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Hiriira Spatiotemporalities: Mapping Oromo Women's Liberation in Post-Imperial Berlin

Madeline Bass

*MOVES European Joint Doctorate, Division of Arts and Humanities, University of Kent,
Canterbury, UK and
Freie Universität Berlin;
madelinebass@gmail.com*

Abstract: In September 2020, Oromo women marched through the streets of Berlin, Germany, demanding recognition for their struggle. This protest march, called a *Hiriira* in the Oromo language, offers a case study into the entanglements between settler colonial Ethiopia, Germany's post-empire, and the forces of oppression which link them. This paper uses the spatiotemporal reckonings generated from the *Hiriira* perspective to understand violence and elucidate the practices of resistance that have emerged despite it. These contrasting ways of viewing space and time are expressed through the tension between *imperial spatialising*, a way of knowing the world that is imperial and oppressive in nature, and *geography guraacha*, a Black and Blackened way of knowing space with a particularly Oromo perspective. The result is a type of mapping, tracing the *Hiriira* route across Berlin while describing the histories that shadow these streets, and the pathways towards liberation that Oromo women are organising.

Ji'a Fulbaana bara 2020 keessa dubartootni Oromo qabsoo isaanii beekumtii akka argatu gochuuf biyya Jarmanii, magaalaa Barliin keessatti diddaa dhageessisuuf daandii irraa bahan. Diddaa mulisuuf daandii irraa bahun, Afaan Oromoon *Hiriira* jedhamu, dhimma wal-xaxaa walitti hidhata qabu, sirna koloneefatoota qubattummaa Itiyoophiyaa, Impaay-eera Jarmanii fi humnoota cunqursaa kan walitti isaan hidhu yookin haariroo isaan gid-duu jiru irratti, qoorannoo (case study) geggeessuuf carra kenna. Barreeffamni kun, tilmaama yeroo fi iddoo ilaalacha keessaa galchuun, akeeka Hiriirchaa irraa hubannoo gaj'ina fi akkaataa diddaan gindeefame irraa maddeetti fayyadama. Iddoo fi yeroo akka faallaatti ilaalun kan ibsamuu dhiphina Iddoo impaayeraan murteeffame, addunyaa impaayeeera uumamaan cunqursaa ta'e fi geograafii guaracha, beekumsaa iddoo guraachi-fame, addatti akeeka Oromo ilaalchise walfalmii gidduu jiruu dha. Bu'aan isaas gosa kaar-taa, karaa Barliin Hiriiri qaxxaamuree hordofuun seenaa daandii kana isa golgamee osoo ibsu, fi daandii gara bilisummaa dubartoonni Oromoo qindeessaa jiran ibsudha.

Keywords: Oromo, Germany, Black geography, guraacha, liberation movements

Introduction

Oromo people have been engaged in a struggle for liberation since their colonisation by the Abyssinian Empire, modern day Ethiopia. The challenges they face, as Indigenous peoples in a settler colonial state, an African diaspora in the white supremacist world system, and women organising against cisheteropatriarchy, are intersecting and intersectional. Ongoing tensions on the Ethiopian borderlands demonstrate the failures of the nation-state to reconcile itself with the Oromo

peoples caught up in its imperial project, while the tools of governance used by diaspora states are unable to make fully legible Oromo experiences.

Across borders, there is a need to critically reimagine the way Oromo women navigate these forms of harm. As the Ethiopian state's necropowerful (rule which actualises by way of control over life and death, after the work of Achille Mbembe [2003]) force extends past its mapped-out borders, it threatens the safety, sanity, and lives of the Oromo people into the diaspora. The diasporic Oromo community of Germany is in active solidarity with its counterparts in Oromia. Cities across Germany, and Berlin in particular, have been sites of prolific organising and resistance against the Ethiopian state, as seen in archival documents from the 1970s that declare "Freiheit für Oromiya".¹ Many of these activists are now elders in the Oromo community, still fighting for their liberation today. Learning from this tradition, this paper uses an Oromo women's protest in Berlin as a case study through which to identify forms of resistance within, despite, and against empire.

The Afan Oromo word for a protest march is *hiriira*, also translated as a parade, demonstration, or queue. Throughout this paper I will refer to the Oromo women's protest that happened on 3 September 2020 as "the Hiriira". This particular Hiriira was planned by Oromos across Germany, best represented by the organisation the *Hawaasa Oromo Jarmani* and the *Dhubartoota Oromo Jarmani*, the Oromo Community of Germany and Oromo Women of Germany. The women's event was scheduled to take place on a Thursday, described on the posters and notices sent out as a "Hiriira Dhubartoota" (Women's March), to be followed by a hiriira (unqualified, for everyone) the next day.² Drawing upon a Black geographic lens, as developed by Katherine McKittrick (2006), I use Berlin to identify the presence of a *geography guraacha*, a Black presence that exceeds (in)visibility. Focusing on this protest, I map out transparent spatial relationships of Berlin as a post-imperial city by exploring how an active Oromo women's presence has influenced space and place.

Through centring the Hiriira, I aim to unpack the entangled dynamics of violence related to race, gender, state, and citizenship and how the heavy weight of each of these histories has gained new life across borders. Oromo people are members of the African diaspora, the participants of the march all self-identified or affiliated with women (presumed based on their partaking in a women's march), and though not all the individuals were im/migrants, their transnational engagement with Ethiopia makes questions of citizenship and migration part of the broader conversation. The layers of these interlocking structures, uncovered along the route of the Hiriira, show how Germany as a nation-state struggles still to not only reckon with its own first-hand involvement in imperial violence, but also acts as an implicit facilitator of other forms of harm through its foreign policy. To address these entanglements, I think alongside theoretical and epistemological frames that emerge from Black diasporic and Oromo scholarship and lifeways.

Methods

In putting forth my analysis of the Hiriira, my involvement and access to the event requires clarification. I attended the march as more of a friend and comrade than

researcher. It was not the first (nor last) protest I walked in, helped make signs for, or documented. As I moved with the group, I took photos and short videos on my iPhone 11; winking at people I knew from behind the camera lens and offering to email the images to anyone who asked. The “data” from these photographs and videos is reflective of an intent to capture the scene without a strong “academic” intentionality. As a hobby photographer I seek out moments that form a particular beauty for me (see further meditation in Camp 2017; Sonntag 1977), and as a novice videographer I hope that my hands are steady enough to record relevant speeches. It was not until after the Hiriira that I thought to use these artefacts as data and see what might emerge from strategic analysis. The photographs chosen for inclusion in this work have all been cropped to conceal the identities of the participants, as the limits of Ethiopian necropower should not be underestimated.

The methodological approach for this paper borrows strategies from sociology with a careful grounding in Black and Critical Indigenous Studies; it is rooted in an anti-colonial praxis and pays attention to the entanglements of conquest and empire as they influence our understandings of theory, history, and writing (King 2019; Smith 2012). Described in methodological language, the data analysed in this paper was collected using “non-participant observation” and “visual ethnography” during a protest. The subsequent analysis was informed by three years of data collection in Oromia, in-depth interviews with members of the Oromo diaspora, and ethnographic work with Oromo communities in Europe. This formulation captures in a somewhat clinical sense my participation; it may be better described as an act of lived solidarity that generated research.

In the discussion that follows, it is my intent that both roles, the academic and the personal, be brought to the forefront; while this analysis draws on historical and scientific sources, it is also coloured by my own experience as a Black woman who has walked the streets of Oromia and Germany in turn, and who knows intimately what the disdain of the empire feels like. I operationalise Black geography as a way of considering my experiences as related to the Oromo women I walk with. Thinking with geography *guraacha* requires both solidarity and careful understanding of the unique ways Oromo women’s lifeways layer with and diverge from my own. In other words, as a Black diasporic woman who works with Black diasporic women, my “research” is an investment in the Hiriira’s meanings, part of our collective liberation as a “united front from which the world has not yet heard” (Lorde 1991:viii).

Contextualising the Hiriira

The Oromo homeland stretches across the Horn of Africa into Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. Prior to colonisation, the Oromo were governed by the Gadaa institution (Jalata 2001) and Siinqee system (Kumsa 1997), which emphasised community relations, gender equality, reciprocal relationships with nature, and mutual respect (Megerssa 1993) that came from the Waqqeffanna religion. The rise of the Abyssinian Empire in the late 1890s simultaneously brought systematic attempts to destroy each of these cultural institutions. Under the rule of Haile

Selassie, the Oromo language and religious practices were banned, and land was seized for and by the state and Orthodox Christian church (Bulcha 1997; Hassen 2002).

Rising to power after Selassie's downfall in 1974, the Dergue regime institutionalised new forms of necropower against the Oromo, including but not limited to resettlement, forced labour, and unjust imprisonment (Gudina 1997; Halliday and Molyneux 1982). This facilitated the growth and formation of an organised global Oromo diaspora, fuelled by dis/placement, exile, and a search for refuge outside of state borders. It was during the time of Dergue rule that the Oromo diaspora community in Germany was established and organised, an era wherein the Black community of Germany was itself in the early stages of forming initiatives and groups (Eggers 2016:35). The relationships between these group struggles have not been documented, but anecdotal evidence supports some collaborations and overlap. The Dergue was overthrown in 1991, followed briefly by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, and the current constitution was implemented in 1994. Despite these reshufflings, as a settler colonial nation-state that was built upon violence, Ethiopia has not addressed or reconciled the harm inflicted upon its people (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990; Jalata 1998). Rather, the relationship between Oromo relationality within and outside of their homeland has produced a decades-long struggle for Oromo liberation.

The specificities of the Oromo struggle are contextualised in this paper by understanding what Saidiya Hartman (2007) calls the "afterlives" of slavery and empire. While slavery and colonialism formally ended, their legacies were imbricated into new forms of governance, maintaining the structural oppression of former subjects. This idea is further carried on in notions such as Christina Sharpe's (2016) analysis of slavery's "wake", and la paperson's (2010) explanation of the "post+colonial", among others. Each of these frameworks describe the intersecting (and intersectional) cultural, economic, and institutional forms that slavery's afterlives have built for Black and African diasporas and Indigenous peoples. These concepts also stress the emergence of interstitial spaces within the post-empire and diaspora where marginalised peoples organise, resist, and build more liberatory futurities.

In this paper I utilise space-making to unpack the processes that build up to, and exceed, the women's Hiriira of 2020 in Berlin. I employ the notion of *imperial spatialising* as it works in dialect with and undermines Black geography, and introduce the idea of *geography guraacha* to describe the Oromo epistemological framing. Imperial spatialising draws on the work of Mishuana Goeman (2009:184), calling attention to the relations between people in place, addressing the tendency to read space and ethnicity with colonial grammars and ideologies, and the use of imperialist knowledge to make truth claims about a population. McKittrick (2006:xv) identifies this process as the formation of "transparent space", generating a vision of place that is intelligible through and evidence of an imperial vision, presuming "that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true". Trusting in the transparency of a space, is a way of suggesting that "some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place" (ibid.). When these bodies, the bodies

of Black women, are tied up in imperial spatial narratives, domination and control are reinforced, and Black geographic knowledge is seen as out of place. Through a transparent lens, the hegemonic power maintains hierarchies between the (national, white) self and the (im/migrant, Black) other.

Black geography, coming from the work of McKittrick (2006:103), elucidates Black women's spatialising and finds "critical sites of nation" amidst the "absence and elsewhere" of the imperially produced space (see also McKittrick and Woods 2007). Bringing these ideas of space-making to an Oromo diasporic standpoint leads to the notion of *geography guraacha*. This form of space-making is centred on Oromo evocations of *guraacha*, the Afan Oromo word for the colour black. In addition to this simplistic meaning, *guraacha* as a concept is linked deeply to Oromo ontological and epistemological meanings. *Guraacha* refers to "absolute origin", "the source of all things", and that which is "not yet revealed"; symbolic beyond connotations of the colour (Megerssa 1993:96). Waaqa, the black god, creates everything and "weaves them into an intricately interrelated, interdependent, and well-balanced cosmic order" (Kumsa 2013:72). The Oromo worldview recognises the interrelation of the seen and unseen, known and hidden, finding cycles and connections between the past and present. The Blackness of the Oromo people and the symbolism of the colour black are both expressed in geography *guraacha*. In its originary framing and as a form of "geography", *guraacha* allows for "the various layers of knowing and not knowing" that relationality to Waaqa makes possible (Kumsa 2013:85). The Oromo epistemology that Waaqa and *guraacha* emerge from is linked to the natural world and skies above, as much as the bonds between people. Oromos gathering to express their autonomy and sense of self is inextricably bound to these cultural practices.

Through integrating and building on these concepts, I conduct a Black/*guraacha* mapping of the Hiriira demonstration, identifying the post-imperial entanglements, unbounded by nation-state borders, that both produce and reveal relationships between cultural, institutional, and economic structures. In order to link these rich theoretical understandings to the Hiriira, I trace the physical route of the march, analysing certain stopping points, slogans, usage and interactions within space, and the lingering shadow of the empire (Ethiopia's and Germany's) as it follows the protest.

The path of the Hiriira is complicated by the sociopolitical culture of Berlin itself, where tensions between acknowledgement and erasure of Germany's history are ongoing. The city is both an emblem of international conflicts, and a site of significance for Black German women's organising (Florvil 2020). In each contemporary era, from Prussian rule, the Weimar Republic, Nazi regime, post-war occupation, and in its current positionality as a global power, Berlin's uses and understanding of its space has shifted. What is "transparent", therefore, is really what has been made legible or intelligible through space-making practices and language that is state-sanctioned and stuck in the imperial. Through a Black geographic analysis of Berlin, we may peel some layers of the empire, foregrounding an alternate existence. By positioning the analysis alongside, embedded, and in motion with the perspective of Oromo women, the *guraacha* map is made visible.

Findings

Alexanderplatz

Alexanderplatz is located on the western side of former East Berlin, a short distance from the city's old border and "Checkpoint Charlie". Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Alexanderplatz has undergone several transformations. In a post-GDR world, Alexanderplatz became known as an "unruly open-air market", dominated by shady foreign figures, losing its shiny socialist lustre as the nation struggled to reconcile itself with the past and reintegrate the infrastructure into a new state vision (Weszkalnys 2007:211). It was not until the 2000s that Alexanderplatz was renovated to fit the "narrative of the German past as characterised by the struggle of the working classes and their own particular culture" (Standley 2013:686). Renewal efforts sought to cleanse Berlin's violent history and pave the way for a brighter future. Fatima El-Tayeb (2020:79) describes this as the drive to form a "singular linear narrative of the past" into a contrived idea of the nation-state. German imperialism has shown its ugly face to the world, and its current imperial occupants sought to put their own stamp on the city.

On a sunny day, the expansive streets and sidewalks of Alexanderplatz are inviting, with people walking together through the open spaces. If you turn left on the street Karl Marx Allee (a road near Alexanderplatz), you'll see engravings on the side of buildings in the socialist realist style of art, showing country women with headscarves on, going from farmer to scientist (presumably with support of the faithful leadership of the USSR). In the evenings, the rows and rows of rectangular buildings seem to take on a darker life, the staunch structures that line the city blocks stretching beyond the line of sight (Sonne 2004). As a part of the modern German state, they are a tangible reminder of a history unwritten and rewritten with different imperial tongues.

The Hiriira starts in Alexanderplatz, but the square is just one section of an area with larger significance. In the context of this paper, we may understand Alexanderplatz's shifting symbolism through multiple layers, the "transparency" of the space reflecting its former tension with increasing globalisation (Dushkova and Kasatkina 2015), as well as retaining its radical roots (Arandelović 2014). The convergences and conflicts between Alexanderplatz's "socialist" past, hyper-capitalist future, and the anti-colonial spirit in the spatiotemporality of the Hiriira make themselves known even if they are not the focal point. Though there were attempts at the construction of a "new history" for a "new Berlin and a new Germany, in which a line can be drawn under the past and a guilt-free future constructed", it seems the success in creating something new was not able to rid the area of some shadowy sense of guilt (Cochrane and Jonas 1999:153; see also El-Tayeb 2020).

The Oromo women protesting chose the Weltzeituhr, the World Time Clock, as their meeting point. The sculptural clock was constructed in 1969 alongside other major public buildings, intended to convey to citizens and visitors alike that the GDR was on the path to a bigger, bolder, and more global future, and has been an important gathering place for demonstrations throughout the 20th and 21st

centuries (Arandelović 2014; Standley 2013). The *Weltzeituhr* is made to look like a planet with revolving rings and numbers, a different view from every angle. In addition to the clock's unique shape, it also has a peculiar way of showing time. Rather than naming time zones, temporal geographies are represented by renowned cities: Amsterdam, New York, Paris, and all the way from Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. Though Oromo people gather to fight for freedom in Germany, Ethiopian imperialism follows.

The Ethiopian post-empire that shadows the Hiriira is asserted through such spatiotemporalities, what Mark Rifkin (2017) describes as "settler time". While maps and borders are modes of making space, temporality has its own role in upholding imperial systems and enforcing control. Conversely, Gadaa time keeping, part of Indigenous Oromo culture, is one way of writing geography *guraacha*. Under Gadaa governance, Oromo people understood and counted time in relation to the world around and the movement of stars, rather than a linear, standardised model (Legesse 1973). The intricate temporality of the Oromo refuses easy incorporation into settler temporal frames that seek to construct a "shared present" for Indigenous people "defined by settler institutions, interests, and imperatives" (Rifkin 2017:viii). In the context of Black Germany, Nicola Lauré al-Samarai (2016:48) recounts the ways in which the "skeleton of a dismembered colonial experience" both "continues to inflect multilayered cultural cartographies" and "inseparably intertwines Black and white German pasts and presents". This temporality is still embedded in the imperialised past, generating the conditions for the imperial now.

Working against imperial time, Rifkin (2017:ix–x) argues instead for the presence of "temporal multiplicity" that opens possibilities for engaging with time as a "narrative", "experience", and "immanent materiality of continuity and change". McKittrick (2006:2) also points to the way disruptions to normative (imperial) time-space progressions are geographic acts, moves to contextualise the past and present of Black lives. For Black German organisers in Berlin, presenting narratives of Blackness outside of a linear time is part of unsettling "racist notions of a blackness fixed in time and place" (Florvil 2020:145). Connecting Black and Indigenous temporalities opens our understanding to the liberatory intent of geography *guraacha* as an expression of Oromo transnational resistance. With the understanding that time is its own mechanism of control, it is fitting that the *Weltzeituhr* is such a visible physical reminder of imperialised space-making.

When the Hiriira begins we are facing and faced by the side of the clock that covers the edge of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Australia. Cities on this side range from New Delhi and Karachi in the west to Melbourne and Magadan in the east. Settler colonial spaces on display (Melbourne), careful attention paid to the demarcations of the former empire (the former Soviets in this context), and a 24-hour block that measures the days as they pass for the local population; though some of the city names were changed after its creation (e.g. Leningrad to Saint Petersburg) and alterations were made to some of the time measurements (an extra 30 minutes given to New Delhi), Addis Ababa stands stubbornly over our heads.

Start of Hiriira

The morning of 3 September was chilly, evidence that Berlin's seemingly unrelenting winter grey was coming soon. The women assembled near the mouth of the underground station, greeting each other in turn and showing off their traditional styles. Most, if not all, of the women wore some items of Oromo cultural garb, distinct to different regions of Oromia. Some had Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) flags emblazoned on their Covid-19 face masks or clothing, an evocation of the politicised nature of Oromo identity as much as a recognition of the significance of the flag itself, with its *odaa* tree brightly in the centre. As the group waited for more people to arrive, a few women pulled out thermoses of coffee and tea, a plastic wrapped loaf of home-made bread was revealed, plates and cups passed around, and breakfast was served. It is clear that the Hiriira was conducted and led by members of a community; beyond their political agreements there was a sense of kinship and responsibility that emerged in this shared sustenance, breaking bread, gathering together in friendship as they gather together to fight.

Before the walking began, there was a blessing, with each of the major religions of the Oromo people represented: Waqqeeffanna, Islam, and both Protestant and Orthodox Christianity. The first voice reached out to Waqaa, the black god, asking for support in their undertaking. She closed the prayer with "...*Oromia billisomsiiitu. Kan hafe Waqqayyo, itti nuuf haa gutu. Jabbadhaa, hin jabbana*". In direct translation, the phrase reads as "Let Oromia be free. All the rest God will fulfil. Be strong, we'll be strong". The phrasing of the last sentence reflects the relationship between the speaker, Waqaa, the Oromo people at large, and the Oromo women listening. The Oromo verb *jabbachuu* means to be strong. The root, *jabb-*, can be given the suffix *-eenya*, to mean strength (*jabbeenya*). Rather than a conveyance of physical strength, the command form *jabbadhu* (singular), or *jabbadhaa* (plural/formal, as used by the speaker), is meant to convey to the recipient the need to utilise or build the resources of an internal strength. In trying times, a friend will say *jabbadhu* as a form of encouragement, a recognition of that around you which seeks to weaken you, and an acknowledgment that the strength to overcome this is within you.

In this Waqqeeffanna blessing, the speaker follows the formal/plural command (*jabbadhaa*) with the first-person plural statement *hin jabbana*, we are strong, or we will be strong (there are no common linguistic indicators for future tense in Afan Oromo). The speaker thus addresses Waqaa (through the formality in the command form *jabbadhaa*), Oromo people in other contexts (through the plurality within the command form *jabbadhaa*), and the sisters that surround her in the square (through the first-person plural form *jabbana*). While she works and waits for Oromia to be free, asking for Waqaa's support in this pursuit, she acknowledges the community strength that will make this possible, a strength she knows the women already have. Bringing Waqaa to Alexanderplatz is a spatial act, a way of positioning guraacha sensibility as a primary way of knowing. When there are disruptions to *safuu*, the cosmic law and order that guides Oromo epistemologies, women gather and work to repair this harm. From their "spaces of liminality", through their organisation, and in conversation with Waqaa, Oromo women engage in a transnational feminist praxis that is unbound by imperial

spatiotemporalities (Kumsa 2020:127). While the temporality of the empire, Addis Ababa standing overhead, is a transparent way of attempting to know the space, the geography is made *guraacha* through the prayers of these Oromo women.

Rotes Rathaus

After exiting Alexanderplatz, the Hiriira crosses in front of Berlin's City Hall, known as the Rotes Rathaus, or Red Town Hall for its imposing brick façade. Although the building is generally open to visitors, the city tourism office warns that due to "political events and safety reasons temporary closures of the town hall may occur". It is unclear if the Hiriira would qualify as such an interruption, but no one is seen entering or exiting during our passage. As the morning ends the day stays brisk but not too cold, and a few clouds dot the otherwise blue skies. The wind shudders across the street as the march moves forward, with some unseen force seeming to direct its irregular route. In the videos I take, the row of flags in front of the town hall appears to be flapping in slow motion, stilted when compared to the fluidity of the movement on the street. The decision behind the display of these emblems appears to convey that the state, nation-state, and the European Union as its own post-imperial force are all inter-connected. Though this is merely a city hall, its jurisdiction is seemingly granted legitimacy by the relationship it has with these supranational bodies, each of their emblems waving slowly, heavily in the wind.

In a mapping of this area's "transparent space", the casual witness may be pre-occupied by the power of this city government, the solemn brick glowering its disapproval (McKittrick 2006:xv). Focused on this transparency, we read the Rotes Rathaus only through its formal description, see it on a digital map with a copyrighted image of orderly flags, a thoroughly German building in the German state. Reviews of the Rotes Rathaus on Google Maps describe it as "beautiful building that surprisingly survived a very hard history", noting that its "square red shape give [sic] an imposing, yet agile impression", and making sure to add that "this solidity does not look like just a tasteless piece of stone".

In transparent terms the Rotes Rathaus is a solid German landmark, an emblem of state order (despite its hard history), ongoing governance (with a type of agility), poise (beautiful, tasteful), and somewhere easily accessed by the people (the tunnel of the newly constructed underground station leading directly to its doors). Other than one commentator's mention of a "hard history", there is no connection between the Rotes Rathaus and the historical struggle that surrounds it, nor to the ongoing struggles taking place on the streets below it. In a city comprised of imperial space the Rathaus can be only red, strong, solid. There is no room in this spatialising for attention to elsewhere and otherwise. Conversely, a Black geographic reading, embedded in the spatiotemporality of the Hiriira, allows the Oromo diaspora to stake its claim alongside the alternate histories of Black Berlin. The Oromo Liberation Front flags come to the forefront at this moment, and the eye of the camera takes this image up with it (Figure 1). Stepping back across the street, the vision is even more overwhelmingly Oromo, with this flag of liberation carried, displayed, and pasted on the side of the lead car.



Figure 1: Berlin's Rotes Rathaus with the flags of the European Union and Germany, and the Berlin Landesflagge (from left to right), in the background, and the flag of the Oromo Liberation Front in the foreground (source: author)

An easy denial of the validity of this rendering is that the Oromo presence is somehow temporary, that the march continues on, but the Rotes Rathaus remains red and ready to rule. I prefer to follow the thinking of Berlin's Dekoloniale, located just a few kilometres down the road, whose organisers urge an attention to "how the invisible can be experienced and the visible can be irritated".³ This connects to McKittrick (2006:91), who suggests that the nation-state's refusal to name Black diasporic presence as local and connected intimately to the nation-state body in an attempt to erase it results in "surprise" when it asserts itself. We are "surprised" to learn the Blackness of Berlin if our geographic knowledge is stagnated by the image available on Google Maps, in the transparent white social space. If we bring a Blackened geographic sensibility to the forefront then we are forced to acknowledge that the vision of the Hiriira is not only a legitimate framing of the Rotes Rathaus, but that it is integral to the existence of the Rathaus itself, and the city it governs. What would Berlin be without its imperial past, and the imperial entanglements it shared across Africa with its European counterparts? (El-Tayeb 2020). The transnational connections between the "omnipresent" colonial past and the colonial now are a central focus of the Dekoloniale, who call for the creation of a "memory culture" as a form of redress. A Black geography forces us to think through and with these ideas, irritating the transparency of the space

and making the post-imperial legacy one that is intimately in conversation with both present and future. The temporality of the Hiriira and its guraacha lens recognises Oromo women as “viable geographic subjects who live and negotiate the world around them” thus “offering a different sense of how geography is and might be lived” (McKittrick 2006:92). For a few minutes, the Rotes Rathaus is an active Oromo diasporic space. Captured on film and camera, it is immortalised as such, impossible to deny.

As the Hiriira passes the Rotes Rathaus, the city’s leadership is called to task. The women demand that these politicians answer for Germany’s contribution to foreign state-sponsored violence which has direct effects on its local citizens, however far away that nation-state may be. The Hiriira condemns the city’s leadership, targeting the then-Bürgermeister Herr Michael Müller specifically, asking the government to stop their financial and political support of Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian prime minister, and address the ongoing harm against Oromo people that is taking place in Ethiopia. The chorus of Hiriira voices denounces dictatorship and demands freedom, voices echoing off the brick walls, penetrating the few windows that have been left open. In the soundspace of the Hiriira, for each of the curious onlookers, this city hall is in tune with the fight for Oromo liberation. Soon, though, the moment passes, the walk goes onward, and the struggle continues.

Singing Under the Lindens

The singing begins on the stretch of road that leads up to the Brandenburg Gate (Figure 2). This broad street is flanked on both sides by prestigious government buildings: the embassies for France, the USA, and the Russian Federation, as well as the ambassador for the European Union. The street is named for trees that line either side of it: “Unter den Linden” translates directly to “Under the Lindens”. The linden trees are shy, preparing for winter it seems. They peek out over the road but don’t seem to give the feeling of really being “over” the path we walk. Whether this is the efforts of careful urban tree trimming or the result of the trees choking back the polluted gas that usually blows among their leaves is not clear. Over and above the linden trees on this street are the seats of individuals with an extraordinary influence on global relations and politics. We walk under them in name, according to the imperial map, but their impact is not felt; the shadows of other trees still hold more influence here.

Any mapping of Oromia would be remiss without identification of Oromo people’s key cultural and religious sites, places like Abba Muda or Bishoofu, characterised by a body of water and a stately *odaa* (sycamore) tree. Specific to Oromo women, the oak tree or *qilxxu* was a site essential to enacting sociolegal frameworks. As Asafa Jalata (2001:67) describes, “When there were violations of their rights, women left their homes, children, and resources and travelled to a place where there was a big tree called qilxxu and assembled there until the problems were solved through negotiation by elders, both men and women”. The qilxxu was connected to balance and justice; the frail lindens are moved under during the Hiriira, but their meaning is only a shadow of the proud qilxxu



Figure 2: The Hiriira moving down the boulevard Unter den Linden, the Russian embassy visible on the left side (source: author)

(Kumsa 2013:63). For Oromo women in the diaspora, in a mapping of Berlin that addresses these transnational experiences, the sycamore and oak by the local lake are substituted for a manufactured canal and a row of thin lindens. The seats of governance and decision makers are tucked away above and beyond the trees, rather than gathered together underneath them as they would within the Siingee Gadaa governance.

The songs performed during this protest are part of a rich tradition of Oromo musical performance including forms such as *geersa* (Holcomb and Klemm 2018; Tolesa 1990), *kadhata*, and *dalaga*; the latter two are discussed at length in Martha Kuwee Kumsa's *Songs of Exile* (2013), among other places. Geersas have a well-documented significance in the culture and lifeways of Oromo people, particularly as a form of anti-colonial expression. The songs expressed during this Hiriira are *wallisa*.⁴ These *wallisa* have a few distinct parts: the call and response or communal aspect, the lyrics, the rhythm and flow, and the circumstances of singing. These may be re-phrased as the individual, the community, and the world around. The leader of the song sets the tone and designs the lyrical content. The rest of the group places their faith in this leader, trusts that the message is one worth repeating and giving support to.

The songs have a joyful feel, even if their lyrical content is darker. "*Abiy muratee dhageesse, oddu sii geesse*", one chant leads: "I heard Abiy is mentally ill, spread the word". The major repetition comes with the end of each line; whatever news (*oddu*) you have heard (*dhageesse*) is then shared and passed along to others to arrive in their ears (*sii geesse*). In Gadaa times, women would gather and sing for a number of reasons, in celebration as much as in protest. The songs are a moment of power, unmatched by speeches or ordinary chants. The meanings of the *wallisa* and their performance are their own geography *guraacha*, connecting

the spirit of Waaqa with the participants in the Hiriira, and calling back to Oromia. In this diasporic space, under the German lindens, the singing is evidence of an undeniable Oromo presence, and the harsh truths of the lyrics are made melodic.

A song performed under an odaa tree would have signified a monumental event, something worth gathering the entire community for: public justice, a holiday, life or death. Under the linden trees it is some variation on all these things, even if the onlookers are unable to understand. The voices raised in song draw more attention to the march, bystanders taking videos in addition to photographs, children whispering questions into the ears of parents who seem uncertain. Approaching the shadow of the Brandenburger Tor (Brandenburg Gate) (Figure 3), the march stops so the speakers can lead another round of chants, repeating again the key demands, listing one more time the grave injustices that they are rallying against. When the Hiriira begins to move forward again, the singing picks back up.

Bundeskanzleramt

The Hiriira ends in front of the German Bundeskanzleramt, or Chancellery building, the seat of then-Chancellor Angela Merkel. From the side where we gather, the full image of the building is hidden. We are greeted instead by a metal fence and row of flagpoles, with the rusted copper shape of an abstract statue visible in the near distance. While the building seems to be open and facing us, with long glass walls showing glimpses of government bureaucrats walking back and forth inside, the sharp metal fence and line of police officers make it clear that it is truly



Figure 3: Video still, the Hiriira moving towards the Brandenburg Gate (source: author)

closed. The Hiriira arriving at the Bundeskanzleramt is a significant political moment; presenting their grievances directly to the head of the German state is a primary intention of this march, and their presence at the foot of the great hall should not be taken lightly.

The Bundeskanzleramt is a site loaded with meaning and another indication of the challenges of German reunification. It stands directly across from the Reichstag, the home of the German parliament, a spatial relationship with symbolic weight. In preparing for its redesign, then Federal Minister of Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development called for a building that stood “in dialogue with the Reichstag building without calling into question” its dominance as the seat of parliament (Klaus Töpfer, quoted in Sonne 2004:301) (Figure 4). The geographic conversation built into these brick and glass formations is in the shadow of the empire, a sign of imperial space-making even as it sought to write a new force into power. In both iterations, Germany maintains its hegemonic whiteness and strengthens its “colonial amnesia” (El-Tayeb 2020). The dialogue taking place is reflexive of global conversations that began in the colonial era and remain unresolved, leaving a “residue of denied truths and unresolved conflicts” that continue to haunt dominant discourse (El-Tayeb 2020:74). In the temporality of the Hiriira, I am further struck by the role of representation, the intangible control over space and place that echoes around us.

The Oromo, like other colonised peoples, have too often been required to be satisfied with a smiling face or census demography that seems to align with their own, rendering any protests as hypercritical. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is the face and voice of much of the Ethiopian empire, and Sahle-Work Zewde, an ethnic Amhara, sits in the seat of the Presidency and has a high involvement in the day-to-day operations of the state. She is the first woman to hold the position,



Figure 4: Video still, the Hiriira approaching the Reichstag building (source: author)

and at the time of the Hiriira the only woman head of state in Africa. Ethiopia is thus on paper led by an Oromo and a woman. Western observers, the public, the Nobel Prize Committee, they all see this as progress, justice, and success. However, Abiy's Oromo identity is more notable for the way it facilitated his eventual betrayal of the Oromo youth whose protests brought him to power.

Abiy became prime minister in the aftermath of years of organised protests by Oromo youth called the Qaree/Qeerroo movement. This hope-filled transition was soon abandoned, and Abiy's government has since unleashed a violence against Oromos even worse than that of the former rulers (Burke and Zelalem 2020; Gemechu 2022; Jalata 2019). Although ethnically Oromo, Abiy's rule is premised on the desire for a system that keeps all ethnic peoples subjugated as a "nameless geography for state extraction" (Tibesio and Abdurahman 2021:45). A panel convened during the Oromo Studies Association Mid-Year Conference 2022 described Abiy's turn to violence as a "once-in-a-generation revolution highjacked [sic]"⁵. The Ethiopian nation-state is a demonstration of the fragility or perhaps impossibility of claiming kinship and citizenship to colonial formations. Kenyan scholar K'eguro Macharia (2012:214), writing about former President Barack Obama, identifies such experiences as "moments in which Obama is both 'brother' and 'stranger', the face of US imperialism and the smile of racial fraternity". The Oromo women in the Hiriira avoid the trap of representation politics that has enraptured so many American citizens through their disillusionment with the Ethiopian nation-state, which has revealed that shared identities are political fodder that lack real relationality. While these Oromo women have exchanged the settler colony for the post-empire, Germany's complicity in Ethiopian state violence troubles the possibility of embracing a nation outside of Oromia.

The nature of the Hiriira discourse demonstrates an intimate knowledge shared by Black women who have experience organising "against their own abandonment" (Gilmore 2017:47). The Oromo women leading the march are not impressed by Merkel's gender, and do not imagine any solidarity between this rich white imperialist and themselves. In this sense, the marchers in the Hiriira join a long tradition of Black and Afrodiasporic women organising in Berlin, movements born of the knowledge that the German state sought to render them out of place, and white German feminists' racism (Florvil 2020; Lennox 1995). Black German social movements, led by Black women, demonstrate the agency and power that comes from this distinct positionality, one in which they "claim their color and their voices" (Lorde 1991:xiv). There are no special protest chants designed for Merkel or addressing her womanhood. The Oromo women speak to her the same way they did the Bürgermeister, and the message is consistent: stop supporting the Ethiopian dictator; freedom for Oromia. This message and the women delivering it do not care for the identities of those it is directed at. They want freedom, unconditionally.

Race, Citizenship, and Gender on the Road

The implications of Oromo women's race, citizenship status, and gender as they function in relation to the onlookers and larger societal space shadow the Hiriira

route. These identities are both generated from the simultaneity of their Blackness and Oromo-ness and tempered by the larger context of Black Europe⁶ and its histories of Black feminism and struggles for intersectional justice. In the Hiriira, race, citizenship, and gender all come into play as distinct forces, indicative of the complexity of the spatiotemporality.

Along the Hiriira route, the race of the protest participants stands in opposition to those outside of it. The police force is majority white or white passing, as are the politicians at whom the chants are directed and the onlookers at each of the stopping points. In the context of the Hiriira, visibility is an expected or encouraged aspect. Taking a protest to the streets is a way of drawing attention from those who may be otherwise uninformed or uninterested. But, for Black women, visibility is a constant in any aspect of life, a reflection of the legacy of racialisation and race-making under slavery (Ayim 1991:141). Blackness lived and Blackness announced both encompass the expansive presence of Black life, rendered out of place in the Northern post-empire. Black people in Germany are seen as “always arriving, considered to be from somewhere else, nonexistent as Germans” (Florvil 2020:180) while Germanness is conflated with whiteness (El-Tayeb 1999; Lukate 2019). Black women in Germany and Black German women have worked tirelessly over the last half-century to make legible and express their struggles within the nation-state, turning this in/visibility into a liberatory Black space-making practice.

Class positionality in the Hiriira is clarified with attention to citizenship. This follows the German state’s notion of migration, and the economic facets embedded within it. Oromo women are forced to define their personhood in the terms of the Ethiopian state to make their claims legible in Germany. As citizenship is regulated with economic intentions, it is presumed that individuals who are German by birth have an inherently higher economic worth which they need not articulate. Migrant status is inferior to the local, creating a hierarchy with an economic tint that is further impacted by colonial legacies of racialisation (Monforte 2020; Piesche 2016). The role of race as a determinant in migration control has been well-documented (see also Black Mediterranean Collective 2021; Isakjee et al. 2020; Walia 2013). In Germany the potential economic power of the Oromo people is linked to the economics of the global South. They are thus simultaneously restricted from fully participating in the German state while Ethiopian state relations are a stigmatising former citizenship that institutionalises further oppression.

Gender is an influential factor in the Hiriira from the start: this is a women’s march, a separate occurrence from the community march that occurred the day after. In the decision to host the march on these terms, some characteristics of womanhood and women’s experiences are made visible. Oromo women are leaders in their religious communities (seen by their prayers), vocal in their political demands, and they move with a deep connection to Oromo culture. Viewing the Hiriira’s songs as a conversation amongst sisters is an affirmation of women’s distinct political power, and sisterhood as its own institution. Resonating with local histories of Black German activism, while the Oromo women demonstrate solidarity within their own community, they do not extend this relationality to Merkel

(Lennox 1995). Some combination of her race and class differences, both of which enhance her hierarchal positionality, separate her from this community.

Conclusion

While the Hiriira ends at Merkel's front door, the political struggle is far from over. Many of the participants headed directly from the Chancellery to the Ethiopian embassy across town, joining their comrades with more songs, shared meals, community care, and resistance. By reading and rewriting Berlin through a Black and guraacha geographic lens, I have sought to add to theorising which challenges the spatialising that has written the city in imperial terms. Building a concept of space and space-making that prioritises Black resistance and liberation reveals a layer of significance that is otherwise in danger of being erased.

Despite Germany's humanitarian obligations, role as a "migrant magnet" (Riebig and Müller 2016), and self-proclaimed culture of welcome or *Willkommenskultur* (El-Tayeb 2020:74), it fails to leave real discursive space for inclusion of individuals beyond their nation-state positionality. Peggy Piesche (2016) describes challenges for recognition within and beyond the role of citizenship in the GDR, for example, as generating "Black (step)children". El-Tayeb (1999) offers more comprehensive examples, connecting German colonial activities to racialisation and citizenship over time. In this sense, the German migrant is "left nowhere and everywhere", even as the empire "orients, imagines, and critiques itself" through this ghostly body (Byrd 2011:xix). Shifts in Germany's governance, alongside changing geopolitical relationships, have allowed German narratives to differentially place the im/migrant into the discourse in ways that diminish individual agency and the overwhelming (necro)power of the nation-state. Necropower, as a means of understanding structural violence and North-South relations, has been discussed in work such as Davies et al.'s (2017) piece on refugee experiences in Europe. Not unique to Germany, necropolitics allows for political abandonment of refugees through the bind of in/action; in both Ethiopian and diaspora state politics, the Oromo people are excluded from access to rights and included when their death can be actualised. Imperial spaces render Indigenous peoples "nowhere and everywhere" (Byrd 2011:xix), colonial subjects "born anywhere, anyhow", in a "world with no space" (Fanon 1963:63), and these forces build an entire "nation on no map" (Brooks 1987, cited in Anderson 2021). Imperial space-making seeks to strip away relationality, making a diaspora of anywhere, everywhere, and elsewhere.

Colonisation and the lingering governance of the empire push the Oromo as a diasporic migrant outside of nation-state discourse, rendering the Oromo people ungeographic, despite their decades of (documented) relationality and space-making practices in the German state. Through a geography guraacha, and the mapping practice attempted here, I reiterate and reinforce the stability of Oromo transnational presence, the refusal of Oromo people to be displaced without building back a *place/meant* (following Fred Moten's [2017] riff on Amiri Baraka); even in a diasporic space the Oromo are creating new meanings, imbuing the diaspora with their presence. While the failures of the nation-state to leave

political or discursive space for Oromo communities are reflected in practices of othering, citizenship forms that are outside of imperial temporalities are more inclusive of the full Oromo experience. Neither a faded Ethiopian state residence card nor a German passport is sufficiently able to grasp or contain Oromo transnational movements. Through a geography *guraacha*, Oromo experiences are intimately connected with the German nation-state, and this diasporic sensibility is part of the global project for Oromo liberation.

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Endnotes

¹ Oromo Horn von Afrika Zentrum archive, Berlin, accessed March 2020.

² I name the event a Hiriira Dhubartoota following its in-person description and advertising materials. Oromo women's assemblages in response to societal violations are also called "Goodansa Siiqqee" or "Siiqqee trek" (Kumsa 1997:129).

³ <https://www.dekoloniale.de/en/about> (last accessed 26 September 2022).

⁴ This same form of song is described by Kuwee Kumsa (2015) as an "Iyyaa Siiqqee" or "Siiqqee scream". I reach for *wallisa* as this was how the songs were named by members of the community. This differentiation in label may reflect the formality of the Siiqqee institution in contrast to Oromo women's organisation of other forms; the latter groups are guided by their Oromumma or Oromo-ness, but operate with their own adaptations. It may also be that other members of the Hiriira would call the music an Iyyaa Siiqqee, or simply a *sirbaa* or song. My attempts at labelling or defining are limited by my own positionality and way of coming to knowledge.

⁵ The full title read "Anatomy of the Nonviolent Pro-Democracy Oromo Youth Movement" and was moderated by Asebe Regassa, featuring input from Bonnie Holcomb, Ezekiel Gebissa, and Milkessa Midega Gemechu (27 March 2022).

⁶ Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande's (2019) collection *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* is a rich accounting of these experiences.

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