Unfinished Histories
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Thinking, Performing, and Overcoming Belgium’s ‘Colonial Power Matrix’?

An Introduction

Pierre-Philippe Fraiture

Belgium once had an empire in Central Africa. The historical processes informing this imperial presence – the foundation of the Congo Free State (CFS) in 1885, its demise, the emergence of the Belgian Congo in 1908, and the subsequent absorption of ‘Ruanda-Urundi’ by Belgium under the aegis of the League of Nations in 1922 – are well documented and have generated a voluminous collection of responses in all fields of knowledge and human activities. This edited book will reflect on this colonial past but, more crucially, appraise the many post-colonial traces and legacies of this past in Belgium, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi. The post-colonial period and the independence of the Congo (1960) and that of Burundi and Rwanda in 1962 did not herald a completely new era but marked, more prosaically, the beginning of decolonisation. This process, which is unarguably still unfolding now, cannot be univocally defined. One of the chief aims of this volume will be to explore how this contested notion has shaped cultural debates and responses in the geographical areas under scrutiny. It would be an understatement to say that this post-colonial period has been marked by violence. Real violence, as tragically exemplified by the continuous string of civil wars, pogroms, ethnic cleansing, and genocides, but also cultural and epistemological violence as political emancipation did not elicit the expected cultural autonomy.

This period has witnessed the rise and often the fall of extraordinary and larger-than-life political figures, such as Mobutu Sese Seko, Patrice Lumumba, Pierre Mulélé, Prince Louis Rwagasore, Laurent and Joseph Kabila, Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, Juvénal Habyarimana, and Paul Kagame. It has also coincided with cultural experiments in the field of literature, thought, music, and the arts and the emergence, in Central Africa and in the diaspora, of formidably creative individuals and (public) intellectuals like Sony Labou Tansi, V. Y. Mudimbe, Papa Wendo, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, and Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. At the same
time, Central African cultures have continued to attract the attention of scholars and have, in fact, often been mobilised to develop original empirical and theoretical research, as illustrated by the works by Jan Vansina, Johannes Fabian, Colette Braeckman, Luc de Heusch, Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Filip De Boeck, Mathieu Zana Aziza Etambala, Sammy Baloji, David Van Reybrouck, Thierry Michel, Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, Didier Gondola, and Nancy Rose Hunt. In the wake of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, other important statements have appeared, not only to account for this unfathomable tragedy, as exemplified by the vast corpus of novels, films, and testimonies on this event, but also to reappraise more distant events such as Leopold’s anti-slavery campaign, the Red Rubber Scandal, the publication of *Tintin au Congo*, and the assassination of Lumumba, in addition to the role and significance of the AfricaMuseum in a post-colonial Belgium.

Written sixty years after the independence of most sub-Saharan African former colonies, this book aims to explore the enduring influence of this Belgian colonial past in Belgium, its former colonial domains, and beyond. We will privilege here cultural and epistemological issues pertaining to the emergence of critical voices, whether intellectuals in the human sciences (e.g. history and anthropology), novelists, playwrights, musicians, artists, filmmakers, art critics, journalists, art curators, urban planners, and geographers, and, as already indicated above, we will favour particular past and contemporary events through which the many intertwinements between Central Africa and Belgium can be examined.

In this title, *Unfinished Histories: Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium*, every word is equally significant. The ambition is to explore the long-term legacies and the material and immaterial traces of Belgian colonialism in Central Africa, and, as importantly, to measure the effects and consequences of colonial and postcolonial encounters, and clashes, on Belgium itself. How this short-lived empire has continued to shape African-ness and Belgian-ness is a question that is worth investigating and which has unarguably remained underinvestigated. ‘Central Africa’ as a geographical entity is understood here to comprise the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi.

The DRC did not exist as a geographical reality before 1885, when it became the Congo Free State, and later the Belgian Congo, from 1908 to 1960. Therefore, the unification of this huge and disparate territory is an invention, and my own use of this word is a reference to the formidably relevant work conducted by V. Y. Mudimbe on colonial Africa in the aptly named *The Invention of Africa*, a book mapping the discourses and concepts that facilitated Africa’s entry into a Western order of knowledge. It was an invention because it regarded itself as the beginning of a new temporality that was supposed to benefit the locals and paved the way for their incorporation into a progressive historicity. However, in this process of homogenisation, the African ‘space of experience’ was utterly
denied at the expense of a modern ‘horizon of expectation’, to refer to the two cardinal notions developed by Reinhart Koselleck in his examination of modernity and historical time. The Congolese territory was divided into provinces – again at the expense of other precolonial subdivisions – when the Congo was made up of the semi-nomadic (Luba, Kuba, Lunda, and Kongo) states whose influences were felt well beyond the current boundaries of the DRC. In this process of territorial dismembering, time itself was spatialised and divided into precolonial and modern provinces.

The context in which the colonisation of Ruanda and Burundi took place was very different but equally demeaning. Ruanda-Urundi, as it was then referred to, had first been colonised by Germany in the wake of the Berlin Conference. After the Treaty of Versailles, it became not a Belgian colony but a mandate under the terms defined by the newly created League of Nations. In actual fact, Ruanda-Urundi was managed in the same way as a colony. The Belgian colonisers, following a trend initiated by their German predecessors, were keen to emphasise, in fact overstate, the innate order presiding over the social and ethnic structure of Ruanda-Urundi. This other invention (of the Nilotic Tutsi) had catastrophic consequences for post-colonial Rwanda. And it continues to have catastrophic consequences in eastern Congo and in Burundi in particular.

The history of Belgian colonialism is complex. It involved many stakeholders from a religiously and linguistically divided country. But also international actors who, from the beginning, were attracted by Leopold’s project and the many resources – natural, mineral, and human – offered by the new colony. The word ‘resource’ is important because when the Congo Free State was set up, the Congolese were not regarded as agents but as resources to facilitate the profit-driven objectives of this enterprise, that is, what commentators have rightly called Raubwirtschaft, in other words, a type of economic model based on plunder and loot. Leopold II was a modern-day entrepreneur, and the irony is that he never set foot in his Congo. Despite some improvements from the early days of the Congo Free State until 1960, and 1962 in the case of Ruanda-Urundi, it must be said that Belgian colonial rule largely remained predicated on issues of economic profitability. Until the end of the Second World War, forced labour was part and parcel of the legislative apparatus set in place by Leopold, then briefly cancelled when the Congo became Belgian on 18 October 1908, but swiftly reinstated in 1909 in the ‘Colonial Charter’ when the colonisers realised that they would continue to be faced with labour shortages in large infrastructural projects, particularly those involving the construction of roads and railways, the farming of cash crops, and the launching of military operations. Until the bitter end, then, Belgian colonialism, in the Congo and in Ruanda-Urundi, remained a violent, discriminatory, and coercive system.
Violence and coercion were also at the roots of the epistemological invention to which these colonies were submitted. The colonial library, another richly evocative phrase coined by Mudimbe to account for the West’s epistemic takeover of Africa, was a site of violence and a zone where knowledge itself was necessarily constrained. Central Africa became an object of knowledge, and in the process of this objectification, it was turned into a commodity. By 1895, a mere ten years after the official birth of the Congo Free State, Alphonse-Jules Wauters, the Belgian geographer who would act as the editor-in-chief of the *Mouvement géographique* until 1922, listed 3800 scientific works on the Congo alone. By parenthesis, this journal, the *Mouvement géographique*, aptly illustrates the paradoxical nature of imperial knowledge production and its deliberate reluctance to separate science from propaganda. Indeed, it was created in 1884 to inform the general public on the geographical expeditions – in fact, military operations – conducted by colonial heroes such as H. M. Stanley and Francis Dhanis under the aegis of the Association Internationale Africaine, the organisation that paved the way for the creation of the Congo Free State. Interestingly, the *Movement géographique* was taken over by the Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l’Industrie (CCCI), the all-powerful trade and industry private conglomerate headed by Albert Thys, the Belgian tycoon who would oversee major infrastructural projects in the colony. The CCCI survived several regime changes and was only liquidated in 1971 under Mobutu. It had financial ties with very company that mattered in the colony and in Belgium: the Forminière, the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), the Compagnie du Chemin de fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga, and the Société Générale de Belgique. As such, the CCCI can be regarded as a crucial Belgo-Congolese lieu de mémoire.

This knowledge-mapping operation would accelerate and, gradually, affect all areas of human activities, be they practical, intellectual, or spiritual. It would be implemented by the Congo Museum (in Tervuren), the Royal Colonial Institute, the Colonial University in Antwerp, and by an army of semi-private researchers who would often work in conjunction with (and with the partial support of) these public institutions. The problem, however, with colonial knowledge is that it remained largely instrumental and at the service of the extractive and exploitative logic of Belgian colonialism. The irony is that this knowledge did not disappear after decolonisation and that, while it has continued to contaminate contemporary perceptions of Africa, it has also critically fed the reflection of many scholars, artists, critics, and writers in Central Africa and in the former metropole.

In the last sixty years, two major attitudes have prevailed. First, one of oblivion and indifference. For the majority of Belgians, the colonial past, when it was not couched in dubious nostalgia, was simply eschewed, although many
families had an aunt, an uncle, a grandfather, or more distant relatives and acquaintances with some degree of colonial credentials. This state of affairs was compounded by the quasi absence of any critical references to the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and their respective histories in school curricula, even though some rare criticisms of Leopold II and the Belgian royal family started appearing in isolated Flemish textbooks by the end of the 1970s. As someone who was educated in Belgium (Wallonia) many years after the political demise of Belgian colonialism, I can attest to this glaring deficiency. Apart from one passing allusion to Leopold’s œuvre when I was ten years old, I cannot recall any single reference to this long chapter of the national history in my own schooling. By parenthesis, this word – œuvre – is anything but neutral. As it is normally employed to account for exceptional undertakings and selfless achievements, its use in this specific context smacks of ignorance and (neocolonial) paternalism. Well after political decolonisation, it certainly bore witness to the survival of the grandiloquently jingoistic terminology that had characterised Belgian school textbooks during the colonial era.

In Central Africa, the relationship to this colonial past in the immediate years after political decolonisation was even more complicated, as the 1960s were marred by political coups, interethnic violence, and human rights violations. In Burundi, decolonisation maintained the political hegemony of the Tutsi and the ‘institutionalized ethnic pathology’ bequeathed by the Belgians. Well after 1993, the country experiences mass killings of Twa and Hutu and counter-reprisals against the Tutsi. In Rwanda, on the other hand, the years leading to independence witnessed the rise of the Parmhutu, a political organisation that persecuted the Tutsi minority and fomented the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. In the Congo, the early years of independence were marked by the assassination of Lumumba, the Katangese and South-Kasai secessions, Maoism-inspired armed rebellions, and the rise of Mobutu, who eventually seized power in 1965 against the backdrop of the Cold War. In Burundi, Rwanda, and (by then) Zaire, the next two decades coincided with the consolidation of neocolonialism, particularly after the 1973–75 world economic recession, an event that increased Africa’s dependence on foreign aid and the econometric logic of the International Monetary Fund. In this new context in which the old colonial order, albeit officially disbanded, was still surreptitiously operating, there was little appetite among Central African intellectuals to reassess the aftermath of Belgian rule. This said, the period was marked by an attempt on the part of the Mobutu regime to reconfigure the country’s national identity through a process of Zairianisation. Also known as the politics of authenticity, this initiative, which was defended by official spokespersons such as Kutumbagana Kangafu, advocated not a return to precolonial world views but the promotion
of intrinsically Congolese values, languages, and cultural production. This vast programme, which combined ideas previously developed by early supporters of an African philosophy, successfully launched Congolese – Zairian – culture in Africa and beyond. Rumba musicians but also visual artists, writers, and theologians were able to benefit from this politics of authenticity and to contribute to the cultural vibrancy of Kinshasa. After the economic crises of the 1970s, however, the tenets underpinning authenticity were increasingly used to formulate chauvinistic views and foment ethnic division.

The second attitude to have emerged from this post-colonial period is altogether less dependent on the strictures of an enduring coloniality as it was, in fact, adopted to challenge the very basis of this coloniality. Its main proponents are to be found in cultural spheres, grassroots collectives, investigative journalism, and academia. If Belgium went through a period of amnesia in the first two decades or so after decolonisation, the mid-1980s, notably in the wake of the centenary of the Congo Free State in 1985, witnessed the emergence of a more dialogical environment, which elicited not only the beginning of a (at first limited) critical self-examination among Belgian intellectuals but also more productive encounters between Belgians and Africans.

The exhibition Zaire 1885–1985. Cent ans de regards belges was held at the Botanique cultural centre in Brussels in 1985 and focused on Belgian colonial propaganda and on a wide range of objects, including literature, news items, postcards, photographs, advertisements, art pieces, and everyday objects. The aim of this display was to showcase how the regards belges [Belgian perceptions] of the Congo and Congolese had developed in the previous hundred years and how these images, in turn, had created disparaging and racially abusive stereotypes that were still prevalent at the time of this exhibition, curated by the Brussels-based NGO Coopération par l’Éducation et la Culture (CEC). This event was critically important and has since generated other imagology-inspired exhibits, colloquia, and publications, which, over the years, have increasingly generated dialogues between Belgian and African figures. While focusing on the memory of the Belgian Congo and, later, on that of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the activities conducted by the CEC have predominantly been driven by an ambition to combat racism and equip the Belgian public and Belgium-based African (and Global South) diasporas with (pedagogical) tools to forge better intercultural links and cohabit in a more equitable society. Albeit not strictly speaking historical in its approach – indeed, it primarily conceives of itself as ‘observatoire des stéréotypes’ – the CEC, through its many interventions in the last four decades, has contributed to a better understanding of the deep-seated historical roots of Eurocentrism and post-colonial racism.
In this silence-breaking operation, the interventions of individual authors have been equally effective. In addition to benefitting from the critical insights of imagology and some of its most dynamic proponents – from Martine Louff to Edward Said – this new appraisal of Belgian colonialism also prioritised the idea that African experiences had to be mediated by Africans themselves. *Tango Ya Ba Noko*, a collection of Zairian testimonies on the colonial era, exemplifies this new focus on first-hand witnesses as a means to produce more reliable accounts of a past that until the beginning of the 1980s had remained largely obfuscated and shaped by the colonial doxa. This collection was a collaborative venture between a group of researchers based in Brussels and Kinshasa and published under the aegis of the Centre d’Étude et de Documentation Africaines (CEDAF)/Afrika Studie- en Documentatiecentrum (ASDOC), a group that included the most influential specialists of the period. This collection presents itself as a series of interviews of Zairians who had worked – as nurses, soldiers, priests, and clerical staff – and lived alongside their Belgian supervisors. The responses given by the interviewees offer a nuanced picture of colonial life in the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi and provide a wealth of fascinating information on racial segregation, the *évolué* status, the role of missionary education and Western medicine, and the significance of the French language in daily life. Although some of these witnesses look back nostalgically at the colonial period, it must be said that, overall, their personal stories offer grim and chilling accounts of the conditions in which the colonised were forced to live under Belgian rule. The first interviewee of this volume is none other than Paul Lomami Tshibamba, the pioneer of Congolese literature in French and feted author of *Ngando*, the magic realist novel exploring colonial Kinshasa through the prism of Kongo mythology. In his answers to the interviewer’s candid questions, Lomami Tshibamba also paints a damning picture of life under Belgian imperialism:

We realised that by utilising blacks, whom they called indigènes [natives], the missionaries and the representatives of Bula Matari worked hands in hands towards the exploitation of the country. For this enterprise to be successful, blacks had to be morally and psychologically forced into submission. For the other category of whites working in private firms, it was imperative to use coercion to control their black workers. Whenever native workers made a mistake, missionaries would be immediately informed, approach the offenders, and remind them that their negative and hostile behaviour would lead them to Hell and make God unhappy. As they knew that natives were profoundly religious, they exploited this argument to the full and almost all Sunday sermons revolved around it.
Thirty-five years after the publication of *Ngando*, a book that had been awarded the literary prize of the 1948 Brussels Colonial Fair, this statement would reiterate, in plain words, what the novel had poeticised.

The return of memory in the 1980s coincided with the rise of the witness and the proliferation of declarations – like that of Lomami Tshibamba – in which colonial times took centre stage. And this act of witnessing in the first person would increasingly pervade academic writing, shape researchers’ interventions, and inflect ‘their emotions, their investments in their life’s work, and their values’, as suggested by Aleida Assmann. V.Y. Mudimbe’s trajectory as a scholar is a point in case. Until the publication of *The Invention of Africa* in 1988, he was an *African* intellectual, that is, a scholar who had dedicated his research to the examination of the factors informing Africa’s discursive alienation. Although a groundbreaking book, *The Invention*, as acknowledged by Mudimbe himself in the introduction, was built on ‘presuppositions and hypotheses’ already developed before and on which he had been working for the previous ‘fifteen years’ from *L’Autre face du royaume* (1973) to *L’Odeur du père* (1982).

For all their pessimism and painstaking dissections of Africa’s ‘gnostic malady’, these three essays are nonetheless underpinned by a utopian project, an ambition to contribute to a better future and the creation of the Fanon-inspired ‘new man’. This oft-quoted passage, situated at the very end of *The Invention*, attests to Mudimbe’s adherence to a logic of progress:

> I believe that the geography of African gnosis also points out the passion of a subject-object who refuses to vanish. He or she has gone from the situation in which he or she was perceived as a simple functional object to the freedom of thinking of himself or herself as the starting point of an absolute discourse. It has also become obvious, even for this subject, that the space interrogated by the series of explorations in African indigenous systems of thought is not a void.

Here, Mudimbe plainly says that his archaeology of African discourses is transformative and emancipatory and provides a clear rupture from the colonial matrix. For this reason, *The Invention of Africa*, like his previous essays, is informed by the future-oriented – progressive – logic of the ‘modern time regime’, as this phrase is explored by Aleida Assmann, and specifically by this regime’s ability of ‘dramatizing and accelerating the break from the past’.

In his later essays, however, Mudimbe, the *modern* African scholar, became a *Congolese* witness. Indeed, subsequent publications are marked by a clear engagement with the Congo’s colonial past through personal memories, recurrently summoned to reflect on his own experiences as a former colonised and
This memorial exercise is extensive and touches on many aspects of his youth,\textsuperscript{56} his assimilation of the Benedictine world view,\textsuperscript{57} his retreat as a novice monk at the monastery of Gihindamuyaga in Rwanda, and his return to secular life in 1961 after disapproving of the 'scandalous' role played by the Catholic Church in the ethnic conflicts between Hutu and Tutsi in a soon-to-be independent Rwanda.\textsuperscript{58}

These memories of imperial violence, but also of cultural, religious, and linguistic acculturation during Belgian colonial rule, constitute a significant phenomenological archive, and, beyond the examples of Lomami Tshibamba and Mudimbe, it is interesting to note that since the 1990s there has been increased interest in this past, whether as lived and witnessed experience or as fictionalisation and artistic reappropriations. This process of amplified memorialisation has taken place at the expense of the modern project and its attendant delivery of a better future.\textsuperscript{59} Here the present is no longer absorbed by the future, and the management of the latter's progressive potential but is marked by a reinvestment in the Belgian imperial past understood as a cluster of unfinished stories. Progress, as a force for change, has been superseded by a focus on present inequalities, that is, on present past traces that the idea of progress itself had not been able to eradicate. As argued by Mike Savage in \textit{The Return of Inequality}, the 'importance of duration' needs to be reasserted:

This involves resisting the blandishment of an epochalism that sees the past as 'left behind'. History is not a skating rink, around which we can swoop to pick up attractive bouquets of flowers hither and thither. Instead, history has a force and a direction that cannot be reversed. Understanding our now-time means that we have to go beyond modernity's mundane differentiation of time into linear and separable blocks of past, present, and future. Recognizing the logic of capital accumulation and the build up of wealth in recent decades impresses on us that the force of the past is increasing.\textsuperscript{60}

This memorialisation has invariably been triggered by the crises faced by Central Africa in the 1990s: the disintegration and then the fall of the Mobutu regime, the Rwandan genocide, the subsequent armed conflicts generated by these two events until today, and the new scramble for Central Africa. These catastrophes, and their devastating effects in neighbouring countries such as Angola, Uganda, and Tanzania, have revealed the lingering presence of Belgian imperialism, not only in Central Africa but also in post-colonial Belgium, among Flemish- and French-speaking Belgians and Afro-Belgians from the African diaspora.\textsuperscript{61}

In the last three decades, the exploration of this past has generated a large volume of responses. In the wake of the federalisation of Belgium, a process that
started in the early 1960s and is ongoing, the country’s literary heritage has been submitted to renewed analyses and has been scrutinised to evaluate how literature, including colonial literature, has contributed to the construction of a specifically Belgian imaginary. It soon appeared that beyond erudition, and knowledge for knowledge’s sake, the reassessment of this imaginary would form the basis for more ethical reflections and formulations on colonial repentance, historical agency, and the role of the (imperial) archive both understood as ‘excision,’ as that which limits because ‘based on a set of exclusions’ and ‘excess, as unlimited, in the sense of the endless readings to which it gives rise.’ If Belgian colonialism inspired many authors, it must be pointed out that this literary activity – swept under the carpet [‘sous le boisseau’] by critics and readers – was above all conducted in French rather than in Dutch. For this reason, the available literary criticism on the francophone corpus significantly outweighs the existing scholarship on the Flemish one.

In a recently published anthology dedicated to The Congo in Flemish Literature, Luc Renders and Jeroen Dewulf remind us that ‘despite the fact that most Belgians who lived in the Congo came from Flanders, the de facto official language in the colony was French.’ This colonial literature in French and in Dutch, albeit not a monolith in terms of content and quality, said more about Belgium than its ‘putative object’ – the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi – to use Said’s words in his own description of the orientalist tradition. The instrumentalisation of the Congo by Flemish nationalists is exemplary of this tendency to tropicalise Belgian conflicts. Although they would compare their own inferior status to that of the Congolese suffering under the yoke of a colonial francophone ruling class, Flemish authors, as Renders and Dewulf argued, rarely challenged the legitimacy of the Belgian civilising mission and frequently adopted a derogatory terminology ‘to establish a hierarchy vis-à-vis the Congolese.’ The comparison served another purpose and was used as a means to ‘distinguish themselves from the nation’s French-speaking bourgeoisie. By portraying themselves as the “blacks of Belgium”, Flemish nationalists primarily dissociated themselves from the patriotic rhetoric of Belgium’s francophone elite.’ By and large, then, this colonial corpus, whether by francophone or Flemish authors, proves to be a fascinating resource to identify the main colonial and missionary discourses informing Belgian rule in Ruanda-Urundi and the Congo, examine the interaction of White and Black characters against colonial segregation, delve into Central African precolonial history, and register, more rarely it must be said, anticolonial sentiments expressed by these writers and their narrators and protagonists.

This increased interest in all things colonial was further intensified by the publication of journalistic blockbusters such as Adam Hochschild’s King Leopold’s Ghost (1998), Ludo De Witte’s The Assassination of Lumumba (1999),
and, later, David Van Reybrouck’s *Congo: the Epic History of a People* (2010). The popularity of the first two was aided by the large-scale mediatisation of the 1994 Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. Adam Hochshild’s bestseller popularised the idea of an African Holocaust at a time when the Shoah itself was submitted to systematic memorialisation in academia and beyond and across a wide range of cultural artefacts. Like the Rwandan genocide, Ludo De Witte’s book triggered a parliamentary inquiry into Belgium’s involvement in the elimination of the Congo’s first premier. As it was published in 2010, Van Reybrouck’s *Congo*, for its part, significantly benefitted from the publicity surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of Congo’s independence. While based on verifiable facts, these three books are all characterised by their authors’ literary posture. De Witte’s narrative reads like a whodunnit; Hochschild’s exploration of Leopoldian abuses is presented as a ‘story’, and Van Reybrouck’s book – even though the epithet ‘epic’ was added to the English-language title – has all the features of an *epic* history in which a first-person narrator, Van Reybrouck himself, is also involved in the historical account.

This tendency to blur the lines between story and history – to engage with experienced (lived and witnessed) histories to weave stories – is one of the main features of this period. The Rwandan genocide has elicited the publication of numerous narratives told from the perspective of first- and second-hand witnesses. The same tendency has been observed across the other countries considered in our book, where a glut of fictional works has emerged to reflect on this colonial past, its main figures, episodes, and enduring echoes in our here and now. It would be impossible to list them all, but what is striking is that, in addition to the publication of fictional accounts by acknowledged international authors such as Barbara Kingsolver, Éric Vuillard, and Mario Vargas Llosa, this surge of material on Central Africa – recent books by Lieve Joris, David Van Reybrouck, Jean Leroy, Jean-Pierre Orban, and Marcel-Sylvain Godfroid – has been driven by a new generation of post-colonial Flemish and francophone writers from Belgium.

Equally interesting are the responses produced by Central African writers, scholars, and artists, whether based in their countries of origin, in Belgium, or in the wider diaspora. Here, too, it would be impossible to be exhaustive. The indirect, direct, and often sublimated exploration of the region’s imperial past and its present resonances features highly in this production. Pie Tshibanda’s humorous but also devastatingly poignant account of his trajectory as a Congolese asylum seeker in *Un Fou noir au pays des blancs* revealed to large audiences the ravages of ordinary racism at the hands of officious Belgian bureaucrats. While adopting the stand-up comedy format, Pie Tshibanda reminds his spectators that Belgians, too, were once unwanted intruders in his native land. His
A candid account brings home the complexities of Belgo-Congolese history. Pie Tshibanda was born and bred in Kolwezi, Katanga, but his parents were originally from Kasai. In a desperate move to cling to power and avoid further political dissidence in Katanga, Mobutu, from the early 1990s onwards, manipulated public opinion and persuaded ethnic Katangese – “Katangais authentiques” – to turn against Katanga-based Luba-Kasai. This campaign led to the persecution, massacres, and forced expulsions of Luba-Kasai like Pie Tshibanda, who arrived in Belgium in 1995 to claim asylum. However, this ethnic conflict, as often in the former Belgian empire, has its roots in colonial Congo, where Baluba were enticed by the Belgian administration to migrate to Katanga to work in the province’s thriving industries. Before being forced into exile, Pie Tshibanda worked as a psychologist for the Gécamines, the company that took over the operations of the UMHK after Mobutu’s nationalisations of the mining sector in 1967.

Fiction writers from Rwanda, Congo, and, to a lesser extent, Burundi – where, however, Roland Rugero has emerged as a leading voice in this discussion – have also participated in this search for imperial traces. The Rwandan genocide, as already argued in this introduction, has been one of the major triggers of this literary explosion. A plethora of authors – Yolande Mukagasana’s, Scholastique Mukasonga’s, and Camille Karangwa’s autobiographical novels come to mind – have unearthed the colonial origins of racial hatred. In Congo, this search has gradually grown in significance. In early post-colonial fictions by writers such as Georges Ngal and V. Y. Mudimbe, there was little direct focus on the colonial period. In Giambatista Viko ou le viol du discours africain [Giambatista Viko or the Violation of the African Discourse] and L’Errance [Wandering], the discussion remained abstract and driven by the scholarly arguments that circulated among Congolese and African academics during a period – from the 1960s to the 1980s – overwhelmingly dominated by a quest for cultural authenticity and an ambition to dissect intellectual alienation and its effects on African scholars. V. Y. Mudimbe’s novels follow a similar pattern, and although they are studded with explicit references to Congo’s first and second Republics, they are largely concerned with epistemological questions in which Africa and the West, rather than Zaire and Belgium, are pitted against one another. Interestingly, the few real-life Belgian figures appearing in his novels are employed to castigate Western anthropology and the methodological deficiencies and approximations of its practitioners. In L’Écart [The Rift], Jan Vansina is mentioned as a barely disguised ‘J. Dansine’, but this reference is less about the former colonial power as it is about lampooning the West, the abstract entity continuing to wreak havoc in neocolonial Africa.
In recent narratives by Congolese authors, this Belgo-Congolese history has resurfaced more prominently. In *Kin-la-joie, Kin-la-folie* [Kin-the-Joy, Kin-the-Folly], Achille Ngoye explores the cultural, legal, and economic pitfalls associated with migration from Zaire to Belgium, an issue also broached by Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji in ‘Frisson de la mémoire’ [Memory Shiver]. In *La Dette coloniale* [The Colonial Debt], Maguy Kabamba reopens old wounds – colonial extractivism and Lumumba’s assassination – while denouncing Zairian masculinist culture and Belgium’s cynical support of Mobutu’s regime. With *Tu le leur diras* [You Will Tell Them], Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji taps into her own family history to offer a bottom-up account of Belgo-Congolese history from the early years of the CFS until the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Recently, we have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Congolese writers living ‘between continents and languages while being rooted in their own imaginary’ and producing a type of ‘literature that is neither singularly linguistic, disciplinary, or territorial’. In the past decade, the memory of Belgian extractivism has generated further literary responses, as in the case of novels by In Koli Jean Bofane, Fiston Mwanza Mujila, and Sinzo Aanza. One of the many interesting aspects of these recent novels is that they are part of a wider cultural phenomenon involving Congolese artists such as Sammy Baloji whose work as a photographer and filmmaker has overwhelmingly focused on the legacies of Belgian mining in the DRC. By recycling and creatively doc-structing colonial archives – photographs of human subjects (colonisers and colonised), (post)colonial urban spaces, and industrial sites – Baloji intimates that the spectres from the past are still roaming Congo’s dilapidated mining infrastructures and shaping Congolese imaginaries. In its directness and propensity to engage with Congo’s socio-economic history and the many images thereof, Baloji’s work echoes other experiments in DRC and Africa – artists such as Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, Michèle Magema, Freddy Tsimba, and Romuald Hazoumé come to mind – in which the distant past is a present past. Baloji’s art possesses a documentary dimension. It provides a reflection on the spaces, objects, and objectifying processes responsible for the birth of modern Congo under the Belgians and after. In this exploration – his collaboration with Filip De Boeck in *Suturing the City* comes to mind – the visual is often put into dialogue with anthropological research. His work also draws its inspirational drive from archives held at the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, a place that has contributed to Baloji’s trajectory as an artist and curator. The reappropriations of archives has been at the heart of the most daring artistic experiments of these last ten years. By curating *Congo as Fiction*, the Rietberg Museum of Zurich set out to establish a dialogue between colonial archives – photos, texts, artefacts, and sound documents – collected by the German anthropologist Hans
Himmelheber during his travels in the Congo in 1938/39 and a group of Congolese artists: ‘The exhibition shows how artists – past as well as present – critically deal with and assess the repercussions of colonialism, Christian proselytization, and global trade’. To make this encounter possible, the curators

[…] invited six contemporary artists from the Congo and the diaspora to engage critically with Himmelheber’s archives from their own perspective. Sinzo Aanza, Fiona Bobo, Michèle Magema, Yves Sambu, and David Shongo, along with Sammy Baloji (and indirectly Fiston Mwanza Mujila), participated in a dialogic process in the form of brief artistic residencies. They created artworks in reaction to the historical objects, photographs, and texts from Himmelheber; works that focus, comment on, and thereby update the older art and its acquisition as well as the archive and its origins in the context of colonization. Added to that were further works by Angali, Steve Bandoma, Hilaire Kuyangiko Balu, Aimé Mpane, Chéri Samba, Monsengo Shula and Pathy Tshindele. The artists all refer formally and in terms of content to historical art and thereby to their own cultural heritage and firmly, but in entirely different ways, confront the colonial past and the social practice of remembering as well as the exploitation and inequality persisting until today in the Congo.

With ‘Mabele Eleki Lola!’ [The Earth, Brighter than Paradise], a temporary exhibition held at the AfricaMuseum in 2021, Freddy Tsimba, the Congolese sculptor who was trained by traditional blacksmiths and master casters, also experimented with the archival resources from the colonial period. This exhibition, curated by the Congolese novelist Jean Bofane, showcased some of Tsimba’s most iconic pieces, such as his Maison Machettes [Machete House] and human bodies made of empty bullet cases, chains, and surgical scissors. Accompanied by extracts of Bofane’s forthcoming novel (Nation cannibale), in which Tsimba himself is the main character, the bulk of this exhibition focused on contemporary DRC and explored the way in which Tsimba recycles objects of death, repression, and bodily mutilation to transcend Afro-pessimism and advocate, through the transmutation operated by his metal sculptures, the life-giving power of artistic creativity. Tsimba’s repurposing of metal scraps and debris is also aimed at Christianity, this imported religion that promised paradise when, to paraphrase the ironic title of this exhibition, the earth is brighter. This onslaught on Christianity, and its attendant subjugation, is captured by an assemblage of soldered mousetraps in the shape of a crucifix but also by a sculpture made of plastic wastes and representing a decapitated pregnant woman tearing her belly open with a gigantic crucifix. These artefacts speak to colonial and post-colonial oppression, and presented alongside photographs of colonial and present-day Pentecostal churches, they
also testify to the enduring influence of the missionary enterprise in contemporary DRC: ‘Religion has always played an essential role in the Congo to control people’s minds. It erases ancestral memory and influences imaginaries.’¹²⁰

The exploration of Congo’s ancestral (Kuba) rights and cultures is also at the core of Blaise Ndala’s novel *Dans le Ventre du Congo* [In Congo’s Belly].¹²¹ Published in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, which in turn reignited the ‘Leopold Must Fall’ controversy in Belgium and beyond,¹²² this narrative examines in detail the present pastness of colonial Congo for contemporary Belgians and Congolese. The novel establishes a dialogue between different temporal strata of Belgo-Congolese history from the establishment of the CFS to the beginning of the twenty-first century. It takes the readers to precolumial Kasai, when the region was still ruled by an independent Kuba monarchy. It explores the way in which CFS agents coerced Congolese dignitaries into accepting the terms of unconscionable treaties against the backdrop of the Red Rubber scandal. It follows the trajectory of Tshala, a Kuba princess, who, after experiencing a short but passionate romantic interlude with a colonial administrator in the late 1950s, is raped by a Belgian African art dealer in Leopoldville, abducted to Belgium, and forced to impersonate the role of a primitive in the ‘native village’ of the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair.¹²³ Described by Matthew Stanard as ‘the last such show in a long line of “human zoos” in Europe and in the U.S.’,¹²⁴ this village, set at the foot of the Atomium, was erected – and staged – by the Belgians to satisfy the visitors’ quest for exoticism and to show off Belgium’s technological superiority.¹²⁵ While reluctantly performing her role, Tshala is hit by another performer and dies of her injuries. Her whereabouts and her death remain a mystery for her family in Kasai. Forty-five years after these events, Nyota Kwete, Tshala’s niece, arrives in Belgium, officially to study but also to investigate the circumstances that had led to Tshala’s disappearance. Although improbable and somewhat far-fetched, Nyota Kwete’s inquiry reconstructs the events that had for four decades been silenced and kept away from public consciousness. This inquiry is conceived as a ‘machine à remonter le temps’ [time machine].¹²⁶ It revisits a little-known episode of late colonialism, but it also reveals that contemporary Belgium – and some of its most prominent institutions such as its universities, museums, and football clubs – is still struggling to overcome structural racism and incorporate the truth of this past in the national narrative. In this investigation, the AfricaMuseum plays a central role and is presented as the very locus where the commodification and the spectacularisation of racial difference became routinised. Indeed, Nyota Kwete discovers that the town of Tervuren and, more specifically the church of Saint-Jean-l’Évangéliste, hosts, in the form of seven tombs, ‘the biggest African memorial in this country’.¹²⁷ This unofficial memorial takes Nyota Kwete back to 1897, the year when the CFS organised an international exhibition on the Congo
in what would later become the Museum of the Belgian Congo in 1910 before being renamed, after decolonisation, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, or the AfricaMuseum. While showcasing the achievements of the CFS, this event also involved the erection of a Congolese village and the forced recruitment of Congolese natives [‘indigènes’] ‘of the best possible quality’ by a team of Belgian physicians. Of the nearly 270 Congolese mobilised for this performance, seven did not survive the harsh conditions under which they were put by the exhibition curators. Their bodies were first disposed of in a mass grave, and a decade later they were transferred to the cemetery of Saint-Jean-l’Évangéliste, where they were buried – religiously – for a second time. Interestingly, when on 8 December 2018 a refurbished AfricaMuseum was officially reopened, another unofficial ceremony was organised in this church cemetery to pay tribute to these seven victims of the ‘barbarie des Belges’ [Belgian barbarism].

Despite a somewhat contrived tendency to amass improbable coincidences and accumulate reality effects – often in the form of real historical figures such as Lumumba, Mobutu, Marcel Ntsoni (aka Sony Labou Tansi), and Antoine Wendo Kolosoy crossing paths with the novel’s protagonists – Dans le Ventre du Congo provides a compelling examination of the way in which this colonial past has been swept under the carpet, ideologised, fabricated, reinvented, and memorialised since 1885. The novel also spatialises this colonial question and its legacies by focusing on Brussels and other locations in Flanders, Wallonia, Belgian Congo/DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi. This comprehensive spatialisation reflects the shape of the investigation conducted by Nyota Kwete, who in her quest for the truth is aided by DRC-based Congolese, Belgians, and Congolese from the diaspora. This ambition to reconcile actors who would have stood on the opposite sides of the colour bar is a fundamental element of this novel, which also alludes to the various attempts on part of the Belgian government to set up Truth and Reconciliation-style parliamentary inquiry commissions to determine the role of Belgium in the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi, in Lumumba’s assassination, and, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, to investigate the part played by Belgium during the colonial period. Blaise Ndala, who is also a human rights lawyer, reopens, by means of a fictional theatre play provocatively entitled Les Testicules de Tintin [Tintin’s Testicles] and written by one of the novel’s characters, the contentious question of mixed-race children fathered and invariably abandoned by the colonisers. These children – the so-called enfants métis – ‘were often held in suspicion by the [colonial] Administration’ because it was thought that they would foment ‘indigenous revolts.’ Via this play (in the novel), Ndala, then, reminds his readers of an obvious but still neglected fact: that truth and reconciliation cannot be achieved in the absence of equality. While capturing the zeitgeist of the early 2020s, this novel also demands moral and material reparations from the former colonial power.
This issue of the *enfants métis* is yet another example of the present past-ness of the colonial period. Between 1945 and 1960, it was legally acceptable, in the Belgian Congo and in Ruanda-Urundi, to forcefully remove mixed-raced children from their families and send them to religious orphanages where they would be fostered and kept away from their biological parents. Nowadays, this coercive framework would be regarded as a gross violation of one’s human rights. In 2021, five women who were submitted to this treatment and abused by their carers between 1948 and 1961 sued the Belgian state for committing a crime against humanity. The Belgian government officially apologised in 2019 for taking more than fifteen thousand infants from their African mothers but the five plaintiffs lost their case. Although recognising that the situation in which they were put is ‘unacceptable’ from today’s perspective, the court ruled that it would be legally impossible to prosecute the Belgian state for acts that were not regarded as illegal during the colonial period. This issue of the *enfants métis*, then, is a useful reminder that while the colonial past continues to shape our post-colonial present, this present is rarely equipped to hold the past to account.

As argued in this introduction, the past three decades have provided countless examples of symbolic acts and performances to come to terms with the colonial past and its legacies. The latest episodes of this unfinished history include the visit of the Belgian royal couple, King Philippe I and Queen Mathilde of Belgium, to the DRC in June 2022 but also the return of Lumumba’s tooth to his relatives and the welcoming of Congolese authorities at the Palais d’Egmont on 20 June 2022. At this official ceremony, the current Belgian prime minister, Alexander De Croo, apologised for the colonial crimes committed under Belgian rule and said that ‘colonialism – in Congo, Burundi and Rwanda – has shamefully tarnished the history of our country’. One needs to point out that this important act of restitution was held in the very building where the Belgo-Congolese ‘Table ronde’ conference took place in the run-up to Congolese independence in 1960. It remains to be seen whether these apologies will herald a new era between Central Africa and Belgium. Although the memorial process examined in this book has released a much-needed catharsis, it has offered little in the way of actual reparations. This partial failure to compensate the victims and their descendants is, as will be shown now, one of the running threads of this edited volume.

**Structure and Objectives**

This book assesses the resonance of the colonial library (as this notion was understood by Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa*). Sixty years after political decolonisation, this archive still haunts our post-colonial present. In fact, this
post-colonial present is a present past or, better, a ‘hot past’ (to use the expression coined by Aleida Assmann): a past, as she argues, that ‘does not automatically vanish by virtue of the sheer passing of time but stays present in the “bloodlands” of Europe and in other places all over the world.’

This edited volume deals with grave issues but refrains from drawing mournful conclusions. It will also provide the opportunity to delve into the way in which artists, scholars and scientists, writers, and activists have challenged the primacy of the colonial library to develop new perspectives, produce new knowledge, and critically reappropriate cultures that were once silenced, stereotyped, or misrepresented by the advocates of the colonial library. Of course, this process of reappropriation has not happened as dualistically, but it is interesting to observe that colonialism and its major sites (of memory) and actors often provide the basis for novel historiographical perspectives on the countries examined in this book.

As illustrated by existing archives such as Æquatoria and Mukanda, the available bibliography on ‘Belgian’ Central Africa is immense. This book will draw on these archives and, as suggested in this introduction, engage with some of the major publications on the subject, not only by Belgian scholars but also by key (established and emerging) international figures from Central Africa and beyond. Of course, it would be impossible to name them all, but the important point here is that the cohort of scholars referred to in this short introduction testifies to the good health, and sheer multidisciplinarity, of a field that, for want of a better appellation, I would call ‘Central African Studies’.

There are many books on the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi and their development before and after Belgian imperialism. There are, however, very few books (and none in English to my knowledge) on the memory and memorialisation of this historical process across a whole region including the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Belgium. There is a plethora of recent (and sometimes exacting) publications on the Belgian Congo. This book partly coincides with the brief pursued by the editors (Bambi Ceuppens, Vincent Viaene, and David Van Reybroeck) of Congo in België: koloniale Cultuur in de metropool (2009), as I am also of the view that Belgium and its former colonies have become what they are because of reciprocal influences that can be traced in politics, architecture, popular culture, art, museal practices, missionary proselytism, and consumption habits. Their respective histories have been shaped by a bidirectional process (‘tweericthingsverkeer’) whose evolving manifestations are pervasive. Our edited volume also overlaps with Matthew Stanard’s The Leopard, the Lion and the Cock (2019) in that it is our intention here to identify colonial lieux de mémoire. However, Stanard focuses overwhelmingly on colonial monuments in Belgian public spaces, whereas this volume’s contributors are interested in
examining not only the tangible but also the more elusive traces of this past in Belgium and beyond. Our book reflects some of the objectives and scholarly pursuits of *Koloniaal Congo: een geschiedenis in vragen/Le Congo Colonial: une histoire en questions*, edited by Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (2020). Indeed, we also aim to approach this imperial past from a multidisciplinary perspective and read this history through a wide range of objects pertaining to politics, science, development, and education. However, there is in *Unfinished Histories: Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium* a more sustained focus on culture (architecture, literature, performance, cinema, photography, and art) and an ambition to approach these cultural domains not only in Congo but also in the other countries included in our brief. The scholarship on Rwanda and Burundi is equally vast, but our book is predicated on the belief that the examination of these two countries offers fresh insights into the strategies adopted by educators, novelists, the media, and the Catholic Church to appraise their past accountability and develop a set of more ethical responses to undermine a still pervasive ‘colonial power matrix’. This book, finally, endeavours to situate these debates within a trans-African and transnational context, and it is hoped that this focus on Belgium and its former colonies will also provide the opportunity to reflect on the multifaceted ramifications of decolonisation for a variety of fields and actors.

Focusing on Belgian colonialism as a lived but also remembered experience, this book will be divided into five thematic parts.

Part one explores ‘The Decolonisation of Belgian Public Institutions and Regimes of Knowledge’ and pays particular attention to the way in which Belgium’s colonial past is presented and narrated by public bodies and institutions such as schools, museums, and state-funded publishers. In his chapter, Dónal Hassett offers an analysis of the recent overhaul of the AfricaMuseum. Although inspired by the methodologies of the ‘New Museology’, it is argued here that the museum leadership only paid lip service to the decolonial possibilities of this curatorial school of thought and did not quite yield its former – colonial – authority. The new exhibit denounces colonial violence but does not address its deep-seated epistemic structure. The AfricaMuseum leadership also failed to empower the experts from the African diaspora called upon to participate in the renovation project and to initiate a credible programme of restitution of African artefacts. Nicki Hitchcott’s contribution focuses on the representation of post-1994 Rwanda in three novels by francophone Belgian writers: Huguette de Broqueville’s *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant* (1997), Bernard Dan’s *Le Garçon du Rwanda* (2014), and Joseph Ndwanjije’s *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* (2018 [2006]). Belgium’s inability to acknowledge its historic responsibility for the
1994 genocide against the Tutsi is investigated through these authors’ narrative choices and tropes. By providing an analysis of the strategies of denial, obfuscation, and avoidance adopted by these novelists, it is demonstrated that Belgium's imperial gaze has survived well into the twenty-first century. Next, Catherine Gilbert’s chapter examines the space dedicated to colonial history in Belgium’s school curricula. While establishing key differences between Flemish and French-speaking regions, Gilbert argues that the shortage of educational materials is particularly acute with regards to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Although valuable teaching initiatives have been developed, notably with the support of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, it is argued here that recent attempts at decolonising knowledge and pedagogical practices often lack cohesion, as they invariably depend on the goodwill and energy of isolated individuals or memory networks like Ibuka and RCN Justice & Démocratie.

Part two examines the ‘International Ramifications of Belgian Colonialism and Its Aftermath’. Robert Burroughs’s focus on Britain’s little-documented support of the Congo Free State runs counter to many facile accounts in which Britain is invariably presented as the unbiased champion of the humanitarian campaign that precipitated Leopold’s demise. By delving into the development of the Congo Institute in Colwyn Bay (Wales), a school that set out from 1889 to 1911 to evangelise young Africans freshly arrived from Africa, this chapter shows that this institute, while complicit in the violence and abuse that had brought Leopold into international disrepute, also became a hotbed for early pan-Africanists. Yvette Hutchinson’s chapter focuses on the notion of disavowed memory. She shows here that political activists and playwrights have increasingly interrogated colonial monuments and histories to combat amnesia and critically engage with the most contested aspects of European and Belgian imperialism. Colonial archives – whether the equestrian statue of Leopold II in Ostend or the 1913 Ghent world exhibition – have been seized upon to performatively re-engage with past and present violence. In this discussion, Hutchinson brings into dialogue the Flemish-Moroccan theatre maker Chokri Ben Chikha and Brett Bailey, the South African performance artist and enfant terrible. Albert Kasanda, for his part, analyses the emergence of Ciluba as a written language under Belgian rule. While serving a logic of imperial domination, the transcription of Ciluba accelerated the entry of Luba culture into modernity. After independence, French retained its position as official language, but the four main national languages – Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo, and Ciluba – were accorded an increasing role in culture and education. By focusing on Ndi muluba (2004) by François Kabasele, Kasanda identifies the strategies adopted by Luba intellectuals to reconcile their traditional culture with the demands of a globalised world.
Part three is dedicated to the persistence of ‘Imperial Practices and Power Dynamics’ in the regions explored in this book. Caroline Williamson Sinalo’s contribution focuses on the 2020 presidential elections in Burundi and analyses the narrative and discursive strategies adopted by four media outlets: Radio Télévision Nationale du Burundi, SOS Médias Burundi, La Libre Belgique, and Le Soir, the two major francophone Belgian broadsheets. These elections, which took place against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resurgence of ethnic tensions, offer an ideal terrain to identify how Belgian (neo)colonialism and the main religious, racial, and medical prejudices underpinning this enterprise are remembered but also obfuscated now by Burundian and Belgian journalists. Next, Reuben Loffman’s chapter explores colonial architecture in present-day Kongolo (south-eastern DRC), a town that played a crucial role when the colony’s railway network was developed in the early twentieth century. Via the notion of ‘imperial ruination’ (Laura A. Stoler), it is shown here that Kongolo’s former colonial administrative and ecclesiastical buildings are in a state of utter dilapidation and have continued to dynamically shape economic and social hierarchies. These architectural traces are a living archive enabling us now to assess the enduring influence of the Catholic Church and the DRC government’s inability to invest in its hinterland. Sarah Arens focuses on the long-term impact of Belgian colonial land management in Central Africa and the enduring stereotypes generated by this process. She demonstrates here that Belgium was prompt at developing agrarian and agronomical sciences to exploit its overseas territories in Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. Two main scientific figures – Edmond Leplae and Emile de Wildeman – are favoured in this analysis to investigate how Belgian agrarian sciences imposed new paradigms and disrupted local epistemologies and farming practices. In a context dominated by evolutionist theses, African farming was pitted against the project of agricultural modernisation implemented by the Belgian colonisers. In her chapter, Chantal Gishoma examines the legacy of Alexis Kagame. She shows that he was, throughout his career as a Catholic priest, scholar, and poet, tirelessly devoted to the celebration of the poetic and conceptual resources of Kinyarwanda, Rwandan dynastic history, and culture. In this exercise, he advocated modern progress and combat the most Eurocentric aspects of modernity. Although a contested figure, notably for his explicit support of the Hamitic hypothesis, Gishoma shows here that Kagame is a crucial character to understand Belgo-Rwandan politico-cultural entanglements from the colonial period until now.

Part four will develop further the literary threads woven by Hitchcott, Gilbert, and Hutchison in the previous sections but focus more specifically on the ‘Trans-African Entanglements’ elicited by literary activity in DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi. Sky Herington examines the shadowy presence of Belgian colo-
nialism in Sony Labou Tansi’s writing. The selected texts, a short story and two unpublished plays written between 1970 and 1984, offer insights into the continuing racial, architectural, and spatial legacies of Belgian imperialism in Leopoldville/Kinshasa. By delving into Sony’s ability to summon significant figures (Lumumba) and historical episodes (the Katangese secession) and blur the divide between past, present, and future, this piece demonstrates that Sony’s representations of urban spaces, while revealing the enduring influence of neocolonial violence, are also means to assert Congo’s cultural creativity. In her contribution, Maëline Le Lay focuses on the landscapes of the Great Lakes Region. Through narratives by V. Y. Mudimbe, Antoine Ruti, and Saverio Nai-giziki, Le Lay demonstrates that the representation of natural and domesticated landscapes is highly significant from a political perspective. The landscape, whether walked, experienced, or imagined, is an active entity that is summoned to re-enact the past and decipher the toponymic territorialisation that underpinned the imperial conquest in Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. Some iconic loci – the garden, the mission, and the road or railroad – are also used by these authors to critique colonial violence and misappropriations. Hannah Grayson, for her part, focuses on Gaël Faye’s bestselling Petit pays [Small Country] (2016) and analyses how this text explores systemic injustice in Burundi in the period leading to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Via the notion of ‘implicated subject’ (Michael Rothberg), Grayson demonstrates that this novel blurs the divide between the ontologically fixed notions of guilt and innocence. By focusing on the main character’s dual-narrative perspective – as a child and as an adult – this chapter offers a complex picture of the genocide and shows that actors only indirectly implicated in acts of violence can also be viewed as culpable.

Part five examines the ‘Emergence of Diasporic Agents’ in the realm of culture and in a context dominated by a dynamic of antagonistic exchanges between the West and the Global South. In her chapter, Bambi Ceuppens highlights a paradox. She explores the enduring influence of ‘Congoisms’, the demeaning stereotypes whereby the Congo is reduced to the ‘heart of darkness’. But she also reveals the formidable creativity of its artists and Rumba musicians. She opposes the ahistorical ‘authentic’ art developed under Mobutu to the performative open-endedness of pieces produced by self-taught artists such as Cheri Samba. By exploring post-Mobutu era art in a global context, this analysis underscores the rise of a new breed of artists such as Kiri Katembo and Gosette Lubondo who, while engaging with the country’s (post)colonial reality, often eschew realism. Matthias De Groof brings out the parallels between two documentaries shot in the Virunga Park: The Masters of the Congo Jungle (1958), a high-budget film produced under the patronage of Leopold III, and Mother Nature (2020), a short directed by Maisha Maene under the aegis of Yole!Africa, a Goma-based
NGO and cultural collective. Although critical of colonialism, which is seen as environmentally detrimental, *The Masters* remained tethered to the tropes that had been used to promote progress. *Mother Earth*, on the other hand, engages more directly with the social, cultural, and ecological ravages caused by (post) colonial extractivism in this part of DRC. Finally, in my own contribution, I focus on two novels: Sinzo Aanza’s *Généalogie d’une banalité* (2015) and Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s *Tram 83* (2014). I will ascertain how these two texts explore the memorial aftermath of former colonial sites such as the ‘cordon sanitaire’, Stanley’s Congolese railway projects, extractivism, and, specifically, contemporary ‘creusage’ (artisanal ore mining). In this chapter I will also argue that these sites are employed by these two Congolese polymaths to conduct a reflection on the novel as a genre, assess its limits, and probe its intermedial possibilities and ability to build connections with music and the visual arts.
Notes

1. ’Post-colonial’ is used in a chronological meaning here and refers to the period after the political independence and the official demise of Belgian colonial rule in the region. ’Postcolonial’, on the other hand, is not strictly linked to chronology. One can argue, for example, that Aimé Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal [Notebook of a Return to My Native Land], albeit first published in 1939, i.e. in the heyday of French imperialism, was ’postcolonial’ because its author was able to envisage a future after colonialism.


3. On this figure who was, like Lumumba, assassinated in mysterious circumstances and with the logistical support of Belgium, see Ludo de Witte, Moord in Burundi: België en de liquidatie van premier Louis Rwagasore (Antwerp: EPO, 2021).


22. Luc Tuymans’s artistic reexamination of Belgium’s colonial past is perhaps one of the most powerful examples from the post-colonial generation. On his work, see Alisson Bisschop, ‘L’Histoire coloniale de la Belgique exposée à Venise: Luc Tuymans et la série Mwana Kitoko (Beautiful White Man),’ Histoire de l’Art, 80.1 (2017), 141–52.
23. This reflects my own experience: in the 1920s, my grandparents moved to Tshikapa where my own father was born just before the Second World War.
26. This absence is well documented. See also: Herman Van Goethem, ‘Foreword by Herman Van Goethem, Rector University of Antwerp’, in Boons and Collard (eds.), Congoville, pp. 8–10 (p. 8).
29. Ibid., p. 852.
39. See ‘A propos’ (cec-ong.org) [accessed 22 September 2021].
41. See the special issue – 'Ecrire pour le Rwanda' – edited by the CEC – in *Intersections*, 2 (2014) and published to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide.

42. Observatoire des stéréotypes (cec-ong.org) [accessed 22 September 2021].


46. Such as Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, Benoît Verhaegen, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, V. Y. Mudimbe, Jean-Luc Vellut, Jean Stengers, Crawford Young, Buaka Tulu Kia Mphansu, Illunga Kabongo, Laurent Monnier, and Jean Van Lierde, among many others.


57. Ibid., p. 94.

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93. See Juvénal Ngorwanubusa, La Littérature de langue française au Burundi, preface by Marc Quaghebeur (Brussels: Archives & Musée de la Littérature, 2013).


96. G. Ngal, Giambatista Viko ou le viol du discours africain (Lubumbashi: Alpha-Omega, 1975).


98. I have explored this question in V. Y. Mudimbe, Undisciplined Africanism (Brussels: Archives & Musée de la Littérature, 2013), pp. 83–106.


103. Maguy Kabamba, La Dette coloniale (Montreal: Éditions Humanitas, 1994).


115. CONGO AS FICTION – Museum Rietberg [accessed 3 December 2021].


117. See the catalogue of this exhibition: In Koli Jean Bofane, with Pascal Blanchard, Henry Bunjoko and Bogumil Jewsiewicki, Freddy Tsimba: Mabele Eleki Lolo! La Terre Plus Belle Que Le Paradis! (Brussels: Kate’Art Éditions, 2020).


120. Ibid.


122. See University removes link to colonialist | News [The Times [accessed 6 December 2021].


124. Stanard, The Leopard, the Lion and the Cock, p. 63.


127. Ibid., p. 294.

128. I have examined the genesis of this institution in the following book: La Mesure de l’autre. Afrique subsaharienne et roman ethnographique de Belgique et de France (1918–1940) (Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 2007); see chapter I, ‘Savoirs Ethnographiques et fictions d’empire’. See also Maarten Coutteyn, Congo tentoongesteld: een

129. Ndala, Dans le ventre du Congo, p. 293.

130. Ibid., p. 294.


133. Martine Dubuisson, ‘Une Commission parlementaire sur le passé colonial belge dès la rentrée’, Le Soir, 18 June 2020, Une commission parlementaire sur le passé colonial belge dès la rentrée – Le Soir [accessed 3 February 2021].


136. ’RD Congo: 5 femmes métisses déboutées par un tribunal belge après avoir porté plainte pour crime contre l’humanité’, Le Soir, 8 December 2021, RD Congo: 5 femmes métisses déboutées par un tribunal belge après avoir porté plainte pour crime contre l’humanité – Le Soir [accessed 8 December 2021].

137. Ceremonie teruggave stoffelijke resten Lumumba – Cérémonie de restitution de la dépouille de Lumumba – YouTube [accessed 22 June 2022].


142. Ceuppens et al., Congo in België, pp. 14–21.


144. A plan of restitution is, however, now being mooted by the Belgian Government and Congolese partners such as André Yoka, the general director of Congo’s Institut National des Arts. See Véronique Kiesel, https://www.lesoir.be/408568/article/2021-11-25/kinshasa-applaudit-la-volonte-belge-de-rendre-au-congo-des-objets-traditionnels, 25 November 2021 [accessed 25 November 2021].