

## **BLACK GEOGRAPHY IN POST-IMPERIAL GERMANY: OROMO WOMEN IN BERLIN**

### INTRODUCTION

Using an Oromo women's protest as a case study, this paper is an attempt to map Berlin with a black geographic lens (after Katherine McKittrick 2006), and read for a Black presence that is above and beyond state visibility. In this sense I intend to both explicate the superficial spatial relationships in Berlin as a post-imperial city and identify the ways in which an active Oromo women's presence has influenced these ways of knowing space and place. The Afan Oromo word for a protest march is *hiriira*, also translated as a parade, demonstration, or queue. For the purpose of identifying the Oromo women's protest that is analyzed here, I will refer to it simply as the Hiriira. The Hiriira took place on 3 September 2020 and was organized by various Oromo leaders across Germany, with specific strategic support by the *Hawaasa Oromo Jarmani*, the Oromo Community of Germany.

The Oromo diaspora in Germany is an active contributor towards the struggle for Oromo liberation in Ethiopia, a struggle which began after their colonization by the Abyssinian Empire in the late 1800s. Across nation-state borders, there is a need to rethink the way Oromo women participate in this struggle, and the larger context of their involvement. As the Ethiopian state's necropowerful control over life and death continues to grow, so do threats against Oromo lifeways. Working against this violence, and embedded in an international network of Oromo movements, cities across Germany have long been sites for organizing and resisting the Ethiopian state, and many activists from the early era of the struggle in the 1970s are now elders in the Oromo community. Learning from this tradition, this paper uses an Oromo women's protest in Berlin, Germany as a case study through which to identify forms of resistance within, despite, and against empire.

### OVERVIEW OF THE OROMO STRUGGLE

The Oromo people have a strong tradition, especially visible in the past decade, of well-organized public demonstrations. Oromo people in Oromia conducted nationwide stay-at-home strikes even during Ethiopia's harshest lockdowns and states of emergency, and diaspora communities across the world have shut down public freeways, hoisted Oromo flags at foreign embassies, and engaged in other bold, strategic acts of resistance against Ethiopian state

transnational necropower. The Oromo community of Germany, both in terms of the formal group and referring generally to Oromos around the country, is comparably active with its counterparts in Oromia. Even though this particular Hiriira was in response to events that unfolded throughout 2020, it is indebted to a decades-long tradition. Understanding black geography as a practice that refuses historic erasure, no discussion of this recent event would be complete without at least an acknowledgement of this inheritance. While an extensive analysis of Berlin's Oromo organizing is outside of the scope of this paper, references and discussions to can be found in journals such as *Sagalee Oromo* and *Oromtitti*.

It is somewhat challenging to create an exact timeline of the events leading up to the 3 September Hiriira. The struggle is rooted, as with most of the Oromo struggle, in the settler colonialism and conquest of the Abyssinian Empire, a history largely suppressed by the post-imperial Ethiopian nation-state. The Oromo homeland stretches across the Horn of Africa into Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya. Prior to colonization, the Oromo were governed by the Gadaa institution (Jalata 2001) and Siinqee system (Kumsa 1997), which emphasized community relations, gender equality, and reciprocal relationships with nature and systems of mutual respect (Ruda 1993) that came from the Waqqeeffanna 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). The Emperor was overthrown in 1974, leading to the rise of the fascist Dergue regime, who ruled throughout the 1980s. In 1991, a successful collaboration between Oromo and other ethnic liberation fronts led to the end of the Dergue regime, and the rise of the modern Ethiopian nation-state. Currently, Ethiopia is organized in an ethnic federal system, with semi-autonomous power. However, in practice the last 30 years of Ethiopian rule has been dominated by a form of suppression mirroring the former violence. The bubbling resistance movement came to a point in 2018, after four years of continued protests, when the Prime Minister resigned and was replaced by former head of the Ethiopian intelligence agency and ethnic Oromo, Abiy Ahmed.

The sense of hope brought by Abiy's rule included the reinstalment of major opposition parties, who had been exiled by the previous regime. The shift in perception of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from Oromo liberator to genocidaire thus happened in small, subtle ways, starting

with shadowy reports of killings in the border regions, internet shutdowns in tumultuous areas like Wollega, and public disagreements by opposition political leaders. In early 2020, this increasingly troubling series of events reached a turning point. Several prominent Oromo Liberation Front leaders were arrested in March of that year. Continuing this dangerous trend, the pandemic was used as justification to postpone the national elections, elections which were expected to show significant gains by the recently reinstated Oromo Liberation Front and more recently founded Oromo Federalist Congress. The conflicts between those opposition politicians who had not yet been imprisoned and the government grew more public, and increasingly aggressive.

This building tension came to head at the end of June 2020 when popular Oromo musician Haacaaluu Hundessaa was assassinated in the streets of Addis Ababa. Haacaaluu was a former political prisoner whose music was a soundtrack to the Qeerro and Qaree Oromo youth movements. During the four-week period after Haacaaluu's death the Armed Conflict Location Event Data project reported 39 political events including riots and battles, extensive violence against civilian protestors, and 169 reported facilities (ACLED 2020). Shortly after Haacaaluu's memorial service, Jawar Mohammed, perhaps the most well-known Oromo opposition politician, as well as several other key figures like Bekele Gerba, and even the children of Oromo leaders, or innocent civilians who came to visit their cells, were arrested.

What would follow, and what continues to unfold in Ethiopia has been described by human rights activist Dr. Trevor Trueman as "more crude and vicious" than that of previous rulers, comparable only to the former fascist regime's period of "Red Terror" (Oromo Human Rights Group conference, 24 October 2020). Reports come in of judges kidnapped, college professors abducted, bodies found abandoned under bridges, and state violence repeatedly pinned on mysterious "rebel" groups like the non-existent OLF-Shanee unit. With this extraordinary violence unfolding in Oromia, Oromo people around the world took action. Over the course of Summer 2020, the Oromo diaspora community organized numerous marches and protests, seeking some semblance of justice. The horrific actions of the Ethiopian state, each of which could have been cause for protest, intersected, overlapped, and engaged each other to create a larger, more horrible force. In each of the demonstrations I attended during the year, and in the images of protests and demonstrations around the world, the Oromo people made clear their demands (free political prisoners, fair and open elections, justice for Haacaaluu), and

worked to bring them to fruition. This ongoing struggle at home, and the impact felt in the diaspora shows the extent to which the Ethiopian settler colonial conquest is still not settled, requiring ongoing justification by state forces, who insist upon their legitimacy.

## KEY CONCEPTS

In this paper I utilize space-making process to frame the Hiriira as a moment inside this larger movement. I draw specifically on the notion of *imperial spatializing* as it works in dialect with and diminishes *black geography*. Black geography understands Black women's spatializing as "critical sites of nation" amidst the "absence and elsewhere" of the imperially produced space (McKittrick 2006:103). Black geography as a practice goes beyond institutional mapping and ways of knowing in order to draw a narrative that is more inclusive of the lived experiences of African diasporic women.

*Imperial spatializing* draws on the work of Mishuana Goeman and describes governmental tendencies to define space and ethnicity through colonial ideologies, and the use of this knowledge to make truth claims about a population (2009:184). McKittrick calls this space-making the formation of "transparent space," a vision of place that is intelligible through and evidence of this imperial vision, presuming "that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true" (2006:x). Through a transparent lens, the hegemonic power maintains hierarchies between the (national, white) self and the (im/migrant, Black) other.

Transparency is made complex by the sociopolitical culture of Berlin itself, where controversies, conversations, and tensions between acknowledgement and erasure of Germany's history are ongoing. In each contemporary era, from Prussian rule, 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 not simply what can be seen with open eyes. Rather it is what is prioritized and seen as legitimate through the imperialized perspective. Through a Black geographic analysis of Berlin beginning within the Hiriira, we are able to unpeel the initial layers of the empire, revealing an alternate existence. By positioning the analysis alongside the perspective of Oromo women, the guraacha geographic map is made visible. 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 perpetuate and reveal the relationship between cultural, institutional, and economic structures. In the subsequent analysis, drawing on multisite visual ethnographic data collection, including photo and video recordings, I will highlight a few key locations on the Hiriira route, and unpack these relationships. The analysis begins, with the Oromo women, at Alexanderplatz.

## FINDINGS

### *Alexanderplatz*

Alexanderplatz is located on the West side of East Berlin, a short distance from the city's former border, and famous "Checkpoint Charlie." Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Alexanderplatz has undergone several discursive transformations. Gisa Weszkalnys describes the controversies over Alexanderplatz that emerged in the 1990s as framing the area as a "problem of urban planning," with its design failing to match "planners' visions for a central square in the heart of the unified capital" (2007:208). In a post-GDR world, Alexanderplatz became known as an "unruly open-air market, dominated by unauthorized vendors," and shady foreign figures, losing all of its shiny socialist luster as the nation struggled to reconcile itself with the past and reintegrate the infrastructure into a new state vision (Weszkalnys 2007:211). During this transition, Alexanderplatz had a reputation as the "dirtiest place in the whole of Berlin," overrun with rats at night, and filled with rubbish during the day (Weszkalnys 2007:216). 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 the violent past and pave the way for a brighter future. German imperialism had shown its ugly face to the world, and its current imperial occupants sought to put their own stamp on the city.

The Oromo women protesting on this September morning chose the ADJ sculptural clock as their meeting point. Known as the *Weltzeituhr* in German, or "World Time Clock," the structure was built in 1969 alongside other major public buildings, its futuristic appeal has made it an important locale for demonstrations throughout the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Arandelovic 2014; Standley 2013). The clock 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, the geographies are represented by renowned cities and capitals from around the world. Though Oromo people have gathered to fight for freedom in Northern Germany, the Ethiopian post-empire has followed, as Addis Ababa (known to the Oromo as Finfinnee) hangs haughtily overhead.

When the Hiriira begins we are facing and faced by the side of the clock with cities like New Delhi and Karachi in the West to Melbourne and Magadan in the East. The cities that line the top row of the clock from our perspective, are almost all Russian, linking back to their Soviet spatiotemporal sculpting. Settler colonial spaces on display (Melbourne) and a careful attention the former empire (the former Soviets in this context); the time kept by this clock is one still steeped in the imperial. Though some of the city names were changed after its creation and changes were made to time measurements, Addis Ababa stands stubbornly over our heads. Mark Rifkin's concept of "settler time" comes to mind in this particular moment, as we see the ways in which even the passing of the days and counting of the clock may be imperial in nature (2017).

### *Rotes Rathaus*

As the first stop on the protest route, after exiting Alexanderplatz, the Hiriira moves in front of Berlin's City Hall, known as the Rotes Rathaus, or Red Townhall for its brick façade. Although the building is open for visitors, the city tourism office warns that due to "political events and safety reasons temporary closures of the town hall may occur" (Berlin Tourism Bureau). No one is seen entering or exiting from the building during the Hiriira's passage. In a mapping of this intersection's "transparent space," witnesses can view the Rotes Rathaus only through its formal description, see it on a digital map with a copyrighted image of these orderly flags. Google Maps reviews of the building paint a picture of the Rotes Rathaus as a "beautiful building that surprisingly survived a very hard history," with its "square red shape give [sic] an imposing, yet agile impression." The tags used to describe the building on the website include brick, beautiful, façade, color, U-Bahn (the German underground train, whose route closely follow the Hiriira), and WWII. In transparent spatialization and usage the Rotes Rathaus is a sturdy German landmark and symbol of state order. Other than a mention of the "hard history," there is no link between the Rotes Rathaus and the struggle that surrounds it, nor to the struggles that take place on the streets below it. In a context of imperial space-making the Rathaus can be only red, strong, solid.

Despite this framing, a black geographic reading that emerges from the spatiotemporality

of the Hiriira, helps the Oromo diaspora to assert their claim. In the videos I record, the flags of the Oromo Liberation Front come to the forefront, and the distortion caused by the type of lens warps the view such that the OLF flag is nearly doubled in size compared to its European partners. Stepping back across the street, the vision is even more visibly Oromo, as the flag of liberation is carried, displayed, and pasted on the side of the lead car.

As the Hiriira passes the Rotes Rathaus, the women ask the Bürgermeister to answer for Germany's support of Ethiopian state-sponsored violence which is affecting its local residents. The Hiriira targets the Bürgermeister Herr Michael Müller for his role, demanding that the government stop their financial and political support of Abiy Ahmed, and do something to address the violence against Oromo people that is taking place in Ethiopia. In the space of the Hiriira, this red house and the power it presents are in sync with the global Oromo struggle.

### *Brandenburger Tor*

Throughout the protest, the women perform a type of Oromo song called a *geerarsa*. Geerarsas are an important aspect of Oromo cultural practices, in governing traditions and as a form of anti-colonial expression (Tolesa 1990). The geerarsa has a few corresponding parts, beginning with a call and response, lyrics tailored to specific events, and an upbeat, soulful rhythm. One could see these pieces as the individual (the song leader), the community (responding), and the world around (the contexts of the lyrics and the substance of the soul). The leader of the geerarsa sets the tone and constructs the lyrical content. The rest of the trusts that their message is worth repeating and giving their oral support to.

The Brandenburger Tor looms over us all, growing as we approach it until it is all that can be seen. When the group crosses underneath the gate their voices echo on the hard stone, amplified. For these moments, for the approximately 30 seconds it takes the group to cross, to keep pace with the strollers and the elders, the leader of the call is a giant, the news is everywhere, you both hear it in the ground and above you, bouncing around. When the response comes, the confirmation of the arrival (*sii geesse*, it comes to you), the sound is multiplied. *Intalaa ayyaa dhageesse*; sisters have you heard? With the voices filling in from all sides, the sisterhood is strong, and the message is clear. The gate is from this view stripped of its previous meaning, in some ways, even as the meanings physically overpower us.

From the view of transparent space and a more traditional geographic reckoning, the

Brandenburg Gate has significance for the surrounding nation and former empire both before and after the second World War. First built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Brandenburg Gate was constructed using the Greek Revival style of architecture, encouraged by the King Frederick William II of Prussia, the elector of Brandenburg at the time, and designed by architect Carl Gotthard Langhans (Åman 2006:381). Its construction was meant to celebrate a time of recent peace wrought from war. The iconography on the Tor, the statues mounted across its roof, gave reference to a number of figures from Greek mythology and the portico was meant to model those found in Athens (Åman 2006:381; Stangl 2018:125).

Sculptor Gottfried Schadow created the figure at the top, known as the Quadriga, which originally depicted Eirene, the goddess of peace, driving a chariot led by four horses (Martin 2002:41). Eirene's tenure on top of the gate was short-lived, however. The Quadriga was stolen by Napoleon in 1806, and upon her return to the Prussians, Eirene was converted into Victoria, the goddess of victory (Stangl 2018:125). Victoria's chariot was embellished with the Iron Cross and Prussian Eagle, which at the time were meant to symbolize post-imperial liberation and rehabilitation of the Gate. As Stangl describes, "the triumph of peace symbolized by the Brandenburg Gate was a peace restored by a Prussian military action, crushing an antimonarchical uprising on foreign soil," the imperial entanglements emerging as a major influence (Stangl 2018:128). The original Quadriga was damaged during WWII and broken during the process of restoration, but a replacement was raised in 1958 (Stangl 2018:127). In addition to the alterations made to the physical form of the Brandenburg Gate, it has had varying sociocultural and political significance since its original construction: as a starting point and iconography for Nazi architecture (Åman 2006:383), the only structure left on the boulevard after WWII and symbol of the division of Germany (Arandelovic 2014; Åman 2006), and viewed as emblematic of the "double history" of liberation and subsequent suppression that the Nazi rulers and Soviet stewards brought (Stegers 1997:253). Paul Stangl points out that it is due to the "iconic status as a symbol of Berlin" held by the Brandenburger Tor that it maintained its shape and existence, unthreatened by the effacement that shifted surrounding stone structures in Soviet attempts to deny any "association with the Prussian monarchy and military" (Stangl 2018:124).

While these shifts unveil the dramatic differences in governance and global rule that have surrounded it, the Gate has consistently been evoked as a symbol of strength and power, in

service of the empire and its subsequent iterations. Allan Cochrane and Andrew Jonas, writing of “reimagining Berlin” in 1999, describe it having the “chance to develop as a ‘normal’ or ordinary city, with suburbs, without a strong military presence, and without the need to make or renew claims to greatness” (1999:147). This opportunity seems to have been neglected in Berlin’s post-occupation transformation, or perhaps the case is that the claims to greatness are so visible they need not be made or remade. A transparent reading and observation of interactions with the space conveys the Tor’s significance for the surrounding city. From within the time-space of the Hiriira, with a prioritization and focus on the Oromo women leading the way, this emblem of German historical power is merely an aesthetic counterpoint to the Odaa tree. The white stone contrasts with the blue sky and complements the colors of the Hiriira, a visual harmony between the imperial and the anti-colonial.

When the Hiriira approaches and penetrates the gate, I am not thinking of Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, or any other fallen ruler, or the consequences of their troubled relationships with liberation. I do not make that connection until much later. In an imperialized space-making, the Tor is a significant site on the Hiriira route because of what surrounds it, rather than what lies in its past. This relic of former empires, this monument to an era that should have paved the way for equality and a brighter tomorrow, remains embedded in forms of ongoing imperialism and post-colonial harm. Just next to the gate the embassy of the settler colonial United States of America stands, its glass walls winking across at France, Russia, the United Kingdom. A group of new-old friends gathered together again while Oromo women sing for their freedom, voices echoing across the symbols of empire, falling on deaf post-colonial ears. Returning to the Hiriira perspective, I ignore these imperial shapes and concentrate on the soundspace being created. The Oromo geerarsas come to me (*geesse*, entrance or arrival; *dhageesse*, heard) and I feel each word of the songs. We cross under and through the gate and turn towards the final destination: the Bundeskanzleramt.

### *Bundeskanzleramt*

The march ends in front of the German Chancellery building, called the Bundeskanzleramt, the seat of Angela Merkel at this time. From the side the Hiriira arrives from, our full view of the Bundeskanzleramt is obscured. We are faced by a tall metal fence and row of flagpoles, with a rusted abstract statue in the near distance. While the building seems to be open and facing us, with long glass windows offering glimpses of bureaucrats walking back and forth

inside, the metal fence and line of armed police officers make it clear that it is closed.

The Chancellery building has a historical importance, a visual representation of the challenges of German unity. It is directly across from the Reichstag, the house of German parliament, an intentional architectural decision. While preparing for the building's redesign, the former Minister of Regional Planning, Building, and Urban Development asked for a building which was "an urban hallmark of German federalism" that was "in dialogue with the Reichstag building without calling into question" its dominance (Töpfer, quoted in Sonne 2007:301). The geographic relationship built into these structures is in the shadow of empires past and present. The dialogue that takes place in the temporality of the Hiriira is not one embedded in internal German government discussions, though, rather it is a part of a global conversation that began in the colonial era and remains unresolved. In the temporality of the Hiriira with the protest chants of Oromo women echoing around, I struggle to make sense of state logics of control over space and place, and the necropowerful tendencies they endorse.

Germany has demonstrated its support of the new Ethiopian state rule with its immigration practices, deportations continuing despite the recent rise in conflicts (Deutsche Welle: [web](#)). Anecdotal evidence from my work in the Oromo community tells the stories of those who have been told that Abiy's Oromo ethnicity is sufficient to spread national peace. The legitimacy of the refugee status of individuals who left their lives behind and crossed the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean is called into question, their suffering is somehow framed as an elaborate lie. Abiy's position in office implies a peace in Oromia that does not actually exist. In these lives, not only will representation fail to save you, but it may well in fact lead to your death as it serves to obfuscate or minimize real harm under the guise of interpersonal or intercommunal disputes. Wendy Trevino, writing on Twitter, describes this inadequacy as such: "representational politics is literally centered on integration into capitalism. it does zero to address overall inequality while celebrating individual entry into wealth and elite institutions as collective progress" (@prolpo/ via Twitter 2021).

The nature of the Hiriira discourse shows the global connections across empires, a knowledge felt by Black women who have experience organizing "against their own abandonment" (Gilmore 2017:47). There are no special protest slogans that target Merkel or somehow construct her as kin or feminist sister. The Oromo women chant to her in the same way they addressed the Bürgermeister, and the message is consistent: stop supporting the Ethiopian

dictatorship. Oromo women protesting on this September morning want freedom, unconditionally.

## CONCLUSION

While the Hiriira ends at Angela Merkel's front door, the political struggle of Oromo women in Germany marches onward. Despite Germany's humanitarian obligations it still fails to leave space for the inclusion of individuals beyond their nation-state positionality (Rietig and Müller: web). Migration to and from Germany reflects the complex violence of the post-empire, relationships that force people to leave their homes behind. The changes in German governance in the post-colonial era, and larger global geopolitical changes, have allowed German narratives to differentially place the im/migrant into the discourse in ways that reduce or erase the individual agency, or the overwhelming (necro)power of the nation-state. By reading for these "traces" of the migrant, we can see more clearly "how power and domination have been articulated and practiced by empire" over time (Byrd 2011:xvii).

Colonization and post-imperial governance push the Oromo outside of nation-state discourse, despite their decades of (documented) organization and space-making practices in the German state; they have to evoke their Ethiopianity to make their claims legible to the state. Through the black geographic map attempted here, I seek to recognize the stability of Oromo transnational presence, the refusal of Oromo people to be displaced from their own lives; 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 room for Oromo communities are reflected in migration discourses and practices of othering, citizenship forms outside of imperial temporalities offer a more inclusive Oromo experience. Neither a disavowed Ethiopian state citizenship nor a shiny new European passport are able to deny these Oromo transnational movements.

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