

## The violent cartographies of violence- the imaginative rape geography of Congo

Andra-Mirona Dragotesc is a Romanian feminist with an academic and activist interest in issues of violence against women. Throughout her MA and PhD studies, she has addressed the violent processes embedded in discourses on violence against women. She is currently based in Romania, at Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara.

Andra-Mirona Dragotesc is a Romanian feminist with an academic and activist interest in issues of violence against women. Throughout her MA and PhD studies, she has addressed the violent processes embedded in discourses on violence against women. She is currently based in Romania, at Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara.

A few years ago if you'd asked me about Congo I wouldn't have known very much about it. I knew where it was located on the world map... the geographical world map. As for the social, political, cultural, economical world map, I didn't quite know where to place it. My interest in violence against women around the world, however, brought Congo to my attention more than once during the second half of the 2000s, and sooner rather than later, I was able to locate Congo on one particular map: the world map of violence against women as the "rape capital of the world"[1].

The horror that is Congo for women is rendered visible through an identification of rape as a problem within the borders of this particular space. The culture of violence thesis which is embedded in the representation of Congo as the rape capital of the world is further supported by categorizations of Congo as the "ground zero of rape". Making people understand the extent of Congo's tragedy must be put into a historical perspective of tragedies (9/11, for example) well-known; thus making it easier to understand. I argue it is a way of appropriating the tragedy

of Congolese women raped during wartime, of essentialising tragedy in general, and of colonising of tragedies elsewhere by rendering them visible by presenting them as similar to Western/American ones. That is, of putting a recognizable mask on the face of a complicated problem with deep roots into world economics and Congolese history.

But, rather than trying to understand the complex factors at work, it seems that it is easier from a western perspective to blame it on the culture, the social milieu of a space where wartime rape has become the "norm" and is "almost a cultural phenomenon". We point therefore to "a rape-prone society"[2]... as opposed a rape-safe society? A less-rape-prone society? Representations mainly focus on the socio-cultural nature of violent gendered acts, shifting responsibility from gendered danger to social danger. In this case, Congo is a pernicious environment which has transformed (armed) "men into natural predators and women into permanent victims"[3] and where "male sexual aggression has become part of a wider social malaise"[4] pointing towards "social, material and political forces that facilitate sexual violence" [5].

Moreover, rape is not solely a weapon of war in Congo, but a way of ruling the country, as "UN warns Congo to end rule by rape". Representing the "rape of Congo" and illustrating the mass wartime rapes of women as "merely part of a larger rape, the rape of Congo" (my emphasis) transforms the lived experience of wartime gendered violence into an abstract construction, reifying rape, transforming it into a trope for the destruction of the country. Rape, thus, becomes the prerogative of Congolese bad governance, which has engendered conflicts that have resulted in the positioning of women into the monolithic category of the potentially rapable.

This discursive deployment of rape is problematic because it allows for representations of Congo to enter the sphere of the pathological. Moreover, it engenders the pathologization of spaces and peoples and renders them abnormal; thus allowing for normal(ity) within the order of things. The Congo is, thus, what I have called an imaginative rape geography, orientalised as *another*

unfamiliar space, arbitrarily mapped and defined through a paradigmatic rape, the abnormal space where rape is the norm (not the exception?). Its representation as exceptional and abnormal functions as a humanitarian (re)action trigger, while simultaneously reiterating global (b)orders. It involves a complex overlap of closing (orientalisation by bordering and ordering this space on the world map) and opening (colonisation by awareness raising, humanitarian intervention lacking reflexivity, epistemic violence embedded in knowledge production) that simultaneously isolates the Congo from the West and makes it penetrable to Western eyes and actions.

The paradox of awareness raising processes in this case is illustrated by one of the most well-known humanitarian campaigns concerning this issue: “**Stop raping our greatest resource – power to women and girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo**”. Additionally, we have portrayals of wartime gendered violence as a means of armed men’s imposition of authority over the raped woman’s community: “**battles are fought on women’s bodies as much as on battlefields**”. Rape is a tactical move of war (“**a strategy to disrupt society**”), a means of genocide (“**done to exterminate the population**”) or as a statement of political authority (“**a way to ensure that communities accept the power and authority of that particular armed group**”). In this framework the woman’s body is perceived as a mediator through which authority over a particular community is enforced and rendered visible. As an NGO representative states: “**When a woman is raped, it’s not just her that’s raped. It’s the entire community that’s destroyed**”. Such representations of wartime gendered violence reproduce the problematic metaphor of woman as community and female body as political, cultural and economical geography/resource.


Moreover, a dimension of world geopolitics and relations is embedded in awareness-raising representations of violence against women in the Congo wars. Thus, the Congo is gazed upon by an imagined community which is established through these representations as having (respons)abilities to engender systemic changes. I am quoting here at length from the description of an **awareness raising campaign** in order to illustrate this idea:

The “Turning Pain to Power Tour”—beginning February 11<sup>th</sup> in New York City before moving to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Atlanta and Washington D.C.—supports a joint V-Day and UNICEF campaign to expose the devastating impact of rape on Congolese women’s health, their families and their communities.(my emphasis)

If 250 women who have been raped, torn, starved and tortured can find the strength to dance us up a mountain, surely *the rest of us can find the resources and will to guarantee their future.* (my emphasis)

A discourse of “othering” is visible in the previous **quote**, but neo-liberal ideas with imperialistic overtones of *us* as potential providers of good governance (as opposed to Congo’s “**tradition of epically bad government**”). This is yet *another* instance when African tragedies show up on Western radar screens. Thus, eventually, rape discourses re/construct the subject positions, drifting away from deconstructing hierarchies and unequal power relations.

Having a rape capital pin-pointed on a map of the world will not end violence; it will, however, add to it, continue it, and transform direct gendered violence into epistemic violence, into the arbitrary violent construction of violent spaces and knowledge about them. Pathology, then, shifts towards the “we”/ “us”, in my opinion, as the identification of violated “suffering strangers”[6] and the “space of victimhood”[7] that is Congo is poignant to what Moeller called “the pornography of suffering” [8].

1 I won’t even try to give a reference here, you can just google the phrase and you’ll get results from the past 6 years from CNN, The Guardian, Foreign Policy, BBC, Euronews, the  United

Nations.

2 Peggy Reeves Sanday, “The Socio-cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-cultural Study”, in Michael S. Kimmel with Amy Aronson (eds.), *The Gendered Society Reader*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 55- 72.

3 Joanna Bourke, *RAPE: Sex, Violence, History*, Great Britain: Virago Press, 2007, p. 129.

4 Bourke, *Op. cit.*, p. 384.

5 *Idem.*

6 Kevin Rozario, “Delicious Horrors: Mass Culture, The Red Cross, and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism”, in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Sep., 2003): 417-455, 441.

7 See François Debrix , “Deterritorialised Territories, Borderless Borders: The New Geography of International Medical Assistance”, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (Dec., 1998), pp. 827-846.

8 Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 18.

---

May 15th, 2013 | [Development](#), [Politics](#), [Society](#) | [0 Comments](#)

---

☺

