



Conservation by racialized dispossession: The making of an eco-destination on Honduras's North Coast

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of neoliberal conservation and ecotourism development, the Honduran state has prioritized the desires of foreign tourists and private investors over the needs of indigenous and black coastal inhabitants, and increasingly this is leading to state-sanctioned violence against marginalized groups. I use Peluso's analytic of coercive conservation (1993) to show how conservation practice furthers the expansionist policies of the state and elite investors while simultaneously dehumanizing the indigenous peoples that depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. While Garífuna culture is central to Honduras's ecotourism ambitions, their livelihoods, in the eyes of many developers and conservation NGOs, are a potential threat to the viability of the emerging tourism imaginary. Black and indigenous coastal inhabitants are valued for the cultural cache they add to regional tourism plans, yet denigrated for their inherent "backwardness" and presumed inability to respect the delicate ecosystems they inhabit. This imaginary authorizes material practices of racialized dispossession, which were set in motion by neoliberal conservation regimes designed to exploit the natural and cultural resources upon which tourism development is premised.

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1. Introduction

On February 6, 1995, Blanca Jeannette Kawas, a prominent Honduran environmental activist, was assassinated. Her death garnered international attention, due in part to the state's failure to adequately investigate and prosecute those responsible for her murder. The Honduras General Bureau of Criminal Investigation found evidence of state security forces' complicity, but did not take further action.¹ As the founding director of the Foundation for the Protection of Lancetilla, Punta Sal and Texiguat (PROLANSATE), Kawas was an early advocate of ecotourism's potential to generate environmentally sustainable economic growth in Tela Bay. This contrasted sharply with the priorities of the state and elite investors who favored agro-industry and mass tourism development. The international outcry following her death furthered the moral imperative for natural resource conservation, and ushered in a series of park management agreements between the government and private NGOs. Newly minted management plans, which linked conservationists, NGOs, state agencies and local communities, had the potential to turn the country's ugly environmental history into

a promising green future replete with eco-resorts and modern infrastructure.

The effects of these new configurations of environmental governance (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006) are particularly sharp within Honduras's Garífuna communities. Garífuna are a people of Carib, Arawak and African descent. They are one of nine officially recognized "ethnic groups"² in Honduras and as such are protected by international conventions regarding the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples, specifically International Labor Organization Convention 169, ratified by Honduras in 1995. Honduras is home to approximately 46 Garífuna communities dispersed along the country's most coveted stretches of white-sand Caribbean beaches. Historian Dario Euraque argues that Honduran national identity—rooted in the ideology of indo-hispanic *mestizaje*³—cohered in opposition to the coast, which white elites in the capital imagined as black and foreign due

² The Honduran state uses the term "ethnic groups" to refer to black and indigenous peoples, who, due to their unique cultural characteristics and modes of livelihood, are distinguished from the majority population. Garífuna make claims to indigeneity based on their mixed ancestry and pre-national settlement on the Caribbean coast, but white Hondurans and foreign visitors also interpellate them as black.

³ *Mestizo* refers to people of mixed indigenous and European ancestry, and is used to identify the dominant racial group in Honduras. *Mestizaje* is the ideology that upholds indo-hispanic racial mixture as the origin of the modern nation (see Anderson, 2009: 78–82). Garífuna use the term *mestizo* and white interchangeably.

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¹ IACHR, "Application to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Blanca Jeannette Kawas Fernández Against the Republic of Honduras" (Case 12.507), 2008.

to the prevalence of Afro-Caribbean laborers brought to work on the banana plantations in the 20th century (1998, 2003). While the Caribbean coast was historically marginal, it has now become the center of *mestizo* elite tourism ambitions, resulting in numerous land conflicts between Garífuna communities and investors, state authorities and environmental NGOs.

In this paper, I draw on Gregory's concept of imaginative geographies (2004) to demonstrate how touristic landscapes are fashioned through the dialectic of race and space, wherein Garífuna are fixed into place as folkloric representatives of a mythical past, rendering their own sense of place and geography "unrecognizable and valueless" (McKittrick, 2006: 4). This imaginary authorizes material practices of racialized dispossession, which were set in motion by neoliberal conservation regimes designed to protect the natural and cultural resources upon which tourism development is premised. As a racialized territorial project, the Honduran tourism imaginary not only refashions natural landscapes for the purposes of economic development, but also violently expands the territorial reach and sovereign powers of the state and multinational capital into spaces that had until recently very little state presence.⁴ This leads to what I term "conservation by racialized dispossession," which entails both primitive accumulation by dispossession, crucial to processes of neoliberal conservation (Fairhead et al., 2012; Kelly, 2011), and the concomitant racialization of space (Goldberg, 1993). This process, I contend, privileges the private interests of *mestizo* Hondurans and foreign tourists over the communal rights and resources of black and indigenous peoples. Moreover, it leads to the enclosure of communally held lands and an appropriation of Garífuna racial and cultural difference for touristic consumption.

By delineating a link between racialized tourist landscapes and conservation practice, I bring attention to the racial logics undergirding eco-development along the Caribbean coast of Honduras, which has sharpened tensions between *mestizos* and indigenous and black Hondurans. While developers value Garífuna coastal inhabitants for the cultural cache they add to regional tourism plans, they are denigrated for their presumed inability to respect the delicate eco-systems they inhabit and for their failure to harness productive opportunities within the tourism sector. As I demonstrate below, some conservation officials have identified Garífuna as "enemies" of the environment for their unwillingness to abide by newly established protection measures (see also Ybarra, 2012). Meanwhile, tourists and private enterprise are seen as potential stewards of the environment and the rich ecological landscapes that could lift Honduras to new economic heights.

To develop my argument, I draw on over two years of ethnographic research in Tela Bay, semi-structured interviews with Garífuna land rights activists, fishermen and representatives from environmental NGOs. I begin by analyzing the trajectory of ecotourism plans in Honduras and the ways in which neoliberal natures shape tourism imaginaries. I focus on two emerging ecotourism destinations in Honduras: the Jeannette Kawas National Park (JKNP) and the Cuero and Salado Wildlife Refuge. Both JKNP and Cuero and Salado overlap with Garífuna territorial land claims in Tela Bay. Next, I discuss how the Honduran Institute of Tourism and the National Institute of Conservation and Forestry Development (ICF) appropriate Garífuna culture as part of a national tourism imaginary. I lay out the broader material practices this tourism imaginary authorizes, specifically forms of violence

and dispossession, and the impact of environmental legislation and park management plans on Garífuna livelihoods. To further explore this relationship, I analyze the case of a Garífuna fisherman who was murdered while allegedly fishing using illegal means in the heart of the Cuero and Salado Wildlife Refuge. I then analyze the newly constructed Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort in the JKNP, and the ways in which racialized dispossession is achieved through eco-design principles. In the final section, I question whose security is at stake in the making of Honduran eco-destinations and the perceived threat Garífuna represent to the national tourism imaginary.

2. The tourism imaginary

Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Gregory defines imaginative geographies as "constructions that fold distance into difference through a series of spatializations" (Gregory, 2004: 17). These spatial imaginaries, which are fashioned through discursive and material practices of dispossession (Hart, 2006: 984), are essential to tourism development schemes promoted by the Honduran state and private investors. Dispossession of Garífuna from their coastal territories, therefore, hinges on both the "racialization of space and the spatialization of race" (Goldberg, 1993; Lipsitz, 2007), which creates the conditions for the accumulation of natural and cultural resources by *mestizos*,⁵ and which is often carried out under the guise of conservation.

Designated protected areas in Honduras cover about 36% of the national territory. In addition to the Rio Platano Biosphere, an UNESCO World Heritage site in the Honduran Mosquitia, the state has designated numerous protected areas along the Atlantic littoral, including the Cuero and Salado Wildlife Refuge, Jeannette Kawas National Park, and Punto Izopo National Park in the Department of Atlántida. These protected sites are home to wetlands of international importance, mangroves, endangered wildlife, and dozens of indigenous communities, including Miskito, Pech, Tawahka and Garífuna. Indeed, it is the presence of ethnic groups in combination with abundant natural resources that demarcates these spaces as deserving of special protections. According to the Strategic Plan of the National System of Protected Areas of Honduras, "Ethnic groups can be found in approximately 70% of priority protected areas in the country and they are key to the establishment of Biological Corridors" (PESINAPH, 2011: 7). Nonetheless, the continued presence of Garífuna within these spaces is increasingly imperiled. In order to analyze this paradox, it is necessary to first chart the trajectory of neoliberal conservation policies in Honduras.

2.1. Neoliberal conservation

The Honduran Corporation for Forestry Development (COHDEFOR), established in 1974, was the state entity responsible for the management of all forest resources on public lands. Due to widespread corruption within the organization, COHDEFOR faced increasing pressure to decentralize. In the 1990s, international aid and development agencies insisted the sustainable use of environmental resources could only be accomplished through the co-management of protected areas. This change in conservation policy, initially backed by the US Agency for International Development, placed greater emphasis on the resource

⁴ I frequently use the term state, by which I mean to refer to the institutions of the state, but also state-like institutions (Trouillot, 2003), which include environmental NGOs, international financial institutions and other development agencies. In the present historical moment, the coherency of the state has been crosscut by a number of non-state actors, and extra-state forces that contribute to the forms of governance I refer to in this paper.

⁵ Moore discusses how the violent dispossession of African property and personhood became the "condition of possibility" for white land rights in Zimbabwe (2005: 12). My work builds on this analytical framework, the notion of racialized dispossession, to show how contemporaneous processes of conservation and tourism development create the conditions for the dispossession of Garífuna lands and the eradication of communal property regimes on the coast of Honduras.

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