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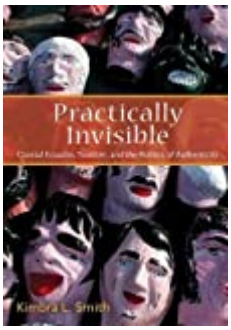

Kimbra L. Smith. *Practically Invisible: Coastal Ecuador, Tourism, and the Politics of Authenticity.* Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015. 256 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8265-2056-2.

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Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Coastal Indigenous Communities in Ecuador

When I was asked to do a book review of *Practically Invisible: Coastal Ecuador, Tourism, and the Politics of Authenticity*, I knew that this book would be from a social anthropology perspective. Judging from the title, I expected it to be a study of the social relations between eco-tourists and the local community they are guests in. This is not what this book is about, or only tangentially. Though it wasnât what I was looking forward to, the book is still a valuable and well-researched read.

For full disclosure, I am a global politics scholar working on global environmental issues. My research is strongly influenced by critical political economy and political ecology approaches. I have worked on environment and the global political economy of tourism, which is why I was asked to write this review. As a result, I cannot judge its merit from an anthropological perspective and will focus on the issue of global-local linkages and the impact of outside influences on subaltern groups instead. Although Kimbra L. Smithâs study is a community study, these are also concerns that ultimately drive her research.

Practically Invisible is about a coastal community in Ecuador, Agua Blanca, located within a national park and constituted of an indigenous population. It is still deeply situated in traditional lifestyles yet intersecting with modernity at various levels. The book analyzes life at the intersection of tradition and modernity from an ethnographic perspective. While tourism is one touch point where internal and external value systems intersect, this tension does not actually lie at the core of the bookâs focus. Rather, the book is about the community and individuals within that community and how they negotiate various situations in their lives. It connects to identity and how outside influences change local senses of identity.

What was of particular interest to me in this ethnography was the discussion of the role of the subaltern in a postcolonial situation and how these social relations played out in Agua Blanca. In the political ecology literature, for example, the concept of *buen vivir* in Ecuador is usually presented as an example of a well-working alternative to the Western growth society and one that incor-

porates the values of indigenous communities from the bottom up. However, Smith recounts very graphically a situation that puts into question the supposed success of *buen vivir*. In 2005, Smith and her husband (an Agua Blanca native) ended up at a meeting organized by the national petroleum company, Petroecuador. They had been traveling and met people from neighboring communities at the bus stop who heard about the meeting by word of mouth. At this meeting, a supposed elected president from the local communities asked the meeting to move forward with a development proposal by the oil company that would have granted it far reaching rights over the land. However, no local representative had ever met this president before and he was not a member of any of the local communities. When the locals raised this point at the meeting they were accused of not having participated in the political process and just not having turned up for the supposed presidentâs election.

These strategies are similar to meetings between Amazonian indigenous communities and government officials/petroleum executives as described elsewhere.[1] According to Smith, President Rafael Correa espoused a pro-indigenous rhetoric during his presidency with the inclusion of indigenous representatives in government and the policy and rhetoric of the concept of *buen vivir*âa bottom-up political concept assigning equal value to non-material cultural and environmental values from indigenous communities to Western concepts of development. *Buen vivir* is enshrined in the Ecuadorian constitution and lauded internationally as an alternative to Western paths of development which are seen as unsustainable and dismissive of indigenous culture and values. Yet local communities have come to reject the concept of *buen vivir* as veiled policies aimed at reducing the autonomy of indigenous communities.[2] Thus subaltern requests can be dismissed because indigenous objectives are already being met through the general political process. This is a very interesting addition to the literature on *buen vivir* which is generally portrayed as a lived example on how to empower indigenous communities.

Practically Invisible provides a thorough case study of the subaltern in a coastal community in Ecuador, which adds interesting new dimensions to perceived wisdoms about indigenous communities, Ecuadorian politics, and the social relations between subaltern groups and the global North. Coastal communities are rarely associated with being composed of indigenous communities.

Notes

[1]. Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Pamela Martin, âGlobal Governance from the Amazon: Leaving Oil Underground in Yasuni National Park, Ecuador,â *Global Environmental Politics* 11, no. 4 (2011): 22-42.

[2]. Carmen Martinez-Novo, *The Citizenâs Revolution and the Indigenous Movement in Ecuador: Re-centering the Ecuadorian State at the Expense of Social Movements* (unpublished manuscript, 2010).

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