

Nadia Yala Kisukidi

Geopolitics of the Diaspora

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e-flux journal #114 — december 2020 Nadia Yala Kisukidi
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Sometimes a given economic, political, or social conjuncture will lay bare in no uncertain terms the insurmountable contradictions inherent in certain ideas. For instance, it is nearly impossible to disregard the context of the Covid-19 pandemic when thinking about the contours of the idea of “diaspora,” or more precisely the (geo)politics that it delineates. The borders of nation-states were closed, putting a stop to the ongoing cycle of trips back and forth that shape diasporic lives. The pandemic slowed down, when it did not actually block, the transfer of funds to their countries of origin from diasporas – especially African – in Northern countries facing an economic crisis.¹ A whole economy of exchanges and movement came brutally undone.

At this point it seems wise, before proceeding any further, to not keep my place of enunciation in the dark. Because this place explains in part the thoughts that follow. I live in a Northern country, in France, crossed by a border – that of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This border may not be physical insofar as it does not materialize a barrier between two neighboring geographic regions, but it is nonetheless real. According to Gloria Anzaldua, borders are truly present whenever people of different cultures occupy the same land: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”² The border that Anzaldua evokes in her writings is a real physical territory located at the point of contact between Texas and Mexico. The border I’m speaking of presupposes a process of affective, symbolic, and cultural externalization that accompanies itinerancy, the exile of a family. The “Congo” sign runs through and recomposes, in a minor key, the French space I inhabit. The “Souths” live in the “Norths”; multiple spatial expanses shape the private lives of families. Landscapes are superimposed and conjoined in the inner life of the individual. This is how life in the diaspora is territorialized.

The health security policies that have halted the constant trips that characterize diasporic existence have partitioned the planet into a series of hermetic physical spaces that reestablish boundaries. Planet earth is not one: it is a multiplicity of small worlds, which coincide, unsurprisingly, with the borders of nation-states. The preventive measures³ intended to protect oneself and others from the pandemic force people to stay put, to be rooted to a spot, to relocate their activities. The very idea of the “diaspora,” insofar as it designates the ability of certain populations to form a unity, a people “despite the spatial dispersion of their members, by way of the unifying reference to a



Kiripi Katembo, *Subir*, from the series *Un Regard*, 2011. Copyright: Kiripi Katembo. Courtesy Fondation Kiripi Katembo Siku et galerie MAGNIN-A.

land or a territory,”⁴ supposes at the very least a tension between two places, return trips, uninterrupted circulation around the globe. Diasporic existence describes a way of being in the world, forced or desired, which requires mobility – that tenacious paradigm of the globalized twentieth century. The sense of community withstands long distances and is confirmed in the joy of reunions.

The spatial concatenations of which diasporic lives are composed describe a concrete form of ubiquity. To think about the idea of the diaspora does not necessarily entail problematizing the “self” in reference to a native land that would give it its ontological substance and identity; it involves thinking about the idea of inhabiting. And more radically still, the idea of inhabiting two places, two lands at the same time. Diasporic life relies on an economy of movement, indifferent to finitude, requiring combustion and spending: flying, traveling across oceans, hitting the road, sending money. All this movement has been undermined by the pandemic and what it reveals about the ecological catastrophe.

Families scattered to the four corners of the world may no longer be getting together because of the virus, yet it is hard to give up on the political potentials of conceiving of the diaspora as a “double presence,”⁵ in other words as a matter of “inhabiting two places at the same time.” We must give thought to the political fecundity of ubiquity, and even more, give it a precise meaning, when the ecological situation no longer presents a unified planet, but instead worlds in conflict. What does it mean to inhabit two places at the same time, when these places are in an antagonistic relationship? The idea of “place” and “world” function here interdependently: “place” refers to a real physical location and “world” refers to a whole that materializes through interrelating a multiplicity of human productions and geosituated forms of life.

By taking a position on a boundary at once real and imaginary – the boundary separating France and the Democratic Republic of Congo – criticism grounds itself in a *concrete terrestrial situation*. Diasporic life traces the contours of a “geopolitics,” whose meaning is almost literal: a politics of the land, or yet again a politics of spatial localization. In spite of the pandemic and the immobility it imposes, it is important for us to think through the real political fecundities of the constant passage from one land to another.

Geopolitics. To reflect on worlds in conflict means to focus not only on war and tensions between sovereign states but also on an economy of death and life. Colonization,

understood as the appropriation of lands and people, stands as the paradigm of this sort of vital economy. I would like to illustrate this through a look at some moments in the history of Central Africa.

Central Africa’s encounter with the West, which started in the fifteenth century – the era when the Eurocentric order and a certain consciousness of global space was instituted – opened a cycle of “extraordinary violence,” in repeated patterns of collapse.⁶ Because worlds can indeed collapse several times. The slave trade developed after the arrival of the Portuguese in the Congo in 1482.⁷ The kidnapping and enslavement, along with the drain on the labor force, destabilized local institutions and demographics. African lands were turned into a huge reservoir of manual labor, feeding trade channels that were becoming increasingly international.

In the nineteenth century, explorers and colonial societies competed on African soil in the name of European states.⁸ The Conference of Berlin in 1885⁹ established the legal terms of the European occupation of Africa, guaranteeing the sovereignty of each European nation and granting them all “complete freedom of trade.”¹⁰ This conference, which consolidated the rules of “commercial imperialism” that developed in Africa throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is to be understood as the point in time when “the European states imposed capitalism on the coasts of Africa.”¹¹ In the Congo Basin – by then the property of the King of Belgium – rubber exploitation led to violent forms of extractivism¹² that included the destruction of villages, the appropriation of land, the massacre and mutilation of local populations, the destabilization of collective life, forced labor, and the exploitation of natural resources to profit foreign companies. Congolese lands fueled the development of the second industrial revolution in Europe.

These cycles of depredation and pillage are being reconfigured in contemporary postcolonial Congo. We must be able to reinterpret them from a vital standpoint: the life of some requires the death of others. Societies of superabundance imply the extinction of societies that function exclusively as reservoirs of energy and material. This is one of the formulations of the conflictuality of worlds in the Capitalocene era. The two Congo wars, which gripped the region with violence in the late twentieth century and have continued into the first quarter of the twenty-first, have accompanied the revolution of digital electronics, with Congolese mineral resources being introduced into the global market.¹³ The systemic violence raging in the Democratic Republic of Congo supports an

“international supply systems coupled with a form of national and regional redistribution of resources.”¹⁴ Mass massacres, the forced displacement of populations, rape, the increased vulnerability of human life, etc. The North/South divide is too broad to account for the conflictuality of worlds. The economy of pillage and extraction that has taken hold of the region is supported by international industrial and financial predations, but also by intra-African alliances¹⁵ and a revenue system maintained by national elites.

Faced with this economy of violence, huge dumping grounds have been established where unneeded populations, deemed useless, are condemned to live. Whole expanses have become zones of infra-life. The globe is riddled with holes, haunted by shadows, dispossessed of the minimum required to satisfy vital needs.

The conflictuality of worlds that is on display in Central Africa testifies to a becoming-vampire, for the vampire is that mythical creature that feeds on the blood of the living to increase its vital forces. It is not the general collapse of the planet that is being manifested but rather the way in which some worlds require the collapse of others to maintain their standard of living, in a context where limited resources imply their rationing, and hence their appropriation by some. The death of some, which preserves the life of others, can never be considered a scandal; at best, it deserves to be forgotten. In this context, many words – “Humanity,” “Universalism,” “Cosmopolitanism” – are emptied of their utopian overvaluation. Because it is a matter above all of grasping what they do not allow us to think through, notably how the life of some presupposes the death of others,¹⁶ and how life in superabundance presupposes the continual reiteration of acts of massacre, the consent to the murder of those who, by their very existence, take up too much room.

In this framework it may be interesting to resignify, politically, the idea of “diaspora.” Beyond the synthesis of opposites¹⁷ that it operates, the idea does not refer exclusively to a spatial conception of identity that puts nationality, territory, and citizenship under strain. Diasporic existence unhinges exclusive affiliations with the body of the nation. To live in the diaspora is to be a member of two spaces at once.

This double presence¹⁸ sheds light on the utopian powers that run through diasporic existence. Such an *existing* (*exister*) presupposes heterological self-construction, which incorporates the other – any other possible place – into the definition of what individuals, peoples,

and communities are. It entails the possibility of a disaffiliation from the national, a breaking down of borders that complicates relationships to places of origin and arrival. It contests rhetorics of authenticity and loyalty that demand total allegiance to a nation defined as a block, a substantialized body. Diasporas can develop a sui generis way of life by forming “transnational and transcultural minorities,” indifferent to the logic of existing nationalities.¹⁹

To think about the diaspora as a double presence is not to privilege one world over the other. The lack of loyalty of which those whose lives unfold across several places are accused needs to be recoded positively as multiplied presences. Diasporic existence is a refusal, the refusal to choose between two worlds. This refusal assumes a singular form when the two worlds are in conflict. It summons a whole vital economy that contests a geopolitics founded on the logic of predator and victim.

“Double presence” has a material, terrestrial significance. To think about the diaspora is to ask a question that is not so much “Who am I?” as much as “Where do I live?” The answer is unambiguous: the diasporic being living at the intersection of antagonistic worlds inhabits a political conflictuality. On the France/DRC border, this conflictuality is brutally apparent: modes of consumption in wealthy societies rely on exploiting “blood minerals” from the Congo.²⁰ In diasporic lives, geopolitics and international relations become family affairs. They run through the affective lives of communities. We must not shy away from the violence of the conclusion: the inequality of worlds sometimes means that one inhabits a society that feeds on the blood of one’s own family. The dialectic is poor: to live well requires the negation of the other.

So we must develop a practical approach to the idea of diaspora, as the refusal to see one world disappear so that the other can live. As the refusal to see one’s kin die. Under what conditions are worlds in conflict equally habitable? How can they provide the same conditions of habitability to their populations, to families separated by a border? The point is not to reactivate, in these finite times, a co-development logic that is overly invested in the development paradigm, and that appears as the humanitarian facet of policies controlling migration flows in wealthy countries.

Diasporic practices are micropolitics; they take the form of an internationalism that is situated rather than abstract. Such internationalism is not some sort of idealized assumption of responsibility for the planet’s future, theoretically positing a shared humanity. It is concerned, on the contrary, with concrete

modalities of action implemented by the people who are interpellated by two places at the same time – two places in conflict that shape the body of their biographies and their attachments.

To think from two places in conflict is not a matter of feeling nostalgia for the world's lost oneness but rather of questioning the way in which both spaces can be equally habitable. All of which implies a certain political practice of postponement.²¹ To postpone the extinction, the death of a world, on the one hand. And to postpone the economic and political logics that increase superabundance, on the other. Poverty of words, poverty of solutions, at a time when certain processes of destruction appear irreversible. But what we need to think about is the way in which geopolitics are embodied in personal lives. And traversing the modes of existence that they demand, we need to try to awaken their revolutionary potentials, knowing that revolution here is firstly a refusal – the refusal to see the death of one world support the life of the other. This is the utopia of diasporic existence: to be present in two worlds at once in spite of the poor dialectics that link them, and to make it possible in each of them to inhabit and to develop the possibilities of a life *in spite of all*.

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Translated from the French by Gila Walker.

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<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/945715/economie/transferts-de-fonds-dangereuse-chute-pour-les-menages-et-les-banquiers/>.

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Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 19, 25.

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Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*, 219.

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Starting from the situation of the DRC, it is a matter of questioning the logic of the production of life determined by the logic of international commerce. On the African continent, forms of producing life exist that are not connected to the relationship with societies of overabundance. (I thank Felwine Sarr for suggesting this point to me.)

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Dufoix, *La dispersion*, 327.

18
On the issue of double presence, see Nadia Yala Kisukidi, "Du retour"; and Dufoix, *La dispersion*, 514ff.

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Christophe Boltanski, *Minerais de sang* (Grasset, 2011).

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I'm borrowing the term from Ailton Krenak, *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, trans. Anthony Doyle (House of Anansi Press Incorporated, 2020).

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