

Jessica Krug, *Fugitive Modernities: Kisama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 280 pp, paperback, ISBN 9781478001546.

---

This is a book about the political imaginations and intellectual labor of fugitives. It is about people who didn't write, by choice.

— Jessica Krug, *Fugitive Modernities*

I am no scholar of Angola. I am not particularly knowledgeable about Portuguese colonialism; I have learnt the trans-Atlantic slave trade, yes, but no more than other informed readers disturbed by its ongoing afterlives. It is therefore telling that I came across Jessica Krug's *Fugitive Modernities* in a conversation with friends similarly unacquainted with West Central Africa and the Americas, but, like me, animated by questions that lie at the heart of this book: How do we write about the disappeared? How to put into words communities whose worlds have been targeted in acts of mass violence? How do we narrate the worlds of those who actively tried to evade the power that, as Trouillot reminds us, makes and records history? My friends and I focus on post-20th century communities elsewhere upended by other forms of violence, including settler-colonial destruction in Palestine, the Ottoman genocide of Armenians, and imperial war in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, *Fugitive Modernities* engages the ideas of communities escaping the grip of brutal states and the violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade around present-day Angola, Colombia and Brazil from the 16th century until today. That Krug's work reverberates across time and space is a testament not only to its intellectual, political and methodological innovations; it is also an important reminder that breaking down the imperially imposed boundaries represented in area studies is a crucial step on our path to decolonisation. Places, peoples and ideas out of Angola can help us rethink the world.

Krug opens her book with two scenes from 1632: one located north of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the other in the colonial capital of Luanda in present-day Angola. In the first scene, seven Portuguese captains have a chance encounter with a Black (*preto*) man, amidst a group of indigenous people. Perplexed as to his presence so far away from both town and plantation, they ask him 'who he was and how he came to be in the area'. He explains that he is not born in Brazil, but is 'of the nation of Quissamã'. The man was on the run, and was never seen again by the captains. In the second scene, a former governor of colonial Angola complains that Portuguese military, slave raiding, trading and plantation enterprises are under threat from 'the province of Quissamã' where people are 'all non-Christians and our enemies', 'powerful, and warlike'. Rather than read invocations of Kisama as descriptors of ethnic

---

1 My friends are Yael Navaro, Mezna Qato and Chana Morgenstern, and together we are running a reading group called *Archives of the Disappeared* out of the University of Cambridge.

origin or geographic location, Krug launches a powerful intervention: Kisama is a meme. It is an imitated practice that circulated among communities on the run from African and European authorities alike as well as voracious slave-traders. It is an idea that circulated among fugitive communities surviving five centuries and the violent Middle Passage between West Central Africa and the Americas. Krug insists that unpacking what exactly Kisama is requires a radical break with how historians and anthropologists of Africa and the African diaspora have approached such places and peoples. She criticises a tendency in existing research to tie identity with geographic origins or to understand identity as materiality, as something 'someone has or doesn't have'. Instead, she argues that to understand the full import of Kisama, identity must be understood 'less as materiality and more of a language through which people describe and orient politics, often independent from geography'. Indeed, she argues that a study of Kisama as a fugitive idea necessitates going beyond a mere retrieval of its occurrence in oral histories, the ethnographic field or the historical archive. In order to fully comprehend Kisama, Krug says that it is necessary to embed 'ourselves in a different epistemological framework, or system of ideas, that, in turn, fosters new chronotopes, or visions of time, and notions of subjectivity, or views of personhood'. That is why she approaches Kisama by abandoning a repeated tendency by scholars to divide the history of Africa into precolonial, colonial and postcolonial periods. Instead, she asks how time was imagined by 'goatherds and blacksmiths, farmers and fisherpeople, weavers and potters'; her book, in turn, traces Kisama to early 17th century present-day Angola, Colombia and Brazil, jumping to the present and creatively interweaving semiotic studies of the Kimbundu language to make sense of what Kisama denotes. Krug goes on to question taken-for-granted ideas of the subject. She does this by taking seriously exhortations by people living in geographical Kisama that she needs to know about Kafuxi Ambari, a *soba* or 'tribal leader' who is believed to have mounted the most sustained and effective campaign against the Portuguese during the Jita Kwatakata or the 'War of Acquisition'. Applying Eurocentric and liberal ideas of personhood would have required her to write about Kafuxi Ambari either as an individual over the course of a life span, or as a description of a position that different individuals took up over several centuries. Krug says that this kind of biography writing would have fundamentally misunderstood how Kafuxi Ambari functioned as a 'collective self, fashioned through the instrumental deployment of historical memory and rituo-political choreography' around which the idea of Kisama cohered. Krug is able to trace Kisama by writing a 'five-century, multi continental biography of Kafuxi Ambari' precisely because she does not see this *soba* as an individual or a title, but as a collective self that Kisama helped engender. It is these interventions that allow Krug to developing a new approach to oral history, ethnography and colonial archives that does not reproduce the violence of the state, reflected in the colonial archive, but pushes against it instead. It is also these insights that allow Krug to trace how Kisama went from being an external descriptor of a geographical area – nestled between the Kwanza and Longa Rivers in present-day Angola – to an ideology and identity that emerged in West Central Africa and survived the Middle Passage to re-emerge in the Americas.

Krug ends up showing how Kisama came to denote obdurate resistance to all outside authority, African and European alike, while refusing militarised warrior identities to instead organise social life around an ever-expanding and fractured collective of vulnerable fugitives. Those who became Kisama, she explains, gained a reputation for military prowess effectively resisting the destructive violence of state and capital. Yet, even as Kisama's martial reputation was a crucial factor in protecting them from state, capital and colonial violence, it did not organise social life. This made them different from the *Imbangala*, a society organised around warfare. While membership in *Imbangala* societies was dependent on militarised initiation rites that included killing a man in battle, Kisama communities regularly integrated vulnerable fugitives, centering other abilities including hunting, agricultural and healing practices. In a fascinating account of a devastating attack by the Portuguese against fugitive communities between 1655 and 1658, Krug explores how Kisama recognised vegetation as a critical part of battle: some people planted thorny grasses across the paths that forced Portuguese soldiers to spend most of their times clearing the passages with machetes. Krug traces the Kisama meme to fugitive communities in present-day Colombia and Brazil, showing how the idea of living an uncompromising collective life outside or beyond state power, without developing militarised cultures, survived through the ideas of abducted slaves that travelled across the Atlantic, through the violent rupture of the Middle Passage. Krug manages to trace an African idea, the idea of Kisama, rather than African bodies, in a violent time and across a violent ocean. This book not only traces Kisama; it provides an alternate route to writing about the disappeared and the fugitive.

Mahvish Ahmad

*Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape*