

Berlín entre 1929 y 1931, o—en menor medida—el lapso en el que permanece aislado en la embajada colombiana entre 1949 y 1954.

Por último, si bien el libro da lugar a diversos rostros de Haya de la Torre, en todos sus perfiles parece subtender una misma imagen que destaca su pragmatismo y su carácter sinuoso. En ese sentido, la perspectiva de García-Bryce no se aleja demasiado de la ofrecida hace una década por el sociólogo peruano Nelson Manrique en un comentado libro sobre el líder aprista. La visión del autor pareciera implícitamente dar crédito a la opinión que él mismo cita del poeta Alberto Hidalgo, quien, a propósito de los rumores sobre el supuesto enmascaramiento de Haya de su orientación sexual aludió ácidamente a su “duplicidad existencial” (p. 126). Es cierto que es tentador ubicar en esos atributos un anticipo del partido vaciado de orientaciones definidas que desde hace algunas décadas es el APRA. Pero esa imagen global que predomina en el libro corre el riesgo de extraviar en el camino al menos dos facetas que hicieron de este movimiento, y de su líder, actores de singular relieve en la historia de América Latina: en el caso de Haya, haber sido la figura que al menos inicialmente personificó el conjunto de valores e ideales de la generación de la Reforma Universitaria, y que gracias a una tozuda vocación política colaboró como pocos en darles proyección continental; en el caso del APRA, el de haberse conformado en su origen como una apuesta política y también intelectual que, al menos por un instante, se propuso cambiar de cuajo la realidad latinoamericana.

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EZER VIERBA, *The Singer's Needle: An Undisciplined History of Panamá*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

The Singer's Needle announces itself from the start as something of a riddle. The first paragraph, from the “Editor’s Preface,” warrants a full quotation:

Three days before Carnival, a happy belly-sticking-out friend of a friend showed me a decaying stack of papers that looked like it had been left underground for half an eternity. It was at the time of year when the weather in Panamá is still tolerable, but the room was so warm and humid that it felt like we were floating in some liquid. Now, I am not one for nonsense. I like things to be neat and organized, and I had to resist the instinct to leave that warm amniotic chamber whose floor was covered with decaying shreds

of paper. The pile reminded me of an image of an embalmed baby I had once seen in an old *National Geographic*, a being sealed before life and after it. An old clock of the type you presumably see in northern Europe hung on the wall, a bit tilted, making an odd sound. I imagined that someone had shot it during some coup, but I was later told it worked on occasion. Distracted, I tucked my wings in, put on a pair of latex gloves, and then took the stack of papers into my hands. (p. vii)

A reader of this passage may have many questions. The front matter of *The Singer's Needle* identifies the book as a “a palimpsest of fiction, nonfiction, and other kinds of writing.” The “editor” who is the putative author of the preface is a fictional character who claims to have not only edited but also translated the text that follows from Spanish into English. The editor offers few biographical details about himself and leaves no name – only initials. The welter of images torn from radically different contexts adds to the overall effect of disorientation. What year is this? Why does it matter that we’re three days before the start of Carnival? Who is this “friend of a friend,” and why that odd formulation, “happy belly-sticking-out”? Does the editor really have wings or is this a metaphor in a paragraph that brims already with figurative language?

There is an old and illustrious history of literary and scholarly texts that begin with disorientation. Think, for instance, of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” or Robert Darnton on the “The Great Cat Massacre of Rue Saint-Séverin,” or W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, which shares with *The Singer's Needle* a debt to Walter Benjamin. When a text poses such puzzles, a reader may become curious and read on. But if the answers to the questions take too long to come, or if they prove too enigmatic, even the most generous reader may begin to lose patience.

Part of the charm of this book is that it recognizes its own difficulty. When the editor expresses frustration with the text, another character, an “Argentinean psychologist,” recommends that the editor adopt “some somatic technique” that includes practices drawn from mindfulness. “I practiced a while before I could loosen the tension in my shoulders,” the editor says (pp. ix-x). The exchange between the editor and the psychologist is one of many jokes in this book, which could be described as self-deprecating if not for the fact that the book questions the very concept of selfhood, along with the unity of authorship, the unity of readership, and many other assumptions of conventional historical scholarship. If the Angel of History and a bodhisattva somehow got together to yuk it up (“Lord, what fools these historians be!”), the transcript of their conversation might share much in common with this book.

The Singer's Needle is “undisciplined,” as the subtitle puts it wryly, but not because it lacks rigor. On the contrary, the book defies not only discipline but also genre in ways that can only be described as methodical. It is a work of fiction that draws on original research in archives as well as oral history and other sources, and it is simultaneously a work of history that makes compelling arguments about the importance of past struggles over form and interpretation. Borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, it presents itself as a “polyphonic history,” one that summons different voices, modes of analysis, and points of view onto the page (p. xxvii). Borrowing from Hayden White, it acknowledges the content of form, and then goes further by experimenting with form in a quest for new historical understanding.

For all its experiments, riddles, and jokes, *The Singer's Needle* makes serious, even solemn contributions to historians' understanding of twentieth-century Panamá. The first of the book's three parts concerns the making and operations of a penal colony on the island of Coiba, with a focus on the period between 1919 and 1939. The book raises questions about different carceral settings in Latin America and other colonial and postcolonial contexts as well as the possibility of critiquing power more generally. It engages the Foucault of *Discipline and Punish* and points to the importance of the penal colony alongside the urban penitentiary in the larger disciplinary apparatus of the Panamanian state. The second part considers the rule of President José Remón Cantera (1945-1955) and the trial that followed his assassination. The book argues that it was not the assassination so much as the shambolic trial that followed that caused a deep crisis for the Panamanian state. The third part of the book draws on oral history to analyze a peasant movement that formed around a Roman Catholic priest named Héctor Gallego, who was disappeared in 1971. What unites these three parts is the book's concern with the relationship between crises in hegemony and “aesthetic crisis,” or what the editor calls “a crisis of and in ‘form’” (p. xiv).

Of the three parts, I found the third to be the most compelling and certainly the most affecting. The analysis of the peasant movement that emerged in Veraguas in the late 1960s and early 1970s relies on impressive, original research and raises questions about rural insurgency, hegemony, and the government of Omar Torrijos that have not been explored by previous scholars. The findings will be of interest to historians not just of Panamá but to any scholar of peasant politics, militarism, and populism in the Americas.

Readers who fear that pure invention may bleed out of the fiction of this book and into the historical record can relax their guard. The palimpsest has distinguishable layers. Footnotes written with a straight face (more or less) indicate which parts of the main page are based on research in archival sources, interviews with real people (including those identified by pseudonyms), and

other sources. Any words that are not accompanied by footnotes can be read, if not as make-believe, then as not necessarily of this world, or at least the world as understood by Leopold von Ranke and his legions.

In an era when publishers face ever greater pressure to move to endnotes or eliminate notes altogether, the footnotes in *The Singer's Needle* offer a welcome reminder of the enriching potential of placing a parallel narrative at the bottom of a page. I enjoyed not having to flip back and forth constantly from the page in hand to the back of the book, and the notes themselves contain some of the most bracing bursts of historiographical prose I have read in years. This gift enabled me to forgive the omission of an index, the lack of which may send some readers in search of the electronic edition.

Teachers of creative writing sometimes refer to the “principle of Chekhov’s Gun”: hang a gun in a prominent place, and something must ultimately come out of the barrel, or readers will feel cheated. The challenge of this book is not that the guns do not go off. It is rather that there are so many guns hanging from the wall, of different calibers and makes, and they go off in such irregular and unpredictable ways, that the overall effect can be like that of an armory that has been set on fire.

But *The Singer's Needle* is also a brave book. And if the acknowledgments are to be believed (and I do not doubt they are), those risks have come at a considerable cost to at least one person. Unlike the character of the editor, I value bravery more than neatness or organization, and so my gratitude outweighs my frustration. *The Singer's Needle* is indeed a book of many voices. Even with all the din, it is worth listening to each and every one of them.

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GERMÁN PATIÑO OSSA, *Black Cookstove: Meditations on Literature, Culture, and Cuisine in Colombia*. Trans. Jonathan Tittler. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2020.

This book is presented as an inquiry into eating and cooking practices in the Cauca Valley, Colombia. Its author was born and raised in this region of the Pacific coast. Germán Patiño Ossa, deceased in 2015, was a writer and novelist who championed the region’s culture. *Black Cookstove*, first published in Spanish in 2007 under the title *Fogón de negros*, perfectly represents these qualities. The word “meditation” in its subtitle (“Meditations on Literature, Culture, and Cuisine in Colombia”) accurately announces the author’s approach. A meditation is a discourse expressing considered thoughts on a subject. This description