviction. The author dismissed mainstream interpretations on Prestán and argued for his vindication. In the book, Tejeira uses the *Epocas* interview with Prestán's soldier as evidence that the court wrongfully convicted Prestán.

In the 1960s, the academic community commended Tejeira's narrative and attention to Colón, which intellectuals had dismissed because of its ethnic population. In the 1970s, under

²⁹Gil Blas Tejeira, *Pueblos perdidos* (Panamá: Impresora Panamá, 1962), 219.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 10.

³¹*Ibid.*, 23.

the military regime, Tejeira succeeded in having *Panama's Ministerio de Educación* (Ministry of Education) use *Pueblos perdidos* to instruct schoolchildren.³² After 1962, five different presses published the book.³³ *Pueblos perdidos* initiated the first nation-wide look into the Prestán case but was considered significant during the military period, not necessarily the republican period.

Under the Republican period, Tejeira and Tejeira Svatos' publications provided minimal exposure for Prestán. Tejeira Svatos' dissertation remained in the stacks at the Universidad de Panamá. Tejeira's book, although highly acclaimed, did not arouse a movement to vindicate Prestán as planned. In 1962, the Panamanian republic was still not receptive to incorporating popular revolutionary leaders into official history. As a mulatto, Prestán did not have the skin color required for the state's *mestizo* ideal, which explains why the popular effort to exonerate the leader failed. The Republic of Panama's elite refused to embrace the contributions of nineteenth-century plebeian figures to forming a national identity. As a result, the republic, throughout the twentieth century, faced numerous conflicts with students, laborers, and peasants who advocated for cultural, political, and economic inclusion. The elite's failure to recognize plebeian struggles of nationalism, like Prestán's movement, and cooperate with twentieth century working-class leaders demonstrates why few people questioned the 1968 National Guard coup.

³²El Ministerio De Educación, "Libros aprobadas hasta el año 2007, 2008," <http://www.meduca.gob.pa/files/general/LibrosAprobados2009.pdf> (accessed January 10, 2012).

³³1962, 1975, 1976 Impresora Panamá, 1995 Editorial Universitaria, 2003 Editorial Juris Textos, 2003 Asamblea Legislativa, 2010 Editorial Universitaria Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro

A Public Affair: The 1985 Vindication of Pedro Prestán

In 1968, the National Guard toppled the Republic of Panama to prevent newly-elected President Arnulfo Arias from replacing veteran generals. The military's unconstitutional actions, not the displacement of the elite, troubled the masses. In order to gain support, General Omar Torrijos instituted a populist program to create an alliance with labor unions, student organizations, university intellectuals, and peasant cooperatives. After forming a coalition with the popular sector in 1972, the government pronounced itself anti-oligarchical and anti-imperialistic to attack traditionally wealthy families and to seek an abrogation of the 1903 canal treaty with the United States. While never abandoning *mestizaje*, military intellectuals used *Torrijismo* discourse (anti-elite and anti-imperialistic) to redefine plebeian struggles for nationalism, beginning with the 1856 Watermelon Riot and ending with the 1964 Flag Riots.³⁴ In reorganizing popular movements based on *Torrijismo* instead of race, writer-statesmen claimed that the military emulated the isthmus's longstanding tradition of plebeian republicanism. Although Manuel Antonio Noriega's (1981-1989) "politics of structural adjustment" replaced the regime's populist-nationalist project, the administration still encouraged intellectuals to publish *Torrijismo*-influenced histories.³⁵ The government's attention to subaltern figures facilitated the second attempt to vindicate Prestán.

August 18, 1985, marked the centennial anniversary of Prestán's death. In preparation for the event, historian Jorge Conte-Porras wrote a four-part editorial, "Pedro Prestán, an

³⁴George Priestley, "Antillean-Panamanians or Afro-Panamanians?: Political Participation and the Politics of Identity During the Carter-Torrijos Treaty Negotiations," *Transforming Anthropology* 12, no. 1&2 (2004): 54.

³⁵George Priestley and Alberto S. Barrow N., "The Black Movement in Panamá: A Historical and Political Interpretation," *Souls* 10, no. 3 (July 2008): 232.

inconclusive debate,” for the national newspaper *Estrella de Panamá*.³⁶ The article agrees with the mainstream interpretation concerning Prestán. Conte-Porras claims the 1885 Colón movement was isolated from the political turmoil between conservatives and liberals. For him, the radical revolutionary mobilized “an army of miscreants” to seize Colón in the midst of the Colombian Civil War.³⁷ On March 31, 1885, during a battle against Colombian soldiers and U.S. Marines, the “bandit,” Prestán, ordered troops to detonate explosives in Colón.³⁸ Describing this battle, Conte-Porras characterizes Prestán as a national threat that the U.S. Marines and Colombian guard needed to suppress. The series concludes with incriminating testimonials against Prestán.

The respected historian’s controversial press release inspired intellectuals associated with the popular sector from the *Universidad de Panamá*, the *Academia Panameña de la Historia*, and *La Estrella de Panamá*, as well as Prestán’s descendants, to engage in a national debate on Prestán. While most of the scholars had no direct ties to the military regime, the state, by allowing the national debate, showed tacit approval of the vindication movement. A study also shows the government closely worked with the *Estrella de Panamá* that published the articles on Prestán.³⁹ To avoid the regime’s shutting it down like it had done with *La Opinión Pública*, the newspaper only printed material in line with the administration’s policies.⁴⁰ The regime’s decision not to censor the debates about Prestán demonstrates that it supported the discussion and the “rehabilitation” of the leader.

³⁶Jorge Conte-Porras, “Pedro Prestán, un debate inconcluso,” *La Estrella de Panamá*, July, 1985.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Organization of American States, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Panama* (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American States, 1979), 76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The vindicators noticed that the government in the 1970s appropriated Victoriano Lorenzo as part of its drive to claim plebeian struggles for nationalism.⁴¹ Lorenzo was an Indian general who fought in the Thousand Day's War (1888-1902) on behalf of the liberal Belisario Porras. After Lorenzo refused to accept a peace treaty between liberals and conservatives, he continued fighting, but liberal generals executed the leader.⁴² Like Prestán, the republic blamed the Indian general for starting a caste war, but the military regime downplayed Lorenzo's ethnicity and focused on the class composition of his movement to incorporate him. In 1971, on two separate occasions, the government passed legislation recognizing Lorenzo as an "emancipator of the Panamanian pueblo" and bestowing him the title of general.⁴³ Prestán's vindicators saw an opportunity to cast Prestán and his movement in a similar manner for state approval. Between July and August of 1985, the vindicators stressed Prestán's innocence and defended his character, public persona, and participation in the Liberal Party. In particular, these intellectuals redefined Prestán and his uprising as part of an anti-imperialist and class struggle for nationalism and not a caste war.

Intellectuals first challenged Conte-Porras's representation of Prestán as an arsonist. Conte-Porras supported his conviction with a source from one of Prestán's generals and testimonies of key court witnesses. After Prestán's execution, government officials released a letter Haitian immigrant Antonio Pautricelli wrote incriminating Prestán. Pautricelli fought as a leading general alongside Prestán the night fire engulfed Colón. In the letter, Pautricelli pleads

⁴¹Ricardo Pardo, "Los ideales de Prestán y su reivindicación," *La Estrella de Panamá*, August 13, 1985.

⁴²Thomas L. Percy, *We Answer Only to God: Politics and Military in Panama, 1903-1947* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 34-35.

⁴³Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por el cual se rinde honores a la memoria del general Victoriano Lorenzo," Resolution No. 16.878, *Gaceta Oficial*, May 18, 1971; Republic of Panamá, Asamblea Nacional, "Por la cual se adiciona la ley 23 de 30 de enero de 1958," Resolution No. 16.044, *Gaceta Oficial*, January 29, 1968.

with Prestán to admit that he detonated explosives throughout the city. Since the note placed Prestán in Colón at the wrong time of day, the Prestán-Elhers family, journalist Max Salabarría Patiño, and sociologist Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena questioned the document's authenticity.⁴⁴ In addition to the scholars' refuting Pautricelli's note, they also questioned Conte-Porras's use of court testimonials. Salabarría shows that the court only allowed foreign witnesses threatened by Prestán's movement, such as superintendent of the railroad Clement Dupuy and Pacific Mail Company employee William Connor, to take the stand.⁴⁵ Since the fighting disrupted the commercial projects of investors, entrepreneurs blamed Prestán for the fire. After dismissing Conte-Porras's evidence, the Elhers insisted Prestán was innocent because his family resided in the city. According to the Elhers, "Prestán would not have destroyed his property or threatened the lives of his wife and child."⁴⁶ Citing letters exchanged between Prestán and his wife, Bethancourt, the Elhers, Salabarría, and journalist Ricardo Pardo show that the revolutionary leader never admitted to the crime.⁴⁷ For instance, one of Prestán's memos informs María Felix that the court sentenced him to death on false charges.⁴⁸ The advocates focus on Prestán's family and personal letters proved his innocence.

⁴⁴The letter's text is ambiguous. In the note, Pautricelli posthumously writes Prestán, which made scholar's question its authenticity. Conte-Porras, "Pedro Prestán"; Max Salabarría Patiño, "En el centenario de la muerte de Pedro Prestán," *La Estrella de Panamá*, September 3, 1985; Alfredo A. Ehlers S. and Domingo A. Perdomo E., "Surge controversia en relación a Pedro Prestán," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 12, 1985; Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "El General Pedro Prestán," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 23, 1985.

⁴⁵Salabarría, "En el centenario."

⁴⁶Ehlers S. and Perdomo E., "Surge controversia."

⁴⁷Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Así se deforma la historia," *La Estrella de Panamá*, September, 3, 1985; Ehlers S. and Perdomo E., "Surge controversia"; Salabarría, "En el centenario"; Ricardo Pardo, "Otros ángulos del crimen cometido contra Prestán," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 22, 1985.

⁴⁸Carlos A. Pérez Herrera, "El general Pedro Prestán: Liberal y cristiano," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 30, 1985.

The exoneration also challenged Conte-Porras's disparagement of Prestán's character. The historian describes Prestán as a "violent man willing to use weapons to settle disputes."⁴⁹ For Conte-Porras, Prestán's capacity for crime explains why the general burned the city. He traces Prestán's villainous behavior to a shoot-out on April 22, 1881, that left merchant Manuel Céspedes dead. However, Bethancourt reveals that Prestán acted in self-defense.⁵⁰ After losing a legal dispute to the leader, Céspedes tried to assassinate Prestán near a Colón meat market, but the general fired back, and the merchant died the following day. Céspedes's brother imprisoned Prestán for two months, which made the general appear dangerous. Bethancourt's examination of the fight demonstrates that Prestán only used weapons responsibly. Another intellectual, Carlos A. Pérez Herrera, focuses on Prestán's religiosity to counteract the notion that he had a sadistic nature. According to Pérez, as a devout Catholic, Prestán could never have acted maliciously or burned the city. Pérez highlights how the general asked God to "forgive his enemies," which the writer claims shows Prestán's noble spirit.⁵¹ In revealing the details of the Céspedes case and Prestán as a pious man, scholars discredited Conte-Porras's negative statements against Prestán.

Another main feature of Conte-Porras's argument questions Prestán's profession and image in Colón, which defamed the revolutionary's public persona. Conte-Porras refers to Prestán as a *tinterillo* (pettifogger), with no legal experience.⁵² In contrast, Bethancourt and Salabarría defended Prestán's knowledge of codes and the law. The scholars ascertain that the

⁴⁹Conte-Porras, "Pedro Prestán."

⁵⁰Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "La conspiración contra Prestán en el caso Céspedes," *La Estrella de Panamá*, September, 5, 1985.

⁵¹Pérez, "El General Pedro Prestán."

⁵²Conte-Porras, "Pedro Prestán."

general attended a law school in Cartagena for a short period and opened a law firm.⁵³

Bethancourt then emphasizes Prestán acquired legal skills while serving in Colón's legislative assembly, where he helped reform the state constitution, election laws, and civil codes.⁵⁴ For Bethancourt and Patiño, Prestán's political engagements and law practice refuted the *tinterillo* myth. Pardo and Salabarría also add that Prestán's profession earned him a good reputation. Pardo scholars stress that Prestán presented himself as a "civilized man with good customs" when interacting with members of the community.⁵⁵ Journalist René Brenes sets Prestán apart from other plebeian figures for being an urban intellectual who associated with different social classes.⁵⁶ The vindicators presented Prestán as an educated attorney and reputable citizen.

Since Prestán participated in liberal politics, scholars challenged Conte-Porras's allegations that the general acted autonomously in Panama's Atlantic sector without political motive.⁵⁷ In fact, Bethancourt shows that Prestán belonged to the radical Liberal Party in Colón. Bethancourt traces Prestán's political involvement in the Liberal Party to when he presided over the city council of the San Isabel district in 1875.⁵⁸ While Bethancourt clarifies that Prestán was political, Salabarría demonstrates that Prestán led a liberal revolt against conservative President Rafael Nuñez. Prestán, along with radical liberals Rafael Aizpuru and Ricardo Gaitán Obeso, protested the administration's abandonment of the Rio Negro Constitution of 1863, which reserved for states powers not given to the central government.⁵⁹

⁵³Max Salabarría Patiño, "La Crónica de hoy," *La Estrella de Panamá*, August 27, 1985; Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán abogado," *La Estrella de Panamá*, September 5, 1985.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Salabarría, "La Crónica de hoy"; Ricardo Pardo, "Pedro Prestán, el mártir de la regeneración," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 9, 1985.

⁵⁶Brenes, "Meditación."

⁵⁷Conte-Porras, "Pedro Prestán."

⁵⁸Bethancourt, "Pedro Prestán Abogado."

⁵⁹Salabarría, "En el centenario."

When President Nuñez rejected the constitution and pursued the conservative Regeneration, Prestán mobilized troops with Aizpuru and Gaitán to oust the administration from office. Bethancourt clarifies that Prestán coordinated his movement in Colón on March 17, 1885, with General Aizpuru's uprising in Panama City the day before.⁶⁰ The debate illustrated that when conservatives tried to repeal liberal policies, Prestán joined forces with radical liberals to protest the actions of the central government.

When discussing Prestán's liberal movement, the vindicators stress class as a major component to portray the struggle as a reflection of the military regime's anti-oligarchical intentions. Conte-Porras's article underlined race to villainize Prestán's followers as poorly armed black "bandits" who were un-patriotic immigrants.⁶¹ In contrast, Prestán's vindicators emphasized that the soldiers were working class citizens, not that they were black, from the *arrabal* (outskirts) of Santa Ana and *barrio Jaimaicano* (Jamaican neighborhood) in Colón, two districts the military regime considered the heart of Panamanian nationalism. Prestán's movement marked another event in which working class *arrabaleños* and *jaimaicanos*, regardless of race, mobilized as citizens to protect their rights. Furthermore, Bethancourt, Brenes, and the Elhers state that the movement garnered the support of all social sectors in Colón, not just the lower classes.⁶² Bethancourt claims, "local traders also picked up their muskets and machetes, and provided money to purchase the troops uniforms."⁶³ Prestán's middle class status and humble origins gave him the social fluidity to connect with the poor as well as professionals. In presenting Prestán's movement as a united social front, the reformers

⁶⁰Bethancourt, "Semblanza de Pedro Prestán."

⁶¹ Conte-Porras, "Pedro Prestán."

⁶²Ehlers S. and Perdomo E., "Surge controversia"; Bethancourt, "El hombre y las circunstancias"; Brenes, "Meditación."

⁶³Bethancourt, "El hombre y las circunstancias."

highlighted that the conservative elite relied on U.S. assistance. The Elhers family argued that in using the stipulation under the 1846 Mallarino-Bidlack treaty to request U.S. military assistance, the conservative oligarchy was unpatriotic.⁶⁴ In focusing on social divisions, intellectuals redefined Prestán's movement as class-oriented. This emphasis on class conformed with the government's nationalist agenda.

In order to have the military regime recognize Prestán as a national hero, intellectuals hoped to demonstrate that Prestán's movement opposed U.S. intervention, not just the conservative elite. Scholars first refuted Conte-Porras's claim that the U.S. Marines only intervened to extinguish the fire and instead insisted that Washington had other motives. According to Bethancourt, the United States used the Colombian civil war to send a message that its military might would guarantee the development of commerce and business on the isthmus.⁶⁵ For Salabarría, Prestán perceived the United States's invasion as an indirect attempt to annex Panama.⁶⁶ To transform Prestán into an anti-imperialist hero, scholars employ his writing on the U.S., in which the general states, "it is necessary that the country rise up against the interventionist Yankee to avoid becoming another U.S. protectorate."⁶⁷ In addition, in their work the Elhers and Bethancourt applaud Prestán for detaining the U.S. consul to Colón. The Elhers argue that Prestán acted as a revolutionary protecting the sovereignty of his country. The vindicators considered him the first Panamanian to threaten the lives of U.S. officials.⁶⁸ The

⁶⁴Ehlers S. and Perdomo E., "Surge controversia."

⁶⁵Bethancourt, "El hombre y las circunstancias."

⁶⁶Max Salabarría Patiño, "Acotaciones a un artículo sobre Pedro Prestán," *La República*, August 18, 1985.

⁶⁷Pedro Prestán, quoted in Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, "Pedro Prestán los radicales vs. la regeneración," *Quincenario Bayano*, March 4, 1985.

⁶⁸Ehlers S. and Perdomo E., "Surge controversia."

scholars' redefinition of Prestán's movement as anti-imperialist elevated him as a hero who fit the military regime's paradigm.

The national newspaper and journal debate attracted a wide audience of Panamanians to reconsider Prestán's conviction and his role in Panamanian history. In decrees, the *Asociación de Profesores de la Universidad de Panamá (APUDEP)*, the *Organo del Comité Central del Partido del Pueblo (UNIDAD)*, the *Consejo Nacional de Defensa de la Soberanía y de la Paz*, the *Consejo Municipal de Santiago*, *Consejo Municipal de Colón*, the *Congreso Nacional*, and the *Academia de Historia* exonerated Prestán and labeled him a martyr.⁶⁹ On August 20, 1985, at the commemorative event for Prestán, legislator Luis Navas Parajos, on behalf of the state, issued a statement declaring Prestán's movement as "patriotic, anti-imperialist, and plebeian."⁷⁰ The military regime distinguished Prestán as contributing to the formation of the nation. In response to the debate's strengthening its powerbase with the ethnic majority, the military regime recognized Prestán's innocence. As result of the 1985 vindication movement and military regime's appropriation of plebeian struggles, the 1986 graphic novel about Prestán incorporated not only the popular intellectuals' revisions but also the state's ideology *Torrijismo*.

Illustrating Prestán: The isthmus's first graphic novel

In 1986, the leading proponent of the historiographical debate, Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, along with Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, created the graphic novel, *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas*. It is the only graphic novel written, drafted, and published on the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Luis Navas Parajos, "Prestán no quemó a Colón," *Diario Crítica*, August 20, 1985.

isthmus. After conducting research in Panamanian archives and the Elhers-Prestán family's collections and studying cinematography in 1983-84, the writer wrote a script on Prestán's movement that even included details on nineteenth-century clothing, language, and customs. For over a year, in 1985, the artist drew and inked each individual panel. By detailing every scene before printing a single page, the collaborators prolonged the process. In 1986, the *Grupo Experimental de Cine Universitario* (GECU) did not have the facilities to manufacture an illustrated work but printed over two-thousand copies and distributed them throughout Panama.⁷¹ Neither the artist nor the writer received compensation, and the publisher did not profit from the work. The creators of the graphic novel believed it was their "duty as Panamanians" to publish a novel concerning Prestán's movement for isthmian children and the working-class.⁷²

Although the government played no role in the creative process, *Pedro Prestán* served as a vehicle of populist nation-building. Panama is the only nation led by a populist military regime to recognize a graphic novel as a historical work.⁷³ Since the material supported the administration's intent to elevate plebeian nationalism, the novel's creators had freedom of expression. The editor of the comic, Pedro Rivera, claims, "the government never censored cultural projects like ours because politicians were interested in tracing the recuperation of the canal to popular movements." As was the case concerning the 1985 vindication movement, the state implicitly supported the production of the graphic novel and approved its publication. In

⁷¹Fernando Martínez, interview by author, Panama City, July 19, 2011

⁷²Bethancourt, interview by author; Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, interview by author, Panama City, July 18, 2011.

⁷³Aida Name T. to Rómulo Bethancourt, Departamento de Curriculum Ministerio de Educación approves *Pedro Prestán: Bajo El Furor de Las Tormentas*, July 6, 1987, Rómulo Bethancourt private collection, Panama City, Panama.

fact, the military allowed the creators to print the comic at the national university.⁷⁴ This section will demonstrate that the creators were individuals the government co-opted and inspired with national discourse. In creating the illustrated work, Bethancourt, Díaz Rivera, and GECU not only applied the revisionist ideas concerning Prestán's character and struggle, but they also used the regime's emphasis on class over race and anti-imperialist rhetoric to create a state-approved hero. *Pedro Prestán* is an interesting case in which writers and artists of a graphic novel used nationalist and popular discourse in their work and, thus, bolstered their government's agenda.

The writer, Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena, is an example of a student organizer who the government co-opted with its populist reforms in the 1970s. In 1969, nineteen year-old Bethancourt was a student leader at the *Instituto Nacional* who questioned the National Guard's unconstitutional overthrow of the republic. The military considered Bethancourt a threat and deported him to Colombia. However, shortly after General Omar Torrijos consolidated power, the regime adopted a populist program to build its political base, and the government encouraged him and other Panamanians to return. As incentives, politicians gave the *Federación de Estudiantes de Panamá* (FEP, Federation of Panamanian Students) control of the *Universidad de Panamá*, which was one of the strongest plebeian groups in the state. Bethancourt joined the FEP in 1972 and 1974 in which he participated as a secretary.⁷⁵ He then obtained a degree, in 1983, at the *Universidad de Santa María la Antigua* on a state

⁷⁴Bethancourt, interview by author; Pedro Rivera, interview by author, Panama City, Panama, July 20, 2011.

⁷⁵Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá Ernesto J. Castillero R., *Biografías Panameñas*, "Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena," <http://www.binal.ac.pa/buscar/lstbios.php> (accessed January 10, 2012).

scholarship.⁷⁶ Within a year, Bethancourt started working as a professor of sociology at the *Universidad de Panamá* and became fascinated with the controversy and politics behind Prestán's movement. Bethancourt argues that an interest in teaching Panamanians about their "real historical heroes" motivated his study.⁷⁷ The regime's intention to elevate plebeian figures as well as popular efforts to exonerate Prestán may have influenced the writer's comment. Between 1983 and 1984, Bethancourt researched Prestán and wrote articles for the 1985 vindication concerning the leader. After the debate, Bethancourt continued working on Prestán and states, "although I could have received credit at the university for publishing a book, I realized a graphic novel would be the best way to reach everyone."⁷⁸ The regime's populist programs, directed at the lower and middle classes, must have encouraged the professor to design a comic book.

To initiate the project, Bethancourt relied on the *Grupo Experimental de Cine Universitario* (GECU), a university program that worked with the military regime in the 1970s. According to the director of the program, intellectuals created GECU out of "political necessity" in 1972 to support the regime's development of national culture and vindication of plebeian historical figures and events.⁷⁹ As a result of the organization's mission to promote the government's agenda, GECU funded the graphic novel and put Bethancourt in contact with Kuna artist Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera. The artist agreed to the project because he also believed Panamanians needed to learn about Pedro Prestán. Díaz Rivera remembers telling

⁷⁶Rómulo Bethancourt Arosemena and Ologuagdi Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas* (Panamá: Ediciones Formato 16, 1986), back cover.

⁷⁷ Bethancourt, interview by author.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Pedro Rivera, *Cine, Cine, Cine, La Memoria Vencida* (Panamá: Ediciones Fotograma, 2009), 26-27.

Bethancourt, “yes, we need to vindicate him. I am Panamanian above all else.”⁸⁰ In making that comment, Rivera refers to his double consciousness as a Kuna indian and Panamanian citizen and demonstrates that, in this particular case, he wanted to work on the graphic novel as his patriotic responsibility. The military government’s rhetoric that downplayed race and emphasized nationalism to co-opt minorities whom its predecessors repressed may have affected the artist. Once on board, the diverse group worked on pardoning and reviving Prestán as a Panamanian nationalist.

The creators incorporated every revision of the 1985 reformation concerning Prestán. Since the book intended to show Prestán and his movement in a new context, the work dismisses his childhood in Cartagena. Instead, the work begins in 1881, on the day Manuel Céspedes, after losing a court case to the general, threatened to assassinate Prestán. The author did not agree with accusations that Prestán had killed Céspedes ruthlessly and stressed that he acted in self-defense.⁸¹ Two pages early in the comic present Prestán as defending himself from Céspedes. The work then shows how Céspedes’s influential brother put Prestán in prison for two months. After Prestán’s friends staged a protest, the judge released him. This scene indicates that Prestán acted as a honest man.⁸²

In addition to explaining the death of Céspedes, the graphic novel also stresses Prestán’s profession. Bethancourt focuses on Prestán’s career to show he was not a bandit and pettifogger.⁸³ In prison for Céspedes’ murder, Prestán offers his legal services to an impoverished prisoner whom police had arrested for stealing food. In that example, the writer

⁸⁰Díaz Rivera, interview by author.

⁸¹Bethancourt, interview by author.

⁸²Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, 26.

⁸³Bethancourt, interview by author.

portrays Prestán as an esteemed attorney who assists members of the community. The creators also constructed a flashback scene in which Prestán recalls studying law at Cartagena's Colegio Araujo, where he fell into debt. In one panel, a professor says to Prestán, "it is unfortunate that you are leaving Pedro, you are a brilliant man."⁸⁴ The writer demonstrates that even though Prestán's economic circumstances limited his schooling, the general had developed an understanding of law, which Colón professionals admired. The creators redefined Prestán as an intelligent professional.

After casting Prestán as a respected lawyer, the graphic novel highlights his involvement in politics and connection to the 1885 civil war. Since the narrative starts in 1881, Bethancourt includes a description of the first revolutionary movement Prestán joined as a radical liberal. On July 2, 1884, Prestán became secretary general of General Benjamín Ruíz's revolutionary government. After President of Panama Dámaso Cervera rigged an election, Benjamín Ruíz, the leading liberal disposed Cervera. Prestán's involvement in the event supports the 1985 vindication effort to claim the leader as a radical liberal. In demonstrating that Prestán actively participated in the party, the graphic novel ties the movement to the 1885 Civil War. The book shows Prestán's working alongside radical politician Rafael Aizpuru to plan uprisings in Panama City and Colón. In a scene in which General Aizpuru seizes Panama City, on March 15, 1885, a comic panel has him thinking: "now everything depends on Prestán."⁸⁵ With that comment, the writer conveys that both Aizpuru's and Prestán's revolts depended on each other to succeed. The comic showed that Prestán led a politically motivated struggle within the larger liberal movement.

⁸⁴Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, 73.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 25.

The novel also addresses the night of the Colón fire on March 31, 1885. In the scene, the graphic novel places Prestán at his family home. After a soldier notifies him of the fire, Prestán gathers his wife and child and sends them to a safe house. While the artist dedicates several panels to Prestán's family, he deemphasizes, in two small images, the fire's devastation. The graphic novel, instead of blaming Prestán and his men, argues the fire was an accident that "strong summer winds spread throughout the city."⁸⁶ Several theories existed about the origins of the fire, but Bethancourt considered that it was probably a consequence of close range fighting. He also believed Prestán would not have risked endangering loved ones.⁸⁷ As a result, the writer had Ologuagdi draw Prestán at home and away from the violence.

Since the graphic novel stressed Prestán's innocence, it dismissed negative court testimonies and countered them with the leader's correspondence. In the comic, Prestán accuses the court of only allowing foreign witnesses to speak. In his defense, Prestán states, "my witnesses, who all have Colombian last names and roots in this country, have not been allowed to testify, but the court permits four foreigners to falsely accuse me without a single reference."⁸⁸ One can trace Prestán's statement to the research the writer conducted for the work. According to Bethancourt, "I found no testimonials that could claim Prestán started the fire, and the only ones that exist were founded on hearsay."⁸⁹ Since Bethancourt rejected Prestán's accusers, he included in the book entire excerpts of Prestán's notes to his wife as evidence of his innocence. In the letter, Prestán tells her to forgive his accusers who have wrongfully convicted him. As Bethancourt explains, "the letters really impressed me because

⁸⁶Ibid., 38.

⁸⁷Bethancourt, interview by author.

⁸⁸Ibid., 79.

⁸⁹Bethancourt, interview by author.

they reveal someone who accepted his situation and pardoned his enemies, which, in a way, revealed Prestán's innocence."⁹⁰ The comic's inclusion of Prestán's notes served to undermine the testimonies against him and proved the general's innocence.

The book concludes with Prestán's execution on August 18, 1885, and with an epilogue dedicated to Victoriano Lorenzo. The epilogue switches from Prestán to General Benjamín Ruíz who meets Lorenzo and joins his army for the Thousand Day's War (1889-1902). In the last panel of the comic book, the artist painted an image of Prestán above Ruíz and Lorenzo to symbolize that the leader influenced these men and the continuation of the national struggle. The creators also included Lorenzo to suggest another project. According to Bethancourt, "we wanted to make a graphic novel on Lorenzo because he suffered a similar experience as Prestán. When liberals signed a peace treaty, in 1902, with conservatives to end the Thousand Days's War, Lorenzo and his movement were judged and suppressed in mainstream history."⁹¹ However, Bethancourt states that personal problems prevented him from continuing the project.⁹² Even though the creators discontinued the series, they published the first novel on Prestán that used the historical revisions of the 1985 vindication movement.

While the creators reinterpreted Prestán and his movement, they also focused on elevating him as a national hero. In order to transform the general, the comic first downplays race in illustrating Prestán and his troops. On the cover of the graphic novel, the artist presents a portrait of Prestán with softened features and light brown skin on one side of his face rather than with strong African characteristics and a dark skin tone. The artist undermines accusations that Prestán, because of his ethnicity, was Haitian. By drawing half of his face brown and the

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

rest light, the artist implies that Prestán was a mulatto. Since Prestán was a mulatto, the creators can claim him as a “colonense” (Colon resident) and not a black Haitian. The cover is the only example of coloring in the comic book. The graphic novel, like the military government, is not concerned with differentiating the ethnicities of the general’s soldiers. Throughout the comic book, the artist gives West Indians African physical traits without any exaggerations, but hides them behind other Panamanian fighters to deemphasize their race. For the government and authors, what mattered more than ethnicity was portraying Prestán’s movement as being composed of concerned citizens. By not darkening any figures in the comic book, the creators focused on portraying everyone as patriots rather than as members of a particular ethnic group.

It is important to note, however, that the comic book gives considerable attention to general's Haitian Antonio Pautricelli and Jamaican George Davis. The work vindicates Pautricelli and Davis who conservatives accused, along with Prestán, of burning the city of Colón. For example, before Pautricelli execution, the comic has him stating, “friends, I die an innocent man who had nothing to do with the country’s politics. I only wanted to help my friend and associate Prestán.”⁹³ Bethancourt made it a priority to reform the reputation of Prestán’s troops that republican predecessors had villanized for being black. However, while the comic elevates Afro-Panamanians by recognizing Prestán, Pautricelli, Davis, and West Indian soldiers, these heroes still do not project a sense of blackness but contribute to *Torrijismo* with its insistence on working class unity in opposition to the oligarchy and the United States.

In downplaying the ethnic composition of Prestán and his troops, the graphic novel avoided defining the movement as a caste war. The creators instead stress that the leader was

⁹³Ibid., 55.

a unifier of working and middle class citizens against the conservative Colombian elite. Like *Torrijismo's* use of *el pueblo* (community) to refer to the popular sector regardless of race, in order to redefine the National Guard in terms of "*pueblo and dignidad*" (community and dignity), in the graphic novel, Prestán also employs "*el pueblo*."⁹⁴ The writer includes an excerpt of Prestán's letter to nationalists and foreigners on March 18, 1885, in which he exclaims, "Compatriots! We are trying to defend the rights of *el pueblo* in this section of the republic." The letter highlights Prestán's reverence for defending *el pueblo* against "its traitors [the elite]."⁹⁵ Illustrations also show the general helping laborers and the poor. While in prison for murdering Céspedes, Prestán notifies a canal laborer, upset about poor working conditions, that he will try to assist him. The graphic novel's emphasis on Prestán's popular discourse and work with the lower classes mirrored the regime's ideology and reforms directed at the Panamanian masses.

While transforming Prestán into a plebeian hero, the comic also pays attention to the social composition of his movement. At the beginning of the book, the writer claims that Prestán and Aizpuru's troops and moral supporters were from the *barrio jamaicano* and Santa Ana working-class communities in Colón and the capital. Under the military regime, these two neighborhoods, especially Santa Ana, were associated with Panamanian nationalism. According to *Torrijismo* doctrine, patriotism lies with the "humble working class, not the commercial elite."⁹⁶ In line with *Torrijismo*, the graphic novel notes that the *arrabaleños* who joined Prestán considered *los de adentro* (elites living in the center of the city) as their "enemies."⁹⁷

⁹⁴José de Jesús Martínez, *Mi general Torrijos* (Panamá: Centro de Estudios Torrijista, 1987), 134.

⁹⁵Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, 29.

⁹⁶Martínez, *Mi general*, 130.

⁹⁷Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, VI.

Key illustrations in the graphic novel show *arrabaleños* protesting and mobilizing against the president's Regeneration while the elite, at a convention on January 1, 1885, decide to send troops to liquidate subversive groups for the "legitimate government of Dr. Nuñez."⁹⁸ The artist draws the contradictory pictures next to each other to cast the elite as unpatriotic and the working-class as nationalist. Reflecting the military regime's desire to delegitimize its predecessors, the artist portrays Prestán's movement as a subaltern struggle that, unlike the elite, defended the nation.

In addition to the working class, middle class citizens also joined the nationalist cause. The comic's hope of connecting the leader with lawyers, doctors, teachers, and business people supports another aspect of *Torriismo*. While *Torrijismo* elevated the working class as representative of national identity, it did not neglect the middle sector. *Torrijismo* emphasized a united front composed of the lower and middle classes to attack the oligarchy.⁹⁹ The graphic novel also redefined the middle class as nationalists. After the scene with *arrabaleño* protestors, the creators' show business people in Prestán and Aizpuru's movement supporting the cause. The cartoon has the merchants and middle class community cheering in unison, "anything for the welfare of the homeland" and "long live, Dr. Prestán."¹⁰⁰ In the comic book, as with the regime, the middle class was an important sector.

While the graphic novel presents Prestán and his working and middle class troops as patriots, it depicts the conservative elite's as *rabiblancos* (elites associated with foreigners). According to *Torrijismo* doctrine, the elite were unpatriotic and "one in the same as

⁹⁸Ibid., 12.

⁹⁹Martínez, *Mi general*, 130.

¹⁰⁰Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, 13, 28.

imperialists.”¹⁰¹ The graphic novel echoes this description of the elite. Colombian elites, more so than Panamanians, appear authoritarian and only interested in monopolizing power. In the first pages of the comic book, Bethancourt has the Colombian president’s cabinet arguing about Panamanians considering themselves “their own country.”¹⁰² The scene presents the oligarchy as cruel and vindictive for laughing at the thought of using violence against the people. The writer shows President Rafael Nuñez stating that he will use North American support to defeat radicals in Panama. In stressing that conservatives depended on U.S. forces, the comic book casts the elite as betraying the interests of the popular sector in exchange for power and international interests. Casting the elite as *vende-patrias*’s (sell-outs) facilitated the transformation of Prestán’s movement into a struggle against oppressive dictators. The novel also portrays the military’s predecessors as abandoning the popular sector in order to benefit North Americans.

The United States played a major role in squashing Prestán’s movement and pushing for his execution. *Torrijismo* also suggested that the “exploiters” were not only the upper class but also imperialists, and that the “fight is against both, at the same time, because they identify with one another.”¹⁰³ The author uses *Torrijismo*’s definition of oligarchical-imperialists in *Pedro Prestán*’s narrative. In the work, Washington intervenes to protect its investment and demonstrate U.S. power. Bethancourt stresses that the U.S., a “new empire with urgency to expand,” sent troops to the isthmus because it envied the French canal construction and English business interests.¹⁰⁴ In the novel, the writer includes a meeting between U.S. officials

¹⁰¹Martínez, *Mi general*, 135.

¹⁰²Ibid., 6.

¹⁰³ Martínez, *Mi general*, 134.

¹⁰⁴Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, VI.

in which they state, “we should intervene not to guarantee the Colombian domain of the isthmus, but to demonstrate to other powers that we are in control.”¹⁰⁵ In the book, Washington’s desire to dominate Panamanian transit encourages the U.S. to consider annexing Panama. Bethancourt states, “even though the U.S. military and canal were not in Panama yet, the U.S. was very involved and treated Prestán with malice to warn locals and Europeans not to interfere with its colonizing plans.”¹⁰⁶ Bethancourt and the military considered Prestán’s conflict important because it developed into an international struggle between Panamanians and North Americans.

In drawing how they lived better than the Panamanian working class and how they resembled fifteenth-century colonizers, the artist portrays North Americans as imperialists. The narrative starts with Prestán’s passing through Colón on a train that runs through French and U.S. neighborhoods as well as the quarter housing Panamanian laborers. While the French and North Americans reside in modern, pristine homes, the working-class inhabit decrepit shanties. The stark differences in lifestyle, best illustrated by the wealth of the Canal Zone and the poverty of El Chorrillo, demonstrate U.S. exploitation of the region and the Panamanian people. After stressing how U.S. businessmen occupy the best real estate, Díaz Rivera also compares U.S. Marines to conquistadors. The artist illustrates U.S. marines as being ready to conquer the region, marching arrogantly in unison while waving U.S. flags through the streets of Colón. The images convey a sense that the United States wanted to expand its empire and impoverish Panamanians.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁶Bethancourt, interview by author.

In casting the U.S. as imperialistic, the creators transformed Prestán into a leader who fought against foreign oppression. They elevate Prestán as a nationalist hero for holding hostage U.S. Consul Robert Wright hostage. The prologue argues Prestán's confrontation provides an example the country could emulate to challenge the 1986 Santa Fe document. In 1986, U.S. President Ronald Reagan implemented the "Reagan Doctrine." The Santa Fe commission that wrote the policy revoked the Panama Canal Commission's power to control the canal's operational funds.¹⁰⁷ Political scientist Robert Harding notes that the Santa Fe document "tied Panama's hands with regard to any canal expansion and improvement."¹⁰⁸ As a result, Rivera's prologue insists that Panamanians follow Prestán's example and create a similar program to resist "the Empire's" policy and develop an independent economy to "strengthen national identity." Prestán provided an example of "resistance to the Yankees" that the regime could use to garner support against Reagan's abandonment of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaty.¹⁰⁹

Prestán's death also provided the military regime an opportunity to cast the United States in a malicious light. In the comic, the U.S. officials force Colombians to ignore the constitution's ban on the death penalty and hang Prestán and his men. One scene shows U.S. Admiral James Edward Joulett saying that since the revolutionary insulted the U.S., Colombians need to "hang every member of the movement and Prestán."¹¹⁰ The novel also stresses that when Colombians sent Prestán to the gallows, a U.S. businessman hanged the general over the U.S.-run railroad tracks. The editor of the comic, Fernando Martínez, remarking on the United

¹⁰⁷Robert C. Harding II, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 160.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Pedro Rivera, quoted in Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán*, II.

¹¹⁰ Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán* 44.

States's involvement, exclaims, "the Yankees are the ones who crushed Prestán's struggle. The gringos persecuted him and hanged him on the gringo railroad."¹¹¹ Reflecting the creators' interest in historical accuracy, the illustration of Prestán's death is an exact rendition of the original photo taken after his execution.¹¹² The image bolsters the regime's intent to cast the U.S. government as murderous and a threat to Panamanian sovereignty.

The novel reflected the regime's *Torrijismo* discourse while demonstrating Prestán's character and innocence and depicting him as a plebeian nationalist hero instead of an unpatriotic arsonist. In the novel, Prestán not only challenges conservatives but also objects to class inequality and U.S. imperialists on the isthmus. Although the regime did not force or manipulate the publication, the creators embraced the government's nationalist agenda and elevated the plebeian hero in the narrative. Since the author participated in the popular movement to exonerate Prestán, he also intended to redefine the leader's movement as class oriented and anti-imperialist in exchange for Prestán's pardon. As a result, the comic assisted the regime's program, connecting its discourse with plebeian historical figures and events to maintain power.

After the publication of the graphic novel, journalists, intellectuals, the Communist *Partido del Pueblo*, and the government commended the work. *Estrella de Panamá's* Eliecer Vásquez Q. described the book as a "profound testimony to Prestán's generosity, strength of mind, and patriotic desire to protect his country."¹¹³ Panamanian professors like Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, author of *Domino y sociedad*, also admired the novel's "ability to capture the

¹¹¹Martínez, interview by author.

¹¹²A picture of Prestán's execution is in Rubén Darío Urriola de León, "Proyección histórica y perfil revolucionario del general Pedro Prestán," (B.A. thesis, Universidad de Panamá, 1980), 157; Bethancourt and Díaz Rivera, *Pedro Prestán* 86.

¹¹³Eliecer Vásquez, "Para Honrar a Prestán," *La Estrella de Panamá*, July 16, 1986.

antagonistic environment that existed in Panama during that period.”¹¹⁴ As for the military’s reaction, officials under General Noriega even tried, after the books’ first printing, to purchase the rights of the comic book, but the creators declined.¹¹⁵ In 1987, the *Ministerio de Educación* approved the book for use as a companion text for a course on U.S.-Panamanian relations.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

Prestán predicted that history would do him justice. A hundred years after the general made that statement, the Panamanian state recognized Prestán’s innocence and elevated him to the level of a nationalist hero. As the previous sections demonstrate, the isthmus struggled with how to interpret Prestán and his movement. Because of the early republic’s disdain for blacks on the isthmus, the first popular vindication movement failed to garner national support. The political and social climate of the country changed, however, under the military regime that wanted to establish a coalition with the masses for consolidating power. As part of its mission to co-opt the lower and middle class, the guard focused on appropriating plebeian struggles for nationalism. As a result of this opportunity to attract state audiences, a second popular movement on Prestán emerged. Throughout the summer of 1985, local intellectuals worked at casting Prestán as a state-approved leader in exchange for his exoneration. The study shows that the government tacitly allowed the national debate and recognized the general. The graphic novel *Pedro Prestán* was the culmination of recasting the leader to fit the national agenda for his innocence. This chapter illustrates that the creators of the graphic novel *Pedro*

¹¹⁴Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, interview by author, Panamá City, Panamá, July 22,2011.

¹¹⁵Díaz Rivera, interview by author.

¹¹⁶Aida Name T. to Rómulo Bethancourt, Departamento de Curriculum *Ministerio de Educación* approves *Pedro Prestán: Bajo El Furor de Las Tormentas*.

Prestán created the work to apply the revisionist history and focus on the state's discourse. In downplaying the leader's ethnicity and by emphasizing class as well as anti-oligarchy and anti-imperialist themes, the graphic novel attacked the guard's traditional enemies and promoted the state's image as being a plebeian revolution. By reflecting national discourse, *Pedro Prestán* added another plebeian figure to the government's mantle of patriots the state used to maintain power with the masses. In couching *Prestán* in *Torrijismo* rhetoric, the creators cleared the general's name in history, a feat that plebeian groups since de Janon's 1887 monograph hoped to accomplish.

I study the military regime's nationalist agenda by analyzing the graphic novel *Pedro Prestán*. The research provides evidence that Panama indeed does have a graphic novel reflective of the mediation theory and that the isthmus deserves further scholarship. The findings also claim that the military started a cultural revolution to establish a new nationalist identity emanating from the popular sector, not traditional white families on the isthmus. The state's efforts allowed the regime to maintain power with the masses until political turmoil disrupted the isthmus in 1989. My thesis is that *Pedro Prestán* provided a space for the military regime to define another popular figure for its pantheon of patriotic heroes as well as for local intellectuals associated with the masses to vindicate one of their popular figures in mainstream history. In order for the popular sector to exonerate *Prestán*, the creators of *Pedro Prestán* defined *Pedro Prestán's* message via *Torrijismo* for state approval. Since the military regime wanted to maintain power and influence with the masses, it tacitly facilitated a national debate on *Prestán* that previous administrations suppressed. Because of the National Guard's interest in reformulating nationalism, the recasting of *Prestán* as a patriot and not an arsonist foreigner

bolstered the government's agenda. Overall, this graphic novel reflected the give-and-take nature of forming nationalism during Panama's military period in which subalterns and the state formulated discourses that suited their own objectives.

The scope of this thesis was limited to a single context, that of Panama, its military regime years, and the example of the *Pedro Prestán* graphic novel. Future scholarship should concern itself with viewing how graphics shape national identity by serving as a space for competing forces in other late-industrialized countries. Studies on countries in Central America would provide a new breadth of literature that could contribute to the mediation theory and reveal new insights on how states and popular actors inform nationalist messages via graphic novels. Since this examination is the first to address a Central American country's nation-building process through an illustrated book, more works on countries like Costa Rica or Nicaragua could present larger trends. Furthermore, an examination on the late-industrialized country Bolivia during its populist military period may provide findings similar to this analysis. Thus, this work is the beginning of a research project to understand how government and subaltern discourses form nationalism through graphic novels.

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VITA

Miriam Elizabeth Villanueva was born July 16, 1989, in Houston, Texas. She is the daughter of José Arnulfo and María del Rosario Villanueva. A 2007 graduate of Weslaco High School, Weslaco, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in History and Political Science from Texas A&M University-Kingsville, in 2010.

In August, 2010, she enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her masters in History, she held a Graduate Assistantship fellowship during the years 2010-2012. In the fall of 2012, she will start the doctoral program at Texas Christian University in History. She is a member of the History Honor's Society Phi Alpha Theta and the Political Science Honor's Society Pi Sigma Alpha.

ABSTRACT

NOT A LAUGHING MATTER: CARTOONS, PLEBEIAN HEROES, AND PANAMA'S MILITARY GOVERNMENT (1968-1989)

By Miriam Elizabeth Villanueva
Department of History
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Peter A. Szok, Associate Professor of History

This work illustrates the popular 1986 graphic novel *Pedro Prestán: Bajo el furor de las tormentas* to understand the cultural and political context of Panama's military period (1968-1969). The narrative focuses on Pedro Prestán, whose contemporaries falsely condemned him for burning Colón, Panama, in 1885. A hundred years after Prestán's death, Panama's military regime, to redefine its image, devised an agenda to appropriate plebeian nationalism. In 1986, the comic's creators saw an opportunity to cast Prestán as a freedom fighter for the state in exchange for his vindication. The novel served as a space for Panama's military regime to refashion its pantheon of revolutionary leaders and for subalterns to absolve a plebeian hero in history. Since officials tacitly approved the comic's publication and recognized Prestán, the book helped the state maintain power. The study demonstrates the give-and-take nature of shaping national identity.