Introduction

I met Kilalo, then ninety years old, for the first time in 2010. He lived – and was later buried – in one of the villages that make up Monigi. Back then, it was close to the city, but still Goma's rural hinterland. Since that time, the city of Goma has been rapidly encroaching on Monigi, as recurrent waves of violence have brought ever more people to the city in search of refuge.[1] From the entrance of Kilalo's small house, Rwanda was always visible, even if during the dry season the dust in the air only revealed the contours of its first hills. During one of our first conversations, he told me: "When my friend from Rwanda comes here, and I have a piece of land, why not give it to him? Like today, the Congolese refugees who are in Rwanda, they also went without UNHCR [UN's Refugee Agency]."[2]

Kilalo's stated openness and "hospitality" seemed out of place back then. So did the willingness to cede land, as land had become a resource increasingly under pressure, leading frequently to conflict.[3] Since the horrific events of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994[4] and the Congo Wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003), the eastern provinces of Congo had been the stage for one of the largest protracted conflicts in the world, producing record numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons. Relations between Congo and Rwanda had been strained over the past thirty years, and remain so, with several periods of increased tension. In that context, Kilalo's words went against much of what I had read about relations between Congo and Rwanda since the 1990s. I had difficulties reconciling it with what I heard around me from younger generations, with the mistrust I was

[1] Büscher, "Reading Urban Landscapes"; Kniknie, "Wayward Edges."
[2] Kilalo, b. 1920, June 2010. UN's Refugee Agency assists refugees and those internally displaced. However, many people move without them as well. Kilalo died in 2014 at the age of 94. I will be forever grateful to him.
[3] See, for example, Mathys and Vlassenroot, "It's Not All about the Land."
[4] While Tutsi were the principal targets and by far the largest group of victims in the genocide, many Hutu were also killed.

witnessing, with the stories about *karuho*-poisoning[5] – in both North and South Kivu. And it also seemed at odds with Congolese political discourses more broadly. In 1994, for example, at least one million refugees had fled across the border into Congo – then Zaïre. The Zaïrian transitional government, in crisis, perceived these refugees as a threat to the survival of Congolese populations in the Kivu provinces, labeling them as "an invasion, an overpowering, a conquest," in what has become known as "the Vangu report."[6] While the report is from 1994, such perceptions about people with roots in what is today Rwanda – sometimes in a very distant past – have become important elements in how Congolese politicians, commoners, as well as many in the diaspora describe relations between Congo(lese) and Rwanda(ns).

Some might say that Kilalo's words can be explained by his own "dubious" nationality. Kilalo's liminality – his locatedness "betwixt and between"[7] – might make his hospitality toward Rwandans "suspicious."[8] Given his proximity to the border, family members across the border in Rwanda, and his mother tongue, Kikumu, Kihunde with many influences from Kinyarwanda[9] – or the other way around

[5] Supposedly, *karuho*-poisoning was introduced by Rwandans. Whether or not this is true, that it is perceived as such is telling in and of itself. Personal observations, and see, for example, Byamungu and Mushobanyi, "Alterité meurtrière."

[6] Rapport de la Commission d'information instauré par HCR-PT, from here on called "Rapport Vangu," 150. Named after Gustave Vangu Mwambeni, principal author of the report. HCR-PT was the institution responsible for the democratic transition out of the Mobutu era.

[7] Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection," 465–66. See also Castryck, "Ex-centring the Global," who develops it as a spatial approach.

[8] In some respects, this resembles the idea of "translocality," see Freitag and Von Oppen, "Translocality," iff. However, I prefer "liminality," as it is not only connections to different places at once but rather precisely their location "betwixt and between" that make these connections meaningful.

[9] Many of those framed as "Kinyarwanda speakers" would not necessarily apply that label to themselves. For example, in Bwisha, some people refer to their own language as "Kinyabwisha," and Banyamulenge sometimes refer to "Kinyamulenge" – distancing themselves from Kinyarwanda and Rwanda while emphasizing the local and regional variations in their languages. See, for example, Nassenstein, "Language Movement." In some cases, "Kihutu" is also used in order to create distance not only from Rwanda but also from Tutsi. See Büscher et al., "Recruiting a Nonlocal Language," 538. "Kihutu" was also used in *Kangura*, one of the publications used in the run-up to the genocide to stoke hatred. See Serugaho et al., "Réaction de la communauté Hutu," 15–16. A collection of *Kangura* issues can be found on https://francegenocidetutsi.org/kangura.html.en.

depending on who you ask – Kilalo might be suspect in the eyes of some Congolese for not being Congolese *enough*. So, was Kilalo the anomaly? Were his words simply manifesting some kind of cross-border "ethnic" solidarity? This book argues that if put into a longer time frame, Kilalo's words are not unusual but rather part of older patterns of thought and social action tying the shores and hinterlands of Lake Kivu together through the manifold connections people established. While today much of our thinking about mobility in the region goes to forced migration and refugees as invoked by the Vangu report, in the late nineteenth century, conditions for mobility were vastly different, and so were understandings of that mobility, as this book shows. The region around Lake Kivu was marked by movement, and people coming from what is now Rwanda were not seen as "invaders," at least not principally. Categories of "ethnic" or "national" identity – for example, "being Rwandan" – were not the most important factor in determining whose mobility across political limits was accepted, and whose was considered problematic. Ethnic identity – meaning, here, shared cultural and perhaps historical traits and experiences – could be very fluid; even "national" identity – meaning political ties and community – could be seen as flexible. These characteristics counter how many see such factors today. Traces of the "hospitality" Kilalo refers to were present in communities on both sides of today's border between Congo and Rwanda. These included people without kinship ties across the border, or from different cultural – or what might be understood today as "ethnic" – backgrounds (see below).

Drawing on cross-border oral history research at the local level in the areas around Lake Kivu, as well as on a wealth of archival material, this book reminds us that there have been ways of conceptualizing relationships between what are today Rwanda and Congo that were not defined by violence; and between the people of what are today two separate countries that nevertheless remain deeply linked. In doing so, this book adds histories of continuities and connections to a region most often seen as defined by its fractured pasts and conflicts. However, this also raises the question of how these societies evolved to arrive at this point. In offering partial answers, the book looks to those lines emerging from people's individual stories about multiple strands of mobility, connecting people across the lake. It looks at how people straddled borders and used mobility and connections across

them to shelter themselves both in continuation of older patterns and in response to the colonial respacing of the region.

But it also focuses on those lines that have the potential to separate – the borders colonialism introduced, national as well as internal; and how these separations can be – and have been – induced into conflict. Hence, the ambiguity of these borders is a key theme.[10] "Borders" are much more than lines drawn on a map: They (re)configure social identities, define the extent and nature of political power, and channel our attention to that political power, when in fact so much else goes on in the transition from "frontier" to "border." Emphasizing these connections over conflicts is not about seeing the past through rose-tinted glasses, romanticizing a peaceful past and contrasting it with a violent present. It instead adds other layers of history beyond the hegemonic focus on conflict.

Beyond History as Teleology of the Present

The gruesome events of the 1990s continue to shape "insider" and "outsider" perspectives on the history of this region. This book reframes this history beyond the tired tropes and predilections that have been projected onto the region. These tropes began with the arrival of the Europeans at the end of the nineteenth century and continue to be imposed by the weight of the cataclysmic crises of the twentieth century, which have continued aftermaths in the present. As the book shows, perspectives on the history of this region are not only restrained by these more recent episodes of violence but also display a vast and complex interplay of historical narratives produced within a changing matrix of power over the last 150 years: dominant precolonial, often state-centered narratives intermingled with colonial imaginaries gone awry. Years of experiencing conflicts added another layer. These older narratives still find echoes in contemporary explanations of conflict – by actors inside as well as outside the region: NGOs, international organizations, and so on.

Internationally, the episodes of violence since the Congo Wars reiterate colonial imaginations of the Congo as a "heart of darkness," plagued by irrationality, barbarism, and violence, and in need of

[10] On this ambiguity, Nugent and Asiwaju, "The Paradox of African Boundaries."

"civilization."[11] These protracted conflicts have led to a certain fetishization of both violence and "ethnic" identity as primary lenses "through which to look at people's lives."[12] This goes hand in hand with a tendency toward what Frederick Cooper calls "doing history backwards," wherein contemporary events are used to interpret the past instead of the other way around.[13] While this is quite common, even among historians, the unfortunate consequences in this region are that it makes past and current conflicts seem inevitable. It also leads to an understanding – even by people who live there – that the region is violent today because it has been violent in the past, "naturalizing" conflictual relationships between communities as well as between what are today Congo and Rwanda.[14] Therefore, this book tries to take seriously what could be called the loose ends of history: "the paths not taken, the dead ends of historical processes, the alternatives that appeared to people in their time."[15]

Even if violence was part of these shared histories of people around the lake – as we could say for human societies in general – so too were friendship, kinship ties, and commercial linkages. Different patterns of movement, both temporary and permanent, tied societies around Lake Kivu together. Deep-rooted connections between individuals, families, and communities were crucial in sheltering people from state exactions and state violence. Violence was not the only option for interaction in the frontier zones that would become borderlands; indeed, when violence happened, it did so often through actions by states intent on expansion, not through the interactions of non-state actors. However, if one is only looking for antecedents explaining today's predicaments, such histories of connection are easily overlooked and/or overshadowed by those of military conflicts – "overpowering, conquest" –, which were also part of that late nineteenth-century moment.

Nevertheless, as examples throughout this book show, civil society actors, armed groups, politicians, and many others use references to

[11] Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*; Koddenbrock, "Recipes for Intervention."
[12] Goodhand, "Research in Conflict Zones," 15.
[13] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 18–19. For earlier analysis of the same mechanism: Newbury and Newbury, "Bringing the Peasants Back In," 832–33. See also Leopold, *Inside West Nile*; Eggers, *Unruly Ideas*; Russell, *Politics and Violence in Burundi*. It is a reframing of ideas already presented in Mathys, "Bringing History Back In."
[14] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 129. [15] Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 18.

episodes in a distant past – eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – to make sense of the present. Mobilizing such "usable pasts" is itself not surprising. However, in Congo, painting Rwanda as eternally victimizing Congo has become part of a national meta-narrative,[16] at times used to justify exclusion and violence. It is clear that in Congo, "suffering together" (at the hands of Rwanda) has been a unifying force for narrating the nation[17] – albeit often grounded in lived experiences during and after the Congo Wars, and the travails of meaning-making in tumultuous and destabilizing times.

It has almost become a truism that all nationalisms are by definition exclusive.[18] The borders circumscribing state territory and the state's sovereignty also imagine the community these borders delineate. They define the rights of those who are seen as legitimately belonging to it, hence implying that some are outsiders who do not belong.[19] In Congo, an exclusionist national meta-narrative has impacted not only how Rwanda and Rwandans are perceived in Congo but also how those who came to be associated with Rwanda are viewed *within* Congo – such as Kilalo – because they share a language and have cultural commonalities, even though they are today of Congolese nationality. The contestation of their *Congolité* – their "autochthonous" Congolese-ness – is the result of more recent events, and is a pivot for conflict in this region.[20]

However, this also narrows the scope of what histories can be told about past relationships and exchanges between the societies that make up Congo and Rwanda today. So has the tendency of many scholars who study more contemporary processes while using history merely as a backdrop to the present, a precursor for the current predicament of the region. The individual histories of people such as Kilalo, which are foregrounded in this book, show how much gets lost or silenced through such tunnel vision.

Notwithstanding all these caveats about avoiding doing history backward, I cannot deny that part of the motivation for writing this book was trying to make sense of the present through a better understanding of the past – and this requires a more genealogical approach

[16] Morrissey, "Identity and the Nation." [17] Renan, "What Is a Nation," 19.
[18] Dorman et al., "Citizenship and Its Casualties," 4; Mbembe, "Society of Enmity," 23.
[19] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6–7.
[20] See, for example, Turner, *The Congo Wars*; Jackson, "Sons of Which Soil?"

to history writing as well. Given the recent events in the region and the moments during which I conducted research, this approach seemed almost unavoidable. Many of my experiences in DRC were marked by episodes of violence and conflict. Meanwhile, during all of them, everyone – friends, *motards* (motorbike drivers), colleagues, people's conversations I overheard in bars – had stories about the wars, about flight, about loss. This does not mean that all people talked about was conflict – quite to the contrary – but especially in periods of increased tension, it could also not be ignored, and current dynamics were compared with previous episodes. Layers and layers of meaning-making about conflict, about loss, about violence, about pain, about suffering, about humiliation became woven into the fabric of these narratives. Likewise, in Rwanda, memories about the genocide against the Tutsi and its aftermaths are impossible to escape. In that sense, it was impossible to *not* write about today, or to *not* address questions that have become pertinent today. The stories people told about the past were impossible to disentangle from all these episodes of violence people have lived through. It would therefore have felt useless, maybe disrespectful, to write about something that had little bearing today.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, "even in relation to The Past our authenticity resides in the struggles of the present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge."[21] Thus, although this book is not directly about the genocide, nor about the Congo Wars, it does explore some of the paradigms from the mid-nineteenth century onward, which are central to understanding these catastrophic events. And herein lies a paradox, as such a genealogical approach risks reiterating precisely those categories and perceptions dominant today. History is no "teleology of the present."[22] Nor should "tethering" the past to the present be about mere "continuity or causality."[23] To avoid suggesting that antecedents somehow predict the future – to acknowledge contingency and to refrain from bolstering the inevitability of the present moment – a more detailed examination is required into historical processes beyond those that are often singled out today as precursors for the conflictual present.

[21] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 150–51.
[22] Russell, *Politics and Violence in Burundi*, 276.
[23] Hunt, "An Acoustic Register," 243.

Understanding the region's history thus demands acknowledging this patchwork of narratives, disentangling them from the pervasive influences of recent conflicts while also recognizing their roots in deeper historical contexts. Hence, this book is not only about the material movements and exchanges between Rwanda and Congo but also about how these have been perceived; and how and in which material and political contexts these perceptions were given shape. Therefore, in the narration I go back and forth between "what happened" and "what is said to have happened" – an analysis of the production of historical narratives about these events – without presuming a clear distinction between the two.[24] I fully accept that I myself am also embedded in producing these histories through the choices I made in reconnecting some of the region's fractured histories.

In tracing some of these genealogies, I do not address the political economy of these conflicts, although greed for mineral resources – coveted by Rwanda, Uganda, and the West – has become a dominant popular explanation of these conflicts. Indeed, with different intensities, mineral resources have played an important role in fueling these conflicts.[25] However, too narrow a focus on resources is ahistorical and fails to address the social, political, and affective dimensions and drivers of these protracted conflicts.

Geographic and Temporal Scope

The Lake Kivu region extends across present-day DRC and Rwanda, and I intentionally avoided relying on colonial boundaries to define its scope. Instead, the focus is on a social zone shaped by older relationships, where ecological and geographical factors influenced interactions. This shift in focus is crucial because "doing history backwards" can – inadvertently – lead to a narrow examination of colonial spatial and identity production, reifying specific categories

[24] See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 2; Cohen, "Further Thoughts."

[25] See, for example, the role of coltan for Rwanda during the Second Congo War, Cuvelier, "Réseaux de l'ombre." In recent periods, this link has been less direct, although still important, see, for example, IPIS, "Analysis of the Interactive Map of Artisanal Mining." For a critique of the "conflict minerals" discourse, Vogel, *Conflict Minerals Inc*. For broader analysis of the conflicts after the formal end of the Congo Wars, see Stearns, *The War That Doesn't Say Its Name* and Berwouts, *Congo's Violent Peace*.

and territories rather than exploring what preexisting imaginations became "undone."

This tendency is not surprising, given the pervasive influence of epistemological framings that have led to new forms of demarcation and categorization in the colonial period. The nation-state paradigm, despite criticism,[26] is a spatial frame difficult to escape, particularly for historians who often rely on written sources in colonial archives that (re)produce and perpetuate these national frameworks. Archives, as crucial technologies of rule in establishing and controlling a national polity, tend to reinforce the dominance of the nation-state paradigm. They make alternative spatial epistemological frames less visible and, in some cases, entirely erase them. By reducing reliance on a colonial and nationalist lens when examining place and space, the book aims to highlight what Achille Mbembe refers to as the multiplicity of "*imaginaires* and autochthonous practices of space," acknowledging the often-competing narratives and practices that existed.[27]

Historically, lakes and seas have been important nodes of exchange, with lakeside communities having more neighbors than inland communities.[28] Lakes divide terrestrial zones, but their shorelines link people, making physical connections through commerce and kinship ties, and at times through refuge.[29] It is precisely the multiplicity of these links that reinforces them: The sum is greater than its constituting parts. What Philip Gooding calls "lake-focused living" for Tanganyika also pertains to Lake Kivu.[30] The rugged terrain of the mountains surrounding the lake impeded outside interference, for example. While indeed ecological and geographical factors do not wholly determine the way people move and connect, they do set the limits of what is (im)possible within changing contexts.[31]

While in doing so I may not emphasize ecological aspects to the extent Fernand Braudel might have preferred, this book nods to his work in another way as well. The narrative starts in the latter half of

[26] Larmer and Lecocq, "Historicizing Nationalism."
[27] Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World," 262.
[28] Schoenbrun, *The Names of the Python*, 16. See also Médard, *Désordre colonial dans la propriété*.
[29] Mathys, "People on the Move," see also Gooding, *On the Frontiers of the Indian Ocean*, 10.
[30] See Gooding, *On the Frontiers of the Indian Ocean*, 14.
[31] Castryck, "Bordering the Lake."

the nineteenth century, adopting a *longue durée* perspective. Although Braudel might have envisioned an extension further into the past, the narrative presented here transcends the time of "episodic history" (*le temps événementiel*) and avoids the confines of a "cyclical phase" (*conjuncture*).[32] Such an approach is necessary precisely because of the many pitfalls of "history as teleology" set out above.

As Braudel articulated, a *longue durée* approach not only considers those who make significant noise during a specific episode but also acknowledges the silent actors who may have been less bashful in the past.[33] Put differently, while individuals like Kilalo and others, who emphasize connections over antagonisms, might constitute minorities today, it is crucial to recognize that there may have been a historical period where such perspectives were more prevalent. This matters, because it sheds light on the shifts in societal dynamics and perspectives over time while questioning the inevitability of the present moment.

The Lake Kivu region is part of what is often called the Great Lakes region, the lands stretching between and around the circle of lakes – Kivu, Victoria, Tanganyika, etc. – surrounding the main flow of the Nile. Lake Kivu sits at 1,460 meters. To the west, the Mitumba mountains stretch across the Western Rift valley. The highest peak in this mountain range is the Kahuzi, at 3,308 meters. To the northeast, the chain of extinct Virunga volcanoes forms the current political border between Rwanda and Congo. These volcanoes are part of the Congo–Nile divide, the chain of mountains bordering the lake to the east. The highest of these volcanoes is Karisimbi, with an elevation of 4,507 meters.

It is these mountains that outline the contours of the Lake Kivu region. Breathtakingly beautiful, they also influenced historical interactions. The mountains of the Congo–Nile divide, in the nineteenth century still covered with thick forests, functioned as a kind of natural barrier. Beyond it, to the east, lay the kingdoms of the eastern African interlacustrine cultural complex, such as Buganda, Karagwe, Nkole, and Rwanda; the latter was referred to as the Nyiginya kingdom during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Beyond the Mitumba mountains, to the west, stretching across the lands of the Congo Basin,

[32] Braudel, "Histoires et sciences sociales," 728; for the translation of the concepts I followed Wallerstein, "Braudel on the Longue Durée," 161.
[33] Braudel, "Histoires et sciences sociales," 738.