

Book Review

— *Landscapes of Freedom. Building a Postemancipation Society in the Rainforest of Western Colombia*, by Claudia Leal, The University of Arizona Press, 2018.

In this book Claudia Leal studies – to paraphrase the author – the historical role of the natural environment in the construction of a unique post emancipation society in Latin America; i.e., black people communities in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia after the abolition of slavery.

The author presents this Colombian territory as a land of exceptionalities, e.g., the territory with the largest composition of Afro-descendant population in the Americas, the most humid forest in the western hemisphere, excessive rainfall levels, and an astoundingly rich biodiversity. However, none of these exceptional characteristics of the Pacific lowlands are as thought-provoking and, at the same time, scarcely studied as the synergies that developed between the pervasive rainforest landscape, local people and the post-emancipation society that has emerged.

Leal brilliantly addresses this overlooked issue, unveiling how lowland inhabitants' appropriation of the natural environment helped to construct a society in transition to freedom more ambivalent than is usually thought. As the author masterfully demonstrates, this is not just a traditional history of a tropical-extractive doom. That is, on the one hand, the rainforest facilitated an extractive economy with its typical exploitation practices and minoritarian actors who tried to control resources through their access to capital, political networks, technology, and property rights. On the other hand, in what is a particularity of the lowland territory, the rainforest served as an ally to excluded black inhabitants, empowering them in their search for autonomy.

Specifically, the rainforest provided the majoritarian black people with basics and raw materials with which they ensured their self-reliance and their capacity to live freely. As well, the rainforest allowed the appropriation of means of production by a huge segment of the poor black population. In the wild forest, black people could freely extract commodities by mining metals and collecting vegetable resources without ecological and social restrictions as in other agrarian systems of production in Latin America. The indomitable

landscape also prevented dominant powerful actors from fully monopolizing the labor supply and extraction of commodities. Under this scenario, powerless lowland people searched and found ingenious solutions to resist authorities, captivity, oppression and abuse.

Throughout the book, Leal demonstrates these insights with an in-depth use of new historical evidence. Chapter 1 indeed shows that this synergy between the natural environment, people and autonomy precedes post-emancipation times, since slaves found in the rainforest an ally that allowed them to freely extract commodities and accumulate resources to self-purchase their freedom. Chapters 2 and 3 shed light on the dynamics of the post-slave extractive economy by focusing on the newly independent black peasants (miners/collectors/gatherers) and local traders of commodities. Here, Leal reveals that while black peasants assured their autonomy extracting food, construction materials, tools and commodities in the wild forest, local traders bought these extracted commodities, sold it in overseas markets, and created commercial houses to provided national and import merchandise to lowland peasants. In this dynamic, Leal also describes that local traders and black peasants developed beneficial, but asymmetric, relations with deals in which traders secured the provision of commodities, while black peasants secured access to merchandise and economic support (if necessary). The political economy, on the other hand, also assisted autonomy as chapter 4 exposes. Specifically, local people used overlapping legislation to defend against privatization and abuse by big investors. Moreover, peasants also found in local political and commercial elites supporters of common access to natural resources, since it guaranteed the inclusion of elites in the extractive economy with low investment and higher profits. Finally, chapters 5 and 6 reconstruct the rural and urban history of this lowland society, stressing that black people physically and legally expanded the rural frontier as a way to ensure their autonomy. In turn, the local white elites (local traders, merchants, Catholic Church and civil authorities) focused on the urbanization of rural areas. An important remark is that, in this racialized landscape, white elites did not give up controlling forest territory and people. Black people's autonomy, in both rural and urban landscape, was countered with "civilizing" projects, e.g., religious indoctrination, congregation in towns, urban spatial segregation, and/or racist immigration and educational policies.

Claudia Leal successfully presents an enjoyable account of overlooked aspects in the scholarship such as the constant defense of autonomy in the Pacific lowland rainforest. The book's success is its turn away from the exploitative emphasis the extractive economies to uncover the lowland rainforest landscape as a historical setting in which oppressed people exercised agency. Leal shows in great detail that lowland people here always struggled to defend their autonomy and to live freely with their customary practices and common access to resources. This perspective naturally, as she correctly claims, challenges some insights of scholarship in agrarian and economic history which have kept the

tropical peripheries and non-white people as societies of passiveness, oppression and marginality, with no secure property rights and cruel practices.

Whereas the book is a delightful contribution, it feels sometimes that the argument of the natural environment overshadows dynamics that also contribute to ambivalence. In all societies, whether in the peripheral rainforest or central agrarian territories, power exists and involves social dynamics intended to dominate. Likewise, power is always contested regardless of the geophysical conditions in which powerless people are settled. These opposing and simultaneously occurring dynamics might explain for instance why, in spite of the remarkable agency of black peasants, the lowland history is far from being one with a happy ending. As Leal describes, the achievements in autonomy of black people were simultaneously countered with geo-racialized solutions (e.g. implicit racism, white “civilization” projects). Hence, the analysis of social dynamics is a starting point to address the latest research endeavor posited by Leal, i.e., how the autonomy of lowland people and their appropriation of the natural environment did not translate to long run inclusive development in this unique Latin American society.

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