

## Research Report

### FENCES AS PATRONS OF THE RACIST STATE

Pascale Boucicaut

Next August, 2019, Panama City will [celebrate its quincentennial anniversary](#). The year marks the founding of the earliest colonial settlement on the Pacific Coast by Pedrarias Davila, who moved the capitol of the Spanish-controlled isthmus (then called *Castillo de Oro*) to the Southern coast and named it Panamá. I'd heard this history told dozens of times and visited the archaeological ruins of this Spanish colonial city on countless occasions while staying with friends and family who lived nearby. I remember going for long runs in the ruins, unaware of any boundary that kept the old archaeology from the contemporary wooden and cement houses that make up the surrounding neighborhood, both of which are called *Panamá Viejo*.

Today, Panamá Viejo (the ruins) is separated from Panamá Viejo (the neighborhood) by a wire fence. Visitors like me who plan to enter from the north now have to circumvent the entire 32 hectares by foot on the bustling *Via Centenario*, a major thoroughfare that runs through the city without a sidewalk. This is precisely how I traveled last month, when I was escorted there by Sandra,\* during one of my research trips. As a researcher-participant in my project, Sandra agreed to grab a disposable camera and travel with me to photograph heritage sites around the city.

My research on heritage, which maneuvers between the fields of folklore and archaeology, utilizes a black feminist framework to center a racial and gendered analysis of the material expressions of nationhood<sup>1</sup>. In Panama, I wanted to stray from working singularly with heritage “professionals” (those working inside the structures of power that dictate who and what are heritage). This meant engaging primarily with organizations that define, identify, shape and contest black identity, and addressing the positionality of subjects based on gender, age, and class experience<sup>2</sup>. I was also informed by a genealogy of feminist ethnographers, who uproot the traditional distinction between

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\* Names of researcher-participants have been changed.

“researcher” and “subject.”<sup>3</sup> In giving researcher-participants the camera and refraining from dictating what they capture, I am inviting them to become researchers, choosing what subjects are important for consideration, dictating what *is* heritage and why, and producing new materials together with me. As a consequence, many people chose to photograph beyond the registered landmark monuments, focusing on surprising features and materials.

Of the ninety photographs I have now digitized, twenty-two feature fences prominently. This is nearly a quarter of the photos overall and a surprising amount considering the scarcity of photographic space on a Fujifilm “quicksnap” disposable camera. The fences featured aren’t beautiful. They are made of wrought iron, cement, wood, welded and/or barbed wire. They hold diverse temporalities and possess varieties of uses and meanings.

Take the fence around Panamá Viejo (see Boucicaut\_Tinker\_2), the archaeological ruins which date to 1519. The researcher-participant who photographed this site chose not to enter and instead to capture the view from “outside” the fence. This fence was erected last year, along with a new museum and corresponding admission fees (\$10 for Panamanian adults, \$15 for foreigners). Like me, she spoke of this space as a place where people from “the community” (the surrounding neighborhood of Panamá Viejo) could run, walk, picnic, or “just hang out” – for free, in and around the ruins. The fence not only keeps Panamanians who cannot afford the \$10 admission from entering, it illuminates the experience of exclusion from the state’s own construction of nationhood.

“I don’t go in the museum because this place makes me mad,” Sandra explained. “We’re not represented here.” Despite the colonial records which account that “enslaved Africans were numerically superior to whites,”<sup>4</sup> the UNESCO world heritage site of Panamá Viejo points to Spanish and indigenous cultural life in the city, making note of the presence of slavery without acknowledging the humanity of Africans and Afro-descendants on the isthmus, nor their contribution to Panamanian political, cultural and social life. While photographing the fence as a frame around the ruins, this researcher-participant tells me stories of exclusion that are centuries old.

Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick defines domination as “a visible spatial project that organizes, names, and sees social differences and determines *where* social order happens.”<sup>5</sup> The fences we analyzed dominate through encroachment: pushing in on “historic” Black land to support gentrification and urban renewal (Boucicaut\_Tinker\_3). They inspired the telling of stories about community neglect and commodification of Black culture (Boucicaut\_Tinker\_4), or legally inscribed segregation and its consequences (Boucicaut\_Tinker\_5). Each of these sites of national

heritage are thus transformed, through photographic and narrative processes, into monuments of “negative heritage,” elucidated primarily through the fences that surround them<sup>6</sup>.

Most of these fences were erected by an office of government and were highlighted by researcher-participants to portray experiences of exclusion, erasure, neglect, and blatant discrimination against Afro-descendant Panamanians. Conducting these tours together, I spent more time than I normally would “outside” peering in to the designated heritage space. At times I was extremely uncomfortable, like while walking around the ruins on the Via Centenario, or when my collaborator and I would linger with our cameras in front of armed security guards. In choosing to take photos of the fences, we embodied this experience of domination. The photos themselves memorialize our discomfort amidst these landmarks, and the negative memory that surrounds each of these material sites.

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<sup>1</sup> Battle-Baptiste, Whitney. 2011. *Black Feminist Archaeology*. New York: Left Coast Press.

<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299.

<sup>3</sup> Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. 2015. “Bridging Activism and the Academy: Exposing Environmental Injustices Through the Feminist Ethnographic Method of Photovoice.” In *Human Ecology Review* 21(1): 26–58.

<sup>4</sup> De Goodin, Melva Lowe. 2017. *Afrodescendientes en el Istmo de Panamá 1501 – 2012*. Panamá: Melva Lowe de Goodin, 23.

<sup>5</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>6</sup> Meskell, Lynn. 2002. “Negative Heritage and Past Mastering in Archaeology.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(3): 557–574.