CHAPTER THREE

THE ‘THREE ROOTS’ OF PANAMA’S CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACIAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THEME PARKS

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How can we become, in a way that is ours, masters of our own space? (Lahens 1998: 156).

In recent times scholars have turned their attention to the study of the extent to which tourism plays a part in cultural reconstruction and nation-building (Handler 1988; Norkunas 1993; Adams 1998; Bruner 2005; Sánchez and Adams 2008). As Sánchez and Adams (2008) note,

Many developing nations, socialist and non-socialist, have turned to tourism as a promising avenue for nation-building. While tourism carries the allure of being a quick way in which to earn hard currency, capital is usually a means for the achievement of a much broader nation-building agenda that may include national integration, strengthening of the state, self-determination (sovereignty), and social equity and justice (2008: 28).

However, tourism as a means for nation-building has the potential for profound contradictions: whereas ideally the conditions necessary for the flourishing of nation-building and nationalism include a culturally homogeneous literate population, ‘capable of authoring and propagating its own history’ (Gellner in Steiner 1997: 676), the conditions necessary for the development of international tourism are that a population be as culturally and ethnically diverse as possible (the ‘ethnic’ or ‘exotic’ Other), and that so-called illiterate populations without a sense of historical knowledge be ‘discovered’ and showcased. In other words, the demands of state nationalism and those of international tourism are in disagreement (Steiner 1997: 676).

On some occasions, displays, events and festivities are aimed at satisfying the requirements of both state nationalism and international tourism. Here I offer an analysis of the exploitation of Panama’s diversity for tourism purposes and the resulting contradictions present in
Panama’s nation-building project. I discuss how culture and authenticity are intricately interconnected with politics and representation in the Latin America of the twenty-first century, where globalism1 and multiculturalism reign. Using an ethnographic case study of simulated cultural representations for tourist consumption in Panama—a country torn between strong nationalist sentiments and aspirations for Western modernity—I discuss how the Panamanian government and Panama City’s authorities recreate, interpret, construct and reconstruct conflicting national and ethnic identities.2

Specifically, I study the creation and use of the theme park officially called Centro Comercial y Turístico Mi Pueblito (‘My Little Town Commercial and Tourism Centre’), which is informally known as Mi Pueblito and is located in the country’s capital (hereafter I use Mi Pueblito when referring to the Centro).3 I focus on the expansive

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1 The term globalism refers to the global racial, economic and historical patterns as instruments of domination and rule (globalization), as well as to resistance, contestation, self-determination and the strong responses from civil society to globalizing phenomena (globalism) (Winant 2004: xvi).

2 In earlier articles, my focus was on the responses of Afro-Antillean and indigenous groups to governmental tourism development (Guerrón Montero 2005a, 2006a). This article centres on the perspective of tourism as a means for nation-building among local and national Panamanian authorities.

3 This study is part of my ongoing research project on the construction of regional and national identities as the Afro-Antilleans of Panama participate in the transnational spaces opened up by tourism and other aspects of globalism. I conducted ethnographic research in the summer of 2002 at the Pueblitos in Panama City. I made a preliminary visit in 2000, a short visit follow-up visit in 2003 and carried out follow-up interviews in 2004. As part of my research, I participated in various artistic events at the centre, interviewed administrative personnel, guides and prominent Afro-Antillean figures, and talked to tourists who visited the centre. In addition, I conducted research in the archives of the municipality of Panama from 2000 to 2002, and in the Simon Bolivar Library of the University of Panama, the Revista Lotería library and the Ernesto Castillero Calvo municipal library. I offer my most sincere thanks to the personnel of the municipality, and especially to Lcda Irasema Rosas de Ahumada, Ms Sonia Brown and Prof. Geraldo Maloney at the Pueblitos; Mr David Lindo and his staff at the Department of Social Communication, Mrs Fernando Valdez, Wilfredo Smith, Oscar Gomez, and Ms Cynthia Garcia in Publicity; and Lcda Anabella Lombardo, from the Afro-Antillean Museum. My sincere thanks go to Juan Carlos Navarro, mayor of Panama City (1999–2009), for generously opening the doors of the municipality for my research. I should like to sincerely thank the Centre on Diversity and Community (CoDaC) at the University of Oregon for a research grant that allowed me to conduct the largest portion of this research. I truly appreciate the invaluable suggestions of Kathleen Adams (University of Loyola, Chicago) and Philip D. Young (University of Oregon). I also thank CEDLA (Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation) for inviting me to the ‘Indigenous Cultures, Heritage and Tourism in Latin America’ conference, where I presented a version of this chapter. My most sincere thanks to