

Courtney Desiree Morris, *To Defend This Sunrise: Black Women's Activism and the Authoritarian Turn in Nicaragua*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023. ISBN: 9781978804791 (paper); ISBN: 9781978804807 (cloth); ISBN: 9781978804838 (ebook)

In the opening pages of her book, *To Defend This Sunrise: Black Women's Activism and the Authoritarian Turn in Nicaragua*, Courtney Desiree Morris deftly challenges the widely held belief that the 2018 mass antigovernment uprising in Nicaragua was unexpected. Her alternative explanation links the protests to the contested history of colonial state violence, territorial dispossession, and economic exclusion faced by the Black and Indigenous community of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Her proposal conveys the stakes of overlooking the *longue durée* of the anticolonial, antiracist struggle in which Black and Indigenous women activists have been engaged since the 19th century, noting that it has allowed for an ahistoric reading of contemporary political demands. While the common understanding of the current unrest links it directly to the contemporary regime of Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, and his wife, Rosario Murillo, these activists have brought a much more destabilizing condemnation to the fore. They assert that "democracy is not inherently a just political project but that many forms of violence, dispossession, and exclusion can be enacted within its legal frameworks" (p.215).

Morris' text is rooted in a Black feminist geographic interpretation of the Caribbean Coast, in which she centers Bluefields, the capital city of the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. This region was one of two that were created to usher in a new era of Nicaraguan multicultural democracy as a result of the hard-fought political reforms of 1987 that emerged out of the Sandinista Revolution. Under this ideology, the state was to formally recognize the collective rights of Black and Indigenous groups to self-governance, law, education, land, and natural resources. However, Morris' text chronicles an alternative trend, in which the state has repeatedly undermined these groups' right to regional political autonomy, and forced conditions of extreme material deprivation. These acts of violence have eventually forced activists to take up the terminology of "genocide" (p.3) to capture their relationship to the Nicaraguan state.

Morris' commitment to activist anthropology—namely her nearly two decades of fieldwork and building close relationships with the Black and Indigenous women activists of Bluefields—unearths a narrative of resistance that is otherwise obfuscated by the Nicaraguan state's strategic deployment of a spatial imaginary that marginalizes the coast. She analyzes how the women activists have been forced to respond to a “geo-centric vision” (p.xiii) that the national regime claims to represent multicultural identities, while systematically dispossessing its Black and Indigenous communities of their land. This vision operationalizes a racial logic that attaches Blackness to a single place on the coast. To render it marginal, the state relies on stereotyped connotations of deviance, desire, and danger that also map unevenly onto gender. Morris writes, “racial states create norms of national space and citizens through a spatial tautology that naturalizes the characterization of racially subjugated groups as counter-national subjects whose Otherness is embedded in the landscapes that they inhabit” (p.9). The symbolism that marks the coast as Other then becomes the basis on which the denial of material resources is justified. As such, the racialized coast has been cast into a spatial imaginary that renders it invisible, historically unlinked, and geographically unbound to the rest of the primarily mestizo nation.

However, spatial imaginaries also form the basis of Black and Indigenous women's activism. Their “alternative spatial imaginary” carries with it destabilizing potential by envisioning “modes of Black life and sociality that defy the violence of slow genocidal state policies and political dispossession”; these “offer the possibility of a different kind of political future” (p.xix) by centering local struggles across levels of power to link with other projects for racial justice across the Americas. Morris captures this mode of resistance in her theory of “diasporic locality” (p.25), which puts into practice a Black feminist spatial imaginary that roots struggles for a *specific* place at the center of activism across the scales of the local, national, and global. Thus, while Black and Indigenous activists concentrate on the “racial violence that defines the normative workings of the mestizo state, their activism has taken them from local struggles at the grassroots level to constructing imagined digital communities linked through social media platforms to advocating for the rights of Black and Indigenous communities in transnational human rights spaces” (p.25). Drawing from Katherine McKittrick (2006), Morris

argues that these modes of cultural and political praxis challenge narratives that portray Black women's bodies as "ungeographic" and their spatial knowledge as lesser.

While Black and Indigenous women of Bluefields rely on their intimate knowledge of the specificities of place in their activist praxis, they also subvert, complicate, and reimagine local norms and expectations around their gender to advance an alternative spatial imaginary. Morris' theorization of a "politics of intimate solidarity" (p.177) is one of the key moments in which she provides a close reading of this gendered politics. Maintaining silence in the face of sexual violence is seen as a cultural deficit of the Black and Indigenous women of Bluefields when compared to mestiza women, who are more likely to speak out. However, this belief overlooks the ways in which speaking out has historically been difficult on the coast due to systemic conditions that leave justice systems indifferent, and the community impoverished and less educated. In addition, speaking publicly typically requires women to make claims as individuals, which has prevented sexual violence from being perceived as a structural problem. Morris demonstrates that women have been developing alternative activist strategies that respond to the specificities of the gendered constraints in their community. One such way is by taking private conversations into the public sphere to make *collective* demands upon the state to address the material conditions that have perpetuated violence. It is through this form of organizing that women rewrite the narratives that engender silence by portraying Black women either as strong, resilient fighters, or as virtuous, innocent figures. As a result, Morris' text provides a highly granular examination of how activist strategies rooted in place intersect with a capacious spatial imaginary in which Black and Indigenous women have full access to protection, agency, and humanity.

While several of Morris' chapters provide this richness of detail, the throughline of how women navigate their understanding of themselves and the social role in which they are placed to achieve the broader political and social goals of the region, may appear disconnected to some readers. However, this also seems to be, in part, the point, as Morris demonstrates both the gendered contradictions that women navigate, and those that they *create* through their various political struggles. Morris demonstrates her deftness is navigating these contradictions with her recounting of Lourdes Maria Aguilar Gibbs, the first Black woman elected to lead the South

Autonomous Regional Council, a local governance body. As president, she both worked in the interests of women in the region, *while also* admitting to acts of corruption, such as paying those in her neighborhood to vote for her. Aguilar's explanation reveals the contradictions of the gendered politics of women's activism, as Morris summarizes: "to bring women's gendered interests into politics, to make these ideas tangible in the form of policy, programs, and resources, women have to play hardball like men because politics remains a man's world" (p.103).

The diversity of contradictions that women navigate in the book is largely due to the comprehensiveness of Morris' fieldwork; not only does she cover recent political organizing in Bluefields, but she also sets sail on cruise ships to document the Black and Indigenous women who leave the city in search of economic opportunity. Once again, she navigates the complexity of women's struggles for survival amidst conditions of resource deprivation, the pressure that they often face to support their families (both immediate and extended), and the gendered concerns that their "shipping out" (p.109) harms their children, promotes materialism, and allows for perceived immoral sexual relations. While less obviously connected to the struggle for land rights in Bluefields, Morris' rich ethnographic work with this group of female workers offshore demonstrates how navigating survival for themselves and their families becomes an activist practice. Within it is a direct challenge of the spatial imaginary that produces the coast as deviant and marginal when women take up higher-paid work in other places.

As an activist anthropologist working within the framework of Black feminist geographies, Morris' text contributes to a growing knowledge base across disciplines that documents the actual strategies that Black women undertake to challenge dominant spatial knowledge and put into practice alternative futures (e.g. Perry 2013; Rodriguez 2021). At some moments, Morris' role in the activists' struggle is not fully clear; for instance, she mentions the *Black Women's Voice* radio program that she cohosted once, without fully clarifying the difference between her use of the radio versus that of the women activists—if there is any. However, this is largely overshadowed by her notes on her own praxis, particularly her efforts to shrink the distance between researcher and subject, which provide valuable insights and guidance for others committed to the production of radical geographic scholarship.

References

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