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Transnational Feminism and the Body of the Image in Democratic Republic of Congo

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In 1975, Susan Brownmiller published *Against Our Will*, in which she proposed that a common political logic lay behind numerous wartime and peacetime acts of violence against women throughout history. While tolerated in practice, rape has long been against laws of war (see Copelon 1994, 200–203). The new element in Brownmiller's book was her analysis of peacetime rape as a tool of male domination, rather than as a crime against and within male-dominated kinship structures. Moreover, even in peacetime, sexual violence has been very hard to prosecute and, in almost every historical culture, women who brought complaints were more likely to be shamed and discredited than served justice. Brownmiller's work provoked a historical analysis of rape in both war and peacetime contexts that overturned any understanding of sexual violence as apolitical and inevitable.

Subsequent decades of activism and reflection at the national and international level have led to the realization that "rape" is a phenomenon circulating in images, fantasies, and discourse, as well as a phenomenon affecting physical bodies and their capacities. The polyvalence of violent scenes is particularly complicated in cases where governments and activists respond to reports of sexual violence in other countries. Women's bodies cannot be conceptually or materially separated from the specific conditions and activities in which they act and desire, nor from the political histories in which nations struggle for power and legitimacy. Full justice for such women—justice that rises above suspicions of being an excuse for further domination by global elites—must restore or improve this context, not simply condemn the perpetrators. This complexity is demonstrated by recent international concern over the great numbers of women assaulted in the Congo Wars of the last two decades.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been at war since approximately 1996, when the (Tutsi-led) Rwandan Patriotic Front, having

rather than referring to the right to modesty or honor (which are often defined by male relatives and patriots); and 2) they recognize that the human right to sexual integrity is distinct from the right to freedom from violence, for example, torture, as prohibited by the older Geneva convention: oppressive circumstances may nullify women's freedom to consent or refuse sexual interaction even in the absence of overt violence. Along with Tanya Horeck (2004), Bergoffen has also highlighted the role that sexual violence seems to play as a "spectacle," assaulting both women's and men's self-understanding as members of a community with physical and moral integrity (see chapter 3).² This function seemed particularly prominent in the genocidal context of Rwanda and Yugoslavia, in which women were raped in front of male family members to demonstrate their impotence.

Sexual violence is not the only danger to women's human rights; so are the threat of death, displacement, malnutrition, and lack of access to education and work (Miller 2004, 17–19). International as well as national legal systems pose problems for rape victims who testify, such as anonymity and security, or more often lack of urgency and effectiveness (Copelon 1994). Some countries (including the United States) did make progress in reforming their laws on violence against women during these years, even if much remains to be improved at the level of culture. Far from drawing a sharp line between wartime and peacetime sexual coercion, however, many feminists hope that international consensus on rape as a crime against humanity will improve treatment of rape victims and efforts at prevention *within* the countries that accept the jurisdiction of UN bodies and the ICC (to which, unfortunately, the US is still not a signatory) (Miller 2004, 26; Du Toit 2009; Bergoffen 2012, 72–73).

However, the expansion of international law and juridical institutions is also viewed with caution for two reasons. First, international law has tended to reflect the powers and interests of the most economically, militarily, and culturally dominant nations. By identifying crimes against "humanity" that are not crimes of interstate war, such institutions challenge the principle of

2. The concept of the image or the "spectacle" with which I am working in this paper is drawn from multiple sources, including the Turkish Castoriadis (1987), who contends that human consciousness is shaped by a collective pool of imagined realities and possibilities against which individuals may reflectively turn, the French Debord (1994) who argues that the value of all contemporary activities and products is not only measured by exchange but by their ability to attract attention in an international *representation* of reality, and the Caboness Tonda (2005), who distinguishes between the historical irreversibility of violence that establishes symbolic parameters for collective existence and the psychological mutability of violence that operates within the register of images or the social "imaginary."

national sovereignty. But they have tended to affect the sovereignty of the United States or Northern Europe less than the sovereignty of countries from the global south (the US refuses to join the ICC, while most of its current cases involve central African nations) (Bidima 2013, xxxi; Philipose 2009). As Elizabeth Philipose points out, sexual violence by male American soldiers against Iraqi women (or against female American soldiers) has not been referred to the ICC; nor was the sexual violence of French soldiers after the genocide in Rwanda (2009, 179, 192). Moreover, such institutions are often perceived alongside the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as political tools of the globally dominant nations, even if this is neither their rationale nor their actual function. Not infrequently, the economic restructuring that accompanies intervention gives multinational corporations from the wealthy countries increased access to resources (Philipose 2009, 189). Under the rubric of "policing" and "justice," it depoliticizes conflicts between nations and nonstate actors that are not just about ethnicity and historical territory.

Second, despite dramatic changes in communication technology, there is an imbalance in the degree and kind of information that countries have regarding one another's problems. Not only do more people in the wealthier countries, both experts and laypeople, have access to certain information about problems in poorer countries than the reverse; in some cases they know little about those countries *apart from* their conflicts. During the period of European colonization, social sciences and popular culture were saturated with narratives and images of non-European backwardness, incompetence, and exoticism—including sexual pathology (Miller 2004, Philipose 2009). In both the domestic and international context, legitimate feminist outrage at violence against women has sometimes overlapped with or been manipulated by racists who believe that members of some "other" ethnicity are more sexually aggressive than the members of their own group (Davis 1994, Hansen 2008). The real or imagined "spectacle" of sexual aggression by and among minorities, immigrants, or foreigners serves as a psychological justification for aggression toward them in a different way than a scene in which one's own group is humiliated. Moreover, sexual violence is far easier for most audiences to understand (or to believe they understand) than a report on how multinational companies benefit from monopoly mining rights or on collaboration between generals and foreign investors. Commercial matters cannot easily be brought before international criminal courts, although they have serious consequences for

women as workers and citizens. By contrast, the spectacle of rape seems self-evident because of ideas about sexuality that are overlaid by a history of domination along racial lines.

For centuries, sexual violence in wartime was considered inevitable, indeed biological. Many forms of everyday male domination, such as forced marriage or coercive survival sex for poor women, were also considered necessary evils or blamed on women's "weakness." When military definitions of ideal masculinity spread through civilian populations or when armed men take advantage of war to express their own effects of humiliation, anger, revenge, or aggression in violence toward women, the "image" of rape circulates between both contexts. Some of the most devastating effects of sexual violence result not from the physical violence of the act, but from the way it claims a victim's body symbolically for the aggressor's own imagination. Definitions of ideal masculinity and ethnicity can change over time, and men's ability to imagine themselves may come to depend on violent images (Enloe 2004, 4–7). As Hutchinson and Jok (2002) have shown in the context of the South Sudan, and as was evident in the Yugoslavian war, when paternity is interpreted in biological terms that explicitly exclude enemies, rather than in cultural terms, rape becomes an increasingly plausible way to claim territory and to express masculinity as aggression.

Some kind of serious conflict has plagued the Democratic Republic of the Congo, since *at least* the mid-nineteenth century, when (among other atrocities) Belgian military and corporate agents held Congolese women hostage to force their husbands to tap rubber in the forests (Hunt 2008). Nor must we forget the civil wars between pro-Belgian agents over mining in Katanga immediately after independence and the nationalist/Maoist civil war during the early 1960s (see Verhaegen 1991 141–42) in the eastern part of the country where the worst human rights violations were found, followed by the long dictatorship of Sese Seke Mobutu, who was long supported by the United States.³

The men and women who endured these events share historical time and space with those who have been born since decolonization or Mobutu's death in 1997. In the minds of young people, old nightmares coexist with their own dreams for participation in the contemporary world of global wealth. Whether urban or rural, teenaged or middle-aged, women want to be protected against violence and have the prospect of material security

3. Mobutu's army, the FAZ, was tacitly encouraged to pillage the population in lieu of salaries (see Wrong 2001, 46).

for their children and their communities, a share in the wealth generated by the country's vast resources. This means that they must be part of the peacemaking and rebuilding process (Puechguibal 2003, 1274–76). We must believe that the hostile framing of relations between men and women can be turned around, but this is difficult until women are recognized and able to recognize themselves as potential brokers of national peace (capable of exerting coercive pressure, independent of the support of former male combatants) (Enloe 2004, 217–36).

The government of the DRC has taken some steps in this direction; there is now a Ministry of Gender, Family Affairs, and Children. Since 2007, President Kabila's wife has been leading a public campaign against sexual violence in warfare (Kippenberg et al 2009). Perhaps more importantly, representatives of women's organizations have increasingly been included in negotiations and female judges appointed to hear both international and national cases involving the conduct of soldiers. For example, one of the ICTR decisions was written by Justice Florence Mumba, who had previously participated in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (Bergoffen 2012, 23). The UN, in turn, has increased the number of female peacekeepers. Although it requires its soldiers to comply with the laws of war, which forbid sexual violence, the DRC shares with other modern countries, such as the United States and Australia, a military culture in which sexual aggression is assumed to be part of masculinity, and in which few resources are devoted to prosecuting rapists, especially those higher commanders considered essential to the military mission (Nayak 2009, Baird 2014). Of course, the government cannot control rebel militias (such as the M23, whose commander Bosco Ntaganda recently surrendered to the ICC), deserters, or the families that often shame and exclude raped women. Nor, given the current international economic situation, can they prevent the poverty that drives many women to engage in survival sex, of which foreign peacekeepers, as well as armed combatants may take advantage.

Feminist interest in the women involved in such conflicts cannot stop at the borders of the body, but also has to include the political, financial, and technological apparatus that constitutes the actual and optimal functioning of those bodies. This means that above all, whatever country they may inhabit, whether the United States or France or the DRC, survivors must be known for more than the rapes they have endured; the *event* of their lives cannot be reduced to the *event* of sexual violence. This requires what Cynthia Enloe calls feminist curiosity (2004). Their habits, the technol-

ogy of their labor, the games they play with their children, the magazines or books they read when possible, and the movies they hope to watch or *make* must be part of the body of international knowledge informing public discourse and included in the general vision of reparations. This is the only way to break out of the global spectacle in which poor countries only appear when they are at war and in which their female citizens only appear when raped—offering wealthy countries the obligation or opportunity to govern them from afar. Women's full mental and physical health, not simply their sexual health, must be a topic of concern; while victims of wartime sexual violence do need counseling and sometimes surgery, so do those who have suffered from family violence, who are sick, or have lost homes and loved ones due to many other aspects of war.

In a larger sense, the challenge posed by such curiosity points to two possible meanings of justice for victims of sexual violence. One has to do with demanding public accountability for harm done, and, by means of punishment and example, the prevention of future harm. This is an important task, and not an easy one, especially when the harm has been done by powerful people who insist on impunity. Moreover, it is the task undertaken by most of the international institutions described above, perhaps because it seems to demonstrate the "success" of some states and the "failure" of others. The other meaning of justice has to do with repairing someone who has been harmed; restoring her prior activities and relationships—and even if her dreams have been catastrophically altered, then enabling her to eventually create and pursue new ones. Very few institutions have devoted themselves to this task, which is the one Nietzsche would have considered truly active and not merely vengeful or preventive.

As Human Rights Watch explains, "International human rights law also enshrines the right to an effective remedy, which obligates the state to prevent, investigate, and punish serious human rights violations. Peace treaties, postwar tribunals, and international courts recognize the need for 'reparations' in many cases of transitional justice. States must also provide reparations to victims of human rights violations, such as compensation for damages. The UN has reaffirmed these principles specifically in relation to eliminating violence against women" (Kippenberg et al 2009, 18).⁴ However, Ruth Rubio-Marín (2006) observes that reparations are

4. The footnotes to this document cite the following sources: See UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 31, Nature of the General Legal Obligation on States Parties to the Covenant, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13 (2004), para. 15. See also

often symbolic and the last bill to be paid by cash-strapped governments. Indeed, the prospect of reparations challenges the structural inequalities that are pervasive in war-torn, but also in many peaceful societies. Going beyond the generalities of law as well as those of the spectacle of sexual violence, real repair requires a far more detailed understanding of how a given woman's life may differ concretely from what an international public assumes or imagines than may emerge in the usual legal case.

Lynn Nottage's drama *Ruined* (2009) presents the lives of several women who have been affected by the fighting in the eastern DRC, workers and entertainers in a brothel. As a theatrical production, *Ruined* directly confronts the question of how we imagine the victims, perpetrators, and survivors of sexual violence, as well as the ways in which the spectacle both reveals and conceals. Mama Nadi, the play's main character, "buys" and "sells" young women who lack a community, but also protects them to the extent of her abilities. She hosts, gathers news, brokers sexual services, and fences precious stones for businessmen and members of warring factions, who use her establishment for recreation, intelligence gathering, and as a stage for intimidating their opponents. She resists marriage, but between the lines we understand this is a choice she wishes she *could have made* for herself. One of her employees, Josephine, was the daughter of a traditional chief, betrayed by his second wife during a raid that left her with serious scars. Salima, a farmer who became pregnant as a result of a rape on her way home from the fields, is sold to Mama Nadi when her husband rejects her. Sophie, the youngest and educated if not middle-class, was injured with a bayonet so badly that she can neither hope to marry nor take paying clients. Mama Nadi puts her to work as a singer, in part from charity. Later, Sophie is caught stealing from the till to save money for reparative surgery at the Panzi Hospital—a dream Mama Nadi understands and supports, for reasons that remain ambiguous until the very end.

Updated Set of Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity ("Impunity Principles"), U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/2005/102/Add.1, February 8, 2005, adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights in Resolution E/CN.4/2005/81, April 15, 2005, principle I; Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law ("Reparations Principles"), adopted December 16, 2005, G.A. res. 60/147, U.N. Doc. A/RES/60/147 (2005), principle 1; UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment 31, para. 16; United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, December 20, 1993, G.A. res. 48/104, 48 U.N. GAOR, Supp. (No. 49) at 217, U.N. Doc. A/48/49 (1993).

This play has the potential to be sensationalistic, but the potential is deflated by the myriad small historical details that encourage the foreign reader to learn more, as well as by conflicts portrayed between characters over class and education, the magazines they hide from their employer and read to one another, and Mama Nadi's pleasure in sweets and brand products that friends and clients bring to her from the city. Bitterly reflecting on how her family lost their land, Mama Nadi describes her dreams this way:

I want a powerful slip of paper that says I can cut down forests and dig holes and build to the moon if I choose. I don't want someone to turn up at my door, and take my life from me. Not ever again. But tell, how does a woman like me get a piece of land, without having to pick up a fucking gun? (2009, 27)

It is in such details that we glimpse the texture of the lives that have been disrupted by war, the fabric that any true justice would both repair and allow these women to embellish. We also obliquely witness the damage these wars have done to men, both in Salima's report that a soldier who paid for relations with her demanded to be held while he sobbed after describing a massacre in which some of her own relatives might have been murdered; and in the distraught efforts of her husband Fortune, now himself a soldier, to reconcile with her despite the unborn, unwanted child with whom she finally commits suicide.

In the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, cutting the space for such detail into the foreigner's theater, television, or computer screen requires unloading and neutralizing over a hundred years of prejudicial images about the "heart of darkness" associated with the Congo in wealthy countries. This is an aesthetic, as well as a sociological or ethical project. The task is more difficult for an Anglophone public insofar as so much of the DRC's contemporary cultural production is in French (the national language), if not one of the many regional languages like Lingala, Swahili, or Tshiluba (for example, many teledramas from the Kinshasa troupe Theatre Congolais, some of which are lighthearted and others of which deal with social problems, are available on YouTube and give a tantalizing glimpse into many forms of interiors, fashions, and mannerisms associated with different social classes in the DRC. However, the dialogue appears to be entirely in Lingala, which I do not understand). I searched for contemporary political theater by Congolese playwrights, particularly women playwrights, which might be comparable to the American play *Ruined*, but I could not locate

the few works for which I found references (for example, by the Feminata troupe, which performed a play called *Panic at Makobola*) (see Musengeshi 2003). Finally, undoing the global spectacle in which black manhood is identified with violence and hypersexuality also requires the diversity of interests and experiences among Congolese men to be acknowledged, as Nottage tries to do with the characters Christian and Fortune. In addition to physicians like Denis Mukwege of the Panzi Hospital, there are Congolese authors who have spoken out against the epidemic of sexual violence, such as the novelist Désiré Bolya Baenga (2005), and the sociologist Jean-Jacques Purusi Sadiki (2010), a scholar of the historical forms of women's political power in the African Great Lakes region.

In *Imaginal Politics*, Chiara Bottici observes that "human rights are simultaneously a means for ideological justification of the status quo and for its utopian subversion" (2014, 170). One could say the same of the image, whose contribution to the justification and the enforcement of human rights Bottici believes is undervalued. A tacit image of what counts as human and what counts as an ideal human life pervades the discourse of human rights, even if these images are implicit and only glimmer, like the magazines under Sophie's bed, between the scenes that are presented to the international public. These images are brought out by theater, literature, and film and coexist with other tacit images of the inhuman, for which Africa in particular has been a metaphor. Recognizing the spectacle's role in politics, Bottici adds, also allows us to be cautious concerning the audience's capacity for saturation and exhaustion (175–76) and to remember, as Enloe suggests, that curiosity may do what compassion cannot. To preserve the life, capacity for truth, and potential healing value of the image, it is crucial that it contain openings onto the ways men and women are embedded in, indeed *identifiable only with the full assemblage* of their laboring, loving, praying, and ludic activities—an assemblage about which we can know and also imaginatively identify—not just with the indignant subject or injured body in an iconic scene of violence. In the specificity of such images, and in the concrete means to realize them, the healing power of justice can complement the power to punish that is the state's primary terrain.

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