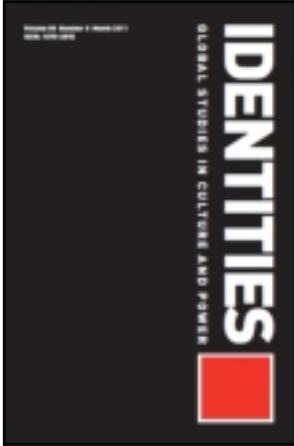


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Sounding sovereignty: performance and politics in the 1999 Panama Canal handover

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Sounding sovereignty: performance and politics in the 1999 Panama Canal handover

Katherine Zien

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The Panama Canal's handover from US governance to Panamanian sovereignty concluded on 31 December 1999. 'Patria Entera' (loosely translated as 'Whole Homeland'), a state-sponsored open-air concert, commemorated the handover and promulgated new readings of the Panama Canal Zone's decolonisation process. Concert headliner Rubén Blades deployed repertory and symbolic strategies to counterbalance Panamanians' ambivalence regarding the handover. 'Patria Entera' recast the Panama Canal Zone as an accessible space and narrated the handover as the Panamanian citizenry's collective inheritance of the Canal and accompanying Zone. Yet the concert's discursive arc overlooked persistent and emerging challenges.

Keywords: Panama Canal; Rubén Blades; performance; salsa music; US–Panama relations; postcoloniality

Introduction

On 31 December 1999, roughly 20,000 people, most Panamanian citizens, assembled in the Panama Canal Zone. Unlike previous occasions, this crowd had not gathered to protest the Zone's occupation by the US government. Rather, the spectators were attending an open-air concert, 'Patria Entera', to celebrate the Panama Canal's transfer from US rule to Panamanian sovereignty. Sponsored by Panama City's mayoralty, 'Patria Entera' was named 'for the fact that at noon on the 31st of December the Canal will pass into Panamanian hands, converting the country into a "whole Homeland ('Patria Entera')," with full sovereignty over all of its national territory' (Concepción 1999). In addition to the concertgoers, up to 400,000 people viewed 'Patria Entera' via television and webcast (Anon 1999b, 2000).

Commemorating the handover, 'Patria Entera' also confronted Panamanians' ambivalence regarding their nation's readiness to assume control of the Panama Canal (Zone).¹ Performing in the Zone, concert headliner Rubén Blades and co-presenters developed a musical account of Panama's decolonisation and democratisation. Through spatial, symbolic and repertory techniques, 'Patria Entera' incorporated concertgoers into a discourse of national belonging.

The handover period's unresolved tensions

The final drawdown of the United States Army on 31 December 1999 marked the end of the Panama Canal handover (1977–1999), a process initiated with the Torrijos–Carter Treaties (the Panama Canal Treaty and the Neutrality Treaty).² By 1991, roughly 61.1% of the Canal Zone's 147,399 hectares were reverted; US military installations were ceded between 1994 and 1999 (Alemancia and Leis 1995, pp. 36–57). Yet for many Panamanians, political and economic questions lingered. Documenting the handover's final day, Panamanian film-maker Luís Romero recorded a range of reactions, from euphoria to disappointment and doubt about the United States' departure (Romero 2009). Composer and musician Rómulo Castro characterised Panamanian attitudes towards the United States as 'sí, pero no' ('yes, but no') and 'quiero que te vayas, pero no te vayas' ('I want you to leave, but don't leave') (personal communication, 20 April 2010).

This ambivalence resulted from decades of political tumult, most recently the dictatorship and ousting of General Manuel Antonio Noriega (see Zimbalist and Weeks 1991, Falcoff and Millett 1993, Conniff 2001, pp. 154–167, Pérez 2011). After his predecessor General Omar Torrijos Herrera's death in 1981, Noriega ruled Panama from 1983 to 1989. His regime spawned pro-democracy resistance movements, notably the National Civic Crusade, nicknamed the 'Civilistas' (Pérez 2011, pp. 75–85). The Civilistas emerged from the Coordinadora Civilista Nacional (COCINA), formed in the early 1980s (Pérez 2011, p. 71). They met with violent repression by Noriega's Panamanian Defence Forces and 'Dignity Battalions' (Borbón and Koster 1990, pp. 301–381).

On 20 December 1989, the United States invaded Panama and captured Noriega, violating the Torrijos–Carter Treaties and United Nations and OAS charters (Sánchez 2007, p. 171). The invasion, 'Operation Just Cause,' killed between 500 and 5000 civilians and wrought massive property damage (Gandásegui 2009). Because many Panamanians initially welcomed the invasion, a political schism divided the nation on matters of US intervention (Leis 2009). After 1989, Panama 'was a country in ruins – internationally isolated, with a massive foreign debt, high levels of unemployment [and] poverty, the concentration of wealth in a few hands, and [occupied] by the US army' (Araúz and Pizzurno 1995–2000). Problems like the Canal Zone's chemical contamination demanded immediate attention (Lindsay-Poland 2003). Additionally, political cynicism reigned. While many Panamanians distrusted the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), that of Torrijos and Noriega, many also took the invasion as a sign that the United States would not honour the treaties (Alemancia and Leis 1995, pp. 23–24, Alemancia and Reyes 1998, Lemoine 1999, Mójica and Morales 1999). This threat was exacerbated by revelations of US–Panama negotiations on the post-handover conversion of military bases into a multilateral anti-drug centre (Alemancia and Reyes 1998). These events deepened public mistrust of both governments (Mójica and Morales 1999). Panamanians desired a locally crafted form of democracy free of association with the US government's 'democratising' incursions, as experienced

throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Méndez 2000, McGuinness 2008).³

Populations across Panama, the Canal Zone and the United States shared reservations about the handover. At the millennium's end, the interim Panama Canal Commission (PCC) would cede control of the Canal to the Panamanian-administrated Panama Canal Authority (ACP) (Alemancia and Leis 1995, Suárez 2007, pp. 29–30).⁴ Questions persisted about the ACP's organisational structure: would the ACP be non-profit or a private corporation? If the ACP became a hybrid public/private entity, what percentage of revenue would be directed towards government services?⁵ PCC employees also expressed concern about future reductions in wages and benefits.

Another important factor was many Panamanians' physical and psychic alienation from the Canal Zone. This collective estrangement had been cultivated throughout the twentieth century: the US government maintained the Panama Canal (Zone) at a remove, implementing checkpoints, fences and other barriers to access. The self-sufficient Zone's well-remunerated employment, recreational provisions and orderly design symbolised 'civilisation' (Donoghue 2006). At the centre of the spectacle was the Administration Building (Anon 1914, Boatwright 1979). Perched atop palm-lined boulevards and sweeping steps, this grandiose Italianate Neo-Renaissance structure commanded an impressive view (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Administration building and Prado, 2008.

Source: K. Zien.

Discourses of the Canal Zone as an exclusive ‘paradise’ or ‘utopia’ for US citizens circulated throughout the twentieth century.⁶ The Zone was ‘an idyllic playground’, ‘Shangri-La’ and a ‘lush green enclave of middle-class prosperity surrounded by [Panama’s] teeming poverty’ (Anon 1975, 1977). Panamanian architect Eduardo Tejeira Davis remarks:

What many people find attractive about the architectural landscape and urban legacy of the Canal Zone. . . is a product of Panamanians’ nostalgia: faced with the chaos of Panama City today, the Canal Zone seems a paradise of order, tranquillity, and amplexness. [. . .] [T]he monumental and residential ensembles of the Canal Zone were purposely developed with their backs turned to Panama City and Colón – and according to highly controlled conditions that cannot be repeated in an environment where private ownership of land prevails. (2004, pp. 8–9)

Historian Alan McPherson affirms this sentiment: ‘[T]he many US citizens in the Zone, called “Zonians”, held all the desirable, racially-segregated jobs in this well-tended tropical paradise. In the eyes of watchful Panamanians, [Zonians] embodied US empire in all its greed, racism, and paternalism’ (2004, p. 148).

The turn of the millennium saw a generational shift in attitudes towards the Canal Zone. Because nearly all of its territory was reverted by 1999, younger Panamanians felt less spatially and socially distanced from the Zone. Moreover, by 1999, the PCC workforce was largely Panamanian, employing only 200 US citizens (Cain 1999). However, many Panamanians still experienced the Canal Zone – designated Panama’s ‘fifth border’ by General Torrijos – as off-limits. Much of ‘Patria Entera’s’ audience was old enough to recall the US police who patrolled the Zone on horseback until 1977. Sociologist Raúl Leis observed that some Panamanians still became disoriented when driving or walking through the area, an attitude that he labelled ‘unconscious revenge’ (*venganza inconsciente*) (personal communication, 28 April 2010).

In Panama, the handover was unaccompanied by an official initiative to educate citizens regarding the history, mechanics or environmental impact of the roughly 550-square-mile Panama Canal (Zone). Existing courses on Panama–US relations often dealt solely with diplomatic history. In this context, various programmes emerged to chart potential economic, social and political applications for the Panama Canal (Zone).⁷ Among these, the political party Movimiento Papa Egoró (MPE), formed in 1991, merits mention.⁸ Inspired by the Civilistas, Rubén Blades and collaborators established the MPE as an independent party whose goals included transforming Panamanian politics, repurposing the Canal Zone and instituting social policies influenced by Western liberal democratic models (Grant 1994, Wilkinson 1994). Born ‘without [mediation] by the military or banking elite’, the MPE styled itself an alternative to the PRD and the Arnulfistas, Panama’s predominating political parties (Sánchez 1994).⁹ In 1992, the MPE outlined its transformative policies in the position paper ‘Una sola casa’ (‘One House’). Citing factors like Panama’s ballooning foreign debt and 55.5% poverty rate, the MPE proposed the creation of a ‘democracy [of] political, economic,

cultural, and social expression' (1992, p. 4). 'Our national slogan, "Pro Mundi Beneficio", is understood by [the MPE] to be "Pro Panama". Panama first – our interests out in front' (Movimiento Papa Egoró 1992, p. 10). This 'nation-first' platform sought to include all provinces in national growth and convert the Canal Zone into a multipurpose financial centre to generate revenues, develop infrastructure and expand local labour opportunities (1992, p. 12). In surveys, the MPE registered 'opposition to the privatisation of strategic national goods' like the reverted Canal Zone lands (1992, p. 9). Future uses of these lands 'should not be limited to economic factors' and would include 'the cultural possibilities of recreation and environmental conservation' (1992, p. 9).

The MPE attracted a cross-class, multifaceted base that oscillated between utopian visions of Panama's reconstruction and infighting (Sánchez 1994). Its momentum spurred Blades' presidential bid in 1994. Although Blades did not win the 1994 election, he garnered third place among seven candidates (Gandásegui 1994, Pérez 2011, p. xx). The MPE dissolved soon after the election, and in early 1999, Blades endorsed PRD presidential candidate Martín Torrijos, son of the late General Torrijos (French 1994, Álvarez 1999). Blades' endorsement of a PRD candidate perplexed and angered MPE supporters, who wondered if the MPE was finished, or if Blades would revive the party for a future presidential campaign. Speculations also arose as to Blades' potential future ties to the PRD.¹⁰ These questions swirled around Blades in December 1999, leading MPE representatives to state that 'Patria Entera' would not pursue 'political goals other than national unity, peace, optimism, and healthy diversion' (Concepción 1999).

Rubén Blades' political aesthetics

While Blades entered Panamanian politics in a roundabout fashion, his music has long been invested in local and regional political issues. Born in San Felipe, a working-class neighbourhood in Panama City and the setting of many of his songs, Blades attended Panama's prestigious National Institute while performing in local bands (Figueroa 1997). His initial musical influences were the North American genres that pervaded Panama via the Canal Zone's Southern Command Network (SCN), the first television station in Latin America to broadcast Elvis and the Beatles. Like many Panamanians, Blades grew up 'loving the US like [a] dear friend' (personal communication, 8 December 2009). Yet 'all of that changed in 1964 with the [Canal Zone flag] riots', a conflict over the Zone's sovereignty:

500 [Panamanians] wounded and 21 dead. . . the most shocking thing you can imagine. [. . .] And it was so ugly, it made all of us in my generation...revise [our] position. And then I started paying more attention, and I saw the [Canal Zone's segregation], and I thought about the American Indian, and then I had to say, 'What happened here?'

After the so-called riots of 1964, Blades distanced himself from North American cultural influences and redoubled his commitment to Latin American and Latina/o

music and politics. In the mid-1970s, he moved with his family to the United States. Working at Fania Records in New York, Blades explored sonic innovations and social justice themes. On albums like 1984s *Buscando América*, diverse genres and ‘pan-Latina/o’ content converge in compositions like ‘Desapariciones’ (dedicated to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina) and ‘El Padre Antonio y el Monaguillo Andrés’ (hereafter referred to as ‘Padre Antonio’), which protest US intervention and Latin American dictatorships (Anon 1985). ‘Padre Antonio’ recounts the killing of a village priest and altar boy, conjuring the 1980 assassination of Bishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero by an El Salvadoran death squad linked to the School of the Americas. Panamanian listeners may also recall the 1971 kidnapping and murder of Panamanian priest Father Héctor Gallego by the Torrijos dictatorship.

The lyrics of ‘Padre Antonio’ foreground a message of hope (‘you can kill the person, but you can’t kill the idea’), using a narrative technique that invites audiences into the scene with visual cues rather than melodrama. When a gunman interrupts the Lord’s Prayer, we are guided into the tumult by a silent witness: ‘Between the cries and surprise, agonising once again/was the wooden Christ nailed to the wall’ (Blades 2012). These lyrics divert our gaze from a direct focus on the mourners’ grief to the peripheral perspective of the wooden crucifix. Yet the use of understatement heightens the song’s intensity. Blades limns the scene with impressionistic details – noting, for example, that the 10-year-old altar boy has died ‘without ever meeting [soccer star] Pelé’ – to evoke the wrenching effects of lived grief, which unfolds through quotidian minutiae rather than grand *tableaux*. His storytelling style first captures a shallow depth of field and then gradually brings the larger schematic into focus through a seemingly haphazard chain of details, unfurling the story at the pace of the listener’s impromptu encounter.

Blades repeatedly employs these techniques to engage broad-based concepts like social justice; an important example is his song ‘Patria’, considered Panama’s unofficial national anthem. In 1988, Blades released ‘Patria’ to protest Noriega and urged the Civilistas to adopt it as their anthem. The group did not take up the song despite its nationalist themes and anti-dictatorship lyrics, causing Blades to feel that ‘the Civilistas did not value this as an act of collaboration with the resistance’ (personal communication, 8 December 2009). This chasm between representation and *realpolitik* influenced Blades’ decision to enter Panamanian politics. Despite some Panamanians’ disavowal of Blades and the MPE, I argue that Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro selected Blades to lead ‘Patria Entera’ as a gesture towards the MPE’s democratic, anti-dictatorship aspirations.

‘Patria Entera:’ nation made whole

Just after the Panamanian government received the Panama Canal from former US President Jimmy Carter, ‘Patria Entera’s’ artists took their places on a raised stage at Fastlich Field, an area adjacent to the Panama Canal and less than a few miles from major sites of US–Panama conflict (Anon 1999a). ‘Patria Entera’

marked Blades' first official performance in Panama since his 1994 electoral defeat. Introducing the concert, Mayor Navarro 'congratulat[ed] Panamanians on the historic recuperation of the canal, a national triumph that unites all and permits the country to enter the new century as a "patria entera" with the hope of national development and progress' (Anon 2000). Behind the stage, the Administration Building stood in clear view, its proximity a reminder of the national goods that Panamanians stood to gain.

During 'Patria Entera', Blades deployed diverse facets of his political and performing personae to recontextualise the Panama Canal (Zone) within a narrative of Panama's history from colonialism through dictatorship towards democracy. To cement this narrative, Blades drew upon his international celebrity status and politicised repertoire while appropriating the character of the Panamanian 'national artist' to foster the aesthetic and symbolic grounds for democratic nationalism.¹¹

Creating this hybrid international self-representation was a challenge, given Panamanians' ambivalence towards Blades' political and artistic allegiances to both Panama and the United States. Blades has frequently produced music and resided in the United States, and the MPE had many US-based donors. These facts proved problematic, as many Panamanians considered Blades a 'crossover success' or a product of the 1990s Latin 'boom' in the United States rather than a 'national artist'. Such debates extended to Blades' explorations of diverse musical genres and styles, which resist essentialism but invite speculation about his geopolitical self-positioning.

My interviews with several Panamanians who attended 'Patria Entera' affirm Blades' efficacy as the concert's facilitator. While many criticised Blades as disengaged from local politics in Panama, 'Patria Entera's' positive reception demonstrates Blades' successful self-localisation. How was Blades able to effect this localising shift? I contend that during 'Patria Entera' Blades deployed international signifiers to foster 'a place of...*betweenness* in [a] global Borderlands composed of historically connected postcolonial spaces' (Saldívar 1991, p. 153).

'Patria Entera' opened with performances by 'national artists' Sammy y Sandra Sandoval and Manuel de Jesús Abrego before segueing into approximately three hours of music by Blades and Costa Rican band Editus, punctuated with appearances by Osvaldo Ayala (Canal Once 1999). Blades covered over two decades of his most popular repertoire, emphasising salsa music (see Table 1). Salsa's peripatetic history of cultural syncretism challenges the concept of the unidirectional 'crossover' (Aparicio 1998, Sánchez-González 1999, p. 65–70, Manuel *et al.* 2006, p. 56–57). Blades has described salsa as an 'international folklore of urban life, reflecting the sentiments of a Latin America in search of unification and identity' (Azúa 1979). His musical themes reconnect salsa with its urban, working class, mixed-race origins while ranging from literary tropes to political and social issues. Blades' depictions of urban poverty find 'beauty in the grotesque' to 'present a problem but not. . . its solution' (Azúa 1979). Employing salsa for populist ends, his songs document the 'bitter day-to-day realities suffered by [poor and working class people]'. (Azúa 1979)

Table 1. Rubén Blades, 'Patria Entera' concert set list.

Song Title	Album Title	Year of Release	Notes
1. 'Pablo Pueblo'	<i>Metiendo Mano</i>	1977	
2. 'Decisiones'	<i>Buscando América</i>	1984	
3. 'Juan Pachanga'	<i>Bohemio y Poeta</i>	1977, 1979	
4. 'Cameleón'	<i>Caminando</i>	1991	
5. 'Todos Vuelven'	<i>Buscando América</i>	1984	
6. 'Amor y Control'	<i>Amor y Control</i>	1992	
7. 'Caminando'	<i>Caminando</i>	1991	
8. 'Ligia Elena'	<i>Canciones del Solar de los Aburridos</i>	1981	
9. 'Padre Antonio'	<i>Buscando América</i>	1984	
10. 'Puente del Mundo'	<i>Tiempos</i>	1999	Composed by Rómulo Castro
11. 'Eres Mi Canción'	<i>La Rosa de los Vientos</i>	1996	Performed with and composed by Osvaldo Ayala
12. 'Mi Favorita'	<i>La Rosa de los Vientos</i>	1996	Performed with and composed by Osvaldo Ayala
13. 'Muévete'	<i>Escenas</i>	1985	Composed by Los Van Van
14. 'Ojos'	<i>Siembra</i>	1978	
15. 'Plástico'	<i>Siembra</i>	1978	
16. 'Pedro Navaja'	<i>Siembra</i>	1978	
17a. '9 de Enero'	N/A	ca. 1967	
17b. 'Tiburón'	<i>Canciones del Solar de los Aburridos</i>	1981	
17c. '20 de Diciembre'	<i>Tiempos</i>	1999	
18. 'Patria'	<i>Antecedente</i>	1988	

Formally, salsa music undermines occidental corporeal sublimation and Cartesian dualism by evoking 'territorial displacement and problematic hybridity' as situated throughout the Americas (Rivera 2004, p. 21). Rather than merely 'execut[ing]' a score, salsa musicians 'actively [elaborate] sonority through the incorporation of vocal and tonal phrases which manifest the individuality of each [musician's signature]' (Rivera 2004, p. 23). Ángel Quintero Rivera also highlights the democratising impact of improvisatory music on its listeners: salsa's collaborative mode of production reconfigures aesthetic labour as communication. In performance, salsa promotes dialogue between artists and audiences through an improvisatory call-and-response section, often labelled a *sonero*. In this section, appropriated from the *montuno* break in Cuban *son*, the song leader (or *sonero*) may reiterate themes or improvise exchanges with the chorus and/or audiences (Morales 2003, pp. 17, 67–70). Blades mastered this style of improvisatory leadership and often combined it with political or social themes. In many of his songs, the *sonero* accommodates a polemical provocation or a call to action.

Throughout ‘Patria Entera’, Blades’ acoustically amplified onstage presence was supplemented by the audible hum of audience participation. Concert footage and interview data indicate that Blades’ repertoire was familiar to many, if not most, in the crowd. Blades frequently paused and yielded to the audience, whose members embellished his verses and refrains, participating with relish.

Opening with ‘Pablo Pueblo’, Blades grounded his identity in Panama from the outset. One of his first major compositions, this song treats the daily frustrations of an ‘average man’ (*pueblo* meaning ‘the people/folk’ or ‘town’), a protagonist midway between human and symbol. As concert footage indicates, during ‘Pablo Pueblo’, Blades inserted improvised declamations identifying Panama’s working-class neighbourhoods of Chorrillo, Calle Segunda and Carrasquilla (Canal Once 1999). This marked the first of many instances in which Blades employed the improvisatory portion of the salsa song to intervene in and localise his repertoire, highlighting points of spatial and temporal specificity within the Panamanian national imaginary.

Blades used improvisation to extrapolate from his compositions to events unfolding in Panama and to interweave his biography with Panama’s national history. He chronicled his life in the *barrio* and as a student at the National Institute and the University of Panama. On other occasions, such as the end of ‘Todos Vuelven’, he acknowledged prominent Panamanians. These included figures such as historian Ricaurte Soler, 1964 protest victim Ascanio Arosemena and composer Roque Cordero, as well as present day sports celebrities and political leaders Davis ‘Junior’ Peralta, Carlos López Guevara, Adolfo Ahumada, Alexis Batista and Eusebio Pedroza.

During ‘Padre Antonio’, Blades linked the Panama Canal Zone’s decolonisation to struggles for social justice across Latin America. While ‘Padre Antonio’ has often been adopted as an anthem of social justice and anti-dictatorship movements across Latin America, Blades concretised its connection to Panamanian history by invoking Ascanio Arosemena and Ricaurte Soler and converting the church bells (*campanas*) that ring after Padre Antonio’s death into ‘campanas panameñas/nuestra libertad’ (‘Panamanian bells/our freedom’). The improvisation, ‘suenan el canal...limpiado de la pena’ (‘sound the canal – washed clean of shame/sadness’) equated the canal with the bells’ intonations of resilience and regeneration.

In addition to its salsa repertoire, ‘Patria Entera’ showcased the musical gains yielded by Blades’ return to Panama. Specifically, his locally produced collaborative albums *La rosa de los vientos* (1996) and *Tiempos* (1999) focus on Panamanian musical, cultural and geographic landscapes, incorporating the *típico* (or *pindeñ*) artistry of accordionist Osvaldo Ayala and the fusion music of Panamanian singer-songwriter Rómulo Castro. Blades produced *La rosa de los vientos* on Castro’s label, Kiwi Records and Castro contributed several compositions dedicated to Panama for *Tiempos*. Blades’ performance of Panama’s local music during ‘Patria Entera’ reinforced his self-identification as a ‘national’ artist and even an *artista del patio*, a localised trope linked to Panamanian national

identity. ‘Patria Entera’ highlighted several songs within the ‘national’ genre of *típico* music. These included ‘Eres mi canción’, ‘Mi favorita’, which Blades performed as a duet with ‘national artist’ Ayala, and Castro’s composition ‘Puente del mundo’. Integral to constructions of Panamanian national cultural identity, *típico* music features accordion and a percussion section comprising the *caja*, *pujador*, and *repicador* drums and a *guáchara* or *churuca* (a corrugated tridimensional metal washboard scraped with a stylus). *Típico* is often punctuated by the *saloma*, a traditional cry uttered by rural farmers in the Panamanian interior (Zárate and Zárate 1962). Local histories were expounded in ‘Eres mi canción’ and ‘Puente del mundo’, two songs showcasing distinct aspects of Panamanian life. Blades introduced Ayala as ‘an important “national artist” (*artista nacional*)’ and stated, ‘We will not only showcase international artists but also *artistas del patio*’ (Canal Once 1999). Here Blades implicitly juxtaposed his persona as the cosmopolitan Panamanian cultural ambassador with Ayala, the local ‘artist of the patio’.

In contrast to the concert’s *típico* selections, Castro’s ‘Puente del mundo’ (‘Bridge of the World’) traces the political, geographic and cultural expanse of the Panamanian isthmus. The song employs indigenous terminology to depict a heterogeneous populace ‘Ngöbe-Buglé [sic], Emberá, Chocó, white, black, and Kuna’. ‘Puente del mundo’ features *salomas* along with many other genres and instruments to portray Panama as a nation of dynamic and hybrid identities. Blades demonstrated his adeptness at performing *panameñidad* by alternating nimbly among salsa, *típico* and Panama-focused music created during the MPE’s heyday. He also inserted the *saloma* into salsa songs like ‘Juan Pachanga’ to situate his compositions within a distinctly Panamanian register. Over the course of the concert, Blades progressively donned symbols of Panamanian national identity. He draped his neck with a Panamanian flag and exchanged his sunglasses and signature black porkpie – symbols of his cosmopolitan ‘jazz’ sensibility – for a *típico* hat that signalled his affiliation with Panamanian folk culture. By the end of ‘Patria Entera’, Blades had accumulated an embodied collage of Panamanian symbols, completing his transition from international celebrity to Panamanian ‘national artist’ while intensifying his narrative thrust towards Panama’s unification.

This trajectory peaked just before the concert’s end, as Blades performed an accelerated, minimalist suite of his most politically controversial songs (‘Nueve de enero’, ‘Tiburón’ and ‘Veinte de diciembre’). The triad, linked by overt anti-US sentiment, diverged sharply from the rest of the concert. ‘Tiburón’ characterises the United States as a shark patrolling the ocean and menacing the ‘shrimp’ (small nations like Panama, El Salvador and Puerto Rico); ‘Nueve de enero’ recalls the 1964 flag protests, and ‘Veinte de diciembre’, the 1989 invasion. Blades presented these songs in chronological order, merging them into a spare revue played straight through with no intervening pauses. Abandoning his band, he performed with only drums and vocals. This presentation isolated the three songs and channelled the audience’s attention to Blades’ musical elaboration of US–Panama conflicts.

Following this potent rupture of the festive frame, Blades readopted the band’s full instrumentation and segued into ‘Patria’. For ‘Patria’, Blades invited

onstage those whose names he had recited throughout, including scholar Carlos López Guevara, Panama Canal treaty negotiations participants Adolfo Ahumada and Omar Jaén, basketball player Davis Peralta, jockey Alexis Batista, boxer Eusebio Pedroza, and pianist and composer Danilo Pérez (Anon 2000). Several women wearing Panamanian *polleras* and representatives of Afro-Antillean, Kuna, Emberá and Ngäbe-Buglé groups also ascended the stage for the unofficial national anthem.

'Patria' exemplifies Blades' inductive storytelling mode, which builds from ephemeral details to a general argument. The song's argument – nationalism – is often a coercive, sentimentalised discourse. Yet 'Patria's' salsa rhythms evoke grassroots popular reception, and its imagery invites listeners to form bonds of recognition and emotional attachment. Opening with light drumming and introductory scattling, the song depicts a scene in which its narrator is approached by a young boy who asks him the meaning of the word *patria*. The narrator attempts to answer but is overcome with emotion. His inability to formulate a coherent definition forces him to represent the nation through a series of vignettes that divulge facets of the 'many beautiful things' elicited by the term. These include 'that old tree, talked about in that old poem', or 'the affection that you still feel for your grandmother after her death' – 'the walls of the *barrio*, of its brown-skinned hope...all that you carry in your spirit, when you move away...the *patria* is a feeling, in the gaze of an old man...the laugh of a newborn sister'. Although the lyrics also include customary nationalist tropes of 'martyrs' and 'flags', these are intertwined with the imagery of the quotidian, including people and sites glimpsed at street level. The song clutters our view with symbols rendered as fleeting impressions. 'Patria's' score interlards the soaring call of the trumpet, an instrument signifying nationalist discourses, with the drumbeats of Afro-Latina/o *congás*. Like 'Padre Antonio', 'Patria' constructs a shallow depth of field, foregrounding visual details as material indexes of abstract sentiment. The song's imagery is both meticulously rendered and generalised, producing a paradoxical sensation of concrete abstraction that mimics the workings of nationalism itself.

Conclusion: from border to limen (and back)

The departure of the United States impacted the lives and livelihoods of many Panamanians. 'Patria Entera' interrogated this transition, asking what (post)colonial sovereignty meant for Panamanians and for the region. Paul Connerton notes that commemorative ceremonies inculcate social memory through performativity, or the bodily deployment of habituated discursive and representational citations (1989, pp. 4–5). For the organisers of 'Patria Entera', the social and political embodiment of Panamanian history was imperative to the production of postcolonial sensibilities. By strategically deploying signifiers of localised identity and international celebrity, Blades and co-performers led audiences through a narrative arc comprising local and regional histories of colonialism, dictatorship and democratisation. Their performances projected

conceptions of nationality, racial and cultural identity, socioeconomic equity and political participation onto the audience/citizen body. Through site specificity, the concert portrayed the dissolution of the Panama Canal Zone's borders, as thousands stood in an area formerly barred to them. 'Patria Entera' evoked Victor Turner's discussion of the production of liminality and *communitas* in ritual processes (1969, pp. 80–130). Engaging Turner, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that performances can convert a border into a threshold (*limen*) and effect social transformation (2008, pp. 203–205).

I contend that 'Patria Entera' materialised both threshold *and* border to demarcate spaces of possibility and persistent challenges. While 'Patria Entera' may have sought to supplant the Canal Zone's border with a *limen*, the concert did not dismantle all borders in the former Canal Zone, a complexly fragmented terrain.¹² Downplayed by the concert's framework of populist sociability were ongoing economic and political fissures. For example, Tejeira Davis notes that privatisation of the Canal (Zone) is actively reshaping the Zone's landscape (2004). Under US rule, the prohibition of private property in the Canal Zone created a centralised bureaucracy. After the handover, the Panama Canal (Zone) was progressively privatised. These factors are often elided in the narrative of Panama's passage from colonialism to democracy. 'Patria Entera' privileged modes of participatory sociability over the production of sustained critique and dissent.

Yet the concert did not transpire in vain, nor were its effects negligible. On the contrary, 'Patria Entera' enabled audiences to participate in the handover physically while remaining psychically distanced by the virtue of their collective status as audiences. Here I invoke Daphna Ben-Chaim's assessment of performance's facilitation of empathic access (1984, p. ix). Performance spectators perpetually oscillate between involvement and disinterestedness, spawning a 'hybrid condition' in which 'perceiving the real and imagining the unreal are not mutually exclusive' (Ben Chaim 1984, pp. 20–21). Fluctuation between symbolism and reality determines audience reception, 'transferring the perceiving subject into a state of betwixt and between' and producing the condition of liminality (Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 89). This liminal state inspires a subjunctive 'as if' mode during performance, creating a space for radical acts of imagination and 'worlding'. In site-specific performance, spectacle and materiality can converge, blurring boundaries between historical events and their representations. Jill Dolan frames these phenomena as 'utopian performatives'. At such junctures, 'pictures of social relations [can] become not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors' (2005, p. 7).

In 'Patria Entera', Rubén Blades' intertwined personae of political performer and performing politician represented (*afro*)*latinidad*, *panameñidad*, masculinity, marginalisation, anti-coloniality, hope and empowerment. Blades cited local, national and international referents, positioning Panamanians within Latin American history. In turn, audiences entered the spaces of the former Canal Zone, layering symbolic valences of history, identity, nationhood and postcoloniality onto the Zone's materiality. Through these interactions, 'Patria Entera' framed

the handover as a historical border/threshold, and spectators as citizens of a newly unified nation, poised to take part in Panama's possible future(s).

Notes

1. Following Ana Patricia Rodríguez (2002), I refer to the 'Panama Canal (Zone)' as conjoined but separate entities comprising both the commercial waterway and its adjacent former military and civilian enclave. This notation seeks to invoke their political and economic linkages without implying that these sites are synonymous.
2. Spatial constraints preclude an overview of US history in Panama, but useful guides include Julie Greene's *Canal Builders* (2009), David McCullough's *Path Between the Seas* (1977) and Matthew Parker's *Panama Fever* (2007).
3. While the exact number of US interventions in Panama is contested, Roberto N. Méndez lists the 1903 military operation to procure Panamanian independence from Colombia; a 1915 conflict between Panamanian officials under then President Belisario Porras and the US government resulting from uprisings in Colón; the 1925 tenants' strike; the 1941 ouster of Panamanian president Arnulfo Arias; and the violent clashes of 1959 and 1964 (pp. 46–48). Aims McGuinness chronicles the Watermelon Riot of 1856, often considered the first US military intervention in Panama, in *Path of Empire* (2008).
4. The Panama Canal Commission was authorised by the Torrijos–Carter Treaties as an interim body, comprising Panamanian and US officials, to oversee the transition. Previously, the Panama Canal was managed by the US-led Isthmian Canal Commission (1904–1914) and the Panama Canal Company (1914–1979). The ACP took over in 1999 and continues to manage the Panama Canal.
5. Recent statistics demonstrate that although Panama's national economic growth rate has increased rapidly since the departure of the United States, the country's profits from maritime tolling and financial sectors have not translated into redistributed income or improved quality of life for most Panamanians (see 'Transformed Panama Shrugs Off Noriega,' *Financial Times*, 20 December 2011). From the ACP's 2008 earnings of approximately \$2 billion, direct financial contributions to the Panamanian government amounted to roughly \$700.8 million, with an additional \$13.6 million in indirect contributions from taxes and social security payments. Yet few see perceptible effects ('Angry Panama: the earthbound bite back.' *The Economist*, 24 November 2012).
6. The following treatments of the Canal Zone as utopia/paradise merit consideration: Missal, A. 2008. *Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, Knapp, H. and Knapp, M. 1984. *Red, White, and Blue Paradise: The American Canal Zone in Panama*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
7. As Jesús Alemanía and Raúl Leis state, nationalising the Panama Canal (Zone) was a central issue for General Omar Torrijos Herrera (1968–1981). Capitalising upon Panamanian anti-US protests in 1959 and 1964, Torrijos rallied Panamanians to a nationalist anticolonial cause. Torrijos advocated 'devoting [the Canal Zone] to the greatest possible social [and collective] use,' a statement later debated by various interest groups as the reversion process began in the late 1970s (*Reversión canalera: informe de un desafío*, 1995, p. 18).
8. Papa Egoró means 'Mother Earth' in the Emberá language.
9. After the 1989 invasion, Guillermo Endara was elected president under the Alianza Democrática de Oposición Civilista (ADOC), which combined the National Civil Crusade with Arnulfistas and other party members. Despite technically winning the

- 1989 election, Endara, who was reinstated with the aid of the US military, did not dramatically reform the political system (see Scranton 1993, pp. 65–102, Millett, 1996). The Arnulfista party became the Panameñistas in 2005 (personal communication, Carlos Guevara Mann, 10 December 2012).
10. Suspicion of Blades intensified when Blades was named Minister of Tourism by Martín Torrijos' PRD government in 2004.
 11. The label 'national artist,' which I use to describe Panamanian artists Sammy y Sandra Sandoval, Manuel de Jesús Abrego and Osvaldo Ayala, is significant due to Panama's law requiring the participation of one national artist per touring international artist, as well as the performance of 'national' repertoire like *pindín* during performances featuring 'international' repertoire. Panamanian composer Dino Nugent suggests that the law requiring the presence of 'national artists' came into being within the last few decades (personal communication, 24 May 2010).
 12. For a critique of Turner's concept of liminality, see Weber (1995).

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