

BOOK REVIEW

Chérie Rivers Ndaliko. *Necessary Noise: Music, Film, and Charitable Imperialism in the East of Congo*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiv + 285 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$30.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780190499587.

Necessary Noise by Chérie Rivers Ndaliko is a refreshing addition to the literature on Eastern Congo for one particular reason. It does what no other study has done before, which is to focus on something besides the conflict minerals that have wreaked havoc in the Kivus, the epicenter of Congo's war zone, or its corollary, the abjection of weaponized violence, which includes child soldiering and martial rape. Instead, this well-wrought study, while not eschewing Congo's mineral conflict altogether, shatters the single narrative of war and conflict that has eclipsed so many other topics, from cultural activism through art, to the imaginary, and the quotidian demand for celebration and empowerment. Indeed, war in Eastern Congo is only half of the story or *noise*, as the author would put it, told by international and local media outlets in self-serving war narratives intended to raise not just outrage in the West but also their own profile and worldview. Through the lens of the Yole!Africa cultural center, an organization operating in Goma, Rivers Ndaliko looks at the ways in which art, as a vehicle of social change, gives voice to the youth and challenges the culture of war that has mobilized so many young people in Eastern Congo. The book also stands as a searing critique of the intervention by international NGOs in Africa, which continues to be redolent with saviorism and dubious do-goodism.

The book is divided into four chapters, with the first chapter surveying the hip hop and cinematic scene in Goma, North Kivu's capital city, in the long aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. By the time its co-founder, Congolese filmmaker Petna Ndaliko Katondolo (the author's husband), moved back to Goma, Yole!Africa had become a powerful magnet that attracted scores of young people thirsting for change and ready to counter the way international media and outlets (mis)represented their lives in war-torn Eastern Congo with their own images, noises, and transcripts.

The second chapter addresses the other war taking place in Congo, a war over history. Here again the analysis focuses on Yole!Africa's activities. By 2011, as this war raged on, the author had been promoted to executive

director of the Yole! Africa organization, tasked with overseeing the expansion of its curriculum on popular history, which had been implemented a few years earlier as a way to reenergize the organization and reclaim its Lumumbist roots. Films such as *Boma-Tervuren* gave youth audiences a glimpse of the Belgian violent and barbaric dismembering of Congo under Leopold II, while Raoul Peck's documentary *Lumumba: La mort du prophète* allowed them to expose Western silences about and erasure of the father of Congo's independence.

In Chapter 3, the author provides a critique of the Janus-faced use of art by NGOs as a way for Westerners to engage positively with Congo on the one hand and to influence creativity, production, and distribution because they control the flow of money on the other. Their aggressive interventionism ends up eroding the agency and authenticity of many artists, who then find themselves cornered into unsustainable compromises. Vertical activism that fulfills the needs of global as well as local activists rather than empowering the victims, the author argues, operates oftentimes to the detriment of horizontal interventions that may not be as glamorous and high-profile but that yield far more benefits at the grassroots level. In the last chapter, Rivers Ndaliko's subtle analysis goes against the grain of the deafening heart-of-darkness single narrative that continues to plague Congo's global standing and to drown out local versions and voices. Pointing to the pitfalls of dehistoricizing narratives of the past and decontextualizing current events that ensnare even well-meaning benevolent foreign journalists and celebrities, this chapter aims to deconstruct the narrative of rape by letting local women tell their stories in their authentic words and performances.

By the time the reader gets to the end of *Necessary Noise*, the manifold ways in which the author employs the intersection of films, songs, and cultural activism all become quite evident. She uses these intersections to tease out how local agency both perpetuates and breaks the stubbornly repetitive cycle of the single narrative of Congo as the epitome of ruination, utter barbarism, and hopelessness. Even though at times the narrative in *Necessary Noise* veers off from its intended regional and grassroots foci and from its epistemological arc and seems carried away by the author's infatuation with the rhetoric and aesthetics of films, the book should nevertheless be taken quite seriously. Even the sloppy and startling transcriptions of many French lyrics, which stand in such stark contrast with its superb English prose, should not disqualify this study or distract readers from appreciating the critical contribution it makes to our understanding of Eastern Congo's predicament.

Ch. Didier Gondola
 Indiana University-Purdue University
 Indianapolis, Indiana
 gondola@iupui.edu

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- Autesserre, Séverine. 2006. "Local Violence, National Peace? Postwar "Settlement" in the Eastern D.R. Congo (2003–2006)." *African Studies Review* 49 (3): 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.1353/arw.2007.0007>
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- Peck, RaShelle R. 2018. "Love, Struggle, and Compromises: The Political Seriousness of Nairobi Underground Hip Hop." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 111–133. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.143>