Creating Positive Social Impact through History Exhibitions:
The Social Construction of Race and the Building of the Panama Canal
by Jonathan Goldman

B.A. in Asian Studies: China Emphasis, 05/2008, Occidental College
B.F.A in Art Direction and Design for Social Impact, 12/2010, Art Center College of Design

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Thesis directed by
Clare Brown
Program Head, Master of Arts in Exhibition Design
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Abstract

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This paper uses the proposal for an exhibition entitled *Building a Canal, Constructing Race: Prejudice and Labor in the Panama Canal Zone* to explore a new framework for which museums create exhibitions: to promote active and positive social change, specifically through history exhibitions. This is accomplished by questioning the true purpose of exhibitions and exploring topics that include design for social impact, precedents for conversations about social issues in museums, as well as empathy building practices and theory. By utilizing this multi-disciplinary perspective on exhibition production, the proposal for this exhibition not only tracing the history of laborers building the Panama Canal, but also includes a more primary narrative on the social construction of race in order to serve a contemporary audience and address contemporary issues through a history exhibition.
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What is your race? No it’s not. Why? Because I say so.

**Introduction**

This paper and exhibition proposal aims to explore how exhibitions can be sites for live-in-the-moment-social impact by proactively exploring ways in which visitors can be given opportunities to have a more direct, compassionate experience with the history on display. By analyzing how race was determined and constructed by the American government in Panama during the building of the canal will provide visitors with the opportunity to have an empathic experience and to directly explore notions of racial construction.

Using history as a means of reflecting upon past tragic events in society with the objective to “learn from our mistakes” and prevent future generations from repeating the misdeeds of past generations is not an original concept. However, this process is often a passive intellectual endeavor in which negative histories are highlighted and explained in full detail, and people are then expected to have learned from this and not repeat it.

Much like how great works of science-fiction present contemporary problems in a futuristic or alternative environment so that the audience has the freedom to explore these issues in a less defensive context, history exhibitions of social impact may also be able to employ stories of the past to explore contemporary issues in such a way that visitors can more objectively explore contemporary social issues in a non-confrontational way. It is the idea behind this paper that in accomplishing this, historical exhibitions are more inclusive, approachable, relatable, and effective in promoting positive change in the world.

In order to produce an “exhibition of social impact,” it is necessary for compassion and empathy building to become the primary objective of the exhibition. The actual history
becomes the vehicle with which empathy may be generated. It is my belief that any history can be explored from an endless array of perspectives. Museums have an obligation to select a perspective that contributes to enhancing the lives of the museum’s contemporary audience. It is not enough anymore to say that museums present textbook-like overviews of history so that people will learn, but instead museums are obligated as authority figures in society to push society forward with new ideas and constructive and overt learning experiences that benefit society.

In this framework, history and objects become the medium with which society may transmit moral and ethical codes, and museums are uniquely poised to promote such ideals with tools that are extremely relatable to every human being. By harnessing true histories and real objects museums evoke a sense of authenticity that other institutions and popular media lack. The proposed exhibition in this paper, *Building a Canal, Constructing Race: Prejudice and Labor in the Panama Canal Zone*, is a case study on employing this idea in exhibits for social impact in museums. The history of the Panama Canal is, like all histories, extremely complex and multi-faceted. By selecting a single narrative within the complete history, this exhibition will address one contemporary social issue among the many histories in the construction of the Panama Canal.

**Exhibition Mission**

*Building a Canal, Constructing Race* aims to reveal to visitors the socially constructed nature of race by telling the story of segregation during the construction of the Panama Canal by the American government. Specifically, through the eyes of white Spanish and white European workers that were not treated equally to their white U.S. citizen counterparts during
a period of severe segregation in the United States. By focusing on this unique story and by providing interactive or compelling “teachable moments” about race, the exhibition offers a new perspective to visitors on their own identity as well as on how society creates artificial classifications for groups of people. In a larger context, the exhibition seeks to promote a more tolerant and equitable community through direct social impact in the museum.

Through a compelling storyline and thoughtful interactions, the exhibition aims to provide a panoramic view of daily life in the segregated Panama Canal Zone. Like the railroad used alongside the canal during construction, visitors will metaphorically embark on a journey through a day in the life of the Spanish workers, “stopping” in multiple zones recreating a sense of the different physical environments in the Canal Zone and how different races were affected and interacted with each other in these spaces. These “stops” may include the home, digging the canal, recreational facilities, or the commissary, and be manifested through large images, objects, and graphics in staging settings. The exhibition will be a place of acceptance and foster dialogue among visitors, however, it may also place visitors in less-comfortable situations in order to evoke positive dialogue and critical thinking about race and our individual preconceptions of race - including our own race.

In addition to researching the history of the canal, this paper and exhibition proposal requires three areas of deeper exploration of precedence. The first is how social impact can be accomplished through museum exhibitions and design. Next, how race and racial conflict are presented in a museum context. Finally, how empathy is taught and communicated in public settings.
Exhibition Topic Overview

The Panama Canal is a 48 mile ship canal cut through the Isthmus of Panama connecting the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The canal saves ships the trip around the continent of South America, drastically reducing travel time. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt decided that building the canal was “vital and indispensable to the U.S. destiny as a global power with supremacy over both its coastal oceans.”¹ The canal is recognized as an enormous and early symbol of American industrial might, but the project was an extremely arduous and painstaking one that took over a decade to complete.

In the United States at this time, segregation and racial divide dominated the social and economic landscape. These forces reached across borders to Panama, where physical distance and special governmental and administrative mechanisms produced an extremely racially polarized society in the Canal Zone. Aggressive labor recruitment campaigns began in earnest across the world. In the United States, skilled labor was sought after, while unskilled labor was primarily drawn from the West Indies. This skilled versus unskilled workers manifested itself in the Canal Zone through the two payment systems of the “Gold System” and the “Silver System.”² Gold system employees consisted of skilled, white U.S. citizens who were paid higher salaries with gold. Silver system employees consisted of mostly everyone else, including skilled black Americans, “artisan” (i.e. skilled) black non-American workers, unskilled workers, and white non-American workers. On top of this racially and nationally

divided payment system there was also more overt racial segregation. However, in many ways, the terms for Gold System and Silver System became synonymous with race and the ways in which canal laborers fit - or did not fit - into this system create points to more deeply explore the nature of race.

Of the 31,525 West Indians reported in the 1912 Canal Zone census, 23,800 - or about two-thirds of the black population - had received medical treatment in a hospital or reported sick that year. As Julie Greene states in her book *The Canal Builders*, “with the mortality rate vastly higher among West Indians than among white Americans, it becomes clear that death, like everything else in the Zone, was highly racialized.” This is in sharp contrast to the white American skilled labor force that lived in relative luxury. Though often disgruntled themselves with the harsh nature of building a canal through tropical Panama, Gold System employees lived in hotels and much nicer housing in towns with proper sanitation measures. They also had access to higher quality food and food services as well as greater recreational facilities, like the YMCA.

European workers, predominately Spanish workers – of which there were over 4,000 during the construction of the canal – occupied a racially ambiguous position in the Canal Zone as “white” people employed under the Silver System. When convenient, European workers were at different times referred to in different racial terms – “semi-white” sometimes and at other times “white,” mostly when compared to West-Indians. The Spanish workers did

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7 Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 161-3, 396
not speak English and were regarded by Americans as inferior to themselves, while superior to West Indians. Spanish workers were given somewhat preferential treatment compared to the West Indians, however, because they were on the Silver System they often had to interact in communal living, eating, recreational, or working situations. As self-identified white people, the Spaniards viewed themselves as better than their black co-workers and sought to be segregated from the West Indians, as well. The U.S. Government attempted to provide separate living areas and mess halls for the West Indians and the Europeans, but this was not always accomplished. Where they could not provide separate areas, conflict and protest arose.  

To further complicate the ambiguous nature of the Spanish identity, one must simply look at the racial identity of the Spanish workers when the crossed the border into Panamanian territory, like Panama City, for leisure. While relating to Panamanians, Spaniards not only spoke their primary language but were also “living representatives of the empire that had colonized: Panama, Colombia, and much of Latin America. As Europeans, they stood high on Panama’s racial hierarchy…”

It is at this point that we can reflect on the artificial nature of race by harnessing the perspective of the Spanish worker in the construction of the Panama Canal. The Spaniards faced an extremely intricate racial identity that fluctuated literally by their geographical or physical location along the Canal and what they were doing. They may have woken up in one place with one racial status, gone to eat and experience another, and then gone out for a drink and experience yet another status within the racial hierarchy in the Canal Zone. The Americans considered them “semi-white,” treating them to conditions often the same as the West Indians.

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and excluding them from the luxurious amenities and recreational facilities reserved solely for white Americas. In contrast, they self-identified as white and often as superior to black people. Finally, they were viewed by the Panamanians as white Europeans with a very high racial status.

Research Methodology

In order to expand the notion of designing exhibitions for social impact, this paper is the culmination of research of both precedents in the museum field, as well as approaches from other disciplines. First is an in depth exploration of the racial and historical context for the audience at the Panama Canal Museum in Panama City. Next is research was conducted into the general discipline of design for social impact and the approach with which it could be applicable to museums. Then are precedents of museum exhibitions that deal with racial and ethnic tolerance are analyzed in terms of what scholarship has deemed successful or not in their approach to create a more tolerant world. Lastly, and perhaps at the core of this paper’s argument, is research on theory and practices for fostering empathy in realtime. The sum of these parts builds a more holistic picture of how museums can incorporate notions of empathy-building and tolerance into museum exhibitions to offer society positive social change inside the museum’s walls.

Site Overview

The Panama Canal Museum (Spanish: Museo del Canal Interoceánico de Panamá), a non-profit museum located in the historic old quarter of Panama City, is dedicated to the
history of the construction of the Panama Canal. The historic museum building was built by
the French in 1874 during their attempt to construct the canal. It later served as corporate
headquarters for both French and American companies, and then as
a government building for the Panamanian government. In 1997,
the building was restored and reopened as the Panama Canal
Museum. Today, the museum is recognized as one of the most
visited and influential museums in Central America and is one of
the few museums in the region to be members of the AAM, ICOM,
and to be Smithsonian Affiliates.

The museum offers a large permanent exhibition as well as
space for multiple temporary exhibitions. Building a Canal,
Constructing Race will be made for the entire first floor of the
museum where the permanent exhibition space stands, since the

10 “Quiénes Somos [Who We Are],” Museo Del Canal Interoceánico De Panamá [The Interocéanic Canal of Panama
12 “Quiénes Somos [Who We Are].”
exhibition aims to create a broad view of the history of laborers constructing the canal.

The current permanent exhibition provides a chron-ological history of the construction of the canal and the handover of the Canal Zone from the United States to Panama - from 1904 to 1977. This new exhibition proposal, in contrast, provides an exciting new narrative structure that is driven more by the individual people that built the canal, their experiences, and the places they lived in. The mission of the museum is protected through this display of history, however, in addition to simply recounting the history of the canal, the experience is further heightened by enlisting history to create a thought-provoking and tolerance-building exhibition by harnessing the ambiguity and artificiality of race along the canal.

Audience Overview

In a general sense, this exhibition is for all Panamanians that are old enough to understand complex ideas about race. One of the greatest benefits of creating this exhibition for Panamanians in the Panama Canal Museum is that visitors will already have a general working knowledge of the history of the canal - as the canal was so closely linked to their independence and current positioning within global economics and politics. This prior knowledge allows for the museum to teach a deeper understanding of the community through the history of the canal because less energy will need to be spent re-explaining the general history of the construction of the canal.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency’s World Factbook, 70% of Panamanians self-identify as Mestizo (mixed Amerindian and white), 14% as mixed Amerindian and mixed West Indian, 10% white, and 6% Amerindian.13 Mestizo is a Latin-American ethnic identity of

mixed race that usually refers to a combination of Spanish and indigenous ancestry. If all Latin American racial identity is to be viewed along a spectrum of lighter skinned to darker skinned peoples, then in the case of Panama approximately 80% of its citizens identify on the lighter skinned side of the spectrum, while the remaining 20% of indigenous or Afro-caribbean descendants fall on the other end of the spectrum. Just by viewing how race is categorized today in Panama, it is evident that the lines between “white” and “black” people are less “black and white” but exist within a more complex series of ethnic and racial categories.

Latin America still faces a high degree of racial inequality and discrimination against Afro-Latinos and indigenous peoples. Additionally, according to the Inter-American Development Bank, “indigenous and Afro-Latin populations in Latin America both suffer from ‘social exclusion’ - or the inability of the social groups to fully participate in the social, political, cultural, and economic spheres of society.” In the context of a society that faces both a more fluid spectrum of race and a high degree of racial inequality, there would be a considerable pressure on the individual to self-identify and promote a self-identity of being as white as possible - whether consciously or subconsciously.

Creating Social Impact

The term “social impact” has become a buzz phrase in our new, eco-conscious society. Yet, it is only very recently that designers have been recognized as holding a skill set that can contribute

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to developing new and innovative ways of transforming our society. This notion holds up the
designer as a humanitarian with a practical skill set and a means to effect positive change in the
world. Designing for social impact can incorporate ideas of sustainability, but can also focus on
the social development and the general improvement of the quality of life for all people.

The first notion in design for social impact is that there is good design and there is
design for good. Allan Chochinov in his foreword for the book Design Revolution states:

“At the start of any worthy design project is a strategic phase… some practitioners call this needs
assessment, some call it problem definition, some call it discovery. But since the best designs
always embody their intentions… what if that intention, from the get-go is aimed toward some
social good? Does that change the product we end up with?”

In a museum context, by establishing design and learning objectives that aim to promote social
good, the ingredients change and the final exhibition will reflect this new goal.

Museum exhibitions may seem off-putting because for some visitors they lack a social
relevance and instead often offer a factual, dry learning experience. James Durston of CNN
writes in his opinion piece Why I Hate Museums:

“‘Vase: Iran; circa 15th century,’ I’m told, time after time, as if this is all I need to know.
As if what isn’t said I should know already.
As if I’m not going to forget every dusty nugget of non-information the moment I walk
away.”

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Durston’s disdain with museums has nothing to do with whether the exhibition or artifacts are presented well, rather it is a deeper frustration at the oversight of explaining why an object is important or significant – the lack of a deeper meaning and purpose for an object’s relevance. Here lies the primary responsibility of an exhibition for social impact. Instead of trying to convey a basic, overall history (i.e. “Iran, circa 15th century”), museums should allow themselves the freedom to convey only the relevant aspect of the object that promotes the core theme of the specific narrative being told. By becoming specific with the relevance of an object, the importance of the object becomes more profound.

In recognizing that history is not absolute and that multiple histories exist when looking at historical events, exhibition producers have the ability to select a perspective that is relevant to contemporary society and enables a more holistic learning experience that pushes society forward. Stephanie Coontz in her New York Times article *Beware Social Nostalgia* explains that “the warm glow of nostalgia amplifies good memories and minimizes bad ones about experiences… In society at large, however, nostalgia can distort our understanding of the world in dangerous ways…”\(^{19}\) It is my assertion that by opting to tell a “general history” rather than a “specific history” – or a singular perspective on a historical time period or event – the messages conveyed by museums become nostalgic rather than relevant.

Take for instance an exhibition on Imperial China or an exhibition on the treatment of women in Imperial China. The former would attempt to explain everything that occurred over many thousands of years in Chinese history, which would prevent it from going into too much detail over specific ideas and would instead be a panoramic overview of a huge topic. The latter would instead create a narrative that would be more specific. This specificity has the

opportunity to create greater relevant, by allowing visitors to trace how the treatment of women has - or has not - changed and been molded over time, extending into their own lives. This exhibition would also have the secondary effect of exploring the history of Imperial China, as well. The ingredients for the Imperial China exhibition are simply that – Imperial China. The alternate exhibition’s ingredients are Imperial China and women’s studies. The final product of an exhibition with more ingredients will inevitable provide a richer and deeper final product.

**Precedents for Racial Tolerance in Exhibitions**

**Maryland Historical Society | Baltimore, Maryland**

This section will explore precedents for talking about race and race relations in museum exhibitions. The first example continues this idea of creating impact in exhibitions through ideas of combating nostalgia and a deeper exploration of the relevance of objects on display.

This image of a display case from the Maryland Historical Society’s exhibition *Mining the Museum* showcases intricate silver pieces alongside slave shackles.²⁰ The case is simply labeled “Metalwork: 1793-1880,” but the association created by overlapping a metal object used to subjugate African-Americans with other metal objects that were produced due to the

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subjugation of African-Americans provides a rich visual explanation of a very specific perspective of the history of “metalwork” from that time period.

This close physical association generates a direct experience where the visitor can explore a unique relationship that heightens one’s understanding of race relations in the United States from this time. The idea of layering and physical associations of objects is a compelling tool in showing the sharp contrasts between different racial experiences. It demonstrates the “why” and “who cares” of the objects on display and clearly articulates the human experience of the time.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | Washington, DC

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides a compelling depiction of the full weight of the tragedy of the Nazi’s persecution and genocide of the Jews. The mission of the museum is to “inspire citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.” While the museum offers rich programming, resources, and temporary exhibitions that confront this, the permanent exhibition, however, does not fully accomplish this mission.

The permanent exhibition, *The Holocaust*, is a linearly arranged historic overview of the Holocaust from 1933 to 1945. While the exhibition is particularly moving and rich, its function as a memorial becomes apparent. Its purpose to provide a space for remembrance

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results in a nostalgic overview arranged in a rigid order. Thomas Laqueur states in his article

*The Holocaust Museum*:

“… the history of the Holocaust is probably not like any other history. Indeed the museum is
predicated on the idea it is not. And yet it is designed to say that with enough objects, linearly
arranged, the ineffable is made manifest.”

For Laqueur, its function as a memorial results in an exhibition that lacks the unfolding of
more subtle histories and insights, resulting in a blunt overview. By relying on an absolute
telling of the entire history, the exhibition lacks a humanistic connection to something tangible
and relevant today.

Laqueur continues to say that:

“… in a deeper sense, this museum stands as an almost pathetic bulwark against the inevitable
passing of the present into the past. Pain, on however unimaginable a scale, dies with those who
suffer it.”

Here, he emphasizes the notion that as a memorial, the history becomes an event that happened
rather than an insight about human nature. This distancing from contemporary society results
in a distancing between the audience and the museum’s intended mission to promote tolerance
and prevent genocide.

As the United States Holocaust Memorial, the need for authenticity is paramount. While some history museums blur the line between the historically authentic and the

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reconstruction in order to give a sense of place, the Holocaust museum does not. Jeffrey Karl Ochsner states:

"Because authenticity is critical for this museum, the division of artifact and reconstruction must be absolute. This division… means that the appropriation of the artifacts to the symbolic context – and therefore, the apparent distancing of the visitor – is particularly strong in the Holocaust Museum.”

By looking at the Holocaust Museum it becomes apparent that in order to provide visitors with an experience of having “experienced” the history, which thereby places objects in a symbolic context for deeper appreciation, exhibitions should refrain from linear, remembrance narratives. By removing objects from their context, exhibitions can become catacombs of historic artifacts that are distanced from the viewer’s contemporary lives, and therefore distanced in practical relevance and application.

**Apartheid Museum | Johannesburg, South Africa**

Left: Entrance to The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa. Right: Signage explaining entrance and visitor experience.

Unlike the Holocaust Museum, the Apartheid Museum in South Africa provides a richer experience of remembering history in novel ways of placing objects in historical contexts. The entrance to the museum, seen here, establishes a mindset for visitors through a simple learning experience of segregated entrances to the museum. Tickets to the museum randomly sort visitors in “white” or “non-white” categories, irregardless of the visitors true race. This interactive learning experience forces visitors to consider their own race, the purpose of the museum, and prepares them for the narrative to follow.

As visitors approach a section of the exhibition on race determination, they must first pass through a section of caged images of identification cards, divided by “non-Europeans” and “Europeans.” This almost poetic dramatization of the physical barriers established by segregation provides a visceral learning experience, where the history is felt rather than imagined. As visitors explore the actual people, they are provided with a more empathic, emotional connection to the history.

The historical reconstruction provided by the Apartheid Museum is not historically accurate. Rather it is evocative of the history. This artistically executed context for the objects and images offers visitors a much closer emotional connection to the history. Here, the weight of murder and legal injustice weighs heavily on the objects displayed in the cases. The museum
is not attempting to say “this is what an apartheid jail looked like” but rather a sense of feeling imprisoned. This experiential context – not re-creation – is a compelling tool for overlapping histories and narratives to provide a richer appreciation of the objects and the story. Additionally, as seen in this image and as explained by C. Creig Crysler, the “views within the exhibition make visitors part of the display, enframing them as both captors and prisoners.”

The Apartheid Museum concludes with an exhibit on voting booths and the contemporary state of an equal South Africa. While this is overtly an attempt at state building, the museum is “as much an allegory for the presumed benefits of privatized and ‘unbundled’ public services in the present, as it is a story of past wrongs made right.” Unlike the Holocaust Museum, the Apartheid Museum’s permanent exhibition directly connects the present with the past and enables visitors to view history in such a way as to highlight their present. Crysler concludes by stating that “…experiential history is offered as a way through to a timeless, universal humanity…”

The true context for the history then becomes contemporary society. This rigorous push-and-pull between “what happened” and “what is happening” is key to conveying a more universal truth about humanity, which, in the end, is more compelling, relatable, and relevant.

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Creating Empathic Experiences

Empathy, or the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is an essential component of generating social change. To enlist the support of society in a cause that does not directly impact their own lives, members of society must first be able to understand the situation of others. Ultimately, individuals need to recognize the larger, social perspective: that the suffering of any member of society is actually their own suffering. Lauren Christine Phillips explains that empathy consists of two components: identification and imagination.

“Identification is the connection of care between who we are and whom we see before us. Through imagination, our perception of the other becomes our reality. Our imagination creates a conscious choice to act with care or without.”

It is in the intersection of this identification and imagination that empathy becomes a reality. Though writing from the perspective of a school educator, Phillips continues to say that:

“It is our job as educators to offer a different view of reality… one based on the possibility of what can be created within each child. The life of the child, not the subject being taught, should be the focus of the school.”

When translating this idea into the museum field, we can recognize that an alternative approach to exhibitions may be available. Establishing that providing a transformative and empathic experience for each individual visitor as the primary goal of the museum, rather than the teaching of a history, is a legitimate choice. Once accepted, this mode of thinking creates the necessity for museum exhibitions to forge a connection between what Phillips calls


identification and imagination. Museums, by their very nature, do the “identification” part of this equation very well. However, it is the imagination aspect that is usually lacking, or deemed less necessary.

Museums do have great potential to provide both identification and imagination, which make them such exciting prospects for sites of social change. Terry Barrett of Ohio State University has explored how post-modern, Constructivist notions of education can be applied to the museum. Barrett advocates the notion that learning is not best achieved with an authoritative position of absolute knowledge, but rather should “encourage visitors to build their own understanding of what they see in ways personally relevant to their own lives.”

This idea is core to the promotion of imagination in the museum and establishing empathy. Museums can choose to provide experiences – perhaps, particularly through interactives – that are more open-ended. These learning experiences should allow visitors to explore an idea rather than conveying an “absolute truth,” thus providing visitors the ability to form their own conclusions and personal relationships to the idea through their own unique life experiences. This is empathy.

Crysler, when considering the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Apartheid Museum, explains that:

“Historical experience reaches its climax as emotional experience, which is rendered as a symptom of larger spiritual themes (evil and good, loss and redemption, pain and joy)… [which] suggest that if the layers of historical trauma are peeled away, one will be left with the shimmering, but ghostly essence that is common to all.”

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It is precisely this larger, emotionally-compelling component of the museum experience that allows visitors to each detach from the specific history and instead engage in their own empathic experiences that recognize a more universal truths of the human condition. Though, as explained earlier, some museum experiences are more compelling than others, the attempt is none-the-less there.

Through these ideas, it is possible to formulate a checklist for generating empathic and impactful museum exhibitions:

- **Identification**: continuing to provide traditional museum explorations of history or ideas through tangible facts and objects.
- **Imagination**: adding components with open-ended explorations of ideas or concepts.
- **Self-guided learning opportunities**: empowering visitors to form their conclusions and develop connections between the historical experience on display and what is relevant in their own personal experiences.
- **Emotional experience**: allowing learning to take place on an emotional level rather than only on an intellectual level.

In addition to promoting social change, value-based museum experiences may also help promote museums and justify public funding. With declining budgets, providing a justification to receive government and public funding for museums in increasingly important. Carol Scott in her article *Using “Values” to Position and Promote Museums*, explains that governments are increasingly feeling pressure to address impact in a period of rapid social change.
“Globalization, cultural diverse populations, growing inequality, declining social trust, and rising civil disobedience are perceived to have impacted negatively on traditional notions of connectedness, citizenship, and social cohesion... accelerated social change challenges governments to envisage a new civic realm that promotes social trust, cooperation, and community well-being.”

By positioning the museum as a site of state-building through increased “social trust, cooperation, and community well-being,” governments can find added value in supporting the museum industry. From the perspective of government (or any donor), the museum is no longer simply a repository of history and knowledge, but rather a critical community site for promoting positive social values and sense of cohesion.

**Learning Goals**

The primary learning goal is to have visitors become more self-aware of their own racial identity – regardless of their race. All racial groups should leave with a heightened awareness of the socially constructed nature of their identities and will hopefully have an experience that will lead to a more complex understanding and conscientious awareness of race and identity.

Through this complication of race, visitors will hopefully gain an insight into the artificiality of their identity that can lead to a deeper appreciation and compassion for other racial groups in society. By confronting head-on the story of a group of Spanish workers, contemporary white and Mestizo people may be more self-aware of how white identity can be taken for granted. It can be easy for members of the majority to think of race only in terms of the minority. This exhibition aims to allow white identity to become as constructed and complex as any other racial identity, which

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offers all visitors a chance to feel personally connected to the subject matter of segregation and racism. By releasing the individual from pre-determined racial constraints, all people may also become more able to generate a self-identity that is more authentic to themselves and less controlled by society’s expectations for their racial identity. In other words, visitors may feel more able to be themselves instead of what society thinks they should be.

The other learning goal is to understand how race affected the daily lives of the white, Spanish workers and their fellow laborers. For instance, Spanish workers lived in white housing, but were excluded from white recreational facilities and were paid on the same system as black people. By following the “railroad station” model for this exhibition, visitors are presented with the opportunity to have a richer understanding of the experience of building the canal, rather than acquiring knowledge about the history of the canal.

Content Narrative

Overview

The most recent permanent exhibition of the Panama Canal Museum in Panama City is a chronological exploration of the canal’s history. Each section is organized in pockets to explain a specific facet of the canal like “Telecommunications and the Canal (1855-1930)” or “Building Systems (1904-1914).”³³ By dividing the history of the canal into sections based on diverse aspects of the canal, the entire exhibition lacks an alternative message instead of a general overview of

³³ “Quiénes Somos [Who We Are].”
the canal building era. This proposal argues that by being more specific about the overall perspective with which the history is told, the exhibition can not only provide an overall history of the canal but also provide relevant insights into modern racism and race construction.

The current exhibition appears to have been organized by first generating a list of important facets of the canal and then trying to organize those facets into a chronological order. The force that binds the disparate areas of the exhibition is time. In my proposal, I am removing time as an organizing element and instead generating a list of potential physical environments along the Canal Zone (across the entire span of its construction from 1904-1914) in which laborers spent their time and then showcase the artificiality of race.

These physical spaces include (in no particular order):

1. Silver System worker accommodations
2. Gold System worker recreational facilities
3. The digging of the canal along the Culebra Cut
4. The construction of the locks
5. Silver System worker mess halls
6. The train and the railroad
7. The commissary
8. Panama City, Panama

Each “location” in the exhibition will explore that specific physical environment of the canal building project across time. The sections will all have primary anchoring objects that best express that location, arranged in a way that evokes the space it represents. Around these
objects, the space will explore not just the history of that site through supporting objects, but also add layers of information that explore the racial dynamics of the time in that space. By comparing and contrasting how race impacted the laborers differently in the different settings, visitors are empowered to empathize with the laborers as well as see how race is fluid and socially constructed.

Sections

Silver System worker housing can be expressed perhaps best through Cirio Camp, which until 1911 was occupied exclusively by Spanish workers and their families. In early 1911, a large group of Barbadians were assigned to the settlement. The Spanish residents petitioned for their removal, sighting “sanitary and moral conditions,” but the government did not remove the Barbadians.34 This section of the exhibition could express both the living conditions of the silver system workers, as well as begin to show the

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34 Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 170
complex racial identity of the Spanish workers in relation to both the white Americas (here, the government) and their West Indian co-workers.

Instead of showing white, American housing, which would be another housing area, it would be better to explore the recreational facilities provided for white American workers on the Gold System. By seeing the relative luxury of these spaces, their better housing conditions can be inferred and immediate relationships can be drawn between silver worker facilities and Gold System amenities. A YMCA clubhouse expressed the government’s attempt to attract and retain highly qualified white, American workers, and can suggest to visitors how many Americans living in the Zone found it greatly important to “create a respectable and civilized domestic sphere.” The contrast between the YMCA and Cirio Camp expresses the radically unequal and segregated conditions along the canal.

The Culebra Cut was the most tedious, dangerous, and difficult part of the canal to dig. Culebra (Spanish for snake) was a winding route through a mountain pass that cut across the path of the canal. At 295 feet above sea level, it was the lowest point through the mountains. Previous attempts to construct the canal by the French called for this pass to be dug down to sea level - and had gone bankrupt trying to, where as the Americans were engineering great

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locks to raise ships up and down along the canal. Still, it was necessary to excavate a great path through the pass. The Americans enlisted the newly developed Bucyrus Steam Shovel, which could excavate 5 cubic meters of dirt at a time.\textsuperscript{37} Theodore Roosevelt, during his trip to the Canal Zone, posed inside one of these steam shovels - which at the time represented American industrial might and engineering superiority. Workers were tasked with “making the dirt fly” by the American government and workers were forced to worked in treacherous and grueling conditions. It is here at this site of canal digging that racial classification in the gold and silver systems are most evident. The gold system engineer operated the steam shovel while “gangs” of silver system workers that were grouped by their nationality shoveled and removed the dirt from the site onto train cars that hauled the dirt away to the coasts. Skilled workers on the Gold System were foremen or engineers that oversaw skilled silver workers or groups of unskilled workers. Here, we could also see the European laborers working in the same conditions as the unskilled West Indian laborers. The racial segregation of the Canal Zone was constructed based on working classifications, so the worksite becomes the primary place to see the specific and unique racial construction of the Canal Zone.

The construction of the locks, like the digging of the canal, shows racial division as expressed through working classification and statutes. However, unlike the digging section, the

\textsuperscript{37} Parker, \textit{Panama Fever}, 281.
locks and dam of the canal were subcontracted to American private companies.\textsuperscript{38} This area of the exhibition not only shows the scale of the project through the construction of, at the time, unprecedented industrial feats of engineering, but it also can offer visitors with perhaps some insight into the “why” of it all. In other words, it represents the nationalist forces of American empire and industrial domination.

Similarly to the example of Cirio Camp, the Spanish mess hall built in the town of Bas Obispo can be used to show Silver System conditions as well as racial tensions and ambiguity among workers. Workers were assigned specific seats in the mess hall, but in March of 1907, a Spanish worker sat out of place. A West-Indian worker told him to move his seat and the Spanish worker stood up on the table and shouted, “Kill the negroes.” A riot broke out and the server was beaten up.\textsuperscript{39} This example can show many aspects of segregated life along the canal, including the poor quality of food for the workers, the nationality-based segregation among the silver workers, the riots and protests instigated by the Spanish workers on the silver workforce, and a further exploration of the complex mixing of issues surrounding race, nationality, and ethnicity.

As the canal was not yet completed, the sole means of traveling along the Canal Zone was by rail. It is not as if there was one place where everyone lived and another where everyone worked. All inhabitants in the Zone were spread across the entire length of the canal and the railroad became an integral part of Canal Zone life. The railroad system can be used to express three important attributes. The first is again the scale of the project, only this time portrays how large the geographic area involved in the construction of the canal was. Across

\textsuperscript{38} Greene, \textit{The Canal Builders}, 74.

\textsuperscript{39} Greene, \textit{The Canal Builders}, 159.
the entire length of the canal there were towns, governmental districts, entertainment areas, and work sites - which were racially divided. Secondly, the transportation system itself was segregated with specific cars for different classes, which offered varying degrees of comfort (and dignity). And finally, wages were distributed from trains on payday along the Zone, and this facet of canal life provides a great opportunity to explore the intricate payment scales through which racial segregation was expressed through the complex and unequal Gold and Silver Systems.

The commissary will perhaps be one of the smaller sections of the exhibition, but it is still an important aspect of the story. As seen on the image on the next page, the commissary had segregated entrances - one marked “gold” and one marked “silver” - that parallels the segregation of Jim Crow laws in the mainland of the United States. The commissary could not only shed light into what objects or items may have been available (or not available) for those living in the Zone, but also the overt segregation of those who were not white Americans. Here, “gold” and “silver” most overtly become interchangeable with “white” and “colored.” By further exploring the Spanish workers interaction with these spaces, we can directly see the artificiality and constructed nature of the Spanish worker’s racial identity in the Zone.

Finally, Panama City – a city outside of the Canal Zone in Panama serves as an opportunity to explore both the relationship between the Panamanians and the Americans as
well as the ambiguous nature of the Spanish laborer’s racial status in the eyes of the Panamanians, as explained above.

Design Narrative

Visitors will immediately be confronted with an entrance treatment inspired by the museum entrance to the Apartheid Museum in South Africa. In order to enter the exhibition, visitors will encounter two entrances labeled “white” and “colored” in reference to the gold (i.e. American and white) and silver (i.e. non-American or white) system. However, unlike the Apartheid Museum, the gold door will be obstructed or closed so that all visitors must pass through the “silver” entrance. This initial confrontation and lack of racial choice will set the tone for the entire exhibition.

The exhibition will be a constant push-and-pull between utilizing materials of the time and place (crates, woods, concrete, metal) with modern materials such as white plastic. This balance will also be seen visually in the graphics through a large array of monochromatic and faded historical imagery combined with modern graphic treatments. Most of the exhibition will be monochromatic with accent colors that perhaps reflect the early 20th Century. See appendix 4 for representations of this visual concept.

Each section of the exhibition, as described above, will feature central, key objects that establish a sense of place and explain that area of the canal’s construction. Both intellectually and physically, the racial context and relations within that specific area will overlay the central objects. This might be accomplished with physical devices such as screens, angled projections, or techniques like pepper’s ghost. Though not in every section, historic music, singing, or
sound may be added to support a visitor’s sense of place. As visitors revolve around the central objects, they will be offered the opportunity to see how race was specifically constructed in that location.

One specific way this is accomplished is through a digital interactive in which visitors approach a touchscreen podium and have an image of their hand taken. Then, another visitor’s hand appears on the screen and they select adjectives on the screen to describe how they would judge the hand on the screen. The hand was selected as a less sensitive area of the body that can still convey a lot of potential qualities of a person. Some adjectives may include: rich, poor, lazy, hardworking, etc… The interactive is located in a central area in which visitors exploring various areas about the different racial groups of laborers keep returning to the interactive, reinforcing the idea that even though the exhibition is about historic prejudice, we continue to judge and categorize people to this day. At the end of the exhibition, visitors may retrieve the image of their own hand and see how other visitors judged them during their time in the exhibition – all in the hopes of generating empathy and initiating dialogue.

To further the sense of place, the staging of objects may be reinforced with digital backdrops that connote the context of where the objects are from, without it being a recreation. The concept drawing in appendix 5 is a good example of a possible execution of the space, showing the push and pull between old aesthetics (monochromatic images, old artifacts, old materials, etc.) and modern aesthetics (digital touch walls, projections, layering, etc). Here, the layering of the multiple narratives – building the canal, labor, and race – are all present and are visually interacting and overlap one another.

Since the exhibition is not arranged in a linear chronology, it is instead more like a “day-in-the-life.” Through lighting, color choice, and emotional weight of the content, the
exhibition will subtly reflect a transition from morning until evening with the end of the exhibition perhaps at the very beginning of dawn the following day. This is not a literal morning to night, but rather an emotional path to support the narrative.

Conclusion

This new framework for exploring the history of the canal – one that traces race across space rather than events across time – provides a more relevant experience for visitors. The exhibition becomes centered around the daily life of real people and their struggles and complex interactions rather than governmental decisions or events from the perspective of those with decision-making powers. The same material can be covered in both versions, but this version is more humanistic and visitors are offered a chance to see the history through the eyes of ordinary people and their experiences.

This approach is perhaps more accessible for visitors to better empathize and imagine what they would do in a similar situation. Since the content is approached in a humanistic way, visitors are given the opportunity to explore ideas of racial construction and may be more open to seeing that aspect of the canal’s history, have greater empathy for those represented in the history of the canal, and hopefully leave with a greater appreciation for the artificiality of race – both in the past and in their present. In the end, this empathy building within the walls of the exhibition is the museum’s contribution to promoting a more tolerant society.

What is your race?
Appendix 1: Bibliography


Appendix 2: Detailed Topic Overview

Before the Americans arrived, France began construction on the canal in 1881 when Panama was province of Colombia. The French, led by the builder of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps, attempted to build a sea level canal without locks. The French underestimated the demands of constructing such a deep canal and by 1889 the project had gone bankrupt and work suspended. The French left the territory, leaving behind a great deal of equipment and laborers.40 With the site abandoned, the building of an inter-ocean canal seemed beyond the technological abilities of the time.

U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt quickly decided that building the canal was “vital and indispensable to the U.S. destiny as a global power with supremacy over both its coastal oceans.”41 The United States stepped in and drafted a treaty with the nation of Colombia to lease the land later to be known as the Panama Canal Zone for 99 years. The American senate ratified the treaty in 1903, but the Colombian government rejected it.42 Roosevelt’s government quickly instigated a revolution with the support of Panamanian independence activists. An American warship and military presence supported a bloodless revolution that began at sunrise and ended by sunset. The Americans negotiated with the new nation the rights to the Panama Canal Zone – a 10 mile wide stretch of land along the path of the canal – in exchange for maintaining a military presence in the freshly independent nation.43 America has effectively


43 “American Canal Construction.”
created a colony in Panama and the American construction era of the Panama Canal began in 1904 and ended a decade later in 1914.

In the United States at this time, segregation and racial divide was active and alive. These forces reached across borders to Panama, where physical distance and special governmental and administrative mechanisms allowed for an extremely racially polarized society in the Canal Zone. While aggressive labor recruitment campaigns began in earnest across the world. In the United States skilled labor was sought after and unskilled labor was primarily drawn from the West Indies. This distinction between skilled and unskilled workers manifested itself in the Canal Zone through the two payment systems of the “Gold System” and the “Silver System.” Gold system employees consisted of skilled, white U.S. citizens who were paid higher salaries with gold. Silver system employees consisted of mostly everyone else, including skilled black Americas, “artisan” (i.e. skilled) black non-American workers, unskilled workers, and white non-American workers. On top of this racially and nationally divided payment system there was also more overt racial segregation.

At the height of the canal construction over 30,000 West Indian workers of African decent lived in the Canal Zone. These workers faced dangerous and inhumane conditions. There was a high death rate from disease and work-related accidents. Black laborers lived in housing “camps” with inadequate insulation, window coverings to prevent mosquitos from coming in, dismal food service, and stagnant, mosquito-breeding pools of water. Jacob Markel, a food supplier from Omaha, noted that West Indians were fed with the scraps and

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leftover bits of food, which was condensed into a soup or stew. He remarked that this slop was “just the same as we do for our hogs out on the farm. The only difference I could see between the way they fed those negroes and the way I feed my hogs is that the food was put on a tin plate instead of in a trough.”47 These subpar conditions were not just unequal but also led to endless problems with disease.

Of the 31,525 West Indians reported in the 1912 Canal Zone census, 23,800 - or about two-thirds of the black population - had received medical treatment in a hospital or reported sick that year. As Julie Greene states her book *The Canal Builders*, “with the mortality rate vastly higher among West Indians than among white Americans, it becomes clear that death, like everything else in the Zone, was highly racialized.”48

In sharp contrast, the white, American skilled labor force that lived in relative luxury. Though often disgruntled themselves with the harsh nature of building a canal through tropical Panama, gold system employees lived in hotels and much nicer housing in towns with proper sanitation measures. They had access to higher quality food and food services as well as greater recreational facilities, like the YMCA.49 People were segregated across the entire canal zone and encampments and towns sprang up, each specifically tailored to different classes. Just by comparing typical West Indian housing to the American headquarters town of Balboa it is clear that much less care was afforded to the silver system workers. Shared spaces, such as the

commissaries, were also segregated with separate entrances for black and white customers. On the surface, the hierarchy engineered to maintain American domination over the project was perhaps a reflection of America’s effort to become the world’s greatest power - in addition to the blatant racism of the time.

While the Gold versus Silver system and segregation may seem simply a division of black versus white workers, there was an extremely large grey area of race and class divisions. While in the American mainland race was more obvious and nationality not a factor, the international profile of the population in the Canal Zone had a dramatic effect on the segregation of the population. The silver system was actually subdivided into a complex sub-hierarchy to compensate for the varying skill set and national or racial identities of the silver workers. Skilled West-Indians were never referred to as skilled, but rather “artisans” and received a higher silver wage - as did black American citizens and white, European unskilled laborers.50 This all had the effect of balancing the American need for supremacy of the white American worker as a gold system employee while also managing to impose a segregated society in a complex and internationally diverse community.

European workers, predominately Spanish workers of which there were over 4,000 of during the construction of the canal,51 occupied a racially ambiguous position in the Canal Zone as “white” people employed under the silver system. When convenient European workers were referred to as “semi-white” and other times “white”, mostly when compared to West-Indians.52 The Spanish workers did not speak English and were regarded by Americans as inferior to themselves, while superior to West Indians. Spanish workers were given somewhat

52 Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 161-3, 396
preferential treatment compared to the West Indians, however, because they were on the silver system they often had to interact in communal living, eating, recreational, or working situations. As self-identified white people, the Spaniards viewed themselves as better than their black co-workers and sought to be segregated from the West Indians, as well. The U.S. Government attempted to provide separate living areas and mess halls for the West Indians and the Europeans, but this was not always accomplished. Where they could not provide separate areas, conflict and protest arose.\(^{53}\)

To further complicate the ambiguous nature of the Spanish identity, one must simply look at the racial identity of the Spanish workers when the crossed the border into Panamanian territory, like Panama City, for leisure. While relating to Panamanians, Spaniards not only spoke their primary language but were also “living representatives of the empire that had colonized Panama, Colombia, and much of Latin America. As Europeans, they stood high on Panama’s racial hierarchy…”\(^{54}\)

It is at this point that we can reflect on the artificial nature of race by harnessing the perspective of the Spanish worker in the construction of the Panama Canal. The Spaniards faced an extremely intricate racial identity that fluctuated literally by where they were along the Canal and what they were doing. They may wake up in one place with one racial status, go to eat and experience another, and then go out for a drink and experience yet another status within the racial hierarchy in the zone. The Americans considered them “semi-white,” treated with conditions often the same as the West Indians and excluded from the more luxurious amenities and recreational facilities reserved solely for white Americas. In contrast, they self-


\(^{54}\) Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 171.
identified as white and often as superior to black people. Finally, they were viewed by the Panamanians as white Europeans with a very high racial status.
Appendix 3: Look and Feel

Headlines in the typeface called Showcase and the rest in a clean, modern slab serif like Univers or Avenir. Color palette is in grays with pops of bold color.
## Appendix 5: Object Matrix – Key Objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THUMBNAIL</th>
<th>OBJECT INFO</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Interviews with workers from the canal.</td>
<td>Many recorded interviews with Canal builders by the University of Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Image of “silver system” (aka colored) canal workers</td>
<td>Shows segregation and conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Spanish workers in “silver system” images</td>
<td>Shows white, Spanish workers in segregated conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Image of segregated entrances to government-run Commissary</td>
<td>Shows overt segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>YMCA lounge for “gold workers” (aka white workers)</td>
<td>This shows the much better conditions for white, American workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>Topographical map of Canal construction</td>
<td>This image shows the incredible feat that the canal project was</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THUMBNAIL</td>
<td>OBJECT INFO</td>
<td>NOTES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>Teddy Roosevelt visits the canal - first time abroad as president</td>
<td>Shows the close American government oversight and complicity with segregation policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>Worker transportation train (train - not image)</td>
<td>This shows the disregard for silver worker conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>The steam shovel used to dig the canal</td>
<td>A whole story of race can be told by recreating a setting with shovel and train. The gold workers operated the shovels while silver workers shoveled dirt into trains and other manually-inten-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>Dirt removal trains</td>
<td>Integral part of process carrying dirt to coast - eventually enough to build cities on. Could accompany steam shovel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>Spanish workers digging canal image</td>
<td>Images like this could create a discussion about how even though they were considered colored, the workers all formed nation-based cliques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Image]</td>
<td>Advertisement to enlist workers in United Kingdom</td>
<td>Advertisements and contracts can be used to show the (sometimes false) promises made to potential workers on the canal and the different payment systems for different nationalities of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THUMBNAIL</td>
<td>OBJECT INFO</td>
<td>NOTES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Application form for black worker to canal</td>
<td>National Archives - Silver worker union leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song - “God Specializes” - Poem turned hymn</td>
<td>Became the most popular song among Canal workers to sing on the job. Lyrics talk about cutting through mountains and traversing great lands.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of the Panama Pacific International Expo, 1915</td>
<td>An overt display of American industrial supremacy at the time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic illustrations</td>
<td>To help answer the initial question: why build the canal in the first place?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>