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Congoese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives

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Abstract
Long absent from the scholarly literature, Congoese migration to Belgium now occupies a greater place in academic research. Nevertheless the various disciplinary approaches undertaken and the many topics of interest explored have not exhausted the complexity of this diaspora, too often the object of prejudice in popular opinion and public policies. The position of “the Congoese issue” in the academic world is thus rarely problematized due to confusion over how to categorize the Congo and the Congoese – either as ‘Africa,’ ‘Central Africa,’ ‘Sub-Sahara,’ etc. This reflects a ‘geography of the Other’ that significantly confounds current social processes at work in Belgium and the particularity of this (post)migratory situation. Grounded in empirical research, this issue in moving beyond merely highlighting a relatively marginalized group in Belgian Migration Studies, is focusing on the postcolonial stakes of the Congoese presence in Belgium. The authors take different viewpoints to explore the place of the Congoese in the former metropole and the forms of marginalization they face. The everyday life, the state regulations and the dynamics of identity are then various lens to bring to light the racial logics at work in the Belgian multiculturalism.

Keywords
Congoese migrations, postcolonialism, Belgium, shared history, diaspora

Résumé
Longtemps absentes du champ académique, les migrations congolaises sont aujourd'hui en Belgique, de plus en plus l'objet de questionnements scientifiques. La diversification des entrées disciplinaires et des objets d'étude est cependant loin d'épuiser la complexité et la richesse de cette diaspora, trop souvent objet de préconceptions. La position de centralité de « la question congolaise » est-elle ainsi rarement objectivée, à la faveur d'une confusion des échelles de désignations « Afrique », « Afrique centrale », « subsahariens », etc. Il en résulte une géographie de l'ailleurs qui brouille de façon significative la compréhension des processus à l'œuvre en Belgique et la singularité de cette situation post-migratoire. Basé sur de solides contributions empiriques, ce numéro interroge les enjeux postcoloniaux de la présence congolais en Belgique. A partir de différents angles, les auteurs examinent la place des Congolais dans l'ancienne métropole et les...
différentes formes de marginalisation auxquelles ce groupe est confronté. La vie quotidienne, les régulations étatiques et les dynamiques identitaires sont alors autant d’entrée pour rendre intelligible les logiques raciales travaillant le multiculturalisme belge.

**Mots-clés**
migrations congolaises, postcolonial, Belgique, histoire partagée, diaspora

### The Congolese Presence in Belgium: Contextualizing the Unthinkable

Long absent from the scholarly literature, Congolese migration to Belgium now occupies a greater place in academic research. Nevertheless the various disciplinary approaches undertaken and the many topics of interest explored have not exhausted the complexity of this migration, too often the object of prejudice in popular opinion and public policies.

The position of “the Congolese issue” in the academic world is rarely problematized due to confusion over how to categorize the Congo and the Congolese – either as ‘Africa,’ ‘Central Africa,’ ‘Sub-Sahara,’ etc. This reflects a ‘geography of the Other’ that significantly confounds current social processes at work in Belgium. Considering a number of empirical points, we may however maintain that the historicity, and more precisely the shared history between this minority and the natives, distinguishes this (post)migratory situation. This historicity indeed refers to the Belgian colonial system, which historically distances Congolese from the metropole (Vellut 1982). Likewise it refers to the central position occupied by Belgium in the spatial distribution of Congolese migration after Independence. The territorial continuities – real, institutional, imagined, or silenced – which are still linking Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are therefore particularly significant in these post-colonial reconfigurations.

Congo was Belgium’s only colony although Belgium did inherit a trusteeship over Rwanda and Burundi after World War One. Compared to British, French or Portuguese configurations, Belgian colonization did not lead to the

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1) The collective efforts of this issue come from two one-day conferences, and were thanks to the support of TRICUD (Transnationalism, Identities’ Dynamics and Cultural Diversification in Urban Post-migratory Situations) and during the second one-day seminar, of Mireille-Tsheusi Robert for her logistical assistance. I also would like to extend thanks to Bénédicte Ledent and Petar Kovincic for their critical reviews and the care and precision of their remarks during the first one-day seminar. I also wish to thank warmly the AFDI’s editorial board for their trust and commitment in this editorial adventure and all the reviewers for making the time to provide such rich feed-back.
establishment of an empire. On the other hand, Belgium did obtain international recognition through its huge colony (80 times bigger than Belgium itself and extremely wealthy). In addition, Congo was a private property (1885-1908) before being the State’s possession (1908-1960), which is a unique situation.

The exploitative and segregating colonial policy practised by Belgium did not stimulate the Congolese to come to Europe (Ndaywel ê Nziem 1989; Etambala 1993; Kagné 2001), even when Belgium needed immigrant labour after the Second World War. The fact that less than ten Congolese had completed a university education in Belgium at the time of Independence is particularly indicative of the colonial policies and the racial boundaries that were put in place.

According to Etambala (1993), the genesis of Congolese presence in Belgium dates back to 1908 when the Belgian State took over colonial rule under pressure from the international community after the red rubber scandal that tainted Leopold II’s power. Yet, this presence remained extremely limited until the late 1950s (Etambala 1989; Kagné 2000; Cornet 2004; Ceuppens 2009). In the aftermath of the Second World War for example, 1,838 Africans and only ten Congolese resided in Belgium (Kagné et Martiniello 2001). Those who reached the European continent were students (Etambala 2011), “évolués”, domestics following their masters, volunteer corps such as Paul Panda Farnana (Tshitungu 2011) – the first intellectual and Pan-Africanist Congolese (1888-1930) – or sailors, catechist and métis (the descendants of colonial masters) (Jeurissen 2003). In addition, colonial exhibitions brought Congolese individuals to Belgium in 1897 and then again in 1958 (Etambala 1992, 2002). The 1930 World Exhibition in Antwerp involved an important presence of Congolese ‘Force publique’ (security forces) and from 1951 the colonies minister started to invite each year between 15 and 17 Congolese notables for a study’s trip. With around

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2) The Belgian colonial system focused on the primary level of education. The first universities opened in 1954 (Kinshasa) and 1956 (Lubumbashi), namely 6 and 4 years before Independence.

3) Abuses were committed under Leopold II’s rule, in particular in relation to the rubber industry: beatings, killings, rape, hostage taking and frequent mutilation (hands being cut off) took place when production quotas were not met. These colonial practices were denounced within British and American circles and culminated in “anti-Congo campaigns” after which Leopold II was compelled to give up “his” Congo.

4) The “évolué” was a legal status by which the colonizer established the social superiority of (male) individuals on a moral basis. In order to obtain this status, the “évolué” was required to be monogamous and Christian, and needed to have a minimum level of education etc.

5) He created « l’Union Congolaise » (Congolese Union) in 1919 « société de secours et de développement moral et intellectuel de la race congolaise » (society for the Congolese race’s help and moral and intellectual development). Seventy members had suscribed in 1920 (Etambala 2010).
700 Congolese as “invited guests” staying for a period of six months, the 1958 World Exhibition held in Brussels – two years before the Congolese Independence – constituted a major turning point in terms of collective presence in Belgium (Ndaywel 1998: 531). Within the context of this exhibition Congolese could meet unionists, artists, pan-africanists as well as ordinary citizens. It thus enabled them to break free from the colonial bubble.

Thereafter, some Congolese remained and were joined by male students, sometimes accompanied by their wife. Diplomats, civil servants and tourists were also part of this new Congolese population in Belgium, and their living standard was significantly higher than that of students (de Clercq 2002; Tshimanga 2003; Demart 2013). Until the end of the 1980s, the Congolese population in Belgium remained highly mobile. From the 1960s Moroccans and Turks joined the labour force in large numbers while the former colonized Congolese were a minority. Belgium never called the Congolese, the Rwandans or the Burundians when labour was needed. A total of 5,244 Zairians resided in Belgium in 1970 (Kagné and Martiniello 2001: 9) and were (already) the main sub-Saharan population in Belgium.

During this period, the Congolese considered Europe a fashionable destination. The mobutist elite spent unlimited funds in Europe, particularly in Belgium. While there was intense back-and-forth mobility (five flights per week) connecting Kinshasa with Brussels, seeking refugee status was unthinkable for this Congolese elite since this would be synonymous with shame and scandal (Mayoyo 1995; Demart 2013).

At the same time, just like the Congolese used to call the Belgians “banako” (the uncles) the former metropole was regarded by Congolese as a “home space” or as “Congo’s extension”. Indeed, as the “elders” used to repeat, “as subjects of the King, we have been Belgian since 1908.” As a matter of fact, a number of Congolese who arrived in subsequent years changed their recorded year of birth so that it would figure as being before 1960, thereby increasing (or believing to increase) their chance of being regularized. Curiously, although racism inherited from colonization had not vanished by then, Congolese identity had a good status in Belgium.

The social situation of students, however, was to deteriorate. Facing a declining socioeconomic situation in their home country, they eventually settled, indefinitely delaying their return. Other categories of Congolese remained relatively mobile until the 1990s and even today, despite restrictive visa poli-

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cies. As of 1982, after several years of irregular payment of scholarships (since 1976), the Zairian State permanently stopped providing scholarships. This left students in conditions of extreme hardship since Belgian law did not allow them to work. Some crossed the border and settled in France while others managed to get by through illegal work or on their partner’s salary, often for domestic tasks. In contrast to the general trend, the Congolese were (and still are) more present in France than in the former metropole during the 1990s (Lututala 1997).

As if neither the Congolese nor the Belgians wanted immigration into Belgium, the Congolese settlement during the late 1980s was last to be taken into consideration by public policies and scholars (Lusanda 1993; Morelli 1994). Since then, Congolese migration has dramatically increased, partly resulting from the situation of the home country (Schoumaker, Vause and Mangalu 2010; Vause 2011): the military plundering in 1991 and 1993, the Ugandan-Rwandan aggression in Eastern Congo from 1998, and the general collapse of state control (Young and Turner 1985; Tréfon 2009). Yet these developments did not prevent a strong desire to return (Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw 2009), nor did they prevent actual return (Lardeux 2012; Flahaux, Beauchemin and Schoumaker 2010).

The number of Congolese migrants globally is now estimated by demographers to be in the range of 500,000 to 1 million individuals, whereas the Congolese state puts this figure at 7 million. Without going into further detail, one may highlight the extreme diversification of the current migratory flows, leading to the internationalization of families and challenging the historical centrality of Belgium. According to Schoonvaere (2010), around 55,000 reside in Belgium as immigrants today, among them a growing number of women (Vause 2012). The figure that we suggest is around 60,000 in order to take into account the migratory dynamics in the home country, particularly between Angola and Congo-Zaïre. Having said that, the Congolese community is still numerically small compared to other migrant groups, though they remain the largest group of Sub-Saharan immigrants (Schoumaker and Schoonvaere 2012) and the third non-European population in Belgium.

7) In the early 1990s historian Anne Morelli (1994), makes this point – summarizing her (Congolese) students’ degrees (Kusukama Salabi, Tshika Yabadi, Uhala Wimbi, Mbikay Kampandha, and Lusanda Ndamina) from data gathered between 1989 and 1992 in a context of intense relations between Zaïre and Belgium (Verhaegen 1994).

8) Despite a lack of accurate statistics, we estimate that about 5,000 Congolese may have Angolan nationality (some currently have Belgian nationality).
Three generations now make up this community although the first generation only remained in touch to the following two to a limited extent, because, until the 1990’s, they remained much more mobile. Between 2001 and 2005, 49% of the mainly Francophone Congolese immigrants lived in the Brussels-Capital Region, while around 33% lived in Wallonia and 17% in Flanders, mainly in Antwerp (Meeuwis 1997), Ghent, and Alost (Schoonvaere 2010). According to Schoonvaere (2010) the settlement strategy of new arrivals is fairly similar to the strategies of those who settled two or three decades earlier. But the Congolese show a paradoxical socioeconomic integration pattern, combining on average the highest level of education with the highest level of unemployment in Belgian society (Schoonvaere 2010; Demart 2010).

In other words, even though the demographic features are now well-known, blind spots still remain concerning the mechanism of (re)production of these racial boundaries and more broadly regarding the significant gap between the research agenda on Congo and the research agenda on Congolese migrations/minority/diaspora in Belgium. The long-term constitution of academic production on the Congo, which is rooted in the colonial period, may explain the contrast with Congolese migration’s marginal and fragmented field. But it does not explain the priorities forged during colonial times, nor does it explain the place occupied by the colony in the Belgian imaginary. Our initial concern, however, is less the Belgian representation or “invention” of the Congo (Saïd 1978; Mudimbe 1988) or the ways in which the social sciences participated in it (Poncelet 2008; Miélants 2009), than the knowledge gap that exists between an over-investigated ‘Elsewhere’ and a ‘Here’ that is unknown and silenced.

On the Postcolonial Critique

The dispersion of data concerning Congolese and a fortiori African immigrants within Belgian society does contribute to the “social invisibility” of Black populations in both Belgian Migrations Studies and in society (Mazzocchetti 2012). This ‘invisibility’, a notion referring to the French situation (Stavo-Debauge 2005; Ndiaye 2008) appears here closely linked to the Congolese presence’s history in Belgium and invites us to examine the postcolonial dynamics at work in this field.

Despite the renewal of colonial historiography in the 1990s, (Etambala 1993; Tousignant 1995; Hochschild 1999; De Witte 2000; Vellut 2005; Lauro 2005, 2009; Gillet 2008) and the public apologies that followed when the commission of inquiry on the violence of the colonial power was concluded (e.g. Patrice
Lumumba, genocide in Rwanda), the postcolonial subject is not a social issue in Belgium (Castryck 2006; Gillet 2007). The absence of public debate reflects the state of the literature (Martiniello et al. 2007; Adam 2011), and points to the limited development of academic interest on the Belgian “postcolony” (Mbembe 2001). There is thus no African or Migration Studies department dedicated to the Belgian postcolonial situation, whereas university-based English-language literature departments have been conducting studies for decades on Afro-Caribbean diasporas in English-speaking spaces.

Some scholars have, however, opened the field to considering the Belgian colonial imaginary (Jacquemin 1985; Vanderlinden 2004; Gillet 2008) or the colonial culture and the issues of memory (Licata and Klein 2005; Vanhensche 2007; Viaene and al 2009; Bragard 2011). Links between the postcolonial critique and multiculturalism have also been discussed in the Belgian case, although unfortunately they remain at the margins of Migration Studies (Mié-lants 2007, 2009; De Mul 2012; Zibouh 2012; Bracke and Fadil 2012).

In this special issue we principally deal with Belgian Francophone circles because of the spatial and temporal distribution of Congolese migration to Belgium. Though the debate is often influenced by France, it would be inappropriate and even damaging to import the French terms of debate into Belgium.

Without going into the details of the different types of French academic resistance to postcolonial studies (cf. Bertaux 2011; Mbembe 2011; Zecchini 2011), we need to address the context of “colonial aphasia” in which this French controversy took place (Stoler 2011). This local disconnection between words and things, to paraphrase Stoler, is not merely following on English-speaking debates – where postcolonial critique has influenced epistemological, institutional, and disciplinary debates for years already – but a rupture with the very French philosophical tradition in which postcolonial studies are rooted.
In addition, although some critics are above all suspicion (Bayart 2009, 2010, 2011), their rejection of postcolonial studies – and most precisely of the way postcolonial studies have been imported by some scholars (e.g. Bancel et al. 2005) – significantly ignores the epistemological requirement and critiques from inside this field (McClintock 1990; Hallward 2001; Cooper 2002; Stoler 2006). This has been shown by the marginality of the debates that eventually took place in the transnational field of research (Pouchepadass 2000; Smouts 2007; Diouf 2010). At a certain level, we can relate these anathemas to a broader difficulty in rethinking the colour-blindness of the French Republican utopia (Fassin and Fassin 2006; Stavo-Debauge 2007; Gueye 2011; Mbembe 2011). Yet, an indisputable collective dynamic of research on France’s postcoloniality is still continuing, related or not to migrations, within the French academic world and beyond, within Anglophone spaces (Chafer and Sackur 2002; Lebovics 2004; Aldrich 2005; Tshimanga et al. 2009; Bancel et al. 2010).14

This is far from being true in Belgium where scholars have been engaged in a research agenda on Congo covering a wide range of topics and periods for decades. Some anecdotes are informative. Two years ago, while speaking to an American specialist on postcolonial issues in France about the status of Belgium in the American or international research agenda, we were surprised to hear that “Belgium simply does not exist for Americans.” Although this may be an isolated point of view, we can highlight the potential indifference or relativism towards a postcolonial situation that does not correspond to an idea of empire. Although comparisons with Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, or Portugal would be useful, the specificity of the Belgian case may be understood as that of a former metropole in need of investigation.

One particular aspect of Belgian colonization was the “Big Congo – small Belgium” association (Stengers 1989; Halen 1993) which was seen as a 19th-century empire’s “gift” to Leopold II, King of a young country that became independent in 1830. By then Belgium itself had been, as Stanard (2012) points out, the victim of European imperialism for centuries. If colonial journalists or historians used to mobilize the notion of empire, contemporary historiography is repulsed by it, as Etambala pointed out to us (personal communication 2013). The limited overseas possessions of the Belgian state were indeed not equivalent to the plural and cross-continental British and French possessions. But this does not mean, according to Etambala, that there was no imperialism and therefore no connection to the current period.

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Stanard (2012) brilliantly shows how the imperialistic propaganda worked as the fourth pillar of the colonial edifice – usually described as a “colonial trinity” (Church, State, and Capital). Inherited from Leopold II, the pro-Empire propaganda was interlocked with an imagery of humanism and altruism in a context where the foreign (especially Anglophone) press had sensationalized Belgian colonialism by depicting it as the worst of modern Europe. If the imaginary of race found a particular way to express colonial violence in Congo, prefiguring in some way the Great Lakes region’s violence (Rwandan genocide, war in Eastern Congo, etc. – cf. Hunt 2008), which greatly mobilized the Congolese diaspora, it would nevertheless be irrelevant to think of Belgian colonialism as different from typical forms of violence in colonial regimes.

National variations have emerged, however. In the Belgian case, we put forth the lack of imperial legitimacy in the international sphere, and thus the strange asymmetry in power relationships in the Congolese diaspora. Belgium was indeed the only country to acquire a colony while being a “new” country, and thus not yet a great power. According to Stanard, the country’s colonial culture has to be seen within the movement of “defending Belgium’s hold on an enormous colony” and thereby to “the decades-long efforts to sell the populace on the idea that the country’s so-called tenth province was integral to Belgium” (Stanard 2012:17). The significant place the Congo still has in the Belgian collective imaginary is particularly intelligible in the recurrent use of the “couple”’s theme\(^{15}\) to qualify the Belgo-Congolese relation, especially within academic circles. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Congo’s independence (2010) have shown in Belgium a mobilisation of the whole nation such that it was impossible to follow each demonstration (May-June 2010). Today the feeling of not having been heard is widely shared within diaspora as if the Belgo-Congolese relation – largely glorified during these demonstrations – could not be thought in the here and now of the Belgian society where Congolese people are strongly assigned to otherness.

Colonial Legacies and Racial Boundaries in Belgium

Grounded in empirical research, this issue in moving beyond merely highlighting a relatively marginalized group in Belgian Migration Studies, is focusing on the postcolonial stakes of the Congolese presence in Belgium. Due to the lack

\(^{15}\) And its various version “divorce”, “marriage”, “The heart has its reasons that the reason ignores”, etc.
of longitudinal research in sociology as well as in anthropology, the postcolonial project of a decentring of Europe leads us to take seriously an attempt of co-analyzing this situation through a pairing of authors; i.e. bringing together scholars with prominent members of the Congolese diaspora. This is an attempt to establish an “epistemological balance” in the research. The hybrid authoring of this collection was also motivated by thoughtful consideration of the extent to which fieldwork would produce accurate and relevant analyses and not merely “raw material.” This, however, does not mean that we draw on ethnomethodology in our approach, even though such contributions from ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) are relevant to the decentring of scholars’ concern in favour of the actors perspectives. We wish to make margins visible which usually remain invisible to most, even though they structure the everyday lives of the Congolese minority. Ideally, the concept of majority would require deconstruction in the context of Belgium’s immigration history (Morelli 2004), but this is of only secondary concern given our focus here on the racialization of social relationships suggested by these margins (Gilroy 1991; Solomos 2003; Jamoule et Mazzocchetti 2011).

The claims on the one hand, and the intertwining of colonial legacy and racialization process on the other, are running threads in this issue. We intend to open up for reflection new lines of discussion in the field of migration rather than to take a specific position within the theoretical debate on postcolonial studies. We must however note that this particularly dense and heterogeneous field cannot be reduced to sequences (after colonization) or to bipolarity (anti-colonization) since it intends to cover the logics of the colonial process (Bhabha 1994).

In this special issue the authors take different viewpoints to explore the place of the Congolese in the former metropole and the forms of marginalization they face in a multicultural society. The racial boundaries that come to light refer to everyday life as well as to the state regulations regarding Congolese associations, or to the dynamics of identity concerning adolescents and religious spaces.

Manço, Robert and Kalonji consider the identity dynamics of Belgo-Congolese youths (socialized in Belgium from their birth or childhood) in Brussels and Antwerp. The authors focus on the significant cultural and racial prejudices experienced by the diaspora in general, and by the second-generation Congolese in particular, since the 1990s. The social upheavals that occurred among these youths from the late 1990s were related to racism as well as to family separations due to Congolese migration patterns at the time. After contextualizing the gangs phenomenon’ emergence, which are emblematic
of the adolescents’ social disruption, Manço, Robert, and Kalonji address the way in which the diaspora reacted to this phenomenon. By doing so, they explore the associative field’s emergence in Brussels as well as in Antwerp, and the relationships between “Belgo-Congolese” associations and Belgian institutions. Compared with groups from other migration flows, the Congolese appear to be the victims of counter-productive paternalism and informal jurisdiction. Attempts by the associations to represent Sub-Saharan Africans as a single group, in order to comply with requirements by the authorities, contrast with the State’s recognition of other associations on a national basis. Under cover of “organization” and “transparency” requirements, the State effectively racializes access to funding.

Paradoxically, the diaspora’s claim for considering the structural character of racial discrimination is disqualified on grounds of “communitarianism.” In Wallonia they observe a significant discrimination in associative funding for diaspora groups, while Flanders seems to offer more possibilities for support and recognition. In both regions however, the Congolese diaspora remains misunderstood despite two decades of activism and fifty years of presence on Belgian territory.

This complex articulation between colonial configuration and racial treatment is also central to the text by Kanyeba and Pezeril on the long-standing institutional links around AIDS between the Congo and Belgium, which are equally complex and multi-situated. Here, the authors tackle the postcolonial ‘debris’ (Stoler 2008) in a comparative approach discussing the way in which the Belgians essentialized the HIV/AIDS epidemic as an “African disease,” more precisely as a “Congolese virus”. In the United States, by contrast, it was gays and Haitians who bore the stigma. Kanyeba and Pezeril suggest that this was due mostly to the perception that the great majority of the infected individuals came from Zaire, but also to the fact that scientists promoted theories pointing to Congo (then Zaire) as the epicentre of the outbreak. They question the legacy of colonial, imperial, and racial ideologies in the Belgian imaginary and in the practices of those involved in the political management of the epidemic. They analyse the constructing of an “African AIDS” and the change in public policy that led to both the invisibility of African migrants living with HIV, to their control through medical surveillance and, in some cases, to their removal. They also revisit the stories of Congolese activists in the fight against AIDS in Belgium to assess the persistence of the practice of HIV testing on entry and the difficulties facing community-based organizations. The paradox of the high visibility of Congolese that the “African virus” reflects, and social invisibility through immigration policy or the non-recognition of community
associations – ultimately stripped of their funding – is glaring. In this respect, one cannot fail to note the similarities with the associational sphere of youths, even though the racialization that the state operates is materially, and not only imaginarily, bounded to Congo.

Bodeux and Demart explore the logics of continuity between the DRC and Belgium that emerge in a conflicting way in the political field. This became overt with the riots that occurred in Brussels in the winter of 2011-12. However, the postcolonial stakes cannot be reduced to the Belgo-Congolese relationship or to majority-minority relations. Rather, they have to do with both federative dynamics (claims) and with divisive dynamics within the Congolese political field in Belgium. Describing the composition of this field since 1960, Bodeux and Demart examine the political pluralism of the diaspora. The authors stress that the organization of the political space, and its international ramifications facilitated by new technologies, affirm the very colonial configuration that the activists intended to fight.

For the politically active diaspora, who denounce the ongoing conflict in Eastern Congo as the “Rwandan war” in Congo, the “international community” for whom Belgium is supposed to be the privileged intermediary, is at the heart of this “postcolonial fight.” Both levels of postcolonial critique, local and international, therefore structure the public denunciations, which federate the diaspora in spite of its internal divisions. This political pluralism put forth by the authors refers to huge conflicts of memory since the ideological divergences eventually look much more related to history’s interferences than to political opinion’s divergences. Ultimately, postcolonial hallmarks of the political field emerge at the intersection of spatial (local, transnational; in the DRC and Belgium) and temporal (colonial, post-colonial) parameters and lie in the content of the claims as well as in their form.

While men largely dominate this political field, political activism is also supported by female activism as Bolya, Godin and Grégoire show in their analysis of a parliamentary session where women implicitly mobilized a shared history in order to argue in favour of a Belgian military intervention in their home country. It is no coincidence that women have become activists since rape and sexual torture are major weapons in this war. The historical perspective sheds a particularly useful light on the skills acquired during (post)migratory trajectories as well as those “inherited” from the home country. If Congolese people as a whole were structurally deprived of rights during colonization, women are the main losers of colonialism. The gains of the post-colonial period in terms of literacy, voting rights and employment are the background of the women who stood up against the Belgian polity. After having contextualized their
migration as well as the emergence of a female activism in the politico-associative field, Bolya, Godin and Grégoire subtly analyse the verbal competencies of these women deployed in the parliamentary interpellation. The women are shown to master the “postcolonial frame” according to which the postcolonial situation in which this interaction makes sense must not be named, but subtly suggested.

The paper sheds light on the unspoken dimension of the postcolonial relationship and on the implicit elements that make up Belgo-Congolese relations. In this sense, this contribution explains the difficult emergence of postcolonial critique in the Belgian public space.

Despite their spiritual warfare and strong determination to transcend racial boundaries, the religious institutions unquestionably occur as diasporic spaces where the postcolonial claims do not involve public space if not they absent from the intellectual debates. However Demart, Meiers and Mélice argue that the postcolonial critique is also present in churches, where it is interpreted through religious categories, namely “Bible” and “Witchcraft.”

In a comparison of the Kimbanguist, the Pentecostal and the Olangist (from the Olangi-Wosho Foundation) movements, the authors address the different spatial and temporal expressions of the ‘witch territories’ in religious discourse. These three religious movements of Congolese origin assert an African Christianity freed from colonial and neo-colonial constraints. Despite their substantial differences, in the 1990s these three churches went through a turning point that opposed bible and witchcraft. In all these movements the dramatic increase of witchcraft affairs indeed demonstrates logics of exacerbation that locate the witch, and even the devil, within the family and the individual in the DRC as well as in the diaspora.

Demart, Meiers and Mélice emphasize that if this witchcraft’s imaginary seems to break with the suspicion about colonial missionaries being witches, it has not disappeared in terms of the “material dispute” related to the European territory. The material and technological performances, on one hand, and the presence of colonial institutions, on the other, are at the heart of this suspicion, which is ultimately related to racism. Although they do not name it as such, racism constitutes the very blockage for Pentecostals and Olangists who claim a total deliverance of all things evil. Kimbanguists, meanwhile, reproduce a withdrawal from public space, which echoes the time of their prophet Kimbangu, who foretold an eventual inversion of the racial status.

In other words, while their interpretative patterns take root in prophetism’s struggle for liberation during (and of) colonization, and draw on categories from the (post)migratory context in order to interpret their current status, the
churches articulate neither racism nor postcolonial relationships within Belgium. In addition, whereas Pentecostal discourses draw on a generic postcolonial critique, Kimbanguist and Olangist churches designate Belgium, and most precisely Brussels, as the centre of the colonial power.

The different postcolonial lenses discussed in this issue remind us of the many frameworks in which the diaspora is rooted. The Congolese minority in Belgium is definitely plural, and despite internal divisions and competitions, it is also deeply mobilized by a desire to go beyond colonial relations and the racial enclosure.

We shall see that certain contributions raise the issue of postcolonial fragmentation stemming from differentiated colonial economies (Congo, Rwanda, Burundi). This relates in large part to differences in the Belgian investment in these three territories, in physical, imaginary, and even emotional terms. In other words, the segregating and exploitative policy that did not favour mobility towards the metropole have co-existed with colonial displacements organized during decades around the metropole’s economic interests. The classification of people and groups that resulted from the stewardship of this colonial space is indicative of an imaginary of race that complicates the postcolonial issue. It would be useful in future research to explore the question of the different postcolonial configurations, and of the resulting internal dynamics between diasporas from these countries and Belgium. The few existing studies about Rwandans (Foyer 2011; Ntamahungiro 2004; Ntampaka 2004; Gakuba 2009) and Burundians (Ntamahungiro 2004; Turner 2007) reaffirm Congolese centrality in this postcolonial context.

This issue thus offers a number of different perspectives on the situation of Congolese people in Belgium, and the underlying logics of the discrimination they face. After being “unthinkable” for decades, Congolese settlement in Belgium is leading to an “invisibility” that involves different levels of power, in particular the State. Because moral and legal codes have theoretically banished racism, mentioning this remains as problematic as in France (Fassin and Fassin 2006; Simon 2010). In the Belgian context one could also argue that there is a significant “anticipation” of confrontation by Congolese, and maybe by Black people more generally. The violence of racism is therefore related to the margins in which it is expressed and relegated, despite attempts at activism or media coverage.16 The fact that politicians or institutional actors remain

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surprised when confronted by activists – or academics' scientific observations – of a specific racism towards Congolese in Belgium is often viewed within the Congolese minority as the expression of a denial (Demart 2013b). In some respects, the frequent disqualification of the diaspora’s claims on grounds of ‘communitarism’ refers as in France to a displacement and a reversal of the racial stigma since the point for the natives is not so much the racialization of global society but the so-called “ethnicisation” or “racism” of the group confronted with this structural racism (Fassin and Fassin 2006).

As a result, the dialogue on this postcolonial malaise is extremely marginal. It might even be said, in respect of these contributions that colonial history looks like a Pandora’s box for autochthon Belgians. The no man’s land to which the Congolese are assigned to in the multicultural fabric of Belgium then questions these autochtons’ anxieties. How to understand that despite five decades of Congolese presence in Belgium and at least two decades of sedentary lives, associative activism and expertise in putting forward specific demands, this group remains relatively unknown by the authorities?

In the continuities of a varied literature, one can highlight the link between knowledge and domination and, precisely, the more discerning understanding of the Other from the perspective of these power’s relation. It will be necessary in further research to examine the practises and dynamics of identity of these Belgo-Congolese interactions. This may shed a particularly useful light on how racial boundaries are (re)produced and on the ways in which the (post)colonial imaginaries that are at the heart of Belgian multiculturalism are maintained.

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