CHAPTER
9

The Political Ecology of Displaced Place-Making

Georgina Ramsay

The first time I met Nyomanda,[1] a Congolese woman who had migrated to Australia through the UNHCR's refugee resettlement program, we were sitting across from each other in her living room talking about how she was experiencing life in Australia.[2] I asked if I could take notes on our conversation, and she nodded in agreement. I only had my smartphone with me, and when I pulled it out to get to a digital note-taking application Nyomanda's expression hardened. As I set the phone down on the coffee table between us, she looked at it pointedly and said, "That . . . you know, that comes from my country. Did you know?"

"Yes," I responded, carefully. "I did know that."

"That is why my country is at war," Nyomanda added. Although Nyomanda had fled the eastern DRC some years previously to seek refugee status in Uganda, she still had many relatives living in her former country and was highly attuned to ongoing conflicts there. It was no surprise, then, that she talked about war in the DRC in the present tense.

"The minerals inside?" Nyomanda added, confirming that I understood the link between the extractive rare earth mining industries that proliferate in the eastern states of the DRC and the displacement of Congolese people, broadly—not just her own. I nodded, unsure of how to verbally respond to being confronted with the fact of global inequality vis-à-vis the small machine that was sitting between us.

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Nyomanda would become one of my closest research interlocutors over the years, but it was this very first conversation with her that prompted a reframe of my research interests. Like many scholars of forced migration, my initial entry point to studying the displacement of refugees was through a lens focusing on narratives of dislocation, as if refugee experiences are defined by detachment from place and that refugees exist in a state of perpetual exile. I had been unintentionally reproducing what Liisa Malkki (1995a) critiques as the sedentarist bias of migration scholarship, which too often sees physical dislocation from place as a fundamental and seemingly automatic rupturing of personal and collective identity. What Nyomanda was demanding I take account of, however, was the historicity of her migration, and the tangible elements that shape not only her flight from the DRC but also her experiences and sense of place within the various sites through which she has transited (see Lems in this volume) and, eventually, in which she has come to settle. Essentially, Nyomanda was reorienting me toward the materiality of the "place" in her experiences of displacement: a link that may sound obvious but is curiously absent in so much research on displacement and migration (Hinkson 2019; Lems 2016, 2018). Too often, research on displacement begins with the migrant figure as if they come into existence at the threshold of a national border, dehistoricizing them from the broader social, political, and material contexts of their lives (Malkki 1996).

The effect is more than just dehistoricization, however. Readings of displacement as reducible to forced migration also underplay the historicity and materiality of the places refugees flee, which often—and especially in the case of the DRC—reflect longer patterns of colonial dispossession and dislocation. Through a conceptual lens of political ecology, I describe in this chapter how contemporary Congolese displacements are structured by and reflective of these patterns of (neo)colonial dispossession, since it is ultimately attachments to land that are at stake. But these displacements are not wholly defining of their experiences of transit, migration, and eventual settlement. Contrary to the sedentarist fix critiqued by Malkki (1995a), which would see displacements resolved by reinserting people arbitrarily into a "national order of things," Congolese people mediate displacements through what I term ecological "fixes," in which they attempt to reconnect themselves materially and existentially to place. Theorizing displacement and emplacement through this ecological lens recognizes both the violent historicity that so often underpins territorial dispossession as well as the possibility of reestablishing a sense of place in new environments. That is, the figure of the displaced migrant or refugee does not have their displacement resolved through politico-legal recognition (which is increasingly contentious). Rather, they create emplacement themselves through cre-

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ative reworkings of the sensorial and corporeal environments around them, within places of transit (see also Vogt in this volume) or the unfamiliar (and often unexpected) places in which they end up settling.

Following that first conversation with Nyomanda, I realized that migration cannot be singularly understood as a struggle toward a specific destination or a stagnant and dislocating stage of liminality—although it can comprise these elements. Rather, as elaborated in the introduction (Drotbohm and Winters, this volume), migration can more fruitfully be understood as a trajectory in which experiences accumulate over time and in conjunction with the materiality of places, including the places that migrants leave behind, the places migrants encounter in transit, and the often-unexpected places within which migrants end up staying for long periods of time—perhaps even "settling" (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2011; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Drotbohm and Winters 2021). This expansive perspective on migration consequently shifted my approach to fieldwork, which I had originally only planned to conduct with resettled Congolese refugees in Australia. Instead, I saw that the ongoing displacements of resettled refugees cannot be dislocated from the formative places that they have experienced elsewhere. Hence, I decided to conduct subsequent fieldwork with Congolese refugees living in Uganda (2013), resettled Congolese refugees in the United States (2018), internally displaced people within the DRC (2019), alongside my initial focus on resettled refugees from the DRC in Australia (2012–14). My aim was to understand how Congolese people make sense of displacement from the vantage of various sites and material situations.

By geographic area, the DRC is the second-largest country in continental Africa and the eleventh largest country in the world. Spread over so much territory, "Congolese people" is a category that comprises hundreds of different ethnic groups and societal contexts, from those living in the busy urban center of the country's capital, Kinshasa, in the west, to those living in isolated villages in the hillsides of the country's eastern provinces. In my research, I have predominantly worked with people who had been displaced from these eastern provinces, particularly South Kivu, North Kivu, Ituri, and Haut-Katanga, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the majority of civil unrest in the DRC that has occurred over the past twenty years has been concentrated in these regions and the majority of Congolese refugees have fled those states (UNHCR 2022: 6), although the majority of displaced Congolese people never actually cross an international border. While the First and Second Congo Wars were officially declared over in 2003, an estimated 120 militia groups are active throughout the South Kivu, North Kivu, and Ituri Provinces alone (Kivu Security Tracker 2021), and incidents of conflict and violence were relatively frequent throughout the years 2012–14 when I conducted a majority of my fieldwork with Congolese refugees.

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Aside from the persistent threat of armed violence and conflict, these eastern states are also where a significant amount of the country's various mining operations—namely extracting gold, copper, tin, cobalt, tantalum, and diamonds—are concentrated, prompting some scholars to draw a link between these forces—extraction and civil unrest—as co-constitutive (Jacquemot 2010; Reyntjens 2005).[3] As my conversation with Nyomanda recounted above suggests, many of the people I worked with also drew links between their dislocation and extractivism in the DRC, even if they were fleeing an immediate threat of armed conflict.[4] They saw the operation of militias as indicative of continuing contestations over access to territory containing valuable mineral deposits.

In Bukavu, the capital city of South Kivu where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2019, most of the people I worked with had moved to the city within the previous five years from more rural villages in South Kivu. In Uganda, where I conducted fieldwork in 2013, the Congolese refugees I met were more diverse, with people identifying themselves across various ethnic and language groups, including a number of different Bantu groups and also Banyamulenge, a highly persecuted ethnic group who predominantly reside in the South Kivu province. While it would be impossible to generalize a specifically "Congolese" experience of place-making based on this diverse subset of Congolese refugees, there were nonetheless shared patterns of experience that shaped common understandings. For instance, the majority of people I conducted fieldwork with were born in a rural village in one of the eastern DRC states, although many had spent later years in towns or cities to attend school or to work. Their relationship to these remote villages, where most had spent formative years and where they had often relied on subsistence agriculture for livelihoods, had a persistent effect on how the people I worked with experienced place-making. Their sense of being emplaced was often connected to gardens and specific kinds of plantfoods, while the sense of being displaced was often articulated as feeling alienated from these.

Throughout my engagements with Congolese people across these diverse fieldwork contexts, one continuity has stood out. The sense of displacement that they describe is often not only grounded in shifting materialities of place but more specifically experienced at an ecological scale that comprises disturbances that manifest across and intertwine both environmental and social contexts of life. Relatedly, it is through ecological fixes that Congolese people attempt—not always successfully—to repair their sense of displacement. In this chapter, I analyze forced migration from the lens of political ecology (Escobar 1999), using historic and contemporary examples from the DRC to show how displacement involves not only a changed relationship between people and place but ultimately also a disturbance

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between human-environmental relations and the kinds of vitality that these sustain. I then illuminate ecological forms of place-making that emerge within nodes of migration journeys that might otherwise remain hidden.

The Political Ecology of Displacement

Since its inception as a colonial territory in the late 1800s, the DRC has been treated as a kind of resource colony for more powerful states and institutions. From the rubber plantations governed brutally by King Leopold II in the early 1900s, which fed then new demands for pneumatic bicycle and motorcar tires, to the establishment of an extensive mining industry under the colonial governance of Belgium driven by the race to acquire minerals like tungsten for armory during World War I, first, and then eventually uranium during World War II in the race to develop nuclear weapons, to the eventual corporate neocolonialism of extractive industries in the DRC that followed the country's independence from Belgium in 1960 (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002; Lalji 2007), the DRC has long been a place where struggles over access to and control over land, and the raw materials within it, have dominated political, social, and economic life.

These contestations reflect what Anna Tsing (2005: 1–5) characterizes as "friction," that is, global encounters structured by and demonstrative of asymmetrical relationships, from which different logic systems rub against one another. In the case of the DRC, extractive systems of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) have, since the early twentieth century, worked to restructure Congolese ways of living in the DRC around the prioritization of global capital while simultaneously excluding most Congolese people from participating in—or even benefiting from—the global markets that require extracting their material resources (Smith 2021), particularly in terms of the recent boom in digital technologies that require minerals like tungsten, tin, and tantalum found in abundance in many parts of the eastern DRC (Mantz 2008; Smith 2011, 2015). One regulatory organization, the International Tin Supply Chain Initiative (ITSCI) (2020), alone oversees two thousand mines in the Great Lakes region (comprising the eastern DRC and parts of Rwanda and Burundi), almost all foreign owned, and with a workforce of approximately eighty thousand miners. But the number of mines and miners in the eastern DRC is likely much higher, since so much of this work is now conducted informally and clandestinely to avoid the attention of mining regulators, such as the ITSCI (Smith 2021). In 2021, for example, the DRC was by far the largest supplier of coltan (which comprises components of tin, tungsten, and tantalum) into global markets (Ojewale 2022), which gives a sense of the scale of mining in the eastern DRC, which

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also has significant mining operations around diamonds, gold, and other rare earth minerals. Throughout my fieldwork, I have sat across from Congolese people, recording conversations on a smartphone that most of those interviewees could not afford, comprising minerals that were quite possibly sourced from the province they had been displaced from. Our very interactions are an expression of global friction.

For Congolese people on the ground, particularly those located in the eastern DRC states where mining is most concentrated, these frictions have manifested in material ways. The mining boom of the mid-2000s following the demand for minerals used in the development of digital technologies at first offered many Congolese people whose livelihood options had been limited as a result of the Congolese wars a rare opportunity for informal labor with the possibility of making significant wealth, while also stimulating the local economies of towns and villages located near mines (Smith 2015). Within a few years, however, international outcry about the seeming violence of "conflict minerals" led to increased regulation of mining industries from international organizations, which led to the exclusion of many artisanal miners (Kabamba 2010; Smith 2021). In the years since this mining boom, other significant social, political, economic, and environmental effects have emerged: from the clearing of land and the open cuts into the ground for excavation to the pollution of waterways contaminated by chemicals and heavy metals, to decreased agricultural activity as a result of environmental and livelihood changes, to outbreaks of violent conflict between various groups who have interests in controlling specific territories that are rich in minerals, including government agencies (and the Armed Forces of the DRC, the national army), various nongovernment militia groups, those who live on the land under contestation, and distinct Indigenous groups who have ancestral claims to it. All of these processes disturb not only the environments surrounding mines but also the vital relationships between those place-ecologies and the people who live there, impacting on, and at times disrupting, their livelihoods, intergenerational and ancestral bonds with the land, and sense of security and stability in place.

These ecological roots of displacement emerged in my own fieldwork with Congolese people in 2019, which I conducted with people living in the city of Bukavu, the capital of the South Kivu province in the DRC. One of the families I worked with had moved to the city five years earlier, from a remote village approximately five hours from Bukavu. Richard—a young man in his early twenties, whom I talked with the most—described memories from his childhood there, many of which involved searching through the tailings of a nearby mine with friends (clandestinely, without permission from his parents, who were scared that they would be injured if they fell near the mining holes or that guards would violently chase them away).

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Over time, a more insidious and unanticipated risk emerged: the local water supply became contaminated by overuse and, they speculated, heavy metals. Local livestock suffered, and people became ill. Unnerved by the social and ecological changes to their local environment, Richard's parents decided to move to Bukavu. This move was especially hard for Richard's father, who angrily burst out during one of my conversations with them that the land was *machafuko*, a Swahili word that broadly translates into disorder, unrest, and chaos. Mining—and the global markets driving demand for Congolese minerals—had resulted in an acute sense of displacement for them, a rupture of their relationship to place.

While the displacement experienced by Richard and his family was not typical in the normative sense that they were not "refugees," this family nonetheless embodied a more foundational form of displacement in the DRC, whereby their relationship to place is damaged at an ecological level, in part because of global frictions with locally felt, material impacts. Such foundational roots of displacement, and their link to systems of extractivist capitalism, are commonly overlooked in scholarly work on displacement which more often focus on the politico-legal spectacle of forced migration and the social ruptures these encompass (Cabot and Ramsay 2021). Nonetheless, attention to these ecological foundations of displacement is important, as Lunstrum and Bose describe (2022: 646, their emphasis): "Displacement is a *prerequisite* to rather than consequence of the environmental or land-use change: people must be moved so that their lands and waterways can then be terraformed." The *machafuko* and displacement experienced by Richard and his family is one such example, which encompasses not only forced relocation but more fundamentally the transformation of land from being a source of collective vitality and sustenance to a source of extractive potential.

Such contemporary frictions and their historic roots in the DRC point to a political ecology of displacement, a focus that was largely overlooked in scholarly work on forced migration until recently (Baldwin and Bettini 2017; Lunstrum and Bose 2022; Morris 2022; Sassen 2016). Political ecology, defined by Arturo Escobar (1999: 3) as "the manifold articulations of history and biology and the cultural mediations through which such articulations are necessarily established," is an analytical lens that transcends the normative binary of society-nature to instead implicate the biophysical and material world within a historicized axis. A political ecology reading of displacement necessitates attention to the materiality of "place" in displacement and understands that the contemporary situations that compel Congolese people to migrate are produced from the interplay of historicized patterns of dispossession and the materiality of the land on which they seek out livelihoods. Their displacement is a product of disturbed and ruptured

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ecologies and a wholly predictable outcome of a longitudinal drive to extract resources from Congolese territories. These points of friction reveal an intentionality of displacement, in that it is a predictable outcome of global systems of extractivist capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017), which at various points require the removal and relocation of "generative units"—meaning plants, animals, microbes, and people—in order for land to be expropriated for extractive purposes (Haraway et al. 2016: 557). Yet, as I describe below from fieldwork conducted with Congolese refugees whose displacement has forced them to leave the DRC, it is through ecological "fixes" that they also attempt to restore their relationship to place.

Ecological Place-Making: Gardens, Growth, and Food

While there is an intentionality to the systems that produce displacement, the forms of place-making that occur within and as a result of displacements are not necessarily defined by oppressive verticalities or horizontal movements into new spaces. Escobar (2008: 289–90) points to "flat ontologies"—that is, emergent assemblages that encompass the material, existential, and social elements of life, broadly defined—through which a sense of place is actualized. Such a reading of place as grounded in social ontologies sees place and place-making as distinct from sedentarist logics, territorialized localities, and simplistic power hierarchies, focusing instead on place-making as emergent and contingent. In my fieldwork, these social ontologies were particularly evident in the relations produced between Congolese people and their ecological surroundings in spaces of transit and new sites of settlement.

Within a week of settling into an apartment in a housing compound in the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda, a Congolese friend, Mama Patrick—a refugee who had at that time been living in Uganda for approximately three years with her son, daughter-in-law, and two nieces—took my hand one late afternoon and walked with me to a small, somewhat hidden space behind the concrete apartment buildings. In the small space between a retaining wall and a high fence there was a strip of soil, maybe a meter wide. The high fence and the apartment buildings on either side of the soil blocked most of the sunlight, so I was incredulous, at first, when Mama Patrick pointed out the bean vines trailing up from the ground and some other edible plants. "I want to show you my garden," she told me as we conversed through my broken Swahili and her limited English. "I want to show you what I grow here."

What was remarkable about this "out-of-the-way" garden (see Drotbohm and Winters, introduction to this volume) was not that it was able to

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Figure 9.1. Mama Patrick shows me her garden, Kampala, 2013. © Georgina Ramsay.

survive literally between the cracks of urbanity but that Mama Patrick and her family were so dedicated to tending these plants that would offer such a small harvest. Every day, she told me, she came to work on the plants, ensuring they had had enough water and monitoring their health and growth. She described how:

> Wherever I live, I have a garden. Here it has been the hardest. When I first came here, I thought that there was no place that I would be able to grow plants. . . . But then I saw that there was just enough space, at the top there. So, I am here.

Together, we picked some of the leaves of a sweet potato plant, which she would later use to create a stew called *matembela*. As we picked and filled a small bucket, I asked her why she tended to the garden. Was it purely

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another source of nutrition for her family? Mama Patrick chuckled and told me: "This is Congolese food. We are in Uganda, yes, but we want to eat like Congolese."

To stress the significance of these foods made from the pounded leaves of tuberous plants (e.g., sweet potato, cassava), she went on to say: "In Uganda, they like *matoke* [green banana]. In Burundi, it is *maharage* [beans]. But for Congolese, it is *sombe* [cooked cassava leaves]."

While foods like *matembela* and *sombe* are eaten throughout east and central Africa, for Congolese people I have worked with these are the foods that have significant social value. In both cases, the leaves of a tuberous plant are pounded into a lurid green sauce that is then cooked, slowly, for many hours, building flavor. Since it takes so long to cook these dishes properly, they require a lot of coal and are therefore more expensive than other kinds of foods. *Sombe*, in particular, is considered by Congolese people to have a powerful nutritional effect. It is a "strong" food, I was told, "good for the blood," a dish of superior taste and nutritional value. Moreover, *sombe* was an important dish for ritual purposes: it was present at every significant event I attended (engagements, weddings, birth celebrations), and the taste of the *sombe* that had been brought to these events was always a keen point of interest and discussion among attendees, who told me they could tell from the taste of *sombe* whether the cook had taken "care" or "pride" in its preparation. For instance, at a Congolese engagement party in Australia, a controversy broke out when the mother of the bride claimed that there was "no salt" in the *sombe*, which was, I gathered, an encoded way of accusing the mother of the groom of being unwelcoming to their daughter. But *sombe* (and *matembela*) were also eaten in everyday contexts. When I would first meet a new Congolese family, particularly one who had been resettled in Australia, they would make a point of preparing *sombe* for me. To be considered a close social connection, I had to eat a dish of *sombe* that they had prepared. These dishes made from the leaves of tubers are foods that actively create sociality, signal vitality, and symbolize an enduring connection to place, a connection to being "Congolese" even without being physically proximate to the DRC.

This sense of being Congolese was most visibly expressed on the afternoons when I would sit and talk with Mama Patrick as she prepared *matembela* or *sombe* in the communal courtyard of our apartment compound. Sitting on a stool with her legs wrapped around a large kino—a Congolese mortar carved out of wood—Mama Patrick would pound the leaves she had either collected from her garden or bought in a local market for at least twenty minutes, crushing them until they formed a watery paste in a lurid shade of green I have never seen replicated in another setting. Pounding the leaves is physically demanding, and sweat would drip from her brow as she

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Figure 9.2. Grinding cassava, Kampala, 2013. © Georgina Ramsay.

worked, yet her expression throughout was that of determination. Mama Patrick looked deeply satisfied by the process of preparing these foods. One afternoon in between hits of the wooden pestle against the leaves she told me, "This is hard, but it is the work of the Congolese. This is our food."

The garden that Mama Patrick was tending to in Kampala represents more than just an additional source of nutrition. The garden is an example of what Ma (2018) refers to as "sensorial placemaking," whereby it is through taste and ingestion that a person forges a sense of connection with place. In Ma's (2018) account of sensorial place-making in regards to Puer tea in China, a sense of place is expressed through the specific flavor of a tea, which embodies characteristics of the soil it is grown in: drinking the tea, then, connects the drinker to the place it was grown and imbues what might otherwise be seen as an overly simple act of drinking tea as a ritual means of symbolically experiencing an assumed connection to nature

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and rural tranquility. For refugees (and other migrants) like Mama Patrick, however, such sensorial place-making takes on some of the diasporic conditions of their own life trajectories. The place-making power of the food is as much about the memories of an elsewhere and a sense of identity that is triggered by its taste as much as it is about the specific locality in which the food is grown and sourced. Describing a similarly diasporic process of place-making for refugees resettled in the United States, Jean (2015) documents how refugees grow foods they were familiar with from "home" as a means for refugees to simultaneously retain a sense of cultural identity that is connected to a place elsewhere *and* a means to forge connection to the new place in which they reside. Farming and growing food is itself an act of place-making, a process of "investing labour to become acquainted with new land" and "making new landscapes legible and familiar" (Jean 2015: 54). What Jean's (2015) work and my own observations from working with Congolese refugees like Mama Patrick shows is that growing food is a means of place-making that is grounded (literally) in connecting to the ecology of place, whereby learning the specificities of the local ecologies is a way to develop a sense of attachment to it.

I interpret Mama Patrick's attempt to grow a garden even within the most constrained of spaces in Kampala as an attempt to remake a sense of connection to place—one that can be literally imbibed and embodied—within the context of protracted displacement. Her life in Kampala was made difficult by her externality as both a refugee and a Congolese person. She and other members of her household lived very precariously without a stable income, in part because there is only a limited system of humanitarian aid relief to refugees available in Kampala—Uganda has long approached humanitarian assistance through a "self-reliance" model that promotes farming and entrepreneurship over aid (Sharpe and Namusobya 2012; Betts et al. 2017)—but also because their ability to enter the labor market was insecure. The only work available to them was menial and low paying, and they often faced discrimination from Ugandan employers who did not look favorably on Congolese refugees. Mama Patrick's son had been the victim of two assaults on construction worksites, and he claimed that the perpetrators were disgruntled Ugandan workers. Like so many others, to live comfortably in an apartment, Mama Patrick and her family relied on remittances from family and friends who had been resettled as refugees outside of continental Africa—in the United States, Canada, or Australia, primarily—but these sources of money were unreliable. As such, they faced ongoing economic precarity, struggling to make rent each month and provide enough food for the family. In addition, they held ongoing fears that members of the militia group they had fled from in the DRC would find where they were living and pursue them. Like other refugees I met in Kam-

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pala—many of whom did not have the resources available to live in apartment compounds and were instead residing in overcrowded, piecemeal neighborhoods built out of temporary material, facing physical dangers and chronic outbreaks of cholera and dysentery—insecurity was the norm.[5]

Throughout these hardships, Congolese refugees I met in Kampala were still attempting to create a sense of connection to place through their gardens, which they established in even the smallest and most out-of-the-way patches of soil close to their residences. These gardens enabled a visceral attachment to place, a literal connection to soil, but the foods they sought to grow were often those that invoked a specifically "Congolese" sense of personal identity and collective community: a simultaneous process of immediate place-making and expression of cultural specificity that is similarly described in Jean's (2015) work on refugee place-making in the United States. What was interesting was that, for the Congolese refugees I worked with, this sense of a Congolese identity was not necessarily tied to a deep desire to return "home" or to an idea of their ancestral legitimacy to identify with that place. Rather, for them, "Congolese" did not invoke so much a sense of coherent collective identity but rather expressed an attachment to place: an autochthony with the physical sites and socialities of the eastern DRC, in particular.

As the second largest country by area within continental Africa, the concept of a unified and nationalized "Congolese" identity does not generally coincide with how Congolese people themselves think about and identify with that category. For people I worked with, to claim to be "Congolese" is not to identify with a nationality but to assert a formative connection to place in the DRC: places where claims to autochthony are often contested and delegitimized, and further exacerbated by tensions over the establishment and expansion of key extractive industries in the region. The Congolese identity being articulated by people I worked with seemed less about historical legitimacy and more about formative consubstantiality: a sense of themselves as being inextricably connected to the materiality of the DRC by virtue of their own formation within and relationships to the local ecologies of the DRC.

They could continue to "be" Congolese outside of the proximate location of the DRC by continuing to reaffirm their activities of daily life as being specific to Congolese people.

This diasporic identity and its material manifestations in the gardens and foods of Congolese people outside of the DRC can, in a way, be seen as a kind of productive effect of global frictions, echoing the forms of collaboration across difference that Tsing (2005) describes among various parties who are invested in the forests of Kalimantan in Indonesia: from the collaborations between Indigenous locals and global activists to the local

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bandits and international corporations. Where only a few short years previously they had been focused on surviving conflict that was often organized or at least enacted along the lines of ethnic group affiliation, during the time of my fieldwork I witnessed how being pushed into new cosmopolitan contexts enabled forms of recognition or assemblage—perhaps falling short of Tsing's (2005) collaborative relationships—across what had previously been important forms of difference, a phenomenon that Liisa Malkki (1995b) similarly documents among people from Burundi who migrated to cities in Tanzania following outbreaks of conflict. In my own work, I saw how Congolese people from different parts of eastern Congo created new and emergent forms of sociality—what Escobar (2008) might call "assemblages of social ontologies"—through corporeal acts of cooking and ingesting specific foods, like *sombe* and other leafy greens. Place-making and being Congolese was not just a human condition; it was a condition, or an assemblage, continually being produced and affirmed through human and plant interactions. Congolese people mediated their displacement through this ecological fix rather than attempting to create a sedentarist connection to the territory on which they had come to settle or transit. These plants and foods formed them as Congolese, and continuing to grow, cook, and eat them was a means of reproducing connection to place that transcends attachment to geography and sedentarist logics of place-making.

Frustrated Place-Making

"That one," Nyomanda told me, pointing at one of her children, who at that time was approximately seven years of age. "That one is my Australian baby." When I asked her to explain, Nyomanda told me: "She only likes to eat Australian things. Chipsies [fries]. Her favorite is pizza." After a pause, Nyomanda added, "She does not like to eat *sombe*." In contrast, Nyomanda told me how one of her other children is "Congolese," because "she loves *sombe*, every time she is asking, "Mama please, Mama make *sombe*.'" Knowing that the child she was talking about had, ironically, been born in Australia, I commented, "She hasn't even been to Congo and she is Congolese!" Nyomanda agreed.

What was at stake in this conversation was more than just conflict over what to prepare for dinner. What concerned Nyomanda most about her child not consuming the foods that make Congolese people "strong" was that, in rejecting these, her daughter was rejecting being Congolese. It was as if Nyomanda's "Australian" daughter was risking familial alienation by rejecting the foods that formed the basis of Congolese identity and sense of being. A few weeks after confiding in me these frustrations, I came to visit

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Nyomanda again and, after calling out through the house and not finding her there, eventually came upon her sitting on her knees in front of an almost empty garden bed. Beside her on a towel were laid out the deadened stalks of a plant I did not immediately recognize. When I asked Nyomanda what she was doing, she did not look up from her work but instead told me, angrily, “Every time they have died. Dead. Finish.” She threw her hands up in exasperation. “Like everything in this country.”

The dead plants that Nyomanda was pulling out of the ground were the remains of cassava plants that she had cultivated in the hopes of establishing a small crop. But the cassava had failed to thrive, eventually dying off under the temperate seasons of southeastern Australia. The loss was devastating to Nyomanda, but not just because the plants were not viable. The inability to grow this food, such a significant source of vitality for Congolese ways of being, was interpreted being symbolic of a broader problem of the perceived hostility of life in Australia: a frustrated sense of place-making that manifested not just in the garden but in other aspects of life. I was struck by the irony of witnessing Congolese refugees in precarious situations in Uganda expressing optimism in relation to their small but thriving gardens, compared to the seeming stability of Congolese refugees resettled in Australia expressing frustration and distress at their garden’s failure to thrive, which Nyomanda at least took as a material metaphor for her own sense of alienation. At stake in these frustrated attempts to create a sense of place through gardening familiar plantfoods was not a physical dislocation but a deeper–and more distressing–sense of alienation from familiar ecologies. Being unable to grow familiar gardens produced an emotional state in women I worked with, like Nyomanda, akin to grieving. Sometimes a similar sense of lamentation accompanied how they described their “Australian” children, a kind of acknowledgment of changed place-making and irrevocable alienation from Congo.

As Nyomanda went on to tell me after pulling up the cassava husks from the garden, “Oh, it is hard here, that is all.” Sighing defeatedly, she went on: “The life in Australia is very different. Here it is all about work, and school and job, and medicine, and house. Blah, blah, blah. Every day. There is no life.”

“What do you mean by no life?” I asked Nyomanda.

Angrily, she gestured sweepingly to the houses of neighboring properties. “The people, living here. I do not even know these people.”

I asked her, “In Congo, would you know your neighbors?” to which she responded, “Yes, of course. There, every day–*every day*—we are eating together. But here, no.” Of course, Nyomanda was recalling a nostalgic frame of reference for everyday life in the DRC, a frame that effectively erases the sorts of tensions and disturbed ecologies that led her to have to leave.[6] But her nostalgia points to a sense of displacement that is more than just phys-

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ical dislocation and ruptured social relationships. Nyomanda is expressing a sense of alienation that is experienced at an ecological scale, in that she is dislocated from the social and material contexts of everyday life that bring meaning and vitality to existence, in her view. Nyomanda then told me about how, when she first arrived in Australia, she had gone to knock on the doors of neighboring houses to introduce herself. Few had been home to respond to her knock; perhaps they had just not wanted to answer the door. Others had smiled at her and been kind, but never taken up the offer to visit. Nyomanda clearly felt an acute separation from a social ecology grounded in consubstantiality; of sharing food, particularly the plant foods that Congolese people value most.

Staring down the husks of the cassava between us, Nyomanda sighed and said, "Nothing is the same here."

But these were acute instances of alienation, moments of especially frustrated place-making that descended into outright feelings of failed connection to place. But these feelings of *dis*placement did not wholly define life in Australia for resettled refugees. At other times, women like Nyomanda lauded their "Australian" children, seeing their cultural hybridity as a source of pride. And, eventually, she and others were able to cultivate thriving gardens, just not necessarily containing the plants from Africa that they most cherished. Instead, they successfully grew beans, potatoes, and—thankfully—sweet potatoes; allowing them to eat freshly prepared *matembela*. The Congolese refugees I worked with in Australia eventually came to experience their gardens as a way to reconnect with a Congolese sense of being *and* a connection to the specific context of life in Australia, reflecting the similar meaning of farming described by Jean (2015) in relation to the place-making practices of refugees resettled in the United States. Becoming familiar with Australian ecologies was a platform of their emplacement.

Conclusion: Cumulation, Migration, and Scales of Place-Making

What Congolese refugees like Nyomanda experience as displacement is a deeply felt rupture within the ecologies that make it possible for vitality—material and social—to flourish. When analyzed from this lens of political ecology, which accounts for a co-constitutive relationship between political processes and ecological effects, it becomes possible to see the situations of forced migration that are experienced by Congolese people in the contemporary period in a more expansive frame: as instances of ruptures in the relationships between people and place that result in long afterlives of colonialism and its extractive impulses that have encompassed systemic forms of dislocation. I have shown how theorizing the materiality of migration at

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an ecological scale can bring attention to these broader patterns and enable us to think more critically about normative frames of forced migration that are predominant in scholarly work.

What has emerged consistently throughout the fieldwork that I have conducted with displaced Congolese people—from those experiencing internal displacement to those in protracted refugee situations in Uganda, to those who have been resettled in Australia—is how essential the materiality of place is in shaping how they experience and understand what it means to be displaced—and, conversely, how it is possible to feel and create a sense of emplacement. People do not flee vague situations of rupture, whether these be conflict, war, political persecution, environmental damage, or general insecurity. Rather, they flee the material risks, volatilities, and disruptions to ways of living—and risks to the corporeal viability of life—that these situations produce. But they are also not defined by these. Indeed, the people I worked with were always attempting to remake a sense of place that would revitalize their Congolese sense of being-in-the-world wherever they ended up, and even in the most out-of-the-way places. For Congolese people, the most salient form of place-making I witnessed involved growing plants and preparing foods that were considered to be distinctly "Congolese." Plants, cooking, and sharing food had a consubstantive vitality for Congolese people that is only recognizable when analyzed from a lens of political ecology (Escobar 1999), seeing the intertwining of history and biology as comprising the broader context of place-making, and ultimately dis- and emplacement.

Most importantly, the diverse experiences of displacement and place-making that I have described in this chapter point to the need, as the editors of this volume similarly urge, to "think against singularity" when examining the lives of migrants—that is, to think about migrant trajectories outside of the binary of migrant origins and migrant destinations. What becomes clear from the perspectives of Congolese people I have gotten to know throughout my fieldwork is that they embody the cumulative arc of their migration experiences: they cannot be reduced to the historical context of their origin place, yet they do not enter into new spaces or nodes of life without the context and influence of the places they have left behind. This became most clear from the ways that people I worked with who saw themselves as indelibly Congolese by virtue of the material and social ecologies within which their early lives had been formed, yet they also saw the necessity of revitalizing these in new contexts of migration. In short, their sense of being was not static but cumulative. Here again, a political ecological lens is informative, since the mutuality of historicity and biology that political ecology foregrounds also parallels the cumulative basis of embodied place-making as I have described it in this chapter.

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Recognizing migration as a cumulative process with no linear starting point or end point illuminates the contingent social, political, and historic context of place-making, which is not exclusive to migrants but which is a reality for all those whose relationship to place is threatened by various forms or patterns of ecological disturbance. Migration is a cumulative process, and displacements—historic and contemporary—are often undergirded by and produced through systems of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) that work to expropriate land and transform the viability of place from a site of social vitality to inert resource extraction. A political ecology view of migration and displacement illuminates these extractive global systems and situations of forced migration as not only linked but co-constitutive: as forms of "friction" (Tsing 2005) through which global asymmetries are illuminated and reinforced. The viability of places and the possibility of emplacement is not only mediated at the scale of individual migrants in the various places through which they pass through and dwell in, but is reflected in the need to transform the systemic forces of uprooting that produce displacements in the first place.

Georgina Ramsay is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Delaware. She is the author of *Impossible Refuge: The Control and Constraint of Refugee Futures* and the coeditor of *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*.

NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms selected by research participants to prevent them being identified.
2. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]. The resettlement program is a UNHCR "durable solution" to protracted displacement, in which people living in a refugee situation with little chance of resolution apply to be resettled to a third country where they receive permanent refuge.
3. It should be noted that many scholars are also critical of the "resource wars"/ "conflict minerals" narrative as the dominant driver of conflict in the eastern DRC, arguing that a direct link between mining and conflict is an oversimplification of a complex social, political, and economic issue (e.g., Smith 2021; Vogel and Raeymaekers 2016).
4. While I was working predominantly with people who had decided to move away from mining regions, it should be noted that towns and villages located near mining sites, even those under militia control, also attract migrants, who see the increase in economic activity as a livelihood opportunity, including some women who may move to participate in sex work (see Bashwira and van der Haar 2020) and men who may seek to work in the mining operations (see Smith 2021).

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5. I discuss the specific insecurities of asylum in Uganda among the refugees I worked with in Ramsay (2019), which provides more insight into this disjuncture between Uganda's progressive "self-reliance" model of humanitarian care and the economic vulnerabilities that can nonetheless persist for refugees living there.
6. In contrast, refugees with whom I conducted fieldwork in Uganda were very hesitant to share food among their neighbors and highly suspicious of those who tried to invite others to share meals. While in Uganda there was certainly a more substantive sociality going on between neighbors and Congolese families living in proximity to one another, this did not extend to sharing food. I detail these situations in Ramsay (2016).

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