

The Pan American Highway: Transformations of a Technology of Integration
T2M Annual Conference, September 2014

Rosa Elena Ficek
Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow, Wesleyan University

Introduction

This paper sketches in broad strokes some of the history of the Pan American Highway, a network of roads that links the Americas from Alaska to Argentina. It conceptualizes the Pan American Highway as an assemblage that brings together ideas, people, and things in shifting configurations that shape notions of togetherness and connectivity across the Americas. It begins by tracing the emergence of the highway in the early twentieth century as a contested integration project fueled by both U.S.-expansionist and Latin American anti-imperialist designs. It then follows the highway project as it attached to individual nation-building efforts, through which Latin American countries worked to build their own national road networks and link them internationally to create a hemispheric highway system. After discussing the role of the Pan American Highway in these mid-twentieth century modernization efforts, the paper concludes by considering how the highway is taken up in relation to neoliberal plans that in many ways dismantle earlier state-centered efforts of integration, suggesting that the forms of mobility that the highway facilitates continue to shape understandings and experiences of American togetherness, albeit in patchy and partial ways.

Pan American Highway Dreams

From its beginning, the idea of a road integrating the Americas was tied up in an emergent system of regional organization dominated by the United States. A Pan American Railroad was first officially proposed in 1890 at the first International

American Conference, a diplomatic meeting convened in Washington by the United States which would later evolve into the Pan American Union and then the Organization of American States. José Martí, the Cuban intellectual and independence fighter who chronicled the event for an Argentinean newspaper, warned readers of the threat this new closeness could represent. “Never, in America” he wrote of the conference, “has there been a matter requiring more good judgment or more vigilance, or demanding a clearer and more thorough examination, than the invitation which the powerful United States (glutted with unscalable merchandise and determined to extend its dominions in America) is sending to the less powerful American nations (bound by free and useful commerce to the European nations) for purposes of arranging an alliance against Europe and cutting off transactions with the rest of the world” (in Foner 1975).

The International American Conference and subsequent meetings in this tradition were an extension of efforts to expand U.S. capital, and thus the conference discussed hemispheric infrastructure in addition to arbitration and standardization. But there was more to it than trade. Though an American identity—as it was formulated by the United States—depended on the expulsion of European powers from Latin American markets, the Pan Americanism that developed at the end of the nineteenth century also embraced a civilizing mission, revealing assumptions about Latin American inferiority that justified U.S. hegemony. Influenced by racist and Darwinian theories of the time, U.S. Americans began to see themselves as responsible for the uplift of backward and decadent Latin Americans. In this way, the U.S. positioned Latin Americans as potential equals but also racially different. The two world wars of the first half of the twentieth century imbued in Pan Americanism a discourse of peace and interdependence that drew from the groundwork laid by the

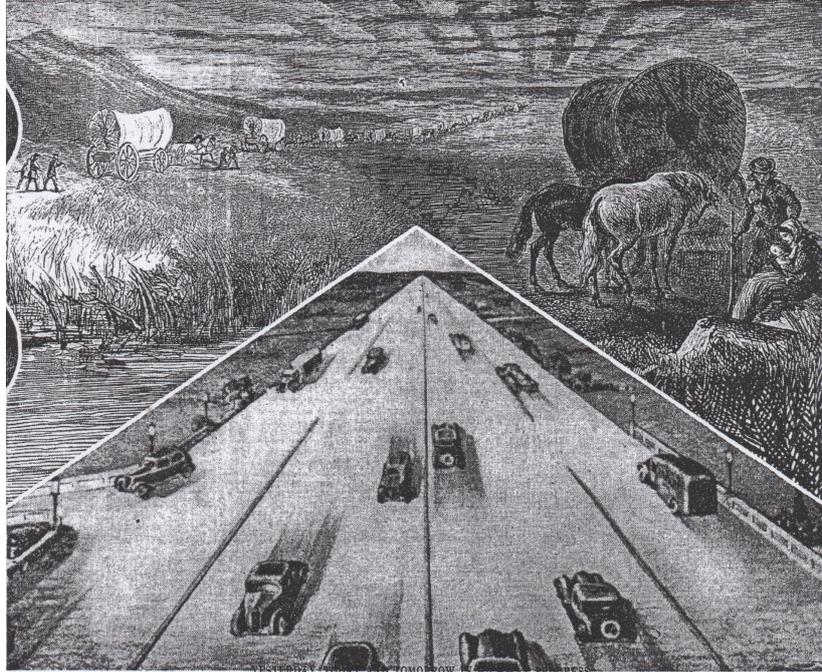
Monroe Doctrine and its insistence on security on a hemispheric scale, meaning security and access to Latin American resources enforced by U.S. military and naval power (Berger 1993, Coates 2014, Gilderhus 1986, Murphy 2005).

The road project, which was reconfigured as the Pan American Highway at the fifth International American Conference of 1923, embodied the tensions generated by Pan Americanism and competing hemispheric designs. Pan Americanism, as it was formulated in the United States, positioned the highway as the extension and culmination of the Bolivarian dream, creating a common history for all the Americas. Pan Americanism also attempted to reconfigure hemispheric space, over the years imagining a closed American neighborhood characterized by middle-class, white, Christian, suburban prosperity and its close relationship to U.S. car culture, roads, and related industries (Berger 1993, Spellacy 2006). The highway promised to make this dream of hemispheric modernity a reality, facilitating contact across nations and races, allowing people not just to trade, but to travel and through these travels, come to know a common history and a common geography.

Many Latin Americans—mindful of the history of U.S. westward expansion and the territorial gains of the U.S. after the Mexican-American War and the Spanish-American War—were skeptical of Pan Americanism and imagined a hemispheric community in ways that rejected U.S. dominance. The image from a 1938 *New York Times* article titled “Tomorrow’s Roads,” about a proposed superhighway system that would connect with the Pan American Highway, illustrates how in U.S. imaginations highways were linked to conquest, territorial expansion, migration, nation-building, and the racial differences underlying these processes.¹ This racialized and mobility-

¹ Crider, John H., “Tomorrow’s Roads,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1938, p. 159. The caption reads: “Emigrants crossing Western plains in covered-wagon days, and an architect’s conception of a great motor speedway from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”

based dream of hemispheric progress leveraged the Pan American Highway to convey to Latin Americans the United States' technological and cultural superiority, part of what Salvatore (2006) calls imperial mechanics.



Despite (or alongside) concerns over the unequal relationships a faster and more direct connection to the United States could imply, the appeal of the Pan American Highway for Latin Americans was undeniable: in contrast to the horizontal, outward-oriented lines of railways swiftly transporting sugar, bananas, beef, tin, copper and more to ports and then shipped overseas—a Galeano-esque image of open veins bleeding the continent dry—the idea of a longitudinal highway linking the Americas to each other, making them more cohesive, promised a lifeline to civilization infused with the prosperity and democracy worthy of a new world.

In short, the highway was a contested project that conjured multiple dreams of American togetherness. These frictions were evident in the Pan American Highway Congresses where engineers from all over the Americas met regularly every four

years beginning in 1925.² The first Pan American Highway Congress had been scheduled to be held in Argentina in 1925. Not to be outdone, the United States quickly called a preliminary conference the year before, inviting delegates from Latin America to the United States for “a mammoth educational highway machinery demonstration” that included tours of auto manufacturing centers, government highway testing and experiment stations, roundtables on highway administration, and a caravan through Washington and nine other states in the south and Midwest.³ In their accounts of the educational tour, as in subsequent Pan American Highway Congresses, Latin American engineers expressed the desire to learn of technological innovations, but stressed that technical knowledge should be exchanged among all countries. In that spirit, delegates to Pan American Highway Congresses of the 1920s circulated technical papers on what even the U.S. delegates conceded were “the most advanced methods of road building and of road policies which could be found anywhere.”⁴ In addition to reports on legislation and financing, Peru spoke of road conscription, Uruguay about the challenges of road building with a low population, Argentina about wood-surfaced city roads, and Ecuador about remaking the routes of ancient Inca roads.

The U.S., however, pushed Latin American countries to follow their example. “Without the experience of the United States in the last two decades of highway transportation,” argued one U.S. delegate, “there would be no yardstick with which to

² Approximately every four years. There was a ten-year gap between 1941 and 1951 because of the war. I have not yet located evidence of congresses after 1991.

³ Highway Education Board, *Highways of Friendship* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, 1924), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴ In the U.S. delegates’ report to U.S. Congress on the second Pan American Highway Congress of 1929 (“Remarks of Hon. Tasker L. Oddie” [HE332.P2 1929] Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.).

measure the future of the Southern and Central Americas.”⁵ At the third Pan American Highway Congress held in 1939, U.S. delegates recommended that Latin Americans adopt the classificatory and analytical methods utilized by the Bureau of Public Roads. A Peruvian engineer’s words reveal resistance to these imperial mechanics: “We have discussed a series of factors that surely do not present themselves in other countries: ours is a country special and unique, because of the nature of its territory, its race, its population, etc., and we cannot adopt the solutions employed in other parts to resolve analogous problems without a previous adaptation to our environment, which requires special study, our own techniques, a Peruvian technique, as a result of our own observation.”⁶

These dreams of transportation-based modernity conjured visions that were different but compatible with the coloniality of the U.S. Pan American Highway dream. An Argentinean engineer hoped the highway would facilitate immigration to frontier lands and make them productive.⁷ More romantically, a Chilean engineer saw in the Pan American Highway’s linking of city to country a way to spiritual and physical uplift, claiming that rural excursions would provide great advantages in moral and physical hygiene by replacing the artificial life of big cities.⁸ A Peruvian engineer promoting road conscription laws praised how roads—particularly roads built through collective labor—lead to nationalism, create moral unity, and extend

⁵ Herbert H. Rice, “Report of the Delegates of the United States. Pan American Congress of Highways, Buenos Aires, October 5-16, 1925” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1927), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Pan American Highway Congress, *Resoluciones adoptadas por el Tercer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Pan American Union, 1939), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁷ Pan American Highway Congress, *Sintesis de los Trabajos Presentados. Primer Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras, Buenos Aires – 1925* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Caraciolo y Plantié, 1927), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸ Marín Vicuña, *Por los Estados Unidos* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Nascimento, 1925, p.10), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

state power to every corner of the country (particularly those with high indigenous populations), likening the Pan American Highway to a torrent of water that polishes and smooths rocks of all sizes and colors into uniform sand.⁹ A Mexican delegate was more blunt: “Mexico understands that to communicate among men is to begin to redeem them of misery and ignorance.”¹⁰ As they imagined communities, Pan American Highway engineers and transport officials grappled with racial and ethnic differences not only between Latin Americans and U.S. Americans, but also between powerful, white, ruling-class Latinos and the indigenous, black and mestizo peoples who constituted the majority of their countries.

The Hemispheric Highway Attaches to National Projects

These comments by Latin American engineers point to how the Pan American Highway raised concerns about U.S.-Latin American relations, but also prompted engineers and planners to look inward and consider their own national situations, which were characterized by heterogeneity and inequality resulting from colonial histories that brought together indigenous Americans, Africans, and Europeans in often violent encounters. The highway and its promise of mobility and togetherness required its planners, builders, and then travelers to link together heterogeneous actors, creating connections across difference. To account for the power-laden negotiations involved in creating connections across difference, I consider the highway’s hemispheric project of integration as neither a “top-down” imposition nor a “bottom-up” (or oppositional) construction. Rather, I would like to emphasize how the Pan American Highway comes about through the linking of disparate elements

⁹ Pan American Highway Congress, *Sintesis de los Trabajos*, 1927.

¹⁰ Dirección Nacional de Caminos, *Informe de la Dirección Nacional de Caminos de México al IV Congreso Panamericano de Carreteras* (Mexico, D.F.: Dirección Nacional de Caminos, 1941), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

that include official entities (such as states, institutions, and their policies), diverse subjects (engineers, construction workers, migrants, motorists, and so on), features of the landscape and roadscape (such as commodities, rocks and holes in the road, mountains, forests and humidity), as well as intangible things like knowledges, memories, affects, intensities, dispositions, orientations, ideas, desires, and dreams. The highway project is an assemblage (Bennett 2005) of elements brought together through circumstance in contingent and sometimes unexpected ways.

The highway began as an idea to connect the Americas with a single road, and already at this initial stage the project was heterogeneous, inspiring multiple dreams of integration—or togetherness—among engineers, business interests, and politicians of diverse races and ideologies. This already-contested idea linked with other projects in order to get built. In its initial years, the Pan American Highway had been conceptualized as a single road that—given the general absence of highways appropriate for motor vehicles in the Americas during the 1920s—would be mostly new. Several maps circulated showing possible routes, but no official route had been decided. Even so, the project was so charismatic that by 1929 Mexico and El Salvador had begun constructing parts of the highway, and Guatemala and Nicaragua had requested international assistance to conduct surveys.¹¹ Pan American Highway construction had begun despite no one being sure about the route, and the issue of coordination became pressing. Bolivian delegates at the 1929 Congress raised the question of whether technical and administrative solutions should be formulated by each country independently or by a centralized entity. With the Pan American Union

¹¹ “Preliminary Report on the Pan American Highway prepared by the Executive Committee of the Pan American Confederation for Highway Education for the information of the delegates to the 2nd Pan American Congress of Highways to convene at Rio de Janeiro, August 16-31, 1929,” Vertical File, Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.

organizing the Congresses, it was easy to imagine which country might be better positioned to dominate the project and determine its route. Seizing the opportunity to challenge imperial mappings, the Argentineans expressed dissatisfaction with the exclusions that a single longitudinal road would bring about, leading to the reformulation of the Pan American Highway from a single route into a Pan American Highway *System* connecting *all* of the American capitals. While the version of the highway as a single route emphasized North-South connections in which the main categories were the United States and Latin America (thus pointing to their *difference*), the highway as a system emphasized the connection of Latin American countries to each other, in addition to the United States. In the system, each country would make its own roads as part of its national network, and join with other country's roads at international borders; countries would send notice of their highways to the Pan American Union in Washington, which would help in establishing international connection points if the individual country routes did not coincide at the borders.¹² Each country, then, could work simultaneously on their national roads and on the Pan American Highway.

The United States considered itself exempt from having to identify which roads in its national system would form part of the Pan American Highway, since, engineers reasoned, the U.S. had numerous good-quality roads.¹³ By refusing to identify a Pan American Highway route within the U.S., engineers and government officials sought to position their highways as an unmarked category, as the invisible standard against which other highways could be measured. Eventually, the entire U.S. interstate highway system would be considered part of the Pan American Highway.

¹² Pan American Highway Congress, *Segundo Congreso Panamericano de Estradas de Rodagem. Boletim Oficial* (Rio de Janeiro, 1929), Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹³ "Preliminary Report on the Pan American Highway," 1929.

The transformation of the Pan American Highway from a single longitudinal route connecting Latin America to the United States into a Pan American Highway System connecting all of the countries in the Americas to each other shows how this project moved from an idea to its planning and construction stages by linking up with the nation-building project that gained momentum across the Americas during the twentieth century. This articulation was possible because individual governments were interested in building their own national road networks, irrespective, in a way, of what neighboring countries were doing. Mexico and South American governments constructed their sections of the highway primarily during the 1930s and 1940s, and Central American governments constructed their sections of the highway in collaboration with the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, though construction continues to this day.¹⁴

The highway became a hemispheric scale-making project that required and helped create comparable units—hence the sizeable amount of time spent in and outside of the Congresses discussing how to create uniformity across nation-states through technical norms relating to the planning, design, construction and maintenance of roads, and the standardization of road legislation including transit regulations, road signs and highway administration. This was all part of the highway project's attempt to create a common time and space, hemispheric, but organized into nation-states that were all more or less comparable to each other, as these maps from 1955 illustrate by delimiting the boundaries of nation-states with dashed lines.¹⁵

¹⁴ Canada was not part of early conversations about the Pan American Highway and was incorporated into the highway system with the Alaska Highway built during World War II. The last remaining section of the highway that has yet to be completed is called the Darien Gap, in the Panama-Colombia borderlands.

¹⁵ Departamento de Asuntos Económicos y Sociales, Division de Turismo, *Mapas del sistema panamericano de carreteras* (Washington, D.C.: Union Panamericana, 1955), Columbus Memorial Library, Organization of American States, Washington, D.C.



Highway Modernization and its Undoing

Hemispheric integration also required national integration, and national integration in twentieth-century Latin America was primarily conceptualized through discourses of modernization. The Pan American Highway played an important if unacknowledged role in state-led modernization efforts by sparking interest in the development of national road networks that would connect peripheral rural areas to urban centers and markets.

The case of Panama serves as an example.¹⁶ In the 1970s the Pan American Highway began to be constructed east from Panama City with the goal of reaching the border with Colombia and linking the roads in the North American continent to those in South America. As in many places throughout Latin America, the highway aimed to assimilate the frontier into the nation through an infrastructural project that was also a civilizing mission. Panamanian government officials made sense of the differences among the people and places being connected through discourses of development and mestizaje (racial mixture that would “improve” and “assimilate” nonwhites) that positioned eastern Panama as an unproductive frontier wilderness. The highway would integrate this frontier into the nation by promoting the migration of mestizo settlers who would convert forest into modern, rational farms and pastures, extending the national culture embodied by the settlers, promoting the region’s greater participation in the national economy, and increasing state power in the frontier, consolidating a common, national, time and space.¹⁷ By integrating nations’

¹⁶ This discussion is based on analysis of the annual reports of Panama’s Ministry of Public Works and oral histories and interviews in Panama.

¹⁷ This was, at least, the idea—though in practice things turned out a bit differently than what government planners and engineers had envisioned. In positioning the forested frontier and its indigenous and afrodescendent inhabitants as obstacles to both national and hemispheric integration, highway planners marginalized and subordinated the heterogeneity incompatible with their modernizing efforts. But what

frontiers through road construction and the subsequent establishment of closer political and commercial relations—that is, by solidifying the spatial parameters of nation-states—the Pan American Highway also created borders. In other words, by integrating frontiers into nations and integrating nations into a hemispheric entity, the Pan American Highway worked to create a system of parts incorporated into a whole, based on national units with national boundaries.

In the contemporary neoliberal Americas, much of the work of twentieth-century modernization is coming undone. Free trade promotes official flows of commodities and unofficial flows of migrant labor across and despite the national borders the Pan American Highway helped solidify. The fruit of state-led development projects, such as national companies and, of course, highways, are being privatized in many places. In this context, infrastructure has garnered increasing attention because of its capacity to constitute subjects (see Mitchell 2002, Seiler 2008). If during much of the twentieth century infrastructures helped constitute national subjects through integration projects such as the Pan American Highway, the kinds of subjectivities emerging through infrastructures that are being privatized, or that are otherwise engaged with neoliberal projects, remains an open question. What are the meanings and effects of the Pan American Highway—specifically in relation to ideas of togetherness and integration—in the current neoliberal context, are they changing, and if so, how?

By way of conclusion, I offer not an answer to this question, but some ideas about where to start looking and thinking. Projects and practices throughout Latin

happened during the highway's construction in eastern Panama and its aftermath suggests that rather than destroy heterogeneity, integration organizes different kinds of people and places, in this case following a modern logic bent on producing rational citizens and resource-use. This ordering of the frontier to incorporate it into the nation only partially defines integration along the highway. Differences—sometimes marginalized but not erased—can overturn these orderings. But that is another story.

America that in one way or another take up the Pan American Highway create social spaces that exceed national boundaries. These linkages shape the highway in new ways: in Peru the trans-Andean effort to identify and preserve Inca roads literally overlaps with the expansion of the Pan American Highway into a super-modern, technologically sophisticated privatized road. At the U.S.-Mexico border, NAFTA commodities are freighted in unprecedented volumes against a backdrop of conflict among smugglers and law enforcers, spurring dreams and fears of a superhighway connecting Mexico to Canada. In Central America, architects of the CAFTA-DR free trade apparatus work to create a seamless transnational transport space by reducing the obstacles freight truckers face at border crossings. Meanwhile, the Pan American Highway continues to inspire travelers from around the world to take epic road trips across its length. Hemispheric dreams of integration and togetherness persist (just think of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas), though their linkages or points of contact with the Pan American Highway could be characterized as patchy or partial, in contrast to the hemispheric ordering of parts into a whole that the highway put forth in an earlier era. These changes, however, do not necessarily mean that the Pan American Highway's history outlined in this paper is no longer relevant. The highway's very materiality and its concrete presence in the landscape—in some places decaying, in some places being resurfaced—suggest that the highway's current trans-national linkages build on and rework forms of integration established through the highway's twentieth-century nation-building projects.

Bibliography

- Berger, Mark T. 1993. "Civilising the South: The US Rise to Hegemony in the Americas and the Roots of 'Latin American Studies' 1898-1945." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 12(1): 1–48.
- Bennett, Jane. 2005. "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout." *Public Culture* 17(3): 445–65.
- Coates, Benjamin A. 2014. "The Pan-American Lobbyist: William Eleroy Curtis and U.S. Empire, 1884-1899." *Diplomatic History* 38(1).
- Foner, Philip S. 1975. *Inside the Monster: Writings on the United States and American Imperialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gilderhus, Mark T. 1986. *Pan American Visions: Woodrow Wilson in the Western Hemisphere, 1913-1921*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Murphy, Gretchen. 2005. *Hemispheric Imaginings: The Monroe Doctrine and Narratives of U.S. Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Salvatore, Ricardo D. 2006. "Imperial Mechanics: South America's Hemispheric Integration in the Machine Age." *American Quarterly* 58(3): 662–91.
- Seiler, Cotten. 2008. *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Spellacy, Amy. 2006. "Mapping the Metaphor of the Good Neighbor: Geography, Globalism, and Pan-Americanism during the 1940s." *American Studies* 47(2): 39–66.