

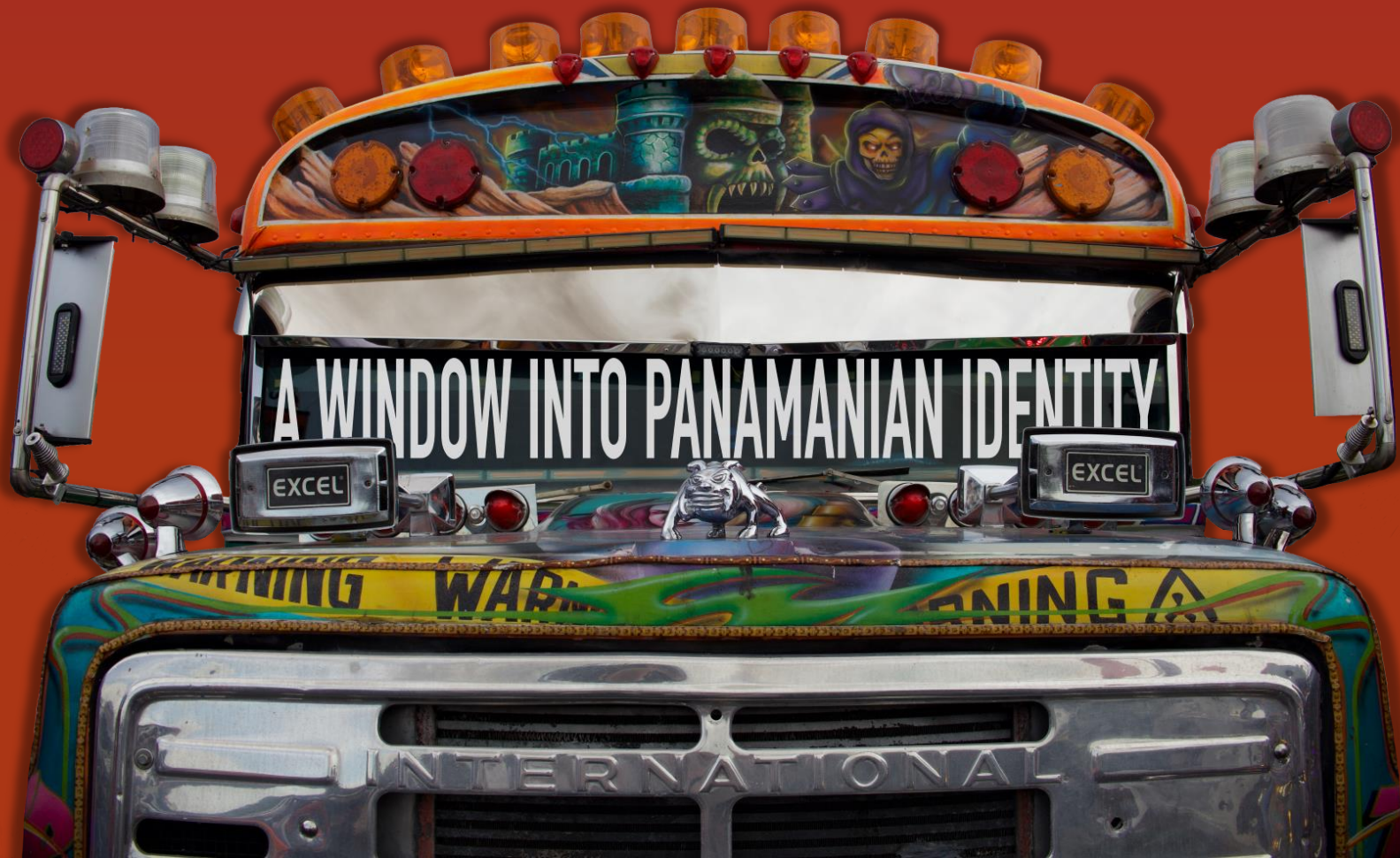


WPI

Interactive Qualifying Project

Anna Callaghan • Leah Kolb • Sam Ollari • Sarah Saeed • Micah Vargas

Diablos Rojos



Diablos Rojos

A Window into Panamanian Identity

Documenting Heritage Buses in Panama City

An Interactive Qualifying Project
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WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
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By:
Anna Callaghan
Leah Kolb
Sam Ollari
Sarah Saeed
Micah Vargas

Report Submitted To:
Dr. Grant Burrier
Dr. Curt Davis
Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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Abstract

Diablos Rojos are privately-owned heritage buses that the Panamanian government is phasing out in favor of the public MetroBus. The purpose of this project is to document how *Diablos Rojos* represent the development of subaltern Panamanian identity. With our sponsor, Dr. Grant Burrier, we collected personal stories from drivers, artists, mechanics, and passengers through a semi-structured interview process and conducted personal ethnographies. The communities we met demonstrated how the buses are essential to Panamanian history, cultural identity, and the mobility of the working class.

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The drivers, mechanics, artists, secres, and passengers who shared their community with us

We immensely thank everyone in the Diablos Rojos communities who talked to us, shared their spaces and their stories, and showed us their kind and welcoming spirit. They moved our hearts beyond what we ever expected and showed us the purest joy of Panamanian culture. We dedicate this project to everyone involved in keeping this beautiful community alive.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this project is to document the history and communities around Diablos Rojos, the iconic private buses of Panama, by collecting the personal stories of the drivers, artists, mechanics, and passengers who have grown around this bus system. We feel that these buses hold significant value to Panamanian culture, and they represent an authentic community, the “real” Panama: the working class, the underrepresented, and the locals who take pride in their neighborhood buses over the ordinary, quiet, and sweaty public transportation. For five decades, thousands of careers and identities have depended on Diablos Rojos, whether it is the drivers themselves or those who use the buses to commute to work in the city.

Panama was the world’s largest importer of old yellow school buses from the United States (U.S.) and took the opportunity to fill their streets with moving art, bringing Diablos Rojos to light. These buses were originally brought to Panama to assist with the construction of the canal, and later transformed into the Diablos Rojos we see racing the streets today in Panama. Since they first appeared, the buses have multiplied, become more colorful, and blast music with the addition of large speakers in hopes of attracting more customers. Each bus is unique to its owner; they decide who will paint their bus and what will be depicted. Some buses are dedicated to passed loved ones, others are dedicated to spouses, and all are covered in meaningful symbols and quotes.

Over time, the presence of Diablos Rojos in Panama City has been substantially reduced. Due to new regulations and the inauguration of the new public bus and subway system, the government offered bus owners roughly \$25,000 to retire their bus routes. According to officials and some members of the public, the Diablos Rojos were dangerous and old but removing them from service also threatens an important piece of Panamanian heritage. As one passenger told us, “Diablos Rojos will never die.” He believes they will always run routes to serve the communities outside of the city. People oftentimes stay loyal to what they know is comfortable, and Diablos Rojos offer Panamanians a sense of home and history, which makes Panamanians feel comfortable using them. Thousands of careers and identities depend on Diablos Rojos, whether it was the drivers themselves or those who use the buses to commute to work in the city, these buses will never become completely extinct.

Project Goal

The overarching goal of this project is to document the impact that Diablos Rojos had on Panama’s culture and to show that they are much more than a method of transportation. These buses are both essential and sentimental to many working-class Panamanians, allowing them to reminisce on their childhood, but their phasing out leaves many with the sadness of knowing their children will not get to experience the same Panama. The Diablos Rojos will live on through stories told to future generations of Panamanians about travels in and out of the city. We hope to bring light to the fact that they are slowly being replaced with government-operated public transportation systems—MetroBus and the Metro subway system—in the city and, in the near future, further into rural Panama. As the city continues to grow the government feels the need to keep up with rising social and economic expectations by providing modernized and environmentally friendly public

transportation systems. As cities continue to modernize the demand for Diablos Rojos will decrease and leave many empty seats, wallets, and hearts as the Diablo Rojo buses become harder to maintain as they age.

Methodology

Our team used a multimethod research approach to increase the validity of our conclusions during this project. We conducted archival research, one-on-one interviews, and ethnography to gain a variety of perspectives on Diablos Rojos, taking measures to reduce selection bias during each research method. By reading articles from a wide array of backgrounds and perspectives, interviewing people who have different relationships with the Diablos Rojos, and conducting extensive field research while being aware of personal subjectivities as researchers, we strived to acknowledge and understand a wide range of perspectives on the topic.

Our informal style of interviewing was crucial to the success of our project. Many interviewees were in between shifts, and a formal interview would have created an uncomfortable atmosphere for them. Instead, we asked for verbal consent to record video and audio and proceeded to have a genuine conversation, forming real connections that continued beyond the framework of our project.

Findings

Being in Panama allowed us first-hand experience seeing Diablos Rojos and meeting people involved in the environment surrounding the buses. Generally, people we spoke to about Diablos Rojos lit up with excitement and immediately shared their fond experiences with these buses. We have gained connections and made friends through our Uber drivers, people we ran into on the street, and drivers of Diablos Rojos who have given us the full experience of riding with them on their bus.

We saw all kinds of artwork adorning Diablos Rojos and experienced every style (and volume) of music one could imagine. From the names of lovers to Indigenous portraiture, every bus we encountered showcased the owner's unique personality and interests, as well as the artist's creativity and freedom to paint what they desire. There were many common threads: rural imagery, names decalated above the windows, and massive sound systems at both ends of the bus, to name a few. In many ways, we found that Diablos Rojos were articulations of Black and Afro-Antillean culture. The people who rode them were not usually of the Panamanian elite. Culture from the West Indies, which entered Panama during the building of the canal, was heavily visible in the artwork, music, and patrons of these buses.

While the buses are certainly a spectacle of sight and sound, the people are what truly make Diablos Rojos. We talked to bus secretaries who call out routes and collect fares, hoping to one day be a driver, artist, or mechanic. The ecosystem of Diablos Rojos stemmed out from the driver, who maintained the many connections necessary for keeping their show on the road. Whether they worked on their buses themselves or hired mechanics, it was clear that the buses' upkeep was the

responsibility and passion of many. Several drivers reflected on their close relationships with the artist of their bus—they had to be the right person as well as the right artist.

Our experience at *Campeonato Automovilismo Terpel 2023*, a race including Diablos Rojos, showed us how these communities truly come together: drivers and their most loyal passengers, bus secretaries, artists, and mechanics all showed up to support one another in a display of color, smoke, and communal pride. Diablos Rojos are crucial to the needs of their passengers, but also offer community to the subaltern cultures of Panama. They are an unignorable display of the working class and their values, offer a viable career path to many Panamanians, and bring genuine joy to the communities in which they operate.

Conclusion

Diablos Rojos are more than just a means of transportation: **they represent a national identity detached from the elitist *mestizo* vision of Panama.** Currently, Metro Buses often do not adequately serve economically disadvantaged areas outside of Panama City. In these marginalized communities, residents tend to be Black and Indigenous. The Diablos Rojos provide vital transportation links to better paying jobs in the city. Yet the images on the bus and the music blasting through the speakers creates an identity of pride, meaning, and belonging to groups who may feel displaced by societal norms.

Aside from this report, we may continue this project by producing a documentary and a news article. The documentary will serve as a visual representation of how Diablos Rojos are still alive. As we conducted research for this project, we also realized that there is no English-language Wikipedia page covering the Diablos Rojos. Since we now have substantial first-hand knowledge and have uncovered peer-reviewed research on the subject, we will also submit writing to create a page that may become the first available English source when people search the term “Diablos Rojos.” Since we now have substantial first-hand knowledge and have uncovered peer-reviewed research on the subject, we will create a page that may become the first available English source when people search the term “Diablos Rojos.”

If further work on this project were to be conducted, future work could more closely examine a) these new uses and their impact on cultural identity and the bussing communities, and b) a potential plan for integration of the private bus system with the government-owned MetroBus. The cultural groundwork that was the focus of our project could be used to make recommendations for the modernization of Panama’s transportation system.

Despite a nearly two-decade-long battle to eliminate Diablos Rojos, they are not dead. In fact, these buses continue to be an essential part of Panama’s transportation system. As the main transportation service to poorer areas outside of the city, Diablos Rojos provide for Panamanians what the government could not. They provide much more than transit—they are an emblem of culture, as seen with the decorations that distinctly represent Panamanian identity, a reminder of reclamation from U.S. imperialism, and a bold statement by those who are not mestizo elites demanding to be seen.

Authorship

Authors				
Sarah Saeed	Leah Kolb	Anna Callaghan	Sam Ollari	Micah Vargas
SS	LK	AC	SO	MV

Section	Author	Editor
Abstract	AC	SS
Acknowledgments	SS	ALL
Executive Summary	LK, SS	ALL
Chapter 1 Introduction	ALL	ALL
2.1 U.S. Imperialism in Panama	AC, SS, LK	ALL
2.2 Elite Constructions of National Identity	LK, SS, SO	ALL
2.3 Creating Subaltern Culture	SS, MV	ALL
2.4 The Diablo Rojo: A Rolling Mural	LK, SS	AC
2.5 Attempts to Phase Out Diablos Rojos	SS, LK	AC
2.6 Cultural Parallels	SS	LK
Chapter 3 Methodology	SS	SO
3.1 Archival Research	SO, SS	ALL
3.2 Identifying Interviewees and Conducting Interviews	SS, AC	LK
3.3 Ethnography	LK	SS
3.4 Avoiding Personal Biases	SS	ALL
Chapter 4 Findings	LK	ALL
4.1 Riding a Diablo Rojo	LK	SS
4.2 Riding the MetroBus	MV	AC
4.3 Race Day — Campeonato Automovilismo Terpel 2023	SS	MV
4.4 People of the Diablos Rojos	AC	ALL
4.4.1 El Secre	MV	SS
4.4.2 El Conductor	SS	LK
4.4.3 Artists	LK, MV	AC
4.4.4 Mechanics	AC	SO
Chapter 5 Conclusion	ALL	ALL

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	iv
Executive Summary	v
Project Goal	v
Methodology	vi
Findings	vi
Conclusion	vii
Authorship	viii
Table of Contents	ix
List of Figures	xi
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. Background	4
2.1. U.S. Imperialism in Panama	4
2.2. Elite Constructions of National Identity	7
2.3. Creating Subaltern Culture	8
2.4. The Diablo Rojo: A Rolling Mural	10
2.5. Attempts to Phase Out Diablos Rojos	15
2.6. Cultural Parallels	16
Chapter 3. Methodology	19
3.1. Archival Research	19
3.2. Identifying Interviewees and Conducting Interviews	20
3.3. Ethnography	21
3.4. Avoiding Personal Biases	22
Chapter 4. Findings	24
4.1. Riding a Diablo Rojo	24
4.2. Riding the MetroBus	25
4.3. Race Day — Campeonato Automovilismo Terpel 2023	26

4.4. People of the Diablos Rojos	31
4.4.1. El Secre	31
4.4.2. El Conductor	33
4.4.3. Artists	35
4.4.4. Mechanics	37
Chapter 5. Conclusion	40
References	43
Appendix A: Informed Consent Script	46
English Version	46
Spanish Version	46
Appendix B: Equipment List	48
Appendix C: Interviewees	49

List of Figures

Figure 1: MetroBus next to a Diablo Rojo	2
Figure 2: Plaque denoting Canal Zone border	4
Figure 3: Newspaper from Balboa Flag Crisis	6
Figure 4: Political graffiti at Cinco de Mayo Station	9
Figure 5: Diablo Rojo covered in lights with secre hanging out the door	10
Figure 6: Front view of a Diablo Rojo with lights and hood ornament	11
Figure 7: Rear view of a Diablo Rojo with ruralismo and rear exit portrait	13
Figure 8: Various mola textiles	13
Figure 9: Colorful Filipino Jeepneys	16
Figure 10: Two Pakistani Jingle Trucks	17
Figure 11: Driver Robert poses with his bus	24
Figure 12: Race cars leaving pit	27
Figure 13: Father and son on top of Diablo Rojo	27
Figure 14: Effects of rain on Diablo Rojo side of race	28
Figure 15: Diablos Rojos and semi-trucks impatiently await their turn to race	29
Figure 16: Crowd awaiting Diablo Rojo races	30
Figure 17: Coche Bomba competes in a race	30
Figure 18: Victory run of a Diablo Rojo and semi-truck	31
Figure 19: Former secre Luis Carlos	32
Figure 20: Supporter of Coche Bomba	33
Figure 21: Artist Piri and driver Mr. De Leon	34
Figure 22: Quote on Mr. De Leon's bus	35
Figure 23: Piri poses with his art	35
Figure 24: Piri's art supplies	36
Figure 25: Mechanic shop in Pacora	38
Figure 26: Mechanics pose at their shop	39

Chapter 1. Introduction

While walking through the streets of Panama, you may hear reggaeton blasting behind you, followed by a low rumble reminiscent of thunder. In seconds, a brightly painted school bus will screech to a halt in a flash of colors, with a young man leaning out the door, yelling out the destination. When you board, you will be sent tumbling as the driver hits the gas before you even take a seat. If you manage to find a spot on this crowded vehicle, you will sink into the leather seat, brushing elbows with the stranger next to you. All thoughts and worries will come to a halt as the bus roars away, the sound system's basslines reverberating in your chest.

This is not your typical suburban yellow school bus. Intricately hand-painted and impossible to miss, it is a *Diablo Rojo*, a *Red Devil*: one of many heritage buses in Panama's transportation system. Since they first appeared, the buses have multiplied, become more colorful, bright with flashing LED lights, and loud with the addition of large speakers in hopes of attracting more customers. Communities of artists, mechanics, and drivers of Diablos Rojos also grew alongside the vehicles, which assisted in their evolution to become a popular repository of national spirit and identity.

Home to the Panama Canal and a land bridge connecting North and South America, Panama was celebrated as "the door to the seas and key to the universe" shortly after its founding (Anguizola et al., n.d.). The canal is largely a result of United States imperialism, but its completion was not the end of U.S. influence in the country. The U.S. kept military bases for nearly a century after the canal was completed, maintaining control over the "Canal Zone," a ten-mile buffer around the Canal which was home to most of the United Statesians¹ who lived in Panama. The stark divide between Zonians, and Panamanians created a tense environment and brittle relationships.

The strained relationship festered for decades as Panama fell victim to U.S. influence. One example of this were the second-hand U.S. school buses that became Diablos Rojos. However, the culture that grew around the artistry and maintenance of these buses became a distinctly Panamanian symbol. The transformation of the exterior, and the popularity of the driver allowed them to become a recognizable aspect of Panama. They defy uniformity: the drivers of these buses dare to be bold, loud, and in-your-face, despite the presence of the monochromatic government-owned Metro Buses.

¹ In this paper, we use the term "United Statesian" to refer to people from the United States in the same grammatical context as the word "American" is used in English within the U.S.A. However, this term avoids appropriating the term "American," since it is also applicable to the thirty-four other countries on the continent (Santos, 2006).

Figure 1

A Diablo Rojo arrives at the Albrook bus terminal, while a MetroBus departs on the highway behind.



Due to new regulations and the inauguration of the new public bus and subway system, many of the Diablos Rojos have been de-commissioned. As their presence in Panama City shrinks, we explored how some routes persist and how their roles have morphed. The Diablos Rojos were dangerous and old, according to officials, but removing them from service also threatens an important piece of Panamanian heritage. When a source of local pride fades away, what happens to the communities surrounding it? In the eyes of one artist, Panama without a Diablo Rojo:

“es como ver un jardín sin rosa. Como mirar un cielo sin estrellas, es lo mismo, igual”
[is like seeing a garden without a rose. Or as you look at a sky without stars, it is the same] (Merszthal, interview, 2023).

Thousands of careers and identities depend on Diablos Rojos, whether it was the drivers themselves or those who use the buses to commute to work in the city.

The purpose of this project is to document the cultural history and communities around Diablos Rojos by collecting the personal stories of the drivers, artists, mechanics, and passengers who have grown around this bus system. Prior to completing interviews, we used archival research to help us gain a primary understanding of this unique subject. By conducting interviews, taking photos and videos, and spending time immersed in the culture of the Diablos Rojos, we sought to understand their deep social, economic, and cultural significance.

To contribute to the preservation of this important piece of Panamanian heritage, we will produce a report and collect material for a filmic documentary to bring the culture around Diablos Rojos back into the public eye and prevent these communities from receding into invisibility. After all, to many, the communities surrounding Diablos Rojos represent the “real” Panama: the working class, the underrepresented, and the locals who take pride in their neighborhood buses over the bland, almost robotic city transportation. Through documenting these heritage buses of Panama, we strive to understand Panamanian national identity more deeply. As a symbol of pride for many locals, these buses represent much more than a means of transportation from one location to another. We will explore the Diablo Rojo community and how something as simple as a bus can be a complex representation of identity, pride in a community, and a rejection of imperialism.

Chapter 2. Background

2.1. U.S. Imperialism in Panama

The United States had its eye on the Panamanian isthmus for quite some time before the canal was built. Building and owning such a geopolitical asset would allow the U.S. to control large swaths of international trade, giving them great economic power. In 1880, French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of Egypt’s Suez Canal, broke ground in Panama. After nine years and nearly 20,000 lives lost, the French abandoned the project with barely one-quarter of the work complete (Frenkel, 1992, p. 145). The canal bankrupted them, and the project was abandoned, giving the United States the opportunity to try a different approach. At the time, Panama was still a part of Colombia, so the U.S. attempted to negotiate a treaty to get access to the area surrounding the proposed canal with a key provision: a ten-by-fifty-mile buffer along the planned route of the canal, wherein the U.S. would have complete sovereignty (Sanchez, 2002, p. 63). This area was dubbed the “Canal Zone.” Colombia rejected this treaty in 1903, forcing the U.S. to find another way. A small independence movement was rising in Panama, so the U.S. sent in its military to assist them with a big caveat: the United States would control the Canal Zone if the operation succeeded. On November 18, 1903, the U.S. signed the Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty, giving them permanent rights to the ten-mile strip of land that cut Panama in half (Sanchez, 2002, p. 65). This moment was the beginning of U.S. hegemony—cultural dominance—in Panama (Gramsci, 1992, p. 145).

The Canal Zone was entirely set apart from the rest of Panama. The U.S. “sanitized” the region, stripping away Panamanian culture (Frenkel, 1992, pp. 146–147). Nearly 40,000 people were dispossessed of their land after U.S. President William Taft signed an executive order to evict Panamanian residents from the Canal Zone (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023). The Canal Zone soon became an English-speaking region dominated by Jim Crow–era social regulations. In lieu of learning Spanish to hire a local workforce, the U.S. outsourced their labor to the West Indies, where English was the most prevalent language (Sanchez, 2002, p. 65). The majority of workers on the canal were from Barbados. For many, being recruited to work on the canal meant getting out of poverty and sending money to their families back home (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023).

However, reality set in soon after work began. Racism was structured into the core operations of the project, and two main categories of employees were institutionalized: “silver” and “gold”

Figure 2

A plaque that once denoted the location of the Canal Zone border.



workers. White² people, typically those from the U.S. in managerial roles, were paid their higher salaries in the gold-backed United States Dollar, while Black and mixed-race workers were paid in Panama's silver-backed currency (Frenkel, 1992, p. 147). Segregation also permeated housing, schools, and other establishments in the Canal Zone. Silver-roll workers lived in barracks rather than single-occupancy housing and received far less access to food and healthcare than gold-roll workers. A police system was also set up in the Zone, with the power to arrest for vagrancy, laziness, and drunkenness—mostly to surveil the “unknown and dangerous” hired laborers (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023). The Panama Canal project took many lives due to mosquito-borne illnesses and unbearable working conditions (Frenkel, 1992, p. 144). Outside of the Canal Zone, tensions between the United States and Panama rose. Many Panamanians objected to the way the U.S. treated their people: they were considered inferior and second-class to the White man (Sanchez, 2002, p. 66).

U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–1961) thought allowing Panamanians to fly their flag in the Canal Zone would assuage local demands for greater control over the canal. Therefore, he voluntarily ordered the Panamanian flag to be flown alongside the U.S. flag within the Canal Zone (Carranza, 2021). Later, U.S. President John F. Kennedy (1961–1963) aimed to expand this executive order by issuing a flag order stating that U.S. and Panamanian flags must both be flown at public sites. However, this order was never fully implemented due to Kennedy's assassination, leaving the responsibility to Robert Fleming Jr., the Governor of the Canal Zone. Fleming was not well-liked by the Panamanians, so when he stated that no flag could be flown in the Canal Zone, local Zonians felt abandoned by the U.S. government and the Panamanians felt betrayed because they fought for an agreement that was never fully implemented (Murphy, 2022). These missteps played a role in what became known as the Flag Crisis of 1964.

On January 9th, 1964, students at Balboa High School in the U.S.–controlled Canal Zone put a United States flag up outside of their school. This display of U.S. patriotism did not sit well with Panamanians because they also wanted ownership and power over the Canal. In response, two days later, Panamanian students from Instituto Nacional High School marched to Balboa High School to raise the Panamanian flag next to the U.S. flag but were sent away by the Canal police after an argument broke out between the two groups. Afterward, riots ensued in Panama City for three days, resulting in the destruction of property and the death of twenty-two Panamanians and four U.S. soldiers (Sanchez, 2002, p. 66). This altercation was not a product of a singular misunderstanding, but rather decades of tension that had built up due to the misjudgments and power plays that occurred under U.S. leadership (Murphy, 2022).

² We are capitalizing White to refer to a racial group and imply weight in discussing race. Setting “White” in lowercase fails to acknowledge the function of Whiteness in institutions and communities (Mack & Palfrey, 2020).

As tensions mounted between the U.S. and Panama, Panamanian military leader Omar Torrijos gained more leverage to push for a new treaty with the United States: one that would rightfully transfer ownership of the canal to Panama. In 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter signed a treaty to transfer control of the canal at the turn of the millennium (Sanchez, 2002, p. 85). The treaty defused some of the ongoing anti-U.S. sentiment in Latin America, but officially recognized Panama's territorial claims and ultimate sovereignty over the canal (Sanchez, 2002, p. 69), but officially recognized Panama's territorial claims and ultimate sovereignty over the canal. At the same time, maintaining the Canal Zone was expensive and the United States no longer needed to own the canal to retain economic power from its use. In an act of self-preservation, the treaty legitimated the U.S.'s military presence in Panama solely to keep the canal open. Just ten years later, the U.S. violated this clause by invading Panama during Operation Just Cause in 1989.

Figure 3

A newspaper published shortly after the Balboa Flag Crisis, depicting several victims and a political cartoon.



Manuel Noriega, Panama's de facto military dictator from 1983–1989, was detained by the U.S. on charges of racketeering and drug trafficking after the U.S.'s brutal invasion that killed hundreds of civilians. In reality, the U.S. had been aware of his illicit activities for years. Noriega had been a CIA asset for the U.S. in Nicaragua for some time, helping deliver guns and materials to undermine the Sandinista Revolution (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023). Over time, the U.S. worried about the power he gave to the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF), fearing it could ultimately threaten U.S. military presence in Panama. Noriega put the PDF in charge of upholding treaties regarding the Canal Zone, giving them a military-like influence over Panama rather than simply that of a police force. Concerned Noriega's growing autonomy and Panama's increasing military power, the U.S. abolished the PDF (Sanchez, 2002, p. 80). While the U.S. argued that the so-called Operation Just Cause was carried out in exercise of the rights granted under the Panama Canal Treaty, several international organizations condemned the invasion by calling it a blatant violation of international law (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023). After the end of the military occupation, U.S. authorities reported that twenty-three of their soldiers were killed. To this day, however, Panama still does not have an exact figure regarding its victims, who were mostly civilians. As of March 2022, the *December 20th of 1989 Commission* registered the deaths and disappearances of at least 205 people and were still investigating at least 363 more potential

victims (Museo del Canal Interoceánico, 2023). United States military forces finally left Panama on December 31st, 1999, in accordance with the Carter-Torrijos treaty (Sanchez, 2002, p. 88).

Since control of the Canal was returned to Panama, the country has continually improved it, building a new set of locks to accommodate larger ships, and modernizing some antiquated features of the original canal system. Though Panama now formally owns its canal, U.S. hegemony has not left the region. For example, the U.S. Dollar is widely used in Panama due to the U.S.'s large influence on the country's economy. The U.S. also has a large amount of influence over Panamanian politics, though that is not explicitly admitted by the U.S. Department of State (Sanchez, 2002, pp. 86–87). Though the two countries continue to be politically close allies, Panama is the most independent it has been in its history and continues to develop a more independent path (Sanchez, 2002, p. 61).

2.2. Elite Constructions of National Identity

While the Canal represented an ongoing struggle for Panamanian sovereignty, it also dramatically altered the demographics of the new nation. Massive inflows of migrants from all over the West Indies, Spain, China, and the Arab world, among other regions flocked to Panama for the promise of work. The greatest influx of people came from Barbados, with over 45,000 Barbadians migrating between 1904 and 1916 (Bascomb, n.d.). Between 1850 and 1950, as many as 200,000 Afro-Antilleans came to Panama to work on infrastructure and the canal (Montero, 2014).

Panama is one of Latin America's most diverse countries and its culture defies any category. The country is often referred to as a “melting pot,” a *crisol de razas* (Szok, 2012), due to the variety of cultures from which it is influenced. During the construction of the canal, the United States preferred hiring workers from the West Indies over the local Panamanian population due to “factors of cost and supply” (Frenkel, 1992, p. 146). Since these English-speaking workers were willing to work for extremely low wages out of necessity, the United States could spend less money and effort than if they were hiring Panamanians. Intentional or not, hiring an English-speaking workforce kept the early Zonian (those living and born in the Canal Zone) population isolated from the greater Panama, making them reliant on the Zone's infrastructure, entertainment, and socializing within it.

Panama was originally part of Colombia, however, its rebellion and separation in 1903 was not a one-off event. These rebellions were inspired by intellectuals Justo Arosemena. He articulated an autonomy provided justification which, included the long distance between Panama and Bogotá and hopes of taking advantage of Panama's geography to provide interoceanic transit (Szok, 2003, p. 153).

However, many of the Panamanian intellectuals—what Szok calls the “ciudad letrada,” or the *literate city* (Szok, 2003, p. 152)—saw an opportunity to challenge the image of being a Spanish colony, instead attempting to modernize the country in a Hispanic image (Szok, 2003, p. 151). In response, those intellectuals and political elites who benefitted from the current state of the country celebrated a more Hispanic and *mestizo* (the mixture of Native Indigenous and

European culture) national identity by promoting the preexisting folkloric traditions, especially those of the Azuero peninsula (Szok, 2003, p. 151). They used the spirit of nationalism to create an “imagined community”—an elite national identity that constituted the “real” Panama. (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Similar to the way in which people from the United States tend to idealize the peaceful countryside (Szok, 2003, p. 171), “el Panamá real... podía ser encontrado en el Interior” [the real Panama... could be found in the Interior] (Szok, 2003, p. 156). They promoted folkloric festivals like el Toro Guapo and la Mejorana, while praising the simple, idealized values and life in rural *pueblitos*. A famous example is Méndez Pereira’s 1934 novel, *Núñez de Balboa, el tesoro de Dabaibe*, a fictional love story between the Spanish conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa and the Indigenous princess Anayansi in the Spanish settlement of the isthmus. His book places this *mestizaje* (the mixture of Native and White blood) at the heart of Panamanian nationalism. However, beginning the story with Balboa’s conquest of the isthmus provides an opportunity to frame the slaves who arrive later—most of whom were of African lineage—as outsiders and, by proxy, “demonstrates the strategies of Panamanian nationalism, its attempts to erase the isthmus’s Afro-Caribbean culture” (Szok, 2012, p. 52). Through this book and other rhetoric, the mestizo create a sense of loss of their “original identity” because of immigrants (Anderson, 1983, p. 111). This ideological framing intentionally others Black culture and immigrants, separating them from the “real” Panama.

Hegemonic culture, then, is constructed at the elite level. Books, radio, television, newspapers, and other forms of communication are created and circulated by those in power, making their voices the most prominent (Anderson, 1983, 39). These ideas propagated throughout the ciudad letrada, including into its institutions, and spread to the greater public. One example was *La Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas*, which was headed by Roberto Lewis, an accomplished painter whose work tended to convey the prominent thoughts of the ciudad letrada (Szok, 2003, p. 166). Many of the students of the school continued painting similar themes of Hispanic folklore and rural traditions in agreement with the prominent intellectuals, but not all students agreed with its message. Some pupils dropped out of the school to develop an aesthetic sense rooted in Black culture and became prominent figures in the artist community surrounding the Diablos Rojos (Szok, 2003, p. 166).

2.3. Creating Subaltern Culture

Although developed by an elite minority, a hegemonic culture reflects the predominant beliefs and identities of a nation. At the same time, a hegemonic culture does not include all belief systems—those in the minority—the subaltern—can develop their own national identity (Gramsci, 1992). In this vein, while a Hispanized, intellectual elite articulated a certain vision and identity for Panama, a group of talented painters emerged from the descendants of the canal’s silver-roll workers that created an urban, Black identity that was juxtaposed with the rural mestizo life. These painters, often self-taught, saw their start working in the Canal Zone. They calligraphed office letterings and designed billboards and signs with some seeking formal education through apprenticeship or classes at *Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas*. During this time, nightclubs,

bars, and entertainment venues were commonly adorned gaudily with large murals of landscapes and figures to attract passing-by potential clients. By the 1940s, this trend had spread to all forms of business. Whether shop, beauty parlor, market, hotel, or restaurant, these paintings advertised both the business and the painter (Szok, 2012). A new form of art and identity began to emerge—one that was distinctly Black.

Prior to our arrival in Panama, we met with WPI Professor Aarti Smith Madan, who studies how art and literature are produced and consumed in Latin America through spatial practices. Our conversation addressed her most recent publication, “Panmela Castro’s Political Street Art: Gendered Geographies of Black Brazilian Resistance.” Castro is a Brazilian street artist who specializes in feminist pieces of art. Her work not only sits in public places, but she also turns down offers of any space where her art may be tucked away. Castro’s placement is intentional so that any social class, gender, race, or religious sect has access to it. This process of carefully selecting where Castro sculpts her artwork made Professor Madan realize that “art is not something to be done in a vacuum, it is something to be done out in public because it is intended to teach and to show.” These pieces typically are works of *artivism*, a combination of art and activism, which is used to communicate issues that might not otherwise be accessible to some citizens and represent overlooked Afro-Brazilian women (Madan, 2023).

Figure 4

Graffiti at Cinco de Mayo Metro Station in Panama City.



The government’s responsibility is to protect and provide for its people, which includes safe environments, free public education, law enforcement, among other tasks that create prosperous communities. Unfortunately, throughout history, many minority groups have felt neglected because the laws and culture were typically defined by hegemonic politicians and presidents without much consideration for the needs of marginalized communities. Additionally, neoliberal governments grew in popularity, which consisted of capitalistic characteristics, decreased government spending, and the reduction of government power in certain industries (Manning, 2022). This government style allowed for underrepresented populations to slip through the cracks. The minority groups then turned towards each other for support and promoted the idea that emotional linkages can be created between similar social classes and that they can take care

of each other. This idea is known as *trans-affective solidarity*, and it represents the strength and ability within the overlooked populations to undo years of neglect. In fact, Professor Madan mentioned how, “their communities have been oppressed, but they have also always resisted.” Similarly, today, even if the Diablos Rojos are “antiquated,” many Panamanians would still prefer to use the pieces of artwork as opposed to the government’s MetroBuses because they have united an underrepresented population for as long as they can remember (Madan, 2023).

Still, the subaltern art of Diablos Rojos is full of love. This art is about joy and visibility but can also be intentionally tough. Bus art often focuses on joy within subalternity, while still recognizing its position as a contradiction to mestizo norms in Panama (Anderson, 1983, p. 143). The images and music associated with the buses are stand-out displays of multiculturalism, personality, and ultimately, communal joy and strength.

2.4. The Diablo Rojo: A Rolling Mural

Figure 5

A Diablo Rojo covered in lights with a secrete hanging out the front door.



Diablos Rojos first arrived in Panama around the 1960s as second-hand buses from the United States and served as a means of cheap transportation around the Panama Canal. When they arrived, they were the typical yellow Bluebird-style school buses fitted with green leather seats inside. Upon arrival in Panama, they initially continued to carry children to and from their schools.

However, once rail street cars were completely phased out in 1940, private buses soon became Panama's main mode of transportation (Panama Life Insider, 2023). In 1968, General Omar Torrijos conducted a coup d'état, and in 1973, he broke up two large public transportation companies, allowing owner-operators to compete for routes (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). This was because he was worried about the political power of the two companies. As a progressive leader, he wanted to support the bus drivers who were striking and demanding labor reforms (Conniff & Bigler, 2019). By allowing any entrepreneur to import and operate these U.S. school buses with an individual permit, the groundwork was set for a renaissance of the Diablos Rojos (Alonso, 2023). To infuse their national spirit into the bland yellow buses, the owners of Diablos Rojos invited artists to cover the exterior in images of what best represented them. It was also a clever way to hide the age of the buses. These artistic expressions granted the drivers an opportunity to stand out from their competitors by catching the eye of potential passengers. Often, they would include pictures of their spouses or children on the back, along with an inspirational quote. Images ranged from characters in show business, music, and cinema, to old glories of sports and local landmarks in Panama (Panama Life Insider, 2023). The insides of these buses were also typically decorated with red leather accents along with decals with bright colors and designs.

Figure 6

The front of a Diablo Rojo, adorned with roof lights and a hood ornament of a bulldog.



In the beginning, the Diablos Rojos were largely unregulated, and their drivers were often reckless (Panama Life Insider, 2023). Many buses lacked proper maintenance due to a lack of access to the right parts to keep them in top-tier condition. They also lacked firm routes and

schedules since they were largely deregulated. The buses allowed citizens on the outskirts of the city to find employment, transporting them to and from the city center. The buses created an experience of proximity for passengers: Skin touched, babies bounced on laps, and the scent of soap and sweat lingered in the air. The routes formed around the community they served; mapless yet reliable, the bus routes were the only transportation option for many Panamanians as there was no centralized public transportation system. Commuters took pride in their neighborhood bus, and strong communities of regular riders developed along their routes (Müller-Schwarze, 2009).

These colorful buses emerged as a counterculture to the official national identity promoted by the Panamanian government (Doe, 2020; Szok, 2003, p. 148). The bus art offers a window into Afro-Panamanian culture, as the artists who work on them are usually of West-Indian descent, and their art tends to emphasize Afro-Caribbean expression. The buses brim with affirmations of personal pride, comparable to bumper stickers. Designed to attract attention, some of the paintings are described as obscene and arrogant in nature. However, the Diablos Rojos assert the subaltern culture into a space that does not usually see it. The imagery used is forceful and boldly visible (Müller-Schwarze, 2009).

Some of the most important Diablo Rojo paintings are located on the front upper arch, the rear upper arch, and the rear exit door. The arches often include names of the driver's family, lovers, and children. One of the most common themes for these areas is *ruralismo*. These idealized rural landscapes, often a contrast to the loud images on the rest of the bus, nod to the mestizo identity promoted by the ciudad letrada. The rear exit door is the most traditional "canvas" on a Diablo Rojo: it is a large, flat rectangle on one of the buses' most visible areas (Szok, 2012, p. 126). This panel often depicts portraits, including celebrities or the driver's children. This can often be a way to elevate normal people to the status of celebrities; what better way to be famous than to appear on the back of your community's bus? This portraiture is a unique way to affirm and celebrate the value of people in a marginalized community. The buses' interiors, too, are not left without artwork. Airbrush painting is usually used for decoration, though ornaments such as feathers, bells, decals, lights, and others are also frequently used. For many bus drivers, the appearance of their bus is a source of pride, and they invest considerable resources to outfit their buses. In fact, most drivers average twenty to forty thousand dollars in upgrades. Each bus represents the community it serves and therefore individual buses are highly recognizable by name from area to area. In addition to the visual culture that these buses create, the loud techno, salsa, and reggaeton music blasting from their speakers identifies them as iconic pieces of Panamanian culture that engage multiple senses.

Figure 7

The back of a bus with ruralismo imagery on the top arch and a portrait on the rear exit panel.



Panamanian popular culture is colorful; people express their colors in many ways: their clothes, homes, and promotion of businesses. These bright colors can be attributed in part to the Indigenous heritage of Panama. Bright colors are profusely and artistically used in the clothing of the Guna women, who craft *molas* (hand-sewn textiles), *chaquiras* (beaded jewelry), and *chácaras* (string bags) (Nalewicki, 2022). One of the staple clothing garments is what is called a mola, the Guna word for “shirt.” The mola is a piece of traditional dress typically worn by Guna women, known for its bright colors and small intricate designs depicting flowers, birds, reptiles, and other emblems of Mother Nature. A single shirt can take anywhere between 60 and 80 hours to complete (Nalewicki, 2022). The colors and patterns depicted on the mola tend to have parallels on the Diablos Rojos; Diablos Rojos tend to be decorated with similar abstract designs in places in which there would typically be a gap.

Figure 8

A variety of intricate patterns and colors displayed within the Mola Museum.



Music is its own part of the artistry of Diablos Rojos. Panamanian music is a blend of many styles, including salsa, Cuban *son*, Colombian *cumbia*, Argentine tango, and Caribbean-island *ska* (Anguizola, 2023). Panama’s multicultural influence is very visible in its music: Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous styles of melody all bleed together into Panama’s varied musical genres. In particular, popular music with Black influence most commonly makes its way into the sound systems of Diablos Rojos. The music that is blasted from these buses is as iconic as the appearance itself. As an experience encompassing many senses, Diablos Rojos are often heard before they are seen. Though the music played on these buses ranges from salsa to reggaeton to mixed radio stations, one aspect remains true across all of them—it is usually conversation-haltingly loud. Through both sight and sound, Diablos Rojos assert themselves into Panama’s cultural scene, refusing to be ignored or fade into the background.

Diablos Rojos are unique in that their art is not tucked away in a museum. Though the drivers are not directly profiting from the buses as pieces of art, they take great pride in the artwork that covers their bus. Some painters make a display when painting to attract crowds and purposefully build up a reputation. One artist, Luis Evans, more commonly known as The Wolf, used this technique to great effect. He built up his reputation and is largely credited as the first to be commissioned by a business to paint a vehicle. One of his paintings, a large panther with the words “The Panther” below on the front door of a truck was detailed in a 1941 *National Geographic* article (Szok, 2012, pp. 86-89). Another famous artist known for their work on the Diablos Rojos was Andres Salazar. Largely considered the father of the Diablos Rojos (Fuentes, 2019), he was a massively influential painter, pioneering the folk art of buses starting in the 1950s (Panama Life Insider, 2023).

This public outlet makes art widely accessible, unlike a private collection or gallery (Madan, 2023). There are many parallels between street art and the designs that cover Diablos Rojos: both are meant to be seen by all, no matter their race, class, or gender. A bus, like a wall that might be tagged by a street artist, is an everyday, unavoidable object—one that you do not have to pay admission to see. Art is thus democratized and can be used to convey a variety of messages that would not otherwise reach a subaltern audience: working-class people who cannot often be patrons of art museums and galleries (Spivak, 2010, p. 77). Public art is didactic, as its bold interruption of common spaces begs one to question and interpret its meaning (Madan, 2023). Many of the paintings on Diablos Rojos have meanings and implications that can be interpreted differently based on one’s cultural context and viewpoint. Since most of the passengers of these buses are working-class Panamanians, the hegemonic culture is not the target of representation in this art (Szok, 2012, p. 115). Often representing a bus’s patrons and routes, the art covering Diablos Rojos is a universal language whose messages can be understood by any Panamanian who takes them—whether poor, illiterate, or otherwise lacking access to experience traditional art (Madan, 2023). They are much more than a means of transportation—Diablos Rojos are a rolling canvas and a voice for subaltern cultures.

2.5. Attempts to Phase Out Diablos Rojos

Although many value this transportation system, it is important to note that not every Panamanian is a Diablo Rojo loyalist. In 2008, President Martin Torrijos initiated the removal of Diablos Rojos because they were noisy and often driven rashly. After drafting the “Plan de Movilidad Urbana y Modernización,” it was confirmed that the state would centralize transportation with a public MetroBus system. President Torrijos’ plan was to purchase four hundred buses with air conditioning, safety features, comfortable seats, wheelchair accessibility, and two doors. The government would create routes that would cover both the northern and southern parts of the city (Telemetro, 2008). Although this plan had the goal of starting in 2009, it took several years to phase out the Diablos Rojos. It was not until 2013, under President Ricardo Martinelli, that they officially stopped running within the city- at least, on paper. As compensation for retiring their buses, Diablo Rojo owners were awarded \$25,000 and some were even hired as drivers for the new MetroBus system (Panama Life Insider, 2023). However, for some, the compensation did not compare to the amount of time, energy, and money that went into decorating the bus nor could it replace the sense of pride that came from driving it. Following the implementation of the MetroBus, 2014 brought the Metro subway system to Panama. The trains ran seven days a week and rapidly connected the northern and eastern parts of Panama to the city. With infrastructure improvements due to the newly available public bus and train systems, the government had laid the foundation necessary to outlaw Diablos Rojos.

Although you may still come across a Diablo Rojo in Panama City, the MetroBus and Metro are a more frequent choice today. Currently, Diablos Rojos are a more common form of transportation outside the city, where the MetroBus does not serve. This includes places like Pacora, La Chorrera, and others. The government believes this is for the better, and one MetroBus official we spoke to told us that she does not feel nostalgic about letting a piece of Panama’s culture go- to her, the heritage does not outweigh the improved safety of the new MetroBuses. She told us that in the past, Diablo Rojo drivers were often unsafe because their pay was directly linked to how many passengers they took, so they drove faster and packed more people onto a bus. She also believed that it was worse for the passengers since the drivers could set any fare they wanted, such as a higher fare at night, while MetroBus drivers cannot unilaterally change fares. Overall, the city government believes the public forms of transportation are more helpful than the Diablos Rojos due to their safety features, ability to rapidly connect people from all different areas in Panama, and the infrastructure they provide the community.

Modernizing urban transportation can have positive impacts if planned and executed properly. They found that improved bus systems went hand in hand with adequate funding during the planning phase, which would decrease the time needed to implement the new system. They also found that defining fares ahead of time is important so that it can cover new buses, company operators, and control systems while still providing breathing room for the community to utilize these new systems. Implementing these steps can result in faster, more efficient, and environmentally friendly transportation systems (Hidalgo & Carrigan 2010). However, in the case of Panama City, cultural impact must be taken into account.

Diablos Rojos are a large part of the nation’s culture and showcase a slice of Panamanian history. Since there are so many Instagram pages and pictures online of the buses, there is still a strong community surrounding the culture and representation of what these buses mean to Panamanians. As years pass, the knowledge of the Diablos Rojos will slowly fade, especially on the streets of Panama City. It is up to Panamanians to keep the legend alive.

2.6. Cultural Parallels

Panama’s iconic private buses mirror vehicles used in several other parts of the world. In the Philippines, for example, U.S. troops abandoned war Jeeps after leaving Manila in ruin because it was not cost-effective to transport them back to the States. Many Filipinos privately adopted these vehicles, outfitting them in bright colors and charging lower fares than the city’s transit system. These “Jeepneys” were the preferred form of transit for many locals. The government has made efforts to phase out Jeepneys by regulating vehicle size, capacity, and engine quality, which in turn stamps out the livelihood of the low-income drivers who operate these vehicles. The implications of these regulations are parallel with Panama’s: both disproportionately affect low-income populations and attempt to erase a rich cultural history that stemmed from reclaiming and redefining imperially imposed vehicles (Gregorio, 2018).

Figure 9

A colorful Jeepney in the Philippines (Caymanian Times, 2020).



Similarly, “Jingle Trucks,” nicknamed by U.S. soldiers during the war in Afghanistan, are ornate trucks which are deeply rooted in Pakistani tradition. Truck art here originates back to the 1920s, when English colonization brought Bedford trucks to the region. As Pakistanis adopted these vehicles, they fitted them with their iconic wooden prow and decorated them with wooden paneling, colorful paint, and bells. The logos were originally intended to signify what the truck carried to people who could not read, but the logos became increasingly ornate over time. Today, Pakistani truck drivers decorate their vehicles with pride and purpose: a fresher, more beautifully maintained truck is more likely to be hired (Stewart, 2018). This pride in maintaining a striking vehicle is reminiscent of the way Diablo Rojo drivers see their buses. Jingle Trucks are cargo vehicles and not typically used for public transportation, but the cultural communities that formed around the artistry of utility vehicles are present across Pakistani Jingle Trucks, Filipino Jeepneys, and Panamanian Diablos Rojos.

Figure 10

Two Jingle Trucks with ornate wooden prows fitted above the windshield (Stewart, 2018).



Acknowledging neocolonialism is an important part of conducting any project abroad, however, it is particularly relevant to this project. The buses that make up Diablos Rojos were originally U.S. school buses. Reclamation of culture plays a large part in the communities surrounding Diablos Rojos because the buses were bought by Panamanians and made nearly unrecognizable. Much like Panama reclaimed their canal and improved it, Panamanians transformed the U.S.’s Bluebird and International buses into a unique moving art piece and a

marker of community. They are now a distinctly Panamanian symbol, and in many ways represent a national identity that is emerging separate from U.S. involvement in the country.

Chapter 3. Methodology

To increase the validity of our conclusions, we used a multimethod research approach. We conducted archival research, one-on-one interviews, and ethnography to gain a variety of perspectives on Diablos Rojos, taking measures to reduce selection bias during each research method. Selection bias occurs when interference in completely random selection leads to results that do not statistically represent an entire population of data (Lustick, 1996). By reading articles from a wide array of backgrounds and perspectives, interviewing people who have different relationships with the Diablos Rojos and conducting extensive field research while being aware of personal subjectivities as researchers, we strive to acknowledge and understand a wide range of perspectives on the topic.

3.1. Archival Research

The first step into our investigation of Diablos Rojos was to become acquainted with the existing literature surrounding the topic: relevant Panamanian history, cultural identities, and, of course, the buses themselves. We began by conducting archival research to create a well-rounded background section.

Our project sponsor, WPI Professor Grant Burrier, provided us with an initial list of resources to jumpstart our research. These included scholarly articles, travel blogs, and news articles on topics such as Panamanian history, parallels between Diablos Rojos and colorful buses in other cultures, first-hand accounts of riding the buses, and guidelines for approaching anthropological research. We divided these readings between the members of our team, noting important points from each article and finding further sources in the reference section of texts we deemed credible. Additionally, our team met with WPI Librarian Jason Cerrato to discuss strategies for effective research and efficient database use. Using these strategies, we developed a broader and deeper body of literature beyond our initial texts.

There are several factors we considered when deciding which texts and media we would include in our background section. First, we reviewed a wide variety of source types and perspectives to a) corroborate the facts surrounding our project, and b) emphasize the diversity of opinions on Diablos Rojos. Second, we took an in-depth look at the authors and publishers of each source. Their educational background, place of residence, race, ethnicity, gender, and connection to the subject all gave us insight into their level of credibility, as well as the unique subject position they brought to the text. After reviewing each source, we noted any shortcomings in their content, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the argument or approach. To avoid selection bias while compiling our background, we prioritized peer-reviewed sources for facts and insight into sociopolitical implications of Diablos Rojos. We also were meticulous in considering source content appropriately for its year of publication. The MetroBus system was introduced less than ten years ago at the time of our project, so we noted that older sources may be out of date. These methods helped us to reduce selection bias by allowing us to deeply understand each source and focus on multiple schools of thought surrounding the Diablos Rojos.

Despite taking these measures, we recognize that our background section is not representative of the entire body of thought surrounding Panamanian culture and the Diablos Rojos. We acknowledge that our implicit biases, level of access to sources, and lack of Spanish fluency influenced which texts we decided to include. Though we worked meaningfully to avoid selection bias, our prioritization of English-language scholarly sources limited the scope of our research.

3.2. Identifying Interviewees and Conducting Interviews

We believe that collecting personal stories from the ecosystem surrounding Diablos Rojos was the most effective way to get relevant and accurate information for our project. By talking to the drivers, artists, passengers, and mechanics of Diablos Rojos, we aimed to collect their experiences and thoughts about the buses' significance. We also planned to interview people who work for Panama's public transportation department, including officials and bus drivers. As we immersed ourselves in the culture of Diablos Rojos, we found several contacts who were willing to be interviewed. Some of these participants agreed on the spot after hearing about our project, while we set up times with others we found through personal connections. With everyone who agreed to participate, we proceeded with a pre-planned semi-structured interview process. This interview process consisted of pre-written questions, with flexibility regarding the order the questions were asked in, and the option to go off-script if necessary (George, 2023). However, before we started interviewing, we established steps to create a safe and comfortable space that encouraged the interviewees to share their personal stories with us.

To ensure the interviewee's comfort and thus greater likelihood of sharing their insights, it was essential that we made the interview feel more like a conversation over a question-and-answer session. We also made sure to abide by the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) regulations during each interview. Prior to collecting personal information from the participants, we obtained oral consent (which is considered more culturally appropriate than written consent in Panama) for audio recording, video recording, and use of their identifying information in our final project. Our request for consent provided a summary of our identity, the goal of our research, the framework and objectives of the interview, any risks or benefits associated with their participation, steps taken to protect their identity, and details regarding the final outcomes and deliverables of our study. We asked for consent in the local language (Spanish) to ensure we were communicating the information effectively and directly.

Preparation is key when conducting interviews, and understanding a participant's area of expertise can result in more meaningful conversations (DeJonckheere, 2019). With this in mind, our crafted set of questions was tailored to individuals of various backgrounds. Additionally, the participant had complete control over the scope of the interview. This freedom included the recording method, location, and ability to decline any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Allowing the interviewees control of their environment played a key role in their comfort level with sharing their stories. Furthermore, talking to a variety of people broadened our network and introduced us to previously unknown contacts. By approaching the interviews as well-prepared

researchers willing to listen, we hoped to acquire raw stories, a deeper understanding of Panama's culture, and the unique perspectives that reside within the community surrounding the Diablos Rojos. Some selection bias was unavoidable during this stage of the research process since we could only interview those who were willing to talk to us. We recognize that willing participants likely included those with greater job security. Diablos Rojos are privately owned, and therefore their drivers and maintainers are at less risk when talking publicly about their line of work. Government employees, however, have a greater obligation to protect themselves by representing their organization positively. Passengers with busy schedules were also less likely to sit down for an interview, so we acknowledge that the time of day we rode the buses influenced who we could collect stories from. However, we tried to reduce interviewee selection bias by speaking to as many different stakeholders as possible. By collecting stories from people with a variety of careers and roles relevant to the buses, we were able to collect a wide range of stories. Still, we acknowledge that these stories are not representative of the entire Panamanian community.

3.3. Ethnography

The third method in our research design was ethnographic in nature: we deeply immersed ourselves in the culture surrounding Diablos Rojos. Because the buses are being phased out, we were aware that in certain locations they could be difficult to find or may operate in areas in which we are unfamiliar. We also noted that Diablos Rojos are evolving and being repurposed for non-transportation related ventures, such as food trucks, party buses, et cetera. For safety, we always traveled in a group, understood that the process would require a lot of patience, and would likely be ongoing as we conducted other parts of our research simultaneously. Our starting point for our ethnographic research was Albrook Station, one of the most important intermodal transportation hubs in Panama City. We focused on five routes: buses traveling to La Chorrera, Pacora, Capira, Colón, and Chame.

Once we identified a Diabla Rojo that we could ride, we determined the stops and end location of the bus and chose a route that made the most sense for us. Our first bus ride was solely for participant observation. We immersed ourselves in the environment of the buses and took meticulous notes (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2003, p. 248). We prepared the fare with exact change to avoid wasting the bus driver's and *secre's*³ time. Once onboard, we prepared our equipment and, with the driver's permission, we took photos and videos to capture the experience, the art, and the bus itself. If we found an interviewee while on the bus, given the tight space we designated one team member to ask the questions and capture the answers. For these interviews, we used a portable audio recorder and, depending on how crowded the bus was and the interviewee's comfort level, recorded video as well. Any group members not actively using equipment were taking notes with paper and/or digital note-taking apps.

³ From *secretario*, or "secretary," this is the driver's assistant. They are typically tasked with jobs such as announcing the route and collecting fares from passengers based on their ride duration.

The notes we took were detailed and qualitative. We recorded the multisensory feeling of being on the bus such as the smells, sounds, and sights we observed. From the feel of the seats and the sound of the engine to the music that is playing and the people on the bus, we also noted how it physically and emotionally feels to be a body on this vehicle. Was it comfortable? What was the mood of the passengers? Was there a sense of community? Of safety? How did we, a group of twenty-year-olds from the United States, fit into this scene? Showing respect and understanding of the local culture is an important part of ethnography, so we dressed appropriately for the areas we were visiting and spoke Spanish to the best of our abilities.

We recorded the types of people we saw as passengers but did not include identifying information without obtaining consent first. When taking photos, especially inside the buses, we were cognizant of passengers and others who may not have wanted their picture taken and either attempted to exclude them from the composition or blurred their face in the editing process. We also asked the driver for permission to photograph or otherwise record the bus from the inside before doing so. For passing buses, we assumed we could take photos within reason as they were in a public space. We chose to disembark at a stop on the route to Colón, spend some time there and draw observations about the types of areas in which Diablos Rojos operate. Getting a strong sense of the locations where these buses are common also gave us insight into the community and culture that surrounds them.

3.4. Avoiding Personal Biases

The IQP can be a great opportunity for expanding cultural awareness with the right mindset, but it can also be easy to fall into the trap of projecting a neocolonial attitude onto the project we are completing. For this reason, it was important for us to acknowledge our subject position before we began our work on the ground in Panama so that we did not make ourselves invisible in the deliverables we produce (Spivak, 2010, p. 39). Our team is made up of students and faculty at a predominantly White institution. While not all of us are White, we are immersed in U.S. cultural norms and ideas, so these could translate to implicit biases we hold. We recognize the national language here is Spanish, and while all of us primarily speak English, we have made an effort to remain open-minded and speak as much Spanish as possible.

Additionally, we recognize that we had a limited amount of time in Panama. We worked hard to research thoroughly with the caveat that we are aware that the work we could accomplish in seven weeks is very different from what we could do with more time. It is not possible to learn everything about a group of people in such a short period of time, so we acknowledge that the observations we leave with only scratch the surface of the culture in Panama.

Acknowledging these aspects of ourselves allowed us to take accountability throughout this project. We knew that we held biases, and therefore could actively work to counteract them. We also know that the information we collected is not necessarily an all-encompassing representation of the culture surrounding Diablos Rojos. With these biases in mind, we could alter the way we conducted our research and document our project to be respectful to Panamanian culture while being cognizant of our place in it and recognizing the limits of our final product.

There are a few ways we planned on conducting our work in Panama to avoid neocolonialism. First, the background research we did was critical to being respectful researchers. By deeply understanding previous scholarship, we could approach the project with less cultural ignorance. Rather than asking to be taught basics, we could get on the ground with a framework of what we seek and ask for further personal insight from the people we talked to. Preparing for these interactions prevented us from taking advantage of free labor by asking Panamanians to educate us on basic information we should have already known. Second, our interviews were conducted on the interviewees' terms as much as possible. Our goal was to make the participants comfortable by allowing them control over where the interview took place, rather than doing what was more convenient for us. Additionally, providing the interviewees with freedom throughout this process granted them agency in what questions they answered and to what extent they were comfortable being documented. Furthermore, every interviewee had different stories and expertise regarding Diablos Rojos, so our job was to be receptive to their personal accounts, and to tailor the interview to their knowledge. Our ability to read the room and be self-aware was essential for conducting these in-depth interviews because it influenced the questions asked in the moment. We aimed to ask questions that were culturally informed, carefully worded to avoid bias, and adapted to the participant.

Chapter 4. Findings

Once we arrived in Panama, we wasted no time finding contacts to begin conducting interviews. We used group connections and local bus stations to start collecting contacts and establishing connections. Our hopes of one contact snowballing into finding more quickly became reality. Our first contact, Piri, a Diablo Rojo artist, invited us to meet mechanics, a secrete, and an owner of a Diablo Rojo all in one day. Everyone involved in the Diablo Rojo community was very passionate about the buses and was more than willing to share their story about how Diablos Rojos have impacted their lives. From the first day, we knew that we would not find it difficult to keep making connections within the Diablo Rojo community.

4.1. Riding a Diablo Rojo

We arrived at the *Terminal Nacional de Albrook* with hopes of making new connections and hearing some more stories. We went in with no plan, simply searching for the bus we thought looked visually appealing and hoping that the driver would be willing to talk to us. We quickly learned that the security guards do not allow pedestrians to roam the bus lot at Albrook; as we approached a bus driver, a guard hovered nearby with a suspicious look and asked us what we were doing. The driver we approached, Robert, quickly invited us onto his bus so he could take us to a spot where we could talk freely. We went for a very short bus ride to the outside of the Albrook Terminal bus parking, and Robert graciously showed us the capabilities of his sound system during the ride. Immediately the bus began shaking and we could feel our chests buzzing along with the metal exterior. The music was so loud we only heard ringing in our ears in place of song lyrics. Along with the music came a visual experience. LED lights lined the interior of the bus and created a club-like feel, flashing every color of the rainbow along to the beat of the music.

We talked for about half an hour and Robert immediately became a new friend, even inviting us to his pool. Unfortunately, his story was cut a little short, as it had reached the time for him to begin his route to Colón. We decided to ride partway to Colón to experience an authentic trip on a Diablo Rojo. Passengers began piling in as soon as the bus arrived at the parking spot. There were many people in work uniforms, solo women, and a few school-aged kids. If you left your seat, it was unlikely you would get the same one back. As soon as every seat was full, we pulled out of Albrook and were on our way. Even with a packed bus, you could still smell the scents of cleaner

Figure 11

Robert posing at the back of his bus.



and air freshener; it was obvious that the driver of the bus took great care of the vehicle, delivering a more pleasant ride. It was a nice day so with every window open the bus had great airflow and there was hardly any need for air conditioning. A rumble came from the back of the bus as some Panamanian techno music and music videos played on a big screen above the driver, which offered a little entertainment for the ride and covered up the street noise from the open windows.

The *secre* of the bus stood in the stairwell at the door, with the door open to make calling out to customers easier. The bus was only on the freeway for a short amount of time then took mostly back roads for the rest of our ride. Whenever we passed by another Diablo Rojo, the driver would honk his horn and flash the headlights at it, greeting the other driver. We observed that the Diablo Rojo community is very tight knit, with many people knowing each other, and the drivers being especially well-known. When passengers hopped on the bus, the *secre* handed them a poker chip, which let them know how much their ride would cost; the further into the trip you joined, the less you paid. Passengers were even able to request a stop if it was along the route, allowing them to get home efficiently. By contrast, the MetroBus only stops in official predetermined locations. Robert let us know when was best for us to depart his route and head back to the city, even mentioning that if we paid more than \$1.50 for the ride back, to give him a call and he would fix it for us.

Diablos Rojos offer an environment that cannot be experienced on other bus systems. They expose people to a very niche experience, which seems to drive the decision to take these buses as opposed to the MetroBus or another government-funded bus service.

4.2. Riding the MetroBus

Prior to boarding a MetroBus, we were met with a schedule of arrivals that was inaccurate. While Diablos Rojos have no fixed time schedule. MetroBuses, despite their published schedule, are frequently untimely, often due to traffic. To try to keep their customers informed, the bus operator released an app, which it proudly advertises at many bus stops. A QR code with large lettering beside it stating, “DOWNLOAD NOW!” adorns many of the MetroBus stops. However, once you download it—if you even can; the app has not been updated recently and is not installable on modern versions of Android—you will quickly find the app does not work! During its initial rollout, the app seemed to work perfectly and solved the problems of waiting for off-schedule buses. Originally, the app showed the viewer any congested routes and gave them the ability to search for a specific stop or route and compare routes to determine which would require less bus hopping. However, recently it has not functioned at all, despite continuing to advertise at bus stops. In our experience, our first bus was twenty minutes behind schedule, which does not support the idea that the MetroBus is a timelier transportation option.

After arriving at the stop, boarding the bus is quite easy. In contrast to the Diablos Rojos, you pay a standard upfront price of twenty-five cents by scanning a MetroCard to enter through a turnstile. Although boarding the bus appears to be foolproof for many, one of our team members accidentally scanned her MetroCard in the wrong spot and the bus driver silently glared at her, as if her mistake was an inconvenience for him. In contrast, all the Diablo Rojo drivers were

extremely welcoming and more than willing to help us out. The MetroBuses are also fully sealed, with massive windows that could not be opened. Although the MetroBuses are advertised to have A/C, it is weak, and we found that the MetroBus felt hotter than our ride on the Diablo Rojo due to their open windows forcing airflow while driving. It was important to have that airflow, especially on a warm sunny day, to prevent the buses from becoming stuffy. However, the cost of that airflow is noise. While in a Diablo Rojo you will hear passing vehicles, roadside work, loud music, and feel the air moving throughout the bus. In the MetroBus it was almost completely silent as people put in their earplugs and glared down at their phones. The silence was occasionally broken up by the chatter of riders, both sitting and standing. The MetroBus gives riders the option to hold onto rails above your head or to sit in one of the many rows of seats made of hard plastic, which were painfully uncomfortable.

It is important to note that MetroBuses are advertised as being accessible, unlike Diablos Rojos. However, this is functionally far from the truth. While the MetroBus has a space on board for wheelchair users to strap their chairs in, there is no easy way for them to get on board. One of our group members observed a MetroBus driver and three other bystanders lifting a wheelchair user onto the bus with great difficulty. There are also turnstiles at all entrance and exit doors of the bus whose gates must be opened for a wheelchair to be loaded onboard. So, while the MetroBuses meet the requirement of being *technically* wheelchair accessible, it is too much of an ordeal for a wheelchair user to comfortably use the bus. While Diablos Rojos are certainly not accessible either, at least they are not incorrectly advertised as such.

We disembarked our MetroBus at Albrook Mall. Exiting was its own ordeal—due to the turnstile, a long line formed at the door, taking about five minutes to fully clear. The five of us breathed a sigh of relief to escape the stuffy vehicle.

4.3. Race Day — Campeonato Automovilismo Terpel 2023

The Diablo Rojo community came together at the Campeonato Automovilismo Terpel. Located in La Chorrera, this all-day race featured race cars, semi-trucks, and Diablos Rojos. We were made aware of the race by a mechanic that we spoke to in Pacora named Victor, who told us, “todo el mundo va a estar ahí” [the whole world is going to be there].

Across the track, Diablos Rojos started to pull in several hours after the car races began—fashionably late. Their entrance was impossible to ignore; rolling down a long, winding road, the Diablos Rojos had their lights and sound systems on full display. They pulled into a long, unpaved dirt strip on the outside of the track where dozens of other buses were parked. The scene was, in essence, a massive tailgate. Families, regular passengers, and bus staff filled the narrow strip. Huge communities of people came to support their bus, including many children. The Diablos side (which had a \$5 entrance fee as opposed to \$20 for the pit) hosted only one small local food stand, so the bus communities were grilling, drinking, and blasting music with amenities they had brought with them. While the cars had the racetrack for the first part of the day, the Diablos Rojos community had an all-day celebration.

Figure 12

Two race cars leaving the pit, preparing for their race.



Figure 13

A father and son stand on top of a bus.

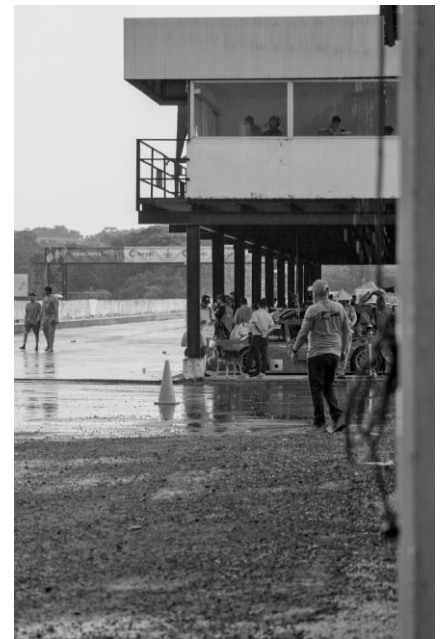


A few hours into the races, the sky poured sheets of rain onto Chorrera, sending everyone running for cover. On the pit side, people ducked under roofs and concrete structures. On the Diablos side, they simply had the buses they arrived on. The dirt road turned to slippery mud: tires, shoes, and anything else that touched the ground became caked in it, while the cars in the pit sat under comfortable covers and on pavement that dried within a few hours.

Figure 14

Left: A bus stuck in the muddy field.

Right: Racing teams shelter from the rain under the viewing and timing platform.



While there was excitement and support on the pit side, it was nothing compared to the Diablos Rojos side. Families and communities came decked out in matching team t-shirts. Music blared, and people hung out of the buses, dancing. You had to yell to hear each other over the joyful ruckus. The smell of diesel, sweat, and beer mixed in the air. The backs of our necks grew sticky with condensation and sweat, and water began to creep through our shoes. The race day was scheduled for 9–5, but as the clock ticked past five and cars continued to zip around the track, the locals grew impatient. Semi-trucks, also waiting to race later that day, revved their engines and threw out thick clouds of black smoke. People danced and picnicked on the roofs of their buses. Those in the stands on the Diablos Rojos side barely looked at the track. The racecars were hardly the spectacle of the hour—even off the track, the Diablos Rojos were impossible to ignore.

Figure 15

Diablos Rojos and semi-trucks impatiently await their turn on the track.



Finally, at almost 6 pm, the first trucks rolled onto the tracks. The crowd erupted: every head was turned; every eye was glued to the racetrack. Drinks were gripped tightly; people were pressed against the barriers of the stands. The semi and bus races were straight-line, quarter mile drag races, not the same winding circuit that smaller race cars could navigate. In clouds of black smoke, flashing lights, and booming music, the buses and trucks zoomed down the track.

The races were electric. People hung out of the sides of the buses as they raced, trash-talking the opposing drivers. Despite the bold *machismo*⁴ performance of the buses, they never lost control of their vehicles. After all, these same buses would be picking up passengers on the way to work the next day. The bus drivers had much more at stake than the racecar drivers—they were racing their source of income and the transportation on which their community depended.

During the victory lap of the racecars, it was hard to tell who won if you were not at the finish line. The Diablos drivers, however, made it abundantly clear. With lights flashing and engines screaming, they took their victory laps blowing smoke directly into the cheering crowds.

⁴ *Machismo* is a social construct that refers to a strong sense of masculine pride in Latin America and Spanish culture (Sotelo, 2023).

Figure 16

The crowd watching the Diablo drag races from the stands and track barrier.



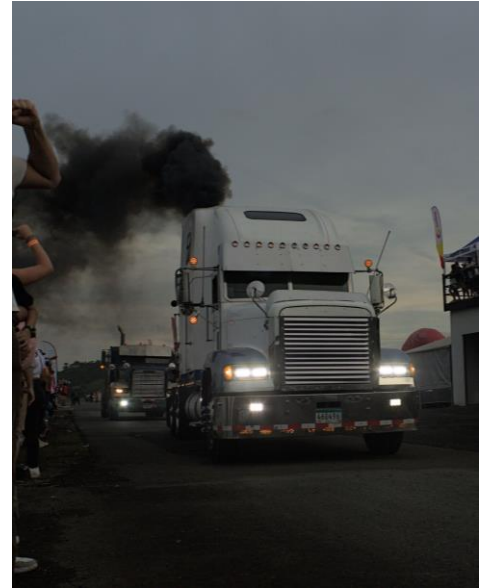
Figure 17

Coche Bomba (left) races against another bus.



Figure 18

A Diablo Rojo (left) and a similarly tuned semi-truck (right) on their victory runs down the pit lane.



4.4. People of the Diablos Rojos

Maintaining the Diablos Rojos takes a village. Luckily, the community within Panama is more than happy to oblige because these buses are family. Diablos Rojos are not just a transportation system, but rather a representation of Panamanian history, culture, and national identity, which fuels a community to keep them alive. Everybody has a designated role: there are *secres/pavos* who announce bus routes and collect the fare, drivers, artists to freshen up and repaint the artwork, mechanics to keep the buses running, and loyal passengers.

4.4.1. *El Secre*

While the Diablo Rojo announces itself with its loud music, roaring engine, elaborate paintings, and blinking lights, there are those who yell above the chaos making a song of announcement: the *secres*. Short for *el secretario*, or “the secretary,” the *secre* broadcasts the destination of the bus in an auctioneer-like fashion that almost becomes music with its rhythm and beat. Colloquially known as the *pavo*, literally translating to “turkey,” their calls of stops from the door of the bus are reminiscent of the bird’s quick, loud gobble. Beyond advertising the bus’s destination, the *secre* also works as the driver’s right-hand man. With Luis Carlos (a former *secre*), describing the relationship as the driver’s third eye, the *secre* helps the driver watch over all the blind spots and navigate the roads.

Unlike the driver who has a one-to-one relationship with each Diablo Rojo (typically owning the bus), the *secres* instead work for many buses. Before the buses start their early morning routes, the drivers will pick their *secre* for the day from those who are at the common meeting

location when they arrive. This makes it vital for secres to wake up bright and early to guarantee their work for the day, typically working long hours.

Figure 19

Luis Carlos, a former secre, demonstrates how he used to call routes from the bus.



To work as a secre, the requirement is about less formal education and more about know-how and organization. It is not unusual for boys as young as thirteen to work as secres. There was a straightforward form of upward mobility within the community: there were the washers (who cleaned the Diablos), the secre, and finally the mechanics, drivers, and artists. As such, many people started as washers. Good, trustworthy washers graduated to secre, with many seeing themselves becoming a driver, mechanic, or artist.

4.4.2. *El Conductor*

Figure 20

A supporter of Coche Bomba at the race.



The driver, or *el conductor*, is the heart and soul of a Diablo Rojo. Each driver we spoke to described their bus and community with pride. Mr. De Leon, a Diablo Rojo driver based in Pacora, shared that his favorite part of being a driver was getting to provide good service to his community. A community's driver is very recognizable: people know their drivers and are even willing to wait for a few buses to pass to get a ride from their favorite driver.

Drivers also clearly have a genuine investment in their passengers: Robert, the driver we interviewed outside Albrook Station, told us to call him if another driver tried to overcharge us. There seemed to be a level of trust between the driver and passengers. Many riders were women riding solo, presumably on their way to or back from school or work. During the bus rides we took, we noticed that there seemed to be more women riding the Diablos than on the MetroBuses, possibly indicating a greater feeling of safety arising from taking a familiar driver's bus. However, we acknowledge that this observation may not have been a representative sample.

Drivers take pride in the proper upkeep of their buses, too: Mr. De Leon shared that the nickname "Red Devil" came from the reckless driving and disrepair often associated with the buses. However, he notes that the new generation of drivers are trying to make a change, noting that they have better tires and take greater measures to maintain the bus. In his words, "han aprendido las lecciones de ayer y se están transformando" [they have learned the lessons of yesterday and are transforming]. In fact, we interviewed him on his day off and he was changing the oil and performing routine maintenance. The hope is to keep Diablos Rojos in commission; hopefully, well-maintained, and safe buses will make this possible. After all, drivers have a reputation to uphold. Mr. De Leon, Robert, and the other drivers we interviewed were all prominent and important members of their communities.

Figure 21

Artist Piri (left) poses with Mr. De Leon (right) and his bus.



Mr. De Leon also noted that his choice of bus artist was a meaningful decision. An artist's work says something about the route, the driver, and the community. Therefore, artists and drivers are very interconnected. Mr. De Leon shared that he hired Piri to paint his bus "por la humildad de él" [for his humility]. This is visible in his art on the back of the bus, which includes a quote translating to "being simple is what makes you big."

Figure 22

The quote on the back of Mr. De Leon's bus.



4.4.3. Artists

Figure 23

Diablo Rojo artist Piri poses with one of his works.



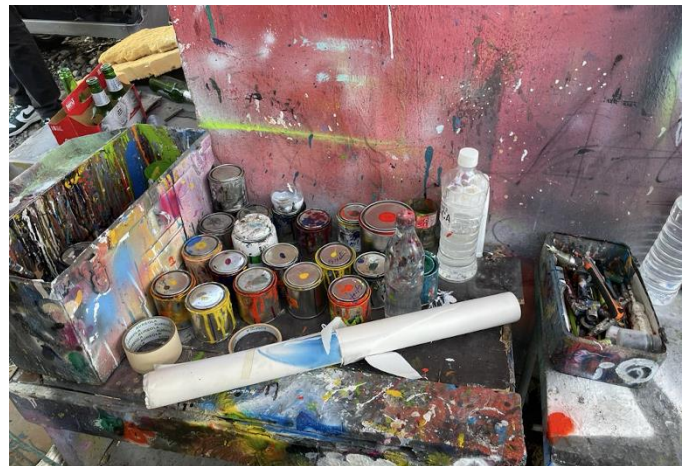
The artists of Diablo Rojo buses are arguably the most important; they initiate the transition from a traditional school bus to a Diablo Rojo. Without them, the streets of Panama would be filled with yellow instead of moving art. “Todo el mundo lo ve por todos lados. Le toman fotos y la gente le encanta” [Everyone sees it everywhere. They take photos and people love it], Piri says. A collaborative effort between the artist and the bus owner produces artwork that both parties can be proud of when they see the bus driving down the street (Merszthal, 2023).

Piri was our first Diablo Rojo contact. We learned of him through a mutual connection to the group and visited his studio, which was also his home. As we arrived in his neighborhood outside of Panama City, we knew we were in the right place when we saw a Diablo Rojo sitting outside his home. He had a cart full of his paint, tape that he used to frame the art, paintbrushes, and the canvas, the Diablo Rojo.

His workspace was simply the street in front of his home, sitting in the open for all his neighbors to enjoy and watch the process unfold. Working outside, under the hot sun’s rays, or in the rain and humidity, he must work around the weather, delaying an already month-long process (Merszthal, 2023). Immediately Piri became a new friend, and he began telling his story with no hesitation. Piri has always been fascinated by Diablos Rojos and their loud music, intricate paintings, and colorful decorations. In fact, the very first time he saw one he told himself that

Figure 24

Diablo Rojo artist Piri’s art supplies outside his home.



someday he would paint a Diablo Rojo. We asked what the buses meant to him, and he replied that, to him, they are “una forma de expresar y dejo alma y corazón en cada buque toco” [a form of expression and I leave heart and soul in every vessel I touch]. Understanding how much thought and care went into the painting process was an eye-opening experience for our team. We got to peer into somebody else’s life for the day so we could better understand how valuable these cultural figures are to an artist. Afterward, Piri introduced us to many of his connections within the community. He talked us through his current art piece—*yes, they are still being painted!*—and shared his story of how he became the well-known artist he is now. He had begun his involvement in the community as a *secre* but knew deep down he was going to be a painter one day. Piri, like many, followed the pattern of upward mobility that is prevalent amongst those who work on Diablos Rojos.

Our second artist was Óscar Melgar, an acclaimed artist who studied at the Universidad del Arte Ganexa and apprenticed under the renowned Diablo Rojo painter Andrés Salazar. Once we arrived at Óscar’s shop, he moved aside a massive, rusted gate so we could enter his workplace.

The area's walls were lined with extra bumpers, hoods, tires, and other spare parts. His space was filled with various cars and three hulking buses. Each bus was in a distinct stage of its lifecycle: The first bus was amid being scrapped for parts, its windows shattered, and its paint faded with broken glass and insulation along its floor. The second was primed and new windows were put in place with a fresh coat of white paint over the entire exterior. The third bus was actively being painted. With major parts of the exterior already finished, the interior was in the process of decoration. He showed us how he airbrushed characters, in this case depicting two popular musicians. These two were icons of *típico*, a genre hailing from the interior of Panama. Óscar noted that in his first sightings of the Diablos Rojos as a child, he was captivated by both the paintings and music. As such, he grew up to be not only a painter but also a DJ.

Óscar shared that he had “mastered color,” which was clear from just a glimpse of his artwork. He utilized neon colors in incredible designs creating captivating textures. His bus also included incredible ruralismo paintings, featuring the wilderness and wildlife in gallery-quality works. Despite the beauty of his work, he recounted how in an art contest a judge told him after the event he would have won first place- had he not painted buses. His work was seen as inferior simply due to his choice of canvas. Despite this artistic prejudice, he later would receive his deserved official recognition. He went on to represent Panama in a trip to the UK, painting two Diablos Rojos while there.

4.4.4. Mechanics

Making sure the buses are in top shape is important so that they can be passed down from generation to generation. Our team wanted to better understand the process and energy that goes into preserving Diablos Rojos, so after speaking with Piri we made our way down a steep gravel road to meet the masterminds behind these roaring pieces of art. As soon as we arrived, we noticed the smell of diesel wafting through the air and piles of scrap metal, random tires, and tool kits dispersed all over the ground. We then approached the grease- and sweat-covered mechanics with the hopes of learning about the methods they use to rebuild Diablos Rojos.

Figure 25

A mechanic shop in Pacora.



We first spoke with Victor, who has worked as a mechanic for 24 years. There were three buses parked in the yard and we asked him about how old they were, to which he replied, “aquí tenemos uno es ‘96 y uno es ‘92 y el otro sí es un poquito más viejo” [here we have one is ‘96 and one is ‘92 and the other is a little older], gesturing at the three buses in turn. We then asked about the most frequent issues the buses experience, and how they locate the parts to repair them. Victor told us the transmission and engine fail most frequently and since their popularity is declining and buses are being scrapped, parts are hard to come by:

“Tenemos que hacer milagros por allí para poder seguir el transporte. Lo que es lo básico es para agotarlo por fuera, ya lo que se trata de motor es muy difícil” [We have to do miracles out there to keep the bussesbuses moving. We have to try to fix it from the outside, since when it comes to [inside] the engine it is very difficult].

Additionally, we chatted about whether they believed the public would prefer to ride a MetroBus or Diablo Rojo, and Victor responded with, “no, que vamos con Diablo Rojo. El MetroBus no tiene aire, está caliente, se daña también igual que el” [no, we would go with a Diablo Rojo. The MetroBus has no air, it is hot, it also breaks down the same]. He then pointed out that the buses in their yard were being prepared for the race, referring to one as a *máquina de guerra*, a *war machine*, and telling us that the buses had reached about 160 kilometers per hour (approximately one hundred miles per hour). They even fitted the buses with nitrous oxide for

added power in a race (Dyer, 2021). This conversation showed us not just what goes into maintaining Diablos Rojos, but how they are a symbol of pride for the Panamanian community.

The mechanics have devoted a large part of their lives to learning the inner workings and quirks of Diablos Rojos. Although it is challenging to keep these intricate machines alive, the residents of Panama are willing to do their part to keep these colorful, creative, and customized buses rolling.

Figure 26

The mechanics at the shop in Pacora.



Chapter 5. Conclusion

Diablos Rojos are more than just a means of transportation: they represent a national identity distinct from the elite's mestizo vision of Panama. We found these buses to be indispensable in the communities in which they operate. MetroBuses often do not serve economically disadvantaged areas outside of Panama City, so the Diablos Rojos play a key role in getting community members to work. More than that, though, these buses are a central part of each area's culture. The local driver is well known, as are the most prominent bus artists. While elites may not celebrate bus artists -only recently have some been able to exhibit their work in galleries- bus art is not a lesser art in Panama. Within their community, bus artists are well respected and even the object of many people's career goals. Cleaners and secres often work their way up the ladder, later becoming mechanics, drivers, and artists. The people of the bus ecosystem hire each other for their skill, but also for their character. The communities surrounding the Diablos Rojos were some of the most friendly and self-supporting we have ever encountered. Everyone knew everyone and were willing to advocate for each other. This tight-knit community was especially clear at the racetrack, where flocks of people showed up in massive support of their local buses.

Since the beginning of this project, one of our goals has been to educate communities outside of Panama about the significance of the Diablos Rojos. Oftentimes we get so comfortable with our current social norms, trends, and routines that we overlook different social norms and cultures apart from ours. It is important to take note, educate ourselves, and grow by immersing ourselves in different cultures. We did just that when we arrived in Panama, which allowed us to see how these revamped vehicles were not just old Bluebird buses from the U.S. First, they were rolling pieces of art or "arte rodante"- fully decorated with lights, paintings that depicted meaningful figures, and quotes. Panamanians took a used bus from the United States and transformed this legacy of imperialism into an icon that is distinctly Panamanian. This popular art articulates a vision of national identity that is different from the identity peddled by Panamanian elites. It celebrates people, particularly Black and working-class people, who have been traditionally marginalized by elites. Second, they forged a community between the routes they served and acted as a shared space for cultural transmission. They brought neighbors and strangers together, baptizing them with the music that defined their personal history. In the past, it was boleros and salsa. Today, it is reggaetón and techno. Finally, the buses are symbols of local lore. Residents know their buses by name and celebrate their success on the track. Humble, working-class jobs occupy an elevated status within their community. The drivers, secres, and mechanics are recognized and respected. While Diablos Rojos may face increasing restrictions and competition from the government, they have given too much to Panama to simply disappear.

This experience was novel, and certainly one we will not forget. Documenting and observing these buses over the past seven weeks was a privilege as we got to see how the Diablos Rojos unite those within and welcome those from afar.

Aside from this report, we would like to continue this project by producing a documentary and a Wikipedia article. The documentary will serve as a visual representation of how Diablos Rojos are still alive. It will showcase the individual interviews referred to in this report as well as

the places where we encountered Diablos Rojos. As we conducted research for this project, we also realized that there is no English-language Wikipedia page on Diablos Rojos. Since we now have so much knowledge and have collected peer-reviewed research on the subject, we decided to submit writing to create a page. After all, Wikipedia is often the first place where people look for general information. We figured that we could contribute accurate and meaningful information that could serve to genuinely educate an English-speaking audience.

If further work on this project were to be conducted in the future, we could focus more on what the future of Diablos Rojos in Panama looks like. During our research, we began to encounter new uses for the phased-out buses. However, future work could more closely examine a) these new uses and their impact on cultural identity and the bus communities, and b) a potential plan for integration of the private bus system with the government owned MetroBuses. We also did not have enough time to adequately incorporate *neveras* into this project. These are the newer, air-conditioned, Hyundai buses that operate privately like Diablos Rojos. While these buses are additional competition for Diablos Rojos, we solely focused on the contrast of Diablos Rojos with Metrobuses due to our time constraint of seven weeks. Further work could unpack how competition between the two private systems functions.

Another limitation of this project was that all our Diablos Rojo interviewees were men. While a small community of Diablos Rojo drivers and artists who are women possibly exists, we were unable to get into contact with any during our research. We also did not collect any direct interviews from passengers who were women. The passengers who volunteered to be interviewed at bus stops were all men, which is understandable from a personal safety point of view. Women may have been more hesitant to be recorded by a group of strangers. Even Peter Szok, who quite literally wrote the book on Diablos Rojos, asked us if we were able to interview any women in our research as he was not. Perhaps with more time to form deeper webs of contacts, we could have found the women of the Diablos Rojo community. However, this shows that the Diablos Rojo community tends to be male-dominated. In contrast, every government employee and urban planner we interviewed was a woman. This created an obvious gap in our research, as a large part of the perspective we collected on each bus system was definitively gendered. Future work could more closely examine how gender functions in Panama's bus systems.

This project focused on defining exactly what Diablos Rojos mean to Panama, and this cultural groundwork could be used to make recommendations for the modernization of Panama's transportation system. The continuation of this project could involve more direct research with Panamanian government organizations. An initiative like this would benefit from our findings because the cultural component of Panamanian transit is essential to understanding why a fully public transportation system may not be realistic. This is especially true because the modern aesthetic of the Metrobuses sacrifices far too much cultural heritage.

Despite all attempts to phase out Diablos Rojos, they are not dead. These buses continue to be a not only existent but essential part of Panama's transportation system. As the main transportation service to poorer areas outside of the city, Diablos Rojos provide for Panamanians what the government could not. They provide much more than transit—they are an emblem of

culture, a reminder of reclamation from U.S. imperialism, and a bold statement that those who are not of the mestizo norm demand to be seen. As one passenger waiting at a bus stop told us, “Diablos Rojos will never die.”

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Script

English Version

We are a group of Junior students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts. We are currently in the research stage of our Interactive Qualifying Project, which is a project that combines technology and social science to direct us away from our typical STEM topics. Our project is documenting the history and evolution of Panama's iconic Diablos Rojos buses. We are interested in collecting stories from the drivers, artists, mechanics, and passengers that comprise the ecosystem surrounding Los Diablos Rojos. Our main method of learning about the buses is through interviewing subjects that we feel are closely connected to Los Diablos Rojos. The responses we collect may be used in our research paper, which will be published online on our university's website, which is accessible to anyone. This will be a spoken interview conducted in a place of your choosing. The questions asked will be about your experiences with Diablos Rojos buses, your identity as a Panamanian, and other things related to culture and your life. You are free to choose whether or not you consent to any of the following:

- Interview audio being recorded.
- Interview video being recorded.
- Your statements being directly quoted in our project.
- Your name being used in our project.

The information you agree to provide may be included in our final report.

This interview is entirely voluntary. You are not required to participate. If you choose to participate, you may answer any question to the extent you are comfortable with, skip any question, or withdraw at any point. In case you want to add or withdraw any part of your interview later on, you may contact our group via WhatsApp or text message at 508-834-2320 or via email at gr-diablosrojosa23@wpi.edu.

Do you have any questions?

Spanish Version

Somos un grupo de estudiantes de tercer año del Worcester Polytechnic Institute en Worcester, Massachusetts. Actualmente estamos en la etapa de investigación de nuestro Proyecto Interactivo de Calificación, que es un proyecto que combina tecnología y ciencia social para alejarnos de nuestros típicos temas STEM. Nuestro proyecto está documentando la historia y evolución de los icónicos buses Diablos Rojos de Panamá. Estamos interesados en recopilar historias de los conductores, artistas, mecánicos y pasajeros que componen el ecosistema que rodea Los Diablos Rojos. Nuestro principal método de aprendizaje sobre los autobuses es a través de entrevistas a sujetos que creemos que están estrechamente relacionados con Los Diablos Rojos.

Las respuestas que recopilamos pueden utilizarse en nuestro trabajo de investigación, que se publicará en línea en el sitio web de nuestra universidad, que es accesible para cualquier persona. Esta será una entrevista hablada realizada en un lugar de su elección. Las preguntas serán sobre sus experiencias con los autobuses de Diablos Rojos, su identidad como panameño y otras cosas

relacionadas con la cultura y su vida. Usted es libre de elegir si acepta o no cualquiera de los siguientes:

- Audio de la entrevista de que se grabe
- Vídeo de la entrevista que se grabe
- Sus declaraciones que se citan directamente en nuestro proyecto
- Su nombre se utilizará en nuestro proyecto

La información que usted acepta proporcionar puede ser incluida en nuestro informe final.

Esta entrevista es totalmente voluntaria. No está obligado a participar. Si decide participar, puede responder a cualquier pregunta en la medida en que se sienta cómodo, omitir cualquier pregunta o retirarse en cualquier momento. En caso de que desee agregar o retirar cualquier parte de su entrevista más adelante, puede comunicarse con nuestro grupo a través de WhatsApp o mensaje de texto en 508-834-2320 o por correo electrónico en gr-diablosrojosa23@wpi.edu.

¿Tienes alguna pregunta?

Appendix B: Equipment List

We used the following equipment to record audio, video, and take photographs:

- Camera: Canon EOS R10
- Camera: Canon EOS Rebel T3
- Camera: Canon EOS 70D
- Camera: GoPro Hero 8
- Camera: GoPro MAX
- Manfrotto Tripod
- Audio Recorder: Zoom H5
- Wireless Microphone System: Saramonic Blink 500

Appendix C: Interviewees

We immensely thank the following people who were interviewed for this project:

- **Piri**, a Diablo Rojo artist based in Pacora.
- **Mr. De Leon**, a Diablo Rojo driver based in Pacora.
- **David**, a former Diablo Rojo driver and current Holiday Inn driver
- **Robert**, a Diablo Rojo driver who drives routes to Colón.
- **Victor**, a mechanic based in Pacora.
- **Óscar Melgar**, a Diablo Rojo artist based in Panama City
- **Thelmo Junior & Senior**, bus drivers at Race Day
- **Luis Carlos**, a former secrete and current chauffeur
- **Ninoshka Salado**, a representative of MiBus (a partner of MetroBus)
- **Farah Ureña Alcaldía**, an architect and urban planner for Panama City
- **Peter Szok**, Author of *Wolf Tracks*
- **Aarti Madan**, WPI professor and expert on Latin American street art