

Kiran Asher, *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and Nature in the Pacific Lowlands*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. xv, 247; ISBN 0822344831.

Kiran Asher's *Black and Green* is an exhaustively – and occasionally dizzyingly – detailed account of the successes and failures of black ethnic organizing in Colombia's Pacific region during the 1990s. It is, at the same time, a much-needed corrective to preponderant and unhelpful trends in scholarship that elide the complex and crucial interrelations and interdependencies that exist between mainstream political and economic forces on the one hand and the groups that would seek alternatives to them on the other. *Black and Green* points to *mutual constitution* as the defining feature of the complicated entanglement of environmentalism, developmentalism, the Colombian state, and Afro-Colombian political movements in the period. Asher would have us part ways with the sorts of false binaries that, she claims, have long characterized studies of this kind – to stop seeing the forces of developmentalism and anti-developmentalism as neatly demarcated, but to see them instead as mutual constitutive and mutually informing. The “processes of black cultural organizing, state policies, and global development interventions in the Pacific,” she claims, “were mutually constituting one another” (20). Development and resistance, Asher iterates again and again, stand in dialectical relation to one another, and as the relationship between them shifts and changes, so do the methods and agents of development and resistance change and transform. Ultimately, the Afro-Colombian organizations whose efforts are plotted in *Black and Green* can be seen to be striving towards an alternative vision – of property ownership, of economic development, of environmental sustainability – one that is simultaneously incommensurable with mainstream models and yet can only, by definition, be defined and constituted through and against the mainstream.

Poor black communities in the Pacific Lowlands – specifically, the Chocó biogeographic region – have long suffered state neglect. Afro-Colombians, though a culturally, economically, and politically marginalized group, were denied the distinctive legal status afforded Colombian Indians until Transitory Article 55 (AT 55) was passed as part of the 1991 Constitution. After AT 55, numerous Afro-Colombian activist movements proliferated, in an attempt to combat neglect and marginalization, and to consolidate a vision for black identity and community empowerment. The passage of the Law of Black Communities (Law 70) in 1993 represented a “a victory” for such movements, one that Asher credits with “making a space for discussion and debates about black rights” (56). However, the capacity of black movements to capitalize on these steps forward was complicated by the heterogeneity of Afro-Colombian organizations themselves. The very groups that sought to promote collective identification and mutual cooperation – to define, as it were, the Afro-Colombian experience – were themselves profoundly diverse, and this posed crucial problems for consolidation. Tensions abounded, for example, between those individuals that sought to work outside of traditional governmental structures, and those that viewed insinuating themselves into such structures as fundamental to accomplishing meaningful change.

Problems of *definition* abounded, from Afro-Colombian movements' self-identification to the application of state- and NGO-sanctioned vocabulary and terminology to local contexts; entities work “to demarcate both physical boundaries and the *discourses* within which to understand and produce the new realities of the Pacific” (90; my emphasis). These difficulties posed major hurdles to the actualization of AT 55 and Law 70. Official conceptions of property rights simply did not meld with local notions of territoriality in the Chocó. What constituted biodiversity or sustainable development to governmentally-organized initiatives like Plan

Pacífico and Proyecto BioPacífico bore little resemblance to Afro-Colombian conceptions thereof. Such initiatives gave lip service to respecting indigenous knowledge systems, but generally treated such systems as secondary to national scientific and economic interests. As Asher explains, “the assessment was widespread and consistent among members of the black community: participation and respect for ethnic rights seldom transcended the rhetorical level in the practice of Proyecto BioPacífico and other state entities” (75). The divergence of Afro-Colombian cosmovisions from mainstream models posed fundamental problems, as black movements struggled, against entities like the World Bank, for control over the very terms of the conversation. At stake in these conflicts were more than territorial concerns – rather, these tensions pointed to fundamental incommensurabilities in conceptions of time, politics, nature, culture, and space. Colombian black and indigenous communities, according to Asher, view the seemingly disparate elements of their existence – culture, identity, territory, etc. – as fundamentally linked. Aware of these incommensurabilities, black movements strove to assert local and contingent visions of development in the face of overwhelming pressure to accept and conform to mainstream models. The basic heterogeneity of these movements posed problems for the elaboration of these visions. Also, Afro-Colombian groups did not work outside of mainstream systems, but within them: “black movements in the region,” Asher argues, “are attempting to construct cultural alternatives to contest state authority and the development apparatus while simultaneously being shaped by these forces” (93).

Black movements did not serve all Afro-Colombians; for some, more geographically isolated communities, the movements may as well have not existed at all. Cultural differences between and among black communities posed serious problems for organization, even when such basic issues as black rights were at stake. Urban and rural spaces demanded unique, and at times conflicting, considerations. Even the very label “Afro-Colombian,” though Asher uses it for purposes of clarity, did not always prove uncomplicatedly portable or applicable. Furthermore, the efforts of black communities were – and still are – always already entangled with authoritative structures. In one of many eloquent demonstrations of *Black and Green*’s cardinal argument, Asher describes the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of the Black Communities or PCN) as it struggles with the text’s defining conundrum: “In defining autonomy *from* the state, the PCN recognizes the state’s authority and in a curious way legitimizes it by engaging its instruments (laws, policies) and institutions”; later, “while the PCN critiques the state’s agendas in the region, the state’s interventions play a key role in shaping the dynamics of the black movement” (128). Asher would have her readers regard the romanticization of resistance with as much apprehension as the reduction of local social movements to structural explanations.

Asher’s text is informed not only by postcolonial considerations but by feminist approaches to ethnography, and Afro-Colombian’s women’s movements are studied in the text’s penultimate chapter. Asher would have her reader understand black women’s movements in the period as participating crucially in the larger context of black movements but, nevertheless, as staking out a claim distinctly their own. Afrocolombianas, Asher explains, “drew on prevailing discourses of development and ethnic identity to assert their right to organize independently from state-led projects and from broader black movements while simultaneously being constituted as subjects of these forces” (131). Asher credits AT 55 and Law 70 with opening spaces for afrocolombianas to articulate their concerns in the context of black social movements. In attempting to do so, however, black women’s movements had to contend with gendered discrimination and expectations that hindered their public or political involvement in

movements' actions. Fascinatingly, Asher describes the way in which the language of development and environment, politics and economics, was harnessed by black women, in their cooptation of the very category of "black women" as a development category.

The study ends with a dire diagnosis of and prognosis for post-1990s Colombia, a period in which anti-narcotic and anti-guerrilla military action has swept across the entire country, and has not left the Pacific regions untouched. As Asher explains, displacement has become a new and crucially important force in the lives and work of black movements. Even as they attempt to cope with these new developments, however, black movements and the gains they made in the 1990s have lost ground in the face of early 21st century military and economic trends. Official attitudes and policies towards environmental, developmental, and territorial issues in Colombia have only tended more towards a narrow and officially sanctioned view of what's needed in the region. Asher diagnoses the situation in 2007 in bleak terms: "radical or alternative possibilities for ethnic rights and social movements in the Pacific region are increasingly circumscribed by the violent tendencies of neoliberal economic globalization and the armed conflict" (172-3). All the while, most Afro-Colombians remain leery of traditional political machinations. In the final analysis, Asher is enthusiastic about the results of such legislation as Law 70, but pessimistic about conditions in Colombia as they exist today.

Black and Green's greatest success lies in its exposure of the dangers of oversimplification and binarization, which, in the Afro-Colombian context (and surely all others, to boot), threaten to "[fail] to capture the complexities of how local movements became vehicles for interventions such as those of the market and the state" (150). As a means to deepened understanding of Colombian contexts, the book's impact is perhaps more vexed; in attempting to correct for the negligence that has heretofore attended treatment political and scholarly of Afro-Colombian communities, the text tends toward atomization at the expense of the bigger picture. A vertiginous array of legal and technical language may prove valuable to some readers, but will tend to the confusion of many others. Still, the field is decidedly richer for *Black and Green*, and future scholars would do well to take to heart its clarion call for the directed and responsible interrogation of contingency and complexity. Balanced by an elaboration of broader contexts, Asher's approach stands to make profound contributions to methodology and scholarship.

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