Marixa Lasso, *Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal*

(Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 344, £25.95, hb

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Erased is a quietly revolutionary book. Marixa Lasso shows how the construction of the Panama Canal, among the world's most iconic modern projects, depended, paradoxically, on the erasure of Panamanian and Latin American modernities. From the transportation of precious metals extracted from South America by mule and boat during the Spanish colonial era to the construction of the Panama Railroad and failed French canal project in the nineteenth century, central Panama has long been a key site of global connection. It is anything but a historical backwater. And yet, many of the historians who wrote the stories of the epochal engineering projects built to move cargo and people between the seas presented them as modern anomalies distinct from what they saw as natural landscapes and backward cultures. These narratives never matched reality, but, regardless, they made a difference in how people rationalised their roles in those stories and arrived at decisions.

In clear, compelling writing, Lasso upends 'Just So' stories about Panama's history by making a subtle yet profound move: she displaces the Panama Canal and its best-known protagonists from the centre of the story to its margins. For the past century, the standard Canal history – typically written by a white male from the United States – has taken the 1904–14 construction effort as its subject. Epitomised by David McCullough's definitive *The Path between the Seas* (1977), these books narrate the history of the Chagres River region as a prelude to the (seemingly) inevitable triumph of US canal builders: engineers, scientists and planners.

Erased, by contrast, focuses on administrative debates and community dramas unfolding during the construction era. Its focal points – land disputes, sanitation protocols, resettlement processes – may appear minor compared to earth-moving, but they actually illuminate something larger (and deeper) than the Canal. The book is an examination of the everyday operations, priorities, blind spots and contradictions of US imperial modernity. It is also an account of how cosmopolitan peoples encountered and negotiated it. Here, Panama Canal administrators are less agents of destiny than vexed bureaucrats, often unsure about what they are doing and why; they construct post-hoc rationalisations to justify policies that displace communities and turn lives upside down. Crucially, this is not simply an account of what and who has been erased from Canal histories, but a reflection on how the brackets that frame historical knowledge are made and maintained.

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It is also a personal meditation on repositioning those brackets and writing history for the present.

As this suggests, *Erased* makes an important and novel contribution to our understanding of Panama, the US Canal Zone, and the liminal spaces in between. The book is part of an emerging body of scholarship that has complicated and changed our historical understanding of the Panama Canal and its relation to the peoples and places of the Isthmus. Histories written during the first decades of the twenty-first century emphasise questions of labour, race, sanitation, borderlands, theatre, tourism, science and ecology, highlighting new stories and actors. And yet, nothing published in English or Spanish substantively examines the overlooked peoples, places and controversies presented here.

But how do you write the story of an absence? Telling the untold stories of marginalised people can present thorny methodological challenges. I'm not a historian, but I have worked in some of the archives that *Erased* draws upon. While the volume of material is expansive, the experiences and perspectives of the peoples at the centre of this book are poorly documented. Lasso's strategy is to work with what is available in the historical record in order to recreate what is not. She identifies letters and claims written by the residents of displaced communities to tell their stories; she reads against the grain of Panama Canal policies and bureaucratic correspondence; she scrutinises the Canal's official photographic record with an eye to what is located within the frame and what (or who) is excluded; she analyses popular Panamanian songs, treating them as windows on contemporary views of issues. Through her work, the reader can imagine a lost world.

The book begins and ends with Lasso's personal story. Growing up in the Panama of the 1970s, she saw the Canal Zone 'as a place of desire and denial' (p. 2) – a landscape of jungle and manicured towns. By introducing the reader to the Zone in this way, she reverses the direction of the anthropological gaze: it becomes the exotic, the other. The rest of the book explains how that strange landscape came to be, focusing on key transformations that took place during the construction of the Panama Canal in the early twentieth century. The opening chapters introduce an urban, sophisticated and historically cosmopolitan Panama City and Chagres River before construction began. The chapters that follow explain how things changed as the Canal Zone became an increasingly exclusionary space. First, Panamanian municipalities were eliminated and new sanitary regulations were enforced. Then, after much internal debate, the US government decided to depopulate the Zone, expelling communities through a process that was confused and contested. The book concludes with Lasso returning to Panama after decades of living in the United States and visiting communities displaced from the former Zone, where she listens to the stories of residents who continue to grapple with what was lost over a century ago.

Erased offers different lessons for different audiences. Humanists and social scientists interested in Latin America, US–Latin American relations, imperialism and modernity will find it illuminating. The book has much to teach us about Panama and the Canal Zone, but it is also an invitation to grapple with the broader intellectual and political project of writing untold histories. What are the stakes of recasting a particular community or nation as urban, modern, or cosmopolitan? How can this be done in one time and place without reifying narratives of cultural

progress that need to be challenged elsewhere? I deeply admire this book and hope it inspires a large body of work in Panama and beyond.

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Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *The Trade in the Living: The Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries*

(Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2018), pp. xix + 606, $95.00, hb.

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Luiz Felipe de Alencastro's *The Trade in the Living: The Formation of Brazil in the South Atlantic* is a fascinating and thought-provoking study of the Portuguese empire's rise to power in the South Atlantic during the long seventeenth century. Alencastro is the Director of the Centre for South Atlantic Studies at the São Paulo School of Economics (Fundação Getúlio Vargas). This book first appeared in 2000, written in Portuguese under the title *O trato dos viventes*. Its meticulous research, innovative arguments and graceful prose cast a bright light upon our understandings of the formation of colonial Brazil, the development of the Iberian Atlantic world and the expansion of the Luso-Atlantic slave trade. The popularity of *O trato dos viventes* has led the State University of New York to publish an English translation of this book.

The success of Alencastro's study stems, in part, from its transcontinental approach to the history of colonial Brazil. He centres the Brazilian slave production zones and the Angolan slave reproduction zones as the primary points of analysis. In seven chapters and five appendices, *The Trade in the Living* charts how these regions became the axis of slavery's two interconnected poles in the 'Ethiopic Ocean', one name used for the South Atlantic during the Age of Sail (p. xviii). Though 18 years have passed since the book's original publication, the translation of Alencastro's seminal work is a valuable and welcome addition to the English-language historiography of the Atlantic world.

It is important to highlight at the outset four noteworthy changes in this new edition. First, this volume includes a new three-page preface and a foreword by world historian Patrick Manning. Second, the footnotes are updated to include the relevant literature produced since 2000. Third, Alencastro amends the statistical data and analysis of the Luso-Atlantic slave trade with the revised estimates from Slave Voyages, the web-based version of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TSTD). The fourth and final change is the removal of two of the appendices that appeared in the Portuguese edition (Apêndices 4 and 7).