



Practically Invisible: Coastal Ecuador, Tourism, and the Politics of Authenticity

Kimbra Smith

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The community of Agua Blanca, deep within the Machalilla National Park on the coast of Ecuador, found itself facing the twenty-first century with a choice: embrace a booming tourist industry eager to experience a preconceived notion of indigeneity, or risk losing a battle against the encroaching forces of capitalism and development. The facts spoke for themselves, however, as tourism dollars became the most significant source of income in the community.

Thus came a nearly inevitable shock, as the daily rhythms of life--rising before dawn to prepare for a long day of maintaining livestock and crops; returning for a late lunch and siesta; joining in a game of soccer followed by dinner in the evening--transformed forever in favor of a new tourist industry and the compromises required to support it. As *Practically Invisible* demonstrates, for Agua Blancans, becoming a supposedly "authentic" version of their own indigenous selves required performing their culture for outsiders, thus becoming these performances within the minds of these visitors. At the heart of this story, then, is a delicate balancing act between tradition and survival, a performance experienced by countless indigenous groups.

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