

DANIEL RUIZ-SERNA. *WHEN FORESTS RUN AMOK: WAR AND ITS AFTERLIVES IN INDIGENOUS AND AFRO-COLOMBIAN TERRITORIES.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 270 P. ISBN: 9781478019503

ANDRÉS GONZÁLEZ DINAMARCA¹

Daniel Ruiz-Serna's *When forests run amok* sets out to explore the far-reaching effects of armed violence in Bajo Atrato (Chocó Department, Colombia), where since 1997 several Afro-Colombian and Indigenous (Emberá and Wounaan) communities faced forced displacement among other serious human rights violations. Ruiz-Serna's proposal is to go beyond the framework of human rights, as well as that of environmental damage. Drawing extensively from posthuman and relational scholarship, Ruiz-Serna argues that the assemblages of human and other-than-human selves in Bajo Atrato are a pre-condition giving rise to a territory considered to be a living entity by local communities (21). The notion of the land as a living entity was later developed by Afro-Colombian intellectuals and leaders and was legally incorporated by the Colombian state through the 'Victims' Law for Indigenous Peoples' (2011), while a ruling by the country's Constitutional Court (2016) extended its reaching by considering 'the Atrato River as a bearer of rights' (216).

A central concept linked to this understanding is that of the 'co-constitution of people and their territories' (18). According to the author this co-constitution evidences the 'ontological preeminence of relations and practices over ontologically derivative entities and substances' (ibid.). Within this framework, the effects of war in the relations composing said 'world-making' assemblages are made intelligible and traced through different instances, termed the 'afterlives of war' by the author (34, 208, 235). They go far beyond the depletion of forests, polluting of rivers, forced disappearances, and acts that lead to collective trauma. The first six chapters explore these afterlives in depth, providing further context to understand the transformations inaugurated by the widespread violence in the region. For instance, while flow and movement are essential conditions for the coming into being of this 'aquatic universe', the abandonment of rivers following forced displacement led to the impossibility of properly taking care of these bodies of water through the collective work of cleaning. Consequently, logjams (*palizadas*) have gone beyond control, now covering one-quarter of the soil. The main effect of this 'stagnation' is that territory ceases being produced since it 'does not exist before the relations and practices that constitute it' (123).

The alterations in the very properties of landscape have implied the consecutive disappearance of some presences (e.g., aquatic beings known locally as *fieras* formerly noticeable through features such as whirlpools). Conversely, emphasizing a somewhat 'generative' aspect of armed violence, Ruiz-Serna shows how new presences emerge, such as the ghosts of killed paramilitaries who did not have a proper burial. Existing threats also get amplified (e.g., an increased abundance of venomous snakes following the replacement of forests with oil-palm plantations, and man-eating jaguars trained by paramilitaries). These effects evidence the different ways in which the forests and rivers of the region have 'run amok' and become 'intermingled with armed violence' (34).

¹ DPhil candidate in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford. Email: andres.gonzalezdinamarca@anthro.ox.ac.uk

My first ethnological approach to this region came from Donald Taylor's work (1996), which presents similar metaphorical and material reflections upon the idea of 'embarking' (Ruiz-Serna 2023: 61) in the Bajo Atrato region. However, there is no mention of this work. Although no explicit reason stands for this or other absences, they might well derive from the author's preference for not distinguishing the different ethnic groups of the region, proposing instead 'an ethnography of place' (30). However, this analytical blurring of ethnic boundaries seems to contradict the local inhabitants' own emphases, as the case of an Emberá man's death renders explicit (99-101). Yet the richness of the text undoubtedly stems from the profusion of ethnographic examples it provides, and the dialogue it fosters between them and a broad interdisciplinary literature.

The last chapter advocates for the emergence of a 'new commons' (*sensu* Rancière), aiming to overcome the limited and prescriptive multicultural paradigm of the modern state, which allegedly render the local communities' knowledge systems (and several entities' very existence) as mere 'beliefs'. Nevertheless, more than relying on Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples' own arguments and dissents, the proposal problematically involves bypassing them, promoting for instance the 'generation of conditions through which rivers and forests [...] find their place within the public sphere as persons whose interests and concerns may overcome those of the communities living near and in them' (226). In parallel, we have been comprehensively reminded throughout the book of the systematic ways in which the modern nation-state fails to guarantee victims proper access to justice. They include governmental negligence (67), the 'always flagrant' connivance between the police and paramilitaries (102), the near total impunity of those who have committed atrocious acts of violence, and the continuity of armed violence throughout the country. In this scenario of *realpolitik*, where 'war becomes the continuation of political and economic neoliberal agendas by other means' (27), one wonders what the effects of a posthuman politics could possibly be, particularly having in mind recent cases of regressive politics elsewhere in South America. It becomes imperative then to bear in mind the theoretical and ethical complexities of the 'multiple-worlds thesis' (Nadasdy 2021) as these frameworks are being increasingly contested within and beyond academic environments. However, against mounting criticism of the 'ontological' anthropology, this book demonstrates why 'the most fundamental dimension of the struggles of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples in defense of their territories' (p. 235) is indeed ontological: they are 'not just defending something they have but also an entity with whom their very way of being becomes possible' (*ibid.*). In sum, *When forests run amok* represents both the tremendous potential and the inherent contradictions embedded in posthuman and ontological analyses in anthropology. Like transitional justice, academic work – however progressive – always risks 'simply reproduc[ing] a hegemonic approach [...] heavily embedded within colonial structures' (236).

Bibliography

Nadasdy, Paul 2021. How many worlds are there? Ontology, practice, and indeterminacy, *American Ethnologist* 48/4, 357-369.

Taylor, Donald 1996. *Embarkations: ethnography and shamanism of the Chocó Indians of Columbia*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum.

This work is copyright of the author. It has been published by JASO under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NonDerivatives ShareAlike License (CC BY NC ND 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal as long as it is non-commercial and that those using the work must agree to distribute it under the same license as the original. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

