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# MI PUEBLITO: ICON OF RESISTANCE OR IDENTITY CRISIS?

Teresa

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*Who is Panama? Deconstructing Panamanian monumentality, this article seeks to index problems in recent attempts to construct a Panamanian national identity. Whether conscious obliteration, or memory loss: blindness prevails.*

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Photo by Tomas van Houtryve

Scarcely more than a year before the sovereignty of Panama was to be realized through the hand over of the U.S.-held Panama Canal Zone, a monument to Panamanian culture, Mi Pueblito, was erected in Panama City. Deliberately located, the site of Mi Pueblito is in the liminal area between the American-established Canal Zone and the neighborhood of Chorrillo, the area of the city that was leveled by bombing during President Bush's "Operation Just Cause." Built at the dawn of Panamanian independence from U.S. Imperialism, the monument attempts to answer the question that was soon to be on every Panamanian's lips, "Who are we?" Responding to a history of outside domination, and to ardently anticipated sovereignty, the monument stands in defiance of many of the forces that have played a dominant role in molding Panamanian identity. The following dedication greets visitors upon entrance to the site:

*Monument to the three cultures dedicated to the Indigenous, Colonial, and Afro-Caribbean ethnicities that, united under a crucible of races, produced the Panamanian nationality. Mi Pueblito, The Indigenous Village, The Afro-Caribbean Village, project of the administration of Mayor Mayín Correa, set within the glorious folds of Mount Ancón. Eternal symbol of the rebelliousness of the generations that reconquered complete sovereignty in the Panama Canal.*

November 26, 1998



Panama's identity, like its history, is neither simple nor linear. Its simultaneously blessed and cursed situation as a land bridge between two oceans has made the small Isthmus of utmost importance in global matters—a land condemned to be both coveted and damned at every turn. Eduardo Galeano's maxim that "places privileged by nature have been cursed by history" rings nowhere so true as in Panama.

Compared to the other Latin American nations, Panama's purpose was slow to be recognized and realized. As an isolated and densely jungled province of Colombia, Panama and her abundant indigenous population enjoyed a lengthy respite from the colonizing Spanish. While the rest of Latin America bore more and more colonial marks, Panama went mostly ignored until the idea of a transcontinental passage through the Isthmus caught European fancy. From that point on, Panama became a dreamscape on which European, and later, global nightmare and fantasy were played out.

The construction of the Panama Canal in 1880 was begun by France on Colombian soil in the province of Panama. When the cost of this enterprise claimed far more lives and money than had been anticipated, the French were forced to abandon their only partially finished task, bankrupt and discouraged. Theodore Roosevelt, inspired by recent success in the Spanish-American war and enjoying the U.S.'s position as a new Imperialist force, picked up the pieces after great deliberation, controversy and delay. Geography and design for the canal were such fraught subjects that it was still uncertain where exactly the canal would finally be—in Panama as the French had decided, or in Nicaragua according to popular American support. A colossal eruption of a Nicaraguan volcano claiming 30,000 lives and news of Panamanian interest in secession from Colombia ultimately determined the site of the future canal.

Panama's history is one in which a tug of war, real or imagined, has been played consistently for centuries. The land that has taken war-sized effort to subdue and mold, has only now begun to write its own history. With Panama's land changing from Indigenous, to Spanish, to Colombian, to American, and finally to sovereign hands, and with an imported labor pool representing many more countries, it is no wonder that Panama and the republic's citizens should be at a loss for defining a unified self.

Mi Pueblito, Panama's recent attempt at publicly reifying its national identity since secession from Colombia takes the shape of something between museum and amusement park. Decidedly unauthentic in its Technicolor renderings and cultural appropriations, Mi Pueblito, the Monument to the Three Cultures, is divided into two main areas, on one side of the entrance is Colonial Panama (Mi Pueblito), and on the other are the Indigenous and Afro-Caribbean Panamas. All three of these cultural and geographic representations are meant to pay homage to the respective cultures' roles in defining the nation.

Mi Pueblito is a spatial rendering of a specifically constructed cultural narrative. Each aldea or village has as its centerpiece "traditional" homes and buildings. The Colonial Village is organized around cobble-stoned plazas and courtyards, and features replicas of houses, shops, and a Catholic church. Splashing fountains and chickens pecking food from between the cobbles add to its charm.

While the Colonial influence of Mi Pueblito is meant to be Spanish, it seems to have come by way of Mexico, as icons of the Mexican Virgen de Guadalupe, found in the replicas of homes and churches, figure as prominently as does Jesus Christ. In a gift shop, wood carvings, statuettes, and small paintings of the Virgen de Guadalupe are nestled between glazed mosaics



with at once kitschy and rustic depictions of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles™. American pop music playing from the shop's radio completes the scene of a self-consciously unauthentic nod to Colonialism. The monument's deliberate effort to undermine North American influence in Panama is brought to the foreground through the shards of U.S. culture that inadvertently seep in.

Opposite the Colonial Village lies the unmarked entrance to the Afro-Caribbean Village. This most ambiguous of aldeas brings to mind a carnivalesque New Orleans more than it does anything Central American or Caribbean. Simply rendered murals of turn of the century Black men and women in half-Victorian dress seem wholly out of place on the bright walls of the aldea's Müller building. Black women in brightly colored (African?) dresses fan themselves as they stand languidly around a paltry pastry shop. Upstairs a Black man whose English is notably Caribbean runs a small shop selling stereotypically Afro-Caribbean goods popularized by the Reggae and Rastafari movements. The front of the shop bears a sign reading "1era Casa Africana en Panamá" (First African House in Panama). Across from the Müller building is a decidedly Baptist church—white, wood framed and complete with steeple and stained glass windows. The empty church lacks any religious imagery—it is exclusively its architecture that tells a tale of geography and denomination. It too seems out of place in overwhelmingly Catholic Panama, and even more so without the U.S. Southerners that did bring Baptist churches to the Isthmus.

Passing the candy-colored houses that complete the Afro-Caribbean village is a lovely and lush path leading to Mi Pueblito's Kuna Village. Uncovered by the canopy of trees that leads to this final village is a collection of thatched palapa-style huts built over sand. Some are houses, others are gathering areas, one is a museum, and the busiest of them all is a souvenir shop that sells magnificent molas, crafted by Kuna Indians, alongside mass-produced Hello

Kitty™ jewelry imported from Asia. Authentically dressed Kuna women compliantly stroll the grounds of the Kuna Village while women in jeans and t-shirts sell their wares.

This monument, and the identity it crafts and claims, is historically, spatially, and temporally anomalous. Surrounded on one side by the scars that remain of the U.S. invasion in 1989, and on the other by the manicured lawns at the threshold of the until recently American controlled Canal Zone, Panama's furtive and futile attempt to render a canal-free identity is clear. The omission of the canal from the monument is glaring, and made more stark by the homage to the Afro-Caribbean people, most of whom, as goes unmentioned in *Mi Pueblito*, arrived in Panama from at least a half dozen nations to labor on the canal. There is also no mention of the influence of the French, who authored the canal, the Chinese who provided much of the labor under French direction, or the North Americans who played an important part in the creation of the Panamanian Republic and completion of the canal—those who, at the inauguration of *Mi Pueblito*, were still a major presence in Panama, for better or worse.

With its Colonial architecture, Indigenous Village, and Caribbean influence, *Mi Pueblito*, it seems, is an idealized snapshot of a turn of the century Panama that never was. With both its geography and history selectively represented, *Mi Pueblito* is perhaps a monument to Panama as it stood during the few years after which the French abandoned the canal, and before the Americans took it over. As such, it is a Panama with a foreign labor force, but with no fruits of its labor. If that is the case, however, it is also a provincial Panama that is no nation of its own, but part of Colombia. Without the possibility of a canal, Panama would have seen little support in its secession from Colombia. Even such a selective representation is based more on national imagination than historical fact.



The Spanish Colonialism presented in Mi Pueblito was, in reality, largely confined to Panama City. At the turn of the century, Panama City was Colonial Panama. Although Panama City was very much shaped by Colonialism by the time of French arrival, most of the country had yet to feel the influence of Colonialism. In fact, much of Panama still bears no Colonial markers. At the time of French arrival they were greeted by a land perceived as readily malleable on which they were eager to leave their mark.

Additionally, the Panama of Mi Pueblito is specifically gendered. As in most touristic displays of authenticity, it is performed as female. Of all the actors making up this representation, only one is male. Any other representations of men come in the two dimensional form of the murals found in the Afro-Caribbean village. Gender, thus, is also raced. The only men deliberately included in the display are Black. That men are both largely absent and raced is of particular importance when considering that Panama's gender at the turn of the century (indeed, throughout the nearly half century that the building of the canal spanned) was decidedly male. It was a male work force that was brought in by the thousands. It was only in the last decades of construction (the American phase) that whole families began moving or wives and children were being sent for. As for the labor force, it was overwhelmingly and visibly foreign, but was comprised of people of many nations and races, only some of whom were Afro-Caribbean. Unlike the Americans, however, the Caribbean workers were more easily assimilated by Panamanian culture. The North American influence, on the other hand, was more commercial than cultural and was most visible in the Canal Zone.

Given that Panama's history has long been tied to other nation's ambitions and has been subjected to both Colonialism and Imperialism from Europe and the U.S., the importance of establishing a master narrative of national identity is clear. One is forced to ask, however, how the three cultures represented were chosen. If the

monument is deliberately anti-imperialist, why is it that Colonial culture is honored? Was Spanish Colonialism no more menacing or pervasive than U.S. Imperialism in Latin America?

While it may be safe to argue that Spanish Colonialism has left a greater mark on Latin America than U.S. Imperialism, this is not so for Panama. Because of Panama's isolation, the impenetrability of the land, and the insalubrious environment whose very earth was thought to be diseased, Panama, with exception of its two coastal cities, was largely passed by during the Colonial contest. As a province of Colombia, it too fell to Spanish hands; such control, however, was more implied than felt. Although parts of Panama were explored in the first stages of Spanish Colonialism (with dreams of an Isthmian passage between the oceans as early as the sixteenth century), the better part of Panama was left unsettled and unexplored.

Centuries after Spanish arrival in the Americas, people finally become committed to exploration of the Isthmus as a potential connection between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The first such effort was the U.S. construction of the first transcontinental railroad across the isthmus during the California gold rush. Until the American East and West Coasts were connected by rail, this was the fastest way to get from one end of the U.S. to another. At the time of this undertaking Colombia had already been independent from Spain for several decades.

Because of this, Panama found itself in the unique position of having largely experienced U.S. Imperialism to a greater extent than Spanish Colonialism. By the time Panama was in a position to reckon with its Colonialism, Spain no longer controlled it. As such, Panama encountered Colonialism and Post-Colonialism simultaneously. Spain's influence, it would appear, took a less hegemonic form in Panama than anywhere else in Spanish Latin America. This explains the conspicuously unproblematic



presence of Colonial culture in Panama's utopic vision of self in the form of Mi Pueblito.

As seen through Mi Pueblito's narrative, Spain's influence, although Colonial, is not figured as repressive, but as somehow organically cultural rather than political. Even in the layout of the monument it seems the Colonial village is the most authentically Panamanian of the three, set aside from the exoticized and removed Indigenous and Black communities. The Colonial village, however, is also easy to miss. More closely resembling the recently built Colonial-style neighborhoods than the original stately European architecture of Panama City, one is at first unsure of how this fits into the display. It appears that it is from this village that Panama's official identity is crafted. With mestizo Colonialism in the foreground, the other two villages give the semblance of balance to make such a national identity plausible.

Built on the eve of Panamanian sovereignty, Mi Pueblito heralded the discussion of Panamanian identity that the young nation, and indeed the world, have begun to engage. What it fails to take into account is that, for better or worse, Panama's greatest asset and curse has always been its location between the seas, and with this, the world's ambitions. As it faces its own independence and the responsibilities that come with it, Panama must decide if it is, as one tale of Mi Pueblito tells, a spirited and rebellious nation crafting its identity as an emergence from under Imperialist shadows, or, as can also be inferred, a nation only now confronting a profound crisis of identity and paternity.

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