Beyond the Garden City

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I closed my eyes and extended my arms absorbing every ray of the Caribbean sun as if I could possibly undergo photosynthesis. I looked up realizing that I had forgotten the intense cyan of Maracay's cloudless sky. Four years of absence became noticeable every time I was struck by a detail as apparent as this one so I focused on every element in an attempt to engrave the image of my home city in my memory.

Beyond all the diverse buildings, and the intersecting avenues stood our velvet mountains. The city’s 1,500,000 inhabitants extend around the mountains and connect with the suburbs. Maracay is the capital city of the state of Aragua and it is also known as the garden city of Venezuela. It is rather difficult to come across what most people would regard as a garden so I imagine that the city's nickname is due primarily to its majestic mountains that stand as if guarding the city. They constitute part of the first national park ever to exist in Venezuela, Henri Pittier National Park.

Henri François Pittier was a Swiss botanist who came to Venezuela between 1916 and 1917. Surrounded by his followers, he devoted his time to the study and classification of the diverse species found in the forest. Realizing that many species were bound to extinction if the city continued to expand in the forest's territory, he did not hesitate to warn the authorities. In 1937, the president Eleazar López Contreras took measures on Pittier's dramatic warnings, and he declared the critical territory as being the Rancho Grande National Park, later renamed to Henri Pittier National Park.

The 107,800 hectares that form part of the Henri Pittier National Park are distributed among coast, valleys, plains, and diverse types of forest. Among the different types of forests found are subtropical and tropical jungle, rainforest, and cloud forest. Two roads that part from Maracay go through the park from different approaches. One begins from El Limón, and after ascending 1,130 meters, it reaches the coast of Ocumare. The other road is a continuation of Las Delicias Avenue, and it reaches 1,590 meters of altitude before arriving to the coast of Choroní.

I am most familiar with the road that leads to Ocumare since that was our usual destination on Saturdays. As we ascended
the mountain, the forest became denser, until at its peak, it felt as
if it condensed into a cold, dense, foggy cloud. On one occasion,
we came across a very confused cunaguaro (a feline found in this
area) in the middle of the mist. It quickly ran out of the narrow
pavement and back into the forest.

After descending again, the heat announced our proximity
to the town of Ocumare. Before reaching Ocumare, we passed by
a tiny river that flows strait into the Caribbean Sea. This disor­
dered territory is where a number of slave-labored cocoa planta­
tions and banana plantations stood in the time of the colonies.
Now it is covered with small rural houses with a few banana trees
and cocoa trees, and signs saying “Se vende cacao,” or “Se vende
cambur.” Occasionally we would stop to buy bananas at a stand.
Our favorites were titiaros (baby bananas) because of their
intense sweetness despite their minimal size.

We usually never stayed in the town of Ocumare, unless we
were renting a house with the intentions to stay for a week or
two visiting the beaches nearby with other members of our
extended family. Generally we went past Ocumare, on a fifteen­
minute drive through an arid, dry, red, mountain that surrounds
our magnificent coast. From the top of this infertile mountain, we
had a broad view of our piece of the Caribbean Sea: Bahía de Cata.
Half of the beach is densely populated with palm trees, and as you
approach the river near the mountains, the amount of palm trees
decreases dramatically, just as the number of tables with umbrel­
las increases. The white sand contrasts with the intense turquoise
waves that incessantly break against its shore. Two immense
buildings stand in the very center of the beach taking away so
much of its natural beauty. I never saw this beach without those
buildings, but people say that the beach was far lovelier without
them.

At the beach, picturesque vendors passed by every few min­
utes selling everything from coconut oil to sunglasses, T-shirts, ice­
cream, hippie jewelry, and aphrodisiacs. Some of the vendors
moved to a different beach every so often, but there were a few
that became fixtures of Bahía de Cata.
The ride back home always felt shorter than the ride to the beach.
I always stared at the trees with nostalgia hoping that someday I
could explore the park as did Henri Pittier, and thus give it the
attention I felt it very well deserved. I wanted to discover this
diverse territory, and on the first opportunity I had to join an
A few weeks into my eighth grade school year, Ivonne (our biology teacher), planned a weekend trip to Henri Pittier National Park as an activity for the members of the science club. Though it was expensive, I joined the group of twenty secondary school students on the expedition into the mountains that surrounded our city. The first day we simply met after school, loaded the bus with our luggage, and drove up to Rancho Grande, the place where Maria and her husband were waiting for us. We then followed them (carrying our backpack and carryon luggage) through a path, past a river, and into the forest where they had their humble home.

Maria was a beautiful mulata with colorful clothes, and a strong personality. Her husband, Miguel, was tall, pale, and with curly blonde hair. They lived in Henri Pittier most of the time out of the pure passion that the place woke in them. Maria was from Ocumare, and Miguel from Maracay, so living there was half way home for both of them. I remember Miguel saying to us, “We tried living in Maracay for a while, and though we were better off economically, we are simply happier here... We give tours to all of those who wish to visit Henri Pittier.”

Miguel was the tour guide. He showed us through the forest during the day, pointing out the diverse types of plants, their medical uses, and distinguishing the scrubs, and parasitic ones. He brought us through rivers, open areas, and sugar cane plantations. The day we passed by the sugar cane plantations, he chopped us each a piece of sugar cane to chew on. The most delicious and sweet juice was stored in between the fibers of the sugar cane.

Immediately after passing by the sugar cane plantations, we reached el trapiche, the place where they processed the sugar cane the old fashioned way. Bees still buzzed around the storehouse, brought there by the everlasting scent of processed sugar cane. The place was not put to use nowadays, but Miguel briefly explained to us how it used to work.

It was made up of five enormous kettles, which were probably as big as bathtubs placed side by side. The juice was extracted from the sugar cane using a certain machine that apparently was missing. It was left to boil in the first kettle, and as soon as it reached a certain consistency, it was passed on to the second ket-
tle, and then passed to the third, and so on, until it reached the consistency of caramel in the fifth kettle. From there, it was transferred to cone shaped molds that were engraved on a long table-top. The final product was what in Venezuela we call, papelón, which is now commercially sold and found in every store, but which is rarely made the original way.

The second day, we passed by the house of El Hermitano. We did not meet him for he was probably off to the river, but we spied on his house from the windows. It was a small, white and simple house. The room that probably told us the most about his personality was isolated by screens instead of walls; thus making it visible for anybody who passed by. He had jars of paint filling up open white wooden cabinets. Canvases of all different sizes were spread around the room, some with rough repetitions of sights in Henri Pittier, and others with completely finished ones. I imagined a lonely, thin, bald, sixty-year-old man, with jean shorts, not much taller than myself. I saw him so vividly in my mind after observing his painting room that I sometimes wonder if I did not truly see him there.

After our second day of expedition through Henri Pittier, Maria was waiting for us in the rancho, with lemonade (sweetened with papelón), hot chocolate (with cocoa brought from Ocumare), and conservas de coco (coconut sweets). After drinking cup after cup of the most delicious and authentic, thick hot chocolate, I stood on the balcony staring at Henri Pittier. I tried to listen to the music of the place, produced by a choir of crickets, and an orchestra of the 520 species of birds that fly through Henri Pittier's skies. It was easy to understand why Maria and Miguel preferred living in such a peaceful paradise over the hot and turbulent Maracay.

That day we had fish for dinner. I believe it was pargo rojo, which Maria prepared by wrapping in aluminum foil, and then stuffing it in between the burning logs of her old-fashioned stove. We had a side of potatoes and beans. After the most delicious meal prepared by the best cook I have ever met, Maria brought us to an open space where we had a bonfire. It was there where she exposed us to an important part of our culture as people from that region of Venezuela.

"Tambor. Oh my God! Tambor! So many people have such a mistaken concept of what tambor is!" she began. I completely agreed with her starting statement. Tambor is a Venezuelan genre
of music that has much African influence. As the name implies, tambor is mainly produced by diverse types of drums, and is dominant in the coast region of Venezuela, where most slaves were brought in the times of the colonies to work the sugar, cocoa, and banana plantations. However, the culture of the slaves dominated and managed to influence the entire region and now whether they know the history or not, most people dance tambor.

Many people believe that tambor's main purpose is for seduction. It is danced by shaking your hips to the rhythm of the drums, and if you let the drums take over your body movements, it is not a wonder how people came up with such a concept. “Oh no! I never dance tambor! That is a sinful dance! My mother says that it was danced by the women before their men took off fishing, to assure that they would soon come home to them.” Yube once said to me at a party when the rhythm of the drums began to echo in the room.

That day her amazed amber eyes attentively looked at Maria as she continued with her enlightened speech: “Tambor is a dance that brings us back to our identity! Every year, for the festival of San Juan, it is a tradition to dance tambor in the plaza, with a statue of San Juan, surrounded with flowers. We walk into the church celebrating, and devoting our happiness through tambor, to God, and to San Juan. After the most exciting mass, we parade back out to the plaza where we continue our festivities. This is the most exciting time of the year, and it would not be the same without tambor.”

I have never been to the festival of San Juan. It takes place in the town of Ocumare, and since it is usually the weekend before final examinations, I couldn’t afford spending it dancing tambor instead of studying for my exams. On top of that, it is usually around the rainy season, and it is dangerous to drive through Henri Pittier during the rainy season. In the late eighties, an avalanche of mud caused a terrible accident killing around 10,000 people.

Maria’s words influenced me greatly, to this very day: “A woman should never dance tambor staring at the floor! This will only make her appear insecure of herself. You must dance looking high over your shoulder, proud of being who you are, and proud of your identity.”

We then resumed to dance tambor as a few of the people of the group played the drums while Maria gave us a brief demon-
stration of the authentic way to dance. The flames of the bonfire danced along with her shadow, and her voluptuous body was invaded by the rhythm of the drums. That was the first day Yube danced tambor in her life because the religious and cultural value had been revealed to her. Maria's words not only reached me, but also opened the minds of others in the group. Perhaps she knew that people from a school like San José would bring along with them, a puritan mentality.

As I stood trying to uncover Maracay, through buildings, avenues, and into the mountains ahead of me, the nostalgia I used to feel on my drives home after a day at Cata invaded me again. I wanted to stay in this city, building new memories, dancing tambor, and going through Henri Pittier every weekend. I felt I had been deprived of my beautiful habitat for the past four years and even though the place I came to land on was not appalling, I desperately wanted to stay in my garden city.

I have, since then, revised and redefined my personal identity. In order to be in peace with myself, I had to understand that I am no longer solely Venezuelan because I am inevitably influenced by the places where I live and the people that I meet. Although new experiences do not replace past ones, they build my present and future character and I would be a very different person had I never left Maracay. I realized that living in another country does not make me unpatriotic, and I had to finally accept my position as a migrant without the stigma of feeling like a deserter. I now find comfort knowing that no matter how far I am from Venezuela, the part of my identity formed by my life there will follow me wherever I go.