

# An Archive of Possibilities: Healing and Repair in Democratic Republic of Congo

By Rachel Marie Niehuus. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2024. Pp. 201. \$ 26.95 (pb)

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In a geographically vast nation, often referred to in popular media as the rape capital of the world, Denis Mukwege, a Nobel-winning surgical gynaecologist, participated in the DRC's 2023 presidential elections. Although he did not win, his entry into politics carries symbolism, especially in relation to Rachel Marie Niehuus' 2024 monograph, *An Archive of Possibilities: Healing and Repair in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. In it, she illustrates the ways in which the imperative to repair the body politic is as urgent as addressing the formidable health-care challenges in the Eastern Congo.

A medical memoir of sorts, this book navigates not only the physical wounds of conflict but also the complexities of healing, drawing attention to the enmeshed fates of individual well-being amid the broader landscape of a gruesome war. Niehuus introduces the concept of aporias that represents the double binds, impasses and contradictions that individuals and communities in the DRC are confronted with. The magnitude of death in the region is shocking, prompting reflection on the issue of global structural racism, and anti-Blackness. While the DRC has garnered substantial humanitarian attention, it has not been enough to impel concerted global political efforts to address ongoing violence. Niehuus describes how Black critical theory has reoriented her thinking and she proposes the discourse as a fresh contribution to the literature on post-conflict societies and humanitarianism.

Readers are presented with a candid discussion of Niehuus' positionality within the field site – namely her Whiteness. Part of what is unique about this book is its deep engagement with the humanitarian industrial complex – a system the author is intimately familiar with. However, the narrative leaves readers curious about the motivations behind the author's initial involvement in eastern Congo, presumably one also motivated by humanitarian aspirations, perhaps revealing her own aporia. An interrogation of this could have enriched how she situates herself within the barrage of foreign agendas circulating there.

*Archive* is divided into five chapters, each featuring poignant quotes from diverse sources and concluding with what she terms an interlude.

In 'Dirt Work', the author lays the literal historical groundwork upon which the Eastern Congo stands and grows. Here, underutilised fertile soil and dirt serve as a framework for healing and hope (p. 39). This chapter presents a crucial exploration of the foundations that shape the region, as well as offers insights into its historical and current context.

Diving into the geographical landscape of Lake Kivu, a methane-filled body of water posing a natural threat, 'A Sea of Insecurity' examines the uncertainties faced by its inhabitants. A historical analysis of the region's topography of violence is provided where the categories of soldiers and bandits become slippery (p. 59).

Chapter three, entitled 'The Body, the Flesh, and the Hospital', weaves haunting vignettes of material and embodied suffering to explore pain on multiple registers. The author situates the hospital as a space for the recognition of suffering, and where health workers serve the function of bearing witness. Readers get a sense of the challenges faced by women in a war-torn region in many aspects of their lives, with one striking example being the risks associated with childbirth. However, delving further into the perspectives of her interlocutors on the significance of bearing children could have offered a more nuanced exploration with regards to larger questions of social reproduction. Do women perceive their act of bringing life into the world as a contribution to the archive of possibility?

'When Life Demands Release' interrogates the ways in which violence holds a therapeutic potential. Niehuus suggests that the act of maintaining eye contact while torturing and dismembering individuals can be construed as an articulation of the perpetrator's subjectivity. This assertion insists upon a form of confrontation that eschews emotional distance (p. 117). While potentially integral to her analysis of the interplay between acts of violence, individual agency and the potential for healing (p. 113), this line of argumentation feels uncertain in its endeavour to fathom the abyss from a subjective vantage point. Perhaps this degree of horror lies beyond theorising.

In the final chapter, 'We are Creating a World We Have Never Seen', the author introduces various accounts of slam poetry, painting and narratives of women coping with their realities, for example, retaining hope for estranged husbands. These elements collectively represent the author's proposition of new possibilities emerging as individuals navigate the seemingly insurmountable aporias explored throughout the narrative. Afrofuturism takes on a unique significance in the context of the DRC's conflict. Part of the futuristic element in this context is the many ways that the country's trajectory is being shaped by a mix of state and non-state actors and private mining companies. Surprisingly, there is a conspicuous absence of any reference to the role of the Catholic and Pentecostal churches. The author's decision to omit this aspect leaves readers to speculate on the potential significance of these religious institutions in the narratives of repair and healing presented in her archive. Could exploring how faith and religious communities contribute to a greater understanding of the kaleidoscopic visions of the future in the Eastern Congo?

As the title suggests, *An Archive of Possibilities* remains just that. Out of what could have easily been overwhelming impressions of unimaginable horrors, Niehuus has carefully sutured together a body of emancipatory latencies, and in such an extreme context, these remain ever elusive.