

María Inés Martínez, Ed.
El despertar de las comunidades afrocolombianas.
Relatos de cinco líderes: Dorina Hernández, Libia Grueso,
Carlos Rosero, Marino Córdoba y Zulía Mena

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In 1991, the National Constitutional Assembly drafted and passed a progressive new constitution, which, among other things, secured cultural, territorial, and political rights for Afro-Colombians. It was an unprecedented act. Aided by leftist intellectuals and indigenous movement leaders, Afro-Colombian grassroots organizers and community political figures across the country worked together to broaden definitions of citizenship and address the subordinate status of Colombians of African ancestry. The culmination of this national shift towards confronting the subordinate position of Afro-Colombians was Law 70 of 1993. This legislation often referred to as the “Law of Black Communities” recognized and protected black ancestral territories and the natural resources found on these lands, provided institutional and financial support to preserve cultural traditions, and promoted ethnic education highlighting the role of Afro-Colombians in the nation. Yet this accomplishment was the outcome of dedicated and committed individuals working for years within their marginal communities like the five Afro-Colombian activists interviewed in María Inés Martínez’s richly descriptive *El despertar de las comunidades afrocolombianas*.

In addition to an introductory essay by Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, *El despertar* contains five testimonies from Afro-Colombian grassroots activists and national leaders from across the country. With the exception of one *palenquera* narrative representing San Basilio de Palenque and Cartagena, the other participants come from the Pacific region ranging from rural and urban areas around Buenaventura to Quibdó. As a whole, the testimonies reflect the prominent position of women activists and offer scholars an opportunity to analyze the gendered-experience of Afro-Colombian community activism. Discussions on the negotiations surrounding Article 55 of 1991 and Law 70 of 1993 as well as the cultural politics around black identity dominate all the testimonies; other topics include differences between rural and urban Afro-Colombian experiences, consequences of neoliberal reforms on Afro-Colombians, and the impact of violence on black rural

communities. Martínez’s objective is to raise the visibility of contemporary social, economic, and political issues facing Afro-Colombians.

El despertar has clearly met its goals. First, the testimonies bridge the gap between academia and activism. This is accomplished through the testimonies narrating the lived experiences of the five Afro-Colombian leaders who assumed roles as both activists and academics. These grassroots organizers often served their communities as educators, presenters at academic conferences, and even through authorship of scholarly publications. Next, the testimonies highlight the historical role of Afro-Colombians. Afro-Colombian activists reveal the collective memories of their communities through maintaining stories and survival strategies dating from slavery. Perhaps the best example of this infusion of historical memory is the account of Dorinda Hernández who shares her efforts to preserve the *Palenque* language and culture in a community confronted by violence and migration. Embedded also in the accounts are multiple strategies against racial discrimination and social inequality. Carlos Rosero and Libia Grueso, for example, reveal the psychological benefits of asserting a black political identity, which assumes dignity and respect for themselves and their communities.

María Inés Martínez’s collection of Afro-Colombian testimonies carefully relates the multivalent process of grassroots organizing as each testimony surveys the trajectory of black mobilization at the local, regional, national, and international arenas. Thus, the reader gains a deeper insight into the diverse and often disparate interests of the different black communities of the Caribbean and Pacific basins. Scholars of a wide range of interests will find the “thickly descriptive” accounts as a portal to a deeper examination of other concerns facing Afro-Colombian communities including cross-racial interactions with indigenous communities, the impact of neoliberal reforms on black traditional ways of life, the effect of the civil war on black rural towns, and representations of Afro-Colombian

culture. One criticism of the collection is the glaring absence of the *raizales*, the term used to describe the English-speaking Afro-descended inhabitants of the Caribbean islands of San Andrés and Providencia, whose activists also participated in the constituent assembly discussions of the 1991 constitution. The *raizales*' disparate history and physical isolation may provide alternative perspectives and

raise additional questions regarding black identity formation and efforts to build a national black movement. Despite this omission, *El despertar* is engaging and insightful. The collection will be useful to a host of scholars interested in Latin American social movements, Colombian politics, race relations, and more broadly, the experience of Afro-descended peoples in Latin America.