Plishka on Loperena, 'The Ends of Paradise: Race, Extraction, and the Struggle for Black Life in Honduras'

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Reviewed by Matt Plishka (Vanderbilt University)
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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)


In *The Ends of Paradise: Race, Extraction, and the Struggle for Black Life in Honduras*, author Christopher A. Loperena begins with a call for a “radical imagination,” a hope for “‘another world’ in which Indigenous and Black peoples thrive” (p. 2). Loperena first grappled with these thoughts on a 2003 bus ride to the Honduran capital of Tegucigal, where a gathering of Indigenous farmers protested the Iraq War. What he heard from these farmers—how neoliberal economic policies threatened the present and future of Indigenous livelihoods—would become the foundation for his ethnographic research and this excellent study of the lives of Black Indigenous Garifuna and their struggle against the Honduran state and multinational tourism complex. Loperena frames the Garifuna struggle as a fight for autonomy and the ability to shape their own future as one of collective survival and success that pits them against the privatizing, extractivist forces of capitalist development.

Loperena makes a number of contributions to studies of tourism, Blackness, and Indigeneity, particularly within the context of Latin America. Rather than viewing tourism as separate from the past extractive industries that shaped Honduras, Loperena argues that tourism is just the next iteration of extraction. Just like the extractive industries of the past, tourism brings “enclosure, dispossession, and environmental degradation” (p. 4). Loperena also calls for a broader understanding of Blackness, one that allows for Black peoples in the Americas to claim Indigenous identities. Loperena wants to shift the focus of Black studies from questions of oceans and water to issues of land and autonomy to refute the idea that Black peoples are placeless. He explores the intersections of tourism and Blackness through the framework of “racialized extraction,” showing how the state uses racial differences to commodify Black culture and bodies while, at the same time, using these racial differences to other the community from the nation (p. 13). How the Garifuna respond to this commodification and exclusion is at the center of this book.

Part 1 places tourism on the Caribbean coast of Honduras within a longer history of extractivism in the region. In chapter 1, Loperena provides the history of extraction in Honduras and its effects on the Garifuna and Black laborers more broadly. He takes the reader from banana enclaves in the late...
nineteenth century to palm oil production in the twenty-first, showing how development and extraction have been inextricably linked in Honduras. In particular, he highlights the tension between the land privatization goals of the Honduran state and the Garifunas’ approach to land as collectively owned by the community. Land privatization efforts often placed the Garifuna in conflict with the mestizo majority within Honduras, who viewed Black and Indigenous land as the “frontier of progress” (p. 50).

Chapter 2 focuses on the politics of tourism development and its impact on the Garifuna within the context of the Honduran state’s promotion of multiculturalism. Loperena explores the paradox of multicultural inclusion being used to exclude and commodify the Garifuna community and their bodies. He describes how the state promotes the Garifuna as a distinct group within Honduras in order to market that difference to prospective tourists. Through this promotion, the Garifuna became the face of Honduran tourism. While exploiting Garifunas' cultural differences to promote tourism, the Honduran state simultaneously uses it to separate the Garifuna from the nation. The state rejected the Indigeneity of the Garifuna to justify expropriating their land for the purposes of tourism development and to privilege mestizo land claims over those of the Garifuna.

Loperena’s work particularly shines in part 2, when he takes the themes and conflicts established in part 1 and shows how they play out within the Garifuna community of Triunfo. Undergirding each of the chapters in part 2 is the question of what it means to be Garifuna. Loperena relies on years of ethnographic work within Triunfo to explore the conflicts between the Garifuna and the state as well as between Garifuna themselves. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on conflict among the Garifuna, particularly between development-focused empresarios (businessmen) and anti-development land defenders. Loperena focuses primarily on two individuals: Ricardo, the spokesman for the development-oriented Garifuna, and Carla, a leader of the land defenders. Although they each have starkly different visions for the future of the Garifuna, they both base their beliefs within the notion of Garifuna autonomy. For Ricardo and the empresarios, community development of and control over tourism will ensure that they escape the “monster of tourism” driven by the Honduran state and multinational corporations, even if this requires sacrificing some traditional Garifuna beliefs and practices (p. 96). For Carla and the land defenders, collective ownership of the land is essential to Garifuna identity; those who would abandon this in the name of development are separating themselves from who the Garifuna are. In highlighting the debates between the Garifuna, Loperena also shows the often gendered divide between the empresarios and land defenders.

The final chapter shifts the focus to the conflict between the Garifuna and the Honduran state, using the Garifunas’ 2014 appearance at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to show how the fight over Garifuna land has played out through the legal system. The trial centers around the Garifuna claims that the Honduran state was violating their collective property rights by privatizing their land. Loperena provides an ethnographic account of the trial, taking the reader into the courtroom to hear the arguments by the state and the Garifuna and to relay the powerful emotions pervading the proceedings. The themes Loperena established previously—Blackness, land rights, Garifuna identity, and difference—all play central roles in the trial and its outcome. While the court sided with the Garifuna over their collective land rights, the state has not complied with the court’s ruling, highlighting the limits of using the legal system for justice. The end of the chapter, and the following conclusion, also make clear the stakes for Garifuna fighting for their land. Disappearances of four land defenders, as well as the murder of Berta Caceres, a Honduran Indigenous environmental
activist, highlight the risk of state-backed violence and death that comes with fighting for place. As Loperena states, “The claim of black placeness is an act of rebellion” (p. 174).

*The Ends of Paradise* is at its strongest when the focus is centered on individual Garifuna and the Triunfo community. Loperena expertly weaves together interviews and conversations with context that helps the reader understand debates within the Triunfo community and the struggles the Garifuna face against an exploitative state. It is through the voices of people like Carla and Ricardo that Loperena is able to show how extractivism has divided the Triunfo community and why both the pro-development and land defense factions believe they are supporting what is best for the future of the Garifuna. The specter of the Honduran state and the tourism complex hang over all of these interactions. By exploring the connection between tourism and extraction in the beginning of the work, Loperena provides the reader with the context to understand how and why the debates between Garifuna play out the way they do.

The single-sited nature of the project allows Loperena to deeply engage with the lives of the Garifuna and their struggles in Honduras. But by remaining almost solely focused on Honduras, Loperena does not place the story of the Garifuna and tourism more firmly within a circum-Caribbean context. Loperena occasionally gestures toward events elsewhere in the region, such as in reference to Jennifer Goett’s and Courtney Desiree Morris’s respective works on land in Nicaragua.[1] However, these moments are brief asides rather than points of consistent engagement. In discussing the Honduran state’s efforts to reject Garifuna Indigeneity, Loperena claims that this rejection “sheds light on the racial logics undergirding dominant notions of Indigeneity in the Americas more broadly” (p. 150). But by not actually detailing the wider scope of Indigeneity in the region, Loperena misses an opportunity to make the work more accessible to non-regional experts.

I also left the work wanting for more environmental aspects of the Garifunas’ experiences. Loperena occasionally references environmental change associated with the struggle over land privatization. For instance, he recounts how the encroachment of mestizo settlers onto Garifuna land caused by the expansion of the oil palm industry resulted in more Garifuna practicing permanent farming techniques, rather than shifting agriculture so that more land would be in use and therefore harder to settle. But these moments are primarily asides. Issues such as how the Garifuna understand and respond to land degradation caused by the expansion of the tourist sector and how climate change and an influx of tourism will affect the environment in and around the Garifuna communities are largely unexplored. I came away from the book curious about how the experiences of the Garifuna would be understood if presented through an environmental justice framework, although this is not within the scope of this book.

Overall, *The Ends of Paradise* is a fascinating analysis of the struggle to define the identity and future of the Garifuna in Honduras. It is a valuable addition to studies of Indigeneity, Blackness, and Latin American/Caribbean studies. Its placement of tourism within the longue durée of extractivism also makes a significant contribution to how we conceptualize and contextualize tourism studies. As the tourism complex continues to expand both in Honduras and globally, communities like the Garifuna will face more and more threats to their ways of life. Works like *The Ends of Paradise* are critical to raise awareness of how these communities respond to and/or resist these efforts and what can be lost if they are not supported in their struggles.

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