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Abstract

Since its independence from Colombia in 1903 backed by the United States government, which resulted in a treaty that granted the US free rein to build, administer and control what would be known as the Panama Canal, Panama's quest for modern nationhood has been severely called into question. More often than not it is posited as an artificial state with little organic unity and limited sovereignty: a state that is literally made in the USA. Panamanian intellectuals, such as Rogelio Sinán, responded to these discourses on the Panamanian nation-state by actively constructing a Panamanian national identity, and by calling attention to the central significance of Panama in the twentieth-century world of global modernity. Questioning the widespread narrative of Panama as a peripheral North American neo-colony that was at best a marginal actor in international history, Sinán positioned Panama at the center of the modern world where World Wars, international migrations and global capitalism connected.

By exploring Sinán's short story "Sin novedad en Shanghai" that takes place in East Asia during World War II, this study argues that the writer's deployment of the Orient—as a geopolitical, cultural, symbolic and imaginary space—allows him to reposition Panama. In its symbolic relation to this Orient, Panama emerges not as the backwaters of global modernity, but at its center—a cosmopolis between the Orient and the Occident that reveals a microcosm of the modern world.

Centering Panama in Global Modernity: The Search for National Identity and the Imagining of the Orient in Rogelio Sinán's "Sin novedad en Shanghai"

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Le ha llegado el momento a Panamá de proyectarse más allá del Continente de América y de Europa. Deberá abocarse, desde ahora, a la conquista de los 'tigres de Asia'. Así, avanzaríamos en nuestro compromiso histórico de unir al mundo a través del Canal de Panamá y ... consolidaríamos nuestra tradición como puente del mundo y centro del comercio hemisférico y mundial. (Qtd. in Ana Elena Porras)

Panamanians must aspire to be universal if we want to survive as a people and as a nation in a globalized world, but we can achieve that only if we are authentic. (Guillermo Castro H. "Afterword" of *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama*)

Introduction: Inter/national Imaginaries of Panama

Since Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903 backed by the United States government, which subsequently resulted in a treaty that granted the US free rein to build, administer and control what would be known as the Panama Canal, Panama's quest for modern

nationhood has been met with skepticism and ambivalence. More often than not, it has been posited as an artificial state with little organic unity and limited sovereignty: a state that was literally “made in the U.S.A” (Porras 21). This discourse on Panama, originally constructed by politicians and historians from nations involved in the history of the Panama Canal—such as Spain, France, Colombia and the United States—asserts that Panama is not a real nation since Panamanians neither share a common national culture nor have a sense of national belonging.¹ Since Panama lacks an authentic national culture, there is no legitimate basis on which to construct a Panamanian nation-state.

Within this discursive framework, Panama’s experience of US neocolonialism and imperialism is seen not as a complex historical outcome of global geopolitics, but rather as a consequence of the Central American nation’s own deficiencies and limitations. This reasoning goes hand-in-hand with the global imaginary that represents Panama as a mere geographical medium whose value is measured by its utility as a land and ocean-crossing instrument for the US and other global powers. Panama, synecdochally, is reduced to the Canal Zone, while its sole significance is attributed to its role as host country for the Canal. Panama’s supposed lack of authentic national culture provides the *raison d’être* ‘reason to be’ for its ambivalent status as a modern nation-state, and for its peripheral role as a transit site for the protagonists of global capitalism.²

Ever since the creation of the Republic of Panama, this discourse delegitimizing and marginalizing the Panamanian nation-state based on declarations of Panama’s inauthenticity has become the hegemonic lens by, through and from which Panama’s national project and history have been narrated.³ In their search for national paradigms in the midst of US neocolonialism and rising global capitalism, Panamanian intellectuals have had to engage with and respond to this dominant discourse: is there an authentic, unique and autochthonous Panamanian culture that all the different social and ethnic segments of its population share? Could this cultural trait be enough to successfully imagine a national community whose role in global modernity would be more than that of a peripheral US neocolony and an interoceanic transit route? Only by answering these questions that underlie the dominant narrative on Panama

could these intellectuals begin to construct their own national projects. This essay examines “Sin novedad en Shanghai” ‘Nothing New in Shanghai’ by the Panamanian writer Rogelio Sinán (1902-94) in which he proposes a national imaginary that interrogates official inter/national imaginaries of Panama while supporting an alternative vision of the nation.

Sinán, much like the Panamanian (and other Latin American) statesmen-writers who preceded him, was a prominent *letrado* ‘intellectual’ who was also deeply involved in his nation’s political life. From 1938 to 1941, he served as the Panamanian diplomatic consul in Calcutta, India when he traveled throughout East and South Asia. “Sin novedad en Shanghai”—published in *Dos aventuras en el Lejano Oriente* (1947) ‘Two Adventures in the Far East’—was inspired by Sinán’s stay in Asia during this tumultuous historical period.⁴ While World War II was under way in Europe by 1939, in the East Asian front the second Sino-Japanese War had begun two years earlier.⁵

In the case of Panama, the United States’ entry into World War II heightened the US military’s awareness of the Central American nation’s potential use-value in military operations, bringing to it whole new areas of supervision and responsibility. By extending capabilities of the navy by a transoceanic route, preparing for military air raids, or providing the testing ground for chemical weapons to lodging soldiers to be stationed in the Pacific, Panama became a highly militarized zone that literally brought World War II to the isthmus.⁶ As the nation’s leading educator who founded the Department of Culture in the Ministry of Education on his return to Panama in 1941, Sinán was concerned about the US military occupation of Panama that jeopardized the sovereign well-being of his nation and threatened to revert Panama to its prior status as a US colony only five years after the legal termination of its protectorate status.⁷

In the midst of these interlinking geopolitical events—from Europe and Asia to the Americas—brought together by the global conflict of World War II, Sinán writes “Sin novedad en Shanghai.” By exploring Sinán’s short story taking place in route to East Asia during World War II, this essay argues that the writer’s deployment of certain narrative techniques and devices allow him to reposition

Panama; instead of being a particular object of knowledge and representation for the US and other global powers, Panama becomes the universal subject of knowledge that represents the globalized world. Sinán presents in his fictional work an alternative national imaginary that questions the dominant discourse of Panama as a peripheral artificial nation with no recognizably authentic culture. Instead, he locates Panama at the center of the modern world where World Wars, international migrations and global capitalism intersect. In his representation of the Orient—as a geopolitical, cultural, symbolic and imaginary space—and of Panama’s symbolic relation to it, the Central American nation emerges at the center of global modernity: a *cosmopolis* between the East and the West that reveals a microcosm of our modern world.

Seeing the World From Panama: Panama as the Universal Subject

Gloria Guardia, in her study of the vanguard writer’s *oeuvre*, asserts that Sinán’s experimentation with various different literary forms, narrative devices and rhetorical techniques are not merely exercises in literary representation, but form part and parcel of his national project: his search for ways to imagine the national community:

Lo que sobresale y adquiere una dinámica propia en la narrativa de Sinán es la manera como él logra crear una “comunidad imaginada” que hoy identificamos como una construcción literaria y un modelo de búsqueda de la identidad nacional Habitante y viajero de mil rutas, lector y estudioso inquebrantable, conocedor como pocos de la diversidad social y cultural del país, así como de su complejidad histórica y étnica, Sinán, en virtud de su vocación y oficio, se reconoce desde muy joven como uno de esos constructores – uno de esos “re-inventores” o “soñadores” – de las identidades nacionales que se mantiene fiel a este compromiso hasta el final de sus días ... en el pensamiento y la obra de este escritor interactúan la búsqueda [de identidad nacional] ... la construcción y deconstrucción de un lenguaje ... una serie de temas y una estética. (XIII)

What stands out and acquires its own dynamic in Sinán’s

narrative is the way in which he manages to create an “imagined community” that today we identify as a literary construction and a model for the search for national identity An inhabitant and traveler of a thousand roads, a reader and unshakeable scholar, a leading expert on the social and cultural diversity of the country, as well as its historical and ethnic complexity, Sinán, thanks to his vocation and occupation, recognizes from a young age that he is one of those constructors – one of those “re-inventors” or “dreamers” – of national identities who remain faithful to this commitment until the end of his days ... in the thought and work of this writer there interact the search [for national identity] ... the construction and deconstruction of language ... a series of themes and an aesthetic.⁸

Characteristic of Latin America’s lettered city, for Sinán writing and nation-building go hand-in-hand. As many critics have meticulously demonstrated, literature in the historical context of Latin America has served as an instrument to explore models for national projects, and also has been the motor that imagines and shapes a modern nation.⁹ However, the way the nation emerges in the textuality of literature is often taken for granted. What role does the nation play in the writing itself? How does it emerge in the language, rhetoric and textuality of literature? In the case of most Latin American elites, the problem of constructing the nation is often equated with that of representing the nation in written form. Often, the main political-literary question at the center of their projects is: how can the nation be transformed into an object of representation? How can one represent and write the nation? The episteme that fuels the lettered city’s project is the idea that a successful literary representation of the nation begot through the formation of national literature would be intrinsically bound to a legitimate and viable construction of the nation in which literature would serve to unify and modernize the Latin American nation-state.¹⁰

As will be explained, in his literary work the Panamanian *letrado* departs from this paradigm and undertakes a different epistemological problem: who is the subject of the nation? What does it mean to speak and/or write from a Panamanian perspective? The question becomes not the objective representation of the nation,

but the problem of the subject-location of representation. If, from the subject position of Europe and the US, Panama is posited as a peripheral nation in global modernity, how would this topography of power change if we were to represent the world from Panama's locus of enunciation? "Sin novedad en Shanghai," engages with this matter and intervenes in the discussion of nation and writing.

At first glance, "Sin novedad en Shanghai" can be read as a fictional text taking place during World War II on a steamship bound from Europe to East Asia with its motley group of colorful cosmopolitan European and Asian characters; it can be viewed as a story that has nothing to do with the Americas, let alone Panama. Sinán's text refrains from explicitly speaking of Panama; it never even states the proper name of the Central American nation. However, as Guardia points out:

"Sin novedad en Shanghai," podría ser exclusivamente leída como una farsa "cosmopolita" con poca o ninguna relación con la situación de Panamá, un país periférico, alejado del teatro de los grandes conflictos internacionales. Sin embargo, una vez más, la propuesta de Sinán gana la partida. Al demoler los esquemas rurales como exclusivos de la identidad nacional ... [el autor] presenta su tesis de que [la narrativa] panameña que merezca llamarse como tal ha de dar siluetas, peripecias, caracteres y ambientes que en todo respondan a particularidades del hecho panameño. (LXII)

"Sin novedad en Shanghai," could be exclusively read as a very "cosmopolitan" farce that has little or no relation to the situation in Panama, a peripheral country, removed from the theater of great international conflicts. However, once again, Sinán's proposal wins the game. By demolishing rural schemes as exclusive of national identity ... [the author] presents his thesis that the Panamanian [narrative] that deserves the label must give outlines, vicissitudes, characters and environments that completely respond to the particularities of Panamanian events.

Instead of reading Panama as absent from Sinán's literary text, Guardia's examination of "Sin novedad en Shanghai" emphasizes its

connection to the Panamanian *letrado's* literary and national project. The short story's cosmopolitan theme and global trajectory do not point to the dismissal of Panama from its narrative space, but rather exemplify the culmination of Sinán's search for new paradigms and models by which to imagine and narrate the Panamanian nation. Although Panama, in "Sin novedad en Shanghai," does not appear as thematic content, it emerges as the subject that represents the globalized world of international war and trans-regional migration as the very subject of knowledge.

Panama as the object of representation in "Sin novedad en Shanghai" might be absent, but as the subject of representation it is more than present. The protagonist from whose perspective the story is told is Jorge Vélez—the consul whose nationality is never revealed in the story.¹¹ This is a relevant detail, since the narrative makes a point of meticulously informing the nationalities of the individual passengers, thereby, highlighting the cosmopolitan and multi-national "Tower of Babel"-like character of the ship. The fact that Jorge Vélez's nationality is the only one left unnamed is not accidental; rather, as will be shown, it is crucial to the narrative framework of Sinán's story.

If the other characters in "Sin novedad en Shanghai" are bound by particularities, such as nation, ethnicity, language and local history, Vélez's character is not. He is marked neither by national-ethnic-linguistic particularities nor by ideological or historical ones. Despite "Jorge Vélez" being a distinctly Hispanic name, in this story his character is not limited or defined by the Spanish language. The narrative demonstrates that he is a remarkable heteroglot to the point that it is never quite clear which specific language he is using with each different character. This non-particular characterization, or universalist construction of the subject's position, enables him to act as the subject depicting and describing the particularities of the ship's diverse passengers who come from different nations, social classes or political ideologies, and whose various local experiences cast light on the interlinked global nature of the World War. Not naming the protagonist-narrator's nationality is relevant in the narrative structure of the text; it allows him to occupy rhetorically the universal subject-position from which the particularities of certain nations, areas and peoples can be described. Placing Vélez

in the position of the universal enables its author to metonymically make Panama itself capable of universality. The nation does not assume the role of proper name or object of representation, but rather is granted the position of the universal knowing subject.

This positionality in “Sin novedad en Shanghai” interrogates the global imaginary that posits Panama as a particular object of observation, examination, expropriation and domination by the Eurocentric hegemonic actors of global modernity. As Pheng Cheah in his critique of Area Studies states, an area (which refers to those nations and regions located at the periphery of global capitalism) “is that which is not universal ... [It] is precisely that which is not capable of universality” (37). To put it in Cheah’s terms, the dominant discourse would characterize Panama as inauthentic, artificial and marginal; it would be that area which is not and cannot be universal.

Examining the claims of this discourse “Sin novedad en Shanghai,” there are two observations. First, the critique of Panama’s presumed lack of authentic national culture is actually a critique of Panama’s lack of particularity. There is nothing distinguishing Panama from other particular nations/areas. It is implicit in discursive framework that Panama, like other Third World nations, can only be particular. This leads to the second observation: peripheral places can never become universal; they can never become subjects of knowledge.

Sinán intervenes by proposing an alternative conceptual framework: not only does Panama’s supposed lack of particular characteristics—represented by the obscuring of the protagonist Jorge Vélez’s nationality—place it in the ideal position to occupy the role of universal subject, but its geographical location places it in the center of the world. Even before independence, the Panamanian imaginary was articulated and framed by its geography. Simón Bolívar’s vision of Panama demonstrates this propensity: “Parece que si el mundo hubiese de elegir su capital, el Istmo de Panamá sería señalado para este augusto destino, colocado, como está, en el centro del globo, viendo por una parte el Asia, por el otro el Africa y la Europa” (Porrás 248) ‘It seems that if the world were to choose its capital, the Isthmus of Panama would be appointed for this stately destiny, positioned, as it is, at the center of the globe, looking on one side at Asia, on the other at Africa and Europe.’ After independence

and the construction of the Canal, the discourse on Panama became even more geographically determinist whereby Panama's sole relevance was attributed to its geographical location while its history was viewed as a direct by-product of geography. As mentioned at the beginning, this geo-paradigm of seeing the country as a mere geographical instrument for wealthier nations helps posit Central American nations as the backwaters of global modernity.

Sinán's text utilizes this geo-narrative of Panama—emphasizing its geographical centrality, its location between the East and the West, and its role as interoceanic transit site—to put forward an alternative imaginary of Panama. If the inter/national imaginary deems the country's role to be an interoceanic transit route to global capitalism and symptomatic of its artificiality, in “Sin novedad en Shanghai,” the very spatial positionality of Panama—between oceans, continents and regions—locates it at the center of global capitalism.¹²

Bringing together peoples from different countries, regions and histories, Panama is at the center of Sinán's story. It is the ship carrying the “Tower of Babel”:

El comedor estaba lleno de gente. Todos hablaban a la par, unos en alemán; en francés, otros; varios, en italiano; muchos, en inglés; pocos, en hindostán; otros, en chino, en japonés.... Y aquello era la torre de Babel rumbo a Shanghai. (44)

The dining room was full of people. Everyone spoke all at once, some in German; others in French; several in Italian; many in English; a few in Hindustani; others in Chinese, in Japanese.... And that was the Tower of Babel bound for Shanghai.

Panama, like the steamship transporting a diverse and multinational group of passengers, witnessed the arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants from all over the world—including a large group of Chinese immigrants—initially generated by the construction of the Canal in 1904.¹³ Just as the World War had caused people from all over the world to board a ship to Shanghai, US imperialistic designs manifested in the very construction of the Panama Canal triggered a large wave of international migration to Panama. If the ship with its cosmopolitan and heterogeneous passengers is interpreted as a

national allegory of Panamanian history and society, how does the ship's destination—Shanghai—comment on Sinán's imaginary of Panama?¹⁴

“Rumbo a Shanghai”: Re-directing National Trajectories

The Chinese port city in the title of Sinán's text provides a destination for the steamship and its passengers in the story Shanghai marks the ship's trajectory as its terminus, while for the majority of the passengers it is an unknown place that promises a new beginning. In the case of the large group of Central and Eastern European Jews fleeing from Hitler's persecution, Shanghai offers them a place of refuge. Nonetheless, as the story illustrates, even the dire situation in Europe cannot calm the fears and anxieties of the ship's European passengers for whom the Oriental city is still a distant, exotic and unfamiliar place that offers them limited resources:

La gran nave iba llegando a Shanghai ... Ya estaban arregladas para enfrentarse con la ciudad macabra. ¿Qué cosas misteriosas, qué vida incierta las esperaba en Shanghai? Sabían por comentarios, que la única esperanza era ofrecerse para los dancing-halls. ¿Qué les esperaba? Irremediamente sus destinos tendrían que dividirse. Terminando ya el viaje, cada cual se veía frente a las cosas sin poder evitarlas. La divina poesía de todo el viaje se diluía en Shanghai. (46)

The great ship was arriving in Shanghai. They were dressed to confront the macabre city. What mysterious things, what uncertain life awaited them in Shanghai? They knew from hearsay that the only hope was to offer themselves to the dancing-halls. What would await them? Inevitably their destinies would have to be separated. Ending the journey, each one saw what was in front without being able to avoid it. The divine poetry of the entire journey was diluted in Shanghai.

The arrival in Shanghai brings an end to their journey and an end to their temporary flight from facing the war. Cast in the sea away from lands, nations and continents, the ship's passengers indulge in bacchanalian revelries to momentarily ward off the war and the

harsh realities it has engendered. However, as Sinán's text shows, their attempt to forget is a fragile dream from which they can easily be awoken. The danger of war grows inside the ship and in the uneasy minds of the passengers.

Even before the Japanese air raids begin as the ship approaches Shanghai, the threat of war is personified by the terrifying figure of Yonekura, the son of a wealthy Japanese businessman who after having killed a native Filipina woman out of rage is forced to leave Manila and go to Tokyo. As the story progresses, Yonekura becomes more and more obsessed with the Chinese doctor's wife, Mrs. Ling, who does not reciprocate his interest at all. The other passengers are privy to the simmering tension and the catastrophe that is about to happen. Coinciding with the Japanese air raids over the Chinese port city and the ship's arrival in Shanghai, Yonekura fires a shot and kills Mrs. Ling on the dock of the ship. This, along with the passengers' landing in Shanghai, marks the end of "Sin novedad en Shanghai."

Instead of examining this incident in isolation as an allegory of Japanese imperialism in East Asia and a critique of Japanese military violence, this study aims to place this within the discursive context of reading Sinán's text. The character Yonekura testifies to the inability of the passengers to escape and forget the war. The omnipresent global nature of the World War contaminates and invades even the space of the ship, which supposedly offers a respite from the violence of the World War. The figure of the Japanese imperialist attests to the global nature of the war where no place is left safe from its reach. Second, the simultaneous occurrence of Yonekura's assassination of Mrs. Ling, the Japanese air raids, and the passengers landing in Shanghai, as well as the reception of fellow European Jews already living in the Chinese port city, point to the fundamental position of Shanghai in this text. All these events coincide and converge in the Chinese port city. Shanghai is the place where the war in Europe and the war in Asia intersect and merge to create a microcosm of a globalized world.¹⁵ As such, Shanghai does not merely mark the trajectory of the short story's narrative plot, but also that of Panama's national imaginary. If the ship in this story can be likened to Panama's position in the world, what does it imply within the framework of Sinán's national project that the

ship's destination is Shanghai? Why is the ship on route to the East and not the West? How does this alter the geo-paradigm of global modernity?

As literary critics have noted, since the independence of Latin American nations from the Spanish Empire, by and large Latin American elites have looked to the West as the model for their national projects.¹⁶ This has had a hand in determining the ways in which Latin American *letrados* have imagined their own respective nations and their relation(s) to the rest of the world, and in shaping their view of the world itself. Mirroring the perspective of the European passengers in "Sin novedad en Shanghai," the dominant Latin American imaginary of Asia construes it as the Orient, the foreign, the distant and the unknown. As the Orient, Asia is often viewed as the barbaric and the premodern in opposition to the West that represents the civilized and the modern.¹⁷ Sinán's work, however, departs from this Orientalist imaginary of the world by presenting China as representative of the global and the cosmopolitan. The destination of the ship carrying the Tower of Babel is not Venice or New York, but the Chinese port city. Shanghai is the locus where the global nature of World War II comes into full view. Instead of positioning Panama in relation to the US or Europe, "Sin novedad en Shanghai" connects Panama to the Orient.

The ship is on route to Shanghai, just as Panama is oriented towards the Orient. It is not that the Chinese port city, the Orient, represents a paradisiacal haven separated from World War II symbolizing some sort of ideal towards which the Central American nation should strive. Rather, Sinán's text implicitly points to the significance of Panama's historical relations with Asia that have often been overlooked in the official Panamanian national imaginary: the large population of Chinese immigrants in Panama and their role in shaping its place in the globalized world, Panama's shipping route to (and from) Asia which was utilized to send and exchange commodities, militaries and Cold War strategies across the Pacific.¹⁷ By placing emphasis on Panama's relations with Asia, Sinán's fictional narrative indirectly proposes a remapping of global modernity: just as the West is not the sole proprietor of universality or modernity, Panama is not necessarily closer to the West than it is to the Orient. Sinán's story calls attention to the need to reframe the

discussion of geography and power.

Questioning the geo-paradigm of power entails a two-fold action in the context of “Sin novedad en Shanghai.” First, by re-orienting Panama, this work proposes a dismantling of East/West divisions and their deployment in fashioning Panama’s (and Latin America’s) position in the world. The ship’s transoceanic route parallels the geographic location of Panama as an interoceanic site bridging the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. During World War II, the Canal Zone served as a rest and recreation port for thousands of US soldiers going to and returning from the Pacific due to its central location. It was the main transpacific node connecting the United States to the Second Sino-Japanese War and subsequently to the Pacific Front in World War II. Similar to the steamship in “Sin novedad en Shanghai,” Panama played a significant role in creating a global network of militarization, communication and economic relations across the Pacific.

This leads to the second way in which it overturns the epistemological basis of global modernity. Sinán’s story interrogates the dominant discourse on Panama that situates it as a peripheral actor in global modernity and undermines the opposition center/periphery (which can also be read as North/South) in relation to globalization. By placing emphasis on the diverse and multi-national character of the ship’s passengers that in turn highlight the global nature of the World War in which local battles and events—from Hitler’s expulsion of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe to the Japanese occupation of East Asia—connect and converge, the story shows how globality does not constitute or signify a homogenous, unified, total and singular event.¹⁸ Although certain historical experiences are privileged and institutionalized as representations of the global—as exemplified by the Holocaust in the case of World War II or the worldwide consumption of US popular culture in the instance of globalization—while others are marginalized, obscured or even disavowed, such as the incidents in Shanghai during the World War or the atrocities committed in the Canal Zone, “Sin novedad en Shanghai” calls attention to the central significance of these supposedly peripheral areas in global modernity.

Sinán’s story highlights the relevance of marginalized areas in their engagement, participation and (de)construction of global

modernity, and more significantly points to the need to see the modern world from the position of these peripheral spaces. It ineluctably questions the geography of power—ranking different nations according to their presumed influence, engagement and protagonic role in global affairs and dividing them into opposing camps, such as center/periphery and universal/particular—that underlies the dominant discussions of modernity and globalization. As such, “Sin novedad en Shanghai” signals the need for a new framing of discussions on global modernity and for a new way of imagining relations between particular geographical areas of the world and the global.

Notes

1 For further discussion on the history of the Panama Canal and its role in geopolitics, see David McCullough *The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (1978), Alfred Charles Richard Jr. *The Panama Canal in American National Consciousness, 1870-1990* (1990) and Walter LaFeber *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (1989).

2 This geographical representation is not limited to Panama, but to the whole of Central America. For further discussion of the ways in which the representations of Central America’s geography and nature essentialize certain spatio-cultural phenomena and facilitate the exploitation and expropriation of natural, human and geographical resources in Central America, see Ileana Rodríguez *Transatlantic Topographies: Islands, Highlands, Jungles* (2004) and Ana Patricia Rodríguez *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (2009).

3 It is significant that this discourse is often deployed by former colonial powers and/or present neo-imperial agents to simultaneously invalidate the sovereignty of postcolonial nations and to justify their own political, military and economic involvement in these nations.

4 I thank Arturo Arias for calling my attention to the fact that the title makes an allusion to Erich Maria Remarque’s popular novel of World War I, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, whose title was translated into Spanish as *Sin novedad en el frente*.

5 The Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937—a battle between China’s National Revolutionary Army and the Japanese Imperial Army—heralded the beginning of total war between China and Japan. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Second Sino-Japanese war merged into the larger conflict of World

War II.

6 For an in-depth discussion of the deep military involvement of the US in Panama that included military invasions of Panama and chemical weapons experiments (such as “The San José Project”), see John Lindsay-Poland *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama* (2003).

7 The US Senate signed a new treaty with Panama in 1936 that ended the country’s protectorate status. In 1941, after significant pressure from the US army, President Arnulfo Arias agreed to the US military occupation of nine airfields and two radar sites in Panama’s interior provinces. See Lindsay-Poland (2003).

8 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

9 Doris Sommer’s foundational text on the intimate relation between nation-building and fiction illustrates the relevance of literary representation in “literally ... engender[ing] new nations” (18). See Julio Ramos *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (2001) and Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) for further discussion of the interconnected relation between nation-building and literature.

10 See Ángel Rama *The Lettered City* (1996) for a discussion on the epistemological origins of national literature: its emergence as an academic discipline is connected to the very construction of the nation-state.

11 The narrative’s characterization of Jorge Vélez recalls the author’s own trajectory: for instance, his occupation as a diplomat and stay in South Asia.

12 It is often overlooked that 90% of world trade travels by sea (<http://www.marisec.org/shippingfacts/worldtrade/>). The fundamental role of maritime transport for global capitalism makes countries such as Panama, Egypt and Malaysia highly valuable for global economic powerhouses, like the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan, since they act as key nodes (e.g. the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Malacca) in connecting shipping routes for international trade. Hence the history of colonization that these nations share can be largely attributed to the fundamental relation between sea trade, global capitalism and global modernity.

13 For a detailed history of Chinese immigration to Panama, see Lok Siu *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (2005).

14 In her reading of “Sin novedad en Shanghai” as national allegory, Guardia (2007) draws parallels between the ship in the story and Panamanian history.

15 Known since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the

international city of the East, Shanghai became the hotbed of international politics during the war, with its population of Chinese nationalists and communists, pro-tsar Russian refugees, Korean resistance members, European-Jewish refugees, French, British and American residents, and Japanese imperial officers.

16 See Angél Rama *The Lettered City* (1996) and Ramos (2001) for a discussion on the important position of Europe in the Latin American imaginary.

17 Panama served as a testing ground for nuclear and chemical weapons that the US would later use in the Pacific during and after World War II, and form that the US control of East Asia in the advent of the Cold War took as its model US neo-colonial relations with Panama (as well as other Latin American countries). See Lindsay-Poland (2003).

18 Here globality refers to the condition of being globalized caused by the spatial-temporal processes characteristic of capitalism. If globalization highlights the actual process by which global interconnection occurs, globality focuses on the resulting spatial paradigm of the world produced by globalization.

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