

Ulrich Oslender, *The Geographies of Social Movements: Afro-Colombian Mobilization and the Aquatic Space*, Durham: Duke University Press (2016). Paperback, 290 pp. ISBN: 9780822361220.

When I think about movement, I think of a cohesive verb—I think of an individual going, or returning, or running, or uprising. “Social movement,” similarly, is imbued by ideals of cohesiveness and action. A social movement is a collective, cohesive political act—one defined by where it is going or what it is doing.

As Oslender demonstrates, however, this understanding of social movement is not as nuanced or helpful as it should be. As an eco-feminist law student interested in social justice work, I found this book enriching on multiple fronts. His study of the black communities of Colombia’s Pacific lowlands posits a fundamentally different, more nuanced, approach to understanding social movements. The perspective he offers on social movement echoes the meandering, connected nature of the moving waterways that form the heart of his studies. He provides ample narration, sometimes colloquial phrasing (see, for example, the colorful phrase “flying hoot” on page 79), photo portraits, poems with translations, and oral histories—all interwoven. Instead of highlighting the *movement* of social movement, however, his approach to social movement emphasizes place and situatedness. In what he calls “critical place perspective,” the “particular geographies” that create social movement (20). This critical place perspective is the significant contribution to the fields of ethnography and political science, and it underscores each aspect of the book.

Oslender masterfully ties different threads together to form a compelling argument about the importance of place and space in charting social movement. Chapter 2—beautifully titled “Mapping Meandering Poetics and an Aquatic Sense of Place”—moves between oral histories and *décima* poems, culminating in the argument that these oral traditions demonstrate both a connection to place and a hidden “transcript” of resistance (73). Chapter 3 then considers historical movements and modern challenges to communities’ traditional understandings of place. Oslender argues, “the aquatic space emerges in activist articulations as a differential space, which gets mobilized in a cultural politics that defends these particular constructions (or local models) of nature” (133). Thus, the *space* becomes the specific site of resistance—“peculiarity, its relative uniqueness” contours the social movement (34).

Moving from a detailed study of aquatic spaces to a broader, more politics-based examination of the development of social movements, the book never loses focus of the premise that social movement is situated, unique, and complex. In Chapter 4, for example, Oslender compares community-based ideals about place and community with those imposed by the state. It is this struggle over place and territory that forms the basis for mobilization (157). And in Chapter 5, we learn about territorialization and the “first awakening to [its] various dimensions” brought on by Community Councils formed along the waterways (179).

Through each chapter, Oslender’s development of the theory underlying his work is also carefully in tune with and founded upon larger political-sociological principles. For example, he often pauses to situate his work. Where pictures, stories, and poems flood the text, Oslender has explained why they are there and what they contribute. In an interlude between Chapters 1 and 2, for example, he relays an in-field experience to reflect on fieldwork in general and to orient his research in the Participatory Action-Research framework. Thus, this book advocates for a place-based perspective on social movement while also developing an ethnographic approach that is closely tied with individuals and long-term, deeply integrated work.

This volume is an important read for any individual interested in politics, geography, ethnography, or social movement. Oslender calls for deeper, more engaged ethnography (180), but he does so in a way that makes deep ethnography seem accessible. Although few of us will spend the time in the field that he has, we can all take a more inclusive, less simplistic approach to understanding social movement. In other words, we can all engage in “conceptual ‘stretching’ ” (72).

I cannot help but think of the immense value of this approach for understanding the present U.S. political situation. In a cultural moment that seems increasingly punctuated with high-visibility social movements—I am thinking of Standing Rock and of the Women’s March, for example—Oslender offers a new, more nuanced way to situate our understandings of resistance and movement. This approach is valuable—not only for better understanding the social resistance of the Colombian Pacific communities, but also for better understanding social resistance as a whole and for broadening our ideals of what constitutes social movement.

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