

Review of *Black and Green: Afro-Colombians, Development, and nature in the Pacific Lowlands* by, Kiran Asher, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009.

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Kiran Asher has written a path-breaking book that uncovers the politics of black activism and state formation in Colombia from 1991 to the 2000s. Her book is based on extensive fieldwork in Colombia throughout the 1990s and on an impressive number of interviews with state representatives, anthropologists, and Afro-Colombian political leaders.

In 1991 a student movement and demobilized armed groups engineered the passage of a new Constitution that gave greater autonomy to the different provinces and ensured the popular election of governors. Most notably, this new Constitution enshrined the rights of indigenous people and celebrated the multicultural character of the Colombian nation. Several notable scholars of Colombian politics, anthropology, and sociologists have studied the impact of the 1991 Constitution on indigenous communities but Asher's book is the first comprehensive look at Afro-Colombian communities. During the process of writing up the Constitution of 1991, the question emerged whether Afro-Colombian communities were deserving of special protection in terms of communal landholding and cultural rights that were granted to the indigenous communities.

The first chapter maps out the different voices within the Afro-Colombian community and how the state gradually came to respond to Afro-Colombian ethnic politics. Intellectuals, state representatives, and Afro-Colombian activists came to a temporary consensus about what an Afro-Colombian identity and culture consisted of in the passage of Law 70. Passed in August of 1993, this law gave special protection to Afro-Colombian communities that owned land collectively as long as they preserved their "traditional ways" of doing agriculture (Asher, p. 51). Asher makes the important point that the Colombian state tied collective landownership protection to environmental stewardship.

Chapter 2 tackles the issue of development and the state's discourse about the Pacific where the vast majority of Afro-Colombian communities reside. Asher seeks to go beyond what she calls the binary of resistance versus cooptation to "development". Instead, she argues compellingly that the very nature of resistance is constructed by and shaped by the "development" discourse. She shows that the Colombian national state's presence grew in the Pacific area during the 1990s in contrast to other Latin American states that shrunk during this time of neo-liberalization and privatization. It should be stated that the prior presence of the national state was minimal at best in the Pacific area.

Chapter 3 examines the ethnic politics that emerged after the passage of Law 70. Asher examines the divisions that complicate the construction of a unified agenda for Afro-Colombian communities. Social class, urban versus rural, and partisan tensions produced different political agendas. Chapter 4 traces the mobilization and political activism of Afro-Colombian women who face specific challenges due their gender and ethnicity. Asher interviewed black women who worked in cooperatives and in a

grassroots organization such as the “Black Women’s Network.” Her findings are that Afro-Colombian women’s mobilization was shaped by the state’s discourse on environment and cultural practices. Chapter 5 focuses on the terrible paradox of the Afro-Colombian communities making great strides in terms of legal and collective landownership of land on the Pacific coast but facing displacement and increasing violence from armed groups such as the paramilitaries. Prior to the passage of Law 70 and to the development plans of the Pacific region, this area was largely peaceful and had been sheltered from the worst excesses of violence seen in other Colombian regions. Now large numbers of Afro-Colombian communities are forced to leave their land and end up as refugees in Bogotá. Asher explains that this displacement (carried out by the paramilitaries) is due to the rise in palm oil and drug cultivation. This book is a very important book for readers interested in the field of development, ethnic studies, and state formation. It will be of particular interest to scholars and graduate students who specialize on 20th century Colombia. This book, because it is innovative and covers new ground, raises many important research questions about the presence of the state and violence in Colombia. Much of the literature on peace and conflict in Colombia suggests that the way to end conflict and violence in Colombia is by making the state more robust and by ensuring a greater state presence in regions traditionally neglected. Kiran Asher’s study clearly questions this assumption by documenting how the Pacific region became violent after the state became more present. The answer to this paradox awaits.