Seeing REDD in Panama: Visibility, Carbon, and the Politics of Indigenous Forests

In May 2013, a Panamanian pan-indigenous coordinating body that was working with state and international planners to design a carbon forestry program (called Reducing Deforestation and Forest Degradation, or REDD) dramatically withdrew from the collaboration, accusing planners of failing to follow through on funding promises, and of using airborne LIDAR data collection techniques to image indigenous forests without consent. Articulating this conflict with larger dynamics of multicultural recognition and neoliberal development in Panama, I argue that this controversy is fundamentally about three forms of visibility—institutional, cultural, and geospatial—that state and international planners expect of indigenous peoples, expectations that may clash with indigenous peoples’ own political agendas. I further argue that, in contrast to development practitioners’ and activists’ tendency to read these clashes as failures of consent, such controversies should be understood as moments of indigenous-directed assertions of visibility that leverage the discourse of consent to achieve other political priorities. The notion of visibility that I draw on is not simply metaphorical, as in the sense of “recognition.” Rather, my analysis includes ways in which foresters visually represent indigenous lands as apolitical spaces for carbon storage rather than bounded legal territories, and images and spectacles that indigenous peoples use to territorialize depoliticized spaces of science and environmental planning.