Mapping Interstitial Space

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Clifford Geertz is, among other things, a significant figure in anthropology. American born, and Harvard trained he holds the title professor emeritus from Princeton and started out his university career majoring in English. **In Works and Lives: the anthropologist as author** he asserts the job of the ethnographer is to not only convince they have been there, wherever there may be, but that "had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded." There is a lot to explore in that statement. For the moment, I want to set aside the problems in Geertz's formulation – the fact that it doesn't apparently accommodate the value of dissenting views or say much about ethnography's broader capacities to generate knowledge as opposed to agreement for example – and accept it at face value.

The part of his observation I would like us to focus on is the unstated assumption that it is possible for someone else to see, feel and conclude as we do. The optimist in me, or maybe I should say the anthropologist, readily accepts and wants the possibility for at least one other person out there in the world to be able to more or less see, feel and reach conclusions that are similar to mine. Geertz though asks us to believe in this occurring on a wider, more general scale. Let's suspend whatever skepticism we may have and allow for what he asks.

One side of his argument concerns rhetorical ability. By that I mean someone's skill in getting their point across convincingly. The other more problematic side, and the one I want to try and think with, asserts a shared, fundamental capacity of people to objectify their subjective self such that similarity might be recognized between that person or group and another person or group. This capacity is what apparently enables common seeing, feeling and concluding and for that matter, problems notwithstanding, can be found somewhere at the base of anthropology as a discipline – as Geertz's comment suggests.

K. Anthony Appiah, the Ghanian born, Cambridge trained, right leaning Princeton based philosopher has recently more or less recognized this same human ability. He describes common seeing, feeling and concluding as a process and calls it cosmopolitanism. Despite coming to similar conclusions from apparently very different directions Appiah and Geertz share the conviction that people have the capacity to transcend differences of cultures and circumstance, even profound ones, to achieve common understanding.

As I said above I would like for us to think with this idea. My reason is that the notion of cosmopolitanism is abstract and idealistic and so would seem only to be connected intellectually, perhaps metaphorically to the way people live their everyday lives. Yet Appiah and Geertz would have us believe it *is* the way people live their everyday lives. And they may have a point.

The reason I have raised the question of common seeing, feeling and concluding is that in spite of the academic objections we could raise to the formulation of a cosmopolitan or ethnographic ideal, casual experience would seem to suggest that people do come to and agree upon common views, feelings and conclusions because they want to and because they can. So what I wonder, and invite you to wonder along with me is how and when this process might work in practice?

What I am going to argue is that difference is objectified and then transcended around the common task of getting around and learning a city. Being interested in material culture I am also curious as to

how objects might be involved in this process. Yes, the city itself has a relational materiality, but 'the city' is a big, rather vague thing and what I want to know more specifically is how people create belonging to, overcome alienation from, leave traces of themselves in and get to know a city. I think that probably happens by way of maps of one kind or another because of what I have seen and experienced during field work. And what I am going to talk about and try and get you to conclude along with me is that in the capital of the Republic of Panama, Panama City, local, practical knowledge of locale and self irrupts through reference to and/or use of various classes of artefactual maps that refuse functioning as straightforward navigational aides.

In Panama, as in most places, maps help structure as well as reflect how people understand their association with particular territories and with others, with whom they may or may not think of themselves as territorially or otherwise conceptually linked. Fundamental to any map is information loss. Maps are obviously real things, but to have an experience with a map is to observe that whatever a map represents and however it might do so is necessarily different from how that thing exists out there in the world. Yet it is in a map's lack of correspondence to reality in which its capacity to help people get from one place to another is arguably located. Maps require that one learn and accommodate oneself to a system of representation which might include self-representation. Maps are usually indices – often but not necessarily pictorial – as well as socio-cultural reference points that help identify crucial conjunctions of a public imaginary, power, belief, knowledge and performance.

This section is intended to do at least three inter-related things. On the one hand it is an exploration of a field site through reflexive written meditation. To that end it includes bits of narrative and relatively unedited passages from my field journals as they were written on the spot. These should be understood as conceptual landmarks or orientation points; as coordinates or potential trajectories. They are organized and have been inserted into the text by relevance to the argument rather than by chronology or topic. They are little solos that I hope add to the texture and value of this exploration. Two, I hope to describe and interpret a series of experiences in navigating Panama City, and finally I seek to raise a number of questions for potential further investigation related to how cities might be understood and the effects they might have upon their users.

I am going to talk about different kinds of maps and will introduce the topic through reference to my personal experience in Panama as a researcher because it was through thinking about my own experience as much as reflecting upon what people said to me about being located that I became aware of the quasi-absence of maps as I normally thought about them and so realized the need to pay attention to and ask questions about them. I am going to try and paint a series of densely described quotidian portraits of Panama. We will start from a bird's eye of the national territory. Then once we have situated the state we will adjust the scale and plunge into the city itself to travel into the city center and talk to some people and hear what they have to say. By way of conclusion, I hope to consider a number of different ways to interpret our experience.

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The city, colloquially called Panama as though it were the nation, is defined in terms of its opposition to the Interior and the Interior is characterized by what the city is not. There is a dialectical between the two places characterized by ambivalence, by which I mean simultaneous desire and lack of desire to be in either place so there is constant movement back and forth in pursuit of being where one is not. The maintenance of family relationships, the requirements of work, 'properly' spending ones leisure time, yes these are the ways people

describe their going back and forth across the bridge of the Americas that spans Panama's Canal, but these answers which describe the attraction of one location over the other at a given moment assume that one understands that one belongs equally to both places and so both attraction to a place *and* self-expulsion from it must be accounted for. It is through acts of mutual belonging made manifest in actions like this that nation is generated and understood in Panama and past and present are folded into one another.

A View of the City

Panama City, the capital of the Republic of Panama has a population that is just over 1.38 million. Like most of the other capital cities of the Spanish speaking countries of the Americas south of the United States, it is the largest city within the nation. In contrast to these same countries the majority of Panama's population, 3.2 million people, still lives outside of the capital, which is situated not in the center of the nation geographically but yet in still is about eight hours by public transportation from both the Colombian and Costa Rican borders, the countries with which Panama shares frontiers.

Due in part to the small size of the country there is a significant, easy and continual movement of people and things between the capital and the nation's other towns and provinces, the most important of which are stretched along the mostly 4-lane, concrete Inter-American highway, that is itself decorated for long stretches with brief glimpses of the Pacific Ocean as the road meanders to Costa Rica. It is not unusual in Panama to skip over the national mail service and to send letters and packages "long distance" with a bus driver from city to province or from province to city addressing the item only to a name or perhaps including a town, neighborhood or bus stop location described by landmarks. To be professional is to be personal to some degree with the bus drivers, who with their machines, plough the national territory and reveal that Panama's fecundity is somehow linked to the ability to move about within its borders.

To be so densely populated Panama City has the feeling of a much smaller place, much like London with its lattice of villages. The City is long and narrow and could be imagined as in the shape of a piece of slightly chewed bubblegum that has been stretched between a thumb and forefinger. At one extreme is Casco Viejo, a peninsula, butting against the mouth of the Canal as it opens onto the Pacific Ocean on one side while the other side forms part of the City's bay. Polluted to such a degree that no one uses the small beaches that skip along the Pacific coast except occasionally unsupervised nut colored children, dogs one would be afraid to pet while wishing them some kindness nevertheless and vultures.

The money to clean the bay, serially allocated, just as regularly is spent on whatever other thing might come up. The coca-cola manufacturers once turned it a biblical red in some industrial mishap. The cynical said it was for publicity making the connection between the red of the bay and the red of the coke product. This was denied. No one dreamed it might be guerilla performance art. That event was worth 2 days of news. The tides eventually dissipated whatever it was. The rusting hulls of old ships anchored there don't seem to take the neglect personally, neither do the glass high rise buildings that look out onto this scene, nor do the people who live and work in them. Fishermen just hunt elsewhere. The fishmarket, a cacophony of *son* claves tattooed by knives on cutting boards, is stubborn though and refuses relocation.

People who were young in the 60's remember family outings to these same beaches. Today families, lovers, athletes of differing abilities, the wandering poor, suspicious characters, addicts hang-out along the sea wall that stretches along *Avenida Balboa* tracing the outline of the bay or in the parks

across the road from it. Traffic is constant along this route. At some hours of the day taxi drivers refuse the fare rather than find themselves stuck in its molasses.

Not unlike Naples in Italy, Casco Viejo is a neighborhood of narrow alleys, heavy square courtyarded buildings with balconies, cobbled streets, plazas, occasional sculptures, museums and cathedrals. Trendy nightspots, restaurants and bars coolly show-off their affluence to families that sit, gathered in doorways and windows of dark, low, stained concrete buildings, in the stream of a free standing fan; men and boys without their shirts confront the heat; these people ignore their television sets to watch the SUV's and cars with six figure price tags hunt for parking in the area. Their drivers and animated, cosseted occupants provide work for industrious addicts, men down on their luck and children. "Bien cuidao!" they shout offering to look after one's vehicle for 10 cents or a quarter or for whatever you might be willing to give them. Only tourists are intimidated.

Silent Kuna Indians and would be Kunas, those who don the Kuna dress for commercial advantage, sit alongside bohemians identifiable by their bracelets, braids, necklaces, tattoos, juggling sticks and nonchalant, patient griminess to sell molas stitched onto anything that they can be stitched to for sale along with hand-made jewelry side by side along the concrete lookout of the peninsula and in the shadow of the French embassy and ministry of culture. From that vantage point, if one were to gaze-out across the water, one could see the Causeway, cruising spot for tourists and Panamanians of whatever class with taxi fare to get there and back.

On the other side of the Causeway are the hulking shapes of small inhabited islands, spots for quick, cheap weekend getaways, and of ships waiting to enter the Canal and go from West to East; what in a certain calculus, in which Panama is an important variable, would be to go from East to West. The masts of the sail boats and schooners also anchored there in silent bobbing clusters seem almost as though they were huddled in packs for safety like animals in the wild at a water hole on the lookout for predators.

In front of the Cathedral, on the other side of the *Plaza Independencia*, the one with the gazebo, on some Friday nights, and when she is able, there is a neighborhood woman who is younger than she looks but with fat, heavy arms and large belly, her children come and go, appearing mysteriously. Silently. She cooks fish. Fried in a small black iron pot over a portable gas flame. Cars park around the plaza waiting for their plates to be done. Drunks content themselves with boisterous conversation in the doorways of 18th century buildings some of which house government offices. With fried yucca a portion of fish costs $2 and is served on a small plastic plate, probably purchased in *Machetazo,* Panama's Wal-Mart, a few blocks up in el barrio de Santa Ana, 25 for a dollar fifty. The fish is finger food. Napkins are free but rationed carefully. One per customer.

People from the neighborhood, as they wait to use the pay phone on that side of the plaza, watch the others eat. Taxis, *chocao y feo,* which is to say beaten-up and ugly, circle the plaza in search of clients like unfortunate, suspect, mechanical birds of prey. They round the corners at speed, touching the brakes only when absolutely necessary, a restraint not reserved for the use of their horns which sound almost constantly.

Chinese restaurants and grocers, tailors, mechanics, shoe repair shops, corner stores, the ubiquitous internet cafés and call centers, $2 dollar restaurants and $10 dollar hotels; stray cats, kicked dogs, loud animated drunks, sullen addicts. Vultures. Hard eyes. Sunken gums. Children. Families. Fenced in playgrounds. Occasional police on street corners. Easy friendliness amid caution. Gringos and an anthropologist. Refreshing night breezes that carry sourceless soot, dust and the occasional shouts and chatter of late night revelers and their music or altercations. There is a seasonal stench of dead

fish and other unidentifiable fetid odors that rise off of the bay. The government is slowly pushing the people who live in these neighborhoods out so they can gentrify the buildings and rent them to the people with the SUVs. Ruben Blades, Panama's most internationally famous citizen, keeps a house there.

It is the best place in the city to see fireworks which accompany Panama's many celebrations and from the windows, balconies and rooftops of the neighborhood's low buildings one can watch the city stretch itself out for admiration. It is an area one might believe picturesque, though few artists seem to think so despite an art school being located on its outskirts across from the police substation in front of the small wedge shaped, concrete plaza that is always surrounded by traffic regardless of the hour.

At the other extreme of the City is Tocumen, a residential neighborhood of close streets and imbricated single story concrete houses that have corrugated red metal roofs and which are set in a landscape of Crayola crayon box shaded greens. These small, single family homes alternate between a severe and visually exhausting, cramped orderliness and closely huddled residences placed in soft clusters barely separated by dirt or grass yards inhabited by fowl, dogs and occasionally pigs, goats and cows.

The houses are porous in the way that Benjamin described Naples. They as much invite the outside in as keep it at bay. Some houses have no windows. Instead, where a window would be concrete rosettes have been placed. Windows are expensive. Keeping out rain, wind and dust is more important than letting in light or letting out heat or so I have been told with an attitude of amazement that the reason was not immediately apparent to me.

When it floods people lose everything. Children play freely in the streets made of gravel, or dirt. Sometimes they are paved. Hammocks and chairs are a regular fixture of the indoor/outdoor patio/livingrooms around which families gather to watch TV at night. It is not unusual to hear a radio. Victorio Vergara, Las Plumas Negras, maybe Samy Sandra, a bachata or Panamanian style reggae. Almost never would one hear in these neighborhoods the music from Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic or the United States though there are always exceptions. Tastes run to Panama and Colombia.

Houses are seldom completed all at once, but rather in stages. It is as if they are undressed but too innocent or brazen to be modest about it. They are always becoming something else and waiting for the next payday for which there is no prior claim for the funds so that they can be done-up a bit more. Interiors such as they are are simple. A bed, table, chairs, lamp, perhaps a couch. A refrigerator and stove, a stereo. A television, colorized family portrait and a crucifix. A fan. Clothes are usually washed by hand and hung out to dry though the better off have automatic and semi-automatic machines.

Between Tocumen and Casco Viejo one travels through the City along one of two routes. One is a high speed concrete toll road called the *Corredor Sur*. It runs along the Pacific coast and hurries you past stretches of brownish beaches dirtied with most things imaginable. On them also lie forgotten, warped and rotting, wooden and once brightly painted dry docked boats and canoes that are remnants of what was once a fishing economy. Waves rush and lap at the shore. Occasional fishermen sit their boats testing their experience. Even more occasionally, families play and lounge in the water. The landscape goes from green and lush to residential monotone concrete and metal.

Compressed concrete buildings with red corrugated roofs soon give way to high rise apartments and multi-story shopping complexes; these overlook overpasses with complex patterns for merging traffic.

The road cuts through school and business districts, and passes the staunchly square American and British embassies, a yacht club, exclusive hotels, a fish market, once elegant neighborhoods and finds its way to meander along amid the sound of horns to a pedestrian mall, clutches of street venders, grotty, covered markets, Chinatown complete with decorative gate and on foot shoppers to arrive finally in Casco Viejo.

Trasistmica, another route from Tocumen to the center is a slow moving mass of traffic and noise that sounds like a middle school orchestra warming-up their instruments and searching vainly for an in-tune pitch. Daredevil drivers and taxis gamble arrogantly as they weave in and out of traffic. Yet they seem to stand still such is the gridlock. *Tranque* the Panamanians call it. The route of the road is a repetition of houses, businesses, shopping complexes, and restaurants that seem as though one had just seen them. It is as if they are photocopies of one another folded in towards the street rather than spreading out and away from it.

Still neighborhoods do change markedly, revealing emigration patterns and heritage. Protestant churches, Jehova Witness temples, catholic chapels, wooden buildings with faded peeling paint pitched on stilts, pool halls, Chinese restaurants that specialize in fish, McDonalds, Wendy's Burger King, Kentucky (Fried Chicken), universities, small plazas, bus stops chock a block with people all boarding retired American school busses that have been customized with chrome and massive exhaust pipes and which are highly decorated with painted depictions of popular culture references that obliterate their once standard issue canary yellow. *Los Diablos Rojos* or Red Devils these vehicles are called. The driver collects his qua'tah, 25 cent fare, and the *pavo* the Spanish word for turkey who is the driver's usually teenaged assistant, leans out of the bus' open doors and shouts the route of the vehicle, his words normally swallowed by Panamanian reggae a mix of dance hall and Miami bass or maybe a *bachata, merengue or salsa* which flood out of the windows and from the doors from which the *pavo* dangles.

As being lost at some point in the day whether in the City or in the Interior became something of a normal condition for me, I would rely upon what other people knew to get me to where I wanted to go. This need spurred me into buying a mobile telephone a few weeks after my arrival. I knew no one and had no personal calls to make, but I would navigate to places that had a contact number by calling up en route in a taxi and then would pass the phone to the driver. I would often ask people I casually ran into on the street for directions. Sometimes this meant I would go on being just as lost though more frustrated after seeking help than I had been before. Most people in Panama I would come to realize shared this experience because the unfamiliarity of places was often mediated by maps that apparently had nothing to do with navigation.

Among the questions I felt as much as heard in such unexpected moments of otherwise chatty conversations were, 'how and where do we fit? With whom do I share what I know?' Sure one can say, probably reasonably, these are older people confronting social change and one should expect such questions and disorientation from them. Disorientation and displacement is proof of their normality irregardless of their age, and of their ability to recognize how they indeed *do* fit and what is required as a result. They just don't like it. No need for hand wringing. Yet at another level, such questioning is also a rejoinder to a project of national slogans and pictorial emblems that took as their product, themes of belonging and of *having* ones bearings. Some of the people I spoke to knew where they were but still felt lost because of what they knew and because of the manner in which they were connected to other people and to the places in which they lived. The maps this man and woman and the people like them possessed had lost the ability to be usefully read.

One way of talking about belief in anthropology refers to the presence of absence and the absence of

presence. Often what apparently appears most absent is another way of witnessing a profound, often reflexive, cultural stamp. Maps are worth attention in part because they negotiate presence and absence so seamlessly. They appear and disappear in unlikely moments, often unexpectedly revealing a society or culture's salient beliefs.

Maps in Panama fall on a continuum of extremes between the navigable map and the un-navigable map or what can be called a view. The view in Panama tends to take a physical form and is indexical to a given territory as well as to wide ranging, imagined conceptions of particular, bounded locations. Navigable Panamanian maps on the other hand are dually invested in the relationship between people and between people and potential landmarks or the things that are more or less fixed and associated with a place. The vast majority of maps fall in between the two extremes and are neither completely views nor completely navigable. To remain a map a view must be held in check to some degree, even if barely perceptibly, by its indexicality and the navigable map is framed by the decisions, assumptions, design and information constraints that are a part of its construction; so though I will use navigable and view throughout, these terms should be understood as conceptual placeholders rather than as attainable categorical goals.

Views of Panama tend to emphasize the Republic as a whole, undivided circumscribed territory whereas navigable maps assert a localized, vernacular understanding of place and location that mitigates such a facile conceptualization. Views tend to be directed at specific groups and as a result may produce and define categorical oppositions: foreign – Panamanian, *El Capitalino – El Interiorano*, tourist – local etc. Views mediate the assertions of groups by presenting Panama as though it were an object of desire, something to be envisioned, projected; something malleable, plastic, to be shaped in the image of some pre-extant abstract form. Views literally give that form shape.

In the Post-American Panama, these relationships and issues inform more than a straightforward touristy turn. In the same year, 2003, that Panama celebrated its 100th anniversary of independence from Colombia, it also enjoyed its 3rd year of freedom from American territorial occupation. Panamanians wonder how complete sovereignty over the physical expanse of the Republic will be responded to. Navigable maps and views are part of their construction of a reflexive answer.

The hunt for a map

Navigable maps of Panama City and of other Panamanian cities and towns were not commercially available in Panama during my time there. I discovered this shortly after my arrival. There were however, lots of variations on the theme of the same basic tourist map of Panama City. As a free pullout in tourist magazines or selling for about $2.50, against a criss-cross of lines intended to represent streets, these maps would show numbers or tiny icons strategically placed to indicate sites that could be of interest to tourists. These were not useful to me as they showed very little detail. Getting my bearings quickly in Panama's capital, the metropolitan area of which is a little more than a million people was one of my first objectives. I thought buying a map of the city would help me do this. The guide book I was using at the time had led me to believe maps *would be* available, and even pointed me to the *Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia* as the place to get one. This goal was *quickly* thwarted.

One morning I set out with the schematic black and white guide book map in hand that showed where '*Tommy Guardia'* was located and hailed a taxi to get me there. The taxi driver had never heard of the place I was looking for, nor had anyone we stopped to ask. Neither of us could really make heads or tails of the map in my book because it only showed major streets and carried little detail. The driver

looked at it with mounting contempt and confusion, one hand and one eye on the map, the other on the steering wheel and traffic. We hurtled along *la via transistmica* the major road that runs along one of principal entrances of the national Panama University and he kept saying it should be around there someplace. We got hopelessly lost. As we rode around, more or less in circles I asked him if he had a map of the city, thinking his would certainly be better than mine and so could help solve our dilemma. He said no. So, I asked, with more curiosity than irony, how he got to know the city's streets. He replied tersely that most people knew where they were going, and added that one usually knows where things are.

Through luck, I spotted a piece of the sign that the Institute's name was on close to where we were driving back and forth. Happy to finally get there, I got out of the taxi and entered the building only to discover that the Institute's maps were primarily topographical and for professional use only which meant they had nothing appropriate for my needs of simple orientation and navigation. Ironically, the guide book, my map, which had led me more or less to the general area of the Geographic Institute, caused me and my driver to get lost and yet it did not occur to me that using a map might create more confusion than it alleviated.

Undaunted, the next day I ditched the guide book and set out on foot in search of a better map than the one I had been using. Starting with the hotels in the area in which I was staying, I was variously told that there were not any maps of the city, was offered blurry, poorly reproduced tourist maps and sent from one business to another in pursuit of my quest. None of these places had maps, though I was told in one that they *used to* sell them. Though I would periodically check places where I thought or was recommended that maps might be had, I eventually gave up expecting to find a usable paper map and learned to ask people for directions – like everyone else did. I was in a sense learning to be local.

The Navigable View

I did get a map eventually, however. A year or so after I had started my search a casual acquaintance, an American guy I would often run into in a café I frequented, and who was starting a fruit hauling business, gave me one. It was badly worn at its folds, with notes written over it, torn in places and discolored with age [2]. As he put it in my hand he commented that this kind of map was no longer available in Panama. He had purchased it a couple of years earlier when he had moved with his wife to Panama from Costa Rica. He had two which was why he was willing to part with one of them.

The map is about 3 feet by two and half feet and is doubled sided. Its size is impressive and it does manage to convey a sense of the length and breadth of the capital. One side shows Panama City and the other the country as a whole. Window panes are arranged around the country's perimeter, inside of which are schematic views of a handful of Panama's cities or alternatively, amplifications of a selection of the capital's neighborhoods, yet curiously the increase in size brings no additional perceptible detail. Everything is just a little bigger. This map shows most of the streets in the capital, and attaches names to a good many of them though not to all. Everything written on the map is in Spanish and it carries an index of the street names shown, tourist sites and of places of interest. There is also a legend to help one figure out what meaning to attribute to the icons employed in marking particular features of the represented city.

The Republic side focuses around the Inter-American Highway that snakes along the middle of country like the backbone of a fish. Some secondary roads are shown and as a general highway map is reasonably serviceable. Besides being a map that one can navigate from in a basic way at the level of the Republic, this map is also a view. The window panes around the map's perimeter that show a selection of Panamanian cities with their key streets in amplification emphasize the relationship

between the Capital, the canal and the Interior. No one I have shown the map to has questioned this orientation or called attention to the total absence of any city in the Darien, the invisibility of the Caribbean coastal towns which are of historical significance to Panama or to the fact that indigenous Comarcas are not shown. One woman asked in support of the view's Interior orientation, "well what is there to see over there?" Taken as a whole this semi-navigable map is a remarkable, stubborn puzzle especially for would be navigators in the capital with little knowledge of the places depicted.

The businesses I had been sent to during my unfruitful search were marked by little images that showed their locations in Panama City as well as in various places outside of the capital and scattered across the Republic. The map had been produced by a private mapping technology firm called Geoinfo, and was sold through the Tommy Guardia Geographic Institute as well as by a clutch of businesses whose ads ran along the bottom of the map.

This map had apparently sold out by the time I had arrived in the country, which was why I could not find one. No one I spoke to in the Institute could say with any certainty when that happened or how many had been printed or when the map had been originally issued. The private mapping firm told me a print run was only about a thousand, and that new updated editions were regularly produced. The map I had been given was a 2001 edition and I had no success finding another one over the 22 months I was in Panama from 2002 to 2004, which if the reproduction information I was given is accurate, probably means I was just very unlucky. The National Geographic Institute was and is one of the private map company's Geoinfo's clients as well as a distribution point for some of their products including the map I had been given. However, both this company and 'Tommy Guardia' were careful to stress to me they had no link with one another, one being a private business and the other an extension of a government office.

In speaking with the ministry that overseas Tommy Guardia I was told they intend to offer a one-sided map of the Republic sprinkled with point of interest icons. When I asked if these indicated locations would be good places to visit, I was told rather dubiously after a pause that I could visit these places if I wanted to. Nevertheless, this map is meant for a tourist market and is projected to sell for around $4.00 or about $2 less than the private firm's map. It does not as yet actually exist however. And while plans can change, I was told there is currently no strategy that includes the production of a navigable map of the capital city or of the Republic. The closest thing available is the 2-sided map my café acquaintance had given me. There is an implicit assumption being made on the part of Panama's map producers apparently that neither locals nor tourists need nor want nor could benefit from visually apprehended maps to get around the city. If such maps are not intended for navigation in Panama, what are they intended to do?

None of this should create any doubt that Panama is well mapped though. [6] The first European map of the Panamanian coast was drawn by Columbus in 1503 a year after Bastidas had first sited the Isthmus. Cartographic knowledge of the country would grow and coincide with the development of commercial, contraband, state building and building projects, from the sixteenth century forward, including most prominently a railroad, Panama's canal and the Inter-American highway. Since 1954 for example, a cartographic section has existed within Panama's Ministry of Public works. The National Geographic Institute the cab driver and I could not find was itself established in 1967. Cartographic information, even GPS and digitally deliverable mapped data are available in Panama. And a mapping consulting business for example is the exclusive distributor of some of the software needed to produce and deliver such documents.

Framing Maps in Words

What surprised me in Panama was not that maps were not in ubiquitous use the way they are in a place like London for example, but rather as the barriers to providing navigable maps would appear to be few, such maps were not to be had for those who might want to use them. Almost twenty years ago J. B. Harvey argued with reference to early European maps from the 16th century that implicit and explicit absences in maps, or that which is known but not shown, may be understood as a process by which maps mediate knowledge to "maintain the political status quo and the power of the state" (1988: 57). What then might the absence of navigable cartographic maps reveal about Panama?

The problem around navigable maps in Panama is framed by the fact that the information and means to produce such functional documents are not lacking. The relevant information simply is not consistently invested in visual formats. What could be mediated by a map is instead interposed socially. There is a saying in Panama: "Preguntando se llega a Roma" which literally means 'you can get to Rome by asking' but as it was explained to me intends to communicate that "the best way to get around Panama is by asking". Another woman commented that the saying is true and that in panama in order to get your bearings and get to your destination you must constantly ask people for instructions. You have no choice. For her though, the saying was more about repetition and having to repeatedly ask different people for assistance to get anywhere. A cartographic representation of spatial belief and its attendant modes of visual competence are held in abeyance by an embodied, performed, local and vernacular knowledge that is based upon situating oneself relative to given landmarks and often through given people. A fold-out map is not consulted to get from one place to another; people, both known and unknown are.

Perhaps one of the best and most overlooked examples of this was one pointed out to me by a friend who shared her thoughts about our waiting for a public bus, one of the infamous *Diablos Rojos,* on *via España* in Panama City. [18] The bus destinations are written on card or pre-printed opaque plastic sheets that fit into the front window of the bus. They are normally positioned so that they may be easily seen when the bus is moving. The bus door is normally open and each driver generally has an informal helper. This person, usually a teenaged boy, is called a *pavo*, or turkey. He never collects money, but hangs or leans out of the door of the moving bus to shout above the sound of the *Bachadas* and Panamanian Reggae blasting from the bus, its destination and route to those people near a bus stop.

A paper bus map did not exist during my time in Panama. All route information or questions about where the bus is going are fielded by the *pavo.* There is nothing written or drawn, at or around a bus stop to give any information about the bus route, schedule or destinations. As one Panamanian told me as we were talking about bus routes "one has to guess and walk around asking other people" [1] Either one asks other people who are waiting or one waits for the *pavo* who more often than not will dismount the bus before it has reached the *parada,* and rapidly explain the route and destination to the people around. The *pavo* is the bus map, though sometimes the bus route itself is the map.

Santiago, who was born in the Interior but now lives in *Calidonia* an area of central Panama City that is bustling [19] and densely populated with people, businesses, museums, restaurants, markets, government offices and bus terminals reported with a hint of pride that he has never needed to use a map. When asked how he managed, he responded off-handedly that he knows his territory (*entorno*), though his movement is usually only around the central part of the city where he lives and works. When challenged that someone must have taught him *his* part of the capital he responded that he walks most places or takes the bus and tends to follow the same routes. Continuing to talk, he finally

[1] uno tiene que adivinar y andar preguntando a otra gente

admitted that occasionally he does ask people for directions but that usually he does not have to because he has learned the bus routes and so can get anywhere he needs to go.

In conversation with people about their use of maps, I was often told they rely on the phone book. On the one hand they call for directions and when absolutely necessary consult the map of the city that is printed inside of it. [26] But this map is not reliable I was told, as "it does not really give accurate information." The best thing to do is to ask someone. These are the most easily and widely accessible views and also the most readily ignored. Most people I spoke to wondered what they were for or remembered they were there only when I reminded them.

Mapping Beliefs

Alfred Gell, an anthropologist, argued that a map is a particular kind of coordinate/index based spatial belief that can find expression in a variety of ways; only one of which might be visual and two-dimensional (Gell 1985). [Gell actually says "non-token-indexical spatial proposition." Non token is simply the expression that carries the proposition being asserted is true while indexical means the relationship between the coordinates of a location and what is actually at the location indicated by the coordinates and spatial refers to the conceptual or imagined relationship between these things]. Other formats could just as well be linguistic, numerical (ibid), gestural or some combination of the four. Asking someone for or receiving directions is obviously an attempt to orient oneself in terms of a known (just not by you) and knowable coordinate/index based spatial belief system. One expects the people one asks for way-finding help to have such beliefs and one hopes that the expression of those beliefs will be practically useful in solving one's immediate directional dilemma – in fact one normally would only ask directions from someone who one assumes would have a good chance of holding and communicating such beliefs.

This could be easily interpreted as a simple 'us' and 'them' statement relative to knowledge and degrees of locality, but to do so in Panama would be wrong. Asking directions is less concerned with recognizing division than with emphasizing the commonality of Panamanians who continually supplement each others local knowledge as they move around the city and the country. What seems to divide is the artefactual map as it slides from the navigational end of the scale to the other to become more like what I have called a view. Its divisiveness, perhaps counter-intuitively, is a consequence of its appeal to values that must be shared. This is most clearly reflected in Guillermo's loaded comments to me that, "*they* invented maps for the foreigners in Panama…"[2] While at one level this clearly is not true, it is a commonly expressed sentiment that mutually constitutes Panamanianess and foreignness not in terms of one another but in terms of maps.

One could argue that the fact that foreigners tend to rely upon icon studded and activity programmed maps and to avoid social contact rather than ask for directions is partially what sets them apart. This is the wrong conclusion though. The shift that has occurred is a subtle one. Foreigners do often ask for directions, Guillermo admits, but it is the nature of the questions that they ask that inscribes their foreignness. "Foreigners always ask me about the places to go," he continues "it is common." They ask where to go, not how to get there. This is a question of discrimination, of value, of asking, where are the 'good places'. The questioning takes physical orientation and accessibility for granted; the maps often supplied to tourists are views that reinforce this shift by usually describing Panama as a territorial outline of the Republic denuded of people, population clusters, contemporary ethnicities, streets etc. but well populated with activities.

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[2] dice guillermo 'los mapas se inventaron para los extranjeros en panamá… aunque el mapa de la guía telefónica y los turísticos no brindan información más exacta'

There is a more subtle point in all of this though that I think is worth emphasizing and that is not explicitly concerned with the vernaculars of tourism. It has to do with the kind of thing a map or a view is. Regardless of how a map or view *is* used or the form they take, they are expected to function usefully. Of course they do not always meet ones needs or expectations, but that does not change the fact that utility has been built into them.

In a restaurant/cafeteria called *Del Prado* where I occasionally ate and which is located on *Via Argentina* in Panama City a couple blocks down from the park with the basketball court, I got into a very brief verbal tussle with the waitress who wanted to take my paper placemat away. It was a map [image] and I wanted to keep it. I insisted that I wanted to keep it, telling her it didn't matter that I had eaten over it and she insisted with much more force that I could not. She won, grabbing and crumpling the mat as she collected the silverware and plates over my ineffective protests. It was a cheap, paper placemat. Why wouldn't she let me keep it? I was miffed because I did not understand what was happening. She reappeared several minutes later with two mats neatly rolled and secured with a rubber band. She presented them to me and walked off. Perhaps that was her way of apology but, as a good anthropologist, I chose to understand it as an act of purification. A view must be a view to do the work of a view and cannot be a placemat whose job is to catch food. The waitress effected the necessary change of state through removal and re-presentation to enable the possibility that the view might do its job whatever that might have been.

It is possible and expected for people to have a relationship with a map or view that causes the people to undertake a particular action. The relationship that attains between a map or view and the people who have contact with it is one grounded in a belief that is expressed through expectation and performance. For example, regardless of whether a person has experience following the directions they might have given from one destination to another, their belief is that giving directions that may be followed successfully is possible. In other words, they believe a map can work. Yes this possibility exists because of what they believe about the permanence of the objects, streets, signs, buildings, trees, potential landmarks that occupy the environment being asked about but more significantly I think, maps work because people believe the person asking them for directions or the person they are receiving directions from is grounded in the same invisible ways relative to the same invisible maps they are and which can produce the same real responses. In other words they frame the problem in the same way largely because they can and this ability transcends identity essentialisms.

Guillermo, and others I spoke to who echoed his sentiments and observations constructed difference at this same intersection of problem and possibility because irrespective of shared language sometimes, or professional background, age or other interests the situation could not be framed in a way that made it possible to believe in the possibility of a relationship that was not based on difference.

Some Concluding Thoughts

I would like to extend this observation into a loose conclusion and argue that the socially mediated, performative vernacular response to a way-finding problem in Panama does more than work against the beliefs that support views. It is also a means of working for a cosmopolitan ideal, what Appiah describes as "a formula, universalism plus difference" (Appiah 2001:202). Appiah argues that a cosmopolitan sensibility is not based around some notion of commonly held values or ideas but in the practical task of reaching substantially similar conclusions when confronted with the same task, material or problem because one sees the problem in largely the same way (ibid). This is a diaspora based around the possibility of belief grounded in the mutual recognition that possibility is the consequence of a process that can be shared.

The refusal of maps in Panama to perform navigational work has consequences. On the one hand, the view as an ideological statement is sometimes completely overlooked and so finds limited cultural purchase because people cannot use them in meaningful, quotidian ways. The other side of this though is that those objects that fall outside of everyday function are reinscribed with a mark of difference and so become deployed to constitute an other as well as oneself in the process. This is a route by which essential identities associated with corporate political bodies are constructed. Panamanians acts of "preguntando se llega a Roma" or the deployment of vernacular, invisible maps, by which local knowledge is called forth, supplemented, shared and deployed as the means by which ones association with place is asserted and fundamental beliefs are objectified play tug-o-war with views and the construction of Panama as a site of desire rather than as a route by which destinations are reached.

The knowledge mediated and called forth by an artefactual navigational map is fungible with the knowledge and competence called forth in social performance, when the aim of engaging in performative activities coincides around navigation. Both navigational acts involve acquiring, making sense of and then using information committed to an abstract form – visual, linguistic, gestural etc – in such a way that it is possible to orient and command oneself through a physical landscape. The relative absence of navigable artefactual maps in Panama suggests that they are clearly not intended as way-finding tools. As one woman who lives in Panama City but outside of the center commented to me, "a map is only a partial guide, my neighborhood does not even appear on some maps".[3]

[3] si es una media guia…incluso para mi, no aparece condado del rey en varios mapas