

Gratitude

Of all the gifts Nsala's daughter gave me, there are three I hold most dear. One is the knowledge that decomposing is a labor of love. Another is the knowledge that the hostages are not, nor will they ever be, extinct. And third is the knowledge that honoring the blueprint of a worldview that actually sustains life is a labor of gratitude. For these and all her other gifts I am fiercely grateful.

I am fiercely grateful, too, to the many beings—dead and living, human and more-than-human—whose energies enabled me to give myself over to this book:

To the (perhaps unwitting) instigator of my unraveling, Katie Donnington, for penning a haunting correspondence that unleashed a world of ghosts, then weathering the storms wrought by my allegiance to them.

To the modern-day abolitionists at the Universities of Nottingham and Liverpool, for entrusting me and my accomplice to usher an archive home and, a dozen decades deferred, respond to the images that introduced “the Congo” to “the World.”

To the sanctuaries, Yole!Africa and Picha, that first embraced the practice of decomposing, and to the early decomposers—in particular Sarah Mukadi, Moustache Muhanya, David Shongo Mafungwa, Bernadette Vivuya, Dorine Mokha, and Kagoma Twahirwa—for accompanying me to the brink of visible possibility.

To Elizabeth Olson, for ushering me into a world where ghosts are welcome, and to Andrea Bohlman, for reminding me to inhabit it on my own terms.

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To the memory-keepers of Yira land, for reminding me of what still could be; and to all who dwell in Uzuri Sanctuary for turning possibility into force of habit.

To the memory-keepers of the Rivers tribe—Aunt Celeste, Aunt Daisy, and the battalion of cousins who hold me close—for causing a precious bundle of letters to arrive in my hands. I will keep them to my dying day, and beyond.

To the many ancestors of my bones and my imagination, including Isaac Rivers and Biodun Jeyifo, who taught me how—and why—to be Nsala's daughter.

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And to the hostages—spirit, purpose, the creative force of chaos, and the perpetual awareness of the relationship between cause and effect—for actually sustaining life.