

## INTRODUCTION

### The Geographies of Social Movements

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. In March 1995 I traveled for the first time to the Pacific Coast region of Colombia. By then I had already spent four months in Colombia on a year-abroad study program while pursuing an undergraduate degree in geography and Hispanic studies at the University of Glasgow. As part of the program, students were sent for a year to a Spanish-speaking country in order to become fluent in their language skills. My choice fell on Colombia. Why? I am not so sure any more. Colombia is a crazed *fútbol* nation, of course. Their flamboyant style with the likes of René *el scorpión* Higuita, *el Pibe* Valderrama, and Freddy Rincón seduced many during the FIFA World Cup in 1990, when Colombia held West Germany to a dramatic 1:1 draw (with Rincón scoring the equalizer in the ninety-third minute). This surely was a convincing pull factor.

Or maybe it was the sheer exuberance of a tropical geography that attracted me. Colombia is the only country in South America with coastlines on both the Atlantic and the Pacific. The massive Andean mountain range, which runs along the western part of the South American continent, suddenly splits as it reaches Colombia. It is as if it couldn't make up its mind where to go next. This topographic indecision has resulted in three distinct mountain ranges: the Western, Central, and Eastern Cordillera. Deep valleys separate the ranges, notably those of the two great rivers, the Cauca and the Magdalena. Climatic variation is determined by this extremely

diverse topography. The higher up you are in the mountains, the colder it gets. The farther down you go, the hotter it becomes. Year-round. It's not time that dictates these temperature patterns, but space.

To the east of the Andes and bordering Venezuela, the *llanos orientales* are a low-lying flat region made up of huge savannahs. The southeast is covered by extensive rain forests. Yet the region that would hold my fascination for the next two decades lay to the west, the far west. With a coastline of around 1,300 kilometers, stretching from Ecuador in the south to Panama in the north, the Pacific lowlands cover an area of almost ten million hectares of tropical rain forest. Sparsely inhabited by around 1.3 million people (some 3 percent of Colombia's national population), the Pacific region garnered international attention in the 1990s as one of the world's top biodiversity hotspots. Set apart from Colombia's interior by the Western Andean mountain range, the lowlands have been described as the "hidden littoral" (Yacup 1934) or the "periphery of the periphery" (Granda 1977) due to their perceived physical and economic marginality in relation to the rest of the country.

Initially of interest to Spanish colonizers for its rich alluvial gold deposits, the region's economy has been dominated by boom-and-bust cycles. During relatively short time spans, natural resources have been exploited intensively, responding to external demands, before a decline in demand led to a rapid decrease and collapse of these economies. Both *tagua* (ivory nut) and rubber exploitation in the first half of the twentieth century, for example, followed this boom-and-bust logic. Since the 1960s the region has been an important source of the country's timber supply. This has led to high levels of deforestation that pose a threat to traditional lifestyles of local populations in many areas. In the 1990s the region began to attract strategic attention in national development plans, with a view to conserving its biodiversity (and exploring its potential exploitation in pharmaceutical industries). This conservationist trend has recently been sharply curtailed by an aggressive return to extractive economies, such as mechanical gold mining, and agro-industrial exploitation, most dramatically seen in the sweeping plantations of oil palm monocultures. Throughout these changing development paradigms a resilient local population—made up overwhelmingly of people of African descent—has continued to practice a diversified subsistence economy in the rural areas based on fishing, hunting, agriculture, gathering, and small-scale artisanal gold panning for their everyday needs.

That was just about all I knew about this region back in February 1995, when I got off the small Satena plane at the airport in Tumaco, the Pacific Coast's most southern and third largest town. In Bogotá I had met Robin Hissong, a U.S. citizen who worked on the World Bank-funded biodiversity conservation program Proyecto Biopacífico. As a geographer-in-the-making, I was generally interested in conservation, biodiversity, and sustainable development. The Pacific lowlands seemed an exciting place, where these notions overlapped in complex ways with an emerging identity politics of the region's Afro-descendant population. Therefore I didn't hesitate when Robin extended an invitation to accompany her to Guapi, a small coastal town some 150 kilometers north of Tumaco, where she needed to deliver equipment to Proyecto Biopacífico's regional office.

This speedboat trip was a first taste of traveling through the maze of mangrove swamps that make up the southern coastline of the Pacific lowlands. Our captain suggested we should travel *por dentro*, slowly threading our way along the numerous meandering brooks and channels that cut through the mangrove landscape. He warned against navigating *por fuera*—on the open sea—as the Pacific Ocean was rough that day. Fine by me, I thought; that way I would get to see the area even better.

It was midday by the time we set off. The sky was overcast with dark clouds as we left the Bay of Tumaco. Humidity was near 90 percent. It was hot, and I didn't understand why we had waited so long. It was going to be a lengthy journey, more than eight hours. Robin had even mentioned that we might have to spend a night on the way.

"Who are we waiting for?" I asked the captain, who had said something about *esperando la marea*.

"When's Marea coming?" . . . Laughter all around. That was one of these silly gringo questions. *Marea* means "tide." Apparently there wasn't enough water in the mangrove's river channels, so we had to be patient and wait for high tide. Later I would realize how this seemingly mundane routine—the daily tidal changes—impacted everyday life patterns in a thousand and one ways. Traveling schedules are set according to the tides, calculating water availability not only in the coastal mangrove swamps but also farther up the rivers. The alluvial plains have such a low gradient that the tidal impact can be felt up to twenty kilometers upstream. High tide also pushes salt water far up the rivers, a bad time for washing clothes or fetching drinking water from the river.

Sitting at the landing steps in Guapi the day after we left Tumaco—we indeed had to spend a night in Satinga on our trip—I took in the majestic leisureliness with which the Guapi River descended to its meeting with the Pacific Ocean. The inevitableness of the encounter was marked by the calm, gracious flow of the river’s waters, which veiled the underlying excited anticipation of the get-together. That first day my gaze was too caught up in the solemn grandeur and the splendid presence of *el río* to notice the sawmill on the opposite river bank. I did notice, however, a number of dugout canoes on the river, powered by the paddling strength of a single occupant, all making their way toward the landing steps from downstream. The rising tide was giving them a helping hand. They would return later that day to their hamlets downstream, when the low tide facilitated a speedier journey.

It was there, at the landing steps in Guapi, where I spent innumerable hours in the years to come, that the idea of the “aquatic space” began to take shape. Anthropologists and geographers have described the interactions of rural populations with the tropical rain forest in terms of human adaptation to an often unforgiving natural environment. In *Black Frontiersmen*, his seminal study on the Afro-Hispanic culture of Ecuador and Colombia, for example, Norman Whitten (1986) sees this adaptive process expressed in intense spatial mobility and the development of traditional systems of social organization. Colombian anthropologist Nina de Friedemann (1974) also stresses social organization as a strategy of adaptation to a changing physical environment. Fellow anthropologist Jaime Arocha (1999) describes local diverse economies, which he calls *polifonía cultural*, as adaptive strategies toward the uncertainties of the natural environment. Meanwhile, U.S. geographer Robert West’s (1957:3) groundbreaking study *The Pacific Lowlands of Colombia* is an inventory of human adaptation to the myriad river basins, where “hundreds of rivers, often in flood, run through the forest from hill and mountain slope to sea. They are the pathways for human travel and their banks are the main sites of human habitation.” I discuss these debates more widely in chapter 3.

Yet sitting at the landings steps in Guapi overlooking the busy activities taking place—canoes arriving, women washing clothes on the river’s edge, children playing in the water, travelers awaiting embarkations to upstream locations—I felt that these were more than merely adaptive responses. The discourse of adaptation maintains those boundaries of culture and

nature that seemed to dissolve in practice in front of my eyes. The idea of the “aquatic space” that was taking root then owes more to a Deleuzian understanding of these complex and changing relations between humans and nonhumans in terms of assemblages. It wants to break with the notion of exteriority of an already existing nature that culture merely adapts to and focus instead, as does anthropologist Laura Ogden (2011:28) in her landscape ethnography in the Everglades of South Florida, on “the ways in which *our relations with non-humans produce what it means to be human.*” Beyond a mere conceptual acknowledgment of debates on “social nature” (Castele and Braun 2001; FitzSimmons 1989; Smith 1990), I am concerned here with narrative strategies of exploring how this social nature is actually experienced on the ground. For this I draw on ideas proposed under the banner of the “narratological turn” in the arts and social sciences (Daniels and Lorimer 2012) in my ways of narrating landscape and environment in the Pacific lowlands through diverse forms and genres, including storytelling.

In 1999 I would spend many evening hours in the half-covered courtyard of the house I rented on Calle Segunda in Guapi, sitting with Doña Celia Lucumí Caicedo, a traditional healer and midwife, with whom I shared this living space. As the rains pummeled the rooftops, generating a thunderous noise that drowned out all possibility of conversation, we just stared ahead, watching sheets of rainwater hammering the patio’s tropical plants and quickly filling up the four barrels, one in each corner, that became a full week’s household water supply. These were moments of great peace for me. There was absolutely nothing else I wanted to do but stare at the falling rain. It seemed we all became one with the rain.<sup>1</sup> I loved those moments of inner calm that Yemayá sent me. There was nothing I could possibly miss out on. No one in Guapi left their home during these deluges. No conversation could be had for the deafening roar of Changó’s fury unleashed on the rooftops of Guapi.<sup>2</sup>

Doña Celia was also lost in her thoughts then. Walking along the shores of her river in her imagination—as she would later tell me—she brought to life memories of her childhood growing up along the headwaters of the Guapi River. She would rock to and fro in her rocking chair, smoking *pa’ dentro*. A custom of many years, she would smoke with the lit end of the cigarette inside her mouth. Occasionally she would take the cigarette out and tip off the ash. This age-old custom, quite common among rural black

women in the Pacific lowlands, enables them to smoke while navigating their canoes, come rain or shine. With both hands firmly holding the paddle, the lit cigarette end is safe from wind and water in the navigator's mouth . . .

"A mi río, no lo olvido," Doña Celia would murmur. "I don't forget my river." She was one with her river, as she was sitting in our patio, smoking *pa' dentro*. There, in our courtyard, it was not necessary to protect the cigarette in that way, as we were covered under a rooftop. Yet more than a mere adaptive response to an aquatic environment, Doña Celia's smoking *pa' dentro* had become part of her, no matter where she was. The concept of the aquatic space, as I develop it in chapters 2 and 3, considers these relations of "becoming" between humans and nonhumans in a landscape characterized by diverse aquatic features as dynamic assemblages. It transcends the idea of mere human adaptation to a physical environment.

So far so good, you might say. But what does this have to do with social movements? And their geographies?

Indeed these were precisely the questions that I was beginning to ask myself during those rain-drenched nights on our patio. A social movement of black communities had emerged in the early 1990s that mobilized around cultural and territorial rights newly enshrined in Colombia's Constitution of 1991. And established social movement theory seemed to have the tools at hand to examine this movement. Political process models, for example, stress the importance of political opportunity structures for creating a favorable context for movements to emerge (McAdam et al. 1996, 2001; Tarrow 1994, 2012; Tilly and Tarrow 2007; Tilly and Wood 2009). Clearly the passing of the new Constitution in Colombia provided such a new political opportunity structure. "Blackness" became a state-regulated discourse, a field of struggle, a structure of alterity (Restrepo 2013).

Resource-mobilization theory (RMT), on the other hand, proposes to examine the resources available for a social movement to draw on. It focuses above all on organizational structures, leadership, and movement goals. Resources include funding and financial support, the existence of networks, the expertise of movement leaders, and some degree of preexisting organizations on whose experience leaders can draw (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978). Finally, identity-oriented perspectives that emerged in the 1980s focus on the ways actors' identities are dialectically constructed in social struggle (Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Laclau

and Mouffe 1985; Melucci 1989; Touraine 1988). These approaches emphasize “the power of identity” (Castells 1997) and have become synonymous with the study of so-called new social movements. These supposedly mark a shift in collective action from class-based mobilization, such as in trade unions, toward a more identity-based contentious politics, such as expressed in struggles over environmental, human rights, gender, and ethnic and racial concerns (Slater 1985).<sup>3</sup> Scholars examining the social movement of black communities in Colombia have drawn on these approaches to differing degrees (Agudelo 2005; Almario 2003; Asher 2009; Escobar 2008; Escobar and Pedrosa 1996; Grueso et al. 1998; Hoffmann 2004; Pardo 2001; Restrepo 2013; Wade 1995, 2002).

Yet sitting on the patio of my rented house on Calle Segunda in Guapi, with the rains pummeling the iron roof, I began to wonder how the particularities of this place—its year-round humidity, its water-based cultures, its river thoroughfares, its people listening to the tides—figured in the making of this social movement. What “place” did this place have in the contentious politics that began to emerge then? There was a deafening silence in the existing literature on social movements regarding the relevance of place in its theorizations. More broadly speaking, sociologists and political scientists had not given much thought to the spatialities of social movements. To be sure, geographers had begun to address this lacuna—Paul Routledge (1993) may have been among the first to do so (see also Pile and Keith 1997; Slater 1998)—but these early calls went largely unheard in the wider social movement literature. While I was aware of these emerging debates in geography that provided exciting new ways of looking at social movements, I *felt* their necessity while listening to the rain in Guapi. In other words, my conviction that social movement theory needed to be infused with a spatial sensitivity that would account for the geographical constitution of social movement agency was first and foremost born in the field. It was not mere theoretical speculation.

In time I began to ask concrete questions. For example, how would this newly formed constitutional discourse on blackness and black cultural and territorial rights—negotiated in the faraway capital of Bogotá—be translated meaningfully to local residents on the Pacific Coast? In what way would local histories of resistance (which I discuss in chapter 3) inform the structures of the emerging social movement of black communities? How would local realities on the ground be fed into mobilization processes? For

example, Law 70 required the establishment of “community councils” (*consejos comunitarios*) as administrative authorities for the newly titled collective lands. How would these be formed? Based on what logic? How would the particularities of place in the Pacific region inform and guide the formation of these community councils? How would local environmental knowledges (which I conceptualize and discuss as “local aquatic epistemologies” in chapter 2) be mobilized by the movement?

Beyond these immediate empirical concerns lay the wider question of how to feed them into a better conceptual understanding of social movements. If theory and practice are regarded as a dialectical unity, as Marx pointed out long ago, and theory is derived, at least partially, from practical experience, then there was a need to transcend the empirical specificity of my case study in the Pacific region to construct a theory of social movements that would account for these experiences more widely. In other words, the geographies of social movements had to be theorized.

Based on this understanding, I propose in this book a “critical place perspective” on social movements. With the focus on place I do not intend to privilege a particular spatiality at the expense of another, as some may impute (e.g., Leitner et al. 2008:166). But I do want to recover the significance of place as a corrective to the increasing trend on seeing the transnational as the “master spatiality” in social movement research. In this I share Arturo Escobar’s (2008:7) concern that “there is a need for a corrective theory that neutralizes this erasure of place, the asymmetry that arises from giving far too much importance to ‘the global’ and far too little value to ‘place.’”

### **Place and Social Movement Research**

Roughly since the mid-1990s geographers have attempted to show how geography matters in social movement research. Whereas Routledge (1993) stresses above all the importance of place in his book *Terrains of Resistance*, Byron Miller (2000) focuses on scale variations in political opportunity structures in his attempt to elaborate a geographical model of social movement mobilization. These examples may illustrate what Leitner et al. (2008:158) describe as “shifting fashions of socio-spatial theory [and the] tendency to privilege a particular spatiality—only to abandon that in favour of another.” Since 1995, they argue, there has been a tendency to focus on the politics of scale in social movement research, in particular examining a



movement's multiscalar strategies, or "scale-jumping."<sup>4</sup> More recently the focus has shifted toward examining networks and mobility. In particular a fascination with the transnational scale of mobilization has dominated recent social movement research and publications. This can be seen in book titles such as *Coalitions across Borders* (Bandy and Smith 2004), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism* (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005), *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics* (Smith et al. 1997), and *The New Transnational Activism* (Tarrow 2005), to name but a few (see also Featherstone 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Routledge and Cumbers 2009; Smith 1998).

While this focus is understandable, given important developments in the way social movements increasingly organize globally—successfully "jumping scale" and engaging global resistance networks such as the World Social Forum (Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Sousa Santos 2006)—it also reflects an enthusiasm on the researchers' part that may easily gloss over other important spatialities that make up social movement mobilization. In other words, the transnational has evolved into the hegemonic scale of analysis in social movement research or, as Leitner et al. (2008:158) refer to it, a "master spatiality." These accounts focus on the connections that movements make, on the commonalities between them, and on the discourse that is produced at these transnational intersections.

All of this is important, of course. But what does this transnational fixation say about an individual movement and its inner workings? Or about the "mobilization within movements," as geographer Wendy Wolford (2010) puts it in her insightful analysis of the landless peasants' movement MST in Brazil. Is there not a real danger of distortion in research that focuses almost exclusively on the well-elaborated discourses of social movement leaders as they are enounced in various transnational settings (to which the researcher can comfortably travel without having to get dirty in the field), if it does not at the same time examine how these discourses can be traced in the everyday, on-the-ground realities of the far-flung places of which a particular movement talks? Often, it may seem in these accounts, "the movement" is little more than the movement leaders' discourse, or rather the researcher's interpretation of the latter.

Longtime social movement scholar Robert Benford (1997:421) critiques this "tendency to focus on the framings of movement elites to the neglect of rank-and-file participants":

Much of the literature is written as though participant mobilization were simply a matter of movement activists pushing the appropriate rhetorical button. . . . This bias is in part a reflection of the ways in which researchers typically study social movements. We tend to study movements either by interviewing people identified as key activists, via media accounts (most frequently newspaper stories), or by analyzing movement-generated or related documents. In all three cases, we obtain data that tend to reflect the views of movement leaders and extra-movement elites. In short, our analyses of framing processes often have a built-in, top-down bias. (Benford 1997:421)<sup>5</sup>

Moreover I argue that “place,” or the complexity of the places out of which these movements emerge and of which they talk, often merely becomes a backdrop in these accounts.<sup>6</sup>

In my approach place is not just one of many spatialities of mobilization. On the contrary, I argue that place implicates space, scale, and territory. Leitner et al. (2008:169) are surely right in affirming that “no single spatiality should be privileged since they are co-implicated in complex ways, often with unexpected consequences for contentious politics.” If they are co-implicated, however, then it might not make much sense to regard them as separate in the first place. Therefore the authors’ effort to come up with a framework of five distinct “co-implicated spatialities of contentious politics” seems counterproductive for two principal reasons. First, they rather haphazardly choose these co-implicated spatialities: scale, place, networks, socio-spatial positionality, and mobility. One may ask, for example, where is territory? Or argue with John Agnew (1987) that place implies scale. Second, it is not clear how their empirical case study—the Immigrant Workers’ Freedom Ride (IWFR) in the United States—shows the co-implication of these spatialities or illustrates “the complexity of these inter-relations” (Leitner et al. 2008:166). Place, for example, is remarkably absent from their account. In other words, co-implication is shown by undertheorizing place. While their general approach may be useful to show “how geography matters in contentious politics” (158), I argue that it is something altogether different to show *how social movements are constituted through particular geographies on the ground*. That is the focus in this book.

There have been other recent attempts reflecting on the organization of sociospatial relations in multiple forms. Jessop et al. (2008), for example,

replicate in part some of Leitner et al.'s framework, adding territory. In their argument "territories (T), places (P), scales (S), and networks (N) must be viewed as mutually constitutive and relationally intertwined dimensions of sociospatial relations" (389). In their "TPSN framework" they identify these four distinct spatialities as framing principles of sociospatial relations. In my view both these frameworks fall into what we may call "the spatial trap."<sup>7</sup> By this I mean that the ever more complex language of spatialities may trap and ultimately limit the empirical usefulness of what is offered. In other words, geographers hold each other prisoner in ever more complex conceptualizations over the spatiality of social life that do not necessarily have much empirical purchase any longer.

For example, how do we show empirically what each "part" in these frameworks contributes to the whole? The argument for distinct yet co-implicated or mutually constitutive spatialities has led Leitner and colleagues (2008) and Jessop and colleagues (2008) to search for polymorphic frameworks in order to account for the totality of relations between and among these co-implicated spatialities. In the end, however, the mind-boggling complexity of this venture gets reduced to multinodal frameworks that are both inclusive, in that they explicitly draw on certain spatialities, and exclusionary, in that they leave out others. Call it SPNPM, as Leitner et al. (2008) could have called it, or TPSN, as Jessop et al. (2008) do call it—the result is the same: a conceptual reduction of the complexity of sociospatial relations that only works (or seems to) by undertheorizing one or several of its key components.

Not surprisingly maybe, that undertheorized component is place, associated by many with notions of traditional, unmoving, backward, and fixed, whereas "mobility," "transnational," and "space" are considered dynamic and progressive (although see Massey 2005 for an impassioned argument against this simplification). One may feel that the abstract dancing around has not paid off much in terms of throwing light on real-world political questions. Maybe "middle-range" theorizing is more useful here than that which often remains distant from empirical concerns.<sup>8</sup>

From this viewpoint my proposal of a critical place perspective unashamedly recovers the progressive notion of place; one that acknowledges multiscale connections in place and between places and that grounds networks, however momentarily, in place. It is not a one-dimensional methodological place-centrism that neglects other spatialities. On the

contrary, a critical place perspective co-implicates scale, territory, and networks. Its aim is to account more fully for the multiple, multiscalar, rooted and networked experiences within social movements. At least that is the way I envision it deployed.

### **Narrating Place and Social Movements in the Colombian Pacific Coast Region**

Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork among Afro-Colombian communities over the past twenty years, I examine how “local aquatic epistemologies”—the place-based and culturally specific ways of knowing a profoundly aquatic environment—have informed political organizational processes in the Pacific region. The book explores these relationships through interviews and participant observation (I discuss methodological implications in the interlude following chapter 1). In my narrative I draw extensively on perspectives of many of the people who accompanied me on my travels throughout the Pacific Coast region. Voices of fishermen, traditional healers, midwives, political activists, miners, poets, schoolchildren, peasant farmers, government officials, priests, and teachers are woven into my account. These help me unfold a deeply spatial understanding of the Pacific lowlands. I also describe how these voices and bodies move through this space, drawing on recent work in narratology to “redeem narrative as a theoretically powerful and complicated form of explanation, a precise cognitive instrument, taking many forms, genres, tropes, tenses, including various kinds of storytelling” (Daniels and Lorimer 2012:3).

As such my approach differs from most studies of social movements, in that my narrative starts from a close examination of the river- and landscapes of the Pacific lowlands, before I turn to the political aspects of social mobilization. This analytical strategy allows me to map the ways specific environmental experiences have been fed into social movement agency and, crucially, what difference they have made in the political organizing processes. This becomes apparent above all in my discussion of the community councils as newly established territorial authorities in the Pacific river basins (chapters 4 and 5). So far the community councils have mostly been sidelined in existing scholarship on black resistance in Colombia. While important contributions have been made in relation to racialization processes (Agudelo 2005; Arocha 1999; Hoffmann 2004; Restrepo 2013; Wade 1993, 2000), to the imbrications of development and

black resistance (Asher 2009; Escobar 1995, 2008), and to territorial conflicts (Ng'weno 2007b; Villa 2013), there are to date no larger ethnographic studies of the community councils on the Pacific Coast. I hope to fill this void by mapping the experiences of some of these community councils in ethnographic detail and by examining the discourses that emerge from these new political actors.

### **A Note (or Two) on Difference**

#### A First Difference: Difference Within

When writing about social movements, it is important to acknowledge that these are rarely homogeneous entities following a single logic in which all participants share the same goals all the time. Instead they should be seen as spaces of debate, difference, and even dissent. They are multiplicities, in the sense that an array of interests usually underlies their formation, and a range of often quite diverse tactics may be deployed, while they still articulate a more or less coherent strategy of an overall unifying goal.

From this viewpoint the social movement of black communities in Colombia is made up of different sectors, which at times pursue different aims. For example, responding to the human rights crisis in the late 1990s in the Pacific Coast region, the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians, AFRODES, was formed in 1999 in order to support thousands of Afro-Colombian families who live in conditions of forced internal displacement (more on this in the epilogue). AFRODES, it may be argued, deploys above all a “displacement frame” that constructs their claims in terms of a defense of Afro-Colombian rights and their cultural identity in the face of violent upheaval. The National Movement for Human Rights of Afro-Colombian Communities, CIMARRÓN—one of the earliest expressions of black mobilization in Colombia and still an important part of the social movement of black communities (Mosquera 1985, 1998)—also deploys this “displacement frame” nowadays in its wider struggle for racial justice and equality.

Clearly the changing situation in the Pacific Coast region starting in the late 1990s has led to new framing strategies by black activists. The movement is heterogeneous, constantly evolving and responding to these changing circumstances. Social movement scholars argue that movements are most effective when they achieve an alignment of their interpretive orientations (Snow et al. 1986), and we may be seeing such a “frame alignment”

around movement discourse on displacement and violent upheaval today, in which the various sectors of the movement come together to focus on a common goal. (This has not always been so.)

Yet in this book I am more interested in examining the particular geographies out of which the movement emerged in the Pacific Coast region in the 1990s and how these are reflected in the movement's framing strategies. Thus my analysis and narrative focus above all on the ethnic-territorial aspects of the struggle of the social movement of black communities in the Pacific region in a historical perspective. While acknowledging the possibility of different readings of the movement and the diverse expressions of black mobilization in Colombia—the “difference within,” so to speak—I am mostly concerned in exploring what I call the “ethnic-territorial frame,” the ways in which the movement has managed to bring together concerns about ethnic identity and difference with a particular territorial vision, expressed through an Afro-Colombian cultural logic intrinsically linked to the right to territory. That is why I focus in my analysis on those sectors of the movement that work directly on issues concerning ethnicity and land rights—in particular the Process of Black Communities (PCN)—and less on those who mobilize around human rights and displacement, such as AFRODES (which does figure prominently, however, in the epilogue).

#### A Second Difference: Difference without Romanticizing

In writing this book it was my desire to offer a cultural geography of Colombia's Pacific lowlands as a lens through which to view and understand the social movement that has mobilized in that region. To achieve this I chose to slowly unravel in front of the reader, in ethnographic detail, the cultural difference of the region in relation to the rest of the country. I realize that this insistence on difference—absolutely necessary in my eyes to understand the region and its political mobilization—might be read by some as an inside-outside dichotomy, or modernity-versus-tradition frame of thinking. Others may read into it a tendency to homogenize or even romanticize the region, its people, and political movements. Such critiques are quite common and frequently launched against accounts of social movements that organize politically around the notion of difference (see, for example, certain political economy critiques of postdevelopment theory). I find that these debates have become increasingly entrenched and little productive.<sup>9</sup>

Instead we should acknowledge diverse politics of reading across positions. In my narrative I do not appeal to a totalizing difference. (Some movement activists indeed do that—the well-known “strategic essentialism.”) On the contrary, throughout the book I point to the many ways rural black populations in the Pacific Coast region are indeed entangled in modernity (most obvious in the lengthy discussion of community councils in chapters 4 and 5). Locals are part of larger logging operations; many work on oil palm plantations; some employ dynamite while fishing; others use mercury or mechanical dredgers in gold mining; many are now involved in illegal coca cultivation; much river travel today is by engine-driven speed boat. All of these things do happen. Rural black populations are modern too, and locals are often deeply entangled as agents in modern technologies and processes.

At the same time, traditional production practices and local subsistence economies are still central to rural lifeworlds and form the backbone to both the definition of “black communities” as expressed in Law 70 and subsequent legislation, and the visions of alternative life projects promoted by sectors of the social movement of black communities. It is necessary, then, to move beyond the all too facile dichotomy of traditional versus modern. In a more nuanced understanding, based on an assemblage approach that I advocate here, one would acknowledge that most people on the Pacific Coast are both modern and traditional to differing extents. This seems a productive way to conceptualize the entanglements of locals with modernity and tradition.

Yet I am unapologetic for my narrative strategy in this book: I need to stress and examine the existing cultural difference of the Pacific Coast region in order to understand the social movement discourse based on difference, while still keeping a critical distance from it. Such is the politics of reading (and writing) across positions. While some observers only briefly acknowledge difference to then emphasize entanglements—thereby often taking the wind out of social movement discursive strategies, even if involuntarily so—I choose to spell out and document in ethnographic detail existing differences on the ground that can explain these discourses. I’d like to think about this narrative strategy as documenting difference without romanticizing.

## Overview

In chapter 1 I develop what I call a critical place perspective on social movements. This also means an engagement with space. I make a sustained

theoretical argument as to why space and place matter in social movement research, and how they influence, shape, enable, or otherwise constrain resistance practices. In particular I draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad that he developed in his book *The Production of Space*, and on John Agnew's (1987) threefold approach to place as optics through which to examine social movements. Following Lefebvre I examine how "representational space"—encompassing the subjectivities of everyday life—can be regarded as a (re)source for the "quest for a counter-space" that social movements often articulate. Tying these insights into an analysis of Agnew's threefold concept of place, I show how "location," "locale," and "sense of place" provide the pillars for the framework that I term "critical place perspective on social movements."

These theoretical elaborations are followed by methodological reflections in the interlude. Here I describe the moment I met Don Agapito Montaña, a respected *decimero* (practitioner of oral poetry) for the first time in 1995 in his house in Guapi. Our conversation was dramatically interrupted that day when three young Afro-Colombians burst into the room demanding explanations as to my motives for interviewing Don Agapito. It turned out the "intruders" were local activists upset that I had not consulted them before. This incident serves to reflect on methodological and ethical considerations of conducting ethnographic research in a politically charged context. I also outline how my prolonged presence among Afro-Colombians in Guapi led to a dialogical engagement, in which I drew on a rich tradition of experimental ethnographies and activist methodologies proposed by paradigmatic figures such as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda.

In chapter 2 I develop the concept of the aquatic space to theoretically and methodologically focus the book. The aquatic space refers to an assemblage of always shifting relations in which everyday life patterns in the region are deeply entangled with a range of aquatic elements, such as the physical and symbolic presence of the sea, intricate river networks, streams, waterfalls, mangrove swamps, high levels of precipitation, significant tidal ranges, and frequent large-scale inundations. Prominent in this chapter are the perspectives of two important people I mentioned already: Don Agapito and Doña Celia. Their experiences and stories provide the individualized, personal keys through which I unlock a more analytical account of the sense of place in this part of the world. Here I engage recent anthropological scholarship on the performative qualities of storytelling



as a way of practicing knowledge (Blaser 2010). I then show how the various expressions of local aquatic epistemologies have been mobilized in the political project of black communities in Colombia. Drawing on James Scott's (1990) work on resistance, I argue that the oral tradition functions as a "hidden transcript of resistance" that is turned public in the articulation of an Afro-Colombian identity politics that reclaims cultural and territorial rights.

Chapter 3 closely examines location and locale on the Pacific Coast. It elaborates on the concept of the aquatic space and its manifestation both in the physical environment of a rain forest crisscrossed by intricate river networks and mangrove swamps and in the spatialized social relationships along river basins (settlement patterns, landownership, kinship ties, and transport). These contexts for social interaction are further channeled through the "logic of the river," a notion with which I frame the flow of life in the Pacific lowlands and the specific forms of spatial mobility organized around river basins.

Chapter 4 brings us into the field of politics proper, examining the ways the aquatic space is reflected in a new political context. In particular I show how that context has been drawn upon in the formation of community councils along river basins. The river remains a key resource here for political mobilization—both materially and symbolically. Yet I also show how ethnic-territorial politics in the region has been mediated by capital and the state, highlighting the complex entanglements between state discourse, capital's profit-seeking drive, and local organizing processes. Crucially I maintain that the community councils—far from being mere administrative bodies—are complex spaces of negotiation between these various actors.

In chapter 5 I describe in more detail the actual formation processes of the community councils, as well as their practices and ideals. I examine the legislation that created these organizing figures as part of the state's conservationist strategy toward the Pacific lowlands and its attempt to extend its reach into this region. I then explore the role that leadership and previous organizational experience played in the newly emerging community councils as important resources for mobilization.

The epilogue brings the analysis to the present. I begin by outlining the geographies of terror that have been produced in the Pacific Coast region since the late 1990s as a result of an aggressive return to extractivist

economic practices, specifically oil palm cultivation and mechanical gold mining. I have published elsewhere on these changing economic, social, and political relations in the region that have led to selected killings of activists, massacres of entire communities, and massive forced displacement (Oslender 2007b, 2007c, 2008a, 2008b, 2012). I draw on these insights in this epilogue to juxtapose the current dehumanizing condition and relentless environmental destruction to the progressive spirit and winds of hope that blew across the Pacific lowlands in the early 1990s. I insist that to continue imagining an alternative future for the Pacific Coast region with its people, we need to turn back our gaze and reengage with the seeds of hope that were sown then.<sup>10</sup> For this we need to fully understand not just the logic of political and economic processes in the region but also the knowledge practices of place-based cultures and their vision for an alternative future. This book's critical place perspective hopes to ensure the latter is not forgotten.