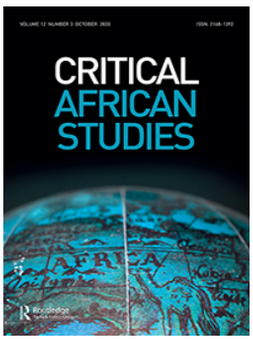

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'The data is gold, and we are the gold-diggers': whiteness, race and contemporary academic research in eastern DRC

'Les données, c'est de l'or, et nous sommes les chercheurs d'or': la blanchité, la race et la recherche universitaire contemporaine dans l'est de la RDC

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The boom of the humanitarian and development industry in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the demand for qualitative and quantitative research that has accompanied it have created a novel political economy of academic research in the region. An array of research associations and private data collection firms have emerged to respond to the international demand by Western universities and research projects. Like many industries operating on the continent, academic research has a racial dimension, which is rarely reflected upon, in part because it is often invisible to white Western researchers. This paper reflects on the creation and evolution of a non-profit association specialized in the collection of data in conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC. The research association was conceived by its Congolese and European founders as an enclave against the racism that pervades professional relations in the region, an experiment upheld by a collective commitment to academic research and an egalitarian ethos. Written from the perspective of three of its founding members, this paper analyses how racialized discursive repertoires and cognitive biases (re)appeared within the organization. We argue that these repertoires and biases serve to activate a particular mode of production, based on racial and geographic inequalities in working conditions and prospects. We interrogate the relationship between race and the system of production underpinning contemporary research, and show that, far from solely being a remnant of the colonial era, race constitutes a resource that can be tapped into, particularly in a context where empirical data, competition for funding, and 'value for money' are increasingly becoming the norm.

Keywords: whiteness; race; decolonization; Democratic Republic of the Congo; data collection; research ethics

Le boom du secteur humanitaire et du développement à l'Est de la RDC et la demande en recherche qualitative et quantitative l'ayant accompagné ont créé une nouvelle économie politique de recherche universitaire dans la région. Un éventail d'associations de recherche et de cabinets privés de collecte de données a émergé pour répondre à la demande internationale de la part d'universités occidentales et de projets de recherche. Comme de nombreux secteurs opérant sur le continent, la recherche universitaire a une dimension raciale, à laquelle il est rare que l'on réfléchisse, en partie car cela est souvent invisible pour les chercheurs occidentaux blancs. Cet article se penche sur la création et l'évolution d'une

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association à but non lucratif spécialisée dans la collecte des données dans des régions de l'Est de la RDC affectées par les conflits. L'association de recherche a été conçue par ses fondateurs congolais et européens comme une 'enclave' contre le racisme qui caractérise les relations professionnelles dans la région, une experience soutenue par un engagement collectif à la recherche universitaire et une philosophie égalitaire. Rédigé du point de vue de trois de ses membres fondateurs, cet article analyse dans quelle mesure les répertoires discursifs et les biais cognitifs racialisés sont (re)apparus au sein de l'organisation. Nous avançons que ces répertoires et biais servent à activer un mode de production particulier, basé sur des inégalités raciales et géographiques de conditions et perspectives de travail. Nous interrogeons la relation entre la race et le système de production soutenant la recherche contemporaine, et montrons que, loin de n'être qu'un 'résidu' de l'ère colonial, la race constitue une ressource pouvant être utilisée, en particulier dans un contexte où, de plus en plus, les données empiriques, la concurrence pour obtenir des financements, et le rapport qualité prix deviennent la norme.

Mots clés: blanchité; Race; Décolonisation; République démocratique du Congo; collecte de données; éthique de recherche

Introduction: beyond race? The experiment and the structure

White academics who study the African continent often believe they have a better understanding of colonial history and its legacies and are more self-aware of their positionality than other white people on the continent. They often consider the moral basis of their endeavour as somewhat distinct from that of humanitarians and development practitioners. While the latter's motivations mostly revolve around a moral engagement to help, and can easily slip into the white saviour complex, the academic's motivations are less vulnerable to such pitfalls, and construed as more neutral: They are just there to 'understand'. Yet, one of the characteristics of whiteness is the invisibility or perceived inapplicability of race to white people (Mills 2007; Sullivan 2006). As a social group, white academics and researchers can perform a particular form of this tendency: being so aware of it that it creates a space of exceptionality around oneself, where extreme awareness allows one to offset racial determinisms. Researchers often actively cultivate such spaces of exception, by purposely building enclaves around their professional and personal lives, experiments where racial legacies are actively and consciously countered.

Yet the nature of contemporary Western academic research[1] ensures such enclaves are permeated by old and new forms of inequalities, social hierarchies, discursive repertoires and cognitive biases that have a racialized character. These range from the methodological whiteness inherent in Western academic ontologies (Bhambra 2017), to the colonial ontologies reproduced in contemporary academic discourse on Africa (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2018). It also derives from the particular relationship between academia and systems of expert knowledge that underpin the development industry (Escobar 1995) and the various forms of racialized inequalities and professional and social practices in the spaces where academic research takes place, from universities to fieldwork sites. While the racialization of Western knowledge and discourse on Africa has a long genealogy (Mudimbe 1988), it is taking new forms with the increasing interdependence of the academic and development sectors, the internationalization of the 'research supply chain' (Desai and Tapscott 2015) and the increased reliance on labor intensive empirical methods. However, fairly limited explicit analysis has examined how whiteness and race – particularly expat privilege – shape contemporary political, economic and cultural life on the continent, beyond the case of South Africa (van Zyl-Hermann and Boersema 2017), and even less how it operates in Africa-focused Western academic research.

This article seeks to contribute to the understanding of how whiteness and race operate in contemporary Western academic research focused on the African continent, by analysing the case of a research association called Marakuja Kivu Research, built by Congolese and European

researchers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and conceived as a post-racial enclave. Such enclaves are characteristic of the way contemporary Western academic research takes place in DRC and are sites in which both longstanding and new forms of racialized professional and personal interactions emerge. We first argue that, rather than deterministically structuring all relations, race operates in a tension between conscious efforts to offset it, and ingrained modes of interaction, cognitive biases and discursive repertoires that can be tapped into to activate a particular mode of production. This mode of production is based on racialized professional and social inequalities, both a reflection of larger structural inequalities and new forms that are emerging in Western academic research on the continent. We show that Western researchers tap into this repertoire intermittently, often as a result of the pressures characteristic of contemporary academia.

Yet, given that pressure is constant, recourse to these repertoires is taken recurrently, and at scale. Recourse to discursive repertoires and cognitive biases that activate a mode of production based on racial inequalities, therefore, constitutes a resource that researchers and research projects can tap into, unconsciously, or intentionally. This is often concealed, given the enclave thinking that characterizes these research projects. This poses an important question about the role of race in contemporary Western academic research on the African continent: is race just a legacy of colonialism that lingers on, or is it a resource which contemporary research projects actively rely on, or both? In a context where academic achievement increasingly relies on access to large amounts of empirical data, a perverse logic can appear whereby, despite declared intentions to work against racial legacies, these in fact enable academic production and achievements. By analysing the relationship between race and the political economy that underpins contemporary Western academia focused on Africa, we follow the debate on the relationship between race and modes of production (Robinson 1983; Hudson 2017). Second, we argue that the political economy that underpins contemporary academic research can also promote, and empirically validate, a form of 'conceptual misinformation' (Sartori 1970), which can have a racial character. This is particularly the case when high work pressure and poor working conditions generate a disengagement from critical inquiry, which thwarts the essential questioning and validation of conceptual frameworks that are deployed to study African societies, thereby giving empirical validation to potentially problematic or ill-suited concepts and discourses. Our paper seeks to contribute to current debates around race and academic knowledge, as well as the ethics of fieldwork, and particularly fieldwork in conflict-affected settings (Middleton and Pradhan 2014; Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Middleton and Cons 2014; Wood 2006).

We start by discussing how racial constructs permeate the political economy, discourses and practices of contemporary Western academic research focused on the African continent. We then move to the case study of Marakuja Kivu Research, a data collection organization based in Goma, DRC, of which the authors are founding members. We first analyse the early days and founding principles of the organization, in particular the commitment to academic research and the egalitarian ethos which were cultivated with the conscious intention of working against the racialized social and professional relationships prevalent in eastern DRC, thereby attempting to build a post-racial enclave. We then show how, as the enclave was fitted to the configuration of contemporary international research – the data value chain – divergences in working conditions and prospects based on underlying structural inequalities became more salient, and conditioned racially differentiated experiences of work, which were often invisible to the white Western researchers. We highlight some of the cognitive biases, discursive repertoires and mechanisms deployed in situations of work pressure and internal negotiations and seek to uncover their racial underpinnings. Importantly, we do not conceive race as deterministic, as if it inevitably structured all aspects of professional and personal relationships, but rather as a discursive and cognitive repertoire, a resource that is tapped into intermittently in such configurations. The fact that one can move in and out of this repertoire depending on the pace and pressures

characteristic of contemporary academic projects means that it is difficult to seize and identify, particularly for white researchers. We then identify how racialized practices and discourses can permeate the knowledge that is produced, as they can enable the empirical validation of racially charged concepts.

The process of writing this article embodies and exemplifies some of the very dilemmas it seeks to unveil. This article was written in two steps. A first draft was written by the first author, a white European male, reflecting on his experience as a founding member of Marakuja Kivu Research, and on his broader experience carrying out PhD research and working on international research projects in the social sciences in the eastern provinces of the DRC from 2012 to 2018. A self-reflective standpoint was adopted, as the focus of the article is on uncovering the architecture of whiteness from within, from the perspective of a white researcher, to understand how racial biases and discursive repertoires can be tapped into, both consciously and unconsciously. Such a standpoint, however, carries inherent limitations in identifying the ways in which whiteness and race operate, as many of them remain invisible to white researchers, and because their effects on non-white researchers cannot be understood from that vantage point. In a second stage of writing, two Congolese researchers, founding members of Marakuja Kivu Research, reflected on the ideas presented in the first draft, and contributed to the analysis by critically discussing their experience of working with white Western researchers both in Marakuja and in other projects. Both have been working in international research projects in the Kivus since 2010. The conclusions drawn from our analysis concern white European researchers doing research in the DRC, and their effects on Congolese researchers' experience. Above and beyond our writing process and auto-participant observation, we are informed by countless conversations with other Congolese and European researchers. We do not consider that the article explores the full scope of race in such contexts, nor is applicable to non-white Western-based researchers or non-Congolese Africans working in and on Congo, who often have starkly different experiences than white researchers (Benton 2016; Hurst 2018), as in Western academia more broadly (Davenport 2008).

Race and Western academic research on Africa

As a social construct and system of social differentiation, race has played a key role in contemporary history, in particular through its association with European imperialism. Race can be defined as a 'regime of inequality', which organizes inequalities across economic, environmental, social and political domains of human interactions, and permeates discursive/cultural fields (Acker 2006; Sriprakash and Walker 2018). As a regime of inequality, race 'intersects with but is irreducible to other regimes of inequality linked to class, gender, disability' (Sriprakash and Walker 2018). Conversely, whiteness corresponds to the racialized power enabled by the racial regime of inequality. Whiteness can be defined as 'a configuration of power, privilege and identity consisting of white racialized ideologies and practices, with material and social ramifications' (Zyl-Hermann and Boersema 2017, 652). Scholars of race and whiteness have emphasized the dangers of reifying race and 'portraying race as a ubiquitous and unchanging trans-historical force rather than a shifting and contingent construction' characterized by a specific social and historical context' (Kolchin 2002, 159) cited in (Zyl-Hermann and Boersema 2017, 654). The ways in which whiteness and race permeate contemporary academic knowledge on Africa produced by European and U.S. universities is complex, multi-layered, and historically and geographically contingent. The objective of this article is not to construe race as an all-encompassing force, but rather to identify some of the ways in which it operates in a specific social and historical research context. Identifying how race operates, however, has often been hindered by a longstanding reluctance on the part of white academics to see, acknowledge and articulate clearly their own racialization. While a full review of the literature on race in DRC, Africa, or indeed Europe is

beyond the scope of this paper, we identify three levels at which it operates, which are interdependent: The relationship between academic knowledge and spheres of political and economic power, racialized ontologies and the social context of research.

The political economy of Western knowledge production in and on Africa: from colonialism to the data value chain

One of the specificities of Western academic research is its wide-ranging effects on African societies, due to the longstanding relationship between academia and systems of power that operate on the continent. It is well known that the nascent discipline of anthropology took part in crafting the ontologies, conceptual tools, categories and maps which colonial powers used to project military power and rule on the continent (Hoffmann 2014; Mamdani 1996). In the post-colonial era, the ideologies of modernization and development and their associated systems of expert knowledge, largely deriving from economic doctrines produced in European and U.S. universities, have continued to have a wide-ranging influence on African countries' political and economic trajectories (Mkandawire 2014; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Mkandawire and Soludo 1999).

The relationship between Western academia and the development and humanitarian sectors has changed in recent years. The securitization of international aid (Greenburg 2017; Howell 2014), the shift toward evidence-based policy and impact evaluations in the aid sector and new academic funding configurations have made academic research increasingly reliant on the aid sector. Bilateral and multilateral aid donors are now among the largest funders of academic research on the African continent – in disciplines ranging from Development Studies, to the social sciences, to health and natural sciences (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2017). Academic research and blogs held by U.S. and Europe-based academics still wield considerable influence over bilateral aid donors and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank, as well as national policy debates on the continent. Methodologies in high demand in the aid sector, such as randomized control trials, have significantly increased the demand for data and generated a thriving and lucrative business based on multi-actor business models and knowledge value chains (Bédécarrats, Guérin, and Roubaud 2017). Furthermore, the increased reliance on data has meant that quantitative academic research has come closer to the big data sector, which has considerably extended its reach into the 'African frontier'[2] and is reshaping modes of economic governance across Africa (Mann 2017).

Africa-focused Western academia, therefore, operates at the nexus between complex systems of economic and political power, and increasingly mirrors other international production sectors, yet this is rarely acknowledged. Like development institutions, Western universities tend to construe their research and involvement as 'benevolence and disinterestedness' (Kapoor 2004, 634), and rarely recognize the complex institutional interests that underpin the 'politics of knowledge production' (Kapoor 2004, 632). Studies have shown that global scientific production can be analysed through the lens of dependency theory, as core–periphery dynamics mirror imperial relationships, with the 'extraction of surplus value without extra-economic coercion' that characterized imperial production systems (Spivak 1988, 290; cited in Kapoor 2004, 633). Funding, human skills and material resources are concentrated in the core, while the extraction of primary resources (in this case, data) is done in the peripheries, often along the lines of former colonial empires[3] (Boshoff 2009; Nagtegaal and de Bruin 1994). The sharp increase in demand for quantitative data has made international research projects increasingly resemble value chains, or supply chains, as argued by Desai and Tapscott (2015). Similarly to commodities or natural resources, the value of data derives from its crude 'quality' on one side, and the process through which value is added to it at various points of cleaning, coding and analysis. Furthermore,

the data production process bears geographical resemblance to other commodities: Data is 'sourced' (i.e. collected) on the African continent, and then exported, analysed, and turned into academic articles, working papers and reports – goods that have high social and professional value – in European or Northern American universities.

This international system of production is also inexorably racialized. Robinson's seminal study of race and European capitalist expansion has shed light on the centrality of race in the capitalist processes of accumulation: racial discrimination was not a by-product, but a central resource of European capitalism (Robinson 1983). Recent studies have shown that race is not just a 'legacy' of periods where it was a central factor in imperial and capitalist production – in particular the Atlantic Slave Trade, or the colonization of Africa – but constitutes a resource which new industries and businesses can take advantage of in a globalized system of production. This was the case, for example, of Wall Street financial operators' expansion into the Caribbean, which was shaped by bankers' racial views and prejudice (Hudson 2017).

The DRC – along with Somalia, South Sudan and the Central African Republic – has been one of the main targets of the recent shift of international aid towards fragile and conflict-affected countries. In recent years, it has experienced a sharp increase in large scale quantitative data collection, a substantial part of which is concentrated in the conflict-affected provinces of the east. Three main groups of people enable the collection of data, at three separate nodes of the data value chain. Because their positioning is defined in relation to their control over the resources of the project, they can be understood as existing in distinct professional classes of people. First, Western researchers, who are predominantly white as a result not only of demographics but also systemic racism in European countries, usually have control over the central resources of projects, namely funding.[4] At the second node of the value chain, a group of predominantly national (i.e. non-Western) research assistants, enumerators, fixers, and intermediaries. These play an ambivalent role, as their work is often concealed in the outputs of the research (Jenkins 2018; Middleton and Pradhan 2014), yet their relatively higher social positioning or 'elite' status in the context of research enables access to research sites and subjects. Finally, at the base of the value chain, which is to say nearest the data collection, exist the research subjects in the 'field', who are usually of lower socio-economic positioning. Thus, race intersects with class in complex ways, yet nevertheless represents a crucial component of the broader structure of the value chain. Recent contributions to the ethics of research have emphasized the structural inequalities that underpin fieldwork in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where extreme poverty and vulnerability enable access to vulnerable populations that would not be accessible in other contexts (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

Race in Western academic ontologies and methodologies

One of the consequences of the association between Western academic knowledge and systems of power on the African continent is that the ontologies and discourses prevalent in Western academia can have consequences on African societies, as they inform, orient, and percolate through these systems of power and the data collection 'value chain'. Our second level of analysis of race, therefore, concerns the ontologies, discourses, and methods of Africa-focused Western academia, particularly with regards to the DRC.

Mainstream ontologies and methodologies in Western academia are often poorly equipped to understand how race operates, which can lead to race-blind interpretations of social phenomena, or what Gurminder Bhambra calls 'methodological whiteness' (Bhambra 2017). This is particularly the case with regards to the knowledge produced on former colonial empires, historically tainted by various forms of orientalism, essentialism and imperialism (Said 1978; Chakrabarty 2000). 'How African worlds have been established as realities for knowledge' (Mudimbe

1988) by Western academic discourse has had multiple and overlapping racial dimensions. Furthermore, as previously noted, contemporary academia focused on the African continent remains close to the field of development,[5] both as an ontology guiding academic research, and as a discourse diffused through a constellation of institutions. Development was originally premised on the teleological conceptions of human progress and civilization that underpinned the colonial enterprise (Kothari 2005; Escobar 1995). Yet development and its associated disciplines display a fundamental reluctance to acknowledge the discipline's complex relationship with colonialism, and to interrogate the relationships between development and race (Kothari 2005; White 2002; Wilson 2012). This is tied, in part, to the lack of voice of the subjects of Development Studies within the discipline themselves, which is characteristic of the relative exclusion of third world populations from instances of Western academic production and discourse (Spivak 1988; Young 2001; Rutazibwa 2018).

Attempts to counter the top-down, Eurocentric, and technocratic character of development and its associated disciplines, such as Amartya Sen's influential reconceptualization of development, have allowed it to emerge as a plural academic field, with diverging ontological and methodological standpoints (Brett 2009). Spivak's critique of Western academic discourse accelerated the participatory turn in Development Studies (Chambers 1997; Gaventa 1980; Hart 2001) the objective of which was to incorporate the voice of the subjects of development, particularly the most marginalized, which had been structurally excluded. In parallel, the 'empirical turn' mirrored a similar will to escape top down theoretical approaches and provide 'objective' empirical evidence about the lives of the beneficiaries of development projects, in order to inform policy and programming with information that took into account the realities and lived experiences of Development Subjects. This led to an increased reliance on ethnographic methods, the development of new inclusive and participatory approaches, and, in quantitative approaches, the development of methods to collect disaggregated 'micro-level' data (Brück et al. 2016; Blattman and Miguel 2010). Yet, race remained rarely discussed, in particular in relation to the ontological and methodological premises of the disciplines themselves. Furthermore, these new methodologies rarely reflected on how the racialized political economies that underpinned the research influenced its very content. Indeed, empirical and participatory methods can, as we will attempt to show in this article, provide erroneous empirical validation to concepts that have limited validity, thereby generating 'conceptual misinformation' (Sartori 1970), as well as new forms of silencing of the voices they were designed to amplify (Kapoor 2004).

The DRC has occupied a specific place in Western discourse about the African continent, both in popular and academic narratives. The country's history has long crystallized fantasies about the 'heart of darkness' of the human psyche and soul, of which the country was a metaphor (Autesserre 2012; Stronach 2006). While these tropes are rarely found in their more caricatured form in contemporary academic discourse, they resonate with more elaborate theorizations of political organization for which the Congo is repeatedly used as an extreme example. This is particularly true of the failed/broken/weak state nomenclature that has gained prominence in Development Studies and political science (Mazarr 2014; Hameiri 2007), and for which the DRC is consistently used as a paradigmatic case (Englebert and Tull 2013). Indeed, the idea that the Congo is the epitome of a failed state, and that the path toward stability and development in the country is state-building, remains the dominant paradigm through which the country is understood, and has significant influence in policy, humanitarian and development spheres in the country (Stearns et al. 2017; Autesserre 2012). As Ferguson showed in the case of Lesotho, these narratives serve to justify development and research programmes and funding on a broad scale, and are thus actively crafted, cultivated, and maintained (Ferguson 1990). Such interests influence the conceptual categories through which the country is understood – sometimes ex ante, by the very concepts used to frame

funding calls – and the choice of conceptual frameworks and language selected to study it. Understanding the circulation of these narratives must, therefore, be done in conjunction with an understanding of the political economies on which they rest, and which they serve to maintain. Narratives, however, are not just projected onto the DRC by foreigners and foreign researchers. Congolese people have longstanding narratives about foreigners' presence in the country to exploit the population and profit from the country's resources (Rubbers 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2017) as well multiple and elaborate repertoires of discursive and practical resistance (Hoffmann 2007; Iñiguez de Heredia 2013), which are also summoned and deployed by Congolese researchers in the context of research projects. Although these are not the primary objects of this paper, they remain important to analyse.

Whiteness and race in the social context of research

The third level of analysis of whiteness and race in this article focuses on the social context of research. The social and professional relationships through which research projects focused on the DRC take place are conditioned by the underlying political economies of research, which as we have seen have a racial dimension, but can play out in multiple and variegated ways. First, social and professional interactions are shaped by the sharp inequalities in material and institutional conditions of work, which have a racial character. In countries like DRC, Western – predominantly white – expats can tap into a considerable material, political and social infrastructure, historically built to protect white bodies. These include insurance and evacuation schemes, travel facilities enabled by European or U.S. passports and high purchasing power determined by dollarized economies and access to forex. They also comprise a security apparatus enabled by the presence of the UN and international humanitarian sector, where expats enjoy the highest level of protection. Furthermore, because Western expats occupy the higher echelons of the sector, they often have considerable professional power, in particular through their control over recruitment decisions and budgets. Expats thus constitute a class, in the sense that they enjoy a specific positioning with regards to production, resources, professional hierarchies, and power. In this case, class does not derive from ex-ante socio-economic positioning, as expats are not necessarily wealthy in international standards, and in many cases less wealthy than local elites. Neither does it derive from qualification, as expats do not necessarily have higher levels of education or professional experience than nationals. However, it has an historical association with race, as the expat status has a colonial genealogy, and the privileges bestowed by belonging to that class are historically associated with being white. Today, a significant number of Western researchers are non-white, and yet are often categorized as 'whites' or 'expats' by local counterparts or populations, which generates complex positionalities with regards to white expatriates and the power conferred by that status (Benton 2016; Hurst 2018). Whiteness confers expat privileges, but at times expat status can also confer privileges historically associated with whiteness in Congo. Furthermore, the privilege and power devolved by whiteness intersect in complex ways with gender, and with the gendered power dynamics within the societies where research occurs. Our objective in this article is to understand how these racially structured differences play out in a context where there were conscious efforts to counter them.

Race has multiple manifestations in the social context of research. A body of research spanning cognitive sciences, psychology and the social sciences has revealed that cognitive biases constitute a key way in which racial prejudice conditions the perception and behaviour of socially dominant groups vis a vis ethnic or racial minorities in Western societies (Spiers et al. 2017; Park 2018). These racialized cognitive biases are present in all sectors of economic, social and political life, from recruitment decisions in the public and private sector, access to healthcare or the justice system (The Guardian 2018; Sullivan 2006; Park 2018). The higher education sector is no

exception: A study has shown that the selection process for research students in U.S. universities was highly biased in favour of white males (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015), and another that students' evaluative judgments of professors of colour in the U.S. were skewed by racialized cognitive biases (Park 2018). In our case study, we analyse the manifestations of these racialized cognitive biases in research, and seek to interrogate whether these are unconscious, or actively used for specific purposes. Similarly, we seek to analyse how certain discursive repertoires can be summoned and deployed by researchers and individuals, and to understand their effects – i.e. the function they play in the context of research.

Building a 'post-racial'[6] enclave in eastern DRC

We now turn to our case study, and retrace the creation and evolution of Marakuja Kivu Research, a research association built by Congolese and white European researchers in eastern DRC. We analyse the manifestations of whiteness and race in this organization, using the three axes of analysis presented in the previous section. We start by analysing the founding principles of the organization, then move to the forms of racialized biases and narratives that emerged in the working environment, and finally analyse how these can alter the very outputs of the work. As previously noted, our focus is on the ways in which racialized discursive repertoires are used by Western researchers and how that impacts the experience of Congolese researchers.[7]

The wave of data collection projects which swept across Africa arrived in eastern DRC in the late 2000s, relatively late as compared to other regions, in part because it was previously thought that it was impossible to collect data in areas of ongoing armed conflict (Brück et al. 2016; Blattman and Miguel 2010). The large presence of the humanitarian-development industry in the region meant that, as soon as it was considered feasible, data collection was in high demand. It is in this context that Marakuja Kivu Research emerged as one of the first organizations to specialize in the collection of data in the conflict-affected provinces of the east. The idea to create the organization initially came from Congolese and European researchers involved in a large-scale evaluation of a development project in 2011. The research component involved a U.S. university, a major international NGO, and a Congolese university in charge of implementing data collection – a configuration typical of development-related research projects. Heavy workloads, difficult and dangerous working conditions, low pay and mismanagement by the Congolese university by whom they were employed are the main reasons invoked by the Congolese researchers – most of them former students of the partner universities – to create an independent not-for-profit organization specialized in data collection. After several iterations, the new organization eventually took the name Marakuja Kivu Research, and included six Congolese recent *gradues* (former university students), as well as three white European PhD students.

From the very outset, the founders of Marakuja conceived the organization as an enclave which, through collective efforts and a strict egalitarian ethos, could partially offset the racial predicaments that weighed on professional and social relations in the region. The prevalence of race in eastern Congo's social and political landscape results in part from the heavy heritage and impact that the colonial period has had on the region's historical trajectory,[8] but also the strong hold that the aid and humanitarian industries have taken on the region. As in other 'contact zones' where vulnerable populations are managed by United Nations and NGO organizations, the power of expats in the region is disproportionate to their age or qualifications, and racialized professional, social and economic hierarchies have emerged (Autesserre 2014). As previously discussed, these are tied to employment inequalities – in terms of salaries, benefits, and protection – but also forms of de facto segregation operating through language and social interactions. As both the European and Congolese researchers who formed the nucleus of Marakuja Kivu Research had shared the experience of working on a research project tied to a

large international NGO based in Bukavu, we had witnessed first-hand these forms of racial discrimination, and they constituted something to work against. Motivations, however, were different according to positionality. For the white researchers, it was about distancing oneself from the practices observed in the NGO sphere, and conceiving one's own purpose and role as distinct from those of other whites in the region (as invoked at the outset of this article). For the Congolese researchers, it was about getting out of the precariat of short term jobs, circumventing the barriers of access to stable positions within the NGO and Congolese higher education sectors, by engaging in academic careers despite the difficulties of doing so in the region and producing research that would be useful and relevant for the Congolese policy environment. The Congolese founders brought an activist ethos inherited from many of the founding members' student activism. These were sharply different starting points and positionalities, but they generated a consensus to build a new collective endeavour.

The idea that race could be superseded through collective efforts rested on two main ideas. First, that collective dedication to a higher cause – academic research and the potential it carried to dispel false narratives about the region – carried intrinsic moral strength and flattened inequalities and differences between members. Science, we thought, was democratic, inasmuch as the only thing that counts is the work itself, not the person who produces it. This idea was to be translated into strict equality in the production of research, consultation of all members at every stage, and co-authorship in the outputs of the research. The second core idea was that our friendship and trust would serve as a buffer against the forms of discrimination that existed in the region. Thanks to this trust and friendship, and because we weren't burdened by the administrative hierarchies typical of larger research projects and NGOs, it would be easier to collectively address any grievances that could arise, including imbalances or inequalities in terms of salaries, employment conditions, etc. We were of the same age, and, despite our starkly different backgrounds, had forged feelings of friendship and trust in shared experiences, notably by travelling together for months in the rural areas of South Kivu to carry out research. This experience was not devoid of racialized imbalances in conditions, many of which were invisible to the European researchers at the time.[9] But we were sufficiently close to build the impression of shared experience and a shared endeavour. The building of this enclave was therefore conceived as political, in that it was imagined to be a real-life enactment of ideals of equality and justice, and as a criticism to prevailing codes and norms of social and professional interactions prevalent in the region.

Awareness of racial hierarchies in the humanitarian sector among the founding members of the organization, however, did not entail awareness towards gendered professional hierarchies, and gender more broadly. The creation of the organization was highly gendered: the founding members of Marakuja were all men. Among the Congolese students who had participated in the large-scale evaluation during which the idea of building an independent organization was born, there was a significant proportion of women, many of whom had played key roles in the evaluation, although none of them had occupied supervisory or managerial positions. Despite the fact that many of the female researchers were professionally and socially close to the founding members, and could have been incorporated in the endeavour, there was, to our recollection, never any discussion of including them as founding members of the organization. Until the discussions leading to the writing of this paper, the problematic character of this gender-exclusive endeavour was never really discussed, chiefly because it was never identified as problematic, or seriously reflected on among either the European or Congolese researchers. Reflecting back on the causes of this omission in the process of writing this article, the assumption by the Congolese researchers was that appointing female researchers in positions of responsibility within the organization would generate problems, particularly with regards to official representation and interactions with Congolese authorities, as Congolese social and professional hierarchies are highly gendered. For the European male researchers, this was accepted without discussion: gendered

social and professional hierarchies assumed to be the norm in the region were uncritically accepted and adopted, thus telescoping with European gendered biases. Cognitive biases with a racial character, to which we now turn, thus intersect in profound ways with gender biases.

The illusion of the shared experience: racialized inequalities in work

Despite attempts to actively work against the region's racial heritage, racially structured forms of power appeared more clearly and more insistently as the organization grew. As we stretched to fit the international data collection value chain, acute structural differences arose in the work conditions and experiences of the white European and Congolese researchers, replicating many of the very dynamics we had sought to transcend.

Inequalities structured along racial lines appeared, starting with divergences in the professional and financial prospects of research work. For the Europeans, the research had high professional and social value, as it not only determined the completion of doctorates in internationally recognized universities, but also the possibility to publish academic articles, a precondition to academic careers. Thus, although the work didn't have immediate financial payoffs – none of the European researchers received a salary or financial compensation for their work on projects – it promised potentially significant future gains and was a strategic time investment. This investment was of such importance and potential future value that excessive work practices – pulling all-nighters, working on weekends – were commonplace, as is often the case in competitive PhD programmes. While often inducing anxiety, stress, and at times depression, the possibility of relative destitution as a result of failure to meet work expectations was small.

The situation was starkly different for the Congolese members of the association. Most of them had serious academic ambitions, but the barriers to entry were stark in the Congolese higher education sector where secure positions are extremely rare, but also in the international academic market, from which Congolese academics and researchers are structurally excluded.[10] Despite repeated attempts to enter the Congolese higher education sector or obtain international scholarships, only one of the six Congolese founding members has, to this day, obtained a formal appointment as a researcher in DRC, and none has been able to leave the country to pursue academic careers abroad. The Congolese members of the association also faced drastically more volatile and insecure work-related financial prospects, resulting from high levels of unemployment in eastern DRC.

Beyond the clear gap in professional and economic prospects, the working conditions were also starkly different. First, because projects have short life spans, employment is time-bound, with frequent interruptions in the delivery of salaries due to a range of factors – from administrative blunders to delays in bank transfers, to funding renewal. The volatile nature of this employment means that the capacity to obtain the job requires being in the right networks, at the right place and the right time. Salaries in Marakuja projects were initially low, owing in part to the fact that the organization started with small research grants. Moreover, the employment didn't include any work-related benefits, such as healthcare, employment insurance, pension schemes, or any other standard work-related benefits.[11] In addition to the precariousness of employment, surveyors and researchers generally face trying and dangerous working conditions, travelling extensive distances in very remote areas, repeatedly exposed to severe insecurity,[12] all while being away from their families and relatives for long periods of time.[13]

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of researchers' work in the field are the social relations in which the research transaction is embedded. These relations are key to the quality of the information obtained, but also, in highly fluid security contexts, to the security of the researchers. They can be particularly tense in highly polarized social contexts like eastern Congo and require significant efforts by researchers to navigate them, often adding to the research fatigue (Clark 2008). This

was all the more the case in Marakuja projects given that many of them focused on very sensitive topics, such as armed groups, illicit taxation practices and violence. Inquiring about these could generate acute suspicion by local military actors and civilian populations, particularly when these were tied to the armed actors being studied,[14] or when researchers were considered foreign to a particular area.[15] Here again, gender played an important role, as female researchers face specific challenges when conducting research, resulting from gendered prejudice within the research profession and Congolese society more broadly (Bahati 2019).

The Congolese researchers involved in these projects repeatedly stressed how much time and effort it takes to build these relationships, which allow them to operate in a particular area while being relatively safe, as well as the need to respect a range of protocols and rules to reduce security risks.[16] Such investments are also crucial to obtaining quality information on very sensitive topics, which requires several rounds of verification and triangulation. They also depend on fieldwork costs – accommodation, food, and safety money – as money is crucial to offset high-risk situations, allowing the flexibility to leave in tense situations.

In most projects that we have been part of, Congolese researchers (including the authors) were not passive regarding their working conditions, and actively negotiated, expressed their voice, and protested. Their leverage, however, was undermined by the limited options that exist in a highly volatile and precarious research market, and by the unequal power Europe and U.S.-based researchers hold in accessing research grants and deciding on who can be employed in projects. A common exit option for Congolese researchers is creating new research organizations, which have mushroomed in recent years in DRC. However, many of these structures face severe difficulties to obtain funding without the intermediation of Western researchers, as most grants are conditional on having a Western-based institution. Therefore, exit often means a financial desert, unemployment, or starker working conditions and work prospects. It also potentially means being evicted from the recruitment networks and opportunities in other projects. Western researchers are relatively few and know each other well, a bad reputation can spread quickly and severely reduce the possibility of being employed in other projects.

For the white European author, the gap in work prospects and conditions were not entirely visible in the early stages of Marakuja. He spent four months in the rural areas of Kalehe and Mwenga with the Congolese researchers, which allowed him to understand the difficult working conditions of Congolese researchers. However, when back in Europe,[17] this gradually became less present in his mind, and the research project mostly revolved around working on a computer. Pressure came in the form of deadlines, grants applications, and presentations typical of academia, with the harsh conditions of fieldwork receding from sight. Thus, work pressures manifested themselves in differentiated ways on each side of the geographic line.

This started to generate tensions, which, often unknowingly, had a racial character. Time was a central source of tension. While on the European side, a project related task could be done quickly thanks to fast computers and internet, the same task would take much more time in DRC due to working conditions. As a result, work pressure was refracted through the project in differentiated ways. A sudden deadline would require pulling an all-nighter on the computer or working on a Sunday on the European or U.S. side. On the Congolese side, it could trigger a drastic compression of the complex and time-consuming negotiations necessary for maintaining a relatively safe environment of field research. Reflecting on such a period, a Congolese author recalled:

> Those moments created strong frustration in us. We had to get the work done even if the person *(the respondent)* is totally exhausted, because we often work early morning or in the evening because these are people who need to go to their fields during the day. We go beyond the security hours and have to travel after nightfall to get back to where we lodge, sometimes as far as 35 kilometres. We don't have

> time to rest and we don't eat well, which makes your head dizzy and really tired *(...)* we barely have time to spend some time and exchange with the authorities, which puts us in risk because here in Congo you really need to sit down with them and share something *(food or a drink)* if you want them to talk[18]

While efforts were made to avoid such situations, this seems to be a common trait in research projects in such areas, which are constrained on one side by the extremely difficult working conditions in the field, and on the other by the tight deadlines and acute pressure of academic research projects. Research projects can vary considerably in terms of the work conditions – financial, material, and temporal – for those researchers working on the ground. Structural inequalities, however, can be partially reduced by increased investments in salaries, fieldwork costs, working conditions, social protection, or capacity building.

The manifestations of race: cognitive biases and discursive repertoires

We now turn to an analysis of the ways whiteness and race appeared in cognitive and discursive reflexes and behaviour, focusing specifically on white Western researchers. White academics and researchers working in the African continent rarely adopt overtly racist behaviour, and often consciously and actively attempt to oppose them. Rather, as we will illustrate, racialized cognitive biases[19] and discursive repertoires are adopted intermittently, often as a reaction to particular work-related pressures.

Perceptions of work and implicit hierarchies

One manifestation of cognitive biases was the perception of the workloads and work conditions described above. The harsh work conditions and differentiated effects of work pressures are often invisible to white researchers working in drastically different contexts, or are considered as either exceptional or commensurate to their own efforts. Cognitive biases of this type are common, such as men's perception that their contributions to domestic work are commensurate to women's, when in fact they are drastically lower (Treas and Sonja 2010; Greenstein 1996). It is due in part to the fact that extra work in the field is not visible or measurable through outputs, contrarily to computer work. Email threads often reflected this imbalance in visibility of different types of work: Long, dense and detailed emails in rapid succession from the U.S./EU based researchers, and just a few, sporadic emails from the Congolese researchers, which didn't reflect the invisible work carried out in the field. Perceived commensurability of means, working conditions, and work could also generate routinized forms of discrimination. Recalling an interaction with a group of non-Marakuja US researchers, a Congolese author of this paper noted:

> They would always ask us to come work in this restaurant which was really expensive, and which we couldn't afford. They would eat, and we would just have to wait there while they were eating, sometimes for hours, although we were also hungry like them, because we were working a lot. Either you don't say anything, or you wait for them to order something to eat for you, which is not good. This happened almost every day for two weeks, and it really frustrated us because they never seemed to realise it.[20]

These biases can be reinforced by implicit hierarchies in how the value of different types of work along the data value chain are perceived. Conceptual and 'intellectual' work– elaborating the research design, carrying out the analysis and writing the outputs – is implicitly considered as having higher overall value. In contrast, collecting information in the field is often considered as technical, quasi-manual work. Such implicit hierarchies also serve to dismiss the highly

intellectual and conceptual nature of data collection work in such contexts. Among the many dimensions of this work, the effort to translate concepts and expressions based on euro-centric ontologies into vernacular understandings is particularly difficult, and requires a close understanding of linguistics and meaning, and advanced translation skills. Such implicit hierarchies are reflected in the very nomenclature of work positions, as African and Congolese researchers are usually referred to as 'local researchers' or 'surveyors', denominations that minimize the relative value of their input in the overall research. Such biases are also reflected in the professional recognition of the work, as the process of silencing of authorship and contributions to articles and reports that come out of the research, resulting in various forms of concealment of the work done by 'research assistants' (Falisse and Stys 2018; Middleton and Pradhan 2014; Jenkins 2018).

Implicit hierarchies also serve to justify the lower financial compensation of data collection work. In our experience, this is present from the very first drafts of research project budgets at the application stage, and persists throughout the project cycles, the invisibility of the work creating a self-reinforcing loop that further justifies wage inequalities. But there is another factor at play. In quantitative analyses based on hypothesis testing, statistical power is partially dependent on sample size.[21] Thus, built in to most quantitative data collection projects is an incentive to achieve the largest 'n' possible, to maximize the number of observations – the units of analysis usually being individuals, households, or villages. Given that quantitative data collection on the African continent is overwhelmingly carried out by African researchers, increasing the number of observations to achieve higher statistical power means increasing the workload of field staff. In projects with fixed budgets (which are the majority) this implies the potential reduction of two major budget lines: Researcher salaries and fieldwork costs, which are central in determining working conditions and safety. On a project budget spreadsheet, the inverse variation is perfectly clear: The sample size (number of observations) increases when the salaries and fieldwork costs of field researchers are decreased.

In our experience, EU and U.S.-based researchers are often conscious of this inverse variation, and can experience a form of cognitive dissonance resulting from their (limited) knowledge of the harsh working conditions in the field on one side, and their inclination towards achieving the highest possible sample size on the other, as it conditions the quality of the analysis and the resulting paper – and thus, indirectly, their own career.

In research projects we have worked on, three main arguments were summoned when salary or fieldwork costs needed to be reduced,[22] and emerged within the discussions and negotiations between white Western researchers and Congolese researchers about working conditions. First, one common argument revolved around the idea that the prevailing unemployment in DRC meant that Congolese researchers employed in the projects should consider themselves lucky to even be employed. A variant of this was that the Congolese should not be paid too much in relation to other Congolese, as this would create imbalances in local economies and societies.[23] Such arguments denoted an awareness to the underlying work conditions in the region, which could be used strategically to exert downward pressure, but also a tendency to invoke normative conceptions of balance or order in African societies.[24] Second, commitment to scientific research was advanced as an argument to dismiss money-related issues. Throughout projects, we repeatedly heard from Western researchers involved in the projects that Congolese researchers needed to look beyond the money and towards the scientific goals of the research, as this was the central purpose of the project. They needed to be driven by commitment, dedication, and passion, rather than money or financial gains. Not only did this emphasis on work ethics and commitment ignore the starkly different financial conditions and prospects of the Congolese, it also served to dismiss legitimate claims to fair financial compensation for work. It concealed a hidden aversion to the Congolese colleagues' purported interest in money, implicitly construed as petty and

greedy, thus echoing longstanding racial narratives about contrasting work ethics between Africans and Europeans.[25]

Third, another family of arguments regularly invoked is surprisingly orthogonal to the ideas of dedication to science and professional ethics, and pertain to the domain of familiarity, trust and personal bonds. Like the scientific argument, the idea that the values of friendship, trust, and equality embedded in personal relationships had been among the founding principles of Marakuja, and yet could be re-deployed in these circumstances. During periods when projects were in dire financial situations, narratives around collective sacrifices based on inter-personal trust and family values were invoked. Again, such discourses ignored the fact that such sacrifices were unequally distributed along the value chain, as salaries of European researchers did not come from the projects. They also reflected double standards about invoking familiarity in professional contexts: While these are restricted by work ethics in European/U.S. universities, they are commonplace in such contexts. Problematic management practices, which exist in many professional contexts but are generally restricted by codes of conduct, were prevalent, and took a racial character. A Congolese author of this article noted that this was one of the prime arguments invoked to justify salary inequalities in the NGO sector:

> You would have Europeans come into projects as our bosses who didn't know anything about the job; we were told they would train us and supervise us, but, if anything, we were training them. And yet they were earning 3 to 4 times the salary that a Congolese colleague would earn in the exact same job, but with much more experience. We knew that this was because they were muzungus *(whites)* (…). When we would raise the issue, we would be told that this was because they were far away from their family, that they had travelled such a long distance to be here, and that it wasn't easy. They would ask us to understand that it's not easy to be far from one's family[26]

The lack of consideration for financial or material questions and the heavy pressures of the work meant that the Congolese researchers could become disillusioned with the projects. This would in turn reinforce the negative perception of white researchers. Yet this was not continuous or irreversible. Conflicts would usually be resolved through conversations, work conditions renegotiated or adjusted, and a more positive work relationship restored. Rather than being deterministic, reliance on racialized discursive repertoires varied and evolved – positively – throughout the existence of the organization, as efforts were made to achieve better working conditions in new research projects. One of the implications of this is that, with appropriate consultation, negotiation, participation in decision making bodies and agreement on salaries and benefits, work conditions and work prospects, the underlying structural inequalities on which transnational research projects are constructed can be partially reduced.

In this section, we have sought to identify the ways in which work-related pressure can trigger racialized cognitive biases and recourse to discursive repertoires that serve to activate and reinforce underlying racialized structural inequalities. Research projects can move in and out of extractive or exploitative configurations, without it being a conscious project, but, rather, after a new deadline or a stressful week. These racialized cognitive and discursive frameworks thus constitute a resource that can be tapped into in order to activate a particular – racialized – mode of production.

New forms of racialized Western academic knowledge and discourse

We now turn to the identification of some of the channels through which racial inequalities can distort academic knowledge that is produced through inequitable, time-bound research projects. Identifying these channels requires understanding how ontologies, theories and concepts travel back and forth through the data collection value chain, how they are produced, understood and

appropriated by different actors. As we will seek to show, the space for consultation, translation, triangulation of the validity of both the conceptual framing and empirical data can either be extended or reduced. The more it shrinks, the more it enables conceptual self-validation, which constitutes a form of 'conceptual misinformation' (Sartori 1970).

Consider the concept of 'community', a key concept since the participatory turn in social sciences and Development Studies. 'Community' has become prevalent in its simplified and generic form in large scale surveys and developmental theories of change. In this reduced form, the concept encapsulates a range of assumptions about African social and political life, construed as being composed of homogenous entities revolving around rural village life.[27] We have witnessed this simplified version of the concept of community incorporated into survey questionnaires, M&E forms, and discussions within academic and humanitarian circles. Its analytical validity is rarely unpacked and debated at the design stage of research projects, which usually take place in European or U.S. universities or development agencies. It then travels to the second and third stages of the data collection value chain. The role of Congolese researchers is crucial at these stages to ensure conceptual verification, as they critically scrutinize the concept's commensurability, translatability, adaptability to the realities they are supposed to capture, as well as their interpretation by research subjects. Scrutiny of the concept leads either to dropping it, or ensuring a refined version is partially built into surveys.[28] Beyond the validation of concepts, the quality of the information collected depends on the efforts of researchers to explain the purpose and rationale of the research and the terms and concepts used to respondents, and on their efforts to verify the responses, which requires careful triangulation across sources. The social context of the research relationship can also influence the way concepts are understood. Development and humanitarian programmes have largely diffused the concept of community, which, as a result, is often implicitly associated with these programmes, and can generate biased responses.

As noted previously, the work conditions of researchers can vary considerably across projects and within the life cycle of a project. Congolese authors of this article emphasized that an increase in the pace of the project or a degradation of the working conditions can cause considerable difficulty for researchers in the field, and, in turn, induce demotivation and disinterest from the research: 'There is a type of work that we do not do because we want to do it, but because we have to do it. People will do it reluctantly'. [29] As a result, the work that is necessary to ensure the validity of the concepts and their translation can be squeezed to a minimum. Discussing his experience in a non-Marakuja impact evaluation study, a Congolese author of this paper recalled:

> We did not have the time to explain all the questions; If we explain the meaning of all the questions in detail, the respondent will ask many questions. If we ask whether there was community participation, they will say that they don't know, ask the rest of the community; But because we are pressed by time, we cannot explain the question [as we would like], so we say do you think that the community supported this initiative, yes or no, and they answer *(...)*. In any case, we need to get the data, for the research. You know, we are like gold diggers. The data is gold, and we are the gold diggers[30]

This points to the process whereby, through increased pressure refracted through the data collection chain, the research relationship between the researcher and the research subject is strained to the point where it changes nature. This can be amplified when methods for data collection are unusual and at times alienating to research subjects, such as tablets and electronic devices, or when the concepts and questions are untranslatable.[31] This reversion, crucially, flattens the space for critical inquiry by the researchers and the research subject, and generates a mode of research whose objective is to guarantee the constant flow of data, rather than a real engagement with the object and the subjects of the research. In our experience, it is in such contexts of

intensified work pressure that cases of data fabrication and fraud by researchers increase, including among experienced researchers, signalling an extreme manifestation of fatigue and disengagement. This can combine with the 'research fatigue' of subject populations, also amplified by subjects' disinterest for the research themes, and by practical matters, such as the duration and complexity of surveys (Clark 2008).

The consequences of this disengagement are important. The flattening of the space of active and critical engagement of the researcher and research subject means that concepts designed and produced at the centre of the chain – i.e. in European or US universities – are not critically engaged with when they reach the field, and circulate back and forth through the data value chain uninterrogated. Given that empirical validation, through surveys for quantitative research and through interviews and focus groups for qualitative research, is a key criteria for scientific validity within most social science disciplines,[32] this constitutes a crucial channel through which concepts that can carry essentialist assumptions about African social life are validated, reproduced and enshrined within these disciplines. In our experience, this is equally the case for inclusive and participatory methods. Given the current atmosphere of tight deadlines, rapid turnover of projects, and pressure for results, this potentially occurs at scale within the social sciences and in research related to the development-humanitarian nexus, generating what could be called a 'research of the mirror',[33] whereby Western racialized ontologies are reproduced and maintained through the methods of empirical validation originally devised to test them.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to trace some of the ways in which race operates in contemporary Western academic research on the African continent. We have shown that, despite the shared original intention of Congolese and European researchers to build a post-racial enclave, racialized discursive repertoires, narratives frames, and cognitive biases appeared more insistently as the organization was fitted onto the international data collection value chain. We have shown that these served specific purposes, in particular, to activate a specific mode of production, reliant on inequalities of employment conditions and prospects that reflected structural racial inequalities. These were summoned intermittently, and often unconsciously, by European researchers. As we have shown, this happened more often during periods of intense pressure and stress in the project cycles and were counter-balanced by conscious efforts to work toward more egalitarian working conditions, prospects, and spirit. We also showed that this affected the quality of the research produced, as it compressed the space for meaningful, iterative engagement by Congolese researchers – discouraged by fatigue and disinterest. These results have three main implications.

The first concerns the relationship between the prevalence of race in contemporary academic research, and its role in a system of production. Recourse to racial biases and racialized discursive repertoires to exert work-related pressure appear to be done inadvertently and unconsciously, despite the good intentions of white Western researchers and efforts to instil an egalitarian ethos. These are, evidently, remnants of racialized systems historically prevalent on the continent, specifically colonization, who live on as discursive templates and various forms of colonial durabilities. While these seem to happen inadvertently, they nevertheless occur repeatedly. Moreover, the fact that they are, to a certain extent, concealed within organizations or relationships that tend to consider themselves as progressive enclaves masks the fact that they occur at scale, systematically, given the dozens of projects and organizations and the hundreds of researchers involved in the Kivus alone. Furthermore, the fact that they serve to activate a mode of production poses the fundamental question of the relationship between race and modes of production, which has been central in the construction of and investment in racism in European imperial history. Race, in this

case, constitutes a resource that works in the background to speed up production and drive down labour costs – somewhat unsurprisingly, given that it was one of its central roles in the historical construction of European empires (Robinson 1983). Given that contemporary Western academia is characterized by increased competitiveness, pressure by donors and funders to produce 'value for money', and an impetus for original empirical data which requires extensive labour, there is a clear and present question of whether Western research projects are relying on race as a resource to increase production and maintain competitiveness on the academic market. This warrants further research on the modes of production, labour and work in the sector. It also warrants further research on the experiences of so-called local researchers in these contexts, which recent projects have started to uncover.[34]

Second, the results interrogate the validity of the concepts and ontologies produced by empirically driven research, which currently attracts – by far – the largest proportion of funding in the Africa-focused social sciences, and disciplines associated to the development sector. As we have shown, empirical methods are in no way a guarantee for the validity of concepts, and can provide erroneous validation. This is particularly the case when the value chain that underpins these research projects becomes more extractive, and the engagement of researchers is reduced, allowing concepts to circulate through the value chain without being challenged, rejected or refined. As we have seen, concepts such as 'community', which are problematic in their generic form as they carry essentialist assumptions about African social life, receive validation through these methods. This poses the question of the new and emerging forms of racialized Western academic knowledge and discourse on Africa, that might be driven by two inter-related factors. On one hand, the increase in academic research that is financed through the development sector, and the fact that funders often define the conceptual reach of research projects. On the other, the fact that the methods devised to provide robust empirical testing, as well as co-creation of knowledge might erroneously provide validation of problematic concepts. Here again, more research on these modes of conceptual validation through empirical methods is warranted.

Finally, these findings can provide insights on current efforts to decolonize the academy. These have often centred on identifying and countering the remnants and traces of colonialism, in particular by deconstructing the racialized assumptions underpinning ontologies, concepts, narratives, and behaviours in and around the academy. Public awareness efforts are often geared toward making people conscious of the ways in which, unconsciously, they rely on these templates, and educating them with the purpose of un-learning ingrained modes of interaction. However, a common critique levelled against such approaches is that focusing on consciousness is not sufficient without addressing the material conditions and structural inequalities that underpin contemporary racial inequalities. Our analysis, shows that by actively cultivating spaces of exceptionality, Western researchers might conceal the ways in which even they actively resort to race in order to achieve their results. Whiteness and its characteristic ignorance or blindness toward race is not passive, but, as Charles Mills argued, is an active and often aggressive ideology (Mills 2007). Therefore, the perceived racial element of seemingly professional inequities – perceived by Congolese co-founders and not at first visible to their European counterparts – is a question of decolonization. It lies not only in the realm of awareness and consciousness, but squarely in the politics of power. A decolonized research ethics should, therefore, put at its centre the question of whether researchers and research projects are relying on race as a regime of inequality to achieve their ends, and develop protocols and ways of assessing it.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. In this article, we use the term 'Western' as a shorthand to designate Europe and regions where populations largely originate from Europe as a result of European Imperialism, namely North America and Australia. However, we do not use it in its essentialist and reified sense, which has imperial and colonial origins, similarly to the concept of Occident (Said 1978). Importantly for the purpose of this article, 'Western' is not necessarily white.
2. New and emerging markets such as the developing economies of the African continent represent competitive frontiers for firms seeking to capture consumers, and global technological inequalities favour the global data mining giants, who operate on the continent through a myriad of data collection firms that collect data which is then sent to advanced economies for analysis and storage.
3. Boshoff has shown that 35% of the research carried out on Central African countries is produced by their former colonial powers (Boshoff 2009).
4. Funding and resources are highly concentrated in Western institutions, with a smaller fraction going to research institutions in target countries.
5. In US and EU universities, a significant proportion of scholars whose work focuses on the African continent can be found in either development related departments or are development specialists working in African Studies departments.
6. We deliberately use the term 'post-racial' to show the contradictions between a project conceived as being beyond race and the manifestations of race within the project. Post-racialism, or the idea that a society has moved beyond race or racism, has been extensively critiqued in African American Studies (Gines 2014).
7. We do not consider that the analysis covers all dimensions of race. The empirical material presented here is based on our experiences as founding members of the organization. However, additional examples are taken from research projects, or personal experiences not directly associated to Marakuja Kivu Research, when these were relevant. As our objective is to provide examples of generic types of behaviours, we keep a narrative distance with recounted events, and do not attempt to identify or attribute behaviours to specific individuals, in order, also, to respect people's confidentiality. We do, however, specifically identify the behaviour of white Western researchers as opposed to Congolese researchers, as this is key to our argument.
8. For a discussion of the genealogy and contemporary manifestations of colonial discursive frames and practices in eastern DRC, see, among others (Northrup 1988; Hoffmann, Vlassenroot, and Marchais 2016; Hoffmann and Vlassenroot 2014; Hoffmann 2014; Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2018).
9. Characteristically, the initial recollection by the white European researcher was that all had shared the same working conditions during that period, as both European and Congolese researchers often slept in the same village houses in the rural areas, ate in the same places, and travelled around on public transport and motorcycle. Yet, as this article was written, Congolese researchers underlined that this recollection wasn't always accurate. In several towns, such as Kitutu, Kamituga, and Minova, the European researchers had spent the night in the local presbytery, more secure and more expensive than small hotels, in which the Congolese researchers had stayed.
10. Exclusion factors are multiple and range from the non-recognition of Congolese higher education diplomas, to difficulties to obtain visas, to financial barriers and the paucity and difficulty of obtaining scholarships.
11. In our experience, these are rarely costed into the budgets of research projects, which only include a daily salary. This seems to be the rule across research projects.
12. Numerous security incidents occurred during fieldwork. In 2014, two researchers had to spend three nights hiding in the forest due to ongoing attacks by armed groups in the Groupement of Baliga, territory of Shabunda, South Kivu. The same year, also in Shabunda, two researchers were arrested by Raia Mutomboki militias and spent several days in their custody. Researchers also routinely experienced harassment by military actors, which is rampant in rural eastern DRC.
13. On average, in these projects, researchers spent 1 month in the field without seeing their relatives, but this could go up to 3–4 months.
14. Paradoxically, some of the most difficult areas of research were those where the armed groups had a strong social basis, such as the Raia Mutomboki held areas of Shabunda, or the Nyatura held areas of the Highlands of South Kivu. As a result of the close relations between the population and the armed groups, researchers were constantly under scrutiny and implicit or explicit threat from armed actors.
15. Rural eastern DRC is characterized by strong ethno-territorial identities that have been reinforced by the armed conflict, and the suspicion towards strangers it produces. In our experience, and from the

testimonies of Congolese researchers, this can considerably complicate data collection, particularly in areas with high ethnic polarization.

16. These include the collection of information on fieldwork sites prior to the research, having sufficient time once in the field to check security risks by spending time with local authorities, leaving the more exposed research sites before nightfall to travel back to more secure towns for the night, checking modes of transport as well as accommodation for security risks, and eating well and exercising to stay in good physical and mental shape.
17. Mobility, and the possibility of travelling in and out of the DRC, is another manifestation of the different working conditions, as only the Western-based researchers were able to do so.
18. Paulin Bazuzi, October 2017.
19. The term 'cognitive bias' is borrowed from the psychology literature. Cognitive biases are 'systematic deviations from rational judgment, whereby inferences about other people and situations may be illogically drawn. As it relates to race, cognitive biases may serve to underscore the stereotype that people of colour, particularly blacks, are unintelligent and incompetent.' (Park 2018, 1054).
20. Paulin Bazuzi, October 2017.
21. In a binary hypothesis test, which are one of the most used forms of statistical analysis in these types of projects, statistical power is conditional on both the magnitude of the effects to be detected and on the size of the sample (Angrist and Jörn-Steffen 2009).
22. This was either to prevent the upward re-negotiation of salaries and fieldwork costs, or, in some cases, to put downward pressure on salaries.
23. An example is that of a European researcher temporarily employed in one of the projects and with extensive experience of working in the region, who argued that the Congolese researchers were in fact paid too much in relation to normal pay in the region.
24. Normative conceptions of order have a longstanding genealogy in European discursive framing of the African continent.
25. Such narratives typically revolve around the idea that Europeans are hard-working and committed to work rather than money, while Africans are lazy and greedy, and date back to the colonial and pre-colonial period (Rönnbäck 2014).
26. Paulin Bazuzi, October 2017.
27. It is easy to see the shortcomings of the concept of community, in its reduced and generic form, in a context like eastern DRC. In addition to the inherent risk of conflating multiple and overlapping forms of social and political organization – the family, extended family, the network, the *colline*, the village, the neighbourhood, the imagined community-, the concept of 'community' seems particularly limited in a context of advanced militarization, where more than two decades of war has generated deep social polarisation and thoroughly transformed social entities (Wood 2008; Verweijen 2013, 2016). Communities do exist in multiple forms, but they rarely, if ever, correspond to what is designated by the generic version of that concept.
28. While large scale surveys carry inherent limitations in their capacity to nuance concepts because of time constraints, some nuance can be built in by disaggregating a concept such as community into several measures of an individual's social networks, and by adding questions on perceptions of 'imagined communities'.
29. Aimable Amani Lameke, October 2017.
30. Paulin Bazuzi, October 2017.
31. For example, concepts such as the 'self', often used in measures of psychological well-being and mental distress, can be difficult to translate into vernacular understandings.
32. Of course, there are many nuances to this, such as qualitative research based on extensive ethnography.
33. This expression is a reference to Chabal and Daloz's 'politics of the mirror' (Chabal and Daloz 1999).
34. See, for example, the Bukavu Series: https://www.gicnetwork.be/silent-voices-blog-bukavu-series-eng/

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