

Review: Morris, Courtney Desiree.

To Defend This Sunrise.

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Morris, Courtney Desiree. *To Defend This Sunrise: Black Women's Activism and the Authoritarian Turn in Nicaragua.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023. Pp. 269. ISBN 9781978804791.

T*o Defend This Sunrise: Black Women's Activism and the Authoritarian Turn in Nicaragua* by Courtney Desiree Morris takes its title from a work by Afro-Nicaraguan poet June Beer. Morris uses this reference to honor the story of Black women's activism in Nicaragua and all the work they have done "to defend this sunrise, an keep back/ de night from fallin" (Morris 63). This book is the culmination of the extensive ethnographical research that Morris performed on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, specifically in Bluefields, starting in 2004. She shares that her methodology is rooted in activist anthropology, a practice which promotes researcher engagement. It is not surprising, then, that in the face of the April 2018 protests, she decided to change the direction of this book. These protests against social security reforms quickly became violent, marking the authoritarian turn of the Ortega administration. As this caught international attention, Morris shifted the focus of her book to how authoritarianism affected the Caribbean coast. She writes directly to readers outside of Nicaragua so they can better understand the truth of the two autonomous regions along the Caribbean coast and their past and present place within the authoritarian turn.

Morris' book is divided into three sections, which each contain two chapters. The first section, fittingly entitled "Genealogies," showcases the roots of Black women's activism in Nicaragua and resists the invisibilization of Black women in the national image and memory. During Morris' discussion of the Reincorporation (1894), the day when Nicaraguan military forcibly claimed Bluefields as part of the Republic of Nicaragua, we are introduced to activist Anna Crowell as well as other women activists like Garveyites and Obeah practitioners. She explores a range of activists who embodied what Morris calls "strategic respectability" and "disreputable femininity" (35). By covering a diversity of activists and the different strategies they used, Morris shows how these women "refashioned the options available to them to serve through the public sphere" (56) and sets up a foundation of strategic activism by Black women from different communities and backgrounds. Morris continues chronologically to Black women activism during the Sandinista Revolution, pointing to the invisibilization of Black revolutionaries and the methods in which their stories, though not in history books, are kept alive through social memory. Many of them are still alive and fighting for a revolution, which sometimes means being "vocal critics of

the *Ortegaista* state” (91). As Morris surveys the history of these two autonomous regions and their journey to citizenship in Nicaragua, she also archives the importance of historical figures whose names have been footnotes in national history. Additionally, by delineating the various strategies of political activism by Black women throughout the period of Reincorporation and the Sandinista Revolution, Morris reinserts their work and their legacy into the history of both the Caribbean coast and the nation of Nicaragua.

The second section unravels how *mestizo* is understood and visualized in a Nicaragua that pursues multiculturalism. In the introduction, Morris maps out six basic groups of people that reside in Bluefields: Creoles, *mestizos*, Afro-Indigenous Garifuna, the Miskito, the Rama, and the Mayangna (5). Two of these groups clashed under neoliberal reforms that had Creole women vocally asserting land rights and actively resisting the state giving communal lands to *mestizo* hands. These fights give context for the *mestizo* victimhood that arose in this time period. As the state pushed forward multiculturalism, the idea of racism as an individual and personal phenomenon rather than a systemic issue also surfaced. In fact, this movement “facilitated the emergence of new and evolving forms of anti-Black racism that reinscribe Black marginality and reconstitute mestizo racial privilege” (126). Although this section bears the title “Multicultural Disposessions,” it is not until the next section that Morris really analyzes the characteristics and effects of multiculturalism. Rather, Morris undertakes a critique of neoliberalism, occasionally noting how institutions use it to “drain multiculturalism of its radical transformative potential” (22). Here we begin to see Morris’ ethnographic work and the fruits of field research she had done with grassroots activists. Morris reflects on her experience witnessing how neoliberal economic reforms affected the financial and physical wellbeing of the women in Bluefields: they financially struggled, seeking labor outside the home to meet the financial needs of their family, while also “suffering from anxiety, high blood pressure, headaches, body aches, and diabetes” (105). With an apparent focus on multiculturalism, this section does more to reveal the political battles the Caribbean coast faced under neoliberal reforms and the ways that they strategically dealt with financial struggles and land rights.

Finally, the last section looks at how Black women activism is being mobilized in the 21st century, during an authoritarian turn in Nicaragua. First, Morris looks at the strategy of silence, especially in regard to sexual violence. Silence, commonly interpreted as submission or, more nefariously, as lack of feminist consciousness, is redefined here as both a survival strategy and as a tool of self-representation. While there may be silence in official reports, Morris found that Black women were not silent when it came to “gossip and women’s collective memory” (155). With this in mind, Morris expands the concept of silence to conceive an “intimate solidarity,” a selective use of silence until in a safe and healing space. Second, Morris turns an eye toward autonomy and how that is

imagined and fought for on the Caribbean coast. In this, Morris criticizes how the strategy of co-optation has dimmed what autonomy these two regions have been able to achieve. She also looks at digital space as a site in which “Creoles circulated their own counter-discourses of Black history and the long struggle for regional autonomy” and by doing so, acquired a sort of autonomy (208). This section shows readers the way that activism and strategies have shifted both with the authoritarian turn of Daniel Ortega’s administration and the ubiquity of digital tools.

This book crosses many disciplines—geography, political science, anthropology, and more—because of that, many students and professors will find in it a valuable resource for understanding the cross-sections of race, politics, and geography in Nicaragua. Additionally, this text is very accessible; Morris’ storytelling as showcased in personal anecdotes and biographical narratives of invisibilized activists draws both the academic and leisure reader in. However, Morris introduces many new concepts that carry weight in their respective chapters but then sometimes go untouched in subsequent sections. The quantity of new key terms throughout the book is most likely due to the range of topics, time periods, and contexts that Morris covers. She does give concise definitions of perhaps the two most central terms of the book in the introduction and conclusion: “diasporic locality” and “multicultural dispossession.” Although easily locatable at the beginning and end, readers could benefit from definitions when used within the context of the Caribbean coast. While the writing is generally accessible, the images referenced in the book were difficult to find, as those referenced in the previous and future sections are hidden in a section between chapters 3 and 4. These images would have been helpful in several instances, especially when reading about Anna Crowdell or about the political cartoon. Even if they had not been embedded in the text of the chapters, a reference to these images and their locations would improve the reader’s experience.

All in all, *To Defend This Sunrise* is an invaluable resource for those seeking a more multifaceted vista of the current political situation in Nicaragua. This book is a necessary reminder that Nicaragua is not a monolith and stands as an example of why looking at the interstices of race, gender, and geography is crucial to understanding the terrors of authoritarianism. While the research here is extremely focused on a specific region, the theory used and created here has further reaches than just the two autonomous regions of Nicaragua. As the author occasionally does, readers can also transfer these same patterns and ideas to other diasporic African communities in the Americas, including the US. Morris ends this book applauding the continual efforts of Black women activists in the face of what seems like never-ending state violence. This book, then, is also a map to hope and perseverance; it is a testament of the many ways that these activists have and continue to defend this sunrise.