



# Undoing Research on Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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## Abstract

In the last decade, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) figures on the international radar as a place of horrific sexual violence and ‘vile barbarity’. Drawing on ethnographic research in eastern DRC, this paper argues these framings have a contaminating effect on the researcher and the way knowledge is produced and mediated. What does it mean to do research on violence in the ‘rape capital of the world’? This paper addresses three significant ‘fields of power’ that emerge when conducting research in a violent setting as a politically and geographically situated researcher. First, the paper argues that a colonial imaginary, which produces racial and sexual hierarchies, informs contemporary representations on sexual violence. Second, it critically examines current knowledge on sexual violence in eastern DRC that, primarily drawing on victims’ testimonies, may reinforce harmful framings. Third, the paper shows how I shaped my research in relation to ‘toxic’ discourses on sexual violence. In doing so, this article reflects on what it means to ‘undo’ research from a ‘violent’ space by disrupting received knowledge on sexual violence and critically exploring the researcher’s responsibility in representing violence as experienced by others and his/her complicity in perpetuating harmful framings.

## Keywords

DRC; representations; sexual violence; knowledge production; methodology; conflict

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## Introduction: An uncomfortable visibility

For more than two decades, episodes of violence, insecurity, economic ruin and massive displacement have marked Congolese lives in the eastern provinces of DRC. Yet these continuities of violence did not start twenty years ago in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide (1994). Violence in the region can be traced back to more than a century of rebellions, dictatorship, slave trade, foreign interventions, colonisation and civil war. The wars that followed the genocide, known as the First (1996-1997) and Second Congo War (1998-2002) caused massive displacement and included brutal rapes committed by all parties involved. Sexual violence was widespread during the Congo Wars (see eg Human Rights Watch, 2002) although only at a later stage (mid 2000s) did the international community start paying attention to the large-scale militarised sexual violence in Congo. When the rapes in Congo finally appeared on the international radar, international actors, state leaders, UN representatives and the media-aid complex focused on particularly ‘bestial’ and ‘barbaric’ acts of sexual abuse, marking Congo’s violence as exceptional and as *different* from other violence.<sup>1</sup> When New York Times reporter Nicholas Kristof (2010) reflected on his experiences in eastern DRC, he framed the violence in terms of barbarity, sexual mutilation and cannibalism:

I’ve never reported on a war more barbaric than Congo’s, and it haunts me. In Congo, I’ve seen women who have been mutilated, children who have been forced to eat their parents’ flesh, girls who have been subjected to rapes that destroyed their insides ...

Former UN Special Envoy for AIDS Stephen Lewis (2008), during a visit to eastern DRC in 2008, remarked that “in the vast historical panorama of violence against women, there is a level of demonic dementia plumbed in the Congo that has seldom, if ever been reached before”. He spoke of “vaginal destruction”, “a situation of nightmarish quality” and said the DRC is “the worst place in the world for women [...]”. The DRC has been described as “the rape capital of the world” (Kristof, 2008), the “cockpit of conflict-related sexual violence” (UNSC, Open Debate, 2013) and “ground zero in the fight against sexual violence in conflict” (Wallström, 2011). John Holmes (2007), former UN Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, after visiting Panzi Hospital<sup>2</sup> and hearing survivors’ stories of sexual violence “so brutal it staggers the

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<sup>1</sup> The international gaze turned towards Congo’s so called ‘rape crisis’ when sexual violence was taken up as a topic on the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda at the United Nations Security Council in 2008. A process of securitisation ensued which framed rape – as a weapon of war – as a threat to international peace and security and thus made it a legitimate concern for the Security Council. Consequently, the securitisation of rape as a ‘tactic of war’ made wartime rape visible in international security discourse, politics and practices (see Mertens and Pardy, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Panzi is a hospital in Bukavu, South Kivu. It is run and founded by Dr Mukwege and internationally renowned for its treatment of rape-related traumas.

imagination”, emphasised that “Congo is *different*” [own emphasis].<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, quantitative data on the scale of sexual violence in eastern DRC have been used by the media-aid complex to represent the violence in Congo as an exceptional phenomenon beyond the experience and imagination of the West. A 2011 study by Peterman et al, based on a DRC nationwide household survey conducted in 2007, estimated that over 400,000 women had been raped in the country over one year. They extrapolated their figures to show that 1,69 to 1,8 million women reported having been raped in their lifetime. These figures allowed for “translat[ion] into approximately 1,150 women raped every day, 48 women raped every hour, and 4 women raped every 5 minutes” (Peterman et al, 2011, 1064-1065). Even though the figures applied to the entire country, media outlets and advocacy campaigns were quick to use the figures as evidence of the truly ‘exceptional’ character of rape in eastern DRC.<sup>4</sup>

While the intensity of the violence cannot be denied, there is something deeply disturbing about the ways in which the rapes in Congo and the Congo itself have been employed and represented within global discourses.<sup>5</sup> Rape has become a spectacle, which “harvests and sells our attention, while denying us the ability for properly engaged political reflection” (Evans and Giroux, 2015, 32; Mertens, 2017). Hyper visibility is granted to particular narratives of brutal rape while other ‘less’ spectacular acts of violence, such as killings, domestic violence as well as structural violence, such as the deterioration of the health sector are ignored (see also D’Errico et al, 2013). Indeed, the visibility given to rape “assaults our senses in order to hide things in plain sight” (Evans and Giroux, 2015, 32). The nearly singular attention to conflict-related sexual violence<sup>6</sup> produces what Zalewski and Runyan (2016, 446) call a “visibility paradox”. In the face of such violence, it becomes difficult and even immoral to question the attention to Congo’s wartime rape and the language used. The only possible answer to these spectacular rapes is

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<sup>3</sup> See also the rich scholarship on the normative framing of international sex slavery and trafficking in which similar concerns and themes are explored (see eg, Doezema, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13367277>;

<http://edition.cnn.com/2011/11/24/world/africa/democratic-congo-rape/>;

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/48-women-raped-hour-congo>. The figures also appeared in the Irish Times; CBS News; Japan Today; The Wire; The London Evening Post; The Star; Al Jazeera; ABC News, amongst many others. It made for spectacular headlines, such as this by News One: “Shocking! 48 Women Raped Every Hour in Congo, 1,152 Per Day”. Importantly, the authors themselves have pointed out that “flawed estimates are often perpetuated by well intentioned actors because of the desire to provide numbers to illustrate the magnitude of violence” (Palermo and Peterman, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Global or international discourses are of course never stable. As postcolonial theorist Bhabha (1984) has shown for colonial discourse, it is marked by hybridity and internal contradictions.

<sup>6</sup> I use the UN term conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) to refer to the limited variant of sexual violence in conflict committed by armed actors. I use the general terms of sexual violence (in conflict) or wartime rape to refer to the perpetration of acts of sexual violence by armed groups and civilians in conflict settings.

one of urgent and visible deeds. While recent years have seen a vast upsurge of research on sexual violence in conflict settings and an increasing consciousness of gendered ethical guidelines for interviewing vulnerable populations (WHO, 2007; Sikweyiya, Dartnall and Jewkes, 2015), little has been written on how violent/spectacular representations of sexual violence both affect and infect the researcher, the research process and the knowledge produced, the key concern of this paper.<sup>7</sup>

My argument draws from ethnographic research conducted between 2012 and 2016 in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Spectacular representations of sexual violence, often drawing on shock-statistics, facilitate a visceral turn towards this violence, that is, these framings serve to mobilise governments, journalists, humanitarian organisations and researchers to act against this suffering. Yet, I argue that such discourse restricts what can “be heard, read, seen, felt and known” (Butler, 2009, 100). Framings of rape as exceptional hide the complicity of international actors, institutions, researchers and the media-aid complex in perpetuating violent representations, effectively positioning and imagining themselves outside of or in opposition to the ‘horrific’ sexual violence ‘out there’, thus occluding the fields of power pertaining to discursive regimes, their effects on research and the ways in which these influence knowledge production. A power/knowledge complex implies that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge and scientific truth (Foucault, 1980). This complex is especially worth investigating when conducting research in a “postcolonial field” (Said, 1989, 209) like the DRC where Western actors have largely shaped and articulated knowledge on events in Congo and where ‘heart of darkness’ imagery fuels contemporary understandings of violence (Dunn, 2003). The Congo is also a space where Western feminist discourse has constructed a violated ‘other’ in need of salvation, which, in turn, justifies its own interventionist impulses (see Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013).<sup>8</sup>

Attention to power hierarchies when conducting fieldwork in (post) conflict settings is not new and has taken many forms of scholarly engagement (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Dauphinée, 2007). Different academic disciplines have enthusiastically investigated the power/knowledge nexus in conjunction to race, gender and the White Woman’s Burden, which refers to the postcolonial critique

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<sup>7</sup> A notable exception is provided by Judith Verweijen (2016) who in her research on the Congolese army analyses how her perceptions were influenced by tropes of barbarity and dominant discourses on development and human rights. She identifies some strategies in order to cope with the ‘barbarian syndrome’. The work of Eriksson Baaz and Stern (2013) reflects on the ethics, dilemmas and fears of engagement and provides a postcolonial reading of the Western urge to save the raped women of Congo, it does not, however, elaborate on how discourses affected their research in the field.

<sup>8</sup> On mainstream Western feminist orthodoxy around the other in need of salvation, see eg Doezema, 2001; Syed and Ali, 2011. On Western feminist praxis and gender politics, see eg Oyewumi, 1997.

on the role that white women played and still play in colonial and development projects (see Ali, 2006; Burton, 1990; Alcoff, 2006; Sikweyiya et al, 2015; Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004; Syed and Ali, 2011). Yet few scholars have written on one particular dimension within the power/knowledge nexus, notably the affective dimensions of violent representations on the researcher and the production of knowledge when conducting research in violent settings.<sup>9</sup>

The argument unfolds along three sections. The first section traces how current representations on sexual violence form part of a long history of representing Congo in racialised and sexualised terms. It argues that such discourse reproduces a powerful colonial imaginary that, in drawing on longstanding scripts of barbarity, not only reinforces racial and sexual hierarchies but also ‘others’ those involved in and affected by the violence (victims and perpetrators alike).<sup>10</sup> It further affects research and knowledge production on sexual violence in eastern DRC that is largely authored by Western actors and that may reproduce colonial imagery and tropes of sexualised and racialised others, the second section of this paper. The last section then examines how I shaped my research in relation to these ‘toxic’ discourses and their harmful effects.

While it has long been recognised that research is already contaminated and determined by researchers’ politically, culturally and geographically privileged position (Spivak, 1988), this paper argues researching violence does not merely imply narrating experiences of violence or ‘giving voice’ to suffering but to account for how experiences of violence and their representations are employed by institutions, researchers and journalists.<sup>11</sup> Abu-Lughod (2011, 44) in her research on honor killings emphasises honor crimes do not occur *outside* international and state institutions but the construction of these crimes to a great extent legitimises those institutions and their practices. The same argument applies to other forms of gendered violence that have received quite sudden and extensive international attention. Constructions of wartime rape thus need to be studied as these legitimise the institutions that frame such crimes. This means to redirect attention to the political work of sexual violence framings and how these affect knowledge production. In other words, this paper aims to reverse the invisibility that research

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview on knowledge production on sexual violence in eastern DRC, see Daley, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> The term “othering” was coined by Gayatri Spivak (1985) to “denote a process through which imperial discourse defines itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes” (Ashcroft et al, 2000, 158). Othering also signifies the process by which “Western knowledge creates differences between itself as the norm and other knowledge systems as inferior” (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010, 618).

<sup>11</sup> How institutions such as the World Bank or the UN hold vested interests in reproducing spectacular – and inaccurate – narratives about ‘Third World countries’ is however not within the scope of this paper.

on wartime rape may manufacture in perpetuating violent representations.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the paper aims to ‘undo’ research on sexual violence by confronting hegemonic narratives on wartime rape and excavating how toxic framings affect the research and the knowledge produced.

### **Rape of the Imaginary<sup>13</sup>**

In recent years, wartime rape has gained international prominence (see e.g. Henry, 2014; Buss, 2014). While this is an important achievement, international discursive practices that establish the severity and intensity of sexual violence in the Congolese war consist of particular graphic and explicit references to sexual abuse, emphasising its bestial and barbaric nature, framings that are evocative of the colonial vocabulary (Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2010). The international community seems to be fixated on sexual violence but at the same time is unwilling to understand it beyond the well-known tropes of barbarity. Stereotypical racialised and sexualised images of Africa and its inhabitants resonate because they draw on a colonial imaginary (Mertens and Pardy, 2017), an ensemble of Western writings and representations that emerged out of the colonial period which, in part, constructs Africa as different and ‘other’ (Desai, 2001, 4; Mudimbe, 1988). Indeed, my archival research into sexual violence and its representations in the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo reveals narratives of civilisation and barbarity as markers of imperial power, which produce “colonial divisions of humanity” (Lowe, 2015, 7). Such colonial narratives and practices were highly gendered, sexualised and racialised and served to intervene in and regulate the most intimate domains of both colonisers and colonised (see also Lauro, 2005; Hunt, 1990). My work in the archives also exposes how colonial processes that produced binary divisions (such as civilised vs uncivilised, sexual freedom vs sexual backwardness) are ongoing. Today, the colonial discursive mechanisms of sexualising and racialising continue to construct and draw on a colonial imaginary that is based on difference and forcefully reinscribes sexual and racial hierarchies (Mertens, 2017).

Contrary to colonial and contemporary framings, perceptions and representations on Africa were not always divisive or hierarchical. In the Middle Ages, representations of Africa were rather indistinct, mostly emphasising the mystery element of the continent (Hall, 1997). Still, ‘positive’ European images of Africa emerged between the twelfth and seventeenth century which depicted Africans as “noble beings” or as “political allies whose vast kingdoms and empires were believed to be commensurate with the most powerful of royal monarchies which reigned in Europe” (Grinker, Lubkemann and Steiner, 2010, 22-23). This changed when Enlightenment thinking attributed savagery, eroticism and

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<sup>12</sup> I am inspired here by Kogacioglu’s (2004) research on framings of honor crimes. She urges us to reverse the “invisibility that modern institutions manufacture about their own roles in perpetuating such framings.”

<sup>13</sup> I borrow this term from Aminata Traoré’s *Viol de L’Imaginaire* (2002).

primitivism to Africans and other non-Western peoples, as articulated by Edward Long in 1774 who considered Africa “the parent of everything that is monstrous in Nature” (cited in McClintock, 1995, 22; see also Hall, 1997). Rudyard Kipling (1899) in his poem *The White Man’s Burden*, in which he urges the US to take control of the Philippines after winning the Spanish-American war, speaks of “new-caught sullen peoples” as “half devil and half child”. The themes of mystery and savagery are abundant in nineteenth century travellers’ and missionaries’ reports and diaries, such as can be found in Joseph Conrad’s *An Outpost of Progress*. Musing on the Congo as “wild” yet “strange”, “incomprehensible” and “mysterious”, Conrad also referred to it as “pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man”, which “brings sudden trouble into the heart” (1990, 6). In Conrad’s famous novel *Heart of Darkness* ([1899] 1990, 186) the protagonist Marlowe travelling on the Congo River “in the night of first ages” fathoms the humanity of native men:

The earth seemed unearthly ... and the men were — No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it — this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough ...

At the end of the nineteenth century, the imperial encounter between European colonisers and the colony of Congo produced a series of images of racial and sexual difference and inferiority (see McClintock, 1995). Fanon (1963, 33) powerfully critiques the colonial vocabulary:

When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary [...] Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody, that laziness stretched out in the sun, that vegetative rhythm of life ...

This colonial imagery of racial otherness, sexual aberration, savagery and laziness entered public and private spheres of the empire through discourses of “civilising missions”, the “porno-tropics” and practices such as the racialising of advertisements (McClintock, 1995).

In the present moment, fragments of these racial stereotypes – what Stuart Hall (1997, 249) calls a “racialized regime of representation” – endure. Indeed, contemporary descriptions of Congolese perpetrators as savage and inhuman and of the violence as “indescribable savagery” are ingrained in contemporary discourse on African conflicts in general (see Richards, 2004; Mbembe, 2001) and the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular (see also Dunn, 2003; Pottier, 2007). As articulated by Judith Verweijen (2015, 1): “There is no better incarnation of the

‘(New) Barbarian’, it seems, than the raping, looting and pillaging FARDC soldier that is omnipresent in the knowledge and imagery productions of the aid industry/news/social media complex.”

The work of a colonial imaginary is visible in contemporary representations of sexual violence in the Congo that tend to concentrate on one particular form of gender-based violence, namely brutal militarised sexual violence in conflict, which renders black, male perpetrators as bestial and ‘inhuman’ while Congolese women are reinforced in their portrayal of enduring victims of ‘black savagery’. When for example UN Special Envoy for Refugees Angelina Jolie and former UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Bangura speak of their meetings with rape victims, their accounts are often staged through the tropes of horror and alterity. A UN French representative during an open debate at the Security Council refers to the “indescribable savagery of sexual violence” in the DRC, which has gained “epidemic and endemic proportions” (UNSC, Open Debate, 2013). As articulated by Kristof at the start of this article, representations of the sexual atrocities committed in Congo emphasise the inhumanity of the ‘perpetrators’, and through the articulation of this inhumanity, the violence is framed as different to the violence that is experienced in the West or as inherent to Congolese culture. Eve Enslar (2007), playwright and founder of V-Day, states, “because so few perpetrators have been held accountable for the crimes that they’re committing, it’s becoming ... like a country sport: rape.” Jeffrey Gettleman (2007) from the New York Times, quoting Dr Mukwege, describes men in Congo as primates. “There used to be a lot of gorillas in there,” he said, “but now they’ve been replaced by much more savage beasts.”<sup>14</sup> Representations of black sexual savagery perpetually reproduce the colonial imaginary. Yet, representations of difference do not only occur through the bodies of black perpetrators. Victims’ experiences of violence become intelligible only through the frame of ‘the raped body’. During interviews with Congolese staff at Pole Institute, one respondent stated: “A Congolese woman is now seen as a rape victim. This downgrades immensely her status and value in society. This is tragic” (interview Goma, October 2012). The experience of Espoir<sup>15</sup> from Bunyakiri, whom I met in 2012, whose husband was killed, land was taken and business destroyed is another example of how a “representational economy” on wartime rape privileges rape experiences only (Buss, 2014, 14). When Espoir talked to foreign observers, they were only interested in her rape experience. The continuities of violence in which

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted however that international discourses are also appropriated by ‘local’ elites or actors on the ground (see Mertens and Pardy, 2017; Verweijen, 2016; Chabal and Daloz, 1999). During fieldwork the author observed how Congolese staff as well as ordinary civilians, for a range of complex and social reasons, recycled/mimicked rhetoric on sexual violence as a weapon of war. Often, reliance on international funding leaves Congolese NGOs with little choice other than to make their language compatible with donors’ priorities.

<sup>15</sup> Names of respondents and focus group participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.



the rape occurred, such as prolonged insecurity, fear, poverty and other forms of violence such as the killing of her husband or the appropriation of her land, are ignored. Her humanity is thus further denied as she embodies the inhuman acts that have been committed. As such, bodies – and the acts they embody – serve as signifiers of difference, marking the violated body as the main point of interest for researchers, journalists and others interested in this violence. Research, through which knowledge is expanded, is thus deeply embedded in colonial and othering practices. Indigenous scholar Smith has explored how imperialism, research and knowledge are inextricably linked. She asserts:

From an indigenous perspective Western research is more than just research that is located in a positivist tradition. It is research which brings to bear, on any study of indigenous peoples, a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualization of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power (2013, 92).

Research thus allows ‘us’ to represent, evaluate and classify formerly colonized peoples’ societies and cultures (Smith, 2013). In relation to sexual violence in Congo this has meant that, in recent years, reports produced by the media-aid complex and some academic research have focused predominantly on brutal militarised rapes when used as a weapon of war. Because of international attention to the problem and an unrelenting demand for quantitative data, studies conducted in eastern DRC often focus on conflict-related sexual violence only, drawing on nation-wide surveys, hospital records and questionnaires for rape victims. The findings of the data collection are then coded into Western knowledge systems and further reproduce a colonial imaginary of difference.

### **Producing Knowledge in the Congo Warscape**

When Peterman et al’s (2011) study estimated that 48 women per hour had been raped in the DRC in 2007, advocacy campaigns such as Save the Congo and others distributed the numbers without scrutiny or any form of critical engagement. As policymakers respond to statistics, which are crucial for mobilising donor funding and humanitarian and political support (Merry, 2016), numbers help to establish a ‘regime of truth’ – in this case the ‘exceptionality’ and barbarity of sexual violence as a weapon of war in eastern DRC, even though a number of studies have challenged the rape as weapon of war framings and associated assumptions of female victimhood and male perpetration (Kelly, 2010; Cohen, Hoover-Green and Wood, 2012; Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013). When I asked a staff member of a local organisation about the international attention to sexual violence and some of the numbers that circulated, he said:

Everyone got mobilised. It was like a dance, everyone participated. It was as if nobody wanted it to finish. There was a lot of

propaganda in which statistics were used to convince the international community, like a merchant trying to sell his products (*marchandise*): '15,000 women raped per month!'; 'every hour 48 women are raped!' (interview, Mudaka, September 2012).

Caught up in the 'urgency' of wartime rape and the pressure from donors to produce hard data, a plethora of studies have emerged primarily by medical and health researchers aiming to quantify the prevalence of sexual violence in eastern DRC (see also Daley, 2014) and qualify individual responses to it (see e.g. Peterman et al, 2011; Bartels et al, 2010, 2013; Longombe et al, 2008; Kelly, et al, 2011; Zihundula and Maharaj, 2015; Mukwege and Nangini, 2009). As rape does not get easily captured in visual images, counting the rape victims becomes the metric of action. Statistics are crucial in establishing and measuring the urgency of an issue and thus the need for intervention and funding (see also Polman, 2010). This is the case despite estimates of the scale of sexual violence being very difficult to obtain.

While the intensity and scale of sexual violence in eastern DRC is beyond question, the majority of scholarship tends to focus on establishing numbers, patterns, effects and tracing experiences of wartime rape. Often however, the method utilised does not easily allow for the existence of other narratives, such as domestic violence or civilian rape (see Cohen, Hoover-Green and Wood, 2012 for an in-depth discussion on misconceptions of wartime rape; see also Boesten, 2017). One study, for example, assesses the prevalence of all forms of interpersonal violence. Johnson et al (2010) found that 39 per cent of women and 23 per cent of men in eastern Congo had experienced sexual violence.<sup>16</sup> Because they conducted random interviews in a cross-sectional study of the Kivus, Maniema and Ituri provinces, as opposed to clinical interviews that present a biased, non-random sample, they identified a much greater scale of civilian and intimate partner rape than previously explored. These findings stand in sharp contrast to studies that draw on data obtained at Panzi Hospital or Heal Africa (see e.g. Zihundula and Maharaj, 2015; Bartels et al, 2010, 2013; Mukwege and Nangini, 2009; Kelly et al, 2011; Pratt and Werchick, 2004; Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International, 2010; Longombe et al, 2008). Using medical data from hospitals and standardised questionnaires with rape victims at health centres, these studies

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<sup>16</sup> The method of random sampling employed in this study is, however, flawed. Johnson et al's study states that interviewers began in the center of the village and through toss coin decided which house they would visit. "At each house, the [Congolese] interviewer requested to speak with a male or female adult household member, randomly chosen by coin toss before entering a household. If that person was unavailable then the next adult in the household was approached ..." (555). This methodology seems to be inappropriate as respondents were approached in their private homes without prior formal arrangements or consent. Moreover, especially in the context of extreme vulnerability, insecurity and intra-community tensions in some rural villages in eastern DRC, the random sampling of house visits might arouse suspicions amongst community members or even violence.

produce a certain ‘truth’ on sexual violence.<sup>17</sup> Panzi receives the worst cases of sexual violence, often women who are gang-raped by armed groups and are in need of urgent medical intervention. Research drawing on hospital records obtained at Panzi will thus generate particular findings based on its context: armed men commit the majority of sexual violence, brutal gang rapes predominate and sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. These findings starkly diverge from, for example, Kaboru et al’s study (2014) with rural communities in the Walikale district. This study concludes that there is a “communalisation” of sexual violence as 45 per cent of the perpetrators are men from the same village. Different methodologies will thus generate very different findings and affect knowledge production differently. As rape in eastern DRC greatly varies geographically and contextually, it is impossible to generalise on the basis of data obtained in one particular area and at one specific period of time. The nature of the conflict continually changes and patterns in violence identified between 2004 and 2008 may no longer apply. Media, advocacy groups and academic researchers do not always problematise the generalisation of certain statistical findings or the biased results drawn from data obtained at hospitals and may thus further reinforce dominant frames of strategicness, ‘exceptionality’ or ‘savagery’.

For example, Zihundula and Maharaj’s (2015) study draws on in-depth interviews with 19 rape victims at Panzi, 15 of whom had been subject to gang rape. The study aims to “deepen our understanding of how women perceive and experience the risk of sexual violence” (Zihundula and Maharaj, 2015, 736). In drawing on women’s narratives and giving voice to the suffering, the study makes visible the horror and pain of rape while allowing the “women the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words...” (736). It is however unclear how it deepens ‘our’ understandings of how women experience rape. We already know of the profound sense of loss, physical and emotional pain, and the risks associated with rape, as multiple reports and studies since 2002 have documented testimonies of sexual violence survivors in eastern DRC (HRW, 2002; Dolan, 2010). This is not to argue that research that draws on hospital records, questionnaires or interviews with rape victims is not valid. Importantly, more research is needed on sexual violence in conflict settings. The main argument here is to point to the researcher’s responsibilities in shaping and representing the lives of Congolese women and men through the frame of sexual violence only. Is it the researcher’s responsibility to merely ‘give voice’ to the suffering and to recount the graphic details of rape scenes? Is it not important to confront the dangers of powerful narratives that continue to reify rape as a higher status problem or as unrelated to other forms of

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<sup>17</sup> While using hospital data or other existing records are important to avoid inflicting further trauma by virtue of interviewing victims about their sexual violence experiences, they are limited in the sense that these data provide a biased and truncated analysis of the lived experiences of sexual violence.

violence and the context in which these occur? Is it not equally important to reflect on his/her complicity in perpetuating harmful framings?<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, research on sexual violence in Congo (and elsewhere) is closely tied to spatio-temporal sites and white privilege. Western actors, primarily medical professionals and human rights organisations author the majority of publications on sexual violence in eastern DRC (see also Daley, 2014). The knowledge produced by this body of work often obscures the complex power relations in which the research was executed. For example, Panzi Hospital because of its location and accessibility is relatively safe to visit. It is a safe ground for researchers looking to access rape victims or medical records. While western hospitals and institutions have very strict regulations on whom can access vulnerable populations, this is not the case in eastern DRC. Even though in recent years, Panzi Hospital has enforced stricter policies on who can access rape victims, this is not the case for many other health centres in the Kivus. It is thus quite easy for any researcher or journalist to access rape victims and interview them. Such permissive environments might give rise to harmful conduct and research practices by foreign academic researchers (see also Lake and Cronin-Furman, forthcoming).

Foreign researchers, journalists and other international actors navigating Congo's landscape thus draw economic, political and social advantages from their privileged, often western and white, position (see also Syed and Ali, 2011). Through international funding, researchers are able to conduct research in conflict settings while their 'international status' often provides them access to places that are not accessible in western countries, such as medical centres or hospitals. Sensitive and private information on sexual and domestic violence incidents stored in legal centres or hospitals is very well protected in western countries. This is not always the case in countries with weak political and state institutions. To undo research on sexual violence is then to critically reflect on the research methods used and to act in ways that do not enforce dominant and/or harmful framings of sexual violence in conflict.

Postcolonial feminist scholars have debated the conundrum of knowledge production vigorously. With Gayatri Spivak leading the charge, a common approach for those writing on the developing world is Spivak's (1988) notion of hyper-self-reflexivity, a method which has since been significant to feminist methodological approaches to the power/knowledge nexus. Concretely, this involves a constant hyper-reflective attitude and an examination of "our own responsibilities for the situations in which others in distant places find themselves" – in other words, our complicity in suffering (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 789). One

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that I am not immune to my own critique. As a Western researcher on sexual violence I am very much aware of my own entanglement in violence as the normative condition within which I operate. Research, like any practice of producing knowledge, is never neutral. There is always violence in representation and there is always betrayal in academic writing.

episode during my research in Congo illustrates this. We had just finished a focus group discussion when a woman approached me and told me how she was brutally raped by multiple soldiers. She described these events in vivid details, shaking her head continuously. She then said the war had destroyed her. For a long time I wondered what to do with this story? Do I retell it, and if so, how? One way would be to retell the experience in the most vivid details and to focus on the physical violence. It would draw attention to the suffering and pain and would instil resentment and anger towards this injustice. It might even provoke an urge amongst some to ‘save’ the Congolese rape victims. Yet the focus on physical violence would obliterate the structural violence of war, the social, gendered, economic inequalities and the violence of women’s and men’s material existence. Reflecting on the researcher’s complicity in representing violence is thus a crucial task to unveil his/her entanglement in the forces and conditions that give rise to suffering especially in relation to representing violence and suffering. However, to think of this approach as a tool or strategy to overcome power hierarchies would be wrong (see Ali, 2006),<sup>19</sup> rather the reflective approach is a call for action to acknowledge the researcher’s complicity and to unlearn his/her privileges and bias (Kapoor, 2004). It is thus a way of being, a way of relating to the world and the people around us. However, while it remains a crucial form of engaging with unequal power relationships, the call for action that is triggered by reflexivity is equally important. To reflect on researchers’ responsibilities thus also entails to act on and to confront researchers’ complicity in capitalising on and representing narratives of rape. The next section elaborates on how I shaped my research in relation to ‘toxic’ discourses on sexual violence in eastern DRC and outlines my struggle in engaging with/resisting the dominating power/knowledge complex on wartime rape.

### Research in the ‘Rape-Capital of the World’

In Walungu territory, South Kivu, an area affected by violence as a result of repeated clashes between the armed groups of Raia Mutomboki, FDLR and the Congolese army, the FARDC, I meet with Dr Etienne who runs a *centre hospitalier* in Nzibira in the health zone of Kaniola. I visit the hospital to examine both the broader context of violence and insecurity in which sexual violence occurs and the response to it. Dr Etienne informs me the centre offers medical services to around 60,000 people (of an estimated 165,000 inhabitants of the *zone de santé rurale*/rural health zone). He shows me the operating room and the dire conditions in which most patients are treated. He tells me about the hardship women endure due to gynaecological complications (often because of prolonged childbirth and the lack of medical follow-up) and the suffering of children due to malnutrition and the

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed postcolonial theorists like Spivak and Said have long argued we are always already situated inside discourse, institutions and geopolitics. As articulated by Said (1989: 216-217): “[T]here is no vantage *outside* the actuality of relationships between cultures, between unequal imperial and nonimperial powers, between different Others [...]”, only “within the actuality, and as participants in it”.

complications of malaria, such as anaemia. A separate building hosts pregnant women who have come to give birth in this hospital. Some women have walked 25 kilometres to reach the hospital. The room has 25 beds with approximately 20 centimetres between each bed and on average 50 to 60 expectant women wait in the room. I note that two to three women share the same bed. I ask Dr Etienne about sexual violence and he says:

Here rape is but one of many problems. We've had incidents of rape due to the armed conflict and violence between different armed groups and the army but the problem is really the lack of healthcare. There is hardly any medical equipment and practically no funding for beds (interview Nzibira, May 2016; see also Verlinden, 2011).

The *centre hospitalier* provides a stark contrast to Panzi hospital in Bukavu, run and founded by Dr Mukwege and internationally renowned for its treatment of rape-related traumas.<sup>20</sup> Due to an increased attention to conflict-related sexual violence in the last years, donors have favoured projects that target sexual violence (Douma and Hilhorst, 2012; Autesserre, 2012). Panzi, as a model hospital for the battle against conflict-related sexual violence, has therefore received millions of dollars in international funding. Dr Etienne, however, has not received a salary in months. Although the *centre hospitalier* is run by the state, there is hardly any support from the Congolese government, only some international funding. The principal source of income comes from the population itself (a medical consultation costs 2USD for an adult and 1USD for a child).<sup>21</sup> Panzi, however, offers free medical services to survivors of sexual violence, malnourished and AIDS/HIV-patients. It is clean, has many doctors, foreign volunteers, medicines and uses modern equipment. Panzi hospital has a total of 61 doctors and 450 beds.<sup>22</sup> The medical personnel at Dr Etienne's hospital consist of two doctors, including himself, four nurses and three midwives. Both research sites thus provide starkly different realities. This example also makes clear how a particular emphasis on wartime rape directs attention away from other equally pressing issues. In their article, 'You say rape, we say hospitals', D'Errico et al (2013) suggest that a focus on wartime rape detracts from structural problems such as the flawed/absent health care system. This is a sobering example of the visibility granted to wartime rape and the limits of such framings and practices. It further complicates the act of researching sexual violence in Congo's warscape as researchers want to recognise the intensity of conflict-related sexual violence but may struggle to do so for fear of reinforcing harmful framings and their othering effects.

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<sup>20</sup> Dr Mukwege has received numerous human rights awards and international prizes for his sustained efforts to bring to light the plight of numerous women and girls in eastern DRC and to advocate for the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

<sup>21</sup> *Rapport Annuel 2015 du centre hospitalier de Nzibira* (Oct 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Panzi has 23 specialists, 19 general practitioners, 8 surgeons, 3 obstetricians, 6 internists, 2 pediatricians, see <https://www.hopitaldepanzi.com/l-hopital-de-panzi>

Indeed, the act of researching sexual violence and the people who experience it – the rape victims, their families and communities – is fraught with ethical dilemmas and methodological challenges. At the onset of my research, spectacular representations of sexual violence and their ‘othering’ tendencies prompted questions about whether it is even possible to research these acts of violence in a way that does not perpetuate a stereotypical image of women as victims and men as perpetrators and that does not enforce (post)colonial imagery of the DRC as the ‘heart of darkness’? If I rely on a methodology, which necessitates testimonies of rape survivors, will I not reproduce the enduring victim/perpetrator dichotomy? Will I not reinforce the objectifying tendencies that underlie contemporary representations? Will I still allow room for a Congolese man or woman to tell their story outside of the rape experience? And crucially, how *can* Congolese people speak outside the hegemonic representations of their situation? These questions and the power imbalances they reveal deeply affected my research in the sense that I shaped my research in order to confront prevailing dominant narratives on wartime rape. Another example from my fieldwork illustrates this point.

In 2012, during a trip to eastern DRC, I visited Panzi hospital in Bukavu. Arriving at Panzi on a rainy afternoon in September, I felt worried and anxious that staff and patients would perceive me as ‘another’ white researcher on sexual violence or ‘another Westerner’ visiting a rape hospital. Indeed, due to international attention to the problem of wartime rape in eastern DRC, visits to Panzi hospital have become an “obligatory stop” for international delegations, Western researchers and journalists (Autesserre, 2012, 13). I therefore entered the hospital with a certain dread. A helpful Swedish volunteer introduced me into the workings of the hospital. In recent years because of numerous international visits, Panzi established a policy that urges foreign visitors to also speak to patients other than rape victims in order to understand that many reproductive health problems that are unrelated to rape require attention. He emphasised that Panzi is a general hospital that, due to the prolonged conflict and accompanying violence, is now specialised in rape-related physical traumas. Nevertheless, he insisted most visitors are only interested in sexual violence issues. Acutely aware of the ease with which foreign visitors can approach and access rape victims and understanding the often perverse and harmful effects of such encounters, I made clear to the staff at Panzi prior to my visit that I did not come to meet or interview survivors of sexual abuse. My aim was to speak to the hospital staff to help understand the problem of sexual violence and the international response to it. The rather voyeuristic media coverage with its focus on spectacular violence and the female violated body contributed to my decision not to adopt a survivor-centred methodology and to frame my research differently.

Different scholarly studies as well as human rights and media reports often rely on testimonies from survivors, thereby placing an increasingly heavy burden on rape victims who are called upon again and again to tell their stories of violence

(see also Buss, 2014). This is not to argue that studies drawing on victims' testimonies are flawed or problematic *per se* or that these necessarily produce 'othering' effects. A discussion on decolonizing research methods (and knowledge production) on sexual violence in conflict settings is, however, crucial, particularly in the DRC context where a representational hierarchy prioritises rape experiences and, in some cases, might overlook the structural, multi-faceted realities in which sexual abuse occurs.

I opted for multiple methods of focus group, participant observation and discourse analysis. I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with key informants but chose not to use this method when dealing with vulnerable or traumatised populations in order not to subject the interviewee to emotional or psychological harm by interviewing them about their experiences. Othering tendencies inherent in contemporary representations that focus specifically on the 'raped body' shaped my decision to use focus group discussions in collaboration with a small community-based organisation that conducts long-term projects on community reconciliation and restoring social cohesion amongst communities and its individuals in the provinces of South and North Kivu. Focus groups are better adapted to understand attitudes and experiences and knowledge on certain topics while interviews may be more suitable for tapping into individual biographies (Kitzinger, 1995, 302).

The focus group discussions were part of the larger project that the organisation was involved with. This ensured the methodology was based on an understanding of the local context.<sup>23</sup> It should however be pointed out that my presence as *muzungu* (white person) may have affected the observations and discussions.<sup>24</sup> There is always the possibility of respondents participating in the debates because they assume certain benefits might be received by collaborating with a foreign researcher. This is a particular risk in the context of eastern DRC where a large humanitarian presence devoting attention to sexual violence has led to its commercialisation, a dynamic which enhances the perception that victims of sexual violence gain greater access to international services and thus receive more material benefits than those who have not been raped (see also Eriksson Baaz and Stern, 2013; Douma and Hillhorst, 2012). It is thus quite likely that focus group participants adapted their behaviour and discourse to my presence.

The focus groups discussed the broader context of prolonged violence and insecurity and the effects on different communities. The community exchanges

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<sup>23</sup> It is important to point out that liaising with a local organisation involves risk as well. In the complex context of eastern DRC it is crucial to be aware of the organisation's political, ethnic or other affiliations in order to avoid harming certain communities by 'choosing sides' (see also WHO, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> I did not feel that my gender affected the discussions in any way. Motherhood, however, does play an important role. The rapport developed through shared motherhood did, at times, momentarily suspend other relations of power or privilege.



then focused more specifically on experiences of and attitudes toward sexual violence and its broader gendered effects on communities as a whole and on men and women individually. In particular, we discussed the violent encounter between the Congolese army, the M23 and civilians in and around Minova in 2012. The focus was not on the actual rape experience or on the female violated body but on the environment and social structure in which sexual and non-sexual violence takes place and responses to it. Many shared their experiences of violence through the focus groups and in doing so provided important first-hand testimony of the structural, economic, military and social context in which the violence occurred.

During a focus group discussion, Solange spoke of the war and how she lives in and with violence on a daily basis. She talked about how sexual violence had destroyed her community. Soldiers had raped her. She never told her husband what had happened, as she feared that he would abandon her. She is now afraid of having more children as she fears disease. However, against the ‘urgency’ of her predicament she also pointed to the ignorance of her ancestors and to the history of colonisation to explain harmful gendered practices and the erosion of traditional gender relations. Solange spoke:

Women have been marginalised because of the ignorance of our ancestors but also because of the colonisers. They [the colonisers] said that women are men’s property. Some customs ensured that women were not properly instructed. We remained ignorant. The men took all the ‘rights’. Even now, some *papas* [literally ‘fathers’] don’t want their women to attend exchange groups (*groupes d’échange*) or training (*formations*)... Have the men taken a collective agreement (*convention collective*) not to educate the women? (focus group Tsheya, 2015)

Solange spoke of the “trace” of violence, which runs through her life, hopes and dreams:

The war has destroyed everything. Rapes occurred before 2012 but there is also insecurity and the lack of hospitals and markets in the area. Women have to walk days to reach a hospital or market. Many women are attacked on the way. Men do not accompany us as they might get killed...

The violence that Solange described is not singular. It is social as it is socially produced. That is, her fear of stigmatisation can only be understood from a discriminatory patriarchal culture. Yet, violence is also structural as it is related to the conflict and years of war and violence. Such structural violence is historically and often economically produced and constrains agency (Farmer, 2005). Beatrice from Kitambi says:

Women need accompaniment when they travel to hospitals ... insecurity is the big problem. In the village, the military is there but

they don't provide security ... on the contrary, people fear them. The humanitarians don't do anything, they advocate (*faire des plaidoyers*) ... so who can provide security (focus group, Kitambi, June 2015)?

Nabintu, a 20-year-old woman, asserts:

Here we suffer, it is unsafe to cultivate the fields; many young men join armed groups ... what else can they do ... when they can't afford the dowry (*dote*) they sometimes take a girl by force to marry her. We have nothing ... This is our life (focus group, Kitambi, June 2015).

Justine, from Kalungu, specifically spoke to the protracted nature of the conflict and the violence:

In our tradition women are respected but this changed with the wars. Now it's normal for a women to be raped and looted when she travels to another territory to trade ... but even with Mobutu we were at war because the government does nothing to protect us, they take our stuff and rape us (focus group, Kalungu, June 2015).

Rape in this context should therefore not be perceived as a singular moment of trauma but as part of long-term structural violence. It is the consequence of local and regional factors that in turn need to be embedded in historical, political and global processes. When asked about how the conflict has affected his community, Patrice spoke of massive displacements in recent years, which led to loss of land and other goods such as cows and goats, which, in turn, resulted in extreme poverty. "I have been displaced twice ... Now I just live, there is nothing else to do", he stated (focus group Kitambi, June 2015). Many others during focus groups felt that poverty and lack of opportunity were their most acute problems.

The information gathered through these methods provides insight into the wider context in which sexual violence occurs and elucidated that sexual violence is never the only problem. It takes places in a context of extreme vulnerability, conflict, insecurity and structural violence. Yet despite the durability of violence in eastern DRC of which sexual violence is just one aspect, the focus on singular events of highly brutal militarised rapes exclude any historical or structural analysis of violence (see also Malkki, 1996). This is not to suggest that the mixed-methods approach as outlined above produces more valid results than for example a victim-centered approach. Rather, it is to point to the importance of researching continuities of violence of which sexual violence is part.

During a focus group discussion at Karangu, one woman tells me how she was deeply touched when a woman from her community was forced to leave her household after she had been raped: "Just imagine: to be evicted from your own house, your family and community because you have been raped" (focus group Karangu, June 2015). Not only does she have to live for the remainder of her life

with the physical trace and memory of this violence, she also lost the only support system she had. This is a reality for many women, men and children in eastern Congo and other parts of the globe. In my analysis on the ways in which framings of wartime rape have affected knowledge production I do not intend to minimise the intensity, the severity or brutality of the violence. Nor do I suggest that we know all that we need to know about sexual violence in conflict. On the contrary, much more systematic research is needed into the structural and social context in which sexual violence occurs. It is, however, precisely the gendered inequality of suffering that deserves attention. And it is a history of colonial and imperial framings and knowledge production on Congolese history and contemporary realities, which warrants a critical gaze.

## Conclusion

Is it possible to research acts of sexual violence not merely through the frame of the raped female body and in a way that does not perpetuate harmful framings of Congo as a land of rape and death? This question has to be posed because to ignore the potential effects of research narrows our understandings of what research does, particularly in a predefined geopolitical space that is Congo. To overlook this question may inadvertently reinstate harmful framings and their 'othering' effects. A question of this sort invites us to deeply investigate research as an ultimate effect of power but also as the means of its articulation. It urges those involved in understanding wartime rape to explore the multiple ways of engaging with and addressing wartime rape.

More recently, the widespread brutal sexual violence in eastern DRC has drawn researchers, journalists, UN and government representatives and celebrities to the Congo. Hollywood actress Robyn Wright Penn (n.d.), for example, stated that she could function as a catalyst to help raise attention to the plight of women and girls who have been raped. It is easy to be seduced by the spectacular violence of rapes and it is common to fall into traps of stereotyping and 'saving' approaches. Without a doubt, the Congo remains a site for white people's journeys of self-discovery in order to find redemption, salvation or (academic) glory. Today Congo still serves as a place where white crusaders act out various moral poses (Achebe, cited in Comaroff & Comaroff, 2010, 32). While curiosity and unease may draw attention to the 'unspeakable' violence in Congo and pull the researcher deeper into these human moments of tremendous suffering, the gruelling details with which rapes are committed may complicate the willingness to understand this violence beyond the familiar tropes of barbarity and savagery and thus smother critical engagement.

This paper has attempted to elucidate how hegemonic narratives on sexual violence in eastern DRC govern understandings and imaginations of Congo and affect knowledge production. Taking a critical stance of the othering tendencies at the heart of contemporary representations, this paper urges to resist anaesthetised certainties on sexual violence, often produced by the media-aid complex. Undoing

research on sexual violence in Congo therefore involves a deep engagement with the question of how to research acts of sexual violence in a way that still allows room for Congolese people to tell their story outside of the rape experience. This is a crucial task specifically for researchers, policymakers, journalists and humanitarians producing knowledge on a country that has been imagined for centuries as a place of sexual excess and violence.

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