THE AUSTRALASIAN REVIEW OF AFRICAN STUDIES
VOLUME 37 NUMBER 1 JUNE 2016

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EDITORIAL

African challenges and challenges to African Studies

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The articles in this issue of ARAS offer very unique views on a range of issues that are relevant to the countries of Africa - the legacies of sexualized violence in conflict; suggestions for preventing conflict; human development; sovereignty and the role of international political and economic imperatives; and the way we understand 'world music' in the age of globalization.

In the article *Sexual Violence in the Congo Free State: Archival Traces and Present Reconfigurations*, Charlotte Mertens presents her extensive archival research conducted in Belgium, and ethnographic research conducted in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Mertens brings to light the ghosts of the past, still haunting this central African nation. Her focus on sexual violence during King Leopold's Congo Free State, and more recently as a result of the ongoing conflict in the DRC, draws our attention to the ongoing legacies of sexualized violence, in particular against women. Mertens argues that this current violence is intricately connected to the colonial past, and is unfortunately enduring into the future.

Obinna Franklin Ifediora argues in his article *Preventive Arbitration: Towards Strengthening the African Union's Mediation Capacity for Human Protection*, that the African Union Commission could strengthen its conflict resolution and pacifying mechanisms through 'preventive arbitration', thus offering the many stakeholders, minority and opposition groups access to relevant and timely mediation, creating enduring peace and human security. Ifediora argues that the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) needs to be restructured to bring 'mediation' into the role of the African Governance Architecture,

ARTICLES

Sexual Violence in the Congo Free State: Archival Traces and Present Reconfigurations.

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Abstract

Western imaginings and colonially scripted images of the Congo as barbaric, savage and the 'heart of darkness' have dominated understandings of events in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since its colonial inception (Dunn, 2003). The contemporary global focus on sexual violence in the armed conflict of eastern DRC has only reinforced such framings (Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2013; Verweijen, 2015). While sexual violence has captured the social imagination long before the Congo, contemporary international discourse has framed sexual violence as "the major horrendous crime of our time" and "an exceptional form of brutality" (Jolie, 2013). Drawing on largely unused archival material obtained at the Royal Museum of Central Africa and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgium, this article sheds light on how sexual violence prefigured our own times in King Leopold II's Congo Free State (1885–1908). The vivid memories and testimonies of the grotesque and spectacular violence inflicted upon the Congolese outline similar sexual atrocities to those that have taken place in the current conflict in eastern DRC. These memories are, in Mbembe's (2007) words, "traces and fragments" of colonial violence and excessive abuses. Yet today's international security discourses occur in the midst of an almost complete absence of such history and its memories. Ultimately it is argued here that the memories and testimonies as traces from a violent past, reshape historical understandings of colonial violence and open new avenues for rethinking past abuses and their endurance into the present.

*This article is based on the author's winning paper submitted for the 2015 Monash / AFSAAP Postgraduate Prize.

Introduction

This article is concerned with two of the most tenacious representational forms in which sexual violence in the Congo has been cast: its current 'oversayability' in international discourses on sexual violence with regard to the conflict in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and its historical 'unsayability' with respect to the Congo Free State. Archival fieldwork[1] reveals that Belgian colonial officials and their sentries employed rape and sexual torture on a massive scale during the predatory rage that characterised the rubber regime of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State. Yet contemporary international discourse on conflict-related sexual violence in eastern DRC is marked by its complete omission of this history. In recent years, sexual violence has become the main frame through which the Congo is made knowable to a global public and through which the roles of humanitarian and international organisations are made meaningful. The Congo has been described as the "rape capital of the world" (Kristof, 2008) and the "cockpit of conflict-related sexual violence" (Kelly, 2013): epithets that confirm what has long been established within the Western imaginary, namely, that the Congo is and will always be a land of violence, sexual license and death.

Colonial rememberings of 1953 mention sentries "amusing themselves while pounding the insides of women's vaginas with sticks" (Boyoto, cited in Boelaert, Vinck & Lonkoma, 1996, pp. 210-211). These colonial forms of sexual violence are similar to the atrocities that have taken place in the current conflict in eastern DRC and which have been reported on by human rights organisations, media and activists. The horror that is evoked by the nature of the violence establishes in us, Western audiences, a perception that the violence is essentially different from and incommensurable with colonial forms of violence. As such, current representational practices not only dehumanise but also dehistoricise (see also Malkki, 1995). Indeed, global governing discourses on gendered violence radically dismiss that it was precisely imperial actors and their iconic violence which gave birth to the ubiquitous heart of darkness imagery. It is therefore imperative to uncover the connective tissue which binds postcolonial gendered

[1] I conducted archival research at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren and in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012 and 2014. I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the eastern provinces of the DRC in 2012 and 2015.

violence and the representations and narratives regarding it to its historical counterpart.

Connecting the dots between past and present is a fraught task, in particular in a country where history is a "violently contested terrain" (Lemarchand, 2013, p. 418) and where longstanding heart of darkness imagery fuels contemporary understandings of violence. Lemarchand (2013) urges us to draw on a "proper reading of the region's tormented past" (p. 437) since so many (mis)representations of the past by local and international actors have reinforced the Congo as an inherently savage and violent place. Indeed, when offering explanations for the Congo's turbulent present, scholarly as well as policy analyses tend to refer to Congo's history of victimisation: the slave trade, colonialism, Leopold's cruel red rubber regime, Mobutu's greed, economic extraction and foreign interventions. The past becomes a scapegoat for all the contemporary tragedies that have befallen the Congo. It is thus easy to read Congo's history as a seamless continuity of rape, brutality and toxic violence. This article is not about reproducing a standard Congo atrocity narrative (see also Hunt, 2008). Nor does it provide a classical Leopold II-as-villain account, which is common among conventional state-centred top-down approaches (Roes, 2010). Rather, through archival research, this article sheds light on the hidden aspects of colonial violence—the sexual—and highlights how traces of this violence continue to circulate in contemporary realities and frameworks of understanding.[2]

In what follows I will examine what most humanitarians and missionaries at the time thought "unfit for repetition" (Singleton-Gates et al., 1959, p. 144) but which is scattered across the archives in the form of recounted memories and testimonies of experiences of sexual violence by the Congolese people. In this sense, this article makes plain the 'unspeakable' and mimes the violence contained in the archive (Hartman, 2008). Yet I aim to do more than simply recount the violence found in these memories and testimonies. In listening to and recounting these stories I want to reveal what lies dormant in the archives and what has been silenced by official historiography; namely, sexual abuse as constitutive of colonial power. As such, this article provides a counter-

[2] The discussion in this paper on the hidden, sexual aspects of colonialism is informed by Nancy Rose Hunt's excellent anthropological scholarship on violence in the Congo Free State and its afterlives (2008).

history, or to use Foucault (1980), an "illegitimate" or "subjugated" (pp. 82-83) knowledge, which offers not only a more comprehensive understanding of how the Congolese experienced the colony but also, and crucially, provides the basis to perform a critique of contemporary framings of sexual violence as inherent to the African continent or even as a function of African culture.

Archival Traces and Memories

> One day when my husband was in the forest to gather rubber, the sentinel Ikelonda found me in my hut where I stayed and asked me to give myself to him. I rejected this proposition. Furious, Ikelonda fired a gunshot at me, which gave me the wound of which you still see the trace. I fell backwards; Ikelonda thought I was dead, and to retrieve the copper ring I was wearing on my lower right leg, he cut off my right foot. This happened in the time of the white man Ekalakamba (Boali of Ekorongo, 12 December 1904).

Boali's testimony, together with her photograph, can be found in the archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her testimony is but one of 258 statements from Congolese people, fifteen of whom were women, who were gathered by the Commission of Inquiry in 1904-1905 which was set up "to investigate the specific charges of atrocities and gross abuses" (Congo Reform Association [CRA], 1905, p. 5) committed by colonial agents and their sentries[3] and alleged to be prevalent in certain districts of the Congo Free State.[4] The charges of atrocities were based on missionaries' reports and extensive

[3] The exploitation of rubber and cobalt was assured by State officials and through the use of sentries. Sentries, also known as *sentinels* or *auxiliaires,* were black, often native but sometimes foreign, overseers armed with a percussion gun who were put into a certain area or village by the State or one of the concession companies (Boelaert, 1996). Their task was to supervise the work of the natives in the forest, mainly in rubber production. The *capitas* were chosen by the white man from the village itself to represent the State

[4] The Commission was instituted by decree on 23 July 1904 by King Leopold II himself. As King of the Belgians and proprietor of the Congo Free State, he ruled this private domain from 1885 until he was forced to sell it to the Belgian government in 1908. The Commission of Inquiry came into being after the Congo Reform Association requested an impartial investigation into conditions in the Congo Free State (see Stengers, 1951).

campaigning by the Congo Reform Association (CRA), one of the first and largest human rights movements of the early 20th century and founded by Edmond Morel with the aid of British consul Roger Casement. Western criticism of Leopold's colonial regime did not receive significant attention until Morel, from his office on the quay in Antwerp, realised that Leopold II's 'civilising mission' was a mere façade[5] and that the entire colony was based on slave labour, extraction and brutal oppression (Hochschild, 1998).

When British Consul Roger Casement, based in Boma, Congo Free State, was instructed to investigate the atrocities that had come to light, he travelled for weeks in the Upper Congo Basin to interview eyewitnesses. In his renowned *The Congo Report* (1903) and his *1903 Diary* he spoke of the "infamous, shameful system … a horrid business … terrible oppression of these poor people" (Singleton-Gates et al., 1959, pp. 153-163) and exposed the cruel rubber system of incentives and the immense suffering it caused amongst the local population. The system ensured that colonial agents received a percentage of the market value of ivory and rubber produced in the Congo State, but on a sliding scale (Hochschild, 1998; Vangroenweghe, 1986). The more produced, the higher the commission. Colonial agents thus had a powerful incentive to force Congolese – "if necessary at gunpoint – to accept extremely low prices" (Hochschild, 1998, p. 118). When the rubber quota was not reached, the villagers were killed and hands or feet were cut off. Congolese memory accounts give examples of the colonial practice of detaching human hands and feet.

> While the white man killed people, he made others prisoner, and cut off hands and feet. He pillaged and burnt down houses. He killed those who did not collect enough rubber (cited in Boelaert, Vinck & Lonkoma, 1995, p. 75)

State officials demanded proof for each cartridge the sentries were given that the bullet had been used to kill someone. In this way the severed hands and feet served as "ghastly vouchers with which the native soldier attests the fact that his cartridges have not been 'wasted'"

[5] Morel worked for the company Elder Dempster, a Liverpool-based shipping line that had the contract for carrying all cargo to and from Congo. In the course of his work he noticed ships were arriving in the Antwerp harbour full of ivory, rubber and other goods and departing carrying only arms and military personnel.

(CRA, 1904b, p. 23). The State left clear instructions for the sentries: "If they do not want to make rubber, you have to bring me the hands of those you have killed" (Boongo in Boelaert, Vinck & Lonkoma, 1995, p. 36). Many testimonies speak of baskets filled with severed hands and feet positioned at the door of the white man's house. Often hands and feet were cut off to retrieve the copper rings or anklets that women wore, further underscoring the economic substructure of such colonial exploitation (see Boali, 1904; Ambo, 1904; Boelaert, Vinck & Lonkoma, 1995).

Mounting evidence of atrocities provided by missionaries and Casement's *Report* fuelled Morel's campaign. In particular, the photographs taken by Alice Harris of mutilated Congolese with severed hands or feet were displayed in publications, pamphlets and magic lantern shows in the UK and even the United States.[6] Their effective use meant Harris's atrocity photographs reached vast audiences, grabbed the public European and North American conscience, and garnered support for reform in the Congo. Like the raped women in the current conflict in eastern DRC, the severed hands and feet served as a powerful metaphor to advance the international humanitarian campaign (see also Brystrom, 2013). Interestingly, however, the cruel and exorbitant acts of sexual violence committed by sentries and colonial officials did not feature in the reports and pamphlets of the Congo Reform Association.

Even though the testimonies laid before the Commission of Inquiry provided distinct examples of sexual torture and rape, Morel's campaign, as well as Belgium's state-managed historiography on the colony, are marked by their sexual amnesia.[7] As Grant (2015) demonstrates, the representation of atrocity must be framed "in accordance with the culturally specific and historically contingent mores of strangers, if one is to enlist those strangers in bringing atrocities to an end" (p. 64). It is thus quite likely that certain testimonies, such as the one of Mingo, below, would not have resonated with Victorian moral attitudes towards sexuality at the time. Mingo narrated:

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[6] Alice Harris was the wife of John Harris and founder of the Congo Balolo Mission in Baringa, an area in the Congo Free State. It was controlled by ABIR, one of Leopold's concessionary companies and responsible for most of the atrocities committed at the time (see Vangroenweghe, 1986).

[7] On whether missionaries/humanitarians considered rape "unfit for repetition", see Grant, 2015. On whether mutilated limbs are more sayable and photographable as a visual ruin, see Hunt, 2008.

> While I was working on making bricks at Mampoko, on two different occasions did the sentries N'Kusu, Lomboto and Itoku, to punish me, make me lift my *pagne* [Congolese dress] and put clay in my sexual parts, which made me suffer greatly […] (Mingo of Ilua, 2 January 1905).

Historian Vangroenweghe (1986), for example, mentions that when Boali testified in front of the Commission of Inquiry and described how she had refused the passions of a sentry, great unease could be felt among the commissioners. It is likely that Boali exposed something that was well known at the time—the rape of native women by colonial agents or the claim that agents and sentries lay on native women—but that this claim unsettled Victorian social mores (see Grant, 2015). In his diary, Morel also makes clear that some atrocities should not be published, such as forced incest (Vangroenweghe, 1986, p.134).

Yet details of grotesque sexual abuse and excess inundate the archives and are framed as significant by the Congolese as well as some missionaries. Indeed, missionaries often referred to forced incest and raped hostages. Charles William Padfield, who was a missionary at the Congo Balolo Mission in Bonginda, recounted on 31 December 1904:

> Once forty women had been working at the station of Boyeka. At night the white man made them stand in line and ordered them to take off their clothes. When they were completely naked, he would choose one to spend the night with. He chose Ewawa, wife of Mbwbenga.

The practice of taking women hostage was also a common tactic amongst the colonial officials as a way to force the native men into the forests to collect rubber.[8] To gather rubber, one had to go into the forest and cut and tap the vine. However, once the forests surrounding the villages were drained dry, the natives had to go deeper into almost impenetrable rainforest and climb higher to reach the sap. State officials did not supervise this arduous and painful work as this would have required the officials to travel with the men and to stay for days on end

[8] See also Casement's *Congo Report* (1903); see testimony of Rev. Somerville Gilchrist of the Congo Balolo Mission in CRA, 1904a; see deposition of Harris of Congo Balolo Mission, 15 Dec 1904.

in the rainforest. Instead, to force them into the forests, state officials would keep their women as hostages until the men produced the required amount of rubber. The women were held at the station where they were forced to work and, on some occasions, divided among the sentries who would "unchain the prettiest ones and rape them" (Bricusse, cited in Hochschild, 1998, p. 162).

It must be acknowledged that state officials often expressed their dissent with certain colonial practices, such as the illegal detainment of women and children, and often pointed to the sentries and *capitas* (overseers) who abused the power given to them to commit all sorts of brutalities (Grenade, 1904). In a series of circulars, Albert Longtain, Director of ABIR (1904), admonishes sentries and forest guards to reduce this abuse. He expresses his disappointment at the minimal surveillance of forest guards and the excessive trust in unworthy *capitas*. George Washington Williams, who travelled to the Congo in 1890, wrote an Open Letter to the King in which he summed up his main accusations:

> These black soldiers, many of whom are slaves, exercise the power of life and death. They are ignorant and cruel, *because* they do not comprehend the natives; they are imposed upon them by the State […] They are the greatest curse the country suffers now (Williams, 1985, p.243).

Yet white colonial agents equally committed violence and often watched, laughed and condoned. For example, Mongondo's testimony confirms Mingo's story as narrated above, and adds: "The white man Longwango was present. He saw it all and he laughed" (Mongondo, 2 January 1905). On the atrocities and their causes Casement makes very clear: "It was the deliberate act of the soldiers of a European administration, and these men themselves never made any concealment that in committing these acts they were but obeying the positive orders of their superiors" (cited in Singleton-Gates et al., 1959, p. 166). On how the violence was condoned by white superiors, listen to Lontombu's story:

> One day, sentry Djoko who was put in our village by the white man Nina, asked my brother Bonkeji to give his wife to him. My brother refused. Two days later, there was a rubber market in our village. Djoko took my brother, tied

> him to a pole and killed him with an Albini gunshot. I was there and I saw it. Three days later, the same sentry Djoko came to the village with the white man Nina and in the presence of the latter, took the wife of my little brother N'Sala. He is still living with her and is sentry in Ilangi (29 December 1904).

The kidnapping (also referred to as *rapt*) of women, especially the beautiful ones, is a recurring theme in the archives. At least two of the fifteen testimonies by women made before the Commission complained about how they were taken from their homes and made mistress to the white man or one or other sentry (Jema of Lokoka, 1904; Bonyonoto of Waka, 1904). But, even more vivid in the testimonies were the depictions of grotesque sexual violence, such as incidents of forced sexual intercourse or enforced public incest. Boyau tells us the "white men installed transparent mosquito nets in the open and made a brother and a sister or a mother and her son enter and force them to have sex" (cited in Boelaert, Vinck & Lonkoma, 1995, p. 308).

These passages clearly illustrate that the rape, sexual exploitation and torture of native women and men were often used as a punishment or as extortion, but also more broadly as a display of colonial power. However, the memories also reveal the intensely brutal and intimate nature of the colonial encounter. As Mbembe (2001) argues, colonial violence is not only built into structures and institutions, it also insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness, even in sleep and dreams. The colonial regime, based on power, coercion and submission, requires direct, intimate contact with its subjects to maintain a bond of subjection. According to Mbembe (2001), violence in the colony is non-existent unless there is a sense of proximity and being in contact: "To colonize is then to accomplish a sort of sparkly clean coitus, with the characteristic feature of making horror and pleasure coincide" (p. 175). The violence and abuse of which these memories speak illustrate that brutality and intimacy were basic to, indeed constitutive of, not only Leopold's rubber regime but colonialism itself.

Present Reconfigurations

Essentially these testimonies uncover how the Congolese experienced the colony as a place where brutality and intimacy coincide. It is paradoxical, given the historical lack of attention to the sexual

aspect of colonial violence, that a century later in the DRC the "more hidden and tactile" (Hunt, 2008, p. 223) forms of violence—the sexual—have become the fixation of international security discourses and humanitarianism. As discussed earlier, the DRC has become renowned for its exceptionally brutal wartime rape. And while memories of past abuses linger among the Congolese today, current international discourse occurs in the midst of an almost complete absence of such history and its memories. Whilst conducting ethnographic fieldwork, I met Espoir during a focus group discussion with community members in the Moyens Plateaux around Minova in South Kivu. Espoir spoke of the war and how she lives in and with violence on a daily basis. She talked about sexual violence and how it has destroyed her community. However, against the "urgency" of her predicament she also pointed to the ignorance of her ancestors and to the history of colonisation to explain harmful gender practices and the erosion of traditional gender relations. Espoir spoke of the "trace" of violence which runs through her life, hopes and dreams. Yet international discursive practices continually focus on the singular events of brutal militarised rapes, a focus which tends to preclude any historical analysis.

However, traces of colonial violence are not only present in the lives and bodies of Congolese today, they are also visible in contemporary representations of sexual violence in the DRC as the "monstrosity of the century" (Stop Rape Now). These representations draw on "hundred-year old racial stereotypes" (Dunn, 2003, p. 5) of African primitivism and barbarity. They further suggest that the colony as a space of terror (see also Fanon, 1965) still defines the Congo today. During an interview with the country director of Women for Women International I asked if she could explain why some rapes in eastern DRC are executed with such brutality. Her reply reflected the perceptions of many other humanitarian workers and international actors that I interviewed during fieldwork: "In the forest, the soldiers are there. They have no family, no wives; they have become almost savages" (Bukavu, 2012). Perceptions of the violence as barbaric, and descriptions of the perpetrators as savage and inhuman, are ingrained in contemporary discourse on African conflicts in general (see Richards, 2005) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in particular (see Dunn, 2003; Eriksson Baaz & Stern, 2013). Indeed, the West seems to believe that the horrific and unique forms of sexual violence perpetrated in the DRC can only be African in origin. It seems that in the course of history,

violence in the colony has been imputed to the colony itself. This naturalisation of colonial violence as a native phenomenon through historical and political frames has actualised the contemporary DRC as a space of terror, while the violence committed by colonial powers has been lost.

The testimonies narrated above, which can be found in the archives today, are thus crucial as they form a connective tissue between the past and the present. Through the tradition of oral storytelling, the experiences of violence are passed on from one generation to the next and into the present moment, as demonstrated by Espoir's story. Fassin (2007), in his work on the experiences and politics of AIDS in South Africa, outlines how memories are not only present in the mind but also in the materiality of the body (p. 29). He speaks of how the embodiment of memory has two dimensions. First, past events are embodied in the objective realities of the present. This partly explains, for example, why the majority of rape victims in the conflict today do not have access to healthcare. Second, past events are inscribed in the subjective experience of the present. This might explain why Congolese refer to sexual violence in their country as an imported crime, as something that has come in with the Rwandan genocide, or it might explain why many rape victims experience the violence as a profound injustice. Indeed, a history of colonisation, foreign intervention and predatory state politics is expressed through "collectively created narratives about trauma" (Wilson & Mitchell, cited in Pottier, 2007, p. 840) such as the common perception amongst Congolese today that sexual violence has been imported from abroad. Through these two dimensions "memory becomes actualized" (Fassin, 2007, p. 29) and is further naturalised by historical and political representations and practices.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to shed light on how sexual violence prefigures the present in the Congo Free State. Most of the testimonies and memories discussed here were only made public more than eighty years after Leopold II was forced to sell his colony. In this way, these memories expose us to a series of 'delayed' experiences of sexual and non-sexual colonial violence. These memories are what Stoler (2008) calls "ruins" or, in Mbembe's words, "traces and fragments" of colonial violence, sadistic pleasure and excessive abuses. The historic 'unsayability' and the contemporary 'oversayability' regarding the violence that I have identified in this article can be considered as two

forms of grappling with it. Yet neither do justice to the suffering. While one deems sexual violence "unfit for [verbal] repetition", the other moves toward another extreme, a "pornography of pain" (Halttunen, 1995, p. 303), in which testimonies of rape victims are used to fit the postcolonial humanitarian narrative (see also Razack, 2007).

When the Commission of Inquiry heard the testimonies in the Baringa area, the big chief of all Bolima stood boldly before the Commissioners, "pointed to his twenty witnesses, [and] placed on the table his one hundred and ten twigs, each twig representing a life for rubber" (Harris, 1904, p. 22-23). The large twigs symbolised the chiefs who had been killed, the shorter ones represented the murdered women and the small twigs stood for the lives of children lost. Like the twigs as metaphors for lives lost and thus for the cruelties suffered by the Congolese under the rubber regime, the testimonies and memories narrated here serve as witnesses to cruel colonial violence. Boali's picture and testimony featured as an important symbol for Morel's humanitarian campaign. Boali appears in the archive as a victim of the red rubber regime, who was shot and mutilated because she refused to have sexual intercourse with the sentry Ikelonda. Yet Boali could as easily have appeared as one of the many women who were held hostage and systematically raped in order to force the men to go into the forest and gather rubber or she could have figured as the *ménagère* or housekeeper/sexual slave of a white colonial official in the Belgian Congo.

Regardless of the form of her incarnation, Boali's testimony matters. It matters because it gives us access to one of the few Congolese voices available of that time. It matters because it gives us insight into how the Congolese experienced the colony as "a place where an experience of violence and upheaval is lived" (Mbembe, 2001, p. 174). And finally it matters because her testimony, together with all the others, provides an important counter history to the sexual amnesia that marks both the official historiography and Morel's humanitarian narrative, and which stands in sharp contrast to the dehistoricising contemporary narrative on sexual violence. In this way, the testimonies and memories that I have narrated here form the connective tissue between the 'unsayable' and 'oversayable' and the past and the present. As subcutaneous traces from a violent past, they reshape historical understandings of colonial violence and open new avenues for rethinking past abuses and their endurance into the present.

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