

Ulrich Oslender, *The Geographies of Social Movements: Afro-Colombian Mobilization and the Aquatic Space* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 304pp. Paperback \$25.95.

In 1991 Colombia passed a new constitution that recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples to territory and a special jurisdiction. The National Constituent Assembly had two Indigenous representatives who presented proposals for differential rights for the original inhabitants of Colombia. In spite of their importance to the Colombian nation and the fact that they make up about 30% of the Colombian population, Afro-Colombians did not have special representatives and it seemed that they were not going to be granted the recognition of special rights. The Constituent Assembly was resistant because, according to some delegates, blacks were Colombians like anyone else in the country (Benavides Vanegas, *A tutelaço limpio*, 2009).

From 2010 to 2016 the Colombian government was in the middle of a peace process with the communist guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). One of the elements of the talks was the creation of a Commission of Historical Inquiry with the mandate to identify the causes of political and social conflict and to set the record straight on the reasons for armed violence in Colombia. The Commission was made up of white Colombian intellectuals. In their final account of the conflict there is not even one reference to the Afro-Colombian population, as if they did not exist or as if they had not been victims of violence in Colombia. As Jaime Arocha put it, by refusing to acknowledge the existence of Afro Colombians, the Commission victimized them again (Arocha, “Sin coincidencias”, 2015).

The struggle of the black communities in Colombia for recognition and visibility is a long one, which dates way back before the 1991 Constitution. Black people’s social mobilization was urban and rural, with different claims, given their different historical trajectories. As Ulrich Oslender holds it, the Constitution—and especially Law 70—gave visibility to a new form of social mobilization, mostly rural and based on claims in term of culture, ethnic identity, territory, and the right to difference (2). In his book *The Geographies of Social Movements: Afro-Colombian Mobilization and the Aquatic Space*, Oslender, an anthropologist with more than 20 years of ethnographic field work in the Pacific lowlands of Colombia, analyzes and shows the development of these claims and the creation of the local councils ordered by Law 70 of 1993—the law that implemented some of the rights recognized in AT (Transitory Article) 55 of the 1991 Constitution. In order to show the struggle for the territory and the social mobilization that led to the political organization of the communities, Oslender uses the concept of the “aquatic space,” with the purpose of showing the changing and fluid nature of the territory. He argues that the river gives identity to the communities and, in doing so, it determines the kind of organization they have and the spatial localization of their struggles.

Territory is a central element in the struggles of the black population in the Pacific lowlands. Afro-Colombians were brought as enslaved people to the country more than 400 years ago, and due to their struggles and their resistance, some of them found a place in the Pacific lowlands. For them this is now an ancestral territory that defines who they are and how they constitute their claims. But this ancestral territory is different from the conception Westerners have of it. Afro-Colombians in this region live around the river, their houses follow the river, towns are built with the river on their side, and a sort of urban imagination is imposed with branches of the river treated as if they were streets that little kids have to cross in their canoes. The river affects identity as well as Afro-Colombian political organization. Law 70 had the provision of recognizing communal property for Afro-Colombian, but they had to organize local councils to claim their rights. But it is the river that determines how these local councils are organized. Instead of looking at the town where they are, people organize around the river they use every day for their trips, to buy food, to find relatives. This aquatic space defines the whole life of these populations.

Oslender's book is an important contribution to our understanding of social movements, and particularly of Afro-Colombian social mobilization. He shows that traditional accounts of social movements pay attention to their scripts, their documents, and their struggles. Even though the space is present, as Oslender puts it, there is not much thought on the spatialities of social movements (13). According to Oslender, it is important to understand how communities relate to the territory, to the space, but also how this relationship is understood in concrete local situations. Drawing from the works of Henri Lefebvre, the urban Marxist philosopher, and Marxist geographer David Harvey, Oslender introduces the idea of a sense of the aquatic space where Afro-Colombians live and which determines their way of life. As Doña Celia, one of Oslender's fieldwork collaborators said, "*A mi río, no lo olvido,*" that is, "to my river, I don't forget" (12).

But to do such deep analysis, Oslender needed to go deeper into his ethnographic work. Instead of just interviewing the leaders of the social and political organizations, he interviewed and worked with local people, like Doña Celia and Don Agapito, two Afro-Colombians with a memory of the river and who transmitted to Oslender their sense of the place that allows him to understand to role the aquatic space plays in political organization in Colombia.

Oslender tells a beautiful and fascinating story that starts with the river and the stories Doña Celia tells about her childhood and her relation to the river, as the place she played as a kid and where she did errands for her mother. But a modern capitalist state like the Colombian one has tried to impose their view of the territory onto these communities, affecting, among other things, their agriculture. At the same time, these attempts to commodify the aquatic space have brought about violence and war in the region. But Oslender does not want to end with a sad note. He understands the fluid character of the river and the resistance and re-

silence of the communities. As Oslender holds it,

The Aquatic Space, however, will remain. Not the same as today. Its assemblage of constantly changing relations will produce new expressions ... And somewhat along the Guapi River, Doña Celia will observe her grandmother as she applies medicinal herbs and prayer to cure the evil eye, while Don Agapito is still chasing and shooting rabbits in the Guajuí basin (217).

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Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country. Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016). 280pp. Paperback \$20.00.

In the mid 1990s, I lived in Damascus in order to brush up my knowledge of Arabic. These were the times of *Suriyya al-Asad*, the Syria of Hafez al-Assad, as the slogans on buildings and along streets clearly indicated. Indeed, the “eternal leader” and “beloved president” was omnipresent. Hafez al-Assad filled the daily news and one could not escape his gaze in the public sphere. In *Ambiguity of Domination*, Lisa Wedeen aptly described the disciplinary power of this cult around Assad and the culture of hypocrisy and opportunism that animated the Syrian security state of the 1990s. However, besides this coercive symbolism and the relentless repression of any opposition, the power of the regime also rested on a certain security bargain with at least parts of the population. In their introduction to *Burning Country* Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami point to the very nature of this security bargain according to which “people could live in relative peace.” The regime was able to rely on the “partial consent of a cross-sectarian peasant constituency” and co-opted parts of the intellectual and economic elites (13). It was the breakdown of this bargain after the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000, during the rule of his son Bashar al-Assad, that “set the scene for the uprising” (34).

In *Burning Country*, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami construct a convincing analytical narrative of the transformation of *Suriyya al-Asad* into a humanitarian disaster. They do so by giving a voice to those people who “dared to demand freedom” and “received annihilation instead” (225). *Burning Country* is informed by many of the voices of the vibrant popular movement that tried to displace the Assad regime by non-violent means. In ten well-organized chapters the book describes the historical path which led Syria into brutal civil war. There is hardly any doubt that Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami wrote a partisan book. They clearly express their sympathy with the grassroots activists and local committees trying to push for reform in the years 2011–2012. Yet this partisanship does not