

RACHEL MARIE NIEHUUS. *AN ARCHIVE OF POSSIBILITIES: HEALING AND REPAIR IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2024. 216 P. ISBN: 9781478025757

MERCEDES BAPTISTE HALLIDAY ¹

Audience Member: Who were you talking about when you wrote “we were never meant to survive?”

Audre Lord: I was talking about you.

- Audre Lord (2020: 233)

An archive of possibilities: healing and repair in the Democratic Republic of Congo by Rachel Marie Niehuus is a formula for a salve, to anoint the festering wounds of colonialism, racial capitalism, mineral extraction, and the exploitation of labour in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

With Niehuus drawing on her expertise as a trauma surgeon, eloquent parallels are illustrated between physical injury and social injury. There is a seamless transition between discussing the repair of the physical body, and of the social body of the nation; ‘in all my years studying the human body, I have never seen a wound heal without a trace’ (12). This statement additionally speaks to the constant threat of war and civil unrest, that creates a hostile, but not sterile environment for healing and repair. The fieldwork for this experimental ethnography began in 2010, and took place in and around Goma, a city in Eastern Congo, bordering Rwanda. Niehuus centres the experience of her Congolese interlocutors in the research, critically assessing the complexities of her positionality as a white American woman. The book heavily relies on the Black radical tradition, such as works by Achille Mbembe, Christina Sharpe and Sylvia Wynter, to name a few, which enables the research to be critically positioned in a broader context of the ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1993).

From the outset, Niehuus states her intention to find universal utility from Congolese people’s ongoing suffering. She writes ‘I believe that Congo has much to teach us all about the possibilities of healing amid political and economic collapse’ (13). This sentiment evokes black speculative and Afro-surrealist thinkers, such as Octavia Butler and D. Scott Miller, who determine that Black and colonised people have already experienced a world-changing apocalypse, in the form of colonialism. The prospect of climate collapse threatens the broader world with a similarly catastrophic fate. As one interlocutor remarks in relation to the Ebola disease in the conclusion of the book, ‘you’re scared of it coming to you, of dying like we are dying’ (150). Black people have historically and continue to be excluded from the category of ‘the human’; denied individual plasticity, and seen as fungible, collectively malleable (Schuller and Gill-Peterson 2020: 3), and subject to necropolitics (Mbembe 2019). As another interlocutor puts it ‘these days, I am so poor. Some days, I ask myself whether I am even

¹ DPhil candidate in Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford.
Email: mercedes.baptistehalliday@anthro.ox.ac.uk

human' (32). Under racial capital, Black people's lives and bodies are valued as sites of extraction, for their realised and potential productivity. As such, from a Black feminist, posthumanist perspective, I think it is problematic for utility to be so explicitly sought in the pain, suffering and death of Congolese people (13). Rather, I see this research as offering further opportunities for gestures of care and solidarity towards Congolese people, through the act of recognising and listening to 'that brokenness – speech of suffering' (hooks 2015: 16). Giving space to those voices to exist in their fullness in *the archive of possibilities*, in 'disruptive' resistance against anti-Black hegemony (hooks 2015: 17).

Following this, Chapter 1 examines Congolese people's entanglements with the land. The writer recalls the maxim 'to be Congolese is to have soil in your hands' (36), which speaks to the land as 'both the site of the original wound in Congo and the possibility for a different future' (39).

Chapter 2 presents the mutability of dynamics between soldiers and civilians, interrogates binary notions of what it means to be a victim and perpetrator in war, and the complex obligations of care 'amid the fear' (58).

Similarly, Chapter 3 challenges assumptions of care, positing the hospital as a site for both healing and harm. Citing the increased risk Congolese women face of dying in childbirth, the uncounted rates of still births, and the often heavy-handed treatment expecting mothers receive from hospital staff (81).

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with the future. Niehuus illustrates how embracing death and violence can be understood as practices of resistance and healing in the DRC (101). So too can dreaming, imagining, and mobilising to create a better world that does not exist in the present (127).

Throughout the text, the reader is given the gift of rest. Each chapter is bookended with interludes, and begins with art, photography, poetry and vignettes. This offers the reader the chance to rest and reflect in the pages between the sometimes graphic and harrowing scenes. For those with lived experience of anti-Blackness, such as myself, these interludes are particularly welcomed.

Overall, *An archive of possibilities: healing and repair in the Democratic Republic of Congo* is a timely ethnography that unbandages the wounds of the DRC, giving readers an understanding of the country's historical and present-day strengths and vulnerabilities. In the spirit of the Black radical tradition, the book holds space for hope and possibility. A materialised testament of Black aliveness, and colonised people's ability not only to survive, but to resist, heal and repair on the path to liberation and freedom.

Bibliography

Gilroy, Paul 1993. *The Black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*, London: Verso.

hooks, bell 1989. Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36, 16-17. doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4411660>

Lorde, Audre 2020. Büchergarten, Berlin, Germany, in *Audre Lorde: dream of Europe; selected seminars and interviews 1984-1992*, edited by Mayra A. Rodríguez Castro, Chicago, IL: Kenning Editions.

Mbembe, Achille 2019. *Necropolitics*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Schuller, Kyla and Jules Gill-Peterson 2020. Introduction: race, the state, and the malleable body, *Social text* 38/2, 1-17.

This work is copyright of the author.

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

