
GLOBAL CRISIS IN MEMORY

Memory in Crisis: Commemoration, Visual Cultures and (Mis)representation in Postcolonial Belgium

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This article analyses the role of visual cultures in debates surrounding memories of the Belgian colonial project and its long-term consequences by focusing on a single case study, Barly Baruti's and Christophe Cassiau-Haurie's comic *Madame Livingstone: Congo, La Grande Guerre* (2014). Focusing on how the image-text represents 'official' commemoration versus 'private' memories in the context of the Belgian colonialism and the First World War in the Great Lakes region, it highlights how a focus on the visual can also function as a counterproduction of images that emphasise the complex and contested nature of commemoration in a transnational context.

'Of all the former colonial powers, we are probably the nation which has been happiest to shed light, with no concessions or taboos, on our past history in Africa.' – Then Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, 29 March 2004

'We note with concern the public monuments and memorials that are dedicated to King Leopold II and Force Publique officers, given their complicity in atrocities in Africa. The Working Group is of the view that closing the dark chapter in history, and reconciliation and healing, requires that Belgians should finally confront, and acknowledge, King Leopold II's and Belgium's role in colonization and its long-term impact on Belgium and Africa.' – Extract from a statement to the media by the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, 11 February 2019

In February 2019, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent published a 74-point report on the conclusion of its official visit to Belgium the same month. While the first eleven points highlight governmental, institutional and grassroots initiatives to combat racism and hate crime and to promote the cultures of African diasporas, notably Congolese, the report unambiguously concludes that '[d]espite the positive measures referred to above, the Working Group is concerned about the human rights situation of people of African descent in Belgium who experience racism and racial discrimination' (n.p.). As the above quote illustrates, the report establishes a clear and direct link between these unacceptable levels of racism against people of African descent in Belgium and the country's inadequate dealing with its own colonial legacy.

This statement represents a stark contrast to Louis Michel's verdict, also quoted above, a few years after he led the 2000–1 enquiry 'that led to an admission of state complicity in [Patrice] Lumumba's death', which was triggered by the publication of Ludo de Witte's *The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba* (1999) (Stanard 29). Indeed, both Matthew Stanard and Idesbald Goddeeris's path-breaking historical studies into the complexities of commemorating Belgium's colonial legacy identify the significance of the publication of a number of popular-history books, namely de Witte's, as well as Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998), and more recently, David van Reybrouck's 2010 *Congo* (see Goddeeris 436).¹ Stanard remarks how critics such as Hochschild 'have at least insinuated that Belgians chose to forget or deliberately ignore their past overseas rule', whereas he argues that 'the relatively longstanding inattention to colonialism's effects on Belgium is not due to Belgians simply forgetting their colonial past because of the shame felt at its darker chapters', but rather to a multiplicity of factors (29).²

In order to analyse the role of visual cultures in debates surrounding memories of the Belgian colonial project and its long-term consequences, I will present a single case study, Barly Baruti's and Christophe Cassiau-Haurie's comic *Madame Livingstone: Congo, La Grande Guerre* (2014). Considering how the image-text represents 'official' commemoration versus 'private' memories, I will highlight how a focus on the visual can also function as a counter-production of images that emphasize the complex nature of commemoration in a transnational context.

Memory in times of crisis

What Stanard's analysis of colonial memories in Belgium reveals is how closely the notion of crisis in Belgium is tied to the idea of nation, state and community, to the deep linguistic, political and economic divisions between Flanders, the Flemish-speaking north of the country, and Wallonia, the Francophone south. These rifts caused a governmental crisis in Belgium, exemplified by the difficult negotiations that broke the world record for a nation-state existing without a functioning government following the early federal elections of 2010 (see Goddeeris 440). Idesbald Goddeeris diagnoses this as an identity crisis and states that

[t]his political crisis contributed to a reconsideration of the Belgian identity in Flanders, which was at the base of the crisis. Many dominant pundits opposed rising Flemish nationalism for its right-wing platform and questionable populism. They therefore avoided criticism of the Belgian past, as well as the colonial one. (Ibid.)

I argue that, in order to come to a better understanding of the Belgian memory crisis, we have to look at memory *in* crisis – at how the past is commemorated in times of crisis.³ I

¹ Alongside more recent events, such as a number of major anniversaries connected to the colonial period, as well as the reopening of Royal Museum for Central Africa.

² He cites the north–south divide between Flanders and Wallonia, the fact that only few Belgians had a direct experience of life in the colonies (unlike European colonial powers that practised settler colonialism, such as the French in Algeria) and the comparatively small size of the Congolese diaspora community in Belgium (28).

³ Not least to highlight the connections between this 'domestic' divide and its consequences for the Belgian colonial project; Pierre-Philippe Fraiture has emphasized that '[t]his antagonism between irredentist and unitary factors constitutes, ultimately, the background against which Belgium and its former colonies have developed since decolonization. After the collapse of the empire, the gap between French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities widened in Belgium and after more than forty years of institutional dismembering of the former centralized state, it is debatable whether or not they still have a common future. The same basic forces – unity, irredentism and ethnic struggles – have also shaped the histories of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi up to the present day' (Fraiture 10).

therefore take a lead from Filip de Boeck, who has described the effects of violence and death on local history and memory in the postcolonial Congo. He retraces an ongoing crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,

which originated in the violent and alienating discrepancies and dislocations generated in and by the colonial project, and was further aggravated in the postcolony [... Here] the subjectivity of crisis – which [...] is itself intimately tied to a generalised *memory crisis* and the breakdown of the production of history – is linked to an impossibility to place or *posit* death. (25, 26; author's emphasis)

While I am not trying to conflate the violent dictatorship and conflicts of the postcolonial Congo with Belgium's regional quarrels, I posit that the connection de Boeck draws between the 'subjectivity of crisis' and a 'generalised memory crisis and the breakdown of the production of history' offers a productive framework to analyse commemoration during the Belgian colonial occupation. Such an approach allows us to trace hegemonic historiography as an important instrument for colonial sovereignty, while paying attention to the multilayered nature of pre- and postcolonial histories of violence, as well as the 'grey zones', the ambiguities within the colonial state – for example during the so-called East African Campaign of the First World War (3 August 1914–25 November 1918), when Belgium, Britain and Germany took the armed conflict to their colonies – on which I will focus in my following analysis.

It remains important to construct nuanced frameworks that take into consideration the differences between the respective European empires (see Forsdick and Murphy 3); however, dealing adequately with colonial legacies is not *only* a national or even regional issue, but requires a transnational perspective in recognizing their shared complicity in the colonial occupation of the African continent. Moving beyond the centre–periphery binary and applying a 'transcolonial' perspective, to employ Olivia Harrison's use of the term, opens up broader contexts, which have received relatively little academic attention so far (O. Harrison 2). A broader perspective allows us to uncover and to trace, for instance, the colonial exploitation of human and natural resources and their dispersal across the globe in the name of war mobilization, illustrated by, for example, the employment of the Belgian Congo's Force Publique in the two World Wars, in both neighbouring colonial territories and later in West Africa and the Middle East, or the significance of natural resources from Katanga province that supported the Allied forces in the Second World War, including uranium from the Shinkolobwe mine that would be used in the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima (see Williams 24).⁴ What is more, a broader timeframe is necessary to understand the long-term consequences of these truly 'global' dynamics, as Mark Harrison has recently argued (640).

Representation and reproduction: a focus on the visual

Interestingly enough then, what the UN report also notices, with its early emphasis on the colonial memorials and the reopening of the infamous Royal Museum for Central Africa, now rebranded as the 'AfricaMuseum' in Tervuren, a suburb of Brussels, is a 'memory crisis' that is tied to a crisis of visual representation. The newly refurbished museum has largely

⁴ The Force Publique was both the colonial police force and the Territorial Army of the Belgian Congo (see Tousignant 235) at the time of the Belgian Congo. It mostly comprised Congolese who had been conscripted or joined voluntarily and an entirely white general staff. Stanard notes that '[a] Force Publique victory in German East Africa at Tabora handed the Belgium its greatest field victory of the entire war, and suffering at the hands of German invaders helped recast the country as victim in the eyes of its western partners' (46). I have not been able to locate any evidence for Congolese soldiers of the Force Publique having received any sort of pension from the Belgian state.

disappointed in providing a decolonized approach. Gillian Mathys, for instance, explains how '[a]s elsewhere in the museum, the "colonial history" room fails to convincingly explain relationships between the colonial past and present; and only superficially addresses the role of the museum in shaping ideas about (central) Africa' (Mathys et al.; see also Vallet, "Musée de Tervuren: décolonisation impossible?" and Forsdick, "Coming to Terms with the Colonial Past"). In terms of visual memory cultures, Belgium's numerous colonial statues and memorials have thus far attracted most academic attention; Stanard highlights that

what they disclose is that the country's rule in central Africa was founded upon military conquest and was sustained over the years through the use of force and the threat of the use of force. This military theme reflects both the violent nature of colonial conquest and the era in which most memorials were built, which was from the late 1800s through the 1930s, a time marked by greater nationalism and military violence in Western Europe than in more recent decades. (148)

It would go beyond the scope of this article to trace this 'visual memory crisis' from Belgium's colonial monuments, via Hergé's infamous *Tintin au Congo* (1931), to the 'recycling' of colonial propaganda photography by the Belgian news media after 1960 (see Stanard 143) and ethically problematic or not adequately contextualized photography exhibitions (see Bishop 515). Instead, I suggest focusing on Barly Baruti and Christophe Cassiau-Haurie's *Madame Livingstone: Congo, la Grande Guerre* – a fictitious, comicbook account of a friendship between a Belgian colonial officer and pilot, Gaston Mercier, and a multilingual, mixed-race Congolese soldier of the Force Publique called David Junior Livingstone but nicknamed 'Madame Livingstone' by his superiors and the other soldiers due to him wearing a Scottish kilt. The plot is set between June and December 1915, during which the two of them attack and sink the German warship *Graf Goetzen* in Lake Tanganyika. Yet the comic avoids romanticizing the friendship between the two colonial soldiers: 'They are eventually separated by the colonial system and the war, as Livingstone is killed because he is believed to have joined the German camps and his mother is killed by the Germans because of her son's participation in the sinking of the battleship' (Bragard 335). As Véronique Bragard further points out, the comic reveals 'how the history of WWI is a [...] continuation of the European appropriation of land' (336, 337), while

the historical approach of this piece [*sic*] reveals a double perspective, which challenges monolithic views of Belgian-Congolese history [...]. Livingstone denounces the ways in which Europeans spread their wars and rivalries into the African continent as well as the fact that they then impose their versions of history on Africa. The authors in their turn superimpose historical layers of meaning on the hergian [*sic*] genre: beneath the story of WWI lies the violence of the colonial system, the Force Publique's rebelliousness, and the details of contested historical moments. (335)

The 'counteracting' I mentioned before thus lies in the comic's twofold approach: firstly, it represents a fictionalized 'historiography from below', not only by presenting its reader with the complexity of colonial oppression from the perspective of the colonized that Bragard mentions, but also by its accessibility through the bande dessinée form to reach a broader audience. Secondly, this 'fictionalized historiography' expands beyond the comic into the book's appendix, which provides the reader with both 'factual' historical information as well as with a fictitious archive of Livingstone's background, turning the book itself into a self-conscious historical artefact.

Commemoration and counternarratives

Baruti and Cassiau-Haurie's *Madame Livingstone* represents 'memory crisis' and the contestation of how to commemorate histories of violence as an inherent issue of the Belgian colonial enterprise, not only of the postcolonial era, and highlights its collaboration and interaction with other colonial powers. For instance, especially in the first half of the text, the flags of the Belgian Congo and of the Force Publique are almost omnipresent and so are the symbols of the so-called Congo Free State (*Etat Indépendant du Congo* (EIC)). This becomes most visible in a scene where the colonial apparatus stages a commemoration of Omer Bodson, a high-ranking Belgian colonial officer and one of the leaders of the Stairs Expedition, a 'race' epitomizing the European 'scramble for Africa' between the Belgian and British imperial powers to take possession of the resource-rich region of Katanga.⁵ Bodson shot Mwami M'Siri, the ruler of the Yeke Kingdom, who refused to accept Leopold II's appropriation of the land and was in turn killed by M'Siri's men (see Gordon 320). In *Madame Livingstone*, the commemoration of Bodson is staged below a statue that depicts him holding a gun up in the air. Behind the statue, we can discern the Belgian and the colonial flags, as well as a building that still carries the insignia of the EIC.

Bodson's commemoration represents a central moment in the text and is significant for several reasons. The colonial state apparatus celebrates Bodson's killing of M'Siri and his own death as a 'heroic' act of the Belgian 'civilizing' mission, using both the usual imperial clichés of 'delivering modernity', but also more specifically Belgian ones, such as the idea that Leopold II's conquest of the Congo region 'liberated' it from a reign of 'terror and blood' (Baruti and Cassiau-Haurie 62–3). In this particular instance, the reference is clearly aimed at M'Siri. The appendix to the comic informs the reader about the life and death of 'le roi M'Siri', depicting him as a belligerent and influential ruler over a vast region, as well as of the significance of his death, which

offrit aux Européens un libre accès au riche Katanga car son fils Mokande Bantu [...], très affaibli et isolé, accepta l'autorité de l'État indépendant du Congo [offered Europeans a free access to the resource-rich Katanga, since his son Mokande Bantu [...] significantly weakened and isolated, accepted the authority of the Congo Free State]. (Baruti and Cassiau-Haurie n.p.).

The information provided on M'Siri is juxtaposed with the preceding page which features an extract from the infamous 1885 General Act of the Conference of Berlin concerning the Congo, which ratified Leopold's claim of the vast territories in Central Africa. This corresponds to Bragard's reading of a later scene, where Livingstone condemns the commemoration of Bodson. She states that 'Livingstone recognizes that M'Siri was a conquering, violent king, but he points out that Belgium killed him not for that reason but rather to obtain "control of a [sic] immense territory"' (Bragard 337). This observation is particularly interesting in that it echoes probably the most fundamental pretence of Leopold's colonial project, namely the fight against the 'Arab slave trader'. In this context, Stanard highlights the role of the Force Publique, who

squelched on-the-ground indigenous resistance and the king (and his agents) characterized their takeover as the 'pacification' of Congo territories, not conquest. They

⁵ Katanga is a particularly significant place in and for Congolese colonial and postcolonial history, as the region seceded and proclaimed independence in 1960, which triggered the deployment of UN peacekeepers. It was also where Patrice Lumumba was assassinated.

also claimed victory over 'Arab' slaving in eastern Congo, that is to say the military defeat of east African Arab-Swahili merchants, including slavers, who dominated the eastern Congo. In this way Leopold II cast his colonial rule as a humanitarian struggle of civilization against cruel, foreign, Arab Muslims who were preying on hapless Africans. (41)⁶

According to Stanard, this anti-enslavement narrative was eclipsed by the reports of murder, mutilation and torture from the EIC, which triggered the international Congo Reform Movement and would eventually lead to the 'nationalization' of the Congo under Belgian state control in 1908 (Ibid.). However, as he demonstrates later on, this narrative had a particularly prolific afterlife in colonial memorials in Belgium, such as Arsène Matton's *L'esclavage* (1920), which was 'one of a number of statues adorning the entrance rotunda of the Tervuren Congo museum that justified colonialism to visitors' (and still is, even after the Museum's renovation) or Thomas Vinçotte's *Monument du Congo* (1921) in Brussels' Parc du Cinquantenaire/Jubelpark, which declares that 'l'Héroïsme Militaire belge anéantit l'Arabe esclavagiste [Belgian military heroism annihilated the enslaving Arab]' (Stanard 164; 166). Goddeeris mentions this particular monument, as well as the fact that it was restored in 2009:

The inscription on one of the peripheral statues – 'The Belgian military's heroic bravery eradicates the Arab slave trader' – was not modified. It did not seem to occur to people that the message may be offensive for some Belgians, particularly the ones frequenting Brussels' largest mosque nearby, in spite of the fact that 'vandals' had erased the word 'Arab' before 2009 (and did again after restoration). (449)⁷

Goddeeris's observation aptly connects unaddressed and (mis-)commemorated narratives of Belgian colonialism with present-day racism in the country, thus providing an interesting substantiation of the UN report by highlighting how multiple forms of racism can be linked to an inadequate 'coming to terms with the past', to a 'memory crisis', including anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. This is a particularly poignant issue, given that the largest diasporic communities in Belgium are those of Moroccan descent and therefore have to be taken into consideration when discussing postcolonial violence in the country.⁸

In *Madame Livingstone*, in every vignette that shows Bodson's statue, we can see the Belgian national flag, as well as the flag of the Belgian Congo in the background.⁹ This composition not only positions the Belgian colonial project as an inherently national(izing) one (see Fraiture 10), it also points to ongoing debates in Belgium concerning colonial monuments and statues. For example, the 2014 publication of *Madame Livingstone* predated the December 2015 protests against events celebrating the 150th anniversary of Leopold's enthronement and which #LeopoldMustFall has documented online, in the wake of the #RhodesMustFall

⁶ He later describes these merchants in more detail as 'mainly Zanzibari or Arab-Swahili from Africa's eastern coast, many of whom had been living and trading in central Africa long before the arrival of any Europeans' (163).

⁷ The original French inscription on the monument for the Congo reads: 'J'ai entrepris l'œuvre du Congo dans l'intérêt de la civilisation et pour le bien de la Belgique.' Unfortunately, Goddeeris's English translation does not bring home the racialized thrust of 'l'Arabe esclavagiste'.

⁸ This is a point I have made before (cf., for instance, Arens 159).

⁹ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the significance of this flag in any great detail. However, it seems important to note that the golden star on a blue ground already served as the official flag of Leopold's Association internationale africaine (an ostensibly humanitarian organization that served as a smokescreen to his economic endeavours), then of the Congo Free State and subsequently the Belgian Congo, as well as of the Force Publique itself.

movement in Cape Town, Oxford and elsewhere. Protesters gathered at one of Brussels' most prominent statues of Leopold on the Place du Trône/Troonplein, doused it with paint and gave speeches to commemorate the victims of Belgian colonial rule, as well as highlighting its long-term consequences. However, as Daniel Cullen has remarked, '[p]redating the Rhodes Must Fall movement by more than a decade, activists have been seeking to counter this false memorialization of Leopold', for example in 2004, by defacing 'a statue in Ostend, which portrays the "benevolent" Belgian ruler surrounded by a group of "grateful" Congolese' (n.p.).

Madame Livingstone narrates a moment of resistance against a state-sanctioned version of history and commemoration: Livingstone, who, throughout the narrative, educates Mercier about the calamitous effects of the imported war and European colonial occupation and yet is at the same time an instrument of this very system in his role for the Force Publique, stages a visible act of defiance at the Bodson commemoration (see Baruti and Cassiau-Haurie 62–5). After saving Mercier from a plane crash and having walked back to Albertville (today's Kalemie) from a remote village, they arrive, dirty and in tattered clothes, among the assembled community of colonialists. Although Mercier tries to hold him back, Livingstone makes his way through the crowd to the front, where the others keep a visible distance from the pair. While the only words that are rendered are those of the speech commemorating Bodson, there is an interesting exchange of gazes between Livingstone and one of the Force Publique soldiers in uniform, the only non-white attendees of the festivities (ibid. 64–5). This silent exchange causes whispering among the soldiers, yet neither their white Belgian commander, who, as a result, is visibly sweating and loses his thread, nor the reader know what this is about (the news of Livingstone's return or an early sign of mutiny?). The ambivalence marking the representation of the figure of Livingstone and its multilayered nature is reflected by him demanding Mercier and, by extension, the (European) reader to understand and acknowledge the complexity and scope of Belgian colonial occupation. While this demand is not an entirely new one in Belgo-Congolese literature as such, the way in which the comic presents itself as both work of fiction and visual historical artefact, and how it destabilizes and questions hegemonic historiography, point to the important role *bandes dessinées* might be able to play in finding a way out of the impasse posed by Belgium's 'memory crisis'.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Similar demands to recognize a shared history between colonizer and colonized can be found, for instance, in Pie Tshibanda's 1999 novel *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs* or José Tshisungu wa Tshisungu's *La Flamande de la gare du Nord* (2001).

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