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Navigating fearscapes: women's coping strategies with(in) the conservation-conflict nexus in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

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ABSTRACT

The gendered impact of fear from persistent insecurities informs women's navigation within and through conflict- and conservation-shaped landscapes. This article introduces a feminist emotional geography approach into discussions concerning the relationship between conservation and conflict studies to explore how navigation of fear enables women's self-determination and agency in generating survival strategies with(in) such 'violent environments'. Based on visual ethnographic methods employed around *Virunga National Park* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the photo diaries and narratives of two women illustrate their attempts to make sense of their fears in order to develop emotional and behavioral coping responses in the form of bartering and performativity. Going beyond a dominant focus on 'everyday resistance' *against* oppressive conservation practices and other armed actors in conflict, I argue that this fear-induced coping allows to account for the compliances and collaborations unfolding *with* landscape and actors, that afford the women a sense of integrity, agency and ownership of their body and mind.

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Introduction

The blackmailing letter must have passed through many hands, as it was tattered, seemingly having been folded and unfolded numerous times before Mama Sifa handed it to me. '*You cannot show it to anybody*', she made clear. The handwriting was difficult to decipher but a sketch indicated where the mother should place the amount of 6000 USD and, with a little cross, where her son would then be released – alive, if she would deliver the ransom in the designated timeframe. Puzzled about the simultaneous trust and mistrust

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in me this overture signalled, I asked: 'But if no one will see it, how can anyone believe it and help?' Mama Sifa answered: '*Everybody who came to help made things worse. If you show this letter to anybody, the kidnappers will know we gave it to you and they will kill us.*' I did not understand: 'Why will the kidnappers know that I have gotten the letter from you?' Mama Sifa responded in a hushed tone: '*Because the kidnappers are amongst us.*'

During my fieldwork around *Virunga National Park* (PNVi – original name in French: *Parc National des Virunga*) in the province of North Kivu, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), this kind of conversation repeated itself over and over. The threats Mama Sifa and many other women referred to throughout the year of 2018 were always there or lurking in close proximity, seemingly unpredictable in terms of when they would appear. Their threat stories reflected how the waves of violence from a brutal colonial legacy and the warfare since the Rwandan genocide in 1994 coalesced with conservation practices into 'violent environments' (Peluso and Watts 2001). Yet, I just got a slight understanding of these threat stories when I got to see and sense the perpetuating condition of fear that decades of these conflicts instilled in the people of the Eastern Congo. Davidson and Milligan called this phenomenon the 'emotio-spatial hermeneutic: emotions are understandable – "sensible" – only in the context of particular places' and '[l]ikewise, place must be felt to make sense' (ibid. 2004: 524).

Critical conflict and conservation scholars commonly discuss these existential fears related to violent environments in reference to Galtungs' conceptualization of direct, structural and cultural violence (ibid. 1969). While fear then could be interpreted as a form of violence in its own right, I found that the multitude of fears encompassed more meanings than being a structural feature or a direct threat of violence, but rather a creation and creator of violence, a meaning behind silences and behind stories, an obstacle and an incentive for movement, permeating and interrelating transnational dynamics and individual livelihoods. In this light, applying a conceptualisation of violence would limit understandings of the various fears and their implications for the people living and working with(in) the conservation-conflict context. In this article, I therefore seek to contribute to an emerging literature on the anthropology of fear (Boscoboinik and Horáková 2014) by bringing a gendered, emotio-spatial dimension into discussion concerning the relationship between conservation and conflict.

Scholars working at the intersection of feminist geopolitics and emotional geographies assert that paying attention to fear enables us to understand the mental and topographical landscape as experienced by different inhabitants (see e.g. Bondi, Davidson, and Smith 2007; Brickell and Cuomo 2020; Pain and Smith 2008; Sharp 2009). Moreover, since fear functions as an embodied survival mechanism, it provides insights into emotional and behavioural coping responses aimed to alleviate perceived, impending

danger. Hence, fear works like an inbuilt compass to navigate a landscape thick with factual and fictive threats - what I call, after Tulumello (2017), a *fearscape*. If, as Green argues, this pervasive, invisible, and often silent presence of fear in conflict-affected areas determines 'the way of life' for its occupants (ibid. 1994: 227), the growing body of work by feminist geographers can aid to examine the gendered dimensions of fear and its spatial manifestations (Koskela 1999; Listerborn, Avis, and Bankey 2002; Tyner and Henkin 2015; Valentine 1989). I apply this approach to the sub-Sahara African context in order to unravel how women, respond *in* and *to* these fears in order to mentally, physically and emotionally survive with(in) the conservation-conflict nexus.

Focussing specifically on PNVi, Hochleithner (2017) documents different forms of 'peasant resistance' embodied in customary land claims against PNVi's conservation practices, while Marijnen and Verweijen (2018) depict how increasingly militarized conservation measures fuel forms of 'counter-insurgency as resistance' by community members. This common reference to Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott 1985, 1990) framework tends to homogenize 'people', not accounting for the diversities regarding age, ethnicity, and gender within park-adjacent communities. It further concentrates on behaviour directed *against* nature conservation practices and hence inhibits us from seeing the opportunities, compliances and collaborations unfolding within and because of conservation areas embedded in conflict-affected regions. To go beyond this dominant focus on resistance, I introduce a feminist geography approach into critical conservation studies to examine the decisively gendered impact of fear informing women's coping strategies *with* both, landscape and actors.

My research did not intend to focus specifically on women. While men equally face fears, albeit less often expressed in further fear of stigmatisation by others (see e.g. Ammann and Staudacher 2020), it was the men who directed me to the women asking me to listen to their stories because, as one local chief stated: '*They are the ones who suffer from the park.*' This statement refers to the predominantly gendered division of household tasks in the rural area around PNVi, with women primarily performing the duties of getting firewood or charcoal, water and resources for cooking and washing. Given a lack of alternatives, a majority of women enter the National Park every day for those basic necessities, exposing them to encounters with park rangers and other armed groups operating within the forest. Women from the adjacent villages reported that they have experienced harassment, physical and sexualised violence, rape, imprisonment and being shot at by park rangers, who are in charge of enforcing the boundaries of PNVi based on its status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a category II Protected Area. Protected Area category II prohibits any access and resource use within the park, apart from scientific research and tourism (International Union for

the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)) 2020). Hence, the geographically confined conservation area produces a space of 'gendered exclusion' (Koskela 1999) as well as an unavoidable space of necessity for the women's daily livelihoods.

In this regard, a gendered analysis accounts for the socio-cultural context in North Kivu and can offer nuanced insights into survival strategies in the conservation-conflict nexus. Examining the relationship between fear and coping affords identification of women's own prioritized needs as potential solutions for livelihood struggles. It hence contributes to fill a noteworthy gap in current research concerning more diverse, inclusive and locally created strategies to reduce the conflict between conservation areas and people more generally. Moreover, by placing special emphasis on women's perceptions of fear and their multitudinous self-created coping strategies with(in) conflict-affected spaces, I follow Utas' call to 'deduce from women's accounts of victimization that they have no agency' (2005: 409). Definitions of women's agency are debated across disciplines, for example in how far modes of female behavior can transcend and transform structures and relationships in traditional, patriarchal and/or religious societies (Kook and Harel-Shalev 2020), or gendered identities (Ahmed 2020). In this article, I refer to agency as women's practices in their everyday lives by interacting with, navigating around, counteracting, adapting to and making use of violent societal structures within a conflict-affected social space (see e.g. Tripp 2015; Yadav 2020). While women's daily activities can have powerful, silent manifestations to deal with persistent insecurities in conflict (Ammann 2020; Fujii 2010; Parpart and Parashar 2019), this article focuses on the women's voluntary articulation through their 'photovoice' (Wang 1999). While not meaning to disregard women's experiences of violence, hardship and structural terror that can result in overwhelming, paralyzing fear and long-lasting trauma, I seek to emphasize women's self-expressed agency as the often untold acts of self-determination, self-representation and active engagement with(in) the fearscape.

In the following, I first introduce a feminist emotional geography approach into discussions concerning the relationship between conservation and conflict studies to explore the concept of coping with fear. Afterwards, I give a brief insight into the history of *Virunga National Park* to thereupon elaborate on my methodology and the visual ethnographic elements in adaptation to the volatile conflict context. Then I turn to the narratives of two women in particular demonstrating how their fears inform their survival strategies with(in) the conservation-conflict dynamics. In concluding, I advocate listening to women's fears can advance our understanding of their own prioritized needs, the political and economic interests behind the production of fear in the conservation-conflict nexus and pathways for mitigating women's livelihood struggles.

Interdisciplinary encounters: fear, 'scapes' and coping

In the past two decades, the study of fear has received growing interest across disciplines, yet few geographers have accounted for the significance of fear in motivating human coping behavior to survive in spatial contexts of violent conflict. As one exception, Taussig (1992) argues that modes of domination, terror and inequality metaphorically and literally transform society as a whole into a 'nervous system'. His essays obscurely refer to the sympathetic nervous system that in threatful situations induces the emotion of fear through releasing the stress hormone cortisol within the brain. Cortisol functions as an innate survival mechanism that prepares the body to fight or flee (LoBue, Kim, and Delgado 2019). When the life-threatening situation has passed, cortisol generally decreases.

However, people who experience ongoing violence, warfare or, what Miller and Rasmussen (2010: 7) call 'daily stressors' in the form of harmful socio-structural and material conditions, can encounter permanent perceptions of threat resulting in chronically elevated cortisol levels (Martz 2010). Such longstanding exposure to threat can lead to an embodiment of fear with far-reaching, epigenetic consequences, effectively storing trauma in the body of successive generations who continue to sense, suffer and react under those fear-induced stress levels (see e.g. Kwapis and Wood 2014). A number of scholars drew attention to this pervasive presence of fear permeating and forging women's everyday lives in conflict-affected regions (Brickell and Cuomo 2020; Green 1994; Mehta 1999; Tyner and Henkin 2015; Scheper-Hughes 1992). While policies, economies and societies at large shift along what Richards calls the 'peace-war-peace continuum' (Richards 2005:13), Green depicts how fear remains engrained within societies in ostensibly post-conflict situations, thus shaping the mental and topographical landscape for its inhabitants. In order to account for this spatial dimension of emotions, conflict studies took up Appadurai's suggested '-scape' suffix, exemplarily in Nordstrom's 'warscapes' (Nordstrom 1997), focusing on how landscapes scarred by violence and warfare interact with people's livelihoods (see e.g. Bourgois 2001).

While these scholars commonly mention the ubiquity of fear within warscapes, they rarely examine how this emotional dimension influences the development of gendered livelihood strategies. For this reason, I suggest shifting the analytical angle onto fear that persists and shapes landscapes even after direct violence and warfare may have faded, and which consequently informs women's navigation within and through these spaces. A conceptual fear approach allows to approximate – yet, not reducing the analysis to – violence that can generate nuanced understandings of inter-relational, discursive, embodied and psychological effects on and of conservation-conflict dynamics beyond categorisations in direct, structural

and cultural forms of violence. In addition, listening to women's fears can indicate their personal understandings of different threats (not necessarily limited to violence), their concomitant needs and their individual coping strategies that can inform practical solutions for mitigating these threats in conservation-conflict contexts.

As an overarching framework, therefore, I build on work in emotional geographies to examine how spaces forge the experience of emotions, and how, in turn, emotions mold these spaces by informing people's everyday navigation routes throughout landscapes (Davidson and Milligan 2004; Koskela 1997; Mehta 1999; Pain and Smith 2008). I refer to landscapes that continuously trigger the emotion of fear as 'fearscapes'. The term originates from behavioral biology to describe 'a variable landscape of predation risk' that influence animal movements in avoiding certain spaces of threat from predators (Olsoy et al. 2015). Similarities to the human sphere were first highlighted by geographers such as Tuan (1979) exploring how the human imagination creates 'landscapes of fear' in association with threats of famine, diseases, authoritarian terror or individual dark thoughts. Tulumello (2017) invoked the 'fearscape' concept to analyse how fear transforms urban environments into controlled spaces of exclusion and seclusion (ibid. 2017: 4).

These urban fearscape characteristics exhibit categorical similarities to the conversion of natural environments into National Parks as a specific form of protected area (PA). Political geographers brought attention to problematic measures applied in this conversion process as a form of 'fortress conservation' (Brockington 2002), 'based on the belief that biodiversity protection is best achieved by creating protected areas where ecosystems can function in isolation from human disturbance' (Sage Encyclopedia of Environment and Society 2020). This conversion commonly entails framing and treating local communities as 'threats' to nature in order to evict, dispossess and punish inhabitants (Ybarra 2016), justify violent and militarized measures to 'protect' conservation sites (Massé 2018) and fight a discursive and physical 'war for biodiversity' (Duffy 2014). In addition, recent work building on the concept of 'violent environments' (Peluso and Watts 2001) points to the entanglement between conservation practices and wider dynamics of warfare within a given region, blurring boundaries between conservationists, civilians and diverse armed actors in their overlapping roles and claims for power, or at least survival (Marijnen, de Vries, and Duffy 2021). In this context, a sole focus on resistance to conservation risks compartmentalizing into 'good' (legitimate) versus 'bad' (illegitimate) actors and behaviours that reinforce dichotomous victim-perpetrator relationships along gendered roles. Thus, it forecloses opportunities to see the 'tactic agency' of women in particular (Utas 2005) within proactive shifts between resistance, compliance and collaboration developed in search of viable livelihoods with conservation.

To overcome these limitations, I ground my analysis of female livelihood strategies on the understanding that fear informs mental and behavioural responses towards survival in the form of coping strategies. While resistance is directed *against* a target, coping unfolds *with* someone or something. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as 'an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one's reaction to such a situation' (American Psychological Association 2020). Based on Selye's 'general adaptation syndrome' (Selye 1976), coping describes the ability of individuals to develop emotional, cognitive and action-oriented strategies for reducing or eliminating perceived threats, and thus lowering chronic feelings of fear in violent and (post-) conflict settings (Johnson and Chronister 2010). Coping entails the 'choice of action' aligned to the personally appraised reality (Haan 1977: 80) and and hence accounts for ownership and empowerment. In this article, I seek to shed light on the fear-induced coping strategies of two women in particular, in their attempts of appropriating Virunga's fearscape that both constrains and enables their efforts to maintain livelihoods amidst ongoing violence.

A recent history of the Virunga area

After the end of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 more than two million people fled into Zaire (name of the DRC from 1971–1997), including the former Hutu government of Rwanda and its military wing *interahamwe* responsible for carrying out the genocide. These old governmental forces reinvigorated their power within Congolese refugee camps to stage attacks against Tutsi-affiliated peoples within Zaire and across the border against the new Tutsi-dominated government of Rwanda. From 1996, this new Rwandan government with support by Uganda, responded with military invasions into Eastern Congo in order to eradicate the expatriated opponents and assumed supporters, in the process also displacing, humiliating and killing millions of Congolese (Mathys 2017). Those Congolese who survived count the following, internationally declared 'two Congo Wars' (1996–1997; 1998–2003) as six waves of an ongoing violent conflict. The instability, combined with a weak – and in North Kivu largely absent – Congolese government, created a power vacuum filled by more than 100 local and foreign armed groups. Many of those groups use Virunga as a passage, hideout and resource base while committing major atrocities against the population (Kivu Security Tracker 2020).

Fearing irretrievable biodiversity loss from these militia activities within the park, PNVi further militarized its conservation efforts when the state-owned conservation authority *Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature* (ICCN) entered a public-private partnership with the British NGO *Virunga*

Foundation in 2008. The new park management under the Belgian Emmanuel de Merode attained international fame and funding from private donors including the Howard Buffet Foundation and the European Union, amongst others. Thereupon, PNVi stated on their official website that they plan to '*deliver large-scale opportunities for the local community by reducing poverty rates, stabilizing security, and strengthening local infrastructure*' (Virunga 2020). These ambitions raised the hopes and expectations of local communities to get their share of the National Park in the form of economic benefits and improved regional security.

In 2018, ten years of disenchantment, during which Virunga's conservation-as-development efforts have not lived up to these hopes, have left an imprint on local attitudes towards the park and its managers. Many Congolese women in North Kivu perceived PNVi as a self-enriching, neo-colonial project of Belgium that is only created for wealthy tourists while stealing agricultural land that local residents would need for subsistence. Despite Virunga's implementation of two hydroelectric power plants, the park management states that only roughly 5000 of the four million people living in proximity to the park benefit from their projects (Virunga 2020). Above all, women stressed repeatedly how they suffer from persistent insecurity coming *from* PNVi. Facing threats to their livelihoods from the multitude of armed actors around and within the forest and a state providing neither protection nor law enforcement, the situation appears exceptionally unjust to residents when PNVi's paramilitary convoys pass through their village safeguarding a few tourists in and out of the park.

Despite deployment of the largest United Nations peacekeeping mission in the world, those who stayed not only feel left out of Virunga's conservation 'success' in monetary and security terms, but also see the park as one more threat worsening their hardship. The threats caused by PNVi include taking away their farmland through park expansions, animals exiting the park and destroying harvest, denial of access to basic resources within the park, and harsh, often violent, punishment by ICCN rangers when entering the area unauthorized. These historical developments reflect how violence, militarization and warfare coalesced conservation practices and the wider, complex dynamics of the regional conflict into a fearscape. Given the gendered division of daily livelihood tasks, particularly the women of Virunga felt the geographical as well as socio-economic exclusion from the fenced-off and patrolled conservation area and the threats of crossing its boundaries.

Methods of visual ethnography

Due to the volatile security situation in 2018, my fieldwork base was in Goma, the regional capital of North Kivu. Given this context for the protection of all participants, all names and explicit locations are pseudonyms or

kept anonymous in the following. From March to December 2018, my Congolese research partner Pat and I conducted research trips to five villages adjacent to Mikeno sector, which is the highly securitized part of PNVi that constitutes the habitat of mountain gorillas blending into the forest of Rwanda. My research partner Pat is a Congolese man respected for his advanced age and longstanding advocacy work in the park-adjacent villages in North Kivu. He became my advisor, protector and translator after a common friend from Uganda introduced us and thereby established the needed, mutual trust. We conducted semi-structured and focus group interviews with local chiefs, governmental officials, security personnel, park rangers, farmers, local cooperatives and so called 'groupes de solidarité'. We repeated visits to one specific women's group who lived in Pat's native village in proximity to the borders of PNVi.

In 2018, political turmoil due to long-term delay of presidential elections and increasingly frequent, unpredictable outbreaks of violence, attacks and kidnappings impeded regular access. Moreover, my presence also had a decisive impact on the women. I sensed an unwillingness to speak to or in front of me, yet another 'white Western researcher' – who are often associated with an exploitative, colonial legacy in the Congolese and conservation context in particular (see e.g. Marchais, Bazuzi, and Lameke 2020) – asking them questions, reminding of the phenomenon Mwambari (2019) calls 'research fatigue'. More even than fatigue, the women later on expressed that they had witnessed how foreign researchers and NGO workers have been coming and going in waves like the warfare, yet similarly have not brought any long-lasting change to their hardship.

To mitigate those barriers, Pat's social embedment in the park-adjacent district enabled us to make use of participatory photography techniques in combination with written diaries and reflective, individual interviews. Participant photography – also referred to as 'photovoice' - constitutes 'a visual method in which research participants are encouraged to visually document their social landscapes through photography and reflect on their photos to produce personal narratives' (Allen 2012: 443; see further Wang 1999). In the paramount objective of protecting our voluntary participants, we ran information meetings about the risks, responsibilities and choice of withdrawal at any time when utilizing the cameras. Pat distributed 15 disposable cameras and diaries to literate volunteers in three different park-bordering villages. Maintaining an open, inductive approach, the photographers were asked to make one picture per day of their everyday experiences and to write a diary entry about the photo and what it meant to them.

All participants were renumerated for their work, received their photos and hold copyright over their images. Only photographs and verbal accounts that participants haven chosen themselves and explicitly consented to use

for the research project are presented in this article. This visual ethnographic approach allowed the participants to represent how they saw and sensed their everyday lifeworld without the unavoidable impact of my presence. The photos and texts further assisted my understanding of what is meaningful to them but equally important, what they *wanted me* to see. In addition to my own observations, we complemented the photo diaries with semi-structured interviews.

In total 52 pictures, complemented by diary entries and personal narratives, pointed to the women's fears generated by different threats to their livelihoods and their individual responses for survival. Given the subjective nature of emotions, identifying fear is a point of personal sensing and linguistic interpretation. Yet I have chosen to focus on fear as it appeared to be more than an emotion, but a deep, underlying condition that informed other feelings of disappointment, resentment, anger, despair, apathy and sadness in the livelihoods of women around Virunga.In the following, I focus on two women from two different villages who have been willing to take photos, write and speak to me throughout 2018. The stories of Pauline and Mama Sifa give an insightful, idiographic – yet widely-shared – account of women's livelihoods adjacent to PNVi.

Coping with(in) the fearscape

Pat and I followed the single road from Goma north until we turned onto dusty side roads flanked by huts with UN tarpaulins and iron sheets as roofs. At the end was a stone house, painted with slogans by the NGO who donated the building as a community hall for village meetings. Mama Sifa, the leader of the self-organised 'groupe de solidarité' for women from the surrounding villages, welcomed Pat at the door and guided us into the dark, windowless room. Inside, 16 women, between 19 and 52 years of age, were already seated in a circle on plastic chairs.

The women seemed calm when we met that first time in March 2018. The high number of kidnappings of Congolese, many of them of children, as well as the violence, lootings and attacks by different armed actors, including the Congolese army *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC) - so shocking for us, so 'ordinary' for them - remained mostly unnoticed by the international media. The earnest serenity and dignity of the women in Mama Sifa's group was admirable, yet alarming considering what Taussig describes as a 'numbing and apparent acceptance' (1992:11) provoked by a permanent state of insecurity.

Pat explained before each interview that our research project and our visits were temporary and we could not promise any positive change in the long run. That somehow validated the women's disappointed assumption about my appearance and my own discomfort asking in how far

anthropology here can really be an agent of social change (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992: 28)? By devoting this article to these women, I hope to give back – or pay forward – by raising attention and acknowledgement that seeks to inspire our own agency for change as academics, practitioners and activists.

Pauline's strategy: bartering

Unlike most young women in the region, Pauline, 24, had finished primary six because her mother found education important and saved to pay the 25 USD annual school fees. Pauline started her first year just after schools re-opened in the short moment of stalemate when the end of the first Congo War in May 1997 brought hope for a return to 'normal life' in Eastern Zaire. In course of 1997, the dictatorship of Mobutu Seso Seko was overthrown by Rwandan forces with their Congolese allies. The country was renamed to the *Democratic Republic of the Congo*. In August 1998, this short glimpse of hope was destroyed when the governments of Rwanda and Uganda disagreed with DRC's new president Laurent-Desiré Kabila. Thereafter, they recruited mostly as ethnic Tutsi identified Banyamulenge from Eastern Congo to form the rebel movement *Rally for Congolese Democracy* heralding the Second Congo War in North Kivu.

During the five years that followed, Pauline's teacher continued lessons at his house, irregularly but sufficient for her to develop her spoken French. Later this turned out to be a decisive asset for Pauline, as it enabled her to hide the Kinyarwanda that was spoken at home. Despite the fact that Kinyarwanda is widely known through trading and kinship in the surrounding regions of the Virunga volcanoes in the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda alike, the Congolese government used this linguistic demarcation as a discursive war tactic to identify, expel and kill the 'Rwandophones' (Mathys 2017). As a result, many Congolese of North Kivu developed strong resentments against Kinyarwanda-speakers, who were accused of being affiliated with and supportive of the Rwandan invaders.

In 2018, Pauline lived with her own four children in her childhood village on the border to Rwanda and PNVi. She had been told by her mother that her family once had a plot of fertile land. The park took this away, leaving the family without the opportunity to cultivate food and hence with no other choice than going into the park unauthorized to find some basic resources to survive. Being born into this 'natural' order of things, Pauline neither questioned the given structure of conservation's domination over the landscape, nor her right to navigate around those policies and practices. Her spatial perception of being an original and thus rightful owner of what is now park land informed Pauline's personal justification to cross those geographical boundaries by going into the forest to extract resources that would effectively be hers. Other women expressed similar attitudes recalling

one specific moment in 2016 when the park expanded its borders 'again'. Park rangers pushed them off their crop fields, confiscating their harvested potatoes and erecting sign posts saying '*ICCN Parc National des Virunga – limite du parc'* to demarcate the conservation-claimed territory. They promised to give the affected villagers compensation for the land taken. However, people never received anything apart from 1000 saplings. Pauline showed me the rotten saplings that were lying at the same spot where they were dumped by the ICCN truck. '*Can we eat those trees?*', she commented concerning the saplings' lack of value in making up for the loss of food harvest. These features exemplify the emotio-spatial dimension of the conservation area creating geographical boundaries of separation and exclusion that inform the emotional and physical topography for the women.

Pauline feared the rangers ever since she observed how they changed when ICCN entered the public-private partnership in 2008 and gained international funding. She remembered that the rangers suddenly got good boots, good weapons and a lot of money. Nowadays, a cohort of about 700 mostly young rangers, trained and equipped as paramilitary, carry out foot patrols along and within the park's borders. These new rangers are the '*Virunga's army*' that Pauline feared. Some women still try to go back to their former fields to plant seedlings, but this army always comes back and rips out the crops, beats them up and threatens to take them to the prison at the park's headquarters in Rumangabo. Some women, Pauline said, were taken there and never returned, orphaning their children.

Despite these threats of punishment when entering the park, Pauline emphasized: '*I have to go into the forest every day – for the survival of my children. The poverty is big and there are no jobs. We are going as robbers, but women have no choice.*' She mostly collects firewood and water for cooking, sometimes also some special plants her mother taught her about that she applies as medicine. In addition to these basic resources, Pauline enters the park to earn some income by working in the makala [charcoal] business. In her camera diary she devoted every photo to makala, documenting the importance of charcoal that is used as a cooking fuel by the majority of households surrounding PNVi (UNEP-MONUSCO-OSESG 2015).

Produced by slow burning trees into carbonized pieces, the charcoal industry is one of the main drivers of deforestation of Virunga's rainforest. PNVi's official website states that 'millions of dollars' worth of illegally trafficked charcoal […] are extracted from the Park each year by members of armed militias' (Virunga 2020). Yet, the photos of Pauline show that not only militias but also girls and women of all age groups are engaged in this business. While men are mostly in charge of the burning process, women cut and bind trees, carry heavy sacks of *makala* on their backs to bring them to markets or transporting trucks, or sell charcoal on the sides of the street. The charcoal made from high-density wood within the park has a

Figure 1. Pauline, photo diary, October 2018.

much higher quality and thus a higher price, as Pauline wrote: '*You come with one sack of full (char)coal costing 10 USD whereas a half sack of (char) coal from Virunga park costs 10 USD. […] The charcoal from the park is heavy and of good quality.*' Rather than selling full bags of *makala*, Pauline prefers to sell in piles of small pieces measured in a bowl for 200 Congolese Franc [roughly 0,10 USD]. Selling in small bowls '*goes fast because many of the clients are vulnerable*'. By also referring to herself and other women as 'the vulnerables' she stressed that she cannot plan for tomorrow in the struggle for surviving from day to day Figure 1.

The majority of the charcoal business in North Kivu is part of an illegal cartel run by the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), one of the biggest rebel groups in North Kivu that emerged from the former Hutu-dominated Rwandan government and its military wings in 2000. The FDLR organizes a network of alliances with public authorities, businesses, the police, the Congolese army, security personnel and community members to produce charcoal within PNVi, transporting it to and selling 90% of it in Goma (UNEP 2015). Studies on the illegal charcoal chain from Virunga state that the FDLR commits major atrocities and human rights violations, animal poaching and trafficking, forced labour and sexual slavery 'accelerat[ing] cycles of insecurity, poverty, fear, and environmental destruction' (Dranginis, 2016: 2).

In contrast to the assertion that the FDLR recruits locals by coercion for illegal charcoal activities, Pauline emphasized her 'choice of action' by stressing that she works *in* the charcoal business and *with* the militias. Blurring

common distinctions between victims and perpetrators, other studies of North Kivu similarly point to the solidarization and 'contentious co-production' of locals with armed groups (Marijnen and Verweijen 2020: 997). Pauline justified her decision with the persistent insecurity surrounding her:

> If we would be safe, we could go everywhere and do something. For example, my man could buy a moto and use it as taxi from […] to […]. But on this road is attack every day, so moto taxis stopped [operating]. Or when a bandit loots all my harvest of cassava and maize. I ask myself: what am I doing on this earth? I work with the rebels because they are robbers too. I have nothing to lose.

'Working with the rebels' hence became Pauline's coping strategy to address two stressors simultaneously: food and physical insecurity. Other studies underline the benefits of this liaison for survival that Pauline expressed, as similar complicity with powerful armed groups can provide a degree of protection from lootings, property destruction and violent attacks (Iñiguez de Heredia 2017; Vlassenroot and van Acker 2001). Given the plethora of armed and 'predatory' actors in the region (Kankwenda 2005), Pauline's complicity with the FDLR underlines what Utas described as the possibility that women work voluntarily with rebel groups as an 'proactive effort to protect self and families' (Utas 2005: 409). Moreover, by categorizing herself and the militias as 'robbers' of the park's resources, Pauline expressed a sense of similarity and symbiosis with the militias. Conservation law makes them appear as equals, since they are both criminalized and punished as illegitimate intruders of the geographically separated space. Yet, Pauline's appraised right to the land makes these geographical boundaries appear as a legal discourse, not a physical barrier. In addition to this socio-economic bonding over PNVi in uniting enemy and 'marketplace', being on good terms with the FDLR functions as a point of access into the park and safeguarding out of it again, hence protection from ranger patrols and other armed actors within the forest. The fearscape resulting from the conservation-conflict nexus hence established restrictions and alternatives for access and manoeuvre at the same time.

Nevertheless, Pauline also feared the FDLR who use the park as a resource base and hide-out. When Pat asked about her relationship with the militias, she fell silent and carefully closed the door to make sure nobody would overhear our conversation. Women who interact with rebel groups, voluntarily or forced, are often stigmatized within the communities since those interactions indicate a 'collaboration with the enemy' and often involve sexual and violent acts. A psycho-counselling study in 2018 found the highest instances of rape and abduction of women as soldiers or sex slaves in the bordering villages to PNVi's Mikeno sector (Robjant et al. 2019). Pauline was not herself a 'victim' of rape, she was a 'troc' ['barterer']. She explained her trading agreements with the unknown, different actors she

might encounter on her way in and out of the park in a professional manner to us: '*In the park there are bandits, rebels, FARDC and rangers. If we meet, we [women] sell what we have. And we have nothing but a body.*'

Pauline never referred to any women specifically but always used the plural 'we' when she spoke about women's collaboration with armed actors, as if she wanted to change all women's fear of being raped by depicting it instead as a work-trade relationship. Besides, by expressing her own experiences as a collective situation, she was able to depersonalize the sexual abuse. This re-phrasing seemed to offer her a form of mental protection, maintaining her dignity and agency to be in charge of her decisions and her body. Being unable to leave the fearscape, threat avoidance proves elusive for Pauline. Yet emotionally coping with her fears by changing her personal narrative helped her to alleviate the threat and horror of sexual violence. Facing the lawlessness and unlikelihood of any prosecution by a largely absent government, she adapted to North Kivu's own rules of power and dependencies on those kinds of personal relationship to participate in the second economy, an 'economy of survival'.

Pauline's example illustrates one particular physical and emotional coping strategy shared by many women whose fear of not being able to feed their family outpaced their fear of the multitude of armed actors shaping the spatial organization in and around the conservation area. To mitigate the heavy impact on mental and physical health and potential stigmatisation, she changed the victim-focussing narrative of 'being raped' or 'being exposed to (sexualized) violence' into a narrative of agency by instead speaking of 'trading' and 'selling her body'. She thus found opportunities to circumvent the constraints of the fearscape by proactively interacting with its features to provide for her children's survival.

Mama Sifa's strategy: performativity

Born in the 1960s, Mama Sifa praised the old days of Zaire's independence under Mobutu Seso Seko when she could safely walk the four kilometres down the road to her school and had realistic aspirations of going to university one day. Her diary entries, written in neat handwriting in a table with dates and locations, relate that the children of today are not able to have this experience of going to school and thus have no hope for any improvement of this tough life. She expressed her concerns that these '*children without a future*' have no other choice than joining an armed group:'*Born and bred in war, what else do they know? Killing is a joke to them.*'

Mama Sifa had nine children, two of whom died from gastrointestinal diseases, while the other seven survived the never-ending war. She was proud of this – her – achievement of protecting them. All her photos were devoted to children in the neighbourhood carrying out different types of

Figure 2. Mama Sifa, photo diary, November 2018.

labour such as selling beans or maize, carrying goods, or cleaning in order to support their families. These duties and the financial inability of affording school fees are only two reasons why children are not in school. More importantly, Mama Sifa emphasized, a mothers' biggest fear is that her child would get abducted by 'the bandits' on the way to school.

She observed that cases of child kidnapping for ransom increased drastically after Virunga stopped its tourism in May 2018, as a consequence of the abduction of two British tourists on the road to PNVi. Before, the fixed hours when tourist convoys were going to the park and back to Goma generated windows of spatial security along the road for everyone. Now, women cannot send their children to go to school or to fetch water anymore. '*The next water source is 40 kilometres away from the village, but the road to Goma is dangerous,*' she says, '*the only salvation is the rain - when the water comes to us, because we cannot go to the water*.' The closest water access would be inside the park consisting of high altitude wetland, wells, and small streams, yet the forest bears similar risks as the road Figure 2.

Many women ascribed the threat of kidnapping and other encounters of unpredictable violence to the vague term 'the bandits'. Similarly, Mama Sifa's statement that '*the kidnappers are amongst us*' referred to community members, and hence to the contextual features of the fearscape that everybody holds multiple, overlapping roles crossing categorisations as 'civilian', 'kidnapper', 'robber', 'rebel', 'army soldier', 'FARDC' or 'neighbour'. 'Bandits' reduced finger-pointing in a context where everybody could be blamed, but also seemed to alleviate the terror of this violence to 'just' an act of banditry. In

addition, Mama Sifa justified the increase of 'bandits' since Virunga closed its tourism and mainly men lost their income opportunities, directly and indirectly linked to PNVi. When Pat and I visited the porter association in North Kivu consisting of 256 men only, they expressed their desperation since they cannot accompany tourists on gorilla tracking and volcano hiking activities within PNVi. A cooperative of men carving gorilla statues for tourists were afraid of what will happen if PNVi never opens again because without the foreigners who were brought to them by tour guides they have no market. Other male-dominated jobs working with or for PNVi such as drivers, tourist operators, guides and employees of the three Virunga lodges also stopped. It was this gendered division of fear in the conservation-conflict nexus that Mama Sifa pointed to when she explained to us: '*These men have a lot of desperation. They fear to not be able to provide for their families. That is the reason why men go into kidnapping business, because ransom brings quick money.*' When tomorrow is uncertain, 'quick money' – similar to Pauline's logic to selling small charcoal piles – is the only valuable currency for survival, creating a gendered fearscape within the second economy.

One day in October 2018, I greeted Mama Sifa, asking in an honest but not (re)searching manner: 'Good morning, *Mama*. How have you been the last weeks?' Her response came quick: '*Aye, aye. Last week bandits came and looted many houses. They killed the grandma and raped the 13-year old girl.*' I was taken by surprise and unsure what to say, but Mama Sifa continued: '*The bandits used pangas [machetes]…*' imitating the slashing movements with the arm, bending her body. '*I founded the association for raped women*', she finished. Later I realized that her timing was not a coincidence. It was just one week after Dr. Denis Mukwege received the Nobel peace prize for founding the *Panzi Hospital* in South Kivu treating women who have experienced sexual violence. When asking Mama Sifa, she confirmed that she heard this news on the radio, eliciting pride that her country was awarded. In founding her own association, she expressed her desire to be part of this 'success' given the morbid paradox of many rape cases in North Kivu that attract international attention and aid (for a comprehensive, critical discussion about sexualised violence in Eastern Congo see Mertens and Pardy 2016).

As Utas witnessed similar coping strategies with violence in post-conflict Liberia, 'presenting themselves as victims was a means by which women effectively established themselves as "legitimate recipients" of humanitarian aid' (2005: 409). Mama Sifa was candid concerning how she learned buzzwords of NGO jargon to organize any kind of support from material and financial goods to security. From her memory, 'rape' has been popular for some time; before it was 'child soldiers', 'food security', 'malnutrition of children', and 'demobilisation'. By picking up different, sensation-seeking depictions of 'the Congo' in international media and aid industry, Mama Sifa demonstrated her capacity for strategic performance to Pat and me. While it is widely discussed

whether performativity can entail a 'conscious' application of speech acts (Butler 1990; Derrida 1973), cognitive and behavioural sciences define performativity as a physiological function of the mind to actively enact and influence personally appraised realities (Pennisi and Falzone 2020: 9-10).

Mama Sifa's adaptation of a certain terminology that characterizes the fearscape is a coping strategy with what Searle (1979) described as 'a functional duality' of the performative speech act: she adopted the linguistic conventions of NGO jargon that played a major role in the conservation- and conflict-affected landscape of her lifeworld; and she actively constituted her own context by attracting this kind of humanitarian assistance to ameliorate the persistent fear. Mertens and Pardy similarly describe this strategic behaviour of community members in North Kivu as 'local compliance with international dictates' used to 'present an image of the DRC they think outsiders want to see' (2016: 16). However, as Pauline's story shows, sexualized violence should not be trivialised as a speech act to attract aid as it constituted a part of women's everyday reality that demanded a strategy for survival. In awareness of the international interest in this and other forms of violence, Mama Sifa demonstrated how she can make the features of the fearscape work for them by presenting it to foreigners who bring stuff in exchange for the stories of women's misery.

This performative alignment with humanitarian NGOs further indicates women's feelings of exclusion from the conservation fortress and its socio-economic benefits. Mama Sifa described her idea of Virunga's headquarters in Rumangabo like '*un château*' sitting enthroned amidst the conflict-ridden landscape. In a physical sense, fences, guards, watchtowers, international security personnel, armed convoys, track hounds, an air force and the paramilitary ranger staff provide the protection of a fortress from the insecurity and unpredictable violence in North Kivu. Yet, it would be misleading to depict PNVi solely as a fortress that radiates fear to its outside(rs) while disregarding the fear of its inside(rs), in particular its rangers who carried many colleagues to the graves, facing the threat of being killed on duty on a daily base (see Trogisch 2021). Additionally, the institution Virunga appears to provide social and economic security to those who are 'inside': regular wages, international funding, shelter, food and some rule of law, in contrast to the lawlessness that rules its surroundings. The women felt excluded from this geographical and emotional protection from fear and left out of conservation-related development projects, without hope for alternative employment possibilities from PNVi.

In response to my inquiry about PNVi's community projects, Mama Sifa guided me around her house to point out the electric wires running through her village to the city of Goma. The electricity line from PNVi's power-plant funded by the Buffet Foundation has not a single cord connection to one of the houses in her village. She told me that PNVi's park director de Merode

asked 163 USD for the monthly electricity, a sum nobody could pay. Yet, she had heard that some villages on the other side of the park got access to the lines, asking me: '*What is the difference to us?*'

In addition to PNVi, many conservation NGOs expressed their intention to make park-adjacent communities the main beneficiaries of conservation and who thus would not have a reason to resort to illegal park activities. Yet, Mama Sifa stated she has not received anything in her lifetime. In an interview with the Congolese community program manager of one of the leading conservation organisations, he complained: '*The nature of locals is that they are always demanding. It does not make sense to invest into communities because every achievement will be destroyed again*.' When asked why he thinks those projects do not persist, he replied angrily that he lost hope in 'locals' (not specifying his use of the term, e.g. how he would classify park rangers) who are either 'lazy' or 'rebels', so '*nothing you can work with*.' In many interviews with PNVi-aligned NGOs, I frequently encountered this negative attitude towards local communities depicting conservation-related development projects as Sisyphean work: projects that are undermined as soon as they are established. Yet, many of these local NGOs are phantom companies that only exist on paper, instrumentalizing the conservation-conflict nexus by purporting to help park-adjacent communities in order to attract donations from international organisations. Many of these have never set a foot into the park-adjacent villages, contributing to the women's perception of being left out by Virunga and conservationists more generally.

Facing this exclusion, Mama Sifa's reproduction of humanitarian NGO discourses showed her own coping with the situation giving her some scope of action. In her concern for not being able to protect today's children from fear, violence and a forlorn future, she found a possibility to bring some short-term support and momentary joy when aid workers arrive, talk, and hand out goods. This coping strategy to appropriate the fearscape for her community simultaneously claimed the legitimacy of women's suffering. Further, it gave hope for some physical protection coming with the presence of NGO workers in the village. These moments of a spatially and temporally perceived security are too-short lived for one to move freely and live an 'ordinary' life, but as Mama Sifa expressed, they allow the children to play on the street and give the angst-ridden mind a break. As the group's eldest, Mama Sifa made the women's fears visible bringing them beyond the realm of an individually felt reality to some form of collective recognition.

Conclusion

At the end of the photo diaries, I asked each woman to make one wish if anything would be possible. The answer was always the same: 'peace'. Despite the ambiguous meanings of peace in relation to the continuum of violence

in conflict-conservation spaces like North Kivu, the women living in a permanent state of fear might see their peace as a permanent end of all forms of threats that would allow fear to vanish.

Staying with the fear, women of Virunga like Pauline and Mama Sifa sought to actively appropriate the fearscape, making fear work for them. Through re-naming her own fears, Pauline alleviated their gruelling mental impact and created room for manoeuvre as a 'voluntary' participant in the second economy. Through performing internationally acknowledged and spectacularized fears, Mama Sifa attracted 'plasters' briefly covering what Mollica (2000) calls the 'invisible wounds' of fear. These coping strategies gave the women cognitive and behavioural space to feel a sense of agency, empowerment and self-determination in surviving from day to day. While conservation efforts construct and constraint female role identities and accompanying navigations through the fearscape, the National Park simultaneously creates novel, enabling features for survival. A feminist emotional geography approach allowed to shed light on the emotio-spatial production of gendered identities by the conservation- and conflict-affected landscape, yet enabled to emphasize how women actively appropriate and co-produce that space through coping. In contrast to the promoted benefits by conservationists, there are barely conservation- and tourism-related job opportunities, but subsistence and economic possibilities that residents – civilians, militias, army – make use of within the park. The disappointment of not gaining from PNVi's promises of socio-economic and physical benefits serves to legitimize women's actions in undermining conservation efforts.

In closing, I want to stress Utas' (2005) important reminder, that certain livelihood strategies in conflict contexts – such as park activities declared as illegal – do not align with our understanding of what is 'right' or 'wrong', thus it is not for us to judge choices born out of fear for survival. This article has demonstrated that attention to fear puts another complexion on the matter of gendered spatiality, violence and survival, allowing us to avoid prejudgments and disabling categories. While past and present experiences of violence will continue to haunt women's fearful memories interlinked with their spatial perceptions, their coping responses give them a degree of ownership, strength and dignity with(in) this conservation-conflict nexus.

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