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RESEARCH ARTICLE

For the archive yet to come

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Abstract
This article explores the promises and pitfalls of the colonial archives for the study of seeing and knowing contemporary violence. As an ethnographic field and a site of decolonial struggles, the colonial archive is increasingly mobilised in scholarship that seeks to historicise and disrupt conventional, Western-centric knowledge production. While using the colonial archives might reproduce asymmetrical power relations, they also hold the potential to unsettle the 'toxic imperial debris' of our time. How can the colonial archives challenge the post-colonial politics of erasing imperial violence and contribute to decolonial futures? Drawing on research in the African Archives in Belgium and fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this paper complicates problematic portrayals of the post-colonial state in the DRC and Congolese women as always already violated or silenced. We argue that the logics of the African Archives reveal a set of destabilising state anxieties that reflect the duality and instability of colonial rule itself and that infuse contemporary (international) politics. This recounting of the violence contained in the archives both narrates the concrete, violent manifestations of our 'global coloniality' and works towards its own demise as part of a broader 'anticolonial archive'.

Keywords: anti-colonial archives; critical IR; Democratic Republic of Congo; post-colonial statehood; sexual violence

> *[The] Western archive is singularly complex. It contains within itself the resources of its own refutation. It is neither monolithic, nor the exclusive property of the West. Africa and its diaspora decisively contributed to its making and should legitimately make foundational claims on it.*
> Achille Mbembe, 2015[1]

The 'traces of my tears'

We start in 1904. A Congolese woman named Mokolo and living in the Congo Free State – now the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – testifies before King Leopold II's Commission of Inquiry. The Commission was established after the CRA, led by British journalist and politician E. D. Morel, requested an investigation be made into conditions in the Congo Free State under King Leopold II's rule (1885–1908).[2] There, she explains her husband was brutally kicked in the head for refusing to bring in more baskets of rubber and later died from his injuries.[3] 'You can still see the traces

[1]Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing knowledge and the question of the archive', Public lecture, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, 2015.

[2]The Commission was instituted by decree on 23 July 1904 by King Leopold II himself. He was the proprietor of the Congo Free State, which he ruled as his private domain until he was forced to sell it to the Belgian government in 1908.

[3]African Archives (herafter AA), Deposition 298, 5 January 1905. All archival sources have been translated by the authors.

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of my tears', she says, closing her testimony. Although her words strikingly echo Sylvia Tamale's claim that 'the past is never dead; it is not even past',[4] Mokolo's description of the lasting effects of imperial violence is still stored in the African Archives[5] in Brussels, away from her descendants, and removed from African citizens and diasporas across the world. Because 'no situation, concept or person can ever be fully understood without probing their histories',[6] the inaccessibility of Mokolo's testimony raises crucial questions about the place of the colonial archives in the study of the violence and politics of 'global coloniality'.[7]

How, then, can we engage with Mokolo's tears and the colonial archives in which they rest, in order to unearth the alternative knowledges entrenched in displaced and subjugated histories? How do we locate and mobilise within the colonial archive what Mbembe calls the 'resources of its own refutation', and how can we bring these into conversation with current struggles for an anti-colonial future? These questions are particularly salient for those of us studying political violence and/in Global North/South relations.[8] Many across social sciences now concur that Western theorisations of Global South politics have contributed to depicting 'the periphery as a projected "other"'[9] and reproduce sexist, racist, or capitalist domination.[10] At the centre of these issues sits the African continent,[11] long construed either as a '*haven of misery*' (Afro-pessimism) or as 'the future El Dorado of global capitalism' (Afro-optimism), always relegating Africa as a place that 'doesn't yet exist'.[12] The DRC is emblematic of these trends.[13] Labelled 'a paradigmatic case of state failure',[14] the 'rape capital of the world',[15] and the 'Heart of Darkness',[16] it has become an exemplary case of Chinua Achebe's 'image of Africa': '"the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore

[4]Sylvia Tamale, *Decolonization and Afrofeminism* (Ottawa: Daraja Press, 2020), p. 1.

[5]For further information, see Luis A. Bernardo y Gracia, '"Les archives africaines": Généalogie d'un nébuleux patrimoine colonial partagé', *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 98:4 (2021), pp. 1119–74; Bérengère Piret and Marie van Eeeckenrode, 'Les Archives de l'État, principal dépositaire des archives relatives à la colonisation', available at: {https://www.contemporanea.be/fr/article/20211-archieven-lang-les-archives-de-l%E2%80%99%C3%A9tat}.

[6]Tamale, *Decolonization and Afrofeminism*, p. 1.

[7]Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, 'Global coloniality and the decolonial option', *Kult*, 6 (2009), pp. 130–47.

[8]For a critical definition of the 'West', see Tamale, *Decolonization and Afrofeminism*, p. 13.

[9]Ole Wæver and Arlene Tickner, 'Introduction: Geocultural epistemologies', in Arlene Tickner and Ole Waever (eds), *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

[10]Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2004); Didier Bigo and R. B. J. Walker, 'Political sociology and the problem of the international', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 725–39; Peace Medie and Alice J. Kang, 'Power, knowledge and the politics of gender in the Global South', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1:1–2 (2018), pp. 37–54; Arlene Tickner and Karen Smith, *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[11]Kevin Dunn and Timothy Shaw, *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Paul-Henri Bischoff, Kwesi Aning, and Amitav Acharya, *Africa in Global International Relations: Emerging Approaches to Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[12]Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), pp. x–xi. Italics original. Afro-optimism should not be confused with Afro-futurism. The latter is a concept developed within writer, artistic, and academic circles, including among Afro-American communities, and depicts a techno-futurist world (think of *Black Panther*) in which the African continent has not suffered the consequences of colonisation and slavery. Afro-optimism, the supposedly more positive corollary of Afro-pessimism, here referred to by F. Sarr in text, encapsulates discourses (i.e. 'Africa rising') developed in the media, and in *The Economist* in particular, that still portray African countries in exploitable, neoliberal ways.

[13]Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[14]Robert Rotberg, 'The failure and collapse of nation-states', in Robert Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 1–45; Jeffrey Herbst and Greg Mills, 'The invisible state. It's time we admit the Democratic Republic of Congo does not exist', *Foreign Policy* (24 June 2013), available at {https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/24/the-invisible-state/}.

[15]See, for example, Nicholas Kristof, 'The weapon of rape', *New York Times* (15 June 2008).

[16]Luke Moffet, 'Ending the cycle of violence in the Congo', *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development*, 13:23 (2009), pp. 1–23.

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of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality'.[17] Many scholars now openly refuse such portrayals[18] and have generated extensive accounts of the modernity–coloniality nexus – 'a gendered and racialized structure of management that operates by controlling the economy, authority, knowledge, and subjectivities'[19] of marginalised groups. Among them are researchers who have studied Congolese histories, politics, and intellectual praxis and engaged with (oral) history, memory, and colonial archives to demonstrate that much of the violence that Congolese citizens experience today is deeply entangled in a long history of archival, intellectual, and material dispossession.[20] Exploring *how the colonial archives might challenge dominant narratives* allows us to provide a fresh theoretical outlook on Congolese politics and the broader manifestations of structural violence in global politics, including processes of knowledge production.

Here, we engage with a growing literature on the concept of the archives and how they might undo the harms of hegemonic knowledges and the perpetuation of power hierachies in disciplinary fields like International Relations (IR).[21] More specifically, we offer a conceptual and empirical exploration of the ways in which the colonial archives can contribute to building anti-colonial knowledges and provide a 'radical re-imagination of historical experiences'.[22] Many have shown interest in the use of archives both as a methodological device with the potential to disrupt dominant narratives and as an emancipatory tool for de- and anti-colonial struggles.[23] Historical

[17]Chinua Achebe, 'An image of Africa', *The Massachusetts Review*, 18:4 (1977), pp. 782–94 (p. 783).

[18]Gabi Schlag, 'Into the "Heart of Darkness": EU's civilising mission in the DR Congo', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 15:3 (2012), pp. 321–44; Siba Grovogui, 'The state of the African state and politics: Ghosts and phantoms in the heart of darkness', in Arlene Ticker and David Blaney (eds), *Thinking International Relations Differently* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 117–38; Dunn and Shaw, *Africa's Challenge*; Siba Grovogui, 'Regimes of sovereignty: International morality and the African condition', *European Journal of International Relations*, 8:3 (2002), pp. 315–38; Séverine Autesserre, 'Dangerous tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences', *African Affairs*, 111:443 (2012), pp. 202–22.

[19]Rosalba Icaza, 'Social struggles and the coloniality of gender', in Olivia Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 58–71 (p. 64).

[20]Gillian Mathys, 'Bringing history back in: Past, present, and conflict in Rwanda and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,' *Journal of African History*, 58:3 (2017), pp. 465–87; Reuben Loffman, 'Belgian rule and its afterlives: Colonialism, developmentalism, and Mobutism in the Tanganyika District, Southeastern DR-Congo, 1885–1985', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 92 (2017), pp. 47–68; Kasper Hoffmann, Godefroid K. Muzalia, César M. Tungali, and Alice M. Nalunva, *The Past in the Present: Ethnicity, Conflict and Politics in Eastern Congo* (Ghent: Governance in Conflict Network, Ghent University, 2022); Judith Verweijen and Vicky Van Bockhaven, 'Customary authority in East and Central Africa in the past and the present', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 14:1 (2020), pp. 1–23; Charlotte Mertens, 'In the ruins of empire: Historicizing sexual violence in Congo', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 25:3 (2023), pp. 529–50; Emery Kalema, 'Scars, marked bodies, and suffering: The Mulele rebellion in postcolonial Congo', *The Journal of African History*, 59:2 (2018), pp. 263–82; Esther Marijnen, 'The coloniality of crisis conservation: The transnationalization and militarization of Virunga National Park from an historical perspective', in Ramutsindela, Maano, Frank Matose, and Tafadzwa Mushonga (eds), *The Violence of Conservation in Africa: State, Militarization and Alternatives* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), pp. 53–72; Stephanie Perazzone, 'Shouldn't you be teaching me?' State mimicry in the Congo', *International Political Sociology*, 13:2 (2019), pp. 161–80.

[21]Siddharth Tripathi, 'International Relations and the "Global South": From epistemic hierarchies to dialogic encounters', *Third World Quarterly*, 42:9 (2021), pp. 2039–54.

[22]Caio Simões de Araújo and Srila Roy, 'Intimate archives: Interventions on gender, sexuality and intimacies', *African Studies*, 81:3–4 (2022), pp. 255–65.

[23]Luis Lobo-Guerrero and Yara van't Groenewout, 'Archival methods', in Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin (eds), *Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 247–52; Martin J. Bayly, 'Introduction', in Martin J Bayly (ed.), *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 1–42; Quynh N. Pham and Robbie Shilliam, *Meanings of Bandung: Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); Mertens, 'Ruins of empire'; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Michel Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in two acts', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 12:2 (2008), pp. 1–14.

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IR[24] and the 'archival turn',[25] for instance, recognise that 'the past comes back not just to haunt, but to structure and drive the contemporary operations of power'.[26] We draw on our research in the African Archives to extricate and confront two such (interrelated) narratives in the DRC: the widely vehiculated image of an inadequate 'post-colonial African State' and its corollary: widespread sexual violence in a context of armed conflict. To be sure, sexual violence, conflict, and government neglect are all different facets of the same systematic failure to protect Congolese lives, but the narrow focus of international actors, academics, and the media on those narratives only works to conceal the broader historical and structural conditions in which these unfold. The aim then is to recover the concrete ways the colonial archives can *shift from their current place of erasure and containment to becoming the site of more inclusionary and alternative knowledges*.[27] These might hold the potential to redress past crimes and to prevent future violence – *an archive yet to come*, taken out of its guarded walls, accessible to all, and mobilised as a critical device for (re)thinking violence.

This article now proceeds in three parts. The first section introduces our experience in the African Archives in Brussels to illustrate the politics underlying the production and containment of the archives, and the colonial structures in place that erase the subaltern histories of those who live(d) in places like the Congo. We borrow from a range of interdisciplinary works that aim to recast the notion of the archive, colonial or otherwise, as a pluralistic and ambivalent site of knowledge production and to resituate discussions on the *exploratory* and *disruptive potential of the (colonial) archive* within the field of social sciences.[28] The second part shows how the ambivalent disposition of the colonial archives can help us question the 'image of Africa' mentioned above. The point is to identify the ways in which the colonial archive can be *leveraged to speak against itself* in order to interrogate hegemonic discourses of state fragility and sexual violence.[29] Indeed, while it often *seems* 'archival logics tend to subsume the violence of the colonial experience

[24]See Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'International Relations and the problem of history', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:1 (2005), pp. 115–36; Joe Turner, 'Internal colonisation: The intimate circulations of empire, race and liberal government', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:4 (2018), pp. 765–90; Mark B. Salter, Can E. Mutlu, and Philippe M. Frowd, *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2023); Tom Lundborg, 'The limits of historical sociology', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22:1 (2015), pp. 99–121; George Lawson, 'The eternal divide? History and International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 18:2 (2012), pp. 203–26; R. B. J. Walker, 'History and structure in the theory of International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 18:2 (1989), pp. 163–83; David McCourt, 'What's at stake in the historical turn? Theory, practice and *phronēsis* in International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:1 (2012), pp. 23–42; Mlada Bukovansky, Edward Keene, Christian Reus-Smit, and Maja Spanu, *Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[25]See Joshua Shifrinson, 'Digging through documents: The promise, problems, and prospects of archival research for International Relations', in R. Joseph Huddleston, Thomas Jamieson, and Patrick James (eds), *Handbook of Research Methods in International Relations* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022) pp. 583–606; Eric Ketelaar, 'Archival turns and returns', in Anne Gilliland, Sue MacKemmish, and Andrew Lau (eds), *Research in the Archival Multiverse* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017), pp. 228–68.

[26]Stephen Dillon, 'Possessed by death: The neoliberal-carceral state, Black feminism, and the afterlife of slavery', *Radical History Review*, 112 (2012), pp. 113–25 (p. 122); Avery F. Gordon, 'Some thoughts on haunting and futurity', *Borderlands,* 10:2 (2011), pp. 1–21.

[27]Jamila J. Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell, '"To go beyond": Towards a decolonial archival praxis', *Archival Science*, 19 (2019), pp. 71–85.

[28]Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance', *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), pp. 87–109; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Palestine: Doing things with archives', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 38:1 (2018), pp. 3–5; Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019); Hazel Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (New York: Verso, 2019); Zeb Tortorici, *Sins against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[29]Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Amina Mama, 'Sheroes and villains: Conceptualizing colonial and contemporary violence against women in Africa', in J. M. Alexander and Chandra T. Mohanty (eds), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 46–62.

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within narratives of state reason and progress',[30] our work in the African Archives reveals instead a set of archival, racial, and sexual *anxieties* that still imbue current configurations of (political) violence in the DRC. To do this, we place archival documents in *dialogue* with fieldwork information we have gathered for over a decade in various parts of the DRC. When joined with archival textual and visual content, this material (ethnographic interviews, participatory photography, participant observation, etc.), work as commentary[31] by Congolese citizens on their own historical trajectories.[32] The concluding section both ends and opens up our argument for 'an archive yet to come'.[33] There, we move beyond mere 'epistemic redress' to imagine, along with other scholars, an anti-colonial archive outside of academia, one that can be seen as a broader ecology of subjectivities, objects, time, spaces, and potentialities for more truly transformative politics.[34] A 'living archive', which, if made more readily available to all, would sustain the anti-colonial struggles that will 'allow people to engage with a different framework' and 'a different narrative'.[35]

The ambivalent disposition of the colonial archive

The African Archives in Brussels are located at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,[36] and visiting rights can only be obtained through formal registration. Until recently, taking photographs of documents was not allowed. Instead, one had to fill out a form listing all the documents one wished to be photocopied. Photocopying could only occur in the afternoon, so the form was submitted in the morning to a civil servant who would then return the hard copies later in the afternoon or on the next day. A single copy costs 0.25 Euros. When we asked where the information we needed might be found, the archivists opened a database on an ancient computer where obscure numbers and titles appeared. Puzzled by the antiquated procedure, and unable to decipher the system ourselves, the administrators eventually suggested files that could be useful. Because of the inaccessibility of the database, we were dependent on the civil servants' inside knowledge of the archive system. The institution also did not have a functional website, which made it impossible for users to know what was there and, despite appearances of bureaucratic neatness and neutrality, there was no obvious rationality to accessing the archives. The overall experience made for a slow, costly, and highly *mediated* archival praxis.

The 2020 Special Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's colonial past confirmed that access is restricted both in visiting the archives and in finding records.[37] The report further details how racial and colonial logics inform the process of accessing the archives and recounts the highly

[30]Daniela Agostinho, 'Archival encounters: Rethinking access and care in digital colonial archives', *Archival Science,* 19:2 (2019), pp. 141–65; James Lowry (ed.), *Displaced Archives* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 145.

[31]Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu, 'Lubumbashi et l'idée de mémoire orale', *Multitudes*, 4:4 (2020), pp. 111–19.

[32]Both Mertens and Perazzone have been conducting fieldwork in the the DRC since 2012. This consists of interviews with key stakeholders of international humanitarian, local, and UN organisations, in-depth participant observation, and focus-group discussions with politicians, state agents, and community members in various cities and towns in the Kivu, Haut-Katanga, and Kinshasa Provinces.

[33]This is inspired by AbdouMaliq Simone's work *For the City Yet to Come* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) where the author analyses the (current and potential) *alternative ways* African cities are build, lived in, and experienced beyond the Western gaze.

[34]Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian (eds), *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[35]Shiera El-Malik and Isaac Kamola, *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. xiii.

[36]Since the 2014 agreement between the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Rijksarchief, the Africa Archives are being transferred to the Algemeen Rijksarchief/National Archives of Belgium. It is also worth noting that as part of a two-phased DIGICOLJUST project, several archival materials related to military records of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo are being digitised and made accessible to broader audiences: available at: {https://researchportal.vub.be/en/projects/military-violence-and-its-discontents-in-colonial-congo-sharing-t}.

[37]'Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, Commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'Etat Indépendent du Congo (1885–1908) et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo (1908–1960), au Rwanda et au Burundi (1919–1962), ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver', Doc 55 1462/003, 26 October 2021, available at: {https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462002.pdf} (hereafter Commission Report).

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humiliating, discriminatory, and expensive process many Africans must endure to visit.[38] As such, the colonial archive is still a place of silencing, containment, and violation.[39] It is precisely because it presents opportunities for recognition and reparation[40] that access to and custody over colonial archival records have long been a *profoundly political matter*. For instance, the colonial state archives in Belgian Congo were always at the centre of political tension between the Ministry of Colonial Affairs in Brussels and the territorial administration and, at Independence in 1960, became a contentious subject between the newly established Congolese government and the former coloniser who endeavoured to repatriate all the archives to Belgium, in secrecy and with military assistance.[41] Similar disagreements erupted in the 1960s over the 'Migrated Archives' removed by the British from 37 former colonies, provoking bitter custodial and political disputes with the newly independent governments.[42] Managing the colonial archives is a thoroughly contentious task because they arrange 'the organic stuff of empire … and the transactions of endless bureaucracies' and are kept in places where they are 'taken further out of context and colonial misinterpretations were assumed to be truth'.[43] Today, colonial archives across the world are still far removed from the places where they were first produced, and political debates continue on their future.[44] The archive is indeed more than a mere institution responsible for the preservation of historical documents. It is a *regime* of truth-making,[45] consisting of a range of practices[46] that reassert reliance on 'the imperial centre for interpretation and authorization'.[47]

This reminds us of an arresting sight. Before entering the African Archives' reading room, each visitor walks through a cloakroom where they are greeted by a portrait of King Leopold II (Figure 1). The private owner of the Congo Free State, he established an economic incentive system for rubber extraction that led to devastating brutality against Congolese people, causing an estimated 1 to 5 million deaths.[48] While the uncritical public display of the king's figure normalises the immense suffering of millions of people, it reinforces the idea that the archives rarely feature – if at all – the voices of those who have first-hand experience of colonial violence. Keeping Leopold II as the guardian of the archives illustrates a racialised and exclusionary order: the archive is the privileged terrain of whiteness and higher social classes of intellectuals, researchers, and journalists[49] and is still managed and controlled by the former colonial state.[50] The interpretation

[38] Commission Report, pp. 349–50. See also Gillian Mathys and Sarah Van Beurden, 'History by commission? The Belgian colonial past and the limits of history in the public eye', *The Journal of African History* 64:3 (2023), pp. 334–43. These dynamics are not unique to the African Archives in Belgium.

[39] Gayatri Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives', *History and Theory*, 24:3 (1985), pp. 247–72; Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, p. 233.

[40] Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

[41] Bérengère Piret, 'Reviving the remains of colonization: The Belgian colonial archives in Brussels', *History in Africa*, 42 (2015), pp. 419–31.

[42] On Kenya, see Riley Linebaugh and James Lowry, 'The archival colour line: Race, records and post-colonial custody', *Archives and Records*, 42:3 (2021), pp. 284–303.

[43] Joy Lehuanani Enomoto and D. Keali'i Mckenzie, 'Saltwater archives: Native knowledge in a time of rising tides', in Olivia Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 289–301.

[44] Agostinho, 'Archival encounters'; Lowry, *Displaced Archives*.

[45] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2004); Paul Basu and Ferdinand De Jong, 'Utopian archives, decolonial affordances', *Social Anthropology*, 24:1 (2016), pp. 5–19.

[46] Arlette Farge, *Le goût de l'archive* (Paris: Media Diffusion, 2013); Azoulay, *Potential History*.

[47] Alina Sajed and Timothy Seidel, 'Anticolonial connectivity and the politics of solidarity: Between home and the world', *Postcolonial Studies*, 26:1 (2023), pp. 1–12 (p. 1).

[48] These are the most recent estimates: see 'Gebruik historici niet als excuus in de discussie over excuses aan Congo', (16 June 2020), available at: {https://www.vub.be/nl/nieuws/gebruik-historici-niet-als-excuus-in-discussie-over-congo}.

[49] This includes researchers like us. Our visits to the archives were also a powerful reminder of our own privileged positionality and the very real risk of reiterating the imperial violence of the colonial archives.

[50] Many colonial archives can still be found scattered around the DRC; see Piret, 'Reviving the remains'.

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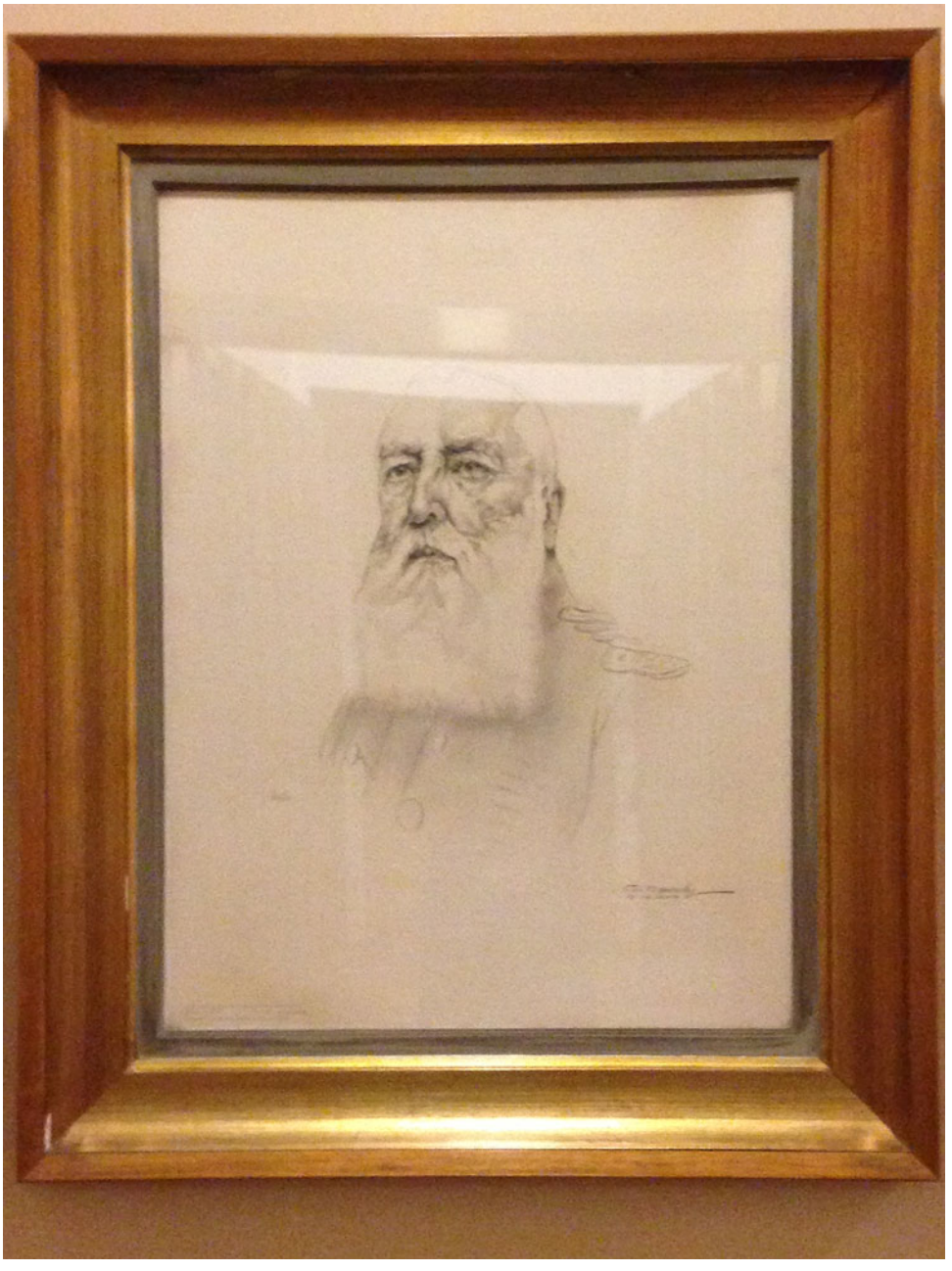


Figure 1. The portrait of King Leopold II upon entering the reading room. *Source: African Archives, Brussels.*

of archival records by primarily white, trained professionals produces specific ways of knowing that are often used to support military occupation, economic exploitation, and socio-political subjugation of the Global South,[51] while subaltern experiences remain silenced. In that sense,

[51] For IR concepts' influence on international policy, see Rita Abrahamsen, 'Blair's Africa: The politics of securitization and fear', *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 30:1 (2005), pp. 55–80.

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the African Archives constitute a Western archive rather than an 'African' one and are a foundational element of Mudimbe's *colonial library*.[52] The latter refers to an intricate web of written and visual documentation assembled by European colonial administrators, missionaries, journalists, and scientists who fabricated, disseminated, and projected a specific 'othering' gaze onto the African continent via the archives' 'diverse narrations, and visceral, nervous assessments of conditions and beings'.[53]

While a new generation of scholars now denounces the harmful politics of knowledge production and 'their forms of extraction, expropriation, and erasure',[54] much remains to be done to address and undo the 'colonial library'. Evidently, the DRC is experiencing armed, state-sanctioned, and colonial violence, but the country also is subjected to a more insidious form of assault: the effects of epistemic violence whereby the sophisticated lived experiences, intellect, and political organisation of Congolese people are distorted via overly sensationalist accounts. The urgent nature of the DRC's conflict tends to engender blind spots for research and policymaking in addressing the slow workings of historical violence, and within it, the promises and paradoxical (dis)position of the colonial archive in global politics. In particular, the construction of difference between colonial and contemporary processes of state and sexual violence should be (re)situated both within the broader, historical structures through which they emerged and within the daily experiences and practices of ordinary citizens.

Such framings are pervasive within policymaking too.[55] Speaking in front of the United Nations Security Council, former US Secretary of State John Kerry declared widespread sexual violence in the DRC was a stark reminder of what happens in the absence of good governance and appropriate rule of law, hereby disregarding the long history of colonialism while simultaneously mimicking colonial tropes of modernity, progress, and the rule of law.[56] Mathys notes that 'researchers … predominantly focus on contemporary issues, or on events since the 1990s. In many – but not all – cases this leads to history being used as a backdrop in the introduction, rather than an analysis of how historical processes continue to have an impact today.'[57] The same could be said of scholarship and policies that look at urgent matters such as contemporary wartime rape and dynamics of state weakness but often gloss over the historical contingencies underlying these problems. Such colonial logics are also at work in other contexts, including Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan, and Egypt, which have been subjected to similar ahistorical, racialised[58] and gendered accounts.[59]

Yet the colonial archives possess the capacity to simultaneously replicate and undo the past, and therefore to deliver alternative, and potentially emancipatory, narratives for the present and the future (even though the epistemic violence of the colonial library can never be fully transcended).[60] Despite the violence they contain, the African Archives, paradoxically, also 'are an important … source of individual and collective memory … They play an important role in

[52]Valentin Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[53]Nancy R. Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 22.

[54]Oumar Ba, 'The Europeans and Americans don't know Africa', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:2 (2022), pp. 548–60 (p. 559).

[55]Chloé Lewis, 'The making and re-making of the 'rape capital of the world', *Critical African Studies*, 14:1 (2022), pp. 55–72.

[56]United Nations Security Council, 'Debate on the Great Lakes and the DRC presided by US Secretary of State John Kerry', S/PV.7011, New York: United Nations, 25 July 2013.

[57]Mathys, 'Bringing history back', p. 466.

[58]Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Swati Parashar, Arlene Tickner, and Jacqui True, *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[59]See Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

[60]Zubairu Wai, 'On the predicament of Africanist knowledge: Mudimbe, gnosis and the challenge of the colonial library', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 18:2–3 (2015), pp. 263–90.

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supporting democracy; they make governments accountable to citizens.'[61] In more conceptual terms, the ambivalent disposition of the archive as both messy (misplaced boxes, torn pages, and obscure governance) and orderly (the seemingly neutral codification, elegant writing, formal institutional arrangements) works to conceals the ontological, epistemological, and daily violence inflicted upon colonised life hidden away in archival documents (Figure 2).[62] The order-messiness of the archives reflects the instability of colonial rule as a whole. As Gordon noted: 'the archive reveals the incompleteness of hegemony: not only its own confusions and contradictions but the inability of colonialists to locate their practices completely in imperial rather than African terms.'[63]

Moreover, Lobo-Guerrero argues that archives can be seen as sites from which to 'wonder about realities and experiences of how others, under different times and circumstances have related to the world. … They provide the possibility of an experience of discovery … that will in turn allow access to alternative ways of knowing the world.'[64] We argue that such critical engagement can be extended and complemented with more systematic inquiries into the politics of colonial archives along with the transformational potential they hold as both promise (of redress and reparation) and menace (to established hegemonic orders and dominant narratives). Building on Arondekar's scholarship on gendered, racialised, and sexualised subjectivities and the archives, Simões de Araújo and Roy position the archive as 'vital for purposes of critique, transformation and imaginative world-making'.[65] They contend that engagement with the archives is not merely about restoring 'lost voices' to the historical record or finding 'new' archival sources. Rather than 'making sexuality visible', Arondekar argues, it is about 'how sexuality is made visible and how this process discloses the very limits of that visibility'.[66]

Inspired by Lawson's call to 'look to history in order to be wrong, to look for interpretations, surprises and contradictions which do not fit with prevailing theoretical explanations',[67] the next section offers insights into how we mobilised the colonial archives to challenge dominant narratives on the 'post-colonial state' and sexual violence. Exposing the colonial anxieties that surround gender and sexuality in the Congo sheds light on how the archives textually record – or not – violence against Congolese men and women. This suggests, in turn, that silences about state and sexual violence in the archives are strategic, not an absence of representation, unveiling therefore the systemic uneasiness and insecurities of colonial regimes.

Anxieties and the 'schizophrenic' politics of global coloniality

Archival anxieties

In many ways, the Congo Free State was a 'failed state' in its own right. The early colonial state, and later on the Belgian Congo, suffered institutional and financial constraints that led to widespread violence against Congolese people, and resulted in greedy politics, hasty rule, and an embryonic but brutal administrative apparatus. As in other colonised territories, exploitative economies, government weakness, and daily violence marked colonial rule and continue to permeate contemporary power relations in both the Global North and South.[68] Based on a gendered and racialised social

[61] Commission Report, p. 349.

[62] See also Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, p. 230.

[63] David M. Gordon, 'Reading the archives as sources', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History* (2018), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.227}.

[64] Luis Lobo-Guerrero, 'Wondering as research attitude', in Mark B. Salter, Can E. Mutlu, and Philippe M. Frowd, *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 28–32 (p. 29).

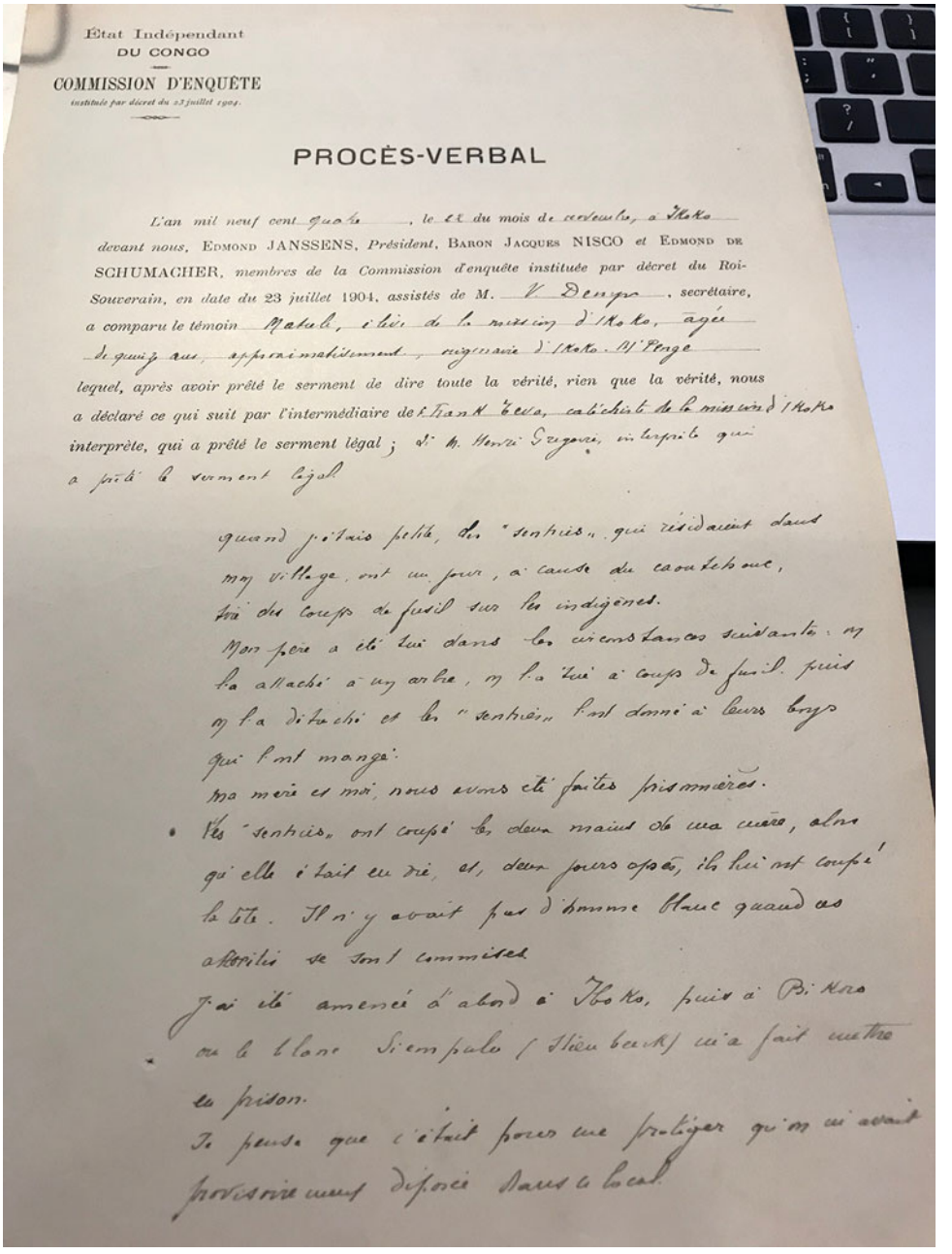
[65] Simões de Araújo and Roy, 'Intimate archives', p. 261.

[66] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 3.

[67] Lawson, 'Eternal divide', p. 221.

[68] Aldwin Roes, 'Contested institutions and the limits to state power: Early colonial natural resource extraction in the Congo, 1890–1914', Workshop on Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development, University of Utrecht (2011); Jean Stengers,

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État Indépendant
DU CONGO

COMMISSION D'ENQUÊTE
instituée par décret du 23 juillet 1904.

PROCÈS-VERBAL

L'an mil neuf cent quatre, le 21 du mois de novembre, à Ikoko
devant nous, Edmond JANSSENS, Président, Baron Jacques NISCO et Edmond de
SCHUMACHER, membres de la Commission d'enquête instituée par décret du Roi-
Souverain, en date du 23 juillet 1904, assistés de M. V. Denyn, secrétaire,
a comparu le témoin Matula, chef de la mission d'Ikoko, âgé
de quinze ans, approximativement, originaire d'Ikoko-M'Penge
lequel, après avoir prêté le serment de dire toute la vérité, rien que la vérité, nous
a déclaré ce qui suit par l'intermédiaire de Frank Vela, catéchiste de la mission d'Ikoko
interprète, qui a prêté le serment légal ; M. M. Henri Grenon, interprète qui
a prêté le serment légal

quand j'étais petite, des "sentries", qui résidaient dans
mon village, ont un jour, à cause du caoutchouc,
tiré des coups de fusil sur les indigènes.
Mon père a été lui dans les circonstances suivantes : on
l'a attaché à un arbre, on l'a tué à coups de fusil, puis
on l'a détaché et les "sentries" l'ont donné à leurs boys
qui l'ont mangé.
Ma mère et moi, nous avons été faites prisonnières.
Les "sentries" ont coupé les deux mains de ma mère, alors
qu'elle était en vie, et, deux jours après, ils lui ont coupé
la tête. Il n'y avait pas d'homme blanc quand ces
atrocités se sont commises.
J'ai été amenée d'abord à Ikoko, puis à Bikoro
où le blanc Siempelo (Siebenkotten) m'a fait mettre
en prison.
Je pense que c'était pour me protéger qu'on m'avait
provisoirement déposée dans ce local.

Figure 2. Graceful handwriting describes how a young girl's mother was decapitated (1904). *Source: African Archives, Brussels.*

order, the colonial state's primary goal was to secure enough financial capital to put Belgium, a small and recently established state, on the world map[69] using forced labour and military occupations.

Congo: Mythes et réalités (Paris and Louvain-La-Neuve: Duculot, 1989); Perazzone, 'Shouldn't you be teaching me'; Mertens, 'Ruins of empire'.

[69]Mainly due to the rubber boom in the late 1890s, the state's precarious financial condition stabilised. See, among others, Bas De Roo, 'De onafhankelijke Congostaat: plundermachine in dienst van een meedogenloze Leopold II', in Idesbals Goddeeris,

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Entrenched in the belief that 'indigenous' populations had to be civilised out of their 'primitive ways of life',[70] the colonial archives uncover a power *dispositif* developed around the idea of 'material progress'[71] and bodily discipline – a 'biopolitical state' of some sorts,[72] which, under the guise of rationalised rule, exhibited in fact the characteristics of a jittery, 'nervous state'.[73] Specifically, the colonial archives show the sophisticated workings of a set of deep-seated anxieties in the form of a relentless urge to control, regulate, and ultimately sabotage Congolese lives. Beyond the Congo, the colonial anxieties found in the archives gesture to the global logics of coloniality and connect to the question of bodies, gender, and sexualities – and, as such, to hierarchies of power. Following Hunt's work, we contend that these anxieties not only imbued colonial rule but also prefigured future state formations that looked 'towards the future … with nervousness and the imperative to prevent a catastrophe'.[74]

Most importantly, it is in the archives themselves that nervousness looms large. The records that chronicle police/military operations as well as provincial government and territorial agents' daily tasks vividly demonstrate how the 'archives talk with a language of urgency: they denounce the disaster that's about to happen. It is a panic-driven approach, which is aimed at preventing and stopping on a daily basis, in a manner that echoed paranoia.'[75] For instance, a 1930 report details several police operations in 'dissident regions' where some individuals had allegedly spread 'subversive talks' on 'the departure of the Belgian colonials and their replacement'.[76] Similarly, many administrative documents from the 1950s express recurring dread over the 'nocturnal commutes' of both colonials and 'indigenous Congolese' across segregated urban areas.[77] With these examples in mind (more below), we construe colonial anxieties as the *broader effect*[78] of the diffuse and mundane governing techniques (which include mapping, counting, displacing, etc.) deployed by territorial agents, missionaries, and ordinary colonials. We thus build and expand on Hunt's argument to show how, behind a facade of order and tranquillity, the so-called colonie-modèle[79] suffered from *pervasive political, sexual, and racial anxieties* which produced a type of violence that stretches far beyond formal colonial rule and heavily *shapes present-day politics* in the Congo.

European colonial anxieties are especially visible in the uneasy ways in which the archives both conceal violence through an order/disorder paradox (see above) and portray sexual violence inflicted on Congolese women. Scholars have long argued that questions of domesticity, sexuality, and gender in racialised terms are central to both colonial rule and its archives, where Black women are recorded as inferior to men, as victims of polygamy, and as highly sexualised, while Black men are fetishised as sexual savages or objects.[80] As a highly mediated space, the colonial

Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (eds), *Koloniaal Congo* (Kalmthout: Polis, 2020), pp. 31–46; Jean-Luc Vellut, 'Réflexions sur la question de la violence dans l'histoire de l'État Indépendant du Congo', in Pamphile M. Mantuba-Ngoma (ed.), *La Nouvelle Histoire du Congo* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004), pp. 269–87.

[70] See George Van der Kerken, *La politique coloniale belge* (Anvers: Editions Zaïre, 1943); Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

[71] The term 'développement matériel et moral' is written too many times across archival records to recount.

[72] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Hunt, *A Nervous State*, p. 7. See also Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[73] Hunt, *A Nervous State*.

[74] Hunt, *A Nervous State*, p. 132.

[75] Hunt, *A Nervous State*, p. 132.

[76] AA, RACB 212, Rapport Annuel AIMO, Politique Indigène (1930).

[77] AA, GG 6298, Autorisations de Circulation Nocturnes (1958).

[78] Timothy Mitchell, 'Society, economy, and the state effect', in George Steinmetz (ed.), *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 76–90.

[79] Amandine Lauro, 'Maintenir l'ordre dans la colonie-modèle', *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés/Crime, History & Societies*, 15:2 (2011), pp. 97–121.

[80] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

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archives (re)present the violence and paradoxes of a history narrated by and filtered through an agitated white male gaze. In this sense, the records of the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo show the archives always uncomfortably sit between governing what can be known about Congolese individuals and unveiling the racial and partriarchal logics of what indeed was – and still is – a 'nervous state'.

One of the most striking examples of this is found within the record-keeping practices of Western agents in reporting widespread rape and sexual abuse against Congolese women in the Congo Free State. Following the CRA's investigation request, the Commission of Inquiry produced a set of first-hand testimonies of Congolese people which were later stored in the African Archives (while the documents of the CRA are held in the Morel Archive at the London School of Economics). These testimonies were interpreted, translated, and, sometimes, staged by missionaries and commissioners.[81] Often, they were only quoted partially, especially when sexual violence was involved. Like in all colonial regimes, African testimonies were routinely dismissed as exaggerations, rumours, or plain lies. Noticeable is the huge discrepancy between male and female witnesses: 350 men – mainly colonial officials and Indigenous men – versus 20 women testified before the Commission. From the 20 women's testimonies, two were given by the wives of the white missionaries Harris and Clark, and one by the adopted Congolese daughter of the Clarks (who, as daughter of white missionaries, was considered part of the civilising mission and therefore higher up the hierarchy).[82] These women provide extensive descriptions of the atrocities they witnessed. Their testimonies (multiple pages) are remarkably longer than the Congolese women's testimonies (about half a page). Nowhere in the archive do we find an explanation of why so few women testified. This is not because they did not come forward, but rather because they were not summoned.[83] As Robert Burroughs explains:

> Missionaries who effectively organised the presentation of evidence in the rubber territories were quite traditional in their views, supposing elite men to be the providers of the most valuable testimony. For this reason, the white mission chiefs gave the most extensive testimonies, which the subsequent statements by Africans and white women often just serve to affirm or supplement. Then there is also the selection process that took place at the sittings. Many missionaries claimed that many more Africans than those who spoke had attended the trials, so presumably the commission exercised some say in which testimonies it listened to.[84]

In other words, even when drawing on first-hand testimony of Congolese people, European gender norms and technology of rule determined what was archived and what was not, which directly affects how women appear in the archives. Heeding those conditions that make certain narratives visible while foreclosing others indicates that both the presence and absence of Black women in the archives are neither objective nor natural. They are *created*. In filtering the testimonies through the gaze of white male witnesses (state officials, missionaries, and humanitarians of the time), the archive reflects the insecurities and anxieties of the colonial state. This practice is most revealing in the manner in which missionaries and critics of the Congo Free State's regime thought the rapes of Black women 'unprintable' and 'unfit for repetition'.[85] Indeed, certain types of evidence were

[81] Robert Burroughs, *African Testimony in the Movement for Congo Reform* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[82] From the 1920s, the colonial regime began to bring over European women to assist with the domestication of Congolese women. This coincided with the belief that the presence of European women in the colony would help reduce cohabitation of a white man with a Black sexual servant ('concubinage').

[83] Many testimonies recount how sentries and colonial officials threatened the Indigenous populations with punishment if they were to testify (for example, AA, Depositions 208 to 212).

[84] Email communication, 10 September 2019.

[85] CRA, *Evidence Laid before the Congo Commission of Inquiry at Bwembu, Bolobo, Lulanga, Baringa, Bongandanga, Ikau, Bonginda, and Monsembe* (Liverpool: CRA, 1905); CRA, *The Treatment of Women and Children in the Congo State 1895–1904: An Appeal to the Women of the United States of America* (Boston, MA: CRA, 1904), p. 50; Roger Casement, *The Casement Report* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1904), p. 290.

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enhanced and promoted, notably the mutilation (cutting off hands and feet) of local populations, while claims of sexual violence, as we shall see, were minimised. Here, the archives clearly seek to dismiss the extent of sexual violence, while altering and staging testimonies worked to silence acts of sexual violence rather than enhancing them.

Among the women's testimonies, one Congolese woman named Mingo, wife of Ilua, speaks of sexual torture.[86] She tells the Commissioners she was making bricks in Mampoko when three sentries punished her by putting clay in her sexual parts. Another testimony by missionary Padfield confirms Mingo's story. Interestingly, the CRA's commentary and writings on the testimonies (kept in the Morel Archive of the London School of Economics, see above) silence the sexual violence and torture inflicted upon Congolese women, as opposed to the Commission of Inquiry's testimonies (held at the African Archives). Even though Morel's writings and pamphlets present harrowing and detailed accounts of the multiple forms of violence inflicted upon the local populations – women and children are flogged (with the *chicotte*), tortured, beaten, mutilated (cutting off hands or feet), abducted or taken as hostage, starved (often through taxation), stolen to be redistributed among soldiers, and burned – sexual violence and rape are rarely mentioned. Comparing the original record of Mingo's testimony to Morel's narration of it shows that Morel considered the sexual torture inflicted upon Mingo (and other women) 'unprintable'. Morel edits Padfield's testimony as follows:

> The women at Mampoko had to tread the clay used for brickmaking, and on one occasion the sentries stripped the women, and in the presence of the White man in charge of the work … (What follows is unprintable).[87]

Morel amends Padfield's testimony again at a later point (Figure 3):

> The town of Bokenyola has to send ten women on Sunday and forty on other days to work at the factory. On one occasion, when the forty women had been working all day, the white agent Lokoka had the women in the evening all lined up, ordered them to strip themselves naked, and then … (what follows is unprintable – E.D.M.)[88]

Reading the original record of Padfield's testimony held at the African Archives, we know the white man, after ordering the women to take off their clothes, chose a woman to spend the night with. Morel had no problem outlining horrific non-sexual abuse but clearly considered the sexual nature of the violence as damaging to his and his readers' social mores.[89] In both examples, the CRA silences the sexual component of the violence inflicted on Congolese women while the African Archives' original records do not (even though they were still mediated and altered at times). Morel thus applies a lens of sexual difference: what the colonisers did was so repugnant it could not be articulated. In doing so, Morel not only distances himself and the British empire from these kinds of atrocities, but in a strategic move to silence what the 'civilised' have done, he also seeks to protect his liberal readers. What or who is thus being saved through the textual form of deletion and ellipsis is both Morel's Western readership and the 'good' colonisers (like the British). Moreover, by conveying less about the actual sexual violence, he stimulates his readers to imagine what could be so horrible it is considered unprintable, replicating Said's Orientalism's 'confusing amalgam of imperial vagueness and precise detail'.[90]

[86] AA, Deposition 267, 2 January 1905.

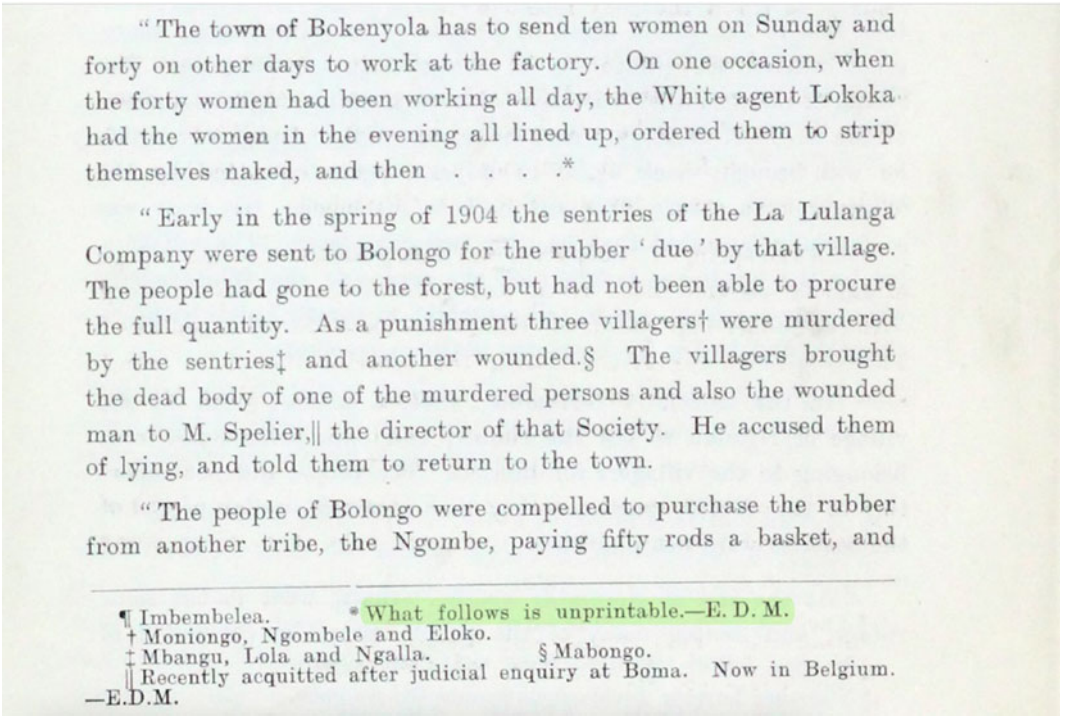
[87] CRA, *Evidence Congo Commission*, p. 52.

[88] CRA, *Evidence Congo Commission*, p. 50.

[89] Kevin Grant, 'The limits of exposure: Atrocity photographs in the Congo reform campaign', in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds), *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 64–88 (p. 64).

[90] Edward Said, 'Orientalism', *The Georgia Review*, 31:1 (1977), pp. 162–206 (p. 163). See also Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

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"The town of Bokenyola has to send ten women on Sunday and forty on other days to work at the factory. On one occasion, when the forty women had been working all day, the White agent Lokoka had the women in the evening all lined up, ordered them to strip themselves naked, and then . . . .*

"Early in the spring of 1904 the sentries of the La Lulanga Company were sent to Bolongo for the rubber 'due' by that village. The people had gone to the forest, but had not been able to procure the full quantity. As a punishment three villagers† were murdered by the sentries‡ and another wounded.§ The villagers brought the dead body of one of the murdered persons and also the wounded man to M. Spelier,‖ the director of that Society. He accused them of lying, and told them to return to the town.

"The people of Bolongo were compelled to purchase the rubber from another tribe, the Ngombe, paying fifty rods a basket, and

¶ Imbembelea. * What follows is unprintable.—E. D. M.
† Moniongo, Ngombele and Eloko.
‡ Mbangu, Lola and Ngalla. § Mabongo.
‖ Recently acquitted after judicial enquiry at Boma. Now in Belgium.
—E.D.M.

Figure 3. Excerpt from a CRA document; the asterisk indicates Morel's edits. *Source: Morel Archive, LSE, London*.

Sexual anxieties and white masculinity

Colonial power rests on narratives of modernity which the archives' records reflect in meticulous bookkeeping of the routinised tasks of colonial agents and statistical data related to labour camps, military posts, health facilities, schools, roads, and railways. These infrastructures project the image of progress, an essential feature of colonial rule, the destruction of Indigenous life, and the making of settler colonial futurity.[91] Indeed, 'Scriveners created order from disorder with pen and ink purging the subterfuge and insurgency of the enslaved from their account books … Accountants transposed people into profits and losses in their ledgers as they whipped them into shape as numbers.'[92] But beneath the neat numbers lay the dread and paranoia of a state on edge. Where state sovereignty (colonial or otherwise) heavily relies on disciplining bodies and regulating the intimate lives of the colonised and the coloniser, creating and policing moral and physical sexual/racial boundaries becomes key in a context where state power is highly mystified, personified, and privatised. In this sense, the figure of the white male colonial agent exerting 'respectable' masculinity in family life and state affairs is central to the colonial enterprise.

By way of example, part of the job of territorial agents was to patrol remote areas where they spent much of their free time with (the very few) white, and sometimes, upper-class colonialists. There, they would share memories, a single malt, and mystical stories about bravery and adventure – male and pale – thus forming social bonds that allowed many to consolidate their power.[93] They glorified their status and persona as well as their own role in shaping Belgium's

[91] Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2014); Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020).

[92] Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, p. 261.

[93] Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, *Recalling the Belgian Congo* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Guibert Crèvecoeur, *Journal d'un Commis de l'État Au Congo Belge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011).

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colonising mission. They relied on their own inherent merit and discretionary power to influence or carry out policies as they saw fit. A colonial agent once wrote that white men were 'treated like semi-gods': each time they visited a village, 'ritual dances' and 'friendly gatherings' around large campfires were organised in their honour. Dancing around the fire, were 'the beauties of the village … some of them little girls as young as seven years old, and other women in full efflorescence', while 'beaded with colourful and heavy pearls, their clothing moved along the movement of their elegant gait … dressed only by the shivering of their perfect bodies of African Dianas'.[94] Personified state power was even more obvious in the tyrannical behaviour of colonial agents and their sentries in the Congo Free State. The Inquiry's testimonies by women reveal this.[95] For example, a Congolese woman called Boali speaks directly to rape. Because she refuses to yield to the sexual demands of a sentry, 'he felled her with his gun and believing her to be dead, cut off her right foot to obtain possession of the ring which encircled her ankle'.[96] Interestingly, her testimony was changed in the reports of the CRA. Grant explains that to enlist the support of the British and American audience, CRA campaigners organised lantern slideshows which showed photographs of mutilated Congolese people.[97] The only account of sexual violence that was made public through the slideshows was the testimony of Boali (her name also appears as 'Boaji'). Her picture was slide number 14 with the following caption 'Boaji, mutilated for her constancy'. The accompanying story to the slide reads as follows:

> Amongst the mutilated was a woman named Boaji, who was so treated because she wished to remain faithful to her husband. You must understand that when soldiers drive men into the forests for rubber, a sentry is left behind to 'guard' the women. The women are at his mercy.[98]

However, Boali's deposition does not mention she refused the sentry's sexual demands because she wanted to remain faithful to her husband. She simply refused him, which is why the sentry assaulted her. Echoing colonial ideals of monogamy and the nuclear family, the CRA campaigners framed Boali's story in a moral narrative emphasising not the assault but the faithfulness to her husband. Missionaries and humanitarians thus shaped colonial violence according to the norms and values of Western audiences who were needed to mobilise resources and support to end abuse. And while scriveners faithfully wrote down Boali's deposition, anthropologist Vangroenweghe makes clear that during her testimony the Commissioners felt great unease, which might explain why Boali was the only female witness in the Baringa area.[99] Clearly, rape and sexual violence were considered 'unsayable' unless the rape was done by Black/brown men and involved white women, thus reinforcing the image of the Black man's sexual savagery. At that point, sexual violence propaganda became a tool to legitimise the civilising mission and 'restore' moral order.[100] The fear of interracial rape also discloses considerable anxiety about European womanhood. As Sharpe argues: '[European] womanhood is an important cultural signifier for articulating a colonial hierarchy of race.'[101] Ideals of respectability and virtue were embodied in the idea of the white woman, while the

[94] Henri Segaert, *Un Terme au Congo Belge: Notes sur la vie coloniale 1916–1918* (Brussels: A Van Assche, 1919), p. 8. Translation by the authors.

[95] 'The white man' is the common term used by the Congolese in their testimonies. Often, the Congolese named white officials in their language, which revealed the Congolese's subjective experience of the colonial encounter, see Osumaka Likaka, *Naming Colonialism: History and Collective Memory in the Congo* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

[96] AA, Deposition 172, 12 December 1904.

[97] Grant, 'Limits of exposure'.

[98] Grant, 'Limits of exposure', p. 64.

[99] Didier Vangroenweghe, *Du sang sur les lianes: Léopold II et son Congo* (Brussels: Didier Hattier, 1986), p. 131.

[100] Deana Heath, 'Torture, the state, and sexual violence against men in colonial India', *Radical History Review*, 1:126 (2016), pp. 122–33; Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993).

[101] Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 4. See also Stephanie Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

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rape of Black women clashed with the civilising mission. Exemplifying the extent of its own ambivalences, the colonial archive simultaneously neglects and dehumanises the suffering of Congolese women (and how this *can be known*), inadvertently disclosing the anxieties of a brutal colonial order.

The archival scripts further connect to the colonial state's broader pathological obsession with regulating Black lives, aspirations, and politics. The sheer number of meetings, annual reports, and red tape dedicated to temporary permissions for 'native men' to circulate at night,[102] authorisations for Congolese people to set up dancing clubs in their own segregated neighbourhoods,[103] or dread over white women waitressing Congolese men in local bars[104] all attest to the anxieties of an unsettled state administration. Colonial agents employed a grammar of (dis)possession, sexual entitlement, and paternalism – they frequently wrote 'our blacks', 'our Congo', 'my boys', 'my territory' in the archives – that infantilised and over-sexualised both men and women, leading to neurotic fears and objectification of Congolese individuals. While rape and sexual predation exerted by white men against Congolese women were rampant, anxieties surrounding sexual promiscuity consistently preoccupied colonial rule. Nightlife, for example, was suspected of moral depravation and interracial intimate encounters. 'Public drunkenness' and 'loud conversations' prompted civil servants to implement 'enhanced police action and heavy fines', imprison inebriated Congolese people, revoke alcohol licences, or restrict opening hours of Congolese businesses.[105] Europeans who owned clubs in Black neighbourhoods went through lengthy administrative procedures and fell under close state scrutiny. Provoking administrative malaise, 'the presence of European female managers was not advisable' because 'Black people under the influence of alcohol can utter, in indigenous language, inappropriate remarks. This [would] undermine the prestige of the white race.'[106]

As part of a repressive and gendered (colonial) state, social, sexual, and intimate interactions crystallised colonial anxieties especially as Congolese communities increasingly 'started to express their emancipation claims … in particular through entertainment in songs and bars. There, they would mock racial inequality and white privileges and explore ways to capture authority on the national scenes.'[107] The colonial archives, therefore, point to a dual and paradoxical dynamic of revealing *and* concealing the subaltern voices of empire, in a double act of invisibilising the former and protecting the latter.

Socio-political anxieties

The archival records, we have seen, give texture to obsessive concerns over rebellion and emancipation on the part of colonised people, leading to spatio-racial segregation, control of leisurely activities and labour relations, as well as surveillance and punishment.[108] Much as the apparent orderliness of the archive offers an illusion of certainty and reason, the colonial state upheld a controlled narrative of calm and discipline while also expressing alarm and using excessive violence

[102] AA, GG 6298 Bureau des Affaires Politiques et Sociales, Katanga (1958).

[103] AA, GG17262, 'Licence N°1', Commissaire de District, Élisabethville, December 1932.

[104] AA, AI1395 Letter from the District Commissary to the Governor, 'Article paru dans la gazette du 15.1.30' – marked 'confidential', 9 April 1930.

[105] AA, GG7804, PV de la réunion du conseil de territoire de Lubero, 23 August 1958.

[106] AA, AI1395 'Letter from the District Commissary'.

[107] René Devisch, 'Colonial state building in the Congo, and its dismantling', *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 30:42 (1998), pp. 221–44 (p. 231).

[108] Trudy H. Peterson, 'Archives, agency, and the state', in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History after 1945* (Washington, DC: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 139–59; Amandine Lauro, 'Le législateur n'envisage en l'espèce que le point de vue physiologique: Régulations du mariage "indigène" et politiques sexuelles au Congo Belge (1908–1940)', in Martine Spensky (ed.), *Le contrôle des femmes dans les empires coloniaux* (Paris: Karthala, 2015), pp. 183–200.

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Figure 4. The caption reads: 'A contest of the most beautiful interior was organised in Bendalungwa neighborhood, in Leopoldville's *cité indigène*. Here is a shot of the "home" of Mr. Mathieu Eboni who won the third prize.' *Source: African Archives, Phototèque, N° 32.62/53, Brussels*.

towards Black communities along with 'poor whites, people of mixed origins, and other interstitial groups'.[109] Colonial rule established a rigid racial and sex/gender binary through imposing a heteronormative Christian monogamous way of life that relegated women to the private/domestic sphere and criminalised polygamy.[110] Black communities fell so low on the colonial social ladder/hierachy that it was commonplace for a Congolese adult working as a servant to a European family to be scolded and ordered around by a six-year-old white child.[111]

The creation of a class of *évolués* – 'evolved' Congolese – as part of Belgium's civilisational project is a case in point (Figure 4). Recalling the gruesome realities of the *évolués*, a Congolese priest living in Kinshasa back in 2015 vividly explained:

> The *évolués* were expected to emulate the European lifestyle. White state agents would come to their homes unannounced to check they were properly dressed, their children went to school, their kitchen was clean, and their houses were tidied. Their houses had to resemble Belgian ones. But then, they also had to cut ties with their extended family and friends who

[109] Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, 'Introduction tensions of empire: Colonial control and visions of rule', *American Ethnologist*, 16:4 (1989), pp. 609–21 (p. 609).

[110] Gertrude Mianda, 'Colonialism, education, and gender relations in the Belgian Congo: The évolué case', in Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 144–63.

[111] Crèvecoeur, *Journal Commis de l'État*.

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> had stayed in the village. It was no longer possible to see our nephews, uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins … They became *schizophrenic.* … There was a separation inside Black people themselves.[112]

The 'schizophrenic' politics of the colonial project produced deep societal fractures and turned everyday life into a dystopic reality for Congolese people. Race and gender became the organising social trope, and colonialism took shape around domesticity and the idea of the home.[113] As Independence drew closer, social and political anxieties over the civilised/uncivilised divide significantly heightened, as it became obvious that a growing number of educated Congolese people demanded equal rights. The civilising mission was simultaneously pursued and feared because, it 'opened up a discourse on the question of whether more "civilizing" would make them into still better farmers, workers, or subjects – and hence a less distinctive category of being'.[114]

Security tropes and pressing hygienist concerns were invoked to justify segregation. As a result, the colonial regime implemented a 'colour bar' in all major cities for fear of contamination and rebellion. Archival records put it this way: the colour bar was a 'police measure[s] that do[es] not target one specific nationality, but rather those individuals from inferior civilizations, who may compromise the sanitary and security status of European quarters'.[115] Police would ask Congolese individuals working in the European quarters to display their 'passport' allowing them to cross the neutral zone, and to circulate between Black and white neighbourhoods. In a 2015 interview, a retired plant worker in Lubumbashi explained: 'The neutral zone … was meant to protect white people. They were a minority: What if all Congolese suddenly rebelled? At least this gave them some kind of psychological comfort, to think the separation would protect them. They were frightened.' In Kinshasa, physical boundaries were built such as railways and a several hundred-metre large 'neutral zone' that comprised a military camp, a zoological garden, a park, a cemetery, and a golf club. Colonial policies routinely portrayed Congolese quarters as housing 'venereal diseases', epidemics, and insecurity.[116] In a 2014 interview, a professor at the University of Kinshasa recalled: 'White people wanted to retain the myth of white people. Psychologically, it was important to keep the prestige of the white people. … They would make it sound like it was for hygiene and security purposes. I think what it really was about, is that white people were scared of Black people.'

Even scarier than Congolese workers entering European neighbourhoods were Congolese people indulging in vagrancy and roaming open urban spaces. An evening curfew was strictly enforced and imposed on all Black neighbourhoods: '*Papapa, papapa, papapa*' recounts a Congolese man, 'before 8pm, we had to head home. It was the obligatory curfew. … At 9pm … the trumpet sounded again: *pa-pa-pa-pa-pa-pa*. That meant: tola-la, to-la-la: to sleep.'[117] Combined, curfews and segregation presented a host of logistical headaches for colonial agents, who often resorted to arbitrary measures. For instance, a train arriving at 10:30pm every Friday in Lubumbashi was the focus of much police activity: the 'two to three hundred natives' it carried 'were legally forbidden from circulating between 10 pm and 4:30am' due to curfew. As a result, the police sought to lock Congolese travellers in the train station until 4:30am, for they dreaded the uncontrolled 'dispersal of those hundreds of' colonised bodies 'across the city and in all directions'.[118] Train stations, like other public spaces, gathered 'undesirable' individuals, including single men brought to town through rural exodus, unaccompanied children, or worse, 'unmarried women', whom the administration

[112] See also Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963).
[113] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[114] McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, p. 610.
[115] AA, AI1384, 'Note au Ministre des Colonies', Cité Indigène d'Elisabethville, 24 April 1924.
[116] Anne-Laure Cocatrix, *Boulevard du 30 Juin: Histoire et perspectives d'avenir* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2014).
[117] François Ryckmans, *Mémoires noires: les Congolais racontent le Congo belge, 1940–1960* (Brussels: Racine, 2010), p. 43.
[118] AA, GG17262, 'Circulation nocturne des indigènes. Lettre de la Police Territoriale au Gouverneur Provincial', Katanga, 16 December 1950.

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was quick to repress.[119] Unmarried women were fined for prostitution, men who had left their villages were sent back (i.e. *refoulement*) only to return as anonymous workers within the informal economy, children were pestered by police officers and accused of 'vagrancy'.[120] Because they were threats to the hierarchised model of society, which placed the white male on top and women and children at the bottom, Congolese citizens were harassed, fined, punished, or locked up. Here, the colonial archive displays the '*resources of its own refutation*' by documenting the contours of an irrational state, which, under the guise of moral and material improvement, exhibited institutional fragilities and political anxieties. The archives unveil a genealogy of contemporary discourses of progress and development, bringing into sharp focus the many forms of violence the DRC still experiences today.

Post-colonial anxieties

Our work in the archives sheds light on the 'ever present-ness of the past'[121] that informs processes of state and sexual violence. This enables us to question evolutionist perspectives that view political formations in Africa as inherently violent because of its failure to replicate the Western/liberal state.[122] Indeed, concepts such as good governance, state failure, collapse, fragility all fuel and reproduce the idea that whatever atrocities may be ravaging the Congo – from blood minerals to wartime rape and rampant poverty – is both the result and cause of state weakness and can be 'fixed' via improved state 'capacity'. Our archival research further uncovers a racialised and sexualised colonial gaze that endures in discourses and responses to sexual violence in the DRC. Feminist IR and other scholarship has critiqued representations of sexual violence inflicted on Congolese women as harmful, limiting, reductive, and reproducing colonial tropes of sexual excess and savagery.[123] A clear need exists to understand sexual violence in non-Western countries beyond tropes of barbarity and difference. This would mean, among other things, to contextualise it within an enduring colonial history.[124] The global knowledge regime of wartime rape builds on a long-standing colonial archival imaginary of framing sexual practices in Africa as different, deviant, and pathological, and thus in need of civilisation. This obscures Congolese women's everyday experiences of violence. Such ahistorical/prescriptive accounts circulating within academia and policy circles suggest structural events (like pre/colonial history) hold no significant weight on the perpetuation of violence in the DRC and 'strip African societies of any actual internal dynamics other than the ability to disintegrate'.[125]

Instead, archival research into the routinised tasks and record-keeping practices of colonial officials shows that African statehoods are more the effect of pervasive colonial anxieties than the failed product of a carefully crafted, Weberian legal-rational apparatus. For example, in a world where colonial archives would be openly accessible by all, crucial information would be available to show how the gendered and socio-racial hierarchical power and bodily control that characterised colonial rule still saturate contemporary configurations of state formation in places like the DRC. This would reveal that the predatory, privatised, and corrupt governance modes detailed in the state weakness literature were *never* the exclusive purview of the *post*-colonial state. The patronage and

[119] Amandine Lauro, *Coloniaux, ménagères et prostituées au Congo belge (1885–1930)* (Loverval: Labor, 2005).

[120] AA, GG6112, 'Compte-rendu de la Réunion des Commissaires de District', 5 July 1957; AA, GG16327, 'Rapport Enfance délinquante', 26 June 1956.

[121] Kirsty Reid and Fiona Paisley, *Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

[122] Klaus Schlichte, *The Dynamics of States: The Formation and Crises of State Domination* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[123] Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?* (London: Zed Books, 2013); Lewis, 'Making and re-making'; Charlotte Mertens and Maree Pardy, '"Sexurity" and its effects in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:4 (2017), pp. 956–79; Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, 'Why do soldiers rape? Masculinity, violence, and sexuality in the armed forces in the Congo (DRC)', *International Studies Quarterly*, 53 (2009), pp. 495–518; Ngwarsungu Chiwengo, 'When wounds and corpses fail to speak: Narratives of violence and rape in Congo (DRC)', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 28:1 (2008), pp. 78–92.

[124] Mertens, 'Archival traces'; Lewis, 'Making and re-making'.

[125] Amy Niang, *The Postcolonial African State in Transition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), p. 11.

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clientelist systems found within the Congolese state do not result either from the failed imitation of the modern state or pre-colonial 'traditions' but mirror the European-instituted personified state power of its old colonial self, which often led to governance incongruity and improvisation, crippled state institutions, and arbitrary rule aimed at controlling and punishing ordinary citizens.[126] Present-day state–society relations in the DRC, and in many other former colonies and settler colonial contexts, still feature high levels of surveillance,[127] police abuse, sexual violence, exploitation, and a lack of state accountability. Much like under colonial rule, the post-colonial Congolese state operates in part via a grammar of control and inferiority that makes ordinary citizens visible only as menace to the state. During interviews, countless state agents have repeatedly portrayed their own constituents as 'uncivic', 'uncivilised', 'anarchist', and 'disobedient' – and often act in the form of punishment, retention, imprisonment, and bodily abuse.[128]

Fieldwork additionally provides empirical renditions of the functionings of global coloniality: it suggests that interactions between street-level bureaucrats and ordinary citizens manifest partly in a nostalgic desire for a social order reminiscent of colonial times. It was often noticed among our Congolese interlocutors that 'the Belgians sent Congolese children to school', 'healthcare was free', 'paychecks were regular', 'housing was guaranteed', and 'food rations provided'. Neglected by their hierarchy, civil servants often resort to nostalgia – 'the judgment that the past was somehow preferable to the present, and the longing for a home in which there is no longing for any other timespace'[129] – conjuring the image of a long-gone *colonie modèle*: a far more desirable place than having to live with the very real consequences of armed conflict, poverty, and infrastructural scarcity. While nostalgic narrations allow to make sense of and denounce the DRC's dire political and socio-economic situation, this also risks reactivating and relegitimising the colonial project. This shows the colonial state continues to exist – or to hide in plain sight – through the subtle workings of today's discursive practices in the DRC, reproducing a structural violence that does not result from failure to replicate the 'international state form'[130] but rather from the *persistent global imperative to do so*.

At the same time, any attempt at governing 'differently', via solidarity networks, kinship, or informal arrangements etc., is almost invariably described as illegitimate, predatory, or inadequate, relegating alternative forms of social and political relationships to oblivion. Similarly, during fieldwork, women survivors repeatedly pointed out that rape and sexual violence is still the main frame through which their experiences are viewed and understood. This was especially the case between 2008 and 2014, when global attention to sexual violence in the DRC peaked. Because of this, women's agency to represent and speak for themselves is limited and invisibilised. One respondent from Goma (2012) stated: 'A Congolese woman is now seen as a rape victim. This downgrades immensely her status and value in society. This is tragic.'[131] The 'sexual violence filter' obscures the multiplicities of violence that women and men endure, such as poverty, insecurity, daily harassment, and other gendered harms. Yet, while the persistence of the archive's white male gaze is rendered evident both in the continuing erasure of Black women's experiences and in the 'oversayability' of sexual trauma today,[132] a different history can still be produced from what the

[126]Verweijen and Van Bockhaven, 'Customary authority'; Kasper Hoffmann, 'Ethnogovernmentality: The making of ethnic territories and subjects in Eastern DR Congo', *Geoforum*, 119 (2021), pp. 251–67; Peer Schouten, 'Roadblock politics in Central Africa', *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 37:5 (2019), pp. 924–41.

[127]Simone Browne, *Dark Matters, On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). Browne shows, in the US context, that contemporary surveillance technologies and practices are informed by the long history of racial formation and by the methods of policing Black life.

[128]Expressions taken from multiple ethnographic interviews conducted between 2014 and 2023 in the DRC.

[129]Meghan Tinsley, 'Revisiting nostalgia: Imperialism, anticolonialism, and imagining home', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43:13 (2020), pp. 2327–55 (p. 2332).

[130]Louise Lombard, *State of Rebellion: Violence and Intervention in the Central African Republic* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

[131]Interview Pole Institute (Goma, 25 September 2012).

[132]Mertens, 'Archival traces'.

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archive offers.[133] Cultivating a conceptual approach attentive to the historical disfigurement and violent (re)production of women as *always already* violated or silenced is a first step. Looking for moments when Congolese women or men do represent themselves is the next. And this is where the archive has tremendous potential. The first-hand accounts we do have, though rare, are 'snapshot' moments of humanity that obliterate all forms of objectivity, and it is to those we should turn to resist the enduring racialised sexism and dispossession Black people still face today around the world.

The long road towards an anti-colonial archive

We began this article in 1904; we end it in 2024. Clearly, the work of disrupting the colonial archive to build more radically anti-colonial narratives has only started. As we explored the possibilities contained within the colonial archives to unsettle the 'toxic imperial debris'[134] that has long informed hegemonic thinking on the 'post-colonial African state' and sexual violence in conflict settings like the DRC, we are reminded that 'all archives … are part of international knowledge'.[135] Bringing the archives into dialogical relation to both ethnographic fieldwork and contemporary theorisations in social sciences points to the limitations of such theorisations 'for the understanding and configuration of an international architecture that is truly democratic and global'.[136] In this sense, what we set out to achieve in this text was to assess how, as an essential part of 'the cultural archive of the West',[137] the colonial archive can both be a powerful tool of domination and, conversely, be the key to *becoming something else*.

In this concluding section, we further reflect on what an archive-yet-to-come could possibly look like. This is essential for the DRC and for all former colonies and settler colonial contexts. In relation to Palestine, Lila Abu-Lughod asks what archives should look like for people without a state, whose knowledges and memories are being annihilated and who live under brutal settler colonial occupation. In this paper, we took up her call to think hard about the 'conditions of archiving and to attend closely to the ways archives are and *could* be used'.[138] Critically engaging with the archive is not merely about questioning its power and knowledge production, it is also about heeding and using its emancipatory potential precisely because it contains the possibilities for its own undoing. Since 'archival objects and those who work with them are always in the process of transforming each other',[139] when colonial archives are made accessible to African citizens and diasporas, new avenues for thinking about and responding to global and historical violence may emerge.

The events surrounding Belgium's Parliamentary Commission tasked with shedding light on its colonial past, and the report and recommendations that emerged from it, are telling in this respect. When in 2020 the Belgian Parliament announced that a commission would be established to examine the country's colonial past, chairperson of the Commission Wouter Devriendt expressed hope that 'the recommendations could be deployed in many fields: decolonisation of the public space, cultural heritage, fight against racism and xenophobia, academic research, education, and diplomatic and development cooperation relations'.[140] It would also be an opportunity to reflect on the

[133] Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

[134] Ann Laura Stoler, 'Imperial debris: Reflections on ruins and ruination', *Cultural Anthropology*, 23:2 (2008), pp. 191–219.

[135] Anna Agathangelou, 'Archives are part of international knowledge, not merely happenstance', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 36:1 (2016), pp. 204–12 (p. 207).

[136] Ibid.

[137] Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), p. 44.

[138] Abu-Lughod, 'Doing things', p. 3.

[139] Motamedi Fraser quoted in Yasmin Gunaratnam and Carrie Hamilton, 'Introduction: The wherewithal of feminist methods', *Feminist Review*, 115:1 (2017), pp. 1–12.

[140] Anne-Sophie Gijs, 'Belgium is reviewing its colonial past in the DRC: It's a sensitive but necessary process' (27 July 2022), available at {https://theconversation.com/belgium-is-reviewing-its-colonial-past-in-the-drc-its-a-sensitive-but-necessary-process-186512}.

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need for reparations and formal apologies. After two-and-a-half years and 300 hearings resulting in a 700-page long parliamentary report (containing 128 recommendations), the commission was dissolved after it failed to agree on recommendations specifically with regard to issuing formal apologies because this would open the way to reparations, which the majority of political parties consider unacceptable.[141] The parliament then argued it could not publish the report of a commission that did not exist anymore. To this day, the report is still accessible on the parliament's website but is difficult to find: clearly, nervousness and anxieties still characterise the contemporary politics of addressing both colonial history and imperial violence.

The work of the inquiry is not lost however.[142] It has shown colonial (and other) archives can be mobilised to provide justice and restore dignity.[143] The report explicitly worked to locate and confront the 'colonial durabilities' of our times,[144] making clear recommendations for an apology, as well as the establishment of a remembrance day, the erection of a monument to the victims of 'human zoos', the creation of a knowledge centre, the granting of scholarships, the declassification of archives, and the development of a national action plan against racism (among many others). Had this process reached completion, it may have been the beginnings of an *anti-colonial archive*, working against a 'dismemberment' that occurs through the theft of history, and towards a 're-membering', that is 'to recover history'.[145] This 'living archive', heterogeneous, complex, inclusive, collaborative, community-based, would thus be accessible to, and perhaps transformed by, Congolese people and diaspora communities.[146]

Examples of participatory and dynamic archiving practices abound across the world, in the classroom[147] or through public engagement.[148] Scholars and activists have established a collective 'Manifesto for feminist archiving calling for an active relationship with the archive',[149] while others have written extensively about thinking through 'the messy, embodied, illegitimate archive' of our own bodies so we can imagine a 'body archive' as 'an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason'.[150] This evidences the profound need for academic work to move to a place of *post-critique*, an explicit endeavour to prevent 'the devaluing of criticality' especially as we reach an 'extremely dangerous moment' of 'anti-criticality and anti-intellectualism' across the globe.[151] This means working 'towards the arduous task of injecting critique/criticality with greater public-political resonance',[152] outside of university walls, libraries, and the archive as institution, and via sustaining and expanding a pluralistic and accessible anti-colonial archive. Returning to Mokolo finally, instead of 'being the tomb of the trace'[153] of her tears, the colonial archives can become a far more dynamic project of *collective* and *collaborative emancipatory politics*. The 'traces of Mokolo's tears' – in both palpable and symbolic terms – are a foundational part of a possible

[141] Ketrin Jochekova, 'Belgium still struggling with its colonial ghosts' (30 March 2024), available at {https://www.politico.eu/article/belgium-still-struggling-with-its-colonial-ghosts/}.

[142] See also Mathys and Van Beurden, 'History by commission?'.

[143] La Vaughn Belle, Zayaan Khan, H. A. Smith, and Julietta Singh, 'Experimentations with the archive', *Feminist Review*, 125 (2020), pp. 17–37.

[144] Charlotte Mertens, Stéphanie Perazzone, and David Mwambari, 'Fatal misconceptions: Colonial durabilities, violence and epistemicide in Africa's Great Lakes Region', *Critical African Studies*, 14:1 (2022), pp. 2–18.

[145] Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Racism and "blackism" on a world scale', in Olivia U. Rutazibwa and Robbie Shilliam (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 72–85.

[146] Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an archive', *Third Text*, 15:54 (2001), pp. 89–92.

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anti-colonial archive, one 'of radical transnational (and global) histories'[154] that holds the future promises of long overdue freedom, redress, and justice.

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