For every activist, researcher, family member and friend guided by a commitment to justice

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Mobilizing Memory for Racial Justice in Belgium's 'Decolonial Moment' (2010 – 2021)

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List of Abbreviations

ASBL	Association Sans But Lucratif
AYO	African Youth Organization
BCR	Brussels-Capital Region
CaCoBuRwa	Collectif d'Associations Congolaises, Burundaises et Rwandaises de Belgique
CADTM	Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes Illégitimes
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CCAEB	Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Europe et en Belgique
CdH	Christian Democratic Party
CMCLD	Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations
COCOF	Commission Communautaire Française
COMRAF	Comité de Concertation MRAC-Associations Africaines
CRAN	Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France
CRDCB	Research Centre on the Decolonization of the Belgian Congo
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ENAR	European Network Against Racism
GFAIA	Groupement des Femmes Africaines Inspirantes et Actives
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INTAL	International Action for Liberation

IYPAD	International Year for People of African Descent
KFC	Kung Fu Clan
MNC	Mouvement National Congolais
MR	Mouvement Réformateur
MRAX	Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie
MSA	Memory Studies Association
NV-A	Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PALU	Parti Lumumbiste Unifié
PS	Parti Socialiste
PTB	Parti du Trvail de Belgique
RMCA	Royal Museum for Central Africa
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
ULB	Université Libre de Bruxelles
UN	United Nations
UNDPAD	UN Decade for People of African Descent
UNIA	Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities
UNIKIN	University of Kinshasa
WGEPAD	Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent

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Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

- Audre Lorde, Sister/Outsider (1984)

Introduction

On 7 June 2020, amid a global pandemic, over 10,000 people took to the streets in Belgium's capital, Brussels. Under the slogan 'Black Lives Matter', they gathered in front of the city's Palace of Justice to protest racism and police violence.[1] Part of a global wave of protests following the murder of George Floyd, their gathering marked a historic moment in the history of anti-racism in Belgium. For the first time, a protest organized by grassroots Afrodescendant organizations mobilized such a large public.[2] Smaller protests took place in various other cities in Belgium.[3] All were expressions of solidarity with demonstrators in the United States, who had taken to the streets in the preceding weeks to condemn the police violence that led to George Floyd's death. Simultaneously, they were a strong indictment of structural racism in Belgian society. The fact that thousands felt compelled to take to the streets in the wake of a strict lockdown underscores the urgency with which the fight against racism had been placed on the public agenda in the preceding decade. The public debate that followed centred on police violence in Belgium, which is known to disproportionately affect racialized individuals from all minorities.[4] Importantly, accusations of police violence were part of a broader set of political claims against structural racism in Belgium, which activists, experts, and opinion

[1] Barbara Moens, 'Thousands Protest Racism in Brussels as U.S. Movement Sweeps Europe', *Politico*, 6 July 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/07/thousands-protest-racism-in-brussels-as-us-movement-sweeps-europe-306081.

[2] This dissertation deliberately uses the term 'Afrodescendant' to refer to the political articulation of a shared sense of connection to the African continent and shared experience of racialization. The notion does not foreclose that actors in this study can, on an individual level, cite a vast variety of self-identifications (e.g. Afro-Belgian, Belgo-Congolese, Afro-European, Pan-African, 'Noir.e', 'black', immigrant). I use 'Afrodescendant' to refer not to such individual identifications but to a collective political subject in a context of racial injustice. I am inspired by, among others, Camilla Hawthorne's use of the notion. See Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Cornell University Press, 2022), xvii.

[3] Marjan Justaert and Kubra Mayda, 'Kleine manifestaties tegen racisme in Gent en Brussel verlopen rustig', *De Standaard*, 1 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200601_04977405; Anouk Torbeyns, 'Tot 700 betogers op Black Lives Matter-protest in Antwerpen', *De Standaard*, 6 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200606_04983696.

[4] Ligue des Droits Humains (LDH), *État des droits humains en Belgique. Rapport 2023*' (Edgar Szoc, 2024), 32, https://www.liguedh.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/EDH_2023_WEB.pdf.

makers directly linked to Belgium's lack of reckoning with its colonial past.[5] Consequently, Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka identified a public reckoning with Belgium's colonial past as a 'necessity' in the demands of the Black Lives Matter protesters.[6]

This observation renders the protests of 7 June 2020 a symbol of how, between 2010 and 2021, colonial memory became central to the repertoires and claims of a growing number of Afrodescendant mobilizations around race and racism in Belgium. Public demands for the 'contextualization' or removal of colonial monuments increased, as well as demands for official apologies for the colonial past, historical truth, the restitution of colonial collections and human remains, and a broad scale of reparative and anti-racism measures. Due to the remarkable growth, since 2010, of Afrodescendant associations that linked their claims for racial equality to colonial memory, various scholars have designated the 2010 decade as a pivotal point in the history of Afrodescendant activism in Belgium.[7] Whereas Afrodescendant mobilizations for racial justice in the 1990s centred around the notions of recognition, citizenship, and 'presentist' demands, a growing number of mobilizations since 2010 have adopted a pronounced 'historical dimension', linking Afrodescendant emancipation to measures aimed at reckoning with Belgium's colonial past.[8] Activists transformed colonial monuments in public spaces into 'platforms for dissent', using them as backdrops for artistic interventions and catalysts for spreading subversive historical narratives.[9] In parallel with this 'new wave' of anti-racist activism, the decade between 2010 and 2021 saw the breakthrough of decolonial claims for memorial justice into the mainstream.[10] Numerous cultural and political institutions developed strategies to address colonial memory in the public sphere or 'decolonize' their policies, claiming to respond to Afrodescendant grievances. Both developments – the proliferation of anti-racist demands centred on colonial memory and the institutionalization of 'decolonization' as a policy tool – lead this dissertation to characterize 2010–2020 as a 'decolonial moment' in Belgium. During this moment, an increasing number of audiences and public discussions in the media began to view engagement with colonial memory as an essential part of the struggle

[5] Marc Reynebeau, 'Sokkel onder Leopold II begint te wankelen', *De Standaard*, 11 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200610_04987750.

[6] Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka, 'Les Afrodescendants Belges et la question de la reconnaissance', *The Conversation*, 3 November 2020, http://theconversation.com/les-Afrodescendants-belges-et-la-question-de-la-reconnaissance-148841.

[7] Sarah Demart, *La fiction postraciale Belge: Antiracisme Afrodescendant, féminisme et aspirations décoloniales* (Editions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2025), 7; Sibo Kanobana, 'Black Brussels', in *Mapping Black Europe : Monuments, Markers, Memories*, ed. Olive Vasell and Natasha A. Kelly (Transcript Verlag, 2023), 49.

[8] Afrodescendant mobilizations in the 1990s were highly varied but were characterized by a process of linking various demands into a common, transnational, Pan-African discourse, coupled with the creation of federations to unify different grassroots associations. See Nicole Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State: "Pan-African" Associations and the Making of an "African Community" in Belgium', *African Diaspora* 3, no. 1 (2010): 159–81.

[9] Ann Rigney, 'Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change', *Studies on National Movements* 9, no. 1 (2022): 20.

[10] Nadia Fadil and Marco Martiniello, for example, identify the emergence of decolonial claims as a 'new development' in the history of Belgian anti-racism. See Nadia Fadil and Marco Martiniello, 'Racisme et antiracisme en Belgique', *Fédéralisme – Régionalisme*, no. 20 (2020), 8.

for racial emancipation. But how and why exactly has 'memory' been linked to racial justice by the actors who put it on the political agenda over the past decade? What exactly is the appeal of history and memory for 'new' anti-racisms' political claim-making? And what do decolonial activist articulations of memorial justice teach us about mnemonic policies developed during Belgium's decolonial moment?

Decolonial Memory Activism[11]

This dissertation asks how and why Afrodescendant anti-racist mobilizations between 2010 and 2021 have articulated the link between memory, on the one hand, and racial justice, on the other.[12] Research on decolonial Afrodescendant mobilizations in the past decade is limited and fragmented. On the one hand, there is the literature on colonial memory in Belgium. Challenging 'colonial aphasia' in the mainstream, diverse authors have mapped the many material traces of colonialism and 'colonial culture' in Belgium.[13] These works generally focus

[11] The notions of decolonization and decoloniality encompass 'a plethora of meanings, ambiguities, conflicting memories, and competing narratives'; Jan C. Jansen and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer (Princeton University Press, 2017), viii. Historians typically understand decolonization as the historical process through which former colonies achieved political independence from foreign rule. Yet anti-colonial resistance movements around the world have drawn attention to the enduring economic, social, and cultural effects of colonization, revealing how this process remains incomplete. In the context of Belgian colonial rule in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, one can point to the lasting influence of Belgian neocolonial economic interests on political developments well beyond formal independence. In Belgium itself, a persistent 'colonial culture' continues to shape postcolonial relations, visible in the metropole's visual and cultural landscape, where nostalgic imagery still presents colonial rule in largely positive terms and colonial ideas about racialized others continue to foster stereotypes and racist depictions of Black bodies. At the same time, racially structured inequalities persist in access to residence permits, well-paying jobs, and housing. In this research, I use the noun 'decolonization' and the adjective 'decolonial' broadly to refer to resistance against this wide array of contemporary colonial legacies – both on the African continent and in Europe. I use the term 'postcolonial' in two distinct, but related ways. First, I use it to refer to the period following the political independence of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. While I am aware that the prefix 'post-' may performatively suggest a clean break from colonial rule – and that some critics see this as implying a world free of colonialism – I argue that for historians, it remains important to distinguish between periods. Political, economic, and administrative forms of colonial oppression have evolved over time, and the term 'postcolonial' does not have to suggest that colonial injustice belongs to the past; rather, it enables us to trace its continuities across shifting historical forms. Second, I use 'postcolonial' to denote the academic and intellectual tradition concerned with theorizing the lasting effects of colonialism on former colonies and their peoples. Finally, I use the term 'anti-colonialism' in this research to refer to political, social, and ideological resistance against colonial rule – before and after formal decolonization – and to the movements, actions, and ideas that have sought to challenge imperial domination and promote independence, self-determination, and cultural recognition.

[12] Although technically no longer a decade, I chose the period 2010–2021 because this research encompasses an activist campaign that began in 2020 and continued well into 2021 (cf. Chapter 7).

[13] 'Colonial aphasia', a term borrowed from Ann Laura Stoler, refers to a society's inability or unwillingness to speak coherently about its colonial past, demonstrating gaps, silences, and evasions in how colonialism is remembered. Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France', *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (2011): 121–56.

on the many *lieux de mémoire* in Belgium: colonial monuments and street names in public space, and the representations of colonialism and racialized bodies in literature, museums, art, education, media, and overall public discourse.[14] Absolutely essential for mapping Belgium's postcolonial memoryscape, this literature simultaneously tends to be disconnected from the variety of communities that shape, claim, contest, or challenge mnemonic representations – sometimes resulting in homogenizing or reifying representations of postcolonial memory claims within the diverse African diasporas in Belgium. On the other hand, there is the still limited and fragmented literature on Afrodescendant presence in Belgium. Pioneering work here was done by scholars of migration, sociologists, and anthropologists embedded in Afrodescendant *milieux de mémoire*, focusing on their manifold migration trajectories, life narratives, and political claims, especially since the 1990s.[15] Together with the slow emergence of Black studies in Belgium, this nascent literature is slowly recognizing the multitude of Afrodescendant actors that have publicly proliferated and their variety of political claims.[16] Moving away from the mere representations or 'sites' of colonial memory, this literature builds

[14] *Lieux de mémoire* is a concept coined by French historian Pierre Nora in the 1980s, primarily but not exclusively referring to material 'sites of memory', such as monuments, museums, anniversaries, symbols, memorials, flags, and so on, 'where memory crystalizes and secretes itself'. Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), 7. For examples of scholarship on Belgium's colonial *lieux de mémoire*, see Matthew Stanard's impressive works on Belgian colonial propaganda and collective memory: Matthew G. Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2019). I can also cite the work of Bambi Ceuppens, Vincent Viaene, David Van Reybrouck, Davy Verbeke, Marte Van Hassel, and Idesbald Goddeeris, who have mapped material traces of colonialism, revealing an ongoing 'colonial culture' in Belgium. Bambi Ceuppens et al., *Congo in België: Koloniale Cultuur in de Metropool* (Leuven University Press, 2009); Idesbald Goddeeris and Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, 'Postcolonial Collective Memory Cultures in Europe. A Fragmented, Divided and National-Bound Landscape: An Introduction', in *Colonialism and Decolonization in National Historical Cultures and Memory Politics in Europe: Modules for History Lessons*, ed. Uta Fenske et al. (Peter Lang, 2015), 201–3; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Congo in onze navel. De omgang met het koloniale verleden in België en zijn buurlanden', *Ons Erfdeel*, no. 1 (2011), 40–49; Davy Verbeke, 'Koloniale dagen en monumenten in Gent: de Congoster voor gesneuvelde "Congopioniers" (1936) en de buste van koning Leopold II (1955) in het Zuidpark', *@rchieflink (Gent)* 21, no. 3 (2021): 5–7; Marte Van Hassel, 'Het koloniale mo(nu)ment. Richting een hedendaags alternatief voor het Belgische koloniale erfgoed' (Master diss., Ghent University, 2022).

[15] I understand *milieux de mémoire* in this context as the social, cultural, everyday practices and environments that shape how communities relate to the past, beyond material 'sites' of memory, but also quite literally the social 'circles' that are bearers of memories. Key works in this tradition include: Véronique Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de colonialité dans l'art et la culture. Faire exister un monde noir à Bruxelles' (PhD diss., Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2023); Demart, *La fiction postraciale Belge*; Pascale Jamoulle and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil* (Editions Academia, 2011); Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, ed., *Migrations subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique. A la croisée des regards* (L'Harmattan, 2014).

[16] Important in this respect has been the two-day colloquium titled 'Black Studies in Europe: A Transnational Dialogue', organized at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) at the initiative of Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti in 2017. While I was writing this dissertation, a younger generation of scholars at the ULB took the initiative to nurture the academic discussion on race and racialization in Belgium through a lecture series titled 'Critical Approaches to Race'. On the emergence of Black studies in Belgium, see also Nicole Grégoire et al., 'Troubles to Define. The Ambiguous Field of Black Studies in Belgium', in *Black Studies in Europe: An Anthology of Soil and Seeds*, ed. Nicole Grégoire et al. (Northwestern University Press, 2025).

on post- and decolonial theorizing to demonstrate colonial continuities in Belgium's contemporary racial grammar.[17]

Though implicitly present, the category of 'memory' as such is either not a central concern in this literature or is taken at face value, without a theoretical unpacking of the various ways – which memories? which modalities of remembering? why? – in which colonial memory has become 'the rallying cry'[18] for a multitude of anti-racist mobilizations in recent years.[19] Given the centrality of memory in the repertoires and claim-making of these movements, it is remarkable that no study has yet examined decolonial mobilizations of the past decade through the lens of memory studies. This study takes on the task of specifically examining the role of memory in Afrodescendant anti-racisms in the past decade.[20] To do so, I approach their mobilizations as examples of decolonial 'memory activism'. The concept of memory activism broadly refers to the diverse ways in which memory and activism intersect. The notion has recently gained considerable traction within the broader field of memory studies – a scholarly development I will elaborate further below.[21]

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[17] 'Racial grammar' is a notion coined by Étienne Balibar, but I borrow it here from Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016), 23.

[18] Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing the University: New Directions', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 15, no. 1 (2016), 32.

[19] In 2014, Jacinthe Mazzocchetti suggested that approaching postcolonial questions through a 'rhetoric of conflicts of memory' obfuscates a proper understanding of Afrodescendants' demands for recognition and dignity. Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'Introduction: Migrations subsahariennes et "condition noire" en Belgique', in Mazzocchetti, *Migrations subsahariennes*, 14.

[20] 'Memory' is a notoriously elusive thing to define. In this dissertation, I understand 'memory' as not limited to the actual act of remembering but simply a contemporary relationship to the past. This relationship can take many forms: cognitive, emotional, cultural, aesthetic, nostalgic, scientific, and so on. This approach resonates with Herman Paul's conceptualization of 'relations to the past', based on Mark Day's work. From this perspective, I consider 'history' to be a form of memory as well – a particular way of relating to the past shaped by disciplinary methods, scientific expertise, and truth claims. See Herman Paul, 'Relations to the Past: A Research Agenda for Historical Theorists', *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (2015): 450–58.

[21] With its object of study so difficult to define, memory studies as a disciplinary field is equally hard to delineate. Broadly speaking, the field focuses on the social and cultural processes through which memory is represented, communicated, and transmitted, as well as the political questions surrounding the relationship between collective memory and political identities. This makes memory studies a distinctly interdisciplinary field, drawing together literary scholars, anthropologists, historians, sociologists, psychologists, and media and cultural studies scholars. While scholarly interest in memory dates back to at least Maurice Halbwachs's seminal *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925), published in Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* trans. Lewis A. Coser (University of Chicago Press, 1992), memory studies began to grow significantly as a disciplinary field only in the second half of the twentieth century, with important contributions from Nora and Aleida and Jan Assmann. From this period onward, memory studies became increasingly entangled with moral and ethical questions of political responsibility for historical injustice, as I explore below. In recent decades, the field has become more professionalized, most notably through the creation of the Memory Studies Association (MSA), which has organized an annual international conference since 2016. Though global in its ambitions, the MSA remains largely driven by institutions and scholars based in the Global North, despite ongoing efforts to diversify. For an intellectual history of memory studies, see, among others Astrid Erll, 'The Invention of Cultural Memory: A Short History of Memory Studies', in *Memory in Culture*, ed. Astrid Erll (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011); Jeffrey K. Olick et al., 'Introduction', in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick et al. (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Studying Afrodescendant anti-racist mobilizations as an example of decolonial memory activism is productive in two ways. First, it brings an analysis of the diverse functions of memory into the growing postcolonial literature on Afrodescendant presence, political mobilization, and postcolonialism in Belgium. In doing so, this research bridges the gap between this body of literature and memory studies. While the lack of research on Belgian Afrodescendant activism from a memory studies perspective can partly be attributed to different linguistic academic practices – with most literature on Belgian Afrodescendant mobilizations developing in French, while memory studies remains a predominantly anglophone field – it also reflects a broader historical trend wherein memory studies 'has largely avoided the issues of colonialism and its legacies' and in which, conversely, postcolonial writers have 'largely left the category of memory out of their theory and practice'.[22] This limited dialogue between memory studies and post- and decolonial literature can, however, not be attributed to the latter's lack of understanding of colonialism's entanglement with memory. Despite their differences, many anti-colonial theorists share an understanding of the colonial project as relying on, in the words of Aimé Césaire, 'a forgetting machine'.[23] Frantz Fanon famously declared that colonialism 'turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it'.[24] Rather, it seems that scholars writing on Belgian Afrodescendant activism from a post- and decolonial perspective do not engage with memory studies because its concepts and theories do not seem to have the same analytical value or political magnitude to account for Belgian colonial and racial injustice.[25] According to a small but emerging subfield of 'postcolonial memory studies', this is due to memory studies' limited understanding of 'how memory functions in post-, anti-, and decolonial contexts'.[26] Examining the ways in which decolonial activists link memory to racial justice in Belgium's postcolonial context thus contributes to the project of 'provincializing' some of memory studies' undeniable 'Euro-/Anglocentric' models.[27]

Second, studying Afrodescendant anti-racist mobilizations as an example of decolonial memory activism critically examines the analytical value and limitations of current conceptualizations of

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[22] Michael Rothberg, 'Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan (Oxford University Press, 2013), 360 and 359.

[23] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000), 52. Cited in Rothberg, 'Remembering Back', 367.

[24] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2004), 149.

[25] This was pointed out to me by scholars Sarah Demart and Emma-Lee Amponsah during informal conversations. Mazzocchetti's remark on the 'rhetoric of memory conflicts' mentioned in footnote 19 also attests to this.

[26] This point was raised by Sakiru Adebayo in 'Postcolonial Memory Work as Wake Work', *Reading Decoloniality. Scholarship for Liberation*, 7 December 2023, https://readingdecoloniality.warwick.ac.uk/postcolonial-memory-work-as-wake-work/.

[27] In essence, to 'provincialize' means to question the assumed universality of European, or Western, ideas, histories and frameworks to instead recognize them as particular, local, and situated. The notion was coined by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000). In 2024, Jarula Wegner urgently called for a 'provincialization' of memory studies' concepts, see Jarula M. I. Wegner, 'Provincializing Memory Studies (Again): Cosmopolitan, Multidirectional, Transcultural, and Fugitive Memories', *Memory Studies* ahead of print, 2 November 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241292504. Jeffrey Olick, Aline Sierp, and Jenny Wüstenberg pointed to memory studies' euro- and anglocentrism when defining the path forward for memory studies' most prominent professional association, The Memory Studies Association, see Jeffrey K. Olick et al., 'The Memory Studies Association: Ambitions and an Invitation', *Memory Studies* 10, no. 4 (2017), 492.

'memory activism' by exploring how it functions in concrete, practical activist campaigns. The enthusiasm with which memory researchers have shifted their focus toward activism and social movements is striking and has led Red Chidgey to identify an 'activist turn' in memory studies.[28] Yet, despite the growing body of literature, the definition of 'memory activism' still suffers from 'teething problems'.[29] Academic interest in the topic comes from various fields, including transitional justice, social movement theory, and literary and cultural studies, resulting in competing definitions and a lack of consensus on how to define memory activism, neither as a 'category of practice' or a 'category of analysis'.[30] Instead of applying a predefined, top-down definition of 'memory activism' onto Afrodescendant mobilizations of memory in Belgium, this dissertation therefore takes the opposite approach. It will analyse three concrete activist mobilizations of memory for racial justice to examine what they teach memory scholars about how to conceptualize decolonial memory activism.[31] These are: 1) the decolonization of public space, with the struggle for Lumumba Square as a central mobilization, 2) the emancipation of racialized youth in the so-called 'quartiers populaires,' and 3) the contestation of Belgium's Congo Commission's mission of 'truth and reconciliation'.

For each of them, the analysis is structured around three interrelated research questions. First, how and why do memory activists adopt specific mnemonic strategies in the development of their initiatives? Second, how are these strategies shaped through interactions within activist networks, as well as through their engagements with cultural and political institutions? Third, how do activists conceptualize the transformative potential of memory in the broader struggle for racial justice? What expectations do they attach to memory in relation to recognition, equality, reconciliation, or reparation? By addressing these questions across three distinct campaigns, this research opens space to explore which memories are understood to hold transformative power, and why, by whom, and for whom. In doing so, this dissertation intervenes in two key assumptions about memory activism: first, the implicit assumption that activists mobilize memory because of its transformative properties, and second, the explicit definition of memory activism as a bottom-up process that develops 'outside state channels'.[32]

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[28] Red Chidgey, 'Intersectionality and Memory Activism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (Routledge, 2023), 65. A non-exhaustive list to illustrate the growing number of publications on memory and activism includes Stefan Berger et al., *Remembering Social Movements: Activism and Memory* (Routledge, 2021); Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2017); Anna Reading and Tamar Katriel, eds., *Cultural Memories of Nonviolent Struggles* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015); Jenny Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Lorenzo Zamponi, *Social Movements, Memory and Media* (Springer International Publishing, 2018); and the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, edited by Gutman and Wüstenberg.

[29] Samuel Merrill and Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Activism: Means and Ends', *Memory Studies* 17, no. 5 (2024): 998.

[30] Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Introduction: The Activist Turn in Memory Studies', in Gutman and Wüstenberg, *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 6.

[31] I borrow the notion of an activist 'campaign' from social movement theory. Following Charles Tilly, this study understands a campaign as 'a sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities.' A campaign is typically defined by a series of coordinated discourses and actions aimed at raising awareness, mobilizing support, or influencing public opinion or policy on a specific social or political issue. In: Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Paradigm Publishers, 2004), 3-4.

[32] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9.

Memory and Sociopolitical Transformation

Memory Studies' Existential Doubts

The recent enthusiasm of memory scholars to study activism must be understood in the context of what can be described as an existential crisis within the broader field of memory studies. This crisis concerns the relevance of memory and remembrance in light of historical, social, racial, and, more recently, climate injustice. The question of how memory can serve as a catalyst for social and political transformation, particularly in post-conflict and transitional societies, lies at the heart of the proliferation of memory studies as disciplinary field. The field has been profoundly shaped by the post–World War II era, in which the commemoration of traumatic pasts and the defence of victims' rights became central concerns, closely intertwined with the rise of a global human rights agenda.[33] Amid a growing grassroots and governmental focus on 'historical justice', memory and memorialization have increasingly been seen as vital instruments for redressing past injustices.[34] This has led to the broader conceptualization of memory as a tool for justice, reconciliation, and democratization, with scholars emphasizing its role in shaping historical consciousness, addressing systemic injustices, and promoting shared, democratic, values. One prominent model in this respect is 'cosmopolitan memory', which promotes a form of remembrance that transcends national boundaries, emphasizing universal moral lessons rather than exclusive nationalist narratives.[35] Similarly, 'moral remembrance', exported as a model for memory policies worldwide, highlights the moral and political obligations tied to remembering past atrocities, advocating for collective responsibility, historical justice, and human rights.[36] In these models, historical traumas such as the Holocaust, apartheid, and colonial injustices serve as ethical benchmarks for global responsibility. However, scholars of memory have recognized the limitations of these models, acknowledging that

[33] Andreas Huyssen, 'Memory Culture and Human Rights. A New Constellation.', in *Historical Justice and Memory.*, ed. Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 28.

[34] Historical justice refers to efforts – both symbolic and material – to acknowledge, address, and redress the harms caused by past injustices such as colonialism, slavery, genocide, or systemic discrimination. These efforts can take many forms, including official apologies, reparations, truth commissions, institutional reforms, memorials, and educational initiatives. The goal is not only to recognize historical wrongs but also to foster accountability, reconciliation, and a more just future by confronting the legacies of these injustices that continue to influence the present. See Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson, 'Introduction. Beyond the Legalist Paradigm', in Neumann and Thompson, *Historical Justice and Memory*.

[35] The concept of 'cosmopolitan memory', coined around the turn of the century by Natan Sznaider and Daniel Levy, reveals the canonical status of Holocaust memory in memory studies literature at the time, serving as a central reference point from which to understand other histories of oppression and injustice. See Natan Sznaider and Daniel Levy, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 87–106.

[36] The notion of 'moral remembrance' was coined by Lea David, who used it to write a criticism of its universal assumptions in *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

memory can be mobilized in exclusionary and polarizing ways.[37] To address this, concepts such as multidirectional memory challenge the idea that collective memory is a zero-sum game, instead proposing that different historical experiences can enhance rather than compete with one another and promote cross-cultural empathy and solidarity. Throughout these debates, memory studies as a disciplinary field has oscillated between descriptive approaches, analysing historical realities, and prescriptive ones, advocating for memory's potential to foster solidarity and transformation, reflecting a broader desire to see memory function as a driver of social justice.

During the years I was carrying out this research project, however, confidence in memory's abilities to lead to recognition, reconciliation, and justice started to shake. Both within and outside Europe, human rights are under pressure, an (extreme) right-wing backlash is poised to limit recently acquired minority rights, polarization on both sides of the political spectrum is on the rise, and collective memories of historical injustices are being mobilized to legitimize processes of exclusion, oppression, and genocide. Some identified a 'crisis of confidence in memory' among Western liberal policymakers.[38] But for memory scholars, too, the 'trust in the power of memory to improve the world is significantly diminished'.[39] Confronted with the 'repetition' of histories of exclusion and injustice, memory scholars are in this 'moment of danger' increasingly asking themselves what memory can(not) do in their struggle for justice.[40] Memory scholars have critically examined the effectiveness of memory policies in addressing historical injustice, questioning their real-world impact. Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc, for example, have argued that despite decades of implementation, such policies have failed to curb the rise of far-right and anti-democratic ideologies, challenging the idea that societies can truly 'learn from the past'. [41] Similarly, Valentina Pisanty highlights the paradox of increasing xenophobia in Western societies while these societies embrace memory policies at the same time, prompting scrutiny of whose interests these latter policies serve.[42] Beyond consolidated democracies, transitional justice scholars have also critiqued moral remembrance, with Lea David arguing that the universalizing human rights framework behind it often disconnects from local narratives.[43] As debates on 'illiberal memory' and 'memory

[37] Noticing such 'antagonistic memories' has led, for example, to a debate among memory scholars about 'agonistic memory', to acknowledge the role of conflict, contestation, and plurality in how societies remember the past. Conceived by Hans Lauge Hansen and Anna Cento Bull and influenced by Chantal Mouffe's idea of 'agonistic democracy', it proposes that instead of aiming for consensus or reconciliation, memory cultures should make space for divergent, even opposing, narratives to coexist and engage in democratic debate. I understand the literature on 'agonistic memory' as an effort of some memory scholars to maintain the older hope that memory does, indeed, serve democratic purposes. See Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On Agonistic Memory', *Memory Studies* 9, no. 4 (2016): 390–404. For elaborate analyses of both the concept and its practical application in memory policies and museums, see Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner, eds., *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (Springer International Publishing, 2021).

[38] Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 'The Rise of Illiberal Memory', *Memory Studies* 16, no. 4 (2023): 820.

[39] Wulf Kansteiner and Stefan Berger, 'Agonism and Memory', in Berger and Kansteiner, *Agonistic Memory*, 208–9.

[40] Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, 'Memory Studies in a Moment of Danger: Fascism, Postfascism, and the Contemporary Political Imaginary', *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 355.

[41] Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc, *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn From the Past?* (Springer Nature, 2020).

[42] Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right* (CPL Editions, 2021).

[43] David, *Past Can't Heal Us*.

warriors' emerge in the field, scholars increasingly question the assumption that remembrance necessarily fosters empathy and solidarity, suggesting it can also fuel division and backlash. [44]

Post- and decolonial perspectives have also increasingly challenged memory studies' understanding of the relationship between memory and sociopolitical transformation. Shifting away from the field's traditional focus on historical traumas of the Holocaust and totalitarianism, scholars are now turning their attention to the memories of colonialism and slavery, both in the West and in former colonies. [45] Next to a shift in focus in terms of *content*, this brings with it a growing critique of memory studies' own complicity in perpetuating colonial and epistemic injustice.[46] Inspired by Aníbal Quijano, Sakiru Adebayo for example coined the notion 'coloniality of memory', emphasizing both 'the ways in which colonialism erases the past of colonized people' and how mainstream memory studies 'reproduces this colonial erasure through its existing theories, epistemologies and methodologies'.[47] Following others, Adebayo underscores that the earlier cited models of memory and transformation, in many respects, remain largely indebted to theories, frameworks, and methodologies developed in the Global North. Decolonial interventions in memory studies have called for an 'epistemic disobedience' to universal moral understandings of how memory works and for research on the agency of subaltern, Indigenous, and racialized voices to shape their own historical narratives and practices of remembrance.[48] This has led to literature criticizing the reduction of subaltern stories to one-sided narratives of trauma and mourning.[49] It has also led to scholarship criticizing the hegemony of Western notions of time and temporality in memory studies, where a linear, progressive framing risks imposing premature 'closure' after historical injustice or hindering the recognition of continuing or 'enduring' injustices.[50] Decolonial

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[44] Rosenfeld, 'Rise of Illiberal Memory'. On 'memory warriors', see Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory', in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford University Press, 2014).

[45] A longer, though limited history of scholars looking into memory through a postcolonial lens exists. See, for example, Mamadou Diawara et al., eds., *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the Past, Reaching for the Future in an Intercultural Context* (Berghahn Books, 2010); Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Richard Werbner, *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (Zed Books, 1998). As 'decolonization' has in many countries become a rallying cry for anti-racist mobilizations as well as a policy term, memory scholars have taken up the task of investigating these policy processes as well. See, for example (though many more examples can be cited), Christoffer Kølvraa and Britta Timm Knudsen, 'Decolonizing European Colonial Heritage in Urban Spaces – An Introduction to the Special Issue', *Heritage & Society* 13, no. 1–2 (2020): 1–9; Jonas Prinzleve, 'Silent Memorylands: City Branding and the Coloniality of Cultural Memory in the Hamburg HafenCity', *Memory Studies* 16, no. 4 (2023): 984–1002.

[46] David Mwambari, *Navigating Cultural Memory: Commemoration and Narrative in Postgenocide Rwanda*, Explorations in Narrative Psychology (Oxford University Press, 2023), 34.

[47] Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80; Sakiru Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 128.

[48] Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009), 159–81.

[49] Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

[50] The notion of 'enduring injustice' was coined by Jeff Spinner-Halev in response to the assumed retrospectivity in the term 'historical injustice', locating the injustice in the past and disconnecting in from the present. He defines 'enduring injustice' as an 'injustice has roots in the past, and continues into the present day; an enduring injustice

critiques have also pointed out that memorialization after/during colonial injustice, if not combined with material politics of repair, restitution, or redistribution, risks remaining a merely 'symbolic' exercise. 'Decolonization', in such cases, remains a 'metaphor' inadequately confronting structural racialized inequality.[51] These critiques and debates about the alleged 'symbolic' properties of memory and remembrance at the expense of 'material' repair mirror older debates about the relationship between 'politics of recognition' and 'politics of redistribution' and remain a divisive issue, even among decolonial movements.[52]

A common thread throughout both policy-oriented criticisms and decolonial interventions studies then is a critique of the 'moral universals' and normative assumptions that structure ideas on the 'right' way to deal with historical injustices or on how memory can be transformative.[53] Instead, they call for detailed analyses of the political and sociological situatedness of memory practices.[54] The call coincides with what Astrid Erll calls a 'third phase' within memory studies.[55] This third phase, or 'transcultural turn', encompasses a growing understanding of 'the logic of memory' as a 'dynamic, multilinear and often fuzzy' process, and of memory as 'never stable or bound to clear-cut social groups and territories'.[56] Resultingly, normative or pretended universal ideas about memory's potential for justice are equally dynamic, multilinear, and fuzzy, as no memory practices are inherently 'good or bad, positive or negative, reconciliatory or destructive, enabling or banalizing'.[57] In short, many of the criticisms raised in this 'moment of danger' can be understood as calls to historicize – and, in doing so, politicize – our assumptions about the relationship between memory and transformation: to expose and critically engage with the political dimensions of these assumptions by highlighting how they are historically, culturally, and socially shaped by power relations, competing interests, and ideological frameworks.

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endures over time and often over space as well. What makes an enduring injustice particularly perplexing is how difficult it is to repair'. Enduring injustice is particularly challenging to address due to its deep-rooted nature and the limitations of liberal justice in effectively remedying it. See Jeff Spinner-Halev, ed., 'Enduring Injustice', in *Enduring Injustice* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56.

[51] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

[52] Nancy Fraser, 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age', *New Left Review* 212, no. 1 (1995): 68–93; Richard Rorty, 'Is "Cultural Recognition" a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?', *Cultural Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2000): 7–20; Nancy Fraser, 'Why Overcoming Prejudice Is Not Enough. A Rejoinder to Richard Rorty', *Critical Horizons* 1, no. 1 (2000): 21–30.

[53] I borrow the notion 'moral universals' from Jeffrey Alexander, who used it to examine how certain historical events, notably the Holocaust, have been universally recognized as epitomes of moral wrongdoing and moral responsibility. See Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The "Holocaust" from War Crime to Trauma Drama', *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002): 5–85.

[54] Gensburger and Lefranc, *Beyond Memory*, 9. A similar argument can be found in Sarah Gensburger and Marie-Claire Lavabre, 'Entre "devoir de mémoire" et "abus de mémoire": la sociologie de la mémoire comme tierce position', in *Histoire, mémoire et épistémologie. À propos de Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Bertrand Müller (Payot, 2005), 77.

[55] Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 4.

[56] Erll, 'Travelling Memory', 14. For more on memory studies' 'transcultural turn', see Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson, eds., *The Transcultural Turn: Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders* (De Gruyter, 2014).

[57] Erll, 'Travelling Memory', 15, cited in Kansteiner and Berger, 'Agonism and Memory', 209.

As is often the case with intellectual and academic developments, it takes a long time before they filter into the discourses and practices of policymakers. In practice, the models of cosmopolitan memory and moral remembrance and their assumptions continue to shape the policies of societies that attempt to tackle political and social challenges of inequality and injustice through memory. Belgium is no exception. In the past decade, a wide range of new political and institutional initiatives on colonial memory and decolonization have been presented as important steps in the emancipation of racialized minorities. Simultaneously, however, grassroots actors have called out some of these initiatives on their inability to practice the social transformation they preach. This suggests that articulations of memory's relation to racial justice need to be critically examined to better identify the alleged, in Sara Ahmed's words, 'non-performativity' of some memory policies on the colonial past.[58] The question then arises: what possibilities and limits do decolonial emancipation movements have when they push their claims in a language of memorial justice, in an institutional and discursive context where hegemonic notions of memory and memory policy are still indebted to the ideas of cosmopolitan memory and moral remembrance?

Turning to Grassroots Activists to Revisit the Question of Memory and Transformation

The recent research agenda on memory activism aligns with the call to contextualize, historicize, and politicize assumptions about the transformative potential of memory. To expand their focus beyond normative and prescriptive models of memory, scholars examine grassroots memory practices as a way to explore the complexities of how memory operates in different social and political settings. Literature on memory activism explicitly counters or nuances some of the earlier discussed biases in the broader field of memory studies. First, part of the new research agenda centres on memories of resistance, resilience, and survival to validate historical experiences beyond a one-sided emphasis on historical trauma. It highlights the capacity of social movements, marginalized communities, and civil society actors to be agents of historical change, building on earlier efforts to move beyond a habitual focus on victimhood. Second, this literature addresses concerns that memory studies, as a field, is allegedly inherently backward-looking – 'a slave of the past' – and risks overlooking pressing ethical and political questions for the present and future.[59] This concern is an heir to older concern that the field's preoccupation with traumatic memory might hinder the development of forward-looking policies.[60] According to some of these older sceptics, the 'memory boom' from the 1980s onwards is a symptom of the crumbling of the old modern belief in progress and represents a broader societal inability to develop emancipatory politics oriented toward the

[58] Sara Ahmed introduces the concept of the 'non-performative' to analyse institutional commitments to 'diversity' and 'antiracism' as specific speech acts that 'do not bring into effect that which they name'. Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), 119, 116–17.

[59] Yifat Gutman et al., 'Introduction: Memory and the Future: Why a Change of Focus Is Necessary', in *Memory and the Future: Transnational Politics, Ethics and Society*, ed. Yifat Gutman et al. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 2.

[60] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 16–18.

future.[61] Studying memory activism has been presented as a way for the field to 'bring the future back in' and examine how memory can be mobilized for future-oriented justice claims. Looking at the intersections of memory and activism seems to be a hopeful way for scholars of memory to explore 'how the past and present can interact in producing scenarios for the future without falling back into grand narratives, but also without being wedded to the traumatic'.[62] Third, by centring contentious politics, the agenda aims to re-politicize memory's relation to transformation, responding to concerns that memory studies as a discipline misses political poignancy because it 'reduces complex political problems of power to questions of memory'.[63] Instead of flattening memory in a cultural framework of representation rather than politically situated sites of contestation and historical struggle, scholars of memory activism attempt to place memory at the centre of the political arena. Together, Chidgey argues, these efforts of the memory activism research agenda can be understood as a new 'orientation' – in the words of Ahmed – within memory studies towards social justice.[64] Confronted with a perceived failure of the field's older models to mobilize memory for progressive change, for some memory scholars turning attention to activism thus presents 'an opportune and ethical moment to revisit the field's theoretical and analytical approaches, and to query the place of social justice orientation within its work'.[65]

Despite the great potential of the recent work on 'memory activism' to rethink some universalist assumptions about memory's transformative potential, residual traces of earlier normative and universalist assumptions can still be found in some conceptualizations of memory activism. Identifying different 'types' of memory activism and the various ways activists mobilize memory is a major contribution of the research agenda on memory activism, facilitating a more diverse and stratified understanding of grassroots relations to the past.[66] Yet, within this diversity, a common thread seems to persist: a belief in memory's inherent transformative power. For instance, Yifat Gutman argues that the uniqueness of memory activism lies in its direct connection of memory claims and transformative claims: activists engage in reshaping memory landscapes and seek recognition for their ways of dealing with the past because they believe this will lead to political change.[67] In her article with Jenny Wüstenberg, Gutman further asserts that activists mobilize memory 'because they view memory as a unique platform for change due to the transformative

[61] Jeffrey Olick and Brenda Coughlin, 'The Politics of Regret: Analytical Frames', in *Politics and the Past. On Repairing Historical Injustices.*, ed. John Torpey (Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 37–62.

[62] Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic', *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018), 369.

[63] Zoltán Kékesi and Máté Zombory, 'Beyond Multidirectional Memory: Opening Pathways to Politics and Solidarity', *Memory Studies* 17, no. 6 (2024): 1664–83.

[64] Red Chidgey, 'Activist Turns: The (In)Compatibility of Scholarship and Transformative Activism', *Memory Studies* 17, no. 5 (2024): 1214.

[65] Chidgey, 'Intersectionality and Memory Activism', 65, cited in Chidgey, 'Activist Turns', 1214.

[66] Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Challenging the Meaning of the Past from Below: A Typology for Comparative Research on Memory Activists', *Memory Studies* 15, no. 5 (2021): 1070–86.

[67] Gutman, *Memory Activism*, 19.

character of memory work'.[68] In the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, both authors reiterate that memory activism 'is a pertinent site to illuminate how memory is transformative in and of itself' (…) a "'power-infused" resource in grassroots struggles over hegemony'.[69] This assumption raises several questions. It prompts us to consider the place in activism of memory practices that are not directly aimed at sociopolitical change but emerge instead from interest, joy, care, curiosity, or individual existential motivations.

Moreover, if memory work is inherently transformative, the question is again where the political is located in the relationship between memory and activism. While it appears that the agenda intends to stay away from normative and prescriptive assumptions about the right way to deal with the past, a normative dimension in the innate importance of memory and memory studies in the political, social, and cultural challenges of the present moment seems to persist. The conclusions of scholars who have criticized moral remembrance – that the performative and transformative potential of memory is not self-evident but situated in political, cultural, and social contexts – should thus be extended to the analysis of memory activism as well. Memory activists may indeed consider 'public memory' a 'unique platform' to advance their cause.[70] Yet, this does not necessarily stem from some innate transformative potential of memory. Public memory can also become an activist tool because, for example, taboos on contemporary colonial and racial injustice make the public articulation of claims that directly tackle the present impossible. As early as in 2001, John Torpey suggested that for activists and policymakers 'who find other channels to progress blocked, the road to the future runs through the prolonged disasters of the past'.[71] Keeping this in mind, we have to question whether memory activists resort to memory because it is inherently transformative and consider which social, political, and cultural contexts make memory transformative for activists, and why and how. I argue that this question can be answered only by examining the interaction between memory activists and the contexts in which they operate.

Memory as a (Unified) Bottom-Up Demand

This brings us to a second assumption this dissertation aims to tackle: memory activism's definition as a bottom-up and counter-hegemonic phenomenon. Above, I have briefly pointed to the teething problems in scholars' efforts to define memory activism. Memory activism is generally conceptualized as non-state mobilizations of counter-memories that challenge official narratives and state-sponsored commemoration. In the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, which has become a central reference point for this emerging research agenda, Gutman and

[68] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Challenging the Meaning', 3.
[69] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9.
[70] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Challenging the Meaning', 3.
[71] John Torpey, '"Making Whole What Has Been Smashed": Reflections on Reparations', *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001), 337.

Wüstenberg define memory activism as 'the strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels'.[72] This emphasis on activism as a non-state phenomenon is meant to differentiate the new scholarly notion of 'memory activism' from 'memory politics' in the broader sense, and to differentiate memory activists from 'non-memory activists or non-activist memory agents'.[73] However, the idea that memory activism occurs outside the state has raised concerns about analytical blind spots. For one, this conceptualization makes it more difficult to notice flexibility and hybridity between counter-memories 'from below' and their hegemonic counterparts. More broadly, scholars argue that following its 'transnational' turns, memory studies has tended to overlook the nation-state's continued administering of memory.[74] Critics highlight that focusing on memory representations while neglecting sociological insights into the state limits understanding of how administrations shape memory. Writing from this critique, Sara Dybris McQuaid and Gensburger call instead for a closer examination of the 'generative relationship' between memory activists and what they call 'the administrations of memory', urging scholars to explore how existing memory policies shape activist strategies.[75]

In the context of Belgium's decolonial moment, this call is urgent. The plethora of institutional initiatives that have emerged in recent years likewise present their policies as a response to bottom-up demands, yet the ways in which memory is framed to serve justice often differ from the perspectives of activist voices from below. Here, we must consider the broader context of Belgium's 'post-racial paradox', in which it remains very difficult for grassroots actors to publicly articulate claims about contemporary racial injustice.[76] As stated by Véronique Clette-Gakuba, 'asserting the issue of postcolonial relations as a societal concern' has long been 'impossible' in Belgium.[77] As Chapter 1 will show, earlier mobilizations for racial justice remained in the margins, could rarely count on broad public engagement, and were met with a limited institutional response. It seems no coincidence that the increased public discussion of racial inequality in the decolonial moment has gone hand in hand with articulations of this inequality in connection to colonial memory. Memory activists respond to political opportunity structures to advance their claims, and memory can be conceptualized as a resource mobilized by minorities in the absence of other narrative frames that render Belgium's racial grammar

[72] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9.

[73] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 5.

[74] Sara Dybris McQuaid and Sarah Gensburger, 'Administrations of Memory: Transcending the Nation and Bringing Back the State in Memory Studies', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 2 (2019): 125–43.

[75] Sara Dybris McQuaid and Sarah Gensburger, 'Administration', in Gutman and Wüstenberg, *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, 142.

[76] The term 'post-racial paradox', coined by Salman Sayyid, describes a phenomenon in Western European societies in which, despite institutional condemnations of anti-Black racism and a strong commitment to European human rights, racial injustice remains both pervasive and difficult to publicly identify or acknowledge. Shannon Gouppy has applied this notion to the Belgian context, see Shannon Gouppy, 'Race Matters in Belgium: A Critical Exploration of the Belgian Post-Racial Paradox', *C@hiers Du CRHiDI. Histoire, Droit, Institutions, Société*, 48 (2024): 3.

[77] Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de colonialité', 1.

intelligible to policymakers. It appears that memory, as a 'mainstream and codified category' for bureaucracies and audiences worldwide, has contributed to the visibility of grassroots actors – both carving out space for activists and imposing constraints.[78] Acknowledging this, we need to examine if and how activist articulations of memorial justice can be co-shaped by institutional structures and what that means for anti-racism in Belgium today.

Additionally, we observe a mechanism in which policymakers not only consider claims to memory policies as bottom-up demands but also treat specific claims to memorial justice as representative of all Afrodescendants in Belgium. This stems from a longer history in which political administrations have forced people of African descent to organize as a single political actor with one unified voice in order to be taken seriously in political negotiations (cf. Chapter 3) and in which institutions tend to externally define 'the category of the African diaspora' in essentialist ways.[79] This dissertation argues that the claimed 'non-performativity' of institutional memory initiatives is inextricably linked to public and political actors' lack of recognition of this plurality of voices. This has implications for how we conceptualize memory activism. Since memory activism is often framed as a struggle between a hegemonic 'official narrative' and a 'counter-memory' from below, we must be cautious not to fall into binary representations of two conflicting memories or adopt a 'tacit imperative of harmony' when analysing counter-memories.[80] Since we know that the performativity and transformative potential of memory is not a given but is socially, politically, and culturally situated, it follows that in a heterogenous group of activists we will encounter a heterogeneity of relationships to the (colonial) past and multiple, perhaps even conflicting, views on the importance of memory for social and racial change. As Katrin Antweiler has argued, if memory studies is to fulfil its new social justice orientation, it must abandon its older aspirations to consensus and universality and instead radically embrace difference and contradiction to acknowledge the 'pluriversality' of relationships to the past.[81]

This dissertation takes this call to heart, revealing a diverse array of activist articulations linking memory and racial justice in Belgium's decolonial moment, within a broader set of claims that remain yet to be analysed. To grasp the diversity and complexity of activist ideas about memorial justice beyond fixed or essentialist group-based narratives, I propose analysing them

[78] McQuaid and Gensburger, 'Administration', 142.

[79] Véronique Clette-Gakuba, 'An Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation in a White Institution: The Case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium', in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, ed. Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek, and Sophie Uitz (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 63.

[80] Katrin Antweiler, 'Why Collective Memory Can Never Be Pluriversal: A Case for Contradiction and Abolitionist Thinking in Memory Studies', *Memory Studies* 16, no. 6 (2023): 1529. Already in 2002, Wulf Kansteiner wrote that 'memory studies presuppose a rarely acknowledged but not particularly surprising desire for cultural homogeneity, consistency and predictability', and that the field 'promises to let us have our essentialism and deconstruct it, too'. In: Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002), 195-196.

[81] Antweiler, 'Collective Memory Can Never', 1541.

as flexible 'registers of dissent': adaptable modes of expression and styles of communication through which racialized experiences and demands for memorial justice are articulated, negotiated, and reshaped across activist positions, memory campaigns, and audiences. Each register consists of specific vocabularies, tones, narrative strategies, and rhetorical frameworks that enable activists to communicate their demands for recognition, legitimacy, and justice in ways that correspond to changing audiences and discursive and institutional contexts. Looking at the plurality of decolonial memory activism in this way shows how for activists, memory can simultaneously be an '*outil de lutte*' (a tool of struggle) in a counter-hegemonic project, in the words of activist Kalvin Soiresse Njall, but also a '*déception*' (a disappointment) in the fight for racial justice in Belgium, in the words of activist Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala.[82]

Outline of the Dissertation

This introduction is followed by **Chapter 1**, which sets the historical and institutional context of Belgium's 'decolonial moment' as the backdrop in which decolonial memory activism developed. **Chapter 2** introduces the methodologies used in this dissertation and their operationalization by focusing on three memory campaigns activists developed in the past decade: 1) the decolonization of public space, with the struggle for Lumumba Square as a central mobilization; 2) the emancipation of racialized youth in the so-called '*quartiers populaires*'; and 3) the contestation of Belgium's Congo Commission's mission of 'truth and reconciliation'. As this study examines how claims are articulated in only these three campaigns, I stress that it is neither a detailed ethnography nor a generalized account of 'the decolonial movement' or 'the African diaspora' in Belgium between 2010 and 2021; it resists such reifying interpretations. To further clarify the vantage points from which this dissertation is written, the chapter details my different levels of participation during my work on each of the three campaigns, ranging from outsider to active participant and 'secretary' of a memory activist campaign. Linked to this is a reflection on these different forms of positionality and their influence on my analysis, including the inevitable blind spots that they bring.

Chapter 3 analyses activist memory work in the struggle to name a square in Brussels after the first prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo, Patrice Lumumba. In line with the temporal delineation of this study, the chapter examines the development of a renewed campaign since 2015, although earlier mobilizations for Patrice Lumumba Square date back much further. In this year, a coalition emerged between various civil society organizations that, despite their differences, had to find a shared narrative to promote the campaign to their audiences and the broader public, but also to political institutions, which have historically

[82] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023; Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 6 June 2019.

expected Afrodescendant communities to act as one actor with one voice. I show how Lumumba's image functioned as a symbol to discursively link a diversity of political claims and identities in the African diasporas and beyond in a shared discourse of enduring colonial injustice in Belgium. In this way, the chapter shows how activist memory practices contribute to Belgium's decolonial activism and how, in practice, the distinction between the 'means' and 'ends' of *memory in activism* is not always easy to make.[83] By showing the different audiences involved in the coalition for Lumumba Square, the chapter introduces the actors that feature in the following chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter 4 analyses how, since roughly 2010, the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD) and its predecessor Collectif Mémoires Coloniales have developed a practice of alternative knowledge production about the Belgian colonial past in response to the nostalgic narratives that were hegemonic in the public sphere at that time. The compilation and organization of public historical activities became central to this social movement's action repertoire and was aimed not only at its own supporters but also at raising awareness among a broad audience. I illustrate how in this campaign, historiography became the main memory device, blurring the lines between common understandings of 'history' and 'memory'. 'Historical truth' features as a central topos in CMCLD's activist discourse and is mobilized simultaneously in its constructivist and objective understandings. Activists use a constructivist view of historical truth to politicize hegemonic nostalgic and justifying historical narratives of colonialism and expose them as products of colonial modes of knowledge production. The notion of 'deconstruction' acts prominently in CMCLD's decolonial historical guided tours and is evoked to debunk persistent colonial myths and historicize coloniality itself to allow for political imaginations of a different future. Simultaneously, activists in the tours tend to resort to a more objective understanding of 'historical truth' to prove their own historical narrative, in which they rely heavily on historical sources and a language of 'historical facts' to lend academic credibility to their counter-memory.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus from public space to the arena of local politics, where the coalition around CMCLD has been fighting for the decolonization of public space since shortly after its founding. The chapter jumps back to the campaign for Lumumba Square as a crucial part of that struggle and analyses how activists articulated their demands in the language of *devoir de mémoire* in this lobbying process. Showing the entangled relationships between activists and political institutions, the chapter explores how hegemonic policy understandings of memory for justice have co-shaped activists' rhetorical strategies. The chapter sketches how globalized moral remembrance can act as a discursive opportunity structure for activists advancing a multifaceted decolonial cause and understands activist comparisons of colonial injustice and the Holocaust as 'multidirectional' articulations aimed at inviting solidarity with their cause.

[83] Merrill and Rigney, 'Remembering Activism', 999.

Chapter 6 examines the activism of the organization Change, founded in 2013 in the Brussels municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. I situate the origins of Change in the context of grassroots community work in Belgo-Congolese communities in Brussels to address social challenges stemming from so-called 'urban gangs'. Although the organization was part of the coalition for Lumumba Square discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, my interaction with its two key figures since 2019 has been marked by their ambiguity towards the CMCLD's memory campaign and moral remembrance. The chapter highlights how memory activists can employ memory in smaller, existential, and therapeutic ways. It moreover suggests that, rather than believing in an innate transformative potential, memory activists can feel obligated to articulate claims for racial equality in terms of public memory or in a language of historical victimhood because the political context forces them to do so if they are to be taken seriously.

Chapter 7 analyses the third memory campaign: BAMKO-CRAN's grassroots truth and reconciliation initiative, Les Assises Décoloniales, launched in 2020. The campaign emerged in direct response to the Belgian federal government's parliamentary commission, which faced criticism for its composition as it lacked Afrodescendant experts and cooperation with former Belgian colonies. I show how in this campaign for memorial justice, 'truth' is once again central to activist discourse. Here, 'truth' is not understood in objective terms but is informed by a positionalist epistemology in which 'truth' about the colonial past can be found only in a collective truth-finding process with a representative body of participants. The chapter analyses how this understanding of truth shaped the concrete formation of Les Assises Décoloniales and how a representative composition of its team was considered crucial to claim legitimacy as a project. Building on these observations about legitimacy, the chapter further details the discursive choices of the Afrofeminist BAMKO-CRAN, influenced by the context of Belgium's federal Congo Commission, as well as its struggle for gender equality within the network of Afrodescendant activist organizations in Brussels. The chapter shows how memory activists 'from below' can appropriate 'top-down' frameworks of 'truth and reconciliation' yet radically altering their meaning.

Finally, in the **Conclusions** I establish that memory relates differently to justice in each of the activist campaigns. In the campaign for the decolonization of public space, memorial justice is linked to the public acknowledgement of 'historical truth' about colonialism. In Change's social work, memorial justice is linked to the availability of historical narratives that enable racialized youth to develop a dignified identity. In the alternative truth commission Les Assises Décoloniales, memorial justice is located in the collaborative process of truth-telling *itself* and the representative participation of Afrodescendant voices in this. In each campaign, memory claims are linked to demands for recognition – recognition as an equal participant in public space, as an equal citizen, and as a credible expert. In this respect, the 'new wave' of activist actions in Belgium's decolonial moment is similar to Afrodescendant movements for recognition in the 1990s. Second, I reflect on these differences in memory's mobilization for justice. Different subject positions shaped by education, political ideology, family origins, class, and gender seem to play a role but are not a sufficient explanation. I conclude that a more

plausible explanation for these differences is that this is a multidirectional struggle for legitimacy and epistemic authority. Memory activists highlight their distinctions to differentiate themselves in their struggle for recognition and legitimation. These different mobilizations of memory consist of three flexible and overlapping registers for articulating the link between memory and racial justice. Third, these registers take shape in an institutional context that offers little room for Afrodescendant organizations to access funding or publicly articulate their demands. Speaking to memory scholars' calls to study memory activism in a more integrated way, centring the 'generative relationship' between activists and institutions, I contend that this context shapes memory activists' discursive choices.

My conclusions stem from an empirical analysis of three memory campaigns by a few specific actors and thus cannot be easily generalized. Nevertheless, I believe that the observation that memory activists' strategies are highly flexible and shaped by their interaction with each other and the institutional context is applicable to other cases of memory activism. This study shows that the struggle for legitimacy is an important part of the struggle for memorial justice and that memory is mobilized for this purpose in a variety of ways.

Chapter 1
A Historical Contextualization: The 2010 Decade as Belgium's 'Decolonial Moment'

1.1 Introduction

This first chapter sketches the historical and political context of the emergence of decolonial memory activisms in Belgium. The chapter conceptualizes the decade between 2010 and 2021 as Belgium's 'decolonial moment'. Drawing inspiration from Chantal Mouffe's notion of the 'populist moment', I understand a 'decolonial moment' as a conjunctural period in which dominant institutional and discursive frameworks about the colonial past begin to lose legitimacy, new political subjects gain significance, and previously marginal vocabularies of decolonization and historical redress for colonialism make their way into the mainstream.[84] In the Belgian case, this moment was marked by three significant developments: first, a shift in mainstream anti-racism discourse from multiculturalism and integration to a focus on colonial legacies and decolonization; second, the increasing public presence and political visibility of Afrodescendant mobilizations demanding recognition and reparation for colonial injustice; and third, the growing uptake of terms like 'decolonization' by political and cultural institutions.

[84] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, 2018), 13.

This chapter first traces the historical conditions that made this moment possible. I begin by outlining Belgium's longer postcolonial memoryscape, which has been shaped by silences around colonial violence, fragmented memories across Belgium's different linguistic spheres, and the relative absence of postcolonial migration when compared to other European metropoles. The chapter then moves to the early twenty-first century, identifying the 2010s as a key turning point. During this decade, Afrodescendant activists – building on much longer genealogies of community organizing – began to publicly challenge dominant historical narratives, making forceful claims about the entanglement between Belgium's colonial past and its present-day racial inequalities. Their work brought decolonial counter-memory out of the margins and into the streets, museums, classrooms, municipal councils, and parliaments. Rather than presenting this period as a clean break, I argue for understanding the 'decolonial moment' as the intensification and politicization of long-standing memory practices and mobilizations in the margins. These were rooted in the lived experiences of Afrodescendant communities and shaped by both local and transnational dynamics. The 2010s mark the point at which these practices – often informal, fragmented, or overlooked – gained public and institutional traction.

At the same time, Belgian institutions, responding to this pressure as well as to international criticism, began to engage with questions of memorial justice, colonial heritage, and reparative policy, albeit often in hesitant or symbolic ways. This institutional engagement with decolonial memory claims shapes a particular playing field for activists, offering both (temporary) opportunities and significant challenges, and forms the background against which the memory campaigns examined in this dissertation unfold.

1.2 Contextualizing the Moment: Belgium's Postcolonial Memoryscape Prior to 2010

1.2.1 Lagging Behind

While Belgium has a reputation internationally as a ruthless colonial power, public debate about the legacies of its colonial past had long been relatively absent within Belgium itself. Belgian colonialism in Central Africa consisted of colonial rule over Congo between 1885 and 1960, and Rwanda and Burundi being under Belgian protectorate from 1916 until 1962. Between 1885 and 1908, Belgian King Leopold II ruled the Congo Free State, where forced labour for

rubber and ivory extraction led to millions of deaths.[85] International outrage about the bloody and exploitative regime in the Congo Free State led to the Belgian state taking over administration from 1908 onwards. Contrary to colonial propaganda, under Belgian state rule, the system remained oppressive, with racial segregation and continued economic exploitation. In Rwanda and Burundi, Belgian authorities reinforced ethnic divisions, contributing to later conflicts in the region. Congo gained political independence in 1960, followed by Rwanda and Burundi in 1962. Yet neocolonial Belgian interference continued to shape Congo's postcolonial economic and political developments, and colonial legacies continue to influence political and social affairs to this day, both in Belgium and in the former colonies.[86] In the aftermath of Congo's independence, on 17 January 1961, in the context of the Cold War, Congo's first democratically elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was assassinated with the knowledge and support of the Belgian authorities.[87] Their involvement, as well as that of the CIA and the United Nations, turned the case into a global symbol of neocolonial interference, and the lack of redress from the Belgian government is still viewed as a symbol of a broader absence of accountability for colonialism as a whole.[88]

Belgian colonial history has been extensively discussed internationally, both by contemporaries and by later historians and commentators, due to its pervasive exploitation and violence. Cultural productions and novels about the Congo Free State and Leopold II, as well as the wide circulation of images of mutilated Black bodies, have made this period an exemplary transnational reference point for collective memory of colonial violence.[89] In postcolonial literature and within Pan-African and Black emancipation movements across the globe, Belgian (neo-)colonialism in Congo has been a recurring point of reflection and critique. Congo has often been conceived as a key battleground in the decolonization of the African continent, with the Congolese struggle for self-determination viewed as a prime example of the broader fight for sovereignty among non-aligned nations during the Cold War (cf. Che Guevara). In the Belgian collective memory, however, there was never much room for criticism of colonialism.

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[85] For a history of Belgian colonial rule in Congo, see: Zana Etambala, *Veroverd. Bezet. Gekoloniseerd. Congo 1876-1914* (Sterck & de Vreese, 2019); Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo. De l'héritage ancien à la république démocratique* (De Boeck & Larcier, 1998); Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (Zed Books, 2002); Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo 1885-1980*, trans. Alice Cameron and Stephen Windross (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[86] See for example: Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, ed., *Unfinished Histories: Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2022).

[87] Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (Verso, 2002).

[88] Chapter 3 in this dissertation delves deeper into Lumumba's legacy.

[89] These include Mark Twain's *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, as well as Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*. The latter was popularized in Peter Bates' 2003 dramatic documentary *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*, bringing the history of early Belgian imperialism to a broad audience. Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (International Publishers, 1970); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Mariner Books, 1999).

The country has been accused of 'lagging behind' in the international trend wherein colonial powers are forced to come to terms with their pasts.[90]

After independence, it took decades before the colonial past became the subject of substantial critical historiography.[91] During the colonial period and immediately after Congo's independence, Belgian historiography was characterized by paternalistic and Eurocentric perspectives, emphasizing Belgium's 'civilizing mission' in Congo and portraying colonialism as a process that brought progress.[92] While some critical voices emerged already in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not until the 1990s and 2000s that a more substantive body of critical research developed, challenging these earlier apologetic narratives.[93] It took even longer for critical historiography to find its way to a broader audience, and public and political debate over the dark chapters of Belgian colonial and postcolonial history remained absent or fragmented for a long time.[94] Although historiography on Belgian colonialism has in recent decades made considerable strides in debunking earlier apologetic and justifying narratives, it can be argued that Belgian historians have largely failed to translate this critical scholarship into accessible knowledge for a wider public.[95] The 'balance-sheet' representation of colonialism, for example, where exploitation and violence is weighed against the alleged benefits, understood as infrastructure, education, and healthcare, is still widely prevalent in public opinion today.[96]

Different concepts have over time been coined to describe dominant attitudes towards the colonial past in Belgium, including 'colonial aphasia', 'colonial amnesia', 'silence', 'ignorance', 'colonial nostalgia', 'historical taboo', and 'historical trauma'.[97] Despite their differences, what these concepts have in common is that they all point to a combination of limited knowledge (and relative disinterest) among the general population, a lack of political accountability, and a societal inability to develop a broad critical discourse on how the colonial past has structured

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[90] Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2019), 26.

[91] Hein Vanhee and Geert Castryck, 'Belgische historiografie en verbeelding over het koloniale verleden', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis-Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* 3–4 (2002): 311.

[92] Guy Vanthemsche, 'The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo', in *Europe and the World in European Historiography*, ed. Csaba Lévai (Pisa University Press, 2006), 103.

[93] Vanthemsche, 'Historiography of Belgian Colonialism', 106.

[94] Vanhee and Castryck, 'Belgische historiografie en verbeelding over het koloniale verleden', 78.

[95] Geert Castryck, 'Whose History Is History? Singularities and Dualities of the Public Debate on Belgian Colonialism', in Lévai, *Europe and the World in European Historiography*, 72.

[96] Rowan Brouwers, Zeger Verleye, and Pieter Verheyen, 'De steun voor dekolonisering in België in kaart gebracht: tussen politieke gevoeligheden en maatschappelijke aanvaarding', *Tijdschrift Sociologie* 3, (2022): 141.
On 'balance-sheet' representations in Belgian (and Dutch) historiography on colonialism, see: Frank Gerits and Gillian Mathys, 'Laat die gevallen engelen maar liggen: Balansbenaderingen in de Belgische en Nederlandse historiografie over het koloniale verleden', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 140, no. 1 (2025): 55–79.

[97] Idesbald Goddeeris et al., 'Het Koloniale Verleden Door Een Belgische Bril: Van Witte Nostalgie Naar Een Veelkleurig Debat', in *Koloniaal Congo. Een Geschiedenis in Vragen*, ed. Idesbald Goddeeris et al. (Polis, 2020), 376; Antoon van den Braembussche, 'The Silence of Belgium: Taboo and Trauma in Belgian Memory', *Yale French Studies*, no. 102 (2002): 35–52; Julien Bobineau, 'The Historical Taboo: Colonial Discourses and Postcolonial Identities in Belgium', *Werkwinkel* 12, no. 1 (2017): 108.

contemporary racialized relations. In comparison to other European countries, Belgian collective memories of colonialism have also been highly fragmented, due to Belgium's complex state structure and the existence of different linguistic spheres. Both regions have their own public debates and post-colonial attitudes, with discussions about the colonial past unfolding differently and at different speeds.[98] Bambi Ceuppens has for example argued that Flemish and francophone Belgian experiences of colonialism were distinct, noting that colonial rule was often perceived in Flanders as an elitist, francophone project. This perception has allowed Flemish actors to distance themselves from political responsibility, despite the significant and widespread involvement of Flemish individuals and institutions in the colonial enterprise.[99] Considered an elitist project, Belgian colonial rule moreover never garnered broad societal support, leading to a relative public disinterest in colonialism in general.[100] Part of the tens of thousands of former colonials who returned to Belgium after independence remained silent about their experiences, either because of shame or because they were traumatized themselves.[101] Others, however, continued to engage and speak out about the colonial project. They organized themselves into various associations, continue to share an often nostalgic view of colonialism through public events and seminars, and advocate for their memories and perspectives to be represented in institutions such as the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren.[102] Starting from the 1980s onwards, critical narratives of colonial violence found their way to the public, not through the work of professional historians, but through the publication of works by novelists and non-academic actors.[103] In schoolbooks, however, dominant discourses remained positive about Belgian rule in Congo, and colonial history is not mandatory in the curricula for Belgian students.[104] In 2021, the average Belgian still had a strikingly limited understanding of

[98] Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium. The Memory of the Congo', *Interventions* 17, no. 3 (2015): 405.

[99] Bambi Ceuppens, 'Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers: Exclusionary Populism in Belgium', *African Studies Review* 49, no. 2 (2006): 147–186.

[100] Martin Ewans, 'Belgium and the Colonial Experience', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003): 174.

[101] Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 37, 192, and 216–217.

[102] Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 218.

An example of this is the association *Mémoires du Congo, du Rwanda et Burundi.* More information on its website: 'Mémoires du Congo', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.memoiresducongo.be/.

[103] Daniel Vangroenweghe, Rood Rubber: Leopold II en Zijn Congo (Davidsfonds 1985); But also for example Hugo Claus' play: Hugo Claus, Het Leven En de Werken van Leopold II: 29 Taferelen Uit de Belgische Oudheid (De Bezige Bij, 1970).

[104] For analyses of approaches to colonialism in Belgian history textbooks, see: Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, 'From Triumphalism to Amnesia. Belgian-Congolese (Post)Colonial History in Belgian Secondary History Education Curricula and Textbooks (1945-1989)', *International Society for History Didactics Yearbook* 35 (2014): 79–100. For an analysis of education on Rwandan history in francophone education in Belgium, see: Catherine Gilbert, 'Confronting the Colonial Past? Genocide Education in Francophone Belgian Schools', in Fraiture, *Unfinished Histories*, 81–100. For an analysis of political decision-making on the colonial past in history teaching, see: Romain Landmeters, 'L'histoire de la colonisation belge à l'école. Décentrement, distanciation, déconstruction', *BePax Analyses*, 2017. https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/fr/object/boreal%3A193191.

the country's colonial past.[105] As demonstrated by a recent study funded by the King Baudouin Foundation, the teaching of colonial history in schools remains one of the central postcolonial demands of Afrodescendants in Belgium.[106]

Simultaneously, material traces of the colonial past remained omnipresent in Belgium's public space. The Belgian colonial project went hand in hand with pro-colonial propaganda in the metropole spanning several decades, and that left its imprint on Belgium's streetscape.[107] King Leopold II, remembered as 'roi bâtiseur' or 'builder king', built monuments and palaces with the profits derived from Congolese 'red rubber' in the Belgian cities of Brussels, Ostend, Antwerp, and others.[108] Pro-colonial propaganda between 1908 and 1960 led to the veneration of colonial 'pioneers', entrepreneurs, and missionaries in monuments and street names throughout Belgium.[109] During the 1920s – and especially throughout the 1930s – the erection of numerous monuments honouring the so-called 'Congo pioneers' in Flanders was closely tied to successful memory activism by associations of colonial circles and former colonials, who actively lobbied local city governments to commemorate their legacy.[110] Traces of colonial stereotyping of racialized people are also still present in various cultural and scientific institutions in Belgium, including the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren.[111] Racialized inequality still structures access to knowledge, resources, citizenship, travel permits, and equal opportunities in education, housing, and employment.[112] Researchers explain the difficult recognition in Belgium of the impact of the colonial past on dynamics and processes within Belgium itself as a result of 'spatiotemporal distancing' of this past. Colonialism was generally seen as something that happened in another, long-gone time, and in another place, in the former colonies, but not in the metropole.[113]

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[105] Although the growing media debate following the Black Lives Matter march brought some improvement, a study by the University of Antwerp showed that, out of ten general knowledge questions, the average Belgian could answer only four correctly. See: Samira Azabar et al., 'Dekolonisering, Erkend Maar Onbeantwoord. Een Onderzoek Naar de Impact van Politisering Op Het Publieke En Politieke Dekoloniseringsdebat in België', unpublished report (Antwerp: University of Antwerp, 2022).

[106] Sarah Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen* (King Baudouin Foundation, 2017), 206.

[107] Ceuppens, Van Reybrouck, and Viaene, *Congo in België: Koloniale Cultuur in de Metropool.*

[108] Debora Silverman, 'Empire as Architecture: Monumental Cities the Congo Built in Belgium', *E-Flux Architecture*, 2024, available at: https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/appropriations/608151/empire-as-architecture-monumental-cities-the-congo-built-in-belgium/

[109] Stanard, *Selling the Congo*; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*.

[110] Verbeke, 'Koloniale dagen en monumenten in Gent', 6.

[111] Maarten Couttenier, 'De Impact van Congo in Het Museum van Belgisch Congo in Tervuren (1897 - 1946)', in *Congo in België. Koloniale Cultuur in de Metropool*, ed. Vincent Viaene, David Van Reybrouck, and Bambi Ceuppens (Leuven University Press, 2009), 116–30.

[112] Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'Bijzondere Commissie Belast Met Het Onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) En Het Belgisch Koloniaal Verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda En Burundi (1919-1962), de Impact Hiervan En de Gevolgen Die Hieraan Dienen Gegeven Te Worden – Verslag van de Deskundigen', 26 October 2021, DOC 55 1462/003, available at: https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462003.pdf

[113] Sarah Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', *African Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (2013): 2.

1.2.2 The Ghosts of King Leopold II and Patrice Lumumba

As Matthew Stanard noted, the gradual development of a more critical public discourse on Belgium's colonial past went hand in hand with a public focus on the so-called two 'bookends' of the colonial period: the violence in the Congo Free State and the figure of King Leopold II, representing the beginning of the colonial period, and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, marking the end of the colonial period.[114] Both bookends were central to the first shift in Belgian colonial memory around the turn of the century.[115] Influenced by international bestsellers, notably Adam Hochschild's 1998 book King Leopold's Ghost, which compared the violence in the colony to the Holocaust, discussions began in Belgium about the number of deaths in the Congo Free State.[116] A BBC documentary loosely based on this book, Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death, further brought this period to the attention of a broad audience. In 1999, the publication of Ludo De Witte's book The Assassination of Lumumba sparked debate about the Belgian government's involvement in the murder. His book led to the creation of a parliamentary inquiry commission, which concluded in 2002 that Belgium bore 'moral', but no 'political', responsibility.[117] Following this, Foreign Minister Louis Michel apologized on behalf of the Belgian state to Patrice Lumumba's family and all Congolese people. However, promised funding for a Patrice Lumumba Foundation never materialized.[118] As Hein Van Hee and Geert Castryck have noted, public debates on the colonial past in these years were often 'largely polarized', oscillating between overly nostalgic perspectives on the one hand and condemning perspectives on the other – the latter often relying on caricatural or 'spectacular' representations of colonial violence.[119] The public attention during this period to the Congo Free State and the assassination of Lumumba led to a first wave of interventions against the many material traces of colonialism in public spaces. In Ostend, the hand of one of the depicted Congolese figures on the equestrian statue of Leopold II was famously chopped off – with the hand missing until this day. In the following years, statues of Leopold II were regularly 'overwritten' with red paint and red sheets in various places in Belgium.[120] While small

[114] Matthew Stanard, review of *The Assassination of Lumumba*, by Ludo De Witte, *H-Empire. H-net reviews*, 2023, https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=58725, 6.

[115] Georgi Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation: Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', in *Politics of Memory and Oblivion in the European Context*, ed. Viktorija L. A. Čeginskas et al. (Routledge, 2021), 11 and 13.

[116] Sarah De Mul, 'The Holocaust as a Paradigm for the Congo Atrocities: Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*', *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (2011): 587–606.

[117] Ewans, 'Belgium and the Colonial Experience', 177.

[118] One of the stated goals of this Foundation was 'to turn a page in history and to support Congo's positive development'. In: Jean Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 44, no. 173–174 (2004): 255.

[119] Vanhee and Castryck, 'Belgische historiografie en verbeelding over het koloniale verleden', 317.

[120] Term borrowed from: Rigney, 'Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change', 20.

actions by Afrodescendants in relation to the colonial past had existed for some time, the turn of the century marked a shift in that the broader, white public slowly became acquainted with new perspectives on colonial history.

1.3 2010 as a Turning Point: Colonial Nostalgia and Decolonial Memory Activisms

1.3.1 The Fiftieth Anniversary of Congo's Independence: Colonial Nostalgia and Renewed Public Interest

A second significant shift occurred in 2010. That year marked the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence and brought renewed public attention to the colonial past. Various cultural productions and exhibitions contributed to this renewed public interest. Historians Idesbald Goddeeris and Sindani Kiangu observed a 'Congomania' during this period, or a renewed historiographical interest in colonial history.[121] For the general, white, public, the work of public historian David Van Reybrouck, Congo: A History, provided a new perspective on the colonial period. Written in an engaging style, the work, unlike those around the turn of the century, presents a less sharp critique of the colonial past and attempts to offer a consensus narrative that transcends polarization – earning Van Reybrouck the criticism of presenting the colonial past in a softened and uncritical manner.[122] At the same time, the period around 2010 saw the publication of numerous books by former colonials that presented a strongly nostalgic view of the colonial period, including ones with titles like Congo: The Best Time of My Life.[123] Political discourse of this period likewise exhibited positive connotations, as exemplified by Louis Michel's assertion that Leopold II should be considered a 'hero for Belgium'.[124] Overall, in the mainstream media the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence in 2010 was

A non-exhaustive list of these actions can be found in the report for the Brussels-Capital Region on pages 20–22 and 28–35. Gia Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep' (Urban Brussels, 2022): https://cloud.urban.brussels/s/aiCpR5pw4j2E9rR

121 Idesbald Goddeeris and Sindani E. Kiangu, 'Congomania in Academia. Recent Historical Research on the Belgian Colonial Past', *BMGN-LCHR (Bijdragen En Mededelingen van de Geschiedenis Der Nederlanden-Low Countries Historical Review)* 126, no. 4 (2011): 54–74.

122 Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 242–243; Goddeeris, 'Congo in Onze Navel. De Omgang Met Het Koloniale Verleden in België En Zijn Buurlanden', 40.

123 Jan Raymaekers and Liesbeth Van den Berghe, *Congo: de schoonste tijd van mijn leven : getuigenissen van oud-kolonialen in woord en beeld* (Van Halewyck, 2009).

124 Flanders News, 'King Leopold II Was a Visionary Hero', *vrtnws.be*, 22 June 2010, available at: https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2010/06/22/_king_leopold_iiwasavisionaryhero-1-808003/

commemorated with largely positive and nostalgic overtones. As reasons for this, Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche cite the public's need for a consensus narrative after years of polarized discussion, the political crises of this period – Belgium had no federal government for eighteen months in 2010–2011 – and the lack of critical Afrodescendant voices in the Belgian public debate.[125]

1.3.2 New Belgo-Congolese and Afrodescendant Mobilizations

In respect to that latter point, however, 2010 also marked a turning point. Critical memory practices around the colonial past that already existed on the margins found their way to the broader public in a process that gradually turned, in the words of Jenny Wüstenberg, 'memory work' into contentious 'memory protest'.[126] According to Sarah Demart, 'the feeling of not having been heard' during the 2010 celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence led to an increase in Belgo-Congolese demonstrations.[127] In 2008, the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales was founded, a collective of various civil society organizations and intellectuals focused on mapping and critically questioning colonial heritage. Around 2010, they developed their first decolonial historical tours in Brussels. A few years later, the collective was reinvented by Afrodescendant activists to the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales et Lutte Contre les Discriminations, explicitly articulating the link between colonial memory and the fight against anti-Black racism and discrimination in Belgium. It is a good example of the rise of a new generation of Afrodescendant activists who, during this period, began to connect their fight against racism with a denunciation of Belgium's handling of its colonial past to a broad audience. The nostalgic narratives present in exhibitions and commemorations around 2010, as well as the lack of space for critical Afrodescendant voices, became the focus of new grassroots mobilizations. These 'dissident voices' are strongly intertwined with the arts field, and the distinction between academics, activists, and artists is sometimes difficult to make in these grassroots mobilizations.[128] From roughly 2015–2017, the notion of 'decolonization' became a shared denominator.[129]

Characteristic of these social movements is the rapid succession of sometimes very small organizations that depend on the unpredictable agendas and time investment of volunteers and, in some cases, the availability of government funding. Alliances between organizations are sometimes temporary, depending on a specific campaign, and the lifespan of some associations is short. In short, it is a network of social movements that was constantly evolving while I

[125] Goddeeris et al., 'Het Koloniale Verleden Door Een Belgische Bril: Van Witte Nostalgie Naar Een Veelkleurig Debat', 380.
[126] Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*, 18.
[127] Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 9.
[128] Sarah Demart and Gia Abrassart, *Créer en postcolonie 2010-2015: voix et dissidences belgo-congolaises* (BOZAR & Africalia, 2016).
[129] Sarah Demart, *La fiction postraciale belge: antiracisme afrodescendant, féminisme et aspirations décoloniales*, 9.

conducted this doctoral research and still is. Their development from 2010 onwards cannot be explained merely by succession of generations, as different generations are active alongside each other in these movements.[130] Nevertheless, their proliferation went hand in hand with new attitudes towards both the colonial past and the Belgian state among new generations of Afrodescendants born in Belgium who express themselves more assertively from a (double) identity as Belgians.[131] On both the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking sides, besides artists, African student associations also played a role in bringing together like-minded people during their university studies and in mobilizing.[132] This role of student associations in Afrodescendant mobilization is not new but dates back to the early twentieth century. As I will show later, historically, a significant share of sub-Saharan African migration to Belgium consists of student migration, where scholarship students temporarily settled in Belgium, and it only became clear much later that their temporary stay took on a more permanent form. Student associations have historically played a central role in advocating for Afrodescendants in Belgium and also in the development of the decolonial memory activist movements between 2010 and 2021.

1.3.2.1 Diversity of Decolonial Memory Activist Actors

Due to the variability and volatility of this network, creating a complete overview of all the actors that have developed since 2010 in both Dutch- and French-speaking Belgium is a difficult task. However, it is possible to provide an outline of the network of actors who have put colonial memory on the political agenda over the past decade. On the Dutch-speaking side, Decolonize Belgium, Belgian Renaissance, and Black Speaks Back spearheaded the debate, supported by the African student associations Kilalo and African Youth Organization (AYO) in Antwerp and Umoja in Ghent.[133] In 2020, these networks gave rise to the national organization Black History Month Belgium, which aims to place Black history more centrally

[130] Sarah Demart raises this point in her forthcoming book *La fiction postraciale belge: antiracisme afrodescendant, féminisme et aspirations décoloniales* on page 16. See: Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge: Antiracisme Afrodescendant, Féminisme et Aspirations Décoloniales*, 16. On the risks of taking 'generation' as an explanatory category for different memory regimes, see this beautiful short piece by Wulf Kansteiner: Wulf Kansteiner, 'Moral Pitfalls of Memory Studies: The Concept of Political Generations', *Memory Studies* 5, no. 2 (2012): 111–13.

[131] Ted Bwatu, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 20 January 2018; Odon Kawaya Meya and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'Tensions intergénérationnelles au sein de familles belgo-congolaises. Transmissions entre rupture et continuité', in *Migration subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique. À la croisée des regards*, ed. Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (L'Harmattan, 2014), 198.

[132] On Afrodescendant student trajectories and Pan-African associations, see: Nicole Grégoire, 'Redéfinir les frontières de l'entre-soi en situation postmigratoire', in Mazzocchetti, *Migration subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique*, 470.

[133] On Decolonize Belgium's actions in the Belgian town of Wilrijk, see: Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 221. For more information on the work of the cited associations, I encourage readers to visit their websites or online platforms: 'Belgian Renaissance', accessed 28 April 2025, https://belgianrenaissance.tumblr.com/?fbclid=IwY2xjawIybbRleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHUW985f3ZP8rdNC7aHX9lDhOutRf6w6nS62r-MevaBsZenCgw_nza_TqGQ_aem_jLwyN_M1EbMmQAGrhTuNTQ, 'Black Speaks Back', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.blackspeaksback.com/, 'Kilalo', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/kilalodebrug/, 'AYO', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.afroyouthorg.be/, 'Umoja Ghent', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.instagram.com/umojagent/

in the Belgian public space.[134] On the French-speaking side, centred in the capital Brussels, we find a mix of older Afrodescendant organizations that existed before 2010, including Ba Ya Ya and Bakushinta, and organizations that emerged after 2010, including BAMKO-CRAN (now Fémïya), Collectif Présences Noires, Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD), La Nouvelle Voie Anticoloniale, Change, and Collectif Susu, and since 2020, the Belgian Network for Black Lives.[135] Closely connected to these associations are Afrodescendant artist collectives such as Café Congo and Warrior Poets.[136] Memory activist actions were also set up by various artists, including Toma Muteba Luntumbue, Laura Nsengiyumva, and Rhode Makoumbou; by white intellectuals and activists, including Lucas Catherine and Théophile De Giraud, and 'artivist' collectives Collectif Manifestement and the Belgo-Congolese Collectif Faire-Part.[137] Student associations include Kilimandjaro at Université Saint-Louis in the centre of Brussels and the Pan African Circle at Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve. In the development of memory activist campaigns, these collectives have sought alliances with white anti-racisms, international solidarity, or other decolonial organizations, such as International Action for Liberation (INTAL); Mouvement Contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX); Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes Illégitimes (CADTM); and Bruxelles Panthères in Brussels, and Hand in Hand tegen Racisme and Labo in Flanders. Though often explicitly anti-establishment or pessimistic about radical change stemming from Belgium's political, cultural, and academic institutions, some collectives have over the years established close ties with politicians, predominantly in the left-wing parties, the Parti du Travail de Belgique/Partij Van De Arbeid België, and the green parties Ecolo and Groen, or with employees in cultural institutions. In Brussels, where a more critical tradition of post- and decolonial scholarship exists compared to Flanders, activists often also maintain close ties with academics.

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[134] 'Black History Month Belgium', accessed 28 April 2025, https://blackhistorymonth.be/
For a history of Black History Month Belgium in relation to other European black history initiatives, see: Samuel vander Straeten, 'Zwarte Zichtbaarheid Creëren in Verleden, Heden En Toekomst. Empowerment En Emancipatie Bij Europese Black History-Initiatieven (2016-2022)', (Master's thesis., Ghent University, 2022).

[135] 'Observatoire Ba Ya Ya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://observatoirebayaya.wixsite.com/observatoirebayaya/lasbl-bayaya; 'Bakushinta,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bakushinta.org/; 'Fémïya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://femiyaasbl.wixsite.com/my-site-1/formations; 'Présences Noires,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.cadtm.org/Veronique-Clette-Gakuba-Ce-qui-est-pose-comme-un-etat-de-fait-c-est-que-l; 'Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/; 'La Nouvelle Voie Anticoloniale,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://joc.be/la-nouvelle-voie-anticoloniale-le-manifeste/; 'Change,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.changeasbl.org/; 'Collectif Susu,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.instagram.com/collectifsusu/; 'Belgian Network for Black Lives,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/BN4BL/.

[136] 'Café Congo,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/cafecongo.be/?locale=fr_FR; 'Warrior Poets,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/warriorpoetsbxl/.

[137] 'Collectif manifestement', accessed 28 April 2025, https://manifestement.be/; 'Collectif Faire-Part', Collectif Faire-Part, accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.collectif-fairepart.com.

1.3.2.2 Decolonial Memory Campaigns

This heterogeneous network of actors is united by a shared political claim linking contemporary struggles for racial justice in Belgium to the colonial injustice. Yet the strategies they employ and the specific demands they articulate vary widely. Over the past decade, activists have launched a wide range of campaigns, yet the public articulation of the so-called 'decolonial moment' has largely been shaped by a handful of highly visible and mediatized initiatives.

One of the most prominent of these was the campaign to name a public square in Brussels after Patrice Lumumba (cf. Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 in this dissertation). After years of grassroots struggle and the formation of an activist coalition in 2015, the square was officially inaugurated in Brussels in 2018. Another key moment came in 2017, when the Afrofeminist organization BAMKO-CRAN, under the leadership of Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, initiated a public campaign calling for the restitution of African cultural objects and human remains held in Belgian museums and scientific institutions. An open letter, published on 25 September 2018, urged the Belgian government and relevant authorities to return these looted items to their countries of origin.[138] Through Robert's lobbying efforts, the campaign led to a debate in the Francophone Parliament of Brussels on 16 October 2018, under the title 'Restitution of African Cultural Properties: Moral or Legal Question?'.[139] The timing of this campaign coincided with the long-anticipated reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), or AfricaMuseum, in Tervuren – an institution that historically functioned as a colonial propaganda tool of King Leopold II and was described by its former director himself as 'one of the last colonial museums in the world'.[140] After five years of renovations, the museum reopened on 9 December 2018.[141] The reopening, as well as the claim of some employees that the institution had 'decolonized' itself, triggered a wave of highly publicized critique from Afrodescendant actors, as well as (former) employees and white experts, who challenged the museum's representation of colonialism in its permanent exhibition and questioned the colonial logic underpinning its collections, demanding to take up the question

[138] Un collectif de signatures, 'Carte blanche: la Belgique est à la traîne sur la restitution des trésors coloniaux', *Le Soir*, 25 September 2018, https://www.lesoir.be/180528/article/2018-09-25/carte-blanche-la-belgique-est-la-traine-sur-la-restitution-des-tresors-coloniaux

[139] '16 octobre 2018 - jeudi de l'hémicycle: restitution des biens culturels africains: question morale ou juridique?', https://www.parlementfrancophone.brussels/activites/evenements/precedentes-legislatures/legislature-2014-2019/2018-2019/16-octobre-2018-jeudi-de-lhemicycle-restitution-des-biens-culturels-africains-question-morale-ou-juridique, n.d.

[140] Guido Gryseels et al., 'Integrating the Past: Transformation and Renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium', *European Review* 13, no. 4 (2005): 637.

[141] The museum's permanent exhibition had not been substantially renovated since the 1950s, prior to Congo's, Rwanda's, and Burundi's independence.

for restitution.[142] At the same time, these critics highlighted the lack of structural inclusion of Afrodescendant voices in the museum's governance and curatorial decisions.[143]

Parallel to these developments, the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD) undertook a sustained lobbying campaign – largely behind the scenes – to make colonial history a mandatory subject in francophone education curricula.[144] During the same years, grassroots action brought public attention to the 'stolen generation' of métis children – born to African mothers and (usually white) Belgian fathers.[145] The Belgian colonial administration viewed them as a threat to the rigid racial hierarchies of the colony, resulting in their forced removal and long-lasting separation from their families and cultural roots, persisting well beyond political decolonization.[146] Beyond these efforts to reckon with colonial history and memory, a variety of initiatives emerged that sought broader recognition and celebration of Black history in the public domain. One example is the launch of Black History Month Belgium, aiming to create visibility for Black histories beyond the narrow frame

[142] During a public debate in Antwerp, former director Guido Gryseels, for instance, claimed the new permanent exhibition radically broke with its colonial past. Author's Field Notes, 'Het Einde van de Witte Wereld': Dekolonisatiedebat in De Roma' (event organized by De Roma), 11 September 2018, Antwerp. See as well: Berber Bevernage and Eline Mestdagh, 'The Elephant in the Room: How the AfricaMuseum Has (Not) Shed Its Colonial "Curse"', in *Jelena Juresa: Aphasia*, ed. Jelena Juresa (ARGOS Centre for Art and Media, 2019), 214–225; Véronique Clette-Gakuba, 'An Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation in a White Institution: The Case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium', in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, ed. Marina Gržinić et al. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 48–66.

[143] Author's Field Notes, 'Décoloniser les musées', discussion with Bruno Verbergt, Georgine Dibua, Anne Westi Mpoma, and Véronique Clette-Gakuba (event organized by Bamko-Cran at Pianofabriek) (Brussels, 18 November 2017). See as well: Clette-Gakuba, 'An Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation in a White Institution: The Case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium', 48–66.

[144] Juliette Bossé, 'L'histoire coloniale, outil de lutte contre le racisme. Interview avec Kalvin Soiresse Njall', La Ligue de l'Enseignement et de l'Éducation permanente, 20 December 2020, https://ligue-enseignement.be/lhistoire-coloniale-outil-de-lutte-contre-le-racisme; Geneviève Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium', in Gržinić et al., *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism*, 45.

[145] Lissia Jeurissen, 'Métis: le retour des vieux démons coloniaux', *Politique. Revue belge d'analyse et de débat*, 65 Le Congo dans nos têtes (3 June 2010), https://www.revuepolitique.be/metis-le-retour-des-vieux-demons/

[146] As I was writing this dissertation, Belgium's court of appeal ruled that this 'systematic kidnapping' of mixed-race children is a crime against humanity. See: Jennifer Rankin, 'Court Ruling on Belgium's Conduct in Colonial Africa Hailed as Turning Point', *The Guardian*, 12 January 2025, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/12/court-ruling-crimes-against-humanity-belgium-colonial-africa-hailed-turning-point. For an overview of the state of the art on the history of forced displacement of métis children during Belgian colonialism, see: Assumani Budagwa, *Noirs, Blancs, Métis. La Belgique et la ségrégation des métis du Congo-Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi (1908-1960)* (Assumani Budagwa, 2014); Kathleen Ghequière and Sibo Kanobana, *De Bastaards van Onze Kolonie. Verzwegen Verhalen van Belgische Metissen* (Roularta Books, 2010) and Sarah Heynssens, *De kinderen van Save* (Polis, 2017). On métis mobilizations between 2010 and 2021, see: Nicole Grégoire, 'Postcolonial Belgium and Reparatory Justice: The Case of the "Colonial Métis"', in Gržinić et al., *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism*, 67–87. For more information about the work of Métis de Belgique/Metissen van België, see: *Metis België*, "Wij Zijn/Nous Sommes," accessed 28 April 2025, http://metisbe.squarespace.com/wij-zijn-nous-sommes.

of colonialism.[147] Following the historic Black Lives Matter march on 7 June 2020, police violence against Black individuals also increasingly became a theme in public discourse. Together these campaigns – focused on public space, restitution, institutional accountability, and reparative justice – generated visual and symbolic interventions that circulated widely through both traditional and social media. Their visibility helped politicize colonial memory during the 2010 decade, turning it into a central public axis of anti-racist mobilization.

In the chapters that follow, this dissertation will examine three campaigns within this wider landscape. The **first** concerns the 'decolonization of public space'. While decolonial activism targeting colonial monuments and street names in Belgium has a long and varied history, this study concentrates specifically on the campaign developed by the CMCLD (established in 2012) from roughly 2010 onward.[148] This campaign is defined by a repertoire of actions that includes public decolonial walking tours on colonial history, political lobbying of local governments to remove or contextualize monuments, and a public discourse akin to moral remembrance and the 'duty to remember'. In the context of this first campaign, the dissertation also includes the struggle for Lumumba Square, which originated in the Matonge neighbourhood (cf. Chapter 2 and 3). In this effort, the Collectif formed a coalition with several other organizations, including Intal Congo, BAMKO-CRAN, and Change. The **second** campaign concerns the activism of Change (established in 2013). Although publicly involved in the campaign to decolonize public space, Change initially focused on supporting and empowering racialized youth in socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods in Brussels, where the phenomenon of 'bandes urbaines' posed pressing social challenges for young people and their families. Their campaign for dignity and recognition of racialized youth as equal Belgian citizens has largely taken place outside the media spotlight. It is characterized by a rejection of the intellectualized discourse of moral remembrance, instead mobilizing memory as part of an existential project of informal repair. The **third** campaign unfolded in response to the creation of Belgium's parliamentary Congo Commission and was developed by BAMKO-CRAN (established in 2015). In reaction to the fact that Afrodescendant voices were initially excluded from the commission – and later mostly included in representative, not expert, roles – BAMKO-CRAN launched an alternative grassroots truth commission. This campaign is marked by a strategic essentialism that emphasizes lived experience over 'historical truth'. Its central concern lies not with the material representations of colonial memory in the public sphere, but with the racialized structures that determine whose narratives are recognized as legitimate expertise.

147 *Black History Month Belgium*, "About," accessed 28 April 2025, https://blackhistorymonth.be/about/.

148 Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 42–43.

1.4 The Turn to Memorial Justice in Belgian Anti-Racism

1.4.1 When It Rains in France (and Elsewhere), It Drizzles in Belgium[149]

The decolonial 'turn to memorial justice', as Françoise Vergès called it, is not an isolated phenomenon.[150] French thinker Norman Ajari identified a wave of 'decolonial iconoclasm' in France directed at monuments evocative of the colonial past.[151] Mobilizations around colonial memory abroad usually found their resonance in Belgium. The 2015 action for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town, South Africa, under the banner 'Decolonize', gave impetus to the establishment of Decolonize Belgium in the same year.[152] In 2017, the demonstration in Charlottesville, United States, against the statue of Robert E. Lee also stimulated public debate about colonial monuments in Belgium.[153] The report on the restitution of African objects published in France by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy reopened the debate on restitution launched by BAMKO-CRAN in 2017 and framed the reopening of the AfricaMuseum the following year in a new light.[154] The Belgian proliferation of decolonial memory activism and its claims thus has to be situated within a global development in which post-imperial nations are confronted with grassroots mobilizations advocating for reparative and memorial justice for colonialism and slavery.[155] Reflecting on these mobilizations, scholars examining the Dutch and French contexts have identified what they call a 'new wave' of anti-racist activisms.[156] This wave stands apart from earlier ones through its explicit discursive

[149] Common Dutch expression meaning that developments in France often have a ripple effect in (francophone) Belgium.

[150] Françoise Vergès, *La Mémoire enchaînée. Questions sur l'esclavage* (Albin Michel, 2010), 100.

[151] Joachim Ben Yakoub, 'De maakbaarheid van geschiedenis : over de strijd voor memoriële gerechtigheid in België', *Tijdschrift voor Mensenrechten* 18, no. 3 (2020): 31.

[152] Seckou Ouleguem, interview by Eline Mestdagh, online, 20 January 2018; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 211; Joachim Ben Yakoub and Gia Abrassaert, 'La chasse aux spectres monumentaux dans la Belgique congolaise', in *Créer en postcolonie: 2010-2015: voix et dissidences belgo-congolaises* (BOZAR & Africalia, 2016), 133.

[153] Goddeeris et al., 'Het Koloniale Verleden Door Een Belgische Bril: Van Witte Nostalgie Naar Een Veelkleurig Debat', 382.

[154] Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain* (Philippe Rey, 2018).

[155] Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Dietmar Rothermund, *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[156] Philomena Essed identified a 'second wave' in Dutch resistance against racism: Philomena Essed, 'Afterword: A Second Wave of Dutch Resistance Against Racism', *Frame* 1, no. 27 (2014): 135–41. More on the Netherlands, for example: Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, *Dutch Racism* (Rodopi, 2014); Melissa F. Weiner et al., *Smash the Pillars: Decoloniality and the Imaginary of Color in the Dutch Kingdom* (Lexington Books, 2018); Markus Balkenhol, 'The Changing Aesthetics of Savagery: Slavery, Belonging, and Post-Colonial Melancholia in the Netherlands', *Etnofoor* 22, no. 2 (2010): 71–89; Markus Balkenhol and Yannick Coenders, 'Metahistory as Diaspora Practice: Mobilising the Dutch Black Radical Tradition', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 18 (2021): 4256–4268. On France, see: Arnaud

linking of structural racism to the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism. What binds recent Afrodescendant anti-racist movements across various European contexts is a shared activist repertoire that foregrounds public memory of the colonial past. Following Philemona Essed's observations on the Netherlands, Nadia Fadil and Marco Martiniello found Afrodescendant mobilizations around colonial memory indicative of a new wave of Belgian anti-racist mobilization as well.[157] To what extent claims for decolonial memorial justice are truly 'new' in Belgium remains until today a matter of debate, as research into Afrodescendant mnemonic practices in earlier decades is still in flux.[158] Regardless of whether claims related to colonial memory existed before, many scholars agree that the decade represents a noticeable shift on at least two fronts. First, it shifted mainstream anti-racism discourse away from the language of multiculturalism, super-diversity, and integration, towards a framework centred on colonial legacies and decolonization. Second, in the history of Afrodescendant activism in Belgium, it marked a transition from public claims focused primarily on contemporary racisms and anti-discrimination to demands that explicitly link contemporary struggles to reparative justice for enduring colonial injustice.

1.4.2 A New Political Discourse of Anti-Racism in the Mainstream

The rise of activist narratives for the recognition of colonial memory meant, as Sibo Kanobana has noted, an overall shift in Belgian discourses of anti-racism.[159] Before the 2010 decade, dominant terminology in Belgian institutionalized anti-racism and among the public centred on culturalist languages of 'multiculturalism', '(super)diversity', and 'immigration'.[160] In the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, in response to the rise of the far-right Vlaams Blok in the early 1990s, the fight against Islamophobia was central to many mainstream anti-racism associations.[161] In line with a larger European trend, or what Etienne Balibar has called 'racism

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Alessandrin, *L'antiracisme en France: enjeux, métamorphoses et controverses au prisme du décès de George Floyd* (L'Harmattan, 2023). And specifically Pauline Picot's analyses of shifting languages of anti-racism: Pauline Picot, 'Quelques usages militants du concept de racisme institutionnel: le discours antiraciste postcolonial (France, 2005-2015)', *Migrations société* 163, no. 1 (2016): 47–60.

[157] Fadil and Martiniello, 'Racisme et antiracisme en Belgique', 8.

[158] See, for example, the recent research project by Ilke Adam, Bambi Ceuppens, and Fatima Zibouh, and the translation of their research to a broader audience through their online platform First Waves. Forthcoming publication: Ilke Adam et al., 'The Pioneers of (the New) Anti-Racism in Belgium', in *A New Wave of Anti-Racism in Europe? Racialized Minorities at the Centre*, ed. Ilke Adam et al., IMISCOE Book Series (Springer, in press). Online platform: 'First Waves,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.firstwaves.be/en/nodes/pages/first-waves/.

[159] Kanobana, 'Black Brussels', 49.

[160] For a history of 'multiculturalism' and 'superdiversity' in Flemish anti-racism, see for example: Karel Arnaut et al., *Een leeuw in een kooi: de grenzen van het multiculturele Vlaanderen* (Meulenhoff Manteau, 2009); Ico Maly et al., *Superdiversiteit en democratie* (Epo, 2014).

[161] This is evident, for instance, in Anja Detant's discourse analysis of the organization Hand in Hand, which played a central role in mainstream anti-racism in the 1990s and continued to do so for many years thereafter. See: Anja Detant, 'The Politics of Anti-Racism in Belgium: A Qualitative Analysis of the Discourse of the Anti-Racist Movement Hand in Hand in the 1990s', *Ethnicities* 5, no. 2 (2005): 183–215.

without race', mainstream anti-racist discourse primarily framed racial discrimination in cultural and religious terms rather than through the lens of race and coloniality.[162] In the French-speaking region, the anti-racism struggle during the second half of the twentieth century was strongly linked to the fight against anti-Semitism.[163] Self-perceptions of 'colourblindness', influenced by French assimilationist ideas, have for a long time limited the possibilities for a public articulation of anti-racist discourse problematizing race, anti-Blackness, and coloniality.[164] According to Sibo Kanobana, this makes Belgium a 'textbook example of "white amnesia"' in which colonial violence as well as anti-colonial resistance is forgotten.[165] Sarah Demart has argued that this historical invisibilisation of racial logic in Belgian discussions on multiculturalism has hindered the public formulation of post- and decolonial claims.[166] The shift from 2010 onwards to languages of 'colonial legacies', 'coloniality', and 'decolonization' is therefore significant. Pushed by Afrodescendant grassroots actions, a multitude of civil society organizations and the white mainstream anti-racism organizations Hand in Hand tegen Racisme in the Dutch-speaking region and Mouvement Contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX) in the French-speaking region gradually adopted similar languages and repertoires, thereby contributing to their visibility in the mainstream. The mainstream arts scene aided this growing visibility. As an example can be cited the Dutch-language art criticism magazine *Rekto:Verso*, which provided a platform for Afrodescendant decolonial voices and dedicated an entire issue to decolonization in 2018, widely picked up in the sector. Similarly, the Beursschouwburg in Brussels provided a platform for discussions on decolonization, including its event 'The Big Conversation on Decolonisation' in March 2018. More research is needed to untangle the different meanings each of these actors has assigned to the term 'decolonization' and how these relate to the claims of the activists in this dissertation. But their engagement with the notion in itself demonstrates that decolonial memory activists between 2010 and 2021 brought critical discourse on Belgium's colonial past from the margins to the centre of the public debate on race and racism.

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[162] Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (Verso, 1991), 21–24. Studying the history of anti-racism in (Western) Europe, Alana Lentin has shown how institutional and state-sponsored approaches have often framed racism as a cultural clash, thereby depoliticizing its structural and colonial roots. In contrast, she highlights the more radical, self-organized forms of anti-colonial anti-racism that challenge these culturalist framings. See: Alana Lentin, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Europe* (Pluto Press, 2004), 72–112.

[163] The history of the Mouvement Contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX), historically one of the central non-profit organizations dedicated to combating racism in francophone Belgium, is for example closely tied to the struggle against anti-Semitism. It was established right after World War II by former resistance fighters, and it initially focused on addressing the situation of Jews in Belgium. Over time, its mission expanded to encompass broader issues of discrimination and support for immigrant communities.

[164] Ceuppens, 'Allochthons, Colonizers, and Scroungers', 147.

[165] Kanobana, 'Black Brussels', 51.

[166] Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 12.

1.4.3 A New Type of Public Afrodescendant Claim-Making

The rise of Afrodescendant activism centred on colonial memory reflects a notable shift in the nature of political claims compared to earlier waves of Afrodescendant mobilization in Belgium. Whereas previous forms of activism often focused primarily on anti-discrimination and demands for equal rights in the present, the memory-based activism of the 2010s increasingly linked those contemporary struggles to historical injustices rooted in Belgium's colonial past. This shift also played a key role in the gradual emergence of a more collective and visible Afrodescendant political subject in the Belgian public sphere. Compared to neighbouring countries such as France or the UK, where postcolonial migration and Afrodescendant organizing have a longer history, this process developed more slowly in Belgium due to the delayed and atypical nature of postcolonial migration.

1.4.3.1 Specifics of Belgian Postcolonial Immigration

Sub-Saharan African immigration to Belgium is deeply entangled with the country's colonial history. Rooted in colonial ideologies, Belgian state-endorsed anti-migration policies actively sought to prevent permanent migration from its colonies to prevent undermining Belgium's perceived white racial homogeneity.[167] This specific historical context renders sub-Saharan African migration to Belgium, particularly from its former colonies Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, an atypical phenomenon, in comparison both to other European countries and to other migratory flows within Belgium in that 'far from being the fruit of public measures, it is the fruit of individual initiatives'.[168] Although the presence of people of African descent on Belgian soil dates back to at least the sixteenth century, it is only in the past few decades that their numbers have grown significantly.[169] Historically, Congolese presence in Belgium was limited to small numbers of students, soldiers, clerks, and Congolese brought to Belgium within the framework of colonial exhibitions such as the infamous *zoo humains* of Belgium's World Exhibitions in, for example, Antwerp in 1894 and in Tervuren in 1897.[170] More structured migration patterns emerged only post-1960, when Congo gained independence, and only

[167] Bonaventure Kagné, 'L'immigration d'origine subsaharienne avant 1960: *CRISP* 1712, no. 15 (2001): 6.

[168] Bonaventure Kagné and Marco Martiniello, *L'immigration subsaharienne en Belgique* (CRISP, 2001), 48. In other European countries, migration from the colonies was sometimes state-endorsed; see: Ulbe Bosma, 'Introduction: Post-Colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands', in *Post-Colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands*, ed. Ulbe Bosma (Amsterdam University Press, 2012). Belgian migration history has been strongly shaped by labour migration from southern European countries, such as Italy, and later from Turkey and the Maghreb. This migration was supported by the state through bilateral agreements. See: Anne Morelli, *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en Belgique de la préhistoire à nos jours*, Petite bibliothèque de la citoyenneté (Couleur livres, 2004).

[169] Mazzocchetti, 'Introduction: Migrations subsahariennes et "condition noire" en Belgique', 6.

[170] Anne Cornet wrote a brief historical overview, discussing the specific modes of Congolese migration to Belgium throughout the periods of the Congo Free State and Belgian Congo, and after Congo's independence. See: Anne Cornet, 'Migrations subsahariennes en Belgique. Une approche historique et historiographique', in Mazzocchetti, *Migrations subsahariennes et condition noire En Belgique*, 39–64.

gradually. One of the rare ways Congolese individuals could migrate to Belgium was as students.[171] A significant proportion of Congolese migrants arriving in the 1960s and 1970s were thus scholarship students sponsored by the Zairian state, often seeking ways to extend their stay in the face of strict Belgian immigration policies aimed at ensuring their return.[172] These students – many of whom belonged to Congolese elites – would eventually go on to form the core of early associational life and activist networks in Belgium, organizing themselves in transnational networks.[173] The generally highly educated profile of this group sets them apart from historical labour migration to Belgium from southern Europe, Turkey, and the Maghreb, which primarily consisted of peasants and individuals with lower levels of education.[174] In the following two decades, besides this growing group of now permanently staying 'temporary' students, the group of (political) refugees and asylum seekers also grew.[175] Their migration histories are strongly linked to the successive periods of post-colonial unrest in Congo and Rwanda and must be studied in connection to those developments.[176] Migration historians more specifically see a growth in numbers during 1991–1993, when military unrest grew in Congo, and from 1998 onwards, because of the civil wars in Eastern Congo and the Ugandan/Rwandan aggression.[177]

Today, Belgium's Afrodescendant population remains relatively small – estimated at around 3 per cent of the national population in 2023 – but is incredibly diverse in terms of migration histories, legal statuses, and socio-economic profiles.[178] While people coming from Belgium's former colonies still make up the majority of Afrodescendants in Belgium (about 60%), more recent arrivals from Cameroon, Guinea, Togo, Ivory Coast, and Senegal have contributed to

171 Cornet, 'Migrations subsahariennes en Belgique', 55.

172 Anton Tarradellas and Romain Landmeters, 'Les mobilités des étudiantes et des étudiants africains: une histoire transnationale de l'Afrique depuis la décolonisation', *Diasporas. Circulations, migrations, histoire*, no. 37 (2021): 7–21.

173 Romain Landmeters, 'Les étudiants congolais à Bruxelles dans les années 1950. Acteurs de la décolonisation et avant-gardes des diasporas', *Diasporas. Circulations, migrations, histoire*, no. 37 (2021): 23. For a comprehensive study of the role of international Congolese students in the development of anti-colonial ideas during decolonization, see: Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo*, Theory in Forms (Duke University Press, 2022).

174 Bruno Schoumaker and Quentin Schoonvaere, 'L'immigration subsaharienne en Belgique. Etats des lieux et tendances récentes', in Mazzocchetti, *Migration subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique*, 74.

175 Eva Swyngedouw and Erik Swyngedouw, 'The Congolese Diaspora in Brussels and Hybrid Identity Formation: Multi-Scalarity and Diasporic Citizenship', *Urban Research & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2009): 71.

176 Bruno Schoumaker et al., 'Political Turmoil, Economic Crises, and International Migration in DR Congo. Evidence from Event-History Data (1975-2007)', *MAFE Working Paper* 2 (2010), available at https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:181403

177 Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 6.

178 Statbel, "Population Structure by Origin," accessed 28 April 2025, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population/structure-population/origin#news.

an increasingly heterogenous group.[179] Overall, Afrodescendants in Belgium remain a highly educated demographic compared to other racialized minorities and compared to the Belgian national average.[180] Most of them live in urbanized and French-speaking regions in Belgium, predominantly in the Brussels-Capital Region.[181] Afrodescendants in Belgium have historically been much more socially and politically active than other diasporas in Belgium.[182] As Nicole Grégoire has shown, having a 'career' in a variety of political and social organizations has often been seen among Afrodescendant elites in Belgium as an important part of one's trajectory as an 'immigrant', and considered to be beneficial to advancing professional careers either on the African continent or in Belgium.[183]

1.4.3.2 The Long Genealogy of Afrodescendant Mobilizations for Racial Justice

Afrodescendant mobilization for racial equality is as old as the migration of Afrodescendants to Belgium. As early as 1919, Paul Panda Farnana founded the Union Congolaise, an association bringing together Congolese students, war veterans, and workers in Brussels, with the aim of fostering intellectual development and political consciousness among Congolese in the metropole.[184] As Afrodescendant migration to Belgium gradually expanded, it was accompanied by the emergence of a rich and diverse associational life within diasporic communities. From the 1960s onward, this landscape took shape through a wide variety of women's groups and religious, professional, political, and especially student organizations, all of them inherently transnational in nature.[185] Reconstructing the histories of these groups and their political activities remains a complex task and well beyond the scope of this dissertation: many operated informally, without legal status or archival preservation, resulting in a historical

[179] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 38. Sub-Saharan African migration to Belgium reflects a variety of motivations, which differ depending on background and legal status. For Rwandans and Burundians, war has been the primary cause of migration, while for Congolese educational opportunities, and family reasons are primary drivers, followed by conflict in more recent decades. Migrants from other francophone sub-Saharan African countries typically migrate in the context of studies or family reunion. See: Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 51–52.

[180] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 59.

[181] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 38.

[182] Barbara Herman and Rebecca Thys, 'La participation politique des immigrés congolais. Etude sur le territoire bruxellois', in Mazzocchetti, *Migration subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique*, 403–27.

[183] Grégoire, 'Redéfinir les frontières de l'entre-soi en situation postmigratoire', 460.

[184] The association later established chapters in Liège and Charleroi. Its political vision was explicitly anti-colonial, opposing the paternalism and racism of Belgian colonialism. Farnana emphasized the importance of education, dignity, and recognition for Congolese people in Belgium. To this day, Paul Panda Farnana and the Union Congolaise are regarded as a historical foundation for the later development of Congolese and Afrodescendant mobilizations in Belgium. Farnana is still remembered across various diasporas as 'the first Congolese intellectual' in Belgium and a symbol of early anti- and decolonial resistance in Belgium. See, for example: Antoine Tshitungu Kongolo and Henri Mova Sakanyi, *Visages de Paul Panda Farnana: Nationaliste, panafricaniste, intellectuel engagé* (L'Harmattan, 2011). For more information on Union Congolaise, see: Zana Etambala, 'Brève histoire de la diaspora congolaise', *Politique* 65 (2010): 24.

[185] Kagné and Martiniello, *L'immigration subsaharienne en Belgique*, 35–38.

record that is both fragmented and underexplored.[186] Thus to this day, our understanding of Afrodescendant associational life in Belgium, especially before the 1990s, remains partial – highlighting a critical task for future historians to further document these histories. Notably, decolonial memory activists are today increasingly assuming this role themselves, developing their own archival practices to document and preserve the legacies of earlier generations.[187] A substantial share of Afrodescendant political mobilizations in Belgium historically centred on 'homeland politics', with diasporic communities actively engaging with developments on the African continent and holding the Belgian state accountable for its postcolonial responsibilities – particularly in relation to ongoing instability in the Democratic Republic of Congo.[188]

Afrodescendant mobilizations for equal rights in Belgium historically emerged from a context in which an elite of predominantly Congolese 'career students' – accumulating courses and diplomas to extend their stay in Belgium – started asserting their status as 'immigrants' to improve the precarious social conditions they faced.[189] In this regard, associations of Congolese students in Belgium initially played a central role.[190] The 1990s were crucial for the development of Afrodescendant social movements as they emerged in the 2010s. That decade witnessed, in the words of Bonaventure Kagné and Marco Martiniello, the gradual shift from migrant associations 'primarily directed toward the social and political evolution of the country of origin', to associations increasingly focused on 'improving the living conditions of their members within the [Belgian] Kingdom'.[191] The decade also witnessed a certain professionalization and formalization, and what Joseph Gatugu has called an 'associational efflorescence', in which a more structured Afrodescendant associational landscape began to emerge.[192] Associations started organizing themselves within the legal framework of non-profit organizations ('associations sans but lucratif', or ASBLs).[193] This went hand in hand with the development of a multifaceted Afrodescendant

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[186] Pierre Petit and Nicole Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics Within a Changing Context: Belgian Pan-African Associations in a Comparative Perspective', in *The Others in Europe*, ed. Saskia Bonjour, Adrea Rea, and Dirk Jacobs (Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2011), 152.

[187] The importance of such 'silent' archiving work beyond 'l'activisme devant les cameras' was for example highlighted by Kalvin Soiresse Njall during a public discourse on CMCLD's Lumumba Day in 2023. In: Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.

[188] Jean-Michel Lafleur, *Le transnationalisme politique: pouvoir des communautés immigrées dans leur pays d'accueil et pays d'origine* (Editions Academia, 2005), 27. See for example: Sarah Demart and Leïla Bodeux, 'Postcolonial Stakes of Congolese (DRC) Political Space: 50 Years after Independence', *African Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (2013): 72–96.

[189] Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité "africaine" et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 29, no. 2 (2013): 99.

[190] African students in Belgium faced difficulties in obtaining scholarships, renewing residence permits, and dealing with discrimination and everyday racism, making daily life and academic work challenging. Many former student organizers would go on to be 'at the head or a founding member' of the later Pan-African associations. In: Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State', 173.

[191] Kagné and Martiniello, *L'immigration subsaharienne en Belgique*, 33–36. See also: Mazzocchetti, *Migrations subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique,* 400–401.

[192] Joseph Gatugu, 'L'enjeu associatif des nouveaux migrants d'Afrique subsaharienne', *Osmoses* 32 (2004): 17–18.

[193] A legal structure for entities that do not pursue commercial profit but aim to fulfil a social, cultural, or educational mission. This organizational form allows people to formally 'exist' in Belgium and to apply for funding through the

struggle for recognition: institutional recognition of these formal associations as legitimate actors, but also legal recognition of Afrodescendants as Belgian citizens with equal rights, and acknowledgement of their presence in and contributions to Belgian public life.[194]

As part of this broader struggle for recognition, the 1990s were marked by attempts to unify a relatively fragmented and dispersed landscape of associations primarily based on intersecting criteria such as national origins, socio-legal statuses, and/or professional, cultural, or political activities into a more structured civil society. It is in this context that the Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Europe et en Belgique (CCAEB) (est. 1994) and, later, the Conseil Général des Africains de Belgique or MOJA (meaning 'one' in Swahili, est. 2004) were founded as efforts to federate a heterogeneous field under a single umbrella.[195] On the Flemish side, the AfrikaPlatform was created in 1999, gaining 'official recognition' in 2001.[196] In bringing together different diasporas, and people from different countries of origin, sociocultural backgrounds, and political orientations, Pan-Africanism played a central role.[197] As Nicole Grégoire has shown, the political ideology of Pan-Africanism, with its emphasis on unity and shared future, has been mobilized by a small 'associational elite' to forge unity not only in formal organization under a shared administrative structure, but also in a shared Afrodescendant identity and a shared political project of emancipation, grounded in shared experiences of inequality, discrimination, and stigmatization in Belgium's racialized context.[198] To do so, projects of political conscientization, intergenerational transmission of memories, and (self-)education have been crucial among associational elites to mobilize others and to build a movement. As an example, one can cite the first African radio broadcast in Belgium *Sous l'arbre à palabre*, founded in 1981 by African students within Radio

Flemish, Walloon, or Brussels governments to support their activities. However, applying for funding is often time-consuming, highly competitive, constraining organizations' possibilities for developing subversive anti-racism. On the challenges for Afrodescendant associations in their capacity as ASBLs to find legal recognition and financial support, including a racialized access to funding, see, for example: Ural Manço et al., 'Postcolonialisme et prise en charge institutionnelle des jeunes belgo-congolais en situation de rupture sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', *African Diaspora* 6 (2013): 35–38.

194 Afrodescendant struggles for social, cultural, and political recognition have been documented by Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti. See: Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State'; Grégoire and Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité "africaine" et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique'; Nicole Grégoire, 'Being a Full Citizen: "African" Otherness, Political Representation and Struggle for Recognition in Belgium', in *Invisible Visible Minority: Confronting Afrophobia and Advancing Equality for People of African Descent and Black Europeans in Europe*, ed. Roda Madziva et al. (European Network Against Racism, 2014).

195 Kagné and Martiniello, *L'immigration subsaharienne en Belgique*, 42; Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State', 171 and 173. Among the founding members of CCAEB were Suzanne Monkasa, Ken Ndiaye, Emilien Sanou, Félicien Kazadi, Kuwala Banda, Marie Claire Ruhamya, Marie Claire Mwanza and Félix Kubwayo. For stories about its history, I refer readers to the online platform First Waves: 'First Waves', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.firstwaves.be/en/nodes/pages/first-waves/

196 Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

197 Historically, the term Pan-Africanism refers to a political and cultural movement that emerged in the nineteenth century, aiming to unite Afrodescendants across the world in a shared struggle against slavery, racism, (neo)colonialism, and discrimination, and in pursuit of independence, sovereignty, and self-determination. Before the emergence of Pan-African 'federations', some student associations already presented themselves as distinctly Pan-African. See: Petit and Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics Within a Changing Context', 153–154.

198 Petit and Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics Within a Changing Context', 151.

Campus, the student radio station of the Université Libre de Bruxelles. To this day, the broadcast – explicitly identifying as Pan-African – addresses topics relevant to the diverse African diasporas every Sunday.[199] *Sous l'arbre à palabre* has historically been a cradle for Pan-Africanist activism in Belgium: many former volunteers of the radio programme would go on to join various organizations, including the aforementioned MOJA, as well as organizations that emerged during the decolonial moment, such as the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations and Change (CMCLD).[200]

The political demands put forward by Afrodescendant movements of the 1990s centred around a legal recognition of Afrodescendants as, first, immigrants, and, later, Belgian citizens, and around policy reforms regarding racial discrimination, inequality in the labour and housing markets, and Belgium's (lack of) intervention in the growing conflicts in Congo.[201] The colonial past already played a role in some of these mobilizations – for example, associations emphasized the responsibility of the Belgian state for Congolese politics due to its long-standing colonial and neo-colonial involvement – yet political 'silence on the colonial past' made the articulation of colonial injustice impossible if activist claims wanted to be 'audible'.[202] Colonial memory as such was not a central activist vehicle in public campaigns, even though memory practices on the colonial past already existed.[203] The emergence of decolonial memory activisms since 2010, thus, represents a public shift from recognition claims focused on legal rights, anti-discrimination, and present-day racism to recognition claims that inherently link contemporary struggles to reparative justice for enduring colonial injustices. [204] Still, presenting this shift as a clean break or the work of an entirely new generation would be misleading: intergenerational continuities and activist networks reveal that the movements of the 2010s are very much the product of community organizing and political education developed in the 1990s and before.

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[199] Eline Mestdagh and Yves Kodjo Lodonou, '1981: 92.1 FM - *Sous l'arbre à palabre*: La première émission africaine en Belgique', in *Samen Sterk. Honderd Verhalen over de Sociale Bewegingen in België / Tous ensemble. Cent récits sur les mouvements sociaux en Belgique*, ed. Jan Dumolyn (Berchem: Epo, 2026).

[200] Grégoire, 'Redéfinir les frontières de l'entre-soi en situation postmigratoire', 470; Author's Field Notes, 'Radio Emission: 'Décoloniser le Musée' (Radio Campus, 3 February 2019, Brussels).

[201] Grégoire and Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité "africaine" et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique', 109.

[202] My translation to English. In: Césarine Bolya Sinatu et al. '"Le Kivu, c'est notre Alsace-Lorraine, Monsieur!": Femmes d'origine congolaise dans l'espace public belge et contraintes de la dénonciation en situation postcoloniale', *African Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (2013): 108.

[203] As early as 1994, historical walks were organized in Matonge. See: Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep', 17. See also Antoine Tshitungu's research on colonial history, as well as his development of historical tours in the neighbourhood of Matonge. In: Sarah Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles): un miroir postcolonial', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 29, no. 1 (2013): 146.

[204] Spinner-Halev, 'Enduring Injustice', 56–84.

In this sense, we can understand the decolonial moment as a 'moment of eruption' in a longer 'protest cycle' – a contentious moment in which longstanding traditions of 'quiet memory work' in 'subaltern counter-publics' emerge in the public arena.[205] Unlike earlier Afrodescendant mobilizations, the memory campaigns that unfolded between 2010 and 2021 increasingly captured the attention of a broader public as they were accompanied by 'increasingly expanding media coverage'.[206] For the first time, these debates featured Afrodescendant voices themselves at the forefront.[207] While interactions between traditional media and Afrodescendant experts have at times drawn criticism for 'tokenism' or silencing dynamics, the overall mediatization of these growing movements and their actions contributed significantly to the emergence of Afrodescendants as a visible collective political subject in Belgium – leading, in turn, to a range of institutional initiatives focused on colonial memory.[208]

1.5 A 'Decolonial Turn' in Belgian Institutions

In addition to a shift in mainstream anti-racism discourse and the rise of Afrodescendant mobilizations centred on colonial memory, a third reason to view the decade from 2010 to 2020 as a decolonial moment is the increasing political and institutional attention to Belgium's colonial past. For Véronique Clette-Gakuba, the sudden engagement of Belgian cultural and political institutions with the postcolonial is so remarkable that it makes sense to speak of 'une période de basculement' (a moment of rupture).[209]

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[205] Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Protest Cycles and Contentious Moments in Memory Activism: Insights from Postwar Germany', in *Remembering Social Movements*, ed. Stefan Berger et al. (Routledge, 2021), 270–271. Nancy Fraser defines 'subaltern counterpublics' as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (p. 67). In these spaces, actors who do not see themselves recognized in dominant public spaces come together to develop alternative discourses. Subaltern counter-publics are in a 'contestatory relationship to dominant publics' and have a dual function in diverse societies (p. 70). First, they are important as 'spaces of withdrawal', which we would today refer to as 'safe spaces' or 'safer spaces': they offer the possibility to withdraw from violent or harmful dominant discourses and thus provide the space 'to find the right words to express their thoughts' (p. 68). Second, subaltern counter-publics function as 'training grounds' for minority groups to collectively seek shared discourses and develop 'agitational activities directed towards wider publics' to make their political demands known (p. 68). In: Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, no. 25 (1990): 56–80.

[206] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium', 45.

[207] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Black Connectivity: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Cultural Media Practices and Collective Identities in Belgium' (PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2023).

[208] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Black Women in and Beyond Belgian Mainstream Media: Between Opinion–Making, Dissidence, and Marronage', *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1286.

[209] Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de colonialité dans l'art et la culture. Faire exister un monde noir à Bruxelles', 1.

1.5.1 The Federal Level: The Long Road to Apologies, Truth, and Reconciliation

Growing pressure from civil society and Afrodescendant mobilizations made it increasingly difficult for policymakers to ignore longstanding domestic as well as international criticisms. In February 2019, the United Nations Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD) published a report following its visit to Belgium.[210] The report concluded that colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary racism and discrimination against people of African descent and contained a list of thirty-four recommendations for Belgian authorities, including reparative politics and several suggestions for memorial policies. Among other recommendations, it urged the Belgian government to issue an official 'apology for the atrocities committed during colonization', to ensure 'durable commemoration of the contributions of people of African descent, and the removal of markers of the colonial period', to provide 'funding for anti-racism associations run by people of African descent to enable them to be partners in combating racism', to 'in consultation with civil society, give recognition and visibility to those who were killed during the period of colonization' and to publicly 'acknowledge the cultural, economic, political and scientific contributions of people of African descent to the development of Belgian society, through the establishment of monuments, memorial sites, street names, schools and municipal, regional and federal buildings'.[211] It also prompted Belgium to 'establish a truth commission (…) to establish facts and the involvement of Belgian institutions in the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi'.[212]

In terms of apologies, Belgium has issued apologies for certain aspects of its colonial past – for instance, the assassination of former Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba – but never for the injustice of colonialism as a whole.[213] A few months after the publication of the WGEPAD

[210] The WGEPAD is a special mechanism established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2002 as part of the UN's efforts to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. Its creation followed the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa (2001), which highlighted the need for international mechanisms to address the legacies of slavery, the transatlantic slave trade, and colonialism. 'Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent', in: https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/wg-african-descent

[211] 'A/HRC/42/59/Add.1 : Visit to Belgium – Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent', 14 August 2019, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/42/59/Add.1, 16–19.

[212] 'A/HRC/42/59/Add.1 : Visit to Belgium – Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent', 16.

[213] Berber Bevernage, 'Politieke Verontschuldigingen in België. Enkele Bedenkingen over Een Morele En Politieke Economie', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (2014): 81.

report, and once again under sustained grassroots pressure, then-Prime Minister Charles Michel formally apologized for the forced removal and segregation of métis children during the colonial era.[214] A year later, in June 2020, following the global Black Lives Matter protests, King Philippe expressed his 'deepest regret' for the 'suffering and humiliations' inflicted under Belgian colonial rule.[215] While this did not constitute a political apology, such an apology was viewed by many Afrodescendant actors as a key expectation following the establishment of the Congo Commission by the Belgian Federal Parliament a month later, in July 2020.[216] Officially titled the 'Special Commission to examine Belgium's colonial past in the Congo Free State (1885–1908), Belgian Congo (1908–1960), and its administration of Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962)', the commission was mandated to assess the historical impact of colonization and to propose recommendations for addressing its lasting consequences. From the outset, however, the commission sparked intense public debate. Some historians criticized its dual mission – both to establish historical truth and to propose political measures for reconciliation – arguing instead for a singular focus on truth-finding, considering this endeavour a task for, first and foremost, professional historians.[217] Others warned against reducing claims for memorial justice to a question of historical truth finding, highlighting the democratic importance of considering other 'experts' in the public debate beyond historians.[218] As I will discuss further in Chapter 7 of this dissertation, the composition of the commission's expert panel and the (implicit) criteria for who was recognized as an 'expert' became a major point of contention from the beginning.[219] Despite two years of research, expert hearings, extensive testimonies, and the production of a 689-page expert report, the commission ultimately failed to reach political consensus. In December 2022, following pressure from the liberal parties as well as the Flemish nationalist party NV-A (Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie), the commission was unable to

[214] Milan Schreuer, 'Belgium Apologizes for Kidnapping Children from African Colonies', *New York Times*, 4 April 2019, World section, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/world/europe/belgium-kidnapping-congo-rwanda-burundi.html.

[215] Jennifer Rankin and Jason Burke, 'Belgian King Expresses "deepest Regrets" for Brutal Colonial Rule', *Guardian*, 30 June 2020, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/30/belgian-king-philippe-expresses-profound-regrets-for-brutal-colonial-rule.

[216] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations, 'Commission spéciale "passé colonial": Une stratégie d'enfumage aux frais du contribuable', 19 December 2023, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/actualites/communique-commission-speciale-passe-colonial-une-strategie-denfumage-aux-frais-du-contribuable.

[217] 'Eerst Het Onderzoek, Dan Het Debat', *De Standaard*, 17 August 2020, https://www.standaard.be/nieuws/eerst-het-onderzoek-dan-het-debat/47772742.html.

[218] Berber Bevernage et al., 'De Verlammende Angst van de Historicus', *De Standaard*, 24 August 2020, https://www.standaard.be/nieuws/de-verlammende-angst-van-de-historicus/47814631.html.

[219] Gillian Mathys and Sarah Van Beurden, 'History by Commission? The Belgian Colonial Past and the Limits of History in the Public Eye', *The Journal of African History* 64, no. 3 (2023): 334–43.

finalize its recommendations, leading to the suspension of its activities without publishing its proceedings or a conclusive report.[220] The much-anticipated official apology did not materialize.[221]

1.5.2 The Regional and Local Levels: Colonial *Lieux de mémoire* in the Public Sphere

Institutional initiatives to deal with the colonial past were not limited to Belgium's federal level. Spurred by sustained grassroots mobilization and political lobbying, between 2010 and 2021 local authorities across the Brussels-Capital Region and beyond were either confronted with heated debates in municipal councils or actually began setting up initiatives to reckon with the presence of colonial heritage within their jurisdictions. In 2015, public backlash forced the City of Brussels to cancel a planned tribute to King Leopold II. In Flanders, Hand in Hand tegen Racisme – back then run by Ludo Segers, Marius Dekeyser, and Stella Nyanchama Okemwa – launched its campaign for 'the decolonization of local society' in 2017, demanding local authorities in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Hasselt, and Leuven to 'decolonize' Belgium's streetscape.[222] In Mons, Charleroi, and Brussels, the CMCLD successfully lobbied for a Patrice Lumumba Street (in Charleroi) and a plaque honouring Patrice Lumumba, Maurice Mpolo, and Jospeh Okito (in Mons).[223] In 2018 the City of Brussels followed by inaugurating the long-awaited Lumumba Square. Soon after, in 2019, the City of Ghent launched a 'participatory process' aimed at gathering recommendations for 'decolonizing' the city, partly triggered by renewed political questions over the Leopold II-Avenue in the city. In 2020, the Flemish Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration), in collaboration with the Vlaamse Vereniging voor Steden en Gemeenten (VVSG, Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities), published a guide for local authorities on 'how to deal with

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[220] Leading to extensive criticisms both among Afrodescendant associations and within the academic community. See: Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations, 'Commission spéciale "passé colonial"'; Romain Landmeters et al., 'Kamervoorzitter moet haar verantwoordelijkheid nemen om rapport van Congocommissie te publiceren', *De Morgen*, 30 January 2024, https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/kamervoorzitter-moet-haar-verantwoordelijkheid-nemen-om-rapport-van-congocommissie-te-publiceren~b0b6ee05/.

[221] Official apologies for colonialism in Belgium have thus far addressed only particular aspects of colonial violence; a comprehensive formal apology for colonialism has yet to be made.
Maïthé Chini, 'Congo Committee: Belgium Fails to Reach Agreement on Official Apology for Colonialism', *Brussels Times*, 20 December 2022, available at: https://www.brusselstimes.com/339612/congo-committee-belgium-fails-to-reach-agreement-on-apology-for-colonialism.

[222]Hand in Hand tegen Racisme, 'Dekoloniseer.be', n.d., https://www.dekoloniseer.be/.

[223] Grégory Fobe and Daniel Barbieux, 'Première en Belgique: une rue Patrice Lumumba bientôt à Charleroi', RTBF, 28 May 2018, https://www.rtbf.be/article/premiere-en-belgique-une-rue-patrice-lumumba-bientot-a-charleroi-9929877.; Ugo Petropoulos, 'Patrice Lumumba aura sa plaque commémorative à Mons', lavenir.net, 7 November 2017, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/mons-centre/mons/2017/11/07/patrice-lumumba-aura-sa-plaque-commemorative-a-mons-3H6DEJGMOVB5HCN7F4YTDMAGT4/.

colonial references in the public sphere'.[224] Still in 2020, the Commissie voor de Territoriale Ontwikkeling (Committee for Territorial Development) of the Brussels parliament approved a draft resolution on 'the structural and inclusive decolonization of Brussels' public space within the framework of a process of dialogue and remembrance'.[225] This resolution was taken up in 2020 by then State Secretary Pascal Smet (from the socialist party Vooruit), leading to the formation of an expert group and a report on colonial symbols in the public sphere of the Brussels-Capital Region in 2022.[226] In that same year, Etterbeek – the Brussels municipality with the highest concentration of colonial monuments – launched its own decolonization initiative. It enlisted the expertise of historians Romain Landmeters and Chantal Kesteloot and invited several advisors to provide guidance to municipal council members. Elsewhere in Belgium, various municipalities have in recent years dealt with colonial monuments and street names in a variety of ways.

Providing an exhaustive list would go well beyond the scope of this dissertation.[227] For the purpose of the analyses of decolonial memory activisms in the chapters that follow, I would simply like to highlight two key points here: first, these examples show a growing policy attention in Belgium for the colonial past; and second, this shift – particularly at the local and regional levels of governance – can be characterized by a focus on (documenting, contextualizing, or removing) material *lieux de mémoire* in the public sphere.

[224] Pieter Gordts, 'Steden en gemeenten krijgen handleiding hoe ze koloniale standbeelden en straatnamen moeten aanpakken', *De Morgen*, 23 October 2020, https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/steden-en-gemeenten-krijgen-handleiding-hoe-ze-koloniale-standbeelden-en-straatnamen-moeten-aanpakken~b9419160/.

[225] Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep', 14.

[226] Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep'. While I was writing this dissertation, the report was taken up by a new team of experts led by *Urban Brussels*, developing the implementation of the report's recommandations. See: 'Urban Is Piloting the Action Plan "Towards the Decolonisation of Public Space in the Brussels Capital Region"', Urban.Brussels, 14 September 2024, http://urban.brussels/en/articles/urban-is-piloting-the-action-plan-towards-the-decolonisation-of-public-space-in-the-brussels-capital-region.

[227] For an overview of 'decolonization initiatives' in Flemish cities and municipalities, I refer readers to historian Marie Deprez's master's thesis, 'Een nieuwe wind. Het dekolonisatiebeleid van Vlaamse stadsbesturen tussen 2019 en 2021' [A New Wind: The Decolonization Policy of Flemish City Administrations between 2019 and 2021]. For an overview of 'decolonization initiatives' in Brussels, I refer readers to sociologist Jean Illi's forthcoming PhD thesis, to be completed at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. See: Jean Illi, 'La "décolonisation" se joue-t-elle dans l'espace public? Analyse de l'institutionnalisation d'une lutte' (PhD diss., Université Libre de Bruxelles, forthcoming).

1.5.3 'Decolonization' in Cultural and Scientific Institutions, and Criticisms of the Institutional 'Decolonial Turn'

The developments across various levels of political governance in Belgium were accompanied by a broader trend among Belgian cultural, scientific, and museum institutions to reflect on the 'decolonization' of their practices. This resulted in the creation of numerous, often short-lived, working groups and decolonization commissions tasked with formulating guidelines and recommendations – a development that Emma-Lee Amponsah, drawing on Nelson Maldonado-Torres, refers to as an institutional 'decolonial turn'.[228] These political and institutional developments have been momentarily applauded by some as providing a brief window of opportunities for activists and stakeholders. Yet the reports, commissions, working groups, and actions that this institutionalization process produced have also been heavily criticized for, in the words of Sara Ahmed, their 'non-performativity' or their inability to produce the commitment to anti-racism and decolonization they proclaim.[229]

Activists and commentators have scrutinized the representational politics that shape who gets a seat at the table in decolonization commissions and advisory working groups.[230] These bodies, often assembled by institutions or local governments, rarely offer adequate compensation for the expertise and labour they require – leading some to denounce them as exploitative.[231] According to these criticisms, participants are expected to contribute time, knowledge, and emotional labour without fair remuneration, reinforcing the very inequalities these initiatives claim to address.[232] Moreover, some critics argue that municipal efforts to 'decolonize the public sphere' exemplify what Herbert Marcuse famously termed 'repressive tolerance': the strategic containment of dissent through selective acceptance of some of the less 'radical' demands.[233] In this logic, authorities appear to embrace the symbolic aspects of decolonial memory activism – such as addressing street names or monuments – while sidestepping its

[228] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Een Draaiboek Voor Dekolonisatie: Hoe Het Niet Moet', in *Being Imposed Upon*, ed. Gia Abrassaert et al. (Onomatopee, 2020), 146.
[229] Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 119.
[230] The debates surrounding the creation of the expert panel for the federal Congo Commission illustrate this well (cf. Chapter 7), but also concern, for example, the decolonization working group in the Brussels-Capital Region, which in the end did not include any CMCLD members.
[231] Sarah Demart, 'Resisting Extraction Politics: Afro-Belgian Claims, Women's Activism, and the Royal Museum for Central Africa', in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, ed. Roger Sansi et al. (Leuven University Press, 2020), 145.
[232] Sarah Demart and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, 'Politiques de re-connaissance et tarification de l'expertise militante', *Analyse 31* (Brussels: Editions Kwandika de Bamko-Cran ASBL, 2018), 6.
[233] Ludo De Witte explicitly mobilized the notion of 'repressive tolerance' to describe the dynamics preceding the inauguration of Lumumba Square (cf. Chapter 5). See: Arnaud Lismond-Mertens, 'Une place Lumumba à Bruxelles', *Ensemble*, 87 (2018): 78–81.

more radical, structural demands for racial justice across education, housing, policing, and employment.[234] Closely tied to this critique is the term 'encommissionnement', increasingly used by activists to describe a growing institutional pattern: the tendency to respond to complex postcolonial issues by creating (temporary) commissions or task forces.[235] This practice, they argue, allows governments and cultural institutions to signal engagement – claiming that a matter is 'under investigation or in progress' – while simultaneously deferring or diluting meaningful action. [236] Through the lens of these voices, the proliferation of an institutional 'decolonial turn' risks functioning less as a commitment to justice than as a mechanism of bureaucratic pacification.

The decade between 2010 and 2021 thus shows, alongside a growth in grassroots mobilizations, a process of gradual institutionalization of 'colonial memory' and 'decolonization' as languages for policymaking. This entails a shift from previous decades, which was generally characterized by a lack of institutional engagement, but also sets the Belgian context apart from, for example, France where, in the words of Françoise Vergès, institutional engagement with decolonial claims can be qualified as an 'absolute refusal'.[237] As of yet, no thorough investigation has been done to assess in detail the discourses, the effectiveness, and the overall impact of the institutional and policy changes regarding the colonial past that proliferated between 2010 and 2021. Yet their development is crucial to understand both the political opportunities and the constraints for decolonial memory activisms in this decade.

1.6 Brief Conclusions

This first chapter demonstrated that the decade spanning from 2010 to 2020 brought a transformation in Belgium's reckoning with its colonial legacy. The decade, characterized by the burgeoning visibility of Afrodescendant decolonial memory activisms and the gradual uptake of the language of 'decolonization' by cultural and political institutions, can be termed

[234] During a double-interview, Kasidi for example stressed, in relation to Lumumba Square, that for him changes in the public sphere amounted to local authorities telling Afrodescendants 'allez, calmez-vous' ('here you go, calm down now'). In: Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double-interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[235] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.

[236] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.

[237] Françoise Vergès and Seumboy Vrainom, *De la violence coloniale dans l'espace public: visite du triangle de la Porte Dorée à Paris*, Illustrated édition (Shed Publishing, 2021).

a ‘decolonial moment’. During this period, dissident memory work transitioned from the margins to the mainstream. What sets this moment apart is not merely the heightened politicization of colonial memory, but also the articulation of demands that link historical injustices to contemporary structural racism. While this newfound visibility provided opportunity structures for decolonial memory activists, it also introduced tensions and constraints. The dynamic interplay between grassroots mobilization, public discourse, and institutional responses during this period provides a crucial context for the memory campaigns analysed in the subsequent chapters. The following chapter first discusses how I, as a white scholar at Ghent University, navigated the decolonial moment and how my experiences led to the methodological choices central to this dissertation.

Chapter 2 A Methodological Contextualization

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the introduction, the central aim of this dissertation is to investigate what decolonial memory activists during Belgium's decolonial moment expect from memory in their struggle for racial justice. To do so, this research is primarily based on the analysis of sources that I collected between 2017 and 2023 through participatory observation in decolonial memory activist networks, and oral history.

Originally trained as a historian, I found myself compelled to borrow methods from anthropology and sociology for three central reasons. First, my research aims to denaturalize common ideas about how societies should (or should not) deal with the past after and during colonial injustice by studying ideas about history and memory grounded in activist *milieux de mémoires*. This requires a focus on the ideas, practices, and strategies of grassroots actors themselves, rather than merely on representations of the past, prompting a situated, fieldwork-based approach. Second, this research has struggled from its inception with limited and fragmented literature on both African migration histories and Afrodescendant political mobilizations in Belgium. As a result, at the start of this research, I had few other tools at my disposal to analyse decolonial memory activisms than collaboration with memory activists themselves. Third, a common grievance of decolonial memory activists in Belgium is that

journalists, policymakers, researchers, and other actors write *about* them instead of *with* them. One of the central slogans of Collectif Mémoire Coloniale en Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD), for example, is 'ce qui est fait pour nous sans nous est fait contre nous', or 'what is done for us without us is done against us'.[238] Writing a dissertation about decolonial memory activisms without the involvement of activists themselves would therefore be difficult to ethically justify.

These three considerations led to my long-term involvement since 2017 with various actors active in the decolonial moment around colonial memory and justice for the colonial past. My position as a complete outsider at the start of the research process, as well as the acceleration of the societal debate during the same period, generating distrust among grassroots actors towards established institutions including universities, led me to devote a large part of this research to building social relationships. I did this by taking on not only the role of researcher within the network of decolonial memory activists but also, at times, the role of activist and policy advisor. This long-term and multi-modal involvement was a messy period of trial and error – interrupted by two years of COVID-19 – and gradually led me to abandon the research objective I originally had in mind when I wrote the research proposal for this project: writing an ethnographic history of decolonial memory activism in Belgium from the bottom up. Along the way, I encountered such a multitude of voices and memorial mobilizations that writing an ethnography with a claim to representativeness struck me as reductionist. Moreover, my position as a white woman, with no knowledge of African languages, in the context of Belgium's decolonial moment makes such an undertaking challenging. Not because I believe that researchers must share lived experiences to produce valuable knowledge, but because this research takes place in a context of (some) Afrodescendants' resistance to academic research about them and respects their 'right to opacity'.[239]

Instead, I made the decision to reframe the central aim as a study of different activist articulations of the relationship between memory and racial justice, recognizing them as a few among many. To operationalize this objective, I decided to zoom in on three memory campaigns that activists developed in the last decade: 1) the decolonization of public space, with the struggle for Lumumba Square as a central mobilization, 2) the emancipation of racialized youth in the so-called 'quartiers populaires', and 3) the contestation of Belgium's Congo Commission's mission of 'truth and reconciliation'. This methodological chapter first discusses some general aspects of my methodology, before reflecting on the long-term period

[238] See: 'Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/.

[239] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.

of multi-modal involvement in activist networks. Taking activists' call for 'radical transparency' to heart, the chapter outlines in detail the trajectory and the voices that have informed the analyses presented in this dissertation.[240]

2.2 A Study of Memory 'in Action'

2.2.1 Ethnographic Methods for the Study of Memorial Justice

2.2.1.1 Bringing Fieldwork Home

This study employs ethnographic methods, specifically participant observation and oral history, to investigate how relationships to the past are formed and expressed beyond the boundaries of academic discourse. This use of fieldwork to interrogate dominant understandings of memory and memory policy draws methodological inspiration from an established body of scholarship within transitional justice studies. In that field, researchers have traced the impact, contestation, and appropriation of the transitional justice model, including its memorial dimensions, through situated, bottom-up case studies that foreground localized, lived experiences of historical redress.[241] At Ghent University's Department of History, a new generation of historians has come to frame such work as a form of critical public history.[242] While public history has traditionally been understood as the translation of academic historical knowledge for broader publics, this evolving approach expands the field to include critical analysis of non-academic relationships to the past. Rather than treating 'popular' uses of history or memory as threats to disciplinary authority or as distortions to be factually corrected, this research tradition regards them as invitations to examine the knowledge foundations and ethical commitments of the historical discipline itself.[243] This interdisciplinary research tradition

[240] Melat Gebeyaw Nigussie, 'Black Skin, White Cube', in *Being Imposed Upon*, ed. Gia Abrassaert et al. (Onomatopee, 2020), 217.

[241] See for example: Rosalind Shaw et al., *Localizing Transitional Justice: Interventions and Priorities After Mass Violence* (Stanford University Press, 2010).

[242] Lore Colaert explicitly builds a case for this kind of 'engaged' public history in her dissertation: Lore Colaert, 'History from the Grave: Politics of Memory in Exhumations of Mass Graves from the Spanish Civil War' (PhD diss., Ghent University, supervisor Gita Deneckere, 2015), 45.

[243] Chris Lorenz, 'Unstuck in Time. Or: The Sudden Presence of the Past', in *Performing the Past. Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 74.

is characterized by its analyses of uses of the past 'in the present' – a time period historians have traditionally been uneasy with – and by a productive synergy between anthropological methods and the literature in memory studies and theory of history. My development as a professional historian over the past decade has unfolded within this research context, and I am methodologically indebted to the scholars whose work has laid its foundations.[244] My research objective – to denaturalize seemingly 'universal' assumptions about memory's transformative potential by situating activist articulations of memorial justice within their specific socio-political contexts – emerges directly from this intellectual lineage. Whereas much of my colleagues' work on memory practices in the aftermath of historical injustice has involved ethnographic fieldwork in international, transitional, settings, my own research relocates this inquiry to a consolidated democratic context, and 'brings fieldwork home' to my own country. This inevitably raises a distinct set of challenges concerning the question of proximity between the researcher and the object of study. As a member of the very society under examination, I occupy in this study the position of an 'implicated subject', entangled in the very structures of injustice that activist actors seek to contest.[245] Additionally, the task of maintaining the kind of critical distance – both mental and physical – typically deemed necessary for scholarly analysis becomes considerably complex when fieldwork unfolds within one's own sociopolitical environment. During Belgium's decolonial moment, it often felt as though everyone around me – academics, activists, cultural workers, policymakers, and friends – was suddenly and impatiently seeking clear answers to the questions of what 'decolonization' actually entails, and what role they themselves might play in it. From the outset, this created a certain pressure on my research as this external demand for swift, actionable insights stood in tension with the slower, more immersive approach I found necessary as an outsider trying to understand the complex dynamics at play.

2.2.1.2 Living Archives

Theoretically, this research stems from an ongoing engagement with what Stuart Hall termed 'living archives'.[246] The notion of 'living' is to be understood here not merely metaphorically but quite literally: this study involves living interlocutors who, at any stage of the research

[244] Tessa Boeykens, 'Exile, Return, Record : A Participatory & Visual Ethnography of Making History with Guatemalan Returnees' (PhD diss., Ghent University, 2021); Lore Colaert, 'History from the Grave: Politics of Memory in Exhumations of Mass Graves from the Spanish Civil War'; Eva Willems, *Open Secrets, Hidden Heroes: Contesting Transitional Justice in Peru* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

[245] Michael Rothberg defines 'the implicated subject' as someone who 'occupies a position aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes'. See: Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.

[246] Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (2001): 89–92.

process, were capable of 'speaking back' – something historians are not typically confronted with – of retracting their consent, or of revising their perspectives over time. This understanding aligns with Hall's own formulation of living as 'present, ongoing, continuing, unfinished, open-ended'.[247] Throughout the research period, decolonial memory activisms remained in a state of continual transformation, and they continue to evolve still. New organizations were established, campaigns reoriented, priorities shifted, and institutional developments reconfigured the broader activist landscape multiple times. The engagement of individual activists was also subject to change, shaped by changing 'biographical availabilities': some began families, others moved away from or significantly changed organizing, and many revisited their earlier involvement with the kind of evolving insight that time and new life choices tend to produce.[248] The profound internal pluralism of decolonial memory movements as well as this inherent fluidity renders any attempt to academically 'fix' them inevitably partial. This dissertation is thus necessarily constrained by choices and arbitrary temporal boundaries: the field research spans from 2017, when I began fieldwork, to 2021, when I chose to step back from direct involvement and shift toward 'distanced' analysis and writing.[249] The analyses I offer should therefore be read as a series of analytical snapshots, capturing particular configurations of activism at specific moments in time, understood from my particular viewpoints, rather than a comprehensive or definitive account. Not only were the memory activisms I studied constantly in motion – so too was the methodology through which I engaged. As a white scholar conducting research on anti-racisms, my approach necessarily involved a sustained process of reflexivity, in which pre-existing methods and assumptions were continuously revisited, rethought, and reshaped in response to the field.

2.2.1.3 A Plurality of Sources

The sources analysed in the following chapters are intentionally diverse and heterogeneous. The core of the empirical material consists of detailed handwritten fieldnotes produced during participant observation at meetings, workshops, and public events organized by memory activists. A second cluster of sources emerged through oral history, which, in this study, is understood in the broadest possible sense. In addition to formal, semi-structured interviews, many of the most valuable oral accounts arose through informal and often serendipitous encounters: conversations over shared meals or during events, or lengthy, unplanned discussions over cigarettes and beer that gradually unfolded into something resembling an interview. Between 2017 and 2021, I transcribed thirty interviews, yet much of the spontaneous

[247] Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', 89.
[248] Doug McAdam, 'Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer', *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 1 (1986): 70.
[249] Exceptions to this temporal demarcation are the small number of follow-up interviews I did with key figures in 2023 while I was already writing this dissertation.

oral material was processed in other forms: handwritten, partial transcriptions jotted down in the moment, or voice memos recorded shortly afterward to preserve key phrasings and narrative textures. In my experience, the most meaningful exchanges often occurred outside the constraints of the formal interview setting, where the presence of a recorder or laptop screen could easily undermine the spontaneity and emotional openness of the conversation. Over time, I complemented these materials with a wide array of activist sources: opinion articles, social media posts, internal meeting minutes, public statements, speeches delivered at demonstrations and commemorations, and – though to a lesser extent – artivist productions.[250] My analysis also draws on media coverage and a variety of institutional and political sources: the minutes of municipal council meetings in Ixelles and Brussels during the campaign for Place Lumumba; policy documents produced during Belgium's so-called decolonial moment, particularly those addressing the decolonization of public space; and material generated in the context of the federal parliamentary commission (2020–2022) investigating the legacy of Belgium's colonial past in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. My intuitive analytical approach in engaging with this variety of sources is best described as a qualitative narrative analysis, examining activist discourse not only in terms of content (what is being said?), but also in terms of form (how is it being said?), attending closely to the social, historical, and interpersonal contexts in which narratives emerge, and the audiences they seek to address.[251] For clarity and readability, I have translated all quotations originally in French into English. Any potential alterations in meaning that may result from these translations are solely my responsibility.

The bibliography to this dissertation provides a list of all interviews, conversations and all fieldnotes the following chapters directly draw on. Beyond these registered sources, my analysis has also been shaped by a wide range of other activities and informal conversations I engaged in over the past years. Everyone cited in this dissertation has given their consent for the use of their work and insights within the framework of this research. Consent, however, is a fluid and contextual concept that cannot easily be captured by strict procedures, such as those imposed by university ethical commissions, and must be continuously renegotiated. The individuals cited in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 have already read drafts of the relevant sections.[252] Their names have not been anonymized in this dissertation, as many of them have explicitly challenged their historical invisibility in academic research and expressed the wish to be acknowledged by name

[250] Other scholars have produced work that is much more closely situated to Afrodescendant 'artivism'. See, for example: Sarah Demart and Gia Abrassart, *Créer en postcolonie 2010-2015: Voix et dissidences belgo-congolaises* (BOZAR, Paleis voor Schone Kunsten, 2016); Hugo DeBlock, 'Contemporary African Art and Artists in Belgium', in *The Routledge Companion to African Diaspora Art History* (Routledge, 2024). On Laura Nsengiyumva's work: Joachim Ben Yakoub, 'PeoPL's Bursting Light: Melting Down the Afterlives of a Monstrous Colonial Monument', *Third Text* 35, no. 4 (2021): 413–30.

[251] 'Narrative analysis', according to Catherine Kohler Riessman, points to a whole family of approaches that analyse how people make sense of experience through the telling of 'stories' in interviews, conversations, documents, and other social texts. It recognizes that stories are situated in time, place, and social contexts and are constitutive of meaning rather than simply reflections of experience. See: Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis* (SAGE, 1993).

[252] For Chapter 7, this is not yet the case, but I assure the jury that this will be addressed before the public defense.

for their work and insights. Consent was given specifically for the purposes of this dissertation, meaning that for any future publication of (parts of) this dissertation, consent will have to be renegotiated.

Most decolonial memory activists cited in this study belong to what can fairly be described as an elite of activist intellectuals within a much broader network of Afrodescendant associations and actors. Their struggle against colonial injustice in Belgium is, in many ways, a struggle over alternative knowledge production and the rewriting of dominant academic narratives – about the colonial past, about themselves, and about postcolonial relations in the present. In the process of gathering and analysing the materials, it was not only ethically but also epistemologically inaccurate to conceive of these voices as mere respondents to questions set by the researcher. This dissertation instead acknowledges them as what Douglas Holmes and George Marcus have termed intellectual or 'epistemic partners': interlocutors who are themselves deeply engaged in processes of meaning making and knowledge production, with their own modes of theorizing, critique, and reflection – actors whom this research considers experts in their own right.[253] Over the years, activists themselves have published quite a lot about their own actions and their relationship to Belgian postcolonialism. I have tried to include these writings as much as possible. The analyses presented in the following chapters are the outcome of a constant dialogue between my own academically shaped perspective and their diverse viewpoints – much like a 'fusion of horizons', in which the dialogical encounter between fundamentally different and situated perspectives transforms them, creating a new understanding.

2.2.2 Belgian Postcolonialism and Academic Inertia

The diversity of sources analysed in this study, as well as the choice for ethnographic methods, stems from the limited research in Belgium on both sub-Saharan African migrations and Afrodescendant political mobilizations. Scholars working in these areas are often compelled to adopt creative and eclectic approaches. When I began this research in the fall of 2017, I was confronted a hypervisibility of Afrodescendant claims for memorial justice in the media and public debate, yet an underrepresentation within academic literature. Scholarly engagement with Afrodescendant mobilizations in Belgium since 2010 has remained sparse for a number of reasons. As discussed in Chapter 1, sub-Saharan African migration to Belgium is a relatively recent phenomenon, especially when compared to neighbouring European countries. Similarly, public and political actions by Afrodescendant actors for recognition and memorial justice only

[253] Douglas R. Holmes and George E. Marcus, 'Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounter', *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1, no. 1 (2008), 83.

gained momentum in recent decades. The critical interrogation of Belgium's colonial past and its postcolonial present has been slow to develop, as has been academic work on postcolonial history and issues more broadly.[254] This scholarly inertia mirrors the broader societal reluctance to confront the legacies of colonialism in the here and now as shown in Chapter 1. Historically, academic research on (post)colonial history and memory in Belgium has focused primarily on the African continent itself, thereby reinforcing a spatial and conceptual distance – conceiving of colonialism as something that happened 'over there', disconnected from contemporary Belgian society and politics 'here'.[255] Resultingly, academic work on Afrodescendant communities' political mobilizations in Belgium still is fragmented and underdeveloped – especially when compared to scholarship on other minorities.

Pioneering research in Belgium was initially carried out primarily by scholars of migration, including but not limited to Belgo-Congolese students themselves, such as Zana Etamabala, Bonaventure Kagné, Ndamina Lusanda, and Mayoyo Bitumba Tipo-Tipo.[256] Their work was instrumental in mapping Congolese migration histories, and in doing so, highlighted the specificity of these trajectories in relation to broader migration patterns within Belgium, offering critical insight for subsequent migration studies.[257] As outlined in the previous chapter, in the 1990s a growing number of Afrodescendants began organizing collectively in response to everyday racism, institutional exclusion, and socio-political invisibility. This surge in grassroots mobilization prompted increased academic interest, though until the early 2000s, most studies remained focused on migration dynamics, integration policies, and 'multiculturalism'. From the 2000s onward and particularly following the fiftieth anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010, a new wave of scholarship began to take shape. A small but influential group of anthropologists and sociologists, notably Nicole Grégoire, Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, and Sarah Demart, began to produce analyses that extended beyond questions of migration and integration to explore Pan-African mobilizations, racialized citizenship, institutional racism, and colonial injustice, grounded in long-term ethnographic engagement

[254] Sarah Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', *African Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (2013): 6.
[255] Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 2.
[256] Zana Etambala, 'In Het Land van de Banoko. De Geschiedenis van de Kongolese/Zairese Aanwezigheid in België van 1885 Tot Heden', *Steunpunt Migranten - Cahiers*, 1993; Zana Etambala, 'Présences congolaises en Belgique, 1885–1940: exhibition, éducation, émancipation, paternalisme' (PhD diss., KU Leuven, 1989); Bonaventure Kagné, 'Africains de Belgique, de l'indigène à l'immigré', *Hommes & migrations*, no. 1228 (2000): 62–67; Bonaventure Kagné, 'Immigration, stratégies identitaires et mobilisations politiques des Africains en Belgique', in *Ethnicités et mobilisations sociales*, ed. Gabriel Gosselin and Jean-Pierre Lavaud (L'Harmattan, 2001); Mayoyo Bitumba Tipo-Tipo, *Migration sud/nord, levier ou obstacle?: les Zaïrois en Belgique* (Institut africain, CEDAF, 1995).
[257] Anne Cornet, 'Les Congolais en Belgique aux XIXe et XXe siècles', in *Histoire des étrangers et de l'immigration en Belgique, de la préhistoire à nos jours*, ed. Anne Morelli (Couleurs Livres, 2004); Quentin Schoonvaere, 'Étude de la migration congolaise et de son impact sur la présence congolaise en Belgique: analyse des principales données démographiques' (master's thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 2009).

within a growing network of Afrodescendant associations.[258] A key milestone in this evolving body of work is the 2014 edited volume *Migrations subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique. À la croisée des regards*, curated by Jacinthe Mazzocchetti. This volume serves as a critical junction between earlier migration-focused studies and newer analyses of Afrodescendant political, cultural, and social organization. It proposes a more structural understanding of race and racialization in Belgium, moving beyond individual migrant experiences to interrogate broader systems of inequality.[259] While the volume has been critiqued for its use of the category 'sub-Saharan African' – a term too general that, critics argue, risks obscuring the specific colonial entanglements of Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian communities in Belgium – it remains a foundational reference in francophone postcolonial and critical race scholarship. Notably, it was among the first academic publications in Belgium to explicitly frame 'Blackness' as a structural condition and a lived reality in Belgium, thus shifting the focus away from studies of migration alone and toward questions of racialized belonging and epistemic marginalization.[260] In the years since, we have seen the emergence of transnational scholarly projects that seek to conceptualize Blackness in Europe – projects attentive to the plurality of colonial legacies, postcolonial migrations, and national frameworks that shape racialization across the continent.[261] In its wake, Belgium has in recent years also seen the slow development of Black studies, pushing the academic reconceptualization of racial inequality in Belgium beyond the language of 'immigration' and 'multiculturalism'.[262] Writing in this tradition, Véronique Clette-Gakuba defended her groundbreaking PhD research in 2023, which investigated racialized patterns of exclusion in Brussels' cultural and art institutions based on nine years of ethnographic involvement in Afrodescendant artivist circles in the city.[263] Sarah Demart's forthcoming *La fiction postraciale belge: antiracisme afrodescendant, féminisme et aspirations décoloniales* is promising in this respect, connecting ten years of ethnographic work on Afrodescendant anti-racisms in Brussels with decolonial and critical race theory.[264]

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[258] These works include: Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*; Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State'; Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité "africaine" et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 29, no. 2 (2013); Sarah Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles): un miroir postcolonial', *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 29, no. 1 (2013); and the forthcoming Sarah Demart, *La fiction postraciale belge: antiracisme afrodescendant, féminisme et aspirations décoloniales.*

[259] Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, ed., *Migrations subsahariennes et condition noire en Belgique. A la croisée des regards* (L'Harmattan, 2014).

[260] Mazzocchetti, 'Introduction: Migrations subsahariennes et "condition noire" en Belgique'.

[261] Stephen Small et al., *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (University of Illinois Press, 2009).

[262] Important in this respect has been the two-day colloquium on 'Black Studies in Europe: A Transnational Dialogue', organized at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) at the initiative of Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti in 2017. While I was writing this dissertation, a younger generation of scholars at the Université Libre de Bruxelles took the initiative to nurture the academic discussion on race and racialization in Belgium through a lecture series, 'Critical Approaches to Race'. On Black studies in Belgium, see as well: Grégoire et al., 'Troubles to Define. The Ambiguous Field of Black Studies in Belgium'.

[263] Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de colonialité dans l'art et la culture. Faire exister un monde noir à Bruxelles'

[264] Demart, *La fiction postraciale belge.*

Over the past decade, academic research on Afrodescendant activism has thus grown significantly in both scope and depth. At the same time, however, fragmentation and limitations remain. First, because much of this pioneering work is grounded in qualitative ethnography, the voices this literature represents often belong to specific subsets of the Afrodescendant population – frequently highly educated elites easily approachable by scholars – leaving a broader diversity of Afrodescendant experiences underrepresented. In 2017, the King Baudouin Foundation, under the direction of Ilke Adam, Sarah Demart, Marie Godin, and Bruno Schoumakers, published a landmark study that provided a broad overview of the experiences and perspectives of citizens of Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian descent.[265] Based on more than 800 surveys, it was the first study to offer a comprehensive portrait of attitudes, living conditions, and postcolonial claims among Belgians with roots in these former colonies. While this research has been crucial in providing a wider empirical overview – demonstrating, for instance, that claims for the recognition of the colonial past in public space and education are broadly supported – its understanding of the varieties of Afrodescendant mobilizations for memorial justice remains limited.[266] For one, some decolonial memory activism originates from people with roots in sub-Saharan countries beyond the former Belgian colonies, including undocumented migrants, whose migration histories remain until today largely neglected by Belgian academia.[267] Second, as indicated in the previous chapter, the Congolese students who came to study in Belgium in earlier decades were predominantly male, and Afrodescendant political mobilizations have long been largely male-dominated.[268] In her forthcoming work, Sarah Demart makes important contributions towards centring female voices within the associational landscape.[269] Yet, much work remains to be done to document and analyse the gendered dimensions of migration, racialization, and decolonial resistance in Belgium.[270] Third, the majority of existing academic literature is based on fieldwork conducted

[265] Sarah Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen* (King Baudouin Foundation, 2017).

[266] The study found that 91% of respondents demanded that colonial history should adequately be taught at school, and 74% said public debate lacked a proper understanding of colonialism. Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 10.

[267] In the study by the King Baudouin Foundation, Afrodescendant voices from outside Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi serve as a 'control group' to identify the specific characteristics of individuals with roots in the former colonies. A broader study on Afrodescendants with roots elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa has not yet been conducted.

[268] Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 12.

[269] Demart, *La fiction postraciale belge*, 23.

[270] The King Baudouin Foundation has already shown that gender of course influences migration trajectories: women, who are slightly more represented in the population, most often migrate for family reasons, while men more frequently point to conflict and studies as their primary motivations. Women also tend to express a stronger intention to settle permanently in Belgium, often accompanied by a greater desire to obtain Belgian nationality. See: Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 51–52. On the role of women in Afrodescendant associational and activist life in Belgium, see: Laanan Fadila et al., *Femmes d'origine africaine subsaharienne et action associative* (Communauté française. Direction générale de la Culture. Service de l'Education permanente, 2009); Nicole Grégoire and Modi Ntambwe, 'Afro Women's Activism in Belgium', in *To Exist Is to Resist*, ed. Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande, Black Feminism in Europe (Pluto Press, 2019), 63–76; Jacinthe Mazzocchetti et al., eds., *Plurielles. Femmes de la diaspora africaine* (Karthala, 2016).

in francophone Belgium. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that most Afrodescendants in Belgium reside in Brussels, and the most visible forms of political and cultural resistance have emerged in this city. However, research on Afrodescendant mobilizations in Dutch-speaking Belgium continues to lag behind, with only a handful of exceptions.[271]

Taken together, these limitations serve as a reminder that existing scholarship represents only a partial view within a much broader field of voices and experiences. They underscore the imperative for scholars working on these topics to be transparent and precise about whose voices are included – and whose are not – in order to avoid reproducing the essentialist and reductive interpretations that continue to dominate public discourse. For this study, the limited state of the literature meant that a large part of the work consisted of preliminary work, slowly getting acquainted with a wide variety of actors. Section 2 of this chapter delves deeper into this work, but first, the next section sketches the institutional contours of decolonial memory activisms in Belgium and the implications for (white) scholars bringing ethnographic approaches to their study.

2.2.3 Institutional Constraints and Ethnographic Refusals

Although scholarship on the history and lived experiences of Afrodescendants in Belgium remains in its early stages, existing research unequivocally highlights the structural racial inequalities and precarity they continue to face.[272] Over 80 per cent of Afrodescendants report recurring experiences of racial discrimination, harassment, and violence across various domains of everyday life.[273] These incidents are not isolated but systemic, manifesting in employment,

[271] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Black Connectivity: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Cultural Media Practices and Collective Identities in Belgium' (PhD diss., Ghent University, 2023).

[272] This scholarship has been confirmed by a variety of both domestic and international policy reports describing the prevalance of anti-Black discrimination and Afrophobia in Belium. See: European Network Against Racism (ENAR), 'Fact Sheet Briefing – Afrophobia in Belgium', March 2016, https://www.enar-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/belgium_fact_sheet_briefing_final.pdf; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 'Being Black in the EU. Experiences of People of African Descent. EU Survey on Immigrants and Descendants of Immigrants' (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2023-being-black_in_the_eu_en.pdf; European Network Against Racism (ENAR), 'Racism and Associated Practices in Belgium', 19 March 2023, https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/library-document/racism-and-associated-practices-belgium_en; Ligue des Droits Humains (LDH), 'État des droits humains en Belgique. Rapport 2023.' (Edgar Szoc, 2024), https://www.liguedh.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/EDH_2023_WEB.pdf.

[273] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 123.

housing, education, and public life.[274] Government-led field tests in Belgium's labour and housing markets have consistently uncovered widespread discriminatory practices towards people of African descent.[275] In education, children of African descent are disproportionately steered toward vocational tracks, thereby narrowing their academic and professional horizons from an early age on.[276] This occurs despite relatively high levels of educational attainment: over 60 per cent of Belgian Afrodescendants hold a higher education degree. Nevertheless, they remain four times more likely to be unemployed than the national average and 56 per cent are employed in positions that fall below their qualifications.[277] Moreover, Afrodescendants are markedly underrepresented in media, politics, and public institutions, reinforcing a broader 'social invisibility'.[278] According to another study supported by the King Baudouin Foundation, 70 per cent of children born to mothers of sub-Saharan African origin in Brussels risk falling below the poverty threshold – compared to the Belgian average of 18.3 per cent – and 39 per cent of them live in one-parent households, further increasing poverty risk.[279] Taken together, these facts point to a racialized social order that continues to structure Belgian society, while, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, publicly naming and confronting racial injustice in these terms remains fraught.

Decolonial memory activist mobilizations between 2010 and 2021 cannot be understood without acknowledging this broader context of racial inequality and socio-economic precarity. At the collective level, Afrodescendant associations often grapple with a lack of resources. Many of these associations are organized as *associations sans but lucratif* (ASBLs) or non-profit organizations, a legal structure for entities that do not pursue commercial profit but aim to fulfil a social, cultural, or educational mission. This organizational form allows them to apply for funding through the Flemish, Walloon, or Brussels governments to support their activities. However, applying for funding is often time-consuming and highly competitive, constraining organizations' possibilities for developing subversive anti-racisms. Belgian policies towards migrant and diaspora associations have undergone several changes in recent decades, and there are notable differences between Flemish, Brussels, and Walloon policies, as well as between

[274] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 124–125.

[275] Interfederaal Kansencentrum UNIA, 'Praktijktesten Op de Brusselse Arbeidsmarkt', 2020, https://www.unia.be/files/2020-11-18_Rapport_Praktijktesten_Brussel_NL.pdf.; Katleen Van den Broeck and Kristof Heylen, 'Discriminatie En Selectie Op de Private Huurmarkt in België. Onderzoek in Opdracht van Het Interfederaal Gelijkekansencentrum' (HIVA - Onderzoeksinstituut voor Arbeid en Samenleving KU Leuven, 2014), https://www.unia.be/files/baro_div_huisvesting_discriminatie_en_selectie_praktijktest.pdf.

[276] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 127.

[277] This phenomenon was identified in 2017 by the King Baudouin Foundation with the term 'déclassement'. Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 204.

[278] Demart, 'Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives', 6.

[279] Myriam De Spiegelaere et al., *Wat Betekenen Armoede En Migratie Voor de Gezondheid van Baby's?* (King Baudouin Foundation, 2017), 21.

local authorities.[280] Yet in the period 2010–2021, which is the focus of this dissertation, the broader societal context of increased securitization and 'deradicalization' contributed to an overall policy environment in which minority organizations have been discouraged from centring ethnocultural identity – perceived as contributing to polarization – and encouraged to present themselves as 'constructive' actors promoting social cohesion.[281] Under the banners of neutrality, such politics of depoliticization and disciplining of civil society both constrain the development of critical voices, and also at times create opportunities for local actors as governmental bodies approach them as intermediaries between marginalized communities and political administrations.[282] For some decolonial and anti-racist organizations this policy context leads to a constant balancing act: on the one hand, they must articulate their activities in a language that aligns with official policy frameworks in order to secure their institutional legitimacy; on the other, they aim to preserve their subversive character to secure their activist legitimacy and activist objectives.[283] Confronted with a lack of financial resources, most Afrodescendant organizations are largely dependent on the resources of time and labour by volunteers.[284] Or, as Billy Kalonji put it: 'people don't sleep, on a voluntary basis'.[285] Having to contend with these structural constraints, decolonial memory activists claim to face greater difficulty in gaining public traction and recognition than, for example, associations of former colonials in Belgium, which generally enjoy more access to financial resources, time to shape and promote their activities, and access to a network of sympathizers holding positions on the boards of museums and major cultural institutions.[286]

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[280] Ilke Adam, *Les entités fédérées belges et l'intégration des immigrés: politiques publiques comparées* (Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2013); Louise Hantson et al., 'Party Politics Across Levels of Governance: Relational Dynamics of Immigrant Integration Policy Making in Belgian Cities', *Local Government Studies* (2024): 1–20.

[281] Nadia Fadil et al., 'Introduction. Radicalization: Tracing the Trajectory of an "Empty Signifier" in the Low Lands', in *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*, ed. Nadia Fadil et al. (I.B. Tauris, 2019), 7.

[282] For instance, local authorities have, at times, enlisted organizations as intermediaries between communities and political institutions, ostensibly to better manage the social challenges associated with so-called 'urban gangs'. Yet this engagement has often been shaped by a politics of appeasement, focused on defusing tensions rather than addressing the deeper structural issues of racialization and marginalization that underlie the phenomenon. See: Ural Manço et al., 'Postcolonialisme et prise en charge institutionnelle des jeunes belgo-congolais en situation de rupture sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', *African Diaspora* 6 (2013): 37.

[283] Nicole Grégoire noted a similar conundrum of a 'double lack of legitimacy' for Pan-African federations in the 1990s. In: Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State', 171.

[284] Geneviève Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, ed. Marina Gržinić et al. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 47.

[285] 'On demande trop aux gens: leur temps, leur énergie… les gens ils ne dorment pas, et de façon bénévole! Bénévolement tu vas te battre, tu prends le métro, tu vas aux débats. Et j'ai de l'admiration.' Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

[286] In this respect, Matthew Stanard speaks of a 'pro-colonial lobby'. In: Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2019), 218.

On the personal level, volunteers often combine their public activism with multi-faceted personal struggles – whether it be obtaining residence or legal status from the Belgian state, searching for a well-paid job that matches their educational level, dealing with intra-familial tensions, or dealing with everyday racisms in Belgian society. There is, moreover, a stark contrast between, on the one hand, media representations of decolonial anti-racism as a broad-based popular movement, and, on the other hand, the realities on the ground. Although, as the King Baudouin Foundation's publication from 2017 has shown, demand for decolonial reparative policies is indeed widespread among racialized populations, most publicly visible mobilizations and activist campaigns are developed by only a relatively small group of committed activists – no more than twenty to fifty individuals – who together shoulder the vast majority of the work. As in many activist environments, this reality, together with the structural constraints this network of activists faces, contributes to the very real issue of activist burn-out.[287] In this sense, too, Belgium's decolonial moment created further restraint. When both the broader public and institutional actors began expressing growing concern over Belgium's colonial legacies, it set in motion a process in which Afrodescendant activists were increasingly invited to offer policy advice or to participate in consultative bodies and official commissions, often cast as 'representatives' of an extremely heterogeneous group.[288] These interactions are typically characterized by deep asymmetries of power: while Afrodescendant voices are invited to share their input, such consultative work is often unpaid or poorly compensated, and the temporary inclusion of Afrodescendant participants rarely translates into permanent or salaried positions within those institutions (cf. **Chapter 7** of this dissertation). While the growing institutional interest in colonial memory and decolonization has been embraced by some as an important first step in a broader decolonial project, it also became increasingly clear that the (unpaid) labour of Afrodescendants rarely resulted in meaningful or lasting change – with well-intentioned individuals working inside institutions often caught between policy directives, the constraints of boards of directors, and the demands of grassroots actors. More research is needed on this larger phenomenon of 'decolonization working groups' and 'decolonization commissions' that emerged between 2010 and 2021. The point I wish to make here is that these developments further contributed to the exhaustion and activist burnout within the network of decolonial memory activists who sustained Belgium's decolonial moment. This became particularly evident toward the end of the decade, when, in addition to the pressures of sustained activism and the pressure of Belgium's parliamentary commission,

[287] Author's Field Notes, 'Conversations sur le Sexisme et l'Harcèlement dans le Monde Militantisme' (event organized by Café Congo), 8 October 2019, Brussels.

[288] This analysis is common to discourses of activists who have themselves had experiences with collaborating with institutions such as the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. This dynamic was highlighted during multiple workshops and public debates and in conversations. It was for example stressed by Monique Mbeka Phoba, Laura Nsengiyumva, and Pitcho Womba Konga during a workshop on Afrodescendant artists working in or for the cultural institution Bozar in Brussels and the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. In: Author's Field Notes, 'Workshop: Mémoire/Histoire – La Puissance de la Décolonisation' (event organized by LeSpace), 3 May 2018, Brussels.

the COVID-19 pandemic also pushed many individuals further into precarity in their personal lives.

Against this backdrop, some decolonial memory activists have begun to adopt a much more sceptical or distrustful stance towards mainstream institutions, including the media, political bodies, cultural institutions, and academic spaces.[289] Some younger generations are increasingly wary of (white) allies, withdraw from institutional collaborations or funding, or develop collective care practices to remain resilient and resist the pressures of institutionalized racism.[290] In reaction to a long history of invisibilization and racialized stereotyping in academic literature, resistance to institutionalized racism also manifests as critique of academic researchers who treat activist demands as mere objects of inquiry. In many ways, decolonial memory activisms can be understood as practices of reclaiming agency and authorship over one's own narrative in the public sphere. Rooted in that struggle, various activists challenge the logic of 'epistemic extractivism' wherein (often white) researchers collect data over a short period of time, subsequently essentializing or misrepresenting their stories.[291] Such 'ethnographic refusals', to borrow Audra Simpson's term, played a significant role in shaping the degree and nature of access I – as a white scholar – was able to attain over the course of this project.[292] As will become evident in the chapters that follow, I interpret the variations in how memory and transformation are articulated through the lens of a performative negotiation of legitimacy and self-presentation. Acknowledging the agency of the actors in this research as authors of their self-representation also entails acknowledging that I, as a researcher, was inevitably drawn into this performative dynamic: based on the narrative they wished to convey, activists exercised careful judgement in determining what information they chose to share with me and what they strategically withheld. From an anthropological standpoint, this dissertation thus does not aim to produce an ethnography in the classical sense, where 'thick description' serves to unpack the deeper symbolic meanings of social practices through richly contextualized observation.[293]

[289] Yet, overall, trust in institutions in Belgium is relatively high among Belgian Afrodescendants. In: Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 139.
François Makanga calls this strategy to retreat from engagement with institutions 'marronage', in: François Makanga, 'Marronnage culturel, ou comment investir les failles de l'institution', in *Traces et tensions en terrain colonial. Bruxelles et la colonisation belge du Congo*, ed. Nicholas Lewis (Luster Publishing, 2022).
[290] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Black Dis/Engagement: Negotiating Mainstream Media Presence and Refusal', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 27, no. 5 (2024): 1037–55.
[291] Sarah Demart, 'Afro-Belgian Activist Resistances to Research Procedures: Reflections on Epistemic Extractivism and Decolonial Interventions in Sociological Research', *Current Sociology* 3, no. 72 (2022): 581–598.
[292] Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014), 95.
[293] Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).

Instead, this work deliberately embraces a form of 'ethnographic thinness' – one that respects the limits of access, representation, and interpretation imposed by the field itself.[294]

2.3 A Situated Methodology

This research initially consisted of 'mapping' the multitude of actors active around colonial memory between 2010 and 2021. In practice this was really a complicated social and emotional process of getting acquainted with memory activists and negotiating my legitimacy as a researcher in their midst. Anthropologists since George Marcus and Clifford Geertz have compared ethnographic fieldwork with the messy, non-linear, and highly uncomfortable project of finding one's way through a labyrinth.[295] Before I made the choice to present this research as an intervention in memory studies with a focus on three delineated memory campaigns, I spent several years in the labyrinth in the various roles of researcher, activist, policy advisor, but also friend. While most of these experiences are not explicitly drawn from in the analyses presented in the next chapters, the following sections outline my maze-trajectory to explicate the specific positions and viewpoints that have shaped my choices. First, though, the following section situates this dissertation in the city of Brussels.

2.3.1 Brussels

The epicentre of the activism studied in this dissertation lies in Belgium's capital, Brussels. It is difficult to convey the inherent complexity and uniqueness of Brussels to readers unfamiliar with Belgium – not least because Brussels, in keeping with the country's at times surreal political structure, is itself something of a labyrinth. Administratively, the City of Brussels is just one of nineteen municipalities that make up the Brussels-Capital Region, one of Belgium's three regions alongside Flanders and Wallonia. The Brussels-Capital Region has its own parliament and regional government, while each of its nineteen municipalities – including the City of

[294] Audra Simpson originally coined the term 'ethnographic thinness' to critique ethnographic accounts that claim representativeness while offering a shallow understanding of the internal dynamics of the communities they describe. The idea that 'ethnographic thinness' might also serve as a deliberate ethical choice – one that respects and protects a community's right to opacity – was later suggested to me by Alana Osbourne.

[295] Honorio Velasco and Ángel Díaz de Rada similarly compared fieldwork to a 'mazeway'. See: Francisco Ferrándiz, *Contemporary Ethnographies: Moorings, Methods, and Keys for the Future* (Routledge, 2020), 1.

Brussels – has its own local administration and mayor. There are considerable disparities across these municipalities in terms of living conditions, income levels, quality of life, and demographic composition.[296] Although relatively small in size (just over 160 square kilometres), Brussels is today home to more than 1.2 million residents, making it the most densely populated area in Belgium.[297] These residents are also incredibly diverse: the city counts over 180 nationalities, and near 80 per cent of the population has a migration background.[298] While Brussels is, as a constitutional compromise within Belgium's federal structure, officially bilingual (French and Dutch), the city in reality functions as a multilingual microcosm. French is the lingua franca (spoken predominantly by over 80% of the population), followed by English (around 50%) and a wide array of languages including Dutch, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, German, Portuguese, Turkish, and Romanian.[299] Alongside Antwerp and Liège, Brussels is home to the largest and most visible Afrodescendant population in Belgium.[300] This research unfolds across multiple locations in Brussels, and in the history of decolonial memory activist mobilizations, municipalities such as Schaerbeek and Etterbeek also play important roles. Most significant in the context of this dissertation, however, are the municipalities of Brussels, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, and Ixelles, which includes the neighbourhood of Matonge.

2.3.1.1 Matonge

In Brussels, Afrodescendants in general and people from Congolese descent specifically of course live across the city, yet in the broader public imagination, their presence is often symbolically associated with Matonge – a small but emblematic neighbourhood located in the municipality of Ixelles. Historically, the neighbourhood has been an important meeting place for sub-Saharan African immigrants in Belgium, as well as for visitors.[301] It borrows its name from a popular party district in the Congolese city of Kinshasa.[302] In public discourse, Matonge has come to be known as the 'African neighbourhood' in Brussels, with its abundance of

[296] Christian Kesteloot and Maarten Loopmans, 'Social Inequalities', trans. Mike Bramley, *Brussels Studies.The Journal of Research on Brussels*, no. Synopsis, CFB No. 15 (2009).
[297] Brussels Institute for Statistics and Analysis (BISA), 'Mini-Bru 2025: Brussels-Capital Region in Figures' (perspective.brussels, 2025), 8.
[298] According to Statbel, Belgium's official statistical office, 40.2% were Belgian nationals with a foreign background, while 39.1% were non-Belgians, in January 2024. Together, these figures show that close to 80% of Brussels' population has a migration background. See: 'Statbel,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/population/structure-population/origin#news.
[299] Mathis Saeys, 'Taalbarometer 5: Factsheet', BRIO- Brussels Informatie-, Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum, 2024, https://www.briobrussel.be/node/19094.
[300] Demart et al., *Burgers Met Afrikaanse Roots: Een Portret van Congolese, Rwandese En Burundese Belgen*, 10.
[301] Eva Swyngedouw and Erik Swyngedouw, 'The Congolese Diaspora in Brussels and Hybrid Identity Formation: Multi-Scalarity and Diasporic Citizenship', *Urban Research & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2009): 69.
[302] Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matongé (Bruxelles)', 133.

African shops, hairdressers, and bars.[303] Yet, because of high housing prices in Ixelles – one of the wealthiest municipalities in the entirety of Belgium – it does not have the highest numbers of Afrodescendant residents.[304] Rather, it serves as a meeting place to which people travel from other parts of Brussels and Belgium to visit the many African shops and bars.[305] At the beginning of the Chaussée de Wavre, right at the entrance of Matonge's Porte de Namur metro stop, visitors are iconically welcomed in the 'Porte de l'Amour' by a canvas representing Cheri Samba's 2002 painting. The colourful image illustrates 'the tensions and difficulties of multiculturalism' in Brussels, but at the same time expresses the hope for inventing a new way of harmonious coexistence.[306]

Over the decades, and in parallel with sub-Saharan African migration histories, Matonge has undergone many transformations. A vibrant site of connection, exchange, and cultural fusion across the colonial divide during the 1950s, it evolved into a popular nightlife destination in the 1970s, albeit increasingly frequented by an exclusively African clientele. By the early 1990s, however, the neighbourhood had become visibly neglected, existing in a condition that anthropologist Karel Arnaut describes as one of 'mild segregation and passive tolerance' on the part of the Belgian state.[307] With a considerable influx of Congolese asylum seekers in the early 1990s – diversifying an immigrant population that had until then primarily consisted of students and political refugees (cf. Chapter 1) – the neighbourhood became increasingly marked by the social challenges of discrimination, unemployment, and precarious legal statuses faced by these communities.[308] By the early 2000s, Matonge had become a site of resistance for Afrodescendant communities in Brussels against police actions, racial profiling, and a broader lack of state support, culminating in a series of 'riots' expressing 'anger and frustration' towards Belgium's institutional neglect.[309] Combined with a growing issue of crime and the emergence

[303] On popular mediations of the Matonge neighbourhood, see: Karel Arnaut, 'Mediating Matonge: Relocations of Belgian Postcoloniality in Four Films', *Afrika Focus* 31, no. 2 (2018): 149–63.

[304] Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw, 'The Congolese Diaspora in Brussels and Hybrid Identity Formation', 72.

[305] Dieter De Clercq, 'Matonge. Het Paradijs van de Verbeelding', in *De Kwaliteit van Het Verschil. B*, ed. Eric Corijn and Walter De Lannoy (VUB Press, 2000), 227.

[306] Tensions arise in the work due to several elements. The use of a French quote referring to Brussels as a mythical city – a paradise where multiculturalism exists in harmony – is marked by irony, especially given the presence of a question mark after 'Porte de l'Amour', suggesting ambiguity or doubt. This romanticized image of peaceful coexistence contrasts sharply with the more troubling aspects depicted in the piece, such as a white character's remark to a Black man expressing surprise that 'Africans can read these days'. This statement not only reflects deep-seated prejudice but also reveals the persistence of colonial stereotypes, highlighting the friction beneath the surface of the so-called multicultural paradise. See Sibo Kanobana's analysis of the work: Kanobana, 'Black Brussels', 56–58.

[307] Karel Arnaut, 'Blowing Bubbles in the City or Does Urban Governance Have a Bad Breath? A Report from Matonge, Somewhere in Brussels', Special issue: Making Sense in the City, *A-PRIOR*, (2006): 64.

[308] In this context, Karel Arnaut speaks of a 'ghettoisation' of the neighbourhood: Arnaut, 'Blowing Bubbles in the City or Does Urban Governance Have a Bad Breath?', 66.

[309] Sarah Demart, 'Émeutes à Matonge et… indifférence des pouvoirs publics ?', *Brussels Studies. The Journal of Research on Brussels* 68 (2013): 7.

of 'urban gangs' in the area, this contributed to racist public perceptions of both Matonge and the racialized minorities frequenting it as threats to urban security.[310] Even though major chains such as H&M and Burger King have now established themselves along Matonge's main shopping street and significantly changed the scenery, the neighbourhood has retained much of its character as a vibrant place where visitors can access African shops, cuisine, and meeting spaces.[311] Hailed by some as an urban space where they can be 'a majority whereas in most spaces in their daily lives they are a minority', it functions as a site of symbolic belonging for many Afrodescendants in Belgium.[312] Because of its history, Matonge also remains a central site for the development of campaigns against anti-Black racism in Belgium, for justice regarding the colonial past, and against neocolonial interference in Congolese politics.

Today, the neighbourhood is a melting pot of people and cultures, with residents of over forty nationalities.[313] With all these layers of history converging in this neighbourhood, Matonge can be conceptualized as a memoryscape where different communities and the traces of various histories and cultural traditions come together in a complex assemblage.[314] For many still, the neighbourhood serves as a highly visible symbol of Afrodescendant presence in Brussels and, by extension, Belgium.[315] Matonge is also symbolically situated near the major centres of power in Brussels, with the European Quarter – home to the seats of the European institutions – just around the corner, and the well-known equestrian statue of Leopold II at Trône located only a few hundred meters from Porte de Namur.[316] This makes it a symbolic site in the struggle for the recognition of African histories and anti-colonial memories. Today, Matonge remains a

[310] Sarah Demart, 'De la distinction au stigmate, Matonge, un quartier congolais dans Bruxelles', *Cahiers de la Fonderie* 38 (2008): 62.

[311] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 45.

[312] Téju Adisa-Farrar, 'Geographies of a Transnational Urban Black Consciousness through Artists and Activists. Mapping Self-Directed Blackness in Vienna, Brussels and Oakland' (Master's thesis, 4Cities Erasmus Mundus Masters Course in Urban Studies, 2017), 27.

[313] Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles)', 134.

[314] The notion of the 'memoryscape' was first developed by Kendall Phillips et al. in: Kendall R. Phillips et al., *Global Memoryscapes: Contesting Remembrance in a Transnational Age*, illustrated edition (University of Alabama Press, 2011). In relation to memory activism, Jenny Wüstenberg has reflected on memoryscapes as spaces of memory that 'encapsulate socially constructed arenas through which memory practices and communities are bounded and equipped with particular purposes and characteristics'. In: Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Introduction: Constructing Spaces of Memory Activism', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Jenny Wüstenberg and Yifat Gutman (Routledge, 2023), 221.

[315] Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw, 'The Congolese Diaspora in Brussels and Hybrid Identity Formation', 72.

[316] The construction and development of this European Quarter from the 1970s onward, which involved the dismantling of the working-class neighbourhood Quartier Léopold, also had its effects on life in Matonge. See: Elke Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs' (PhD diss., Leuven University, 2015), 105.

central meeting space, housing multiple cultural centres and restaurants, such as KUUMBA, L'Horloge du Sud, and the historical Maison Africaine ('Maisaf', African House).[317]

The Matonge neighbourhood, and the administrations of Ixelles and Brussels, form the central backdrop for Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this dissertation, which explore the contentious politics surrounding the decolonization of public space. Matonge served as the starting point for the first activist-led historical walking tours addressing colonial memory. It was in Matonge that the activist demand to name a square in Brussels after Patrice Lumumba first emerged, with the municipal council of Ixelles serving as a first important battleground for the demand in 2013. Rejected by Ixelles, the campaign subsequently started lobbying the City of Brussels administration.

2.3.1.2 Saint-Josse-ten-Noode

Saint-Josse-ten-Noode counts among the smallest municipalities in Belgium and is simultaneously the most densely populated.[318] Along with the municipalities of Schaerbeek and Molenbeek, it is part of a northern corridor in Brussels historically shaped by migration. From the 1960s onwards, these municipalities became destinations for Maghrebi labour migrants, who in the following decades were increasingly joined by migrants of Congolese and broader sub-Saharan African descent. Today, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, together with Ixelles, Molenbeek, and Anderlecht, ranks among the primary destinations for Congolese newcomers, a trend that intensified in the 1990s with the diversification of migration trajectories, particularly the rise in asylum seekers fleeing political instability in the DRC.[319] Today still, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode functions as a gateway municipality: a first point of arrival for many non-European migrants and refugees attempting to gain a foothold in Belgian society by securing legal residence and stable employment, and eventually relocating to areas with better living conditions and more opportunities for upward mobility. In 2021, near 60 per cent of Saint-Josse's residents were born abroad, making it the municipality with the highest proportion of foreign-background residents in the country.[320]

[317] The Horloge du Sud, on the Rue du Trône in Ixelles, is an African restaurant that has historically played a facilitating role in bringing communities together and organizing political debate and social mobilization. Since at least the 1990s, Horloge du Sud has functioned as a meeting space for a variety of grassroots actors in Afrodescendant communities in Brussels (cf. Chapters 4 and 5 in this dissertation). The Maison Africaine, situated close to the Porte de Namur, was created in the 1960s to house Congolese students in Belgium. Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles)', 148.
[318] Brussels Institute for Statistics and Analysis (BISA), 'Mini-Bru 2025: Brussels-Capital Region in Figures', 26.
[319] Tipo-Tipo, *Migration sud/nord, levier ou obstacle?,* 94.
[320] 'Statbel,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/themes/census/population/migration.

In contrast to the affluent Ixelles, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode is one of Belgium's most socio-economically disadvantaged municipalities, grappling with structural poverty and social exclusion for decades.[321] Consistently high rates of unemployment and a high proportion of working poor have earned the area, alongside Molenbeek and Schaerbeek, the label of the 'croissant pauvre' of Brussels (referring to its shape on the map).[322] In Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, 34 per cent of the population is at risk of poverty.[323] Thirty-seven per cent of Congolese families are single-parent households, a significant risk factor for intergenerational poverty when combined with unemployment, which affects 40 per cent of Congolese single-parent households.[324] The combination of superdiversity and socioeconomic precarity makes Saint-Josse-ten-Noode a municipality marked by structural barriers to social mobility, educational attainment, and labour market integration for residents with migration backgrounds.[325] The neighbourhood is known as an example of a 'quartier populaire' (working-class neighbourhood) for its multicultural and working-class identity, though following the gentrification process in the neighbouring municipality of Schaerbeek, the population and outlook of the area are also gradually changing, as an increasing number of white Belgian families are settling in the region.

For some racialized youth growing up in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, the interplay of structural disadvantage, high population density, and limited access to adequate housing often drives them to spend considerable time in public space.[326] In her study on African 'urban gangs' in Brussels, criminologist Elke Van Hellemont has shown how this dynamic can lead to competition over public space and, at times, intercommunal tensions – particularly between young people of Maghrebi and sub-Saharan African descent.[327] Other scholars have highlighted how such frictions, compounded by frequent police surveillance of racialized youth in public areas, contribute to a sense of alienation among Afrodescendant youth in their own neighbourhoods.[328] Some scholars have described them as 'urban nomads', lacking a stable territorial anchoring or sense of home and belonging within the city.[329]

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[321] Statbel, 'Belgium in Figures: Attert Is the Richest Municipality and Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode the Poorest in 2022,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/attert-richest-municipality-and-saint-josse-ten-noode-poorest-2022.

[322] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 23; Schoonvaere, 'Étude de la migration congolaise et de son impact sur la présence congolaise en Belgique', 53.

[323] Statbel, 'Belgium in Figures: Attert Is the Richest Municipality and Saint-Josse-Ten-Noode the Poorest in 2022,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://statbel.fgov.be/en/news/attert-richest-municipality-and-saint-josse-ten-noode-poorest-2022.

[324] Schoonvaere, 'Étude de la migration congolaise et de son impact sur la présence congolaise en Belgique', 66.

[325] Patrick Deboosere et al., 'The Population of Brussels: A Demographic Overview', trans. Mike Bramley, *Brussels Studies. The Journal of Research on Brussels*, no. Synopsis, CFB No. 3 (2009).

[326] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 121.

[327] See as well: Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 80.

[328] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 285 and 292.

[329] Manço et al., 'Postcolonialisme et prise en charge institutionnelle des jeunes belgo-congolais en situation de rupture sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 27.

Saint-Josse-ten-Noode provides the setting for Chapter 6 of this dissertation, which examines the activism of the ASBL Change – an organization established in 2013 to support racialized youth and their families in the wake of the public and political challenges surrounding the so-called 'urban gangs' phenomenon.

2.3.2 Navigating the Labyrinth

I first found my entry into the labyrinth online. I began by following organizations engaged in colonial memory and decolonization on social media platforms like Facebook, and later, Instagram. I initially reached out to several groups, including the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD) and BAMKO-CRAN, by sending general emails introducing my research. These first attempts went unanswered. I quickly realized that this research would only be possible through long-term, active participation in the activities of various associations. In the first stages, social media proved invaluable in keeping track of public events – debates, protests, conferences – and from early on, I attended as many of these gatherings as was possible in combination with my academic engagements. Through physical presence and ongoing participation, I gradually built relationships with individuals who would become key interlocutors in this study.

2.3.2.1 Broad Immersion

During the first two years of my fieldwork, my scope remained intentionally broad. While I focused on associations and initiatives directly addressing colonial memory, I soon realized that many actors operated on different fronts all at once, and that organizations not explicitly focused on colonial history contributed meaningfully to decolonial discourse, making my focus solely on colonial memory seem obsolete at first. Intuitively, I felt that gaining a comprehensive overview was a necessary precondition for formulating research questions that would be both relevant and grounded. Being selective also proved difficult due to the eruption of public debate around decolonization and colonial memory in 2017–2018. At the beginning of 2017, Hand in Hand tegen Racisme launched its first decolonization campaign in Flanders. Later that year, BAMKO-CRAN initiated a campaign calling for the restitution of African cultural heritage. In June 2018, Lumumba Square was inaugurated in Brussels after years of grassroots activism. That same December, the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren reopened after major renovations, only to face widespread criticism over its failure to meaningfully address Belgium's colonial violence and its marginalization of Afrodescendant perspectives in the redesign process (cf. Chapter 1). These overlapping mobilizations – around restitution, public space, museum representation, and institutional racism – coalesced into what I described in the previous chapter as Belgium's decolonial moment. They generated intense public debate across traditional media, cultural

institutions, academic platforms, and grassroots activities. The pace and volume of these developments were nearly impossible to keep up with. As a result, the first two years (2017–2019) of this doctoral project were best characterized as a period of deep and broad immersion: a time in which I absorbed as much as possible, followed events closely, and established connections with key figures in the activist field.

In those same early months, I also tried to meet up with experts, art practitioners, and academics – including Sarah Demart, Bambi Ceuppens, Heleen De Beuckelaere, Mathieu Charles, Emma-Lee Amponsah, Laura Nsengiyumva, and Véronique Clette-Gakuba – who were much more familiar with the field, to gain a better understanding of the broader landscape. To deepen my engagement with decolonial thought and to grasp the transnational dimensions of the developments unfolding in Belgium, I followed Joachim Ben Yakoub – back then a colleague at Ghent University – Rachida Aziz, and Omar Jabery Salamanca to the 'Bandung du Nord' conference in Paris in the spring of 2018 and later attended the Black Europe Summer School in the summer of 2018 in Amsterdam.[330] While none of these activities directly inform the analyses presented in the following chapters, they were nonetheless crucial in grounding me within an activist and intellectual tradition that had been largely absent from my predominantly Eurocentric training as a historian. They provided the conceptual and relational foundation necessary to engage in this field with a sense of orientation, humility, and growing critical awareness.

2.3.2.2 Building Contacts in Antwerp and Ghent

[330] The 1955 'Bandung Conference', famously described by Indonesian President Sukarno as 'the first intercontinental conference of [people of colour] in the history of humanity', marked a symbolic break from colonial dominance by bringing together leaders from Asia and Africa to discuss common struggles and solidarity. In its spirit, the 'Bandung du Nord' conference was held in Paris in May 2018 – an international gathering of racialized communities from the Global North. Organized by the Decolonial International Network and decolonial activists in France, it aimed to confront systemic racism and imperial legacies through a collective call for a 'Decolonial International'. With keynote speakers including Angela Davis and Fred Hampton Jr., the event forged links between different movements resisting social exclusion, state violence, and cultural erasure in postcolonial Western societies. See: https://bandungdunord.webflow.io/ (accessed 3 April 2025). The Black Europe Summer School (BESS) is a two-week academic programme held annually in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Established in 2008, BESS focuses on exploring the experiences and histories of the African Diaspora and other people of colour in Europe. The curriculum delves into the origins of Black Europe and examines how colonial legacies continue to influence contemporary policies, social structures, and legislation. The programme is designed for advanced undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students, as well as professionals working in related fields. Participants engage in lectures, discussions, and field trips, gaining insights into race and ethnic relations, anti-racism, migration, and the social constructions of Blackness within the European context. See: https://www.blackeurope.org/ (accessed 3 April 2025).

While I was already attending activities in Brussels, my earliest contacts and interviews initially took place in Dutch-speaking Belgium, largely due to a language barrier at the start of my project. I conducted exploratory interviews with activists Seckou Ouelguem and Ted Bwatu, who had been involved in Decolonize Belgium, an initiative launched in Antwerp in 2015, as well as with Tunde Adefioye, who was actively campaigning for the decolonization of cultural institutions in Belgium. Subsequently, I met two white anti-racist organizations which during the 2017–2018 period had suddenly become very visibly active under the banner of 'decolonization'. I actively participated in the campaign for the decolonization of public space in Ghent led by the organization Labo vzw during the winter of 2017–2018 and attended events organized by Hand in Hand tegen Racisme in the spring of 2018. At the time, this predominantly white-led organization had launched a decolonization campaign in Flanders, yet was grappling with questions of legitimacy, as Afrodescendant organizations were becoming increasingly vocal.[331] Following my involvement, I conducted several in-depth interviews with Hand in Hand activists Ludo Segers, Marius Dekeyser, and Stella Nyanchama Okemwa. These conversations served as an entry point for understanding the discursive shift that unfolded between 2010 and 2021, in which mainstream anti-racist organizations were 'in the process of reinventing themselves', adopting new language and frameworks for their anti-racism work (cf. Chapter 1).[332] As my engagement with Hand in Hand regularly brought me to Antwerp, I connected with Afrodescendant student organizations based in the city – Kilalo, through Baudouin Mena Sebu, and the African Youth Organization (AYO), through Zakayo Wandoloh and Emmanuel Imayo, both of whom I regularly met for informal conversations over drinks. I also had meaningful discussions with Mohammed Barrie and Aminata Ndow, including a long conversation in April 2018 about the possibilities and pitfalls of academic research on decolonial memory activisms, in which they encouraged me to be long-term involved.[333] Although my participation in AYO's events on Black achievements and Black histories, as well as my conversations with these individuals, is not directly drawn upon in the analyses that follow, I consider them essential to mention. These interactions significantly shaped my understanding of the decolonial moment and helped me gain a broader overview of the range of actors active during these years.[334] I remained in dialogue with some of these early contacts over the years, occasionally testing emerging ideas and interpretations with them over WhatsApp or over coffee. While they are not formally included, their influence was significant, and for that reason, I find it necessary to acknowledge them here.

[331] Over the course of the years I have for example heard people question the legitimacy of Hand in Hand as an anti-racist mobilizer, including Mireille-Thseusi Robert, who denounced the organization's role in 'deciding on strategy' while being led by white people. Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 30 June 2019.

[332] Ludo Segers and Stella Nyanchama Okemwa, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Antwerp, audio, 1 March 2018.

[333] Author's conversations with Mohammed Barrie, Aminata Ndow, and Emmanuel Imayo (28 April 2018, Antwerp).

[334] Particularly Barrie and Ndow's view of 'decolonization' as a new language for 'diversity' later led me to Sara Ahmed's writings on the non-performativity of diversity.

2.3.2.3 Gradual Decision to Focus on Three Memory Campaigns in Brussels

From the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019 onwards, I began to develop closer connections with activists in Brussels and noticed that they were generally more open to participating in formal interviews than most people I had encountered in Flanders. A first important moment occurred during a workshop organized by Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD), where I met activist Lili Angelou, who expressed an eagerness to speak with me about the associational field in Brussels. In our conversations, which took place in November 2018, she introduced me to the various actors who had been involved in the campaign for Lumumba Square in the preceding months, offering her own perspective. She elaborated on the differences between CMCLD, Change, and BAMKO-KRAN, and outlined her personal trajectory within the organization La Nouvelle Voie Anticoloniale. These conversations gave me a first more elaborate sense of the heterogeneous activist landscape in Brussels and acted as a catalyst for me to start analysing the campaign for Lumumba Square as a process of discursively linking different political claims and activist identities – an idea I later developed more fully in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. As my research began to focus more concretely on this campaign, I increasingly spent time in Brussels and gradually became more embedded in this local activist network, leaving my preliminary fieldwork in Flanders unfinished.

A second important moment in my fieldwork occurred on 19 January 2019, during a public debate in Matonge on the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. I was approached by Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala**,** who told me he had often seen me at events and asked what I was researching, and whether I could 'help him'.[335] He explained that he was the spokesperson for the organization Change and that they were struggling to engage youth in their activist campaigns. This encounter marked the beginning of a series of in-depth interviews with Muamba and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, the co-founder of Change, during the spring and summer of 2019, and evolved into a broader inquiry into the relationship between memorial justice claims and socio-economic precarity experienced by racialized youth in Brussels – a theme I explore in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. Also in spring 2019, a few months after the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren, my supervisor Berber Bevernage and I decided to co-author a book chapter on how the museum's new permanent exhibition represents its colonial past. As part of this writing process, I conducted several formal interviews with Billy Kalonji, Anne Wetsi Mpoma, Ayoko Mensah, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, and Primrose Ntumba – who was, at the time, working at the museum and gave me access to

[335] Author's Field Notes, 'Hommage à Patrice Lumumba 1961–2019' (event organized by INTAL Congo and Change Asbl), 19 January 2019, Brussels.

archival materials about the workings of both the COMRAF (Comité de concertation MRAC-Associations africaines) and the G6, advisory bodies composed of Afrodescendant representatives involved in the museum's redesign process. Through this research, I developed ties with Kalvin Soiresse Njall and Aliou Baldé who were activists at CMCLD, and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert and Marlène Izère who ran BAMKO-CRAN, which enabled further collaboration later on in this research project. Several of the epistemic partners I met in Brussels continued to consistently share information with me over time via WhatsApp or Instagram about new campaigns long after I decided to prioritize writing – most notably François Makanga, Billy Kalonji, Yves Lodonou (whom I met later), and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, deserving special mention for this reason.

Around the same time, at an event hosted by CMCLD, I met Christian Lukenge, who had recently moved from Louvain-la-Neuve to Brussels in 2018. Through his involvement with the Parti du Travail de Belgique (PTB), he had become active in Intal Congo. As I explain later, Intal Congo became a key partner in the Lumumba Square campaign, and Lukenge took on the task of coordinating communication and organizing events between the different coalition partners. Having only recently moved to Brussels, he was, like me, an outsider to the city's associational field. We quickly became close friends and began attending meetings and activities together – both of us trying to understand the networks, their dynamics, and the different political positions among actors. My understanding of the activist landscape in Brussels was thus deeply shaped by my friendship with Christian, who regularly shared insider perspectives, critical reflections, and personal doubts with openness and trust. Through these connections and my sustained participation in the activities of CMCLD, BAMKO-CRAN, Change, and INTAL, I gradually began to observe significant differences in how activists articulated their motivations for engaging in memory work, in their styles of political speech, and in their expectations of memory within broader struggles for racial justice. These divergences ultimately gave rise to the central research question of this dissertation: how to understand and theorize the plural articulations of memorial justice that emerged during Belgium's decolonial moment.

2.3.3 Multimodal Engagement

For the largest part of this research, the distinction between my roles as activist, researcher, or volunteer was often blurred – a blurring which, I am sure, comes more easily when conducting domestic fieldwork. Rather than stemming from a deliberate research strategy or clearly defined political stance, this multimodal engagement was largely shaped by intuition and by relational dynamics that developed through personal contacts. My involvement and activist friendships frequently gave rise to an intense internal conflict about the value and role of academic research in the context of systemic injustice. I intuitively responded to this internal conflict by remaining

actively engaged throughout the process, even though the accumulation of activist side activities which emerged along the way significantly slowed down my academic work.

These side activities took many different forms. I often translated press releases or op-eds for activists from French to Dutch, facilitated connections between actors in Brussels and contacts I had made earlier in Flanders, disseminated activist communications via social media upon request, provided access to academic publications hidden behind paywalls, or participated as a speaker at debates organized by activists when invited to do so.[336] While I was writing this dissertation, I also took on the role of co-creating one of CMCLD's guided tours in the city of Ghent, and acting as a French/Dutch translator during the tours. As co-coordinator of the interdisciplinary research forum 'TAPAS/Thinking About the PASt', a role I held from 2017 to 2023, I organized public events on decolonial activism and restitution in Belgium, providing an institutional platform for activists to share their expertise, with compensation, to a diverse audience of researchers, educators, policymakers, activists, students, and others.[337] During the COVID-19 pandemic, at the request of Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, I co-organized a 'Decolonial and Anti-Racism Workshop Series' under the auspices of Ghent University, together with my colleague Julie Carlier. In consultation with Robert, we curated a programme of ten online workshops, each focusing on a specific theme related to decolonization and anti-racism and again giving an institutional platform for activists to share their expertise. These examples illustrate that, in building relationships within the activist networks in Brussels, my position as a researcher at a Flemish university proved to be both an asset and a liability. While some individuals remained wary of collaboration with academics, others reached out to me for support, for access to resources, or to help lend academic legitimacy to their work.

In June 2020, Mireille launched the BAMKO-CRAN-led project Les Assises Décoloniales – a bottom-up, activist truth-seeking initiative intended to critically counter the work of Belgium's federal parliamentary Congo Commission, which had been installed in the summer of 2020. Struggling with limited resources and volunteer capacity to coordinate this ambitious effort, Mireille invited me to serve as secretary to the proceedings of the Assises. This drew me into a time-consuming administrative role throughout the 2020–2021 academic year and ultimately

[336] E.g.: 'Book Club Pietpraat: over Zwarte Piet in België', Contour 9 Biennale (20 October 2019, Mechelen) with Laura Nsengiyumva, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, and Eline Mestdagh; 'Comptoir de la dette: Dettes coloniales, reconnaissances et réparations', CADTM Belgique (10 March 2021, Online) with Anaïs Carton, Aymar N. Bisoka, and Eline Mestdagh.
[337] E.g.: TAPAS Workshop Series 'Decolonizing Practices and Discourses in Belgium: possibilities, pitfalls, dilemmas' (2018–2019, Ghent University); TAPAS Conference 'Restitution of Colonial Collections in Europe' (2–3 December 2019, Ghent University); TAPAS Debate 'Restitution of Colonial Collections in Belgium' (4 December 2019, Ghent University).

led to the analysis presented in Chapter 7 of this dissertation of how this memory campaign reappropriated and transformed dominant notions of 'truth and reconciliation'.

In addition to my close involvement in activist networks, I also became engaged in policy work around colonial memory and decolonization during the same period. As noted in the previous chapter, Belgium's decolonial moment was marked by a dramatic increase in policy initiatives addressing the colonial past and the question of decolonization. Because I was working on these themes during the period of this research – and was already involved in activist associations – I was also approached to serve as an expert advisor in the context of several of these so-called 'decolonization commissions'. Between 2019 and 2021, I acted as an expert for the City of Ghent in its decolonization trajectory, where I contributed to the drafting of a policy report that emerged from a participatory process involving more than a hundred participants. As a result of this role, I was later invited to serve as an expert witness during the proceedings of the federal parliamentary Congo Commission on 21 February 2022, and to contribute to the decolonization working group of the Brussels municipality of Etterbeek on 19 April 2022. This dissertation does not present an ethnography of these decolonization working groups, but my participation in these processes – even though I do not explicitly draw on these experiences in the analysis – has significantly shaped my understanding of them as examples of what might be called 'non-performative' policies (cf. Chapter 1).

2.4 Brief Conclusions

This second, methodological, chapter has outlined the methodological trajectory and epistemological commitments that have shaped this dissertation's engagement with decolonial memory activisms in Belgium. Responding to existing research and an ethical imperative to work with rather than merely on memory activists, this research adopts an ethnographic and multi-modal approach grounded in long-term involvement, reflexivity, and dialogical meaning-making. Rather than presenting a comprehensive or representative account, the study offers situated insights into how memory is mobilized in specific campaigns, through distinct narrative styles, strategic repertoires, and a politics of self-presentation. By focusing on three emblematic memory campaigns, each embedded in the broader socio-political landscape of Brussels, this research foregrounds the plurality of ways in which activists link memory to struggles for racial justice.

Chapter 3 Mobilizing Lumumba as a Shared Symbol of Colonial Injustice

Dead, Lumumba ceases to be a person and becomes all of Africa, with its desire for unity, its turmoil, its power and its powerlessness.

Jean-Paul Sartre[338]

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Navigating Difference in Preparation for Lumumba Square

3.1.1.1 An Attempt at Collective (Self-)Reflection

On 1 June 2018, I attended a public event in a small meeting room on the Chaussée De Haecht in the Brussels municipality of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode. One month before the inauguration of Lumumba Square, spokespeople of three organizations that had carried the campaign in the previous years gathered to discuss the importance of this milestone, as well as its pitfalls. The event was announced online with the title 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: quelle bilan?' ('A

[338] Jean Van Lierde and Jean-Paul Sartre, *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba* (Editions Présence Africaine, 1963), XLIV.

Lumumba Square in Brussels: taking stock').[339] After years of political rejection of the demand for Lumumba Square, how can we interpret the sudden willingness of Brussels mayor Phillipe Close to listen to the demand? How trustworthy were his intentions in a local election year? Should Afrodescendant communities in Brussels consider the inauguration of Lumumba Square a victory in their longer struggle for memorial and racial justice? And what were the implications of the inauguration for activist strategies in the future? How should the organizations manage the inauguration? Who would get a platform to speak, and who would decide on these matters? These were the central questions put forward at the beginning of the meeting around which the discussion, a collective evaluation of the Lumumba Square campaign, would be organized.

Four people were present in the panel. First, Kalvin Soiresse Njall, spokesperson and then president of the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations (CMCLD). This organization, then consisting mainly of highly educated Afrodescendant men, had waged a broader activist campaign for the decolonization of the public sphere by organizing guided tours (cf. Chapter 4). Second, Phillipe Buyck, a white man living in Ixelles who had been active in the campaign for Lumumba Square in that municipality as early as the early 2000s. He was also a memory activist around the figure of Lumumba with his Lumumba Library, or Centre de Recherche sur la Décolonisation du Congo Belge,[340] located in Ixelles behind the Saint Boniface church. Third, Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala from the organization Change ASBL. Created in 2013, Change initially supported Congolese communities in the municipalities of Ixelles and Saint-Josse who were grappling with 'bandes urbaines' ('urban gangs') (cf. Chapter 6), and it joined the campaign for Lumumba Square in 2015. Fourth and last, Isabelle Minnon, spokeswoman for the Brussels branch of Intal Congo, a subgroup of the leftist Belgium-based international solidarity movement International Action for Liberation (Intal). Primarily active in the struggle against Western neocolonialism in Congo and actions against international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the group around Intal Congo has also focused on decolonization and systemic racism in Belgium. Together with Change, Intal Congo joined the struggle for Lumumba Square in 2015. Contrary to my expectations, there was no big turnout that evening. Around twenty people gathered, of all ages, most of African descent and belonging to different Afrodescendant organizations.

3.1.1.2 Challenges to the Lumumba Square Campaign and Its Actors

[339] Online Announcement 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quelle Bilan?,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/events/175286976639274.
[340] 'Centre de Recherche sur la Décolonisation du Congo Belge', Facebook, accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/CRDCB/.

During the panel presentations, even an outsider like me noted how the conversation, initially presented as a joint attempt to reflect on strategy, evolved toward a careful effort to reconcile a multitude of ideological, strategic, gender, and personal differences present in the room. The conversation started with a practical discussion about the inauguration on 30 June. In response to concerns that emerged in the weeks preceding the event, all panellists stated that there would be enough speaking time for both Lumumba's family members and spokespeople of the different Afrodescendant associations. All speakers stressed that the creation of the square was not an end point but rather the start of new mobilizations around different questions. Mutuakashala stressed that he understood that a wide variety of 'demands' lived within the African diasporas, but that in order to proceed, Afrodescendants needed a 'convergence of struggles' by building 'a new solidarity'.[341] Njall mentioned beforehand that the panellists were open to criticisms and tried to include the people in the room by saying, 'you too are actors. By coming here, you are carrying a message. If you have proposals, share them, and we will see how to work with them. We are open to criticism, and it's not just about criticism: by offering your critique, we move forward'.[342] In their presentations, panellists thus showed a caution I found remarkable, as they delicately catered to anticipated contestations of the strategy to lobby for Lumumba Square and of their legitimacy as carriers of a struggle of all Afrodescendants. Anticipating questions about the legitimacy of Phillipe Buyck, a white man, to carry the campaign, Njall emphasized that the campaign should be seen as a collective struggle and that it therefore did not matter who took the initiative: 'Today, Philippe is the man of the hour, tomorrow it may be someone else. He is the one who seized the opportunity, making him the man of the moment in the eyes of his partners. The question is not who took the initiative, but rather that this initiative succeeded, and that from now on, we will continue together, united, to lead various struggles.'[343]

Why was it so important for the speakers to stress to the audience that they were aware of diverging opinions but were acting as a united front? Struggles over legitimacy were present throughout the entire evening on multiple fronts and became more evident during the questions that followed the presentations of the four panellists. Someone in the audience questioned the legitimacy of choosing to wage the Afrodescendant emancipation struggle through a struggle over public memory, scoffing that 'un bout the trottoir' ('a piece of sidewalk'), as Lumumba Square has mockingly been called, would not change 'the fact that the black community, at least the Sub-Saharan one, is currently subjected to major

[341] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.
[342] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.
[343] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

discrimination'.[344] Similarly, someone else wondered how the implicated organizations could ever consider Lumumba Square to be a victory when the designated square can barely be called a 'square' and when the mayor had not yet approved the request for a figurative statue of Lumumba. 'Lumumba died because he refused a sham independence', stipulated the man, so why should activists in Brussels today be content with 'a taxi station of ten square meters' for a Lumumba Square?[345]

But multiple people in the audience also questioned the legitimacy of the choice to name a square in Belgium after Patrice Lumumba. Someone asked whether Lumumba was a 'génocidaire', following a petition launched around the same time stipulating that 'Lumumba was the reason for the Congo Crisis', 'sent soldiers to commit genocides in Kasai' and that brought war to Stanleyville with many deaths'.[346] In the months prior to 30 June, articles had surfaced making such claims, even in the journal *Le Vif*.[347] Other people asked why the square should be named after a *man*, while the histories of African liberation include so many female resistance fighters, implicitly also questioning the right of the male panellists to publicly carry the campaign when Afrodescendant women have had to struggle hard to be heard in the associational milieu (cf. Chapter 7).[348] The fact that the event was co-organized the Groupement des Femmes Africaines Inspirantes et Actives (GFAIA), an organization aiming to promote the visibility of Afrodescendant women, did not resolve the uneasiness about the lack of female-led organizations in the panel. A young girl in the back of the audience pointed out that while Lumumba may be important, 'there are other figures like Sankara and others who played a decisive role and served as role models for all those who fight for freedom and human dignity'.[349] So why not opt for these people? Someone else questioned why Lumumba,

[344] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[345] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[346] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[347] During the 1960 South Kasai secession crisis, troops of the Congolese national army (ANC), under orders to suppress the secession by the central government led by Patrice Lumumba, committed atrocities against Baluba civilians, resulting in thousands of deaths. While Lumumba authorized military intervention, the massacres occurred in a context of loose command and escalating violence, and historians continue to debate the degree of his direct responsibility. At the time, Lumumba's political opponents exploited these atrocities to accuse him of genocide, a charge later invoked to justify his political downfall and assassination. Today, Lumumba's legacy remains contested among some Congolese communities, particularly within parts of the Kasaï region. In Belgium, these historical grievances have contributed to opposition among some Congolese individuals to commemorations such as the creation of Lumumba Square in Brussels. See: Didier Gondola, *The History of Congo* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2002), 124.; Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Patrice Lumumba (Ohio University Press, 2002), 119–122.

[348] In meantime, more recent mobilizations have also succeeded to naming public places after female figures of African resistance, such as the creation of the Parc Kimpa Vita in 2024 in Charleroi. See: 'Deux parcs carolorégiens porteront des noms de femmes', RTL Info, 29 August 2023, http://www.rtl.be/actu/belgique/politique/deux-parcs-caroloregiens-porteront-des-noms-de-femmes/2023-08-29/article/582456.

[349] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

a *Congolese* man, was selected to represent the struggles of all Afrodescendants in Belgium: 'we must respect the African community, not just the Congolese community, but the African community as a whole. The African community is diverse. We must stop confining us to the habit of always saying 'Congolese'.'[350]

3.1.1.3 Asserting Solidarity to Manage Difference

In their responses, Njall, Mutuakashala, Minnon, and Buyck were quick to defend the figure of Lumumba as an image that resonates with across different subject positions and is therefore able to unite the different struggles that people in the room were concerned about. Their individual responses moreover revealed their slightly different arguments for why a Lumumba Square was important. First, Mutuakashala, basing himself on his memory work with youngsters in the Congolese diasporas for Change, stressed that for him, Lumumba transcended the country of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). As a hero, he had become an African character that young people could be *proud* of. Referencing a meeting of Change with the Brussels mayor to discuss the inauguration of the square, he declared:

> It really moved me to see these young teenagers, who have no biological or historical link to Lumumba, speak about Lumumba and take him as a role model. And that is the real victory: realizing that while I claim Lumumba for Congo, and while Congolese people must fight for him, I also agree that they need the support of others and must ensure that this figure is not confined to one country, because he is much greater than Congo. And for me, that really touched me, because I am someone who is generally very emotional. But that day, I was both impressed and moved to see teenagers from very diverse backgrounds speak about this figure and be very proud in front of the authorities.[351]

Based on Change's general emphasis on role models in its work with young people struggling with their self-image (cf. Chapter 6), Mutuakashala embraced the figure of Lumumba as someone who resisted colonialism and should therefore be seen as an example to any Afrodescendant, regardless of their background. Njall followed him to respond to earlier claims by audience members that Lumumba was responsible for a genocide by situating these claims in a wider 'cultural struggle' against the memory of Lumumba. Much in line with CMCLD's broader rhetorical emphasis on the importance of historiographical research and historical 'truth' (cf. Chapter 4), he said that he had studied the question 'historically' and that UNIKIN (University of Kinshasa) experts on the matter had already published a statement denouncing

[350] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.
[351] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

this 'distorted vision of Lumumba'.[352] For him, the Square in Brussels was also a part of CMCLD's memory struggle 'to restore a positive image of Lumumba' and, more importantly, CMCLD's 'duty to establish the historical truth' about both Belgium's colonial past in general and the circumstances of Lumumba's death in particular.[353] Minnon explained that Patrice Lumumba had 'a nationalist, a pan Africanist, but also a progressive vision', enabling alliances well beyond Congolese politics. She stressed that Lumumba's image could help foster 'a solidarity in the face of globalization, a globalization that weights on all peoples, and especially on the peoples of the Global South', pointing to the importance of white allyship. She emphasized that the memory of Lumumba could inspire collaboration between Afrodescendant, African, and Belgian organizations in a larger struggle against neocolonial politics in Congo. Buyck's answer, though less clear to me, stipulated that 'there is always hope because we are alive, and through each of us, Lumumba lives', making of Lumumba a broader symbol of hope for all anti-colonial struggles.[354]

In all responses, panellists repeatedly emphasized the importance of uniting different struggles and of avoiding division. Lumumba Square, in their eyes, needed to become a device for exactly this goal by becoming a platform for different voices and struggles to develop. As Njall stated:

> It is not just about having a square and leaving it like that. It needs to be animated, to have activities organized around it. So, I consider it a victory, yes, but only of a battle, not yet of the war. We must remain vigilant – the war is not over. It's just one battle. We must continue to fight, stay united – that's really the challenge.[355]

That the four panellists, all representing different organizations with different backgrounds and activist strategies, managed to succeed *together* in getting the mayor of Brussels to install a Lumumba Square was reason enough for Mutuakashala to call the inauguration an important victory in a longer struggle to collectively define a strategy:

> What I actually meant to say is that we, as the associative world, were already organized. So if we continue like this, we will succeed. But if everyone acts on their own, we won't make it. So, how can we establish a strategy to move forward effectively? If it's a war, then we also need to prepare soldiers for battle.[356]

Njall agreed with him, saying:

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[352] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[353] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[354] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[355] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[356] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

> There was a unification at the grassroots level. We had many discussions, but it was a collective project carried out over several years with several associations working together within a shared dynamic and towards a concrete project. And I think that is something all movements should take inspiration from for the realization of future projects.[357]

Minnon concluded the evening by agreeing: 'It is important that we continue as we are now with our friends, but we must remain united to avoid divions.'[358] During an event with so much disagreement, the repeated rhetorical emphasis on unity, collaboration, and solidarity accompanied by warnings against division struck me as part of a performative speech act. It was as if the speakers needed to convince both the audience and themselves that they were part of one and the same struggle, believing – or hoping – that unity and solidarity would come into existence if only they declared it strongly enough in words and symbols.

3.1.2 The Afrodescendant Associational Milieu's Challenge of Finding Common Ground

The discussions on the night of 1 June point to a challenge present in any social movement: how to unite a wide variety of people with conflicting ideas, needs, strategies, and subject positions to build a movement that can carry political demands forward? How to, in other words, constitute oneself as a collective actor? For Afrodescendants in Belgium, this question is particularly difficult – and necessary. Both institutional bodies and Afrodescendants view the associational field as a field lacking proper organization – a conception informed by the history of Belgian Pan-African federations in the 1990s.[359] As established in Chapter 1, in that decade, an associative Afrodescendant space began to emerge around issues related to immigrant status and race, such as access to housing, work, identity documents, and discrimination. In order to efficiently put forward these political demands, Pan-African platforms started to federate a variety of smaller organizations.[360] These efforts to federate the different associative and cultural actors in the pluralist diasporas were constrained by individual conflicts and financial difficulties but also by Belgian policies limiting the functioning of Pan-African federations.[361]

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[357] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[358] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

[359] Sarah Demart, 'L'épuisement Des Dynamiques de Fédération Des Associations Afrodescendantes. De La Reconnaissance d'un Sujet Politique', in *Analyse 31* (Brussels: Editions Kwandika de Bamko-Cran ASBL, 2018), 1.

[360] Grégoire, 'Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State'

[361] Demart, 'L'épuisement Des Dynamiques de Fédération Des Associations Afrodescendantes. De La Reconnaissance d'un Sujet Politique', 4. See also: Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 38.

Up until today, as a result of limited access to public funding, differences in opinion, different national, religious, and ethnic origins, generational differences, strategic differences, conflicts over gender, and personal conflicts, Afrodescendant organizations in Brussels have to operate in a highly competitive environment, making structural collaboration difficult.[362] Yet, the representativity of the spokespeople and the demands they defend has often proved essential in these organizations' recognition as trustworthy and legitimate interlocutors by Belgian political authorities and cultural institutions.[363] In this institutional context, finding a way to unite the variety of claims and political demands of different organizations is crucial if the Afrodescendant struggle for recognition is to be successful.

In this chapter, I analyse how the campaign for Lumumba Square contributed to the 'linking' of different political claims, put forward by different actors, around the figure of Lumumba. Rather than establishing a shared associative and administrative framework, as was the approach of Pan-African federations in the 1990s, this strategy operates through the *discursive* linkage of different claims, via the figure of Lumumba, in the narrative of a multifaceted yet unified struggle against enduring colonial injustice.[364] The campaign for Lumumba Square thus contributed to the significant transformation, outlined in Chapter 1, in the Afrodescendant associative field's action repertoires and collective discursive frames between 2010 and 2021.

3.1.3 Articulating an Equivalential Chain in the Lumumba Square Campaign

This chapter argues that the 'activist memory work'[365] around the figure of Patrice Lumumba that accompanied the campaign contributed to the linking of a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands and identities in what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have called a 'chain of equivalence'. The notion of the equivalential chain helps explain how a series of different social demands and identities can be linked in a political discourse through shared opposition to a common adversary or hegemonic power.[366] While these demands and subject positions might be very different at first, they can become 'equivalent' by being articulated as part of the same

[362] Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 46.: Grégoire and Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité « africaine » et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique', 105.

[363] Demart, 'L'épuisement Des Dynamiques de Fédération Des Associations Afrodescendantes. De La Reconnaissance d'un Sujet Politique', 3.

[364] Spinner-Halev, 'Enduring Injustice', 56.

[365] The notion of 'activist memory work' was first coined by Karen Till. See: Karen E. Till, 'Artistic and Activist Memory-Work: Approaching Place-Based Practice', *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 99–113.

[366] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 1985), 113 and 127.

social struggle. As such, the struggle for Lumumba Square can be understood as 'a process of articulation in which an equivalence is established between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group'.[367] The discussions on 1 June 2018 show how this symbolic work needed not only to convince the Belgian authorities but also memory activists' own base and communities.

To demonstrate how Lumumba became a symbol around which decolonial movements united themselves, I first examine the symbolic significance already attached to Lumumba within African diasporas due to Belgium's postcolonial memoryscape and the public debates on colonial justice that preceded the Lumumba Square campaign. Second, I show how the alliance between three key actors in the Afrodescendant field – Change ASBL, CMCLD, and Intal – and later Bamko-Cran to lead the Lumumba campaign was accompanied by the development of annual commemorations of Lumumba on 17 January and 30 June. These commemorations mobilized the organizations' respective audiences and the broader diasporas. The discourses performed at these commemorations typically presented Lumumba as a unifying figure for a multitude of political demands, vocalizing unity and solidarity in the same way as the speakers at the event on 1 June 2018 did. Third, I show how memory activists produced a series of 'memorable images'[368] of earlier activist mobilizations around Lumumba through cultural productions, statues, and comic books. Rather than analysing *memory activism*, or the process through which actors try to change collective memories in society, this chapter therefore zooms in on *memory in activism*, or the role memory plays in the creation and consolidation of social movements.[369]

3.2 Patrice Lumumba's Travelling Memories

[367] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 62-63.

[368] Ann Rigney and Thomas Smits, 'The Visual Memory of Protest: Introduction', in *The Visual Memory of Protest*, ed. Ann Rigney and Thomas Smits (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 24.

[369] To conceptualize the complex interplay between practices of memory and activism, Ann Rigney coined the notion *memory–activism nexus*. She identifies three levels at which the relationship between memory and activism can be analysed: *memory activism*, or 'how actors struggle to produce cultural memory and to steer future remembrance'; the *memory of activism*, or 'how earlier struggles for a better world are culturally recollected'; and *memory in activism*, or 'how the cultural memory of earlier struggles informs new movements in the present'. These three analytical levels constantly interact with one another. In: Rigney, 'Remembering Hope', 372.

It is no coincidence that Patrice Lumumba became the figure around whom decolonial memory activists in Belgium organized. When activists presented their demand for a Lumumba Square in the municipal councils of Ixelles and Brussels, one of the responses they received was that the historical figure of Patrice Lumumba was not 'un personnage consensuel' and would therefore not be suitable for naming a public square meant to foster a common understanding of the colonial past (cf. Chapter 5).[370] Yet, for the network of Afrodescendant activists trying to align different demands, Lumumba turned out to be a suitable 'consensual' symbol. This section cites two overall reasons for this. The first is Lumumba's diversified trajectory in transnational collective memory, which gradually turned him into an icon. The existing variety of 'travelling memories'[371] made his legacy diverse enough for different actors with different political identities and demands to claim it. The second is the more specific trajectory of Lumumba's image in the context of Belgian postcolonialism.

3.2.1 Who Was Patrice Lumumba?

Patrice Emery Lumumba was the first democratically elected prime minister of the independent Congo.[372] He founded the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), the 'first truly national party in the Congo', in 1958 and played a prominent role as a leader in the Congolese struggle for independence from colonial Belgian rule.[373] After Congo rejected Belgium's Van Bilsen-plan in 1956 – a plan stipulating Congo's 'orderly transition to self-government' over thirty years – and three and a half years of mass mobilizations Congo gained its independence on 30 June 1960.[374] During the official ceremony on Independence Day, 30 June 1960, in Leopoldville (now Kinshasa), Patrice Lumumba delivered his emblematic speech in front of Belgian and Congolese government officials, condemning colonial violence in reaction to the 'paternalistic and condescending speech' by Belgian King Baudouin.[375] Through his assertion that the liberation of the Congolese was 'a decisive step towards the liberation of the whole

[370] Ixelles, 'Compte Rendu Sténographique. Séance Du Conseil Communal Du 24 Octobre 2013', 24 October 2013. https://www.ixelles.be/uploads/conseil/steno/75.pdf.), 38-39.

[371] Astrid Erll's notion of travelling memory refers to the dynamic processes through which collective memories can move across time, space, and cultures, transforming as they encounter new contexts and new communities. In: Erll, 'Travelling Memory', 4-18.

[372] After independence, the country was called the 'Republic of the Congo-Léopoldville'. The country was renamed the 'Democratic Republic of Congo' in 1964. Under Mobutu's regime, it became 'Zaire' in 1971, before Laurent-Désiré Kabila restored the name 'Democratic Republic of Congo' in 1997. Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 1.

[373] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 83.

[374] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 82.

[375] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Patrice Lumumba*, 7.

African continent',[376] he not only became a Congolese but also a Pan-African hero advocating national unity, economic independence and pan-African solidarity in the wake of political decolonization.[377] In Belgium, however, authorities and commentators denounced Lumumba's confrontational tone and considered his speech to be an insult to both the person of King Baudouin, whom he addressed with the familiar pronoun 'tu' rather than 'vous' in French, and the Belgian state.[378] As Jean Omasombo Tshonda has shown, the Belgian authorities' distrust of Patrice Lumumba was present long before Independence Day, but his public discourse eventually led them to express their opposition more directly.[379]

Congo's independence was followed by a period of great political turmoil – a period known in Belgian historiography as the 'Congo Crisis', though Congolese historians argue 'a crisis of decolonization' is a more correct formulation.[380] Immediately after independence, Lumumba faced secessionist uprisings in the mineral-rich provinces of Katanga and South Kasai, threatening the fragile unity of the new state. While the United Nations deployed peacekeeping forces, it declined to assist the central government in suppressing the breakaway regions. Faced with mounting instability and lacking international support, Lumumba turned to the Soviet Union for military assistance. During this period of turmoil, tensions quickly rose between Lumumba and Congolese President Joseph Kasa-Vubu (member of the regionalist and ethnic national party Abako), with Kasa-Vubu favoring a more moderate, federalist approach, while Lumumba pushed for national unity and a firm break from colonial influence. Their political clash culminated in mutual attempts to dismiss one another, plunging the newly independent state into crisis.[381]

Amid this instability and within the context of the unfolding Cold War, Lumumba's anti-colonial rhetoric and his outreach to the Soviet Union alarmed the United States and Belgium. Fearing Congo would fall under communist influence, Western forces framed Patrice

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[376] An English translation of his speech can be found here: 'Patrice Lumumba. Speech on June 30, 1960, Zaire's Independence Day,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm. His speech is also included in the book his Belgian friend Jean Van Lierde put together with his writings. In: Lierde and Sartre, *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba*.

[377] Lumumba met with other Pan-African leaders at the time (Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Ahmed Sékou Touré and many others) during the first conference of independent African states in 1958 in Accra. Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 84.

[378] Julien Truddaïu, 'Representing Lumumba (1956-1961): The Twists and Turns of Belgian Colonial Propaganda', in *Lumumba in the Arts*, ed. Matthias De Groof (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 394.

[379] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 242.

[380] Contrast, for example, Emmanuel Gerard's account with Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja's account. Emmanuel Gerard, 'De Congocrisis (1960 - 1963): Het Bewijs van Een Mislukte Dekolonisatie', in *Koloniaal Congo. Een Geschiedenis in Vragen.*, ed. Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (Polis, 2020), 89–102. And: Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 95.

[381] For more background on the context of Congo's decolonization crisis: Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 95 – 118.

Lumumba as "'a puppet of Moscow", the incarnation of the Communist threat in Africa'.[382] Backed by Western intelligence services, Congolese rivals – including army chief later president Joseph Mobutu – arrested Lumumba. Engineered by Belgium and the United States, he was transferred to Katanga, whose secession was supported by Belgian mining interests, where he was executed on 17 January 1961 together with Joseph Okito and Maurice Mpolo.[383] His murder became a defining symbol of Cold War interference and the violent suppression of African self-determination. Press coverage, public debate, and widely circulated dramatic images of Lumumba's capture turned his death into a vivid representation of 'the tragic failure of a peaceful decolonization of the Belgian Congo' in Belgian collective memory.[384]

3.2.2 Patrice Lumumba as Nationalist, Hero, Martyr, and Pan-African Symbol

Since his death in 1961, Patrice Lumumba has been remembered in a variety of ways. In postcolonial Congo, Lumumba until today holds a 'heroic legacy', albeit a complex and multifaceted one.[385] Journalist Christian Parenti summarizes Lumumba's traces throughout Congo's subsequent postcolonial political regimes as follows: 'Once dead, the memory of Lumumba is erased, then revived to prop up a dictator [Mobutu], then to legitimize the rebel who overthrew that dictator [Kabila] and then, out in the jungles along the river, an imaginary Lumumba cures the sick and promises to come back to life'.[386] In Congo, where 'political mobilization took place primarily along ethnic and regional lines', Lumumba's attempt to mobilize 'all strata of the Congolese population' significantly contributed to his electoral success.[387] His nationalist project, attempting to unite Congolese not only beyond ethnic differences but simultaneously bridging the gaps between intellectuals like himself and the masses turned him into a symbol of Congolese unity.[388] As the 'founding father' of national unity and territorial integrity, future Congolese leaders evoked this image in their own political

[382] Georgi Verbeeck, 'The Haunting Past of Colonialism in Belgium: The Death of Patrice Lumumba in Public Memory', *International Public History* 4, no. 2 (2022), 91.
[383] Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*.
[384] Verbeeck, 'The Haunting Past of Colonialism in Belgium', 91.
[385] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 84.
[386] Christian Parenti, cited in: Karen Bouwer, 'The Gender of Decolonization', in *Gender and Decolonization in the Congo* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.
[387] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 84.
[388] The extent to which Lumumba, who belonged to a highly educated Congolese elite, did or did not effectively speak to 'the people' was already being debated among intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and Jean-Paul Sartre. See: Buata Bundu Malela, 'Les enjeux de la figuration de Lumumba: Débat postcolonial et discours en contrepoint chez Césaire et Sartre', *Mouvements* 51, no. 3 (2007): 130–41.

projects.[389] In 1966, Mobutu, even when implicated in his assassination, declared Lumumba a national hero.[390] Laurent-Désiré Kabila promised the Congolese a 'Lumumbist restoration' upon taking power in 1997.[391] In 2002, Joseph Kabila erected a statue for Patrice Lumumba in Kinshasa.[392] Various other political parties and movements have claimed his legacy, many of whom are transnationally active, including in Belgium.[393] Immediately after his death, his memory fed into the development of Congolese student movements as a progressive force in domestic Congolese politics. Lumumba's global iconic status meant that 'through their affiliation with the figure of Lumumba, young Congolese – both at home and among the Congolese student diaspora on both sides of the Cold War divide – could expect to garner support and attention from real and imagined allies around the world'.[394] As Congolese students emigrated, Lumumba's legacy and ideas travelled with them.[395]

Lumumba not only became an image of Congolese unity, 'he and the Congo had come to symbolize African unity and independence'.[396] Beyond Congo, Patrice Lumumba's speech, his emphasis on African self-determination, and his resistance to neo-colonial interference made him a hero of anticolonialism and a symbol of African resistance in the broadest sense. His image was invoked by contemporary African-American liberation movements and the Black Arts Movement.[397] He was embraced by intellectuals and contemporaries such as Aimé Césaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Sékou Touré.[398] Globally, Lumumba earned a place in the canon of Pan-African heroes alongside Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, and Nelson Mandela, and his ideas have been influential in the development of Pan-Africanism.[399] Because of the circumstances of his death, Patrice Lumumba is next to a 'hero' also remembered as 'martyr' of imperialism and neocolonialism, cementing Lumumba's image as a victim of global neocolonial forces, and symbolizing external powers' suppression of African independence and self-determination.

A large number of cultural productions, including photography, film, poetry, literature, visual arts, and even stamps, have contributed to the construction of Patrice Lumumba as an international icon.[400] Worldwide, this legacy has materialized in statues and street names,

[389] Formulation of Bambi Ceuppens upon feedback on an earlier version of this draft.
[390] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 249.
[391] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 252.
[392] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 254.
[393] Demart and Bodeux, 'Postcolonial Stakes of Congolese (DRC) Political Space', 83.
[394] Pedro Monaville, 'The Political Life of the Dead Lumumba: Cold War Histories and the Congolese Student Left', *Africa* 89, no. S1 (2019), 33.
[395] Monaville, *Students of the World*.
[396] Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism: A History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 149.
[397] Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, 200.
[398] Amzat Boukari-Yabara, *Africa Unite !: Une histoire du panafricanisme* (Editions La Découverte, 2017), 290.
[399] Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Patrice Lumumba*, 30-31.; Boukari-Yabara, *Africa Unite !,* 290.
[400] Bogumil Jewsiewicki, *A Congo Chronicle: Patrice Lumumba in Urban Art* (New York, N.Y: Museum for African Art, 1999).; Pierre Petit, *Patrice Lumumba: la construction d'un héros national et panafricain* (Académie Royale de Belgique, 2016).

reflecting Lumumba's enduring significance. The edited volume *Lumumba in the Arts* by Mathias De Groof offers a rich collection of contributions on the manifold art forms that have enhanced Lumumba's iconography and the various contexts and shapes in which his image has appeared.[401] When De Groof attempts to list the manifold nicknames assigned to Lumumba over the past decades, he needs a full page and a very long footnote. They range from 'the black Jacobin', 'the African Lenin', 'the mystic', 'the devil incarnate' over 'the giant tree', 'the Holy Martyr', 'the strawman' and 'the revolutionary' to 'the prophet', 'the madman', 'the hero-victim', and even 'the goat' and 'the toad'. De Groof concludes that his list is far from exhaustive.[402] The manifold causes and political movements that have mobilized his image over the decades highlight its malleability, showing how Lumumba gradually transformed from a historical figure into a symbol 'in which mutually contesting memories converge. Indeed, Lumumba emerges as a 'locus of memory around whom different creative, negotiable, and even falsified memories' come together.[403]

3.2.3 Patrice Lumumba in Belgium's postcolonial memoryscape

In the Belgian postcolonial context, Patrice Lumumba has been remembered among intellectuals in the Congolese and African diasporas, though more research remains to be done to trace his memory among Congolese students after their arrival in Belgium.[404] For some activists who were active the Pan-African movements of the 1990s, Lumumba is still considered today an 'intellectual father'.[405] In the Congolese diasporas, Lumumba's murder has been remembered and connected to a wider idea of an 'international conspiracy against DRC' evident in continued Western interference in Congolese politics.[406] In the Belgian public debate, Lumumba's memory has become a vehicle for opening political conversations about colonial legacies and coloniality. As Chapter 1 shows, postcolonial debates in Belgium have typically centred on either the 'spectacular' violence in the Congo Free State under the reign of Leopold II or the Congo Crisis and the murder of Patrice Lumumba in its wake.[407]

A catalyst in the media and political debate about Lumumba's death was the publication of Ludo De Witte's book *The Assassination of Lumumba* in 1999 (a French translation appeared in

[401] Matthias De Groof, *Lumumba in the Arts* (Leuven University Press, 2020).
[402] Matthias De Groof, 'The Iconography of Patrice Lumumba', in *Lumumba in the Arts*, ed. Matthias De Groof (Leuven University Press, 2020), 6-7.
[403] De Groof, 'The Iconography of Patrice Lumumba', 9.
[404] Landmeters, 'Les Étudiants Congolais à Bruxelles Dans Les Années 1950. Acteurs de La Décolonisation et Avant-Gardes Des Diasporas', 23.
[405] Yves Kodjo Lodonou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 23 November 2023.
[406] Demart and Bodeux, 'Postcolonial Stakes of Congolese (DRC) Political Space', 88 and 76.
[407] Vanhee and Castryck, 'Belgische historiografie en verbeelding over het koloniale verleden', 308.

2000).[408] De Witte is a Belgian sociologist and highly engaged researcher with close ties to activist communities. He has been involved in various activist campaigns to hold Belgium accountable for Lumumba's murder, the slow handling of legal claims to prosecute those responsible, and the return of Lumumba's remains to Congo. During the campaign for Lumumba Square, CMCLD activists frequently invited him to share his perspective at meetings and conferences. *The Assassination of Lumumba* emphasizes the close involvement of the then Belgian government in Lumumba's murder and was published at a time when the exact circumstances of the assassination were still largely unclear.[409] The book thus broke a taboo and led to the establishment of the 'Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry in Charge of Determining the Exact Circumstances of the Assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the Possible Involvement of Belgian Politicians' in 2001.[410] Much has been written about the work of this commission in the last two decades. Researchers have examined the complexity of conducting independent historical research within the political realm of the parliament.[411] The composition of the commission and the group of experts was also heavily criticized, since no African scholars were appointed. Congolese political scientist and Lumumba's biographer Jean Omasombo Tshonda was designated an 'external' expert and faced structural barriers while carrying out his research. Later, he publicly referred to this experience as a 'deeply colonial' one.[412] In a sense, these discussions foreshadowed the debates that arose following the creation of the Congo Commission almost twenty years later, in 2020 (cf. Chapter 1 and Chapter 7).

This history of how Belgium handled its responsibility for the murder of Patrice Lumumba made him a highly charged symbol in the broader debate on justice for the colonial past. Critical commentators and activists commonly argue that the failure of the Lumumba Commission demonstrates that the process of seeking justice for the colonial past remains incomplete.[413] This 'failure' includes the commission's conclusion that Belgium bears a 'moral' but not a 'political' responsibility for Lumumba's murder as well as the unfulfilled promise to establish a

[408] Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*. De Witte's book was largely based on the source material collected by Belgian historian Jacques Brassinne for his doctoral dissertation in 1990. Brassinne had been involved in the events of 1960-1961 himself.

[409] In the book, De Witte identifies individuals directly responsible for Lumumba's murder and also holds the Belgian state accountable. Other experts have noted that the book "assigns guilt variously at different points", making De Witte's claims not always that clear-cut. See: Stanard, 'Review of De Witte L, the Assassination of Lumumba', 2.

[410] Edouard Bustin, 'Remembrance of Sins Past: Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba', *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 93–94 (2002), 537.

[411] Berber Bevernage, 'Geschiedenis in overheidsopdracht: wetenschap, ethiek en politiek in de Belgische Lumumba-commissie', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125, no. 1 (2012), 81.; Bambi Ceuppens, 'Lumumba. De Complotten? De Moord. Onderzoeksrapport of Historische Studie?', *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 122 (2007), 385.; Gauthier de Villers, 'Histoire, justice et politique. À propos de la commission d'enquête sur l'assassinat de Patrice Lumumba, instituée par la Chambre belge des représentants', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 44, no. 173–174 (1 January 2004): 193–220.

[412] Heleen Debeuckelaere, 'Schaduw van Lumumba Valt over Congocommissie', *De Standaard*, 1 February 2022, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220131_97941027.

[413] Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society'.

fund, the 'Lumumba Fund'.[414] This fund, to be managed by Lumumba's family, was to receive an annual grant of 500,000 euros. However, it never received any subsidies.[415] Two years after the conclusion of the commission, Omasombo Tshonda wrote about it as a 'drame sans fin' (a never-ending drama) and mentioned the 'deuil inachevé de la colonization' (the unfinished mourning of colonization).[416] Although Lumumba was already seen as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and a martyr of (neo)colonial violence, the Lumumba Commission's failure in 2002 further contributed to Lumumba becoming a symbol of the Belgian authorities' inability to address the colonial past, not only in relation to Lumumba's death but in the broadest sense. To illustrate the disappointment around the Lumumba Commission, take for example this explanation by Yves Kodjo Lodonou (including his reference to the abovementioned 'international conspiracy'), who has been involved in the Pan-African mobilizations of the 1990s and is one of the elder members of CMCLD:

> I was saying, regarding the question of the assassination of the first Congolese Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba: it has taken us quite a long time to address this issue. We remember that in 2004 [sic], there was a commission in which we were allowed to participate through the professor [Jean Omasombo Tshonda] – he was the only member from our side on the commission. We saw that this commission did not go very far. And today, Lumumba has been brought back to Congo [reference to the repatriation of Lumumba's remains in 2022]. But it is not over. In Congo, there has been no parliamentary commission. This was the country's first leader, assassinated in an international conspiracy. Yet no parliamentary inquiry has ever been held. No real measures have ever been taken to truly tell Lumumba's children that we are sorry – only a few token apologies. No, I believe that on this issue, Belgian and Congolese parliamentarians must set up a joint parliamentary commission to investigate this and assign responsibilities, independently of the judicial authorities, and to declare that this must never happen again. This has never been done. Lumumba was brought back with all the symbolic gestures we saw. But Lumumba's children filed a complaint against his assassins. Today, nothing is happening. One of the accused, Count Guy Weber Étienne, is still alive. (…) So today, can we really say that this case is closed? Are we waiting for everyone to die? There are legal implications. Could justice not act today, out of respect for his memory? He is dead; he will not come back to life. And he suffered. But out of respect, should we not, at the very least, shed full light on this matter? [417]

[414] The intention to create this fund was announced on 5 February 2002 when then-Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel presented an official apology for Lumumba's murder on behalf of the Belgian government.

[415] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 255.

[416] Omasombo Tshonda, 'Lumumba, drame sans fin et deuil inachevé de la colonisation', 221–26.

[417] Yves Kodjo Lodonou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 23 November 2023.

Lodonou not only refers to the Lumumba Commission but also to the criminal complaint filed by Lumumba's family on 22 June 2011.[418] The complaint demanded justice for his 1961 assassination and requested the restitution of his remains – specifically, a tooth held by a former Belgian police officer, Gérard Soete. This tooth, kept as a grim souvenir, became a symbol of both colonial brutality and the ongoing failure to fully acknowledge Belgium's role in Lumumba's murder (cf. infra). The complaint accused twelve named Belgian officials, including Etienne Davignon and Jacques Brassinne, of crimes against humanity and unlawful possession of human remains.[419] After years of legal and public pressure – especially amid renewed attention to colonial legacies following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests – the Belgian authorities finally seized the tooth and, in 2022, returned it to Lumumba's family in a state ceremony.[420] While the restitution was seen as a symbolic step toward justice, no legal convictions followed, and critics argue that full accountability remains elusive.

The work of the Lumumba Commission in 2001–2002 more or less coincided with attempts to federate African organizations in Belgium and with the creation of the Comité de concertation MRAC-Associations africaines (COMRAF), a consultative body of Afrodescendant voices in the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren in 2003 (cf. Chapter 1). These years planted the seeds for the mobilizations to come between 2010 and 2021. Joachim Ben Yakoub writes that 'in the wake of the parliamentary commission, activists turned their attention to the public relics of Belgium's colonial past'.[421] The disappointing outcome of the Lumumba Commission resulted in Lumumba becoming, in the words of Ben Yakoub, the embodiment of 'the unfinished process of decolonization'.[422] Matthias De Groof, Yasmina Zian, and Francis Mapanze Mangol likewise argue that in the years following the commission, the figure of Lumumba became the 'starting point for engaging in memory work on the colonial past' in general.[423] For prominent CMCLD members Geneviève Kaninda, Kalvin Soiresse Njall, and

[418] The initiative came from Roland, Guy, and François Lumumba, three sons of Patrice Lumumba, who sought the help of Belgian laywers Christophe Marchand and Annemie Schaus. In: Ine Roox, 'Aanklacht Tegen de Belgen Wegens Moord Op Lumumba', *De Standaard*, 22 June 2011, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/0j2rrjoc/

[419] This complaint was deemed admissible, and due to the possibility of a conviction for war crimes, the statute of limitations was also lifted. However, no judicial investigation was initiated. It was only five years later, in 2016, that a search was conducted at the home of De Soete's daughter, where Lumumba's tooth was incidentally found. In 2020, the court communicated that Lumumba's family members could come to 'retrieve' his remains, to which family members and activists reacted indignantly (in the words of Ludo De Witte: 'as if we are talking about the Lost and Found department', De Witte in De Morgen in June 2022). It was only after a new complaint that the tooth was finally officially restituted and ceremonially reburied in Kinshasa in 2022. Up until today, it is unclear whether and how the judicial investigation is progressing, with some activists being convinced the court is deliberately waiting for all defendants to pass away to then close the case. Ludo De Witte, 'België moet niet alleen de resten van Lumumba teruggeven, maar zich ook excuseren', De Morgen, 16 June 2022, https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/belgie-moet-niet-alleen-de-resten-van-lumumba-teruggeven-maar-zich-ook-excuseren~b4d4c4f7//

[420] On this matter, see: Yasmina Zian, Matthias De Groof, and Francis Mapanze Mangole, 'L'odyssée de Lumumba: Les enjeux autour du rapatriement de sa dépouille', *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, no. 5 (2023): 19–38.

[421] *Author's translation to English from Dutch.* Ben Yakoub, 'De maakbaarheid van geschiedenis', 34.

[422] *Author's translation to English from Dutch.* Ben Yakoub, 'De maakbaarheid van geschiedenis', 34.

[423] Zian, Groof, and Mangole, 'L'odyssée de Lumumba', 18.

Tony Kokou Sampson, the Lumumba Commission and its shortcomings 'represented the first premises of the organized return of the popular decolonization struggles in Belgium'.[424]

3.3 Building the Lumumba Square Campaign

Lumumba emerged as a shared activist point of reference for engaging with colonial legacies in Belgium not only because of this historical background and they ways it imbued his image with the meaning of an unfinished decolonization. The centrality of this image is also the result of sustained efforts of activists who gradually and consciously built a social movement around his legacy. This part of the chapter begins with a brief and partial overview of the origins of the demand for a Lumumba Square in Brussels, showing how actions for Lumumba Square were relatively isolated events before a new coalition of memory activists took over the campaign in 2015.

3.3.1 Phillipe Buyck and Nzema Omba: Place Patrice Lumumbaplein

Even though Lumumba Square was inaugurated only in 2018, the history of the social mobilization for it goes back much further. The demand originated in the neighbourhood of Matonge in the municipality of Ixelles, introduced in Chapter 2. It is not entirely clear when exactly the demand arose. Some date it to the 1990s or even 1980s, while others link it to the creation of the Centre de Recherche sur la Décolonisation, later renamed the Lumumba Library, in Matonge and the activism of its initiator, Philippe Buyck.[425] Buyck, a white man formerly married to a woman of Congolese descent, amassed a remarkable collection of books and archival materials related to Belgium's colonial past and the political decolonization of Congo. Through this work, he became a familiar figure in and around Matonge. When I met Buyck in spring 2018, it was immediately clear to me that while he referred to himself as one of the main instigators of the campaign for a Lumumba Square, this self-representation was

[424] Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 41.
[425] Lili Angelou, Interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 1 November 2018.

not uncontested.[426] Many activists today do not agree with this version of activist history and mention difficulties when collaborating with Buyck and the Lumumba Library.[427] However, others assert Buyck's 'importance in gathering a wider audience' and in the work of raising consciousness about the history of Lumumba's death and colonial history in general.[428] Because of such conflicting stories about the origins of the demand, it is difficult for me to make definite statements about how and when the claim for a Lumumba Square originated in Brussels. What is certain, though, is that the figure of Patrice Lumumba has had a strong presence within African diasporas in Belgium since at least the 1980s, particularly among a highly educated elite who organized itself in intellectual circles in Brussels and Liège (cf. Chapter 4).[429] Long before the demand for the square gained public visibility, commemorative work going on around the figure of Lumumba already existed.[430]

It is also certain that the demand for a Lumumba Square, previously voiced using the bilingual name 'Place Patrice Lumumbaplein', was made public about twenty years ago. On 8 August 2005, as part of the Esperanzah festival, Buyck, along with close friend Nzema Omba, founder of the Bibliothèque Panafrica, renamed a street in Matonge to 'Rue Lumumba Street'. Shortly thereafter, renovation works in the centre of Matonge transformed a former street behind the Saint Boniface church into a small square, situated between Rue Bouré, Rue de l'Athénée, and Rue Jules Bouillon.[431] Philippe Buyck, along with Omba and others, renamed this square as the 'Place Patrice E. Lumumbaplein'.[432] For many who became involved after 2015, the little square behind Saint Boniface was already considered theirs. Or as Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, who would go on to found Change in 2013, recalls:

> The individuals who would later form Change were already involved in the Lumumba Square story. We were already engaged, and there already existed a Lumumba Square — let's say, fictive or virtual. Let's put it that way. We had already appropriated a space that we had named Lumumba Square, behind the Saint-Boniface church. We had already taken ownership of that space, and every year, we organized gatherings there, we gave our speeches there. So, it was already our square.[433]

[426] Phillipe Buyck, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 4 May 2018.
[427] Informal conversations following performance at Square Lumumba on 30 June 2020. Author's Field Notes, 'Congo 60: Hommage Artistique avec Bram Borloo, Eddy Ekete & Precy Numbi', 30 June 2020, Brussels.
[428] Lili Angelou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 1 November 2018.
[429] Yves Kodjo Lodonou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 23 November 2023.
[430] Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles)', 139 and 151.
[431] Robbert Jacobs, 'Down Lumumba Lane', in *Lumumba in the Arts*, ed. Matthias De Groof (Leuven University Press, 2020), 410.
[432] Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep', 30.
[433] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double-interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

In the following years, activists regularly placed street signs with the name Patrice Lumumba at the square behind the Saint Boniface church, which were consistently removed by the municipality of Ixelles.[434] From these small initiatives, a broader movement gradually emerged, involving various Afrodescendant organizations as well as white civil society organizations, academics, journalists, and political deputies.

3.3.2 The Lumumba Square Campaign since 2015

3.3.2.1 A New Coalition

In 2015, a temporary coalition was formed between three different associations, all of which supported the demand for Lumumba Square and brought the campaign to the attention of the public. In 2013, the municipality of Ixelles rejected an official request for Lumumba Square (cf. Chapter 5). In 2015, CMCLD – engaged since 2011 around the 'decolonization of the public sphere' through active political lobbying (cf. Chapter 4) – took on a leading role in the older struggle for Lumumba Square, allying with the organizations Intal Congo and Change. In that year, the CMCLD–Change–Intal coalition launched a petition for Lumumba Square that gained over three thousand signatures.[435] It also organized various activities to raise awareness of the colonial past, including a re-enactment of the speeches of King Baudouin and Patrice Lumumba during the Congo independence ceremony on 30 June 1960. Google Maps was also mobilized in the campaign: in 2015, activists managed to get the name 'Futur Place Lumumba' on the location behind the Saint Boniface church on Google.[436] In 2018, BAMKO-CRAN, an Afrofeminist organization that launched a campaign for the restitution of African objects in 2017 (cf. Chapter 1), joined the coalition.

3.3.2.2 Different Audiences, Same Symbol

Though belonging to the same small network of activists in Brussels, all involved organizations speak to different publics. First, Intal Congo, CMCLD, and Change are tied to different sociological groups. CMCLD grew out of a network of Pan-African intellectuals with university education and mobilizes a knowledge-driven and cognitive register in its actions aimed at a

[434] Abrassart et al., 'Voor de Dekolonisering van de Openbare Ruimte in Het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest: Een Reflectiekader En Aanbevelingen. Rapport van de Werkgroep', 31.

[435] INTAL Congo, 'Le passé colonial hanterait-il BOZAR ? – Intal', 2020, https://www.Intal.be/le-passe-colonial-hanterait-il-bozar/

[436] Roland Bruneel, 'Ixelles: La "Futur Place Lumumba" n'existe Que Sur Google Maps', *RTBF*, 30 July 2015, https://www.rtbf.be/article/ixelles-la-futur-place-lumumba-n-existe-que-sur-google-maps-9043743

broad audience, including 'new white generations active in the media, institutions, associations, and universities' (cf. Chapter 4).[437] Its members are part of migration histories from across the African continent and are not limited to individuals with migration backgrounds from Belgium's former colonies (Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi). Change, on the other hand, emerged from the Congolese diasporas and primarily addresses Belgo-Congolese youth in Brussels. While its founders and spokesperson during the time of this research also received university education and maintained links with Pan-African intellectuals, for example through internships at the African radio platform Sous l'Arbre à Palabre (cf. Chapter 1), their targeted audience primarily consists of lower-educated segments of the Congolese diaspora.[438] While mobilizing memory, claims for moral remembrance in the public sphere were not their central focus until they joined the coalition for Lumumba Square in 2015 (cf. Chapter 6). Reflecting on their role in the Lumumba Square coalition, Change spokesperson Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala stated that, while it was CMCLD's job to do 'the intellectual work' it was Change's job to convince people 'on the ground'.[439] The association BAMKO-CRAN emerged from a long-standing feminist struggle to bring women more to the forefront within the heterogeneous activist network, and from there seeks to appeal to an Afro-feminist audience. The following chapters in the dissertation delve deeper into the origins these organizations and highlights differences in how they articulate racial justice in relation to memory. The work of Intal Congo is not part of this doctoral research, so it suffices here to note that the organization should be situated in a tradition 'international solidarity' activism in white leftist intellectual circles. While Afrodescendants like Isabelle Minnon and Christian Lukenge have also been involved in Intal Congo's efforts for Lumumba Square, the organization was for the duration of this research viewed as a 'white ally'.[440]

Second, the differences between the organizations in the coalition can also be traced to internal dynamics and tensions within the associative field. Historically, Afrodescendant associations have faced various challenges in uniting, for diverse reasons. Different identifications resulting from diverse migration trajectories and interpersonal conflicts between activists make

[437] Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 45.

[438] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double-interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[439] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double-interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[440] This has been asserted on multiple occasions by Christian Lukenge, who joined Intal Congo in 2018. Author's conversations with Christian Lukenge between January 2019 and June 2022, Brussels. CMCLD-members call Intal-Congo a white ally: Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 44. Antoine Moens, former spokesperson for Intal Congo and formerly active in the Lumumba Square campaign referred to himself as a white ally in a formal interview with me on February 7, 2019. Antoine Moens, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussel, audio, 7 February 2019.

collaboration difficult.[441] Both academics and the actors themselves also point to difficult access to state recognition and public funding, fostering internal competition.[442] The different audiences associations claim to address show how the categories of gender and class play a role in how these organizations present themselves and in the strategies they each employ. As Kalvin Soiresse Njall, former president of CMCLD, explains: 'There is no common ground. Division and questions of identity are a problem. There are also socio-economic reasons: everyone wants to position themselves and secure funding.'[443] Differences in strategies and political ideas are thus sometimes further amplified by the actors themselves to distinguish themselves from each other and create a unique, legitimate position to speak from.

As Laclau and Mouffe point out, differences within a political field can be temporarily suspended either through the expression of 'something identical underlying them all' or through 'a common reference to something external'.[444] The decision to put Lumumba forward as a common reference point embodying the identical claim of unfinished decolonization has been described by Kalvin Soiresse Njall as a remarkably deliberate and strategic process:

> And we asked ourselves how to revive the debate on decolonization, how to reignite the fight against racism. We needed a strong symbol, and we decided that Lumumba had to become that symbol. We told ourselves that the day we succeeded in changing Lumumba's image in public opinion, the issues of racism and decolonization would naturally impose themselves.[445]

For some CMCLD members, inspired by Pan-African tradition, the choice for Lumumba was self-evident. Njall himself identified as a 'fan' of Lumumba and referred to him as his 'political model'.[446] For other actors in the coalition, this choice was less obvious and required more work. According to Njall:

> I had felt that if we wanted to create a critical mass and give more resonance to the struggle, we needed to ally with other movements. For Change, it was clear that Lumumba was our strategy. But… Lumumba had to become a symbol. Because at a certain point, there was also the criminal complaint against Davignon, Jacques Brassinne, and others. Lumumba also became a symbol for the youth, and we made sure that young people identified with him. That was something that did not exist before.[447]

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[441] Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall Soiresse, 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 46.

[442] Demart, 'L'épuisement Des Dynamiques de Fédération Des Associations Afrodescendantes. De La Reconnaissance d'un Sujet Politique', 4. See also: Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 38.

[443] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[444] Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 113-114.

[445] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[446] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[447] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

The young people targeted by Change did not immediately feel a connection to Lumumba. According to Njall:

> In 2004, young people knew little about [Lumumba], and within the Congolese community, he was not very well liked at the time. It was mainly intellectuals who admired him. We developed a strategy to change Lumumba's image among Afrodescendant youth and then among society as a whole. And we succeeded.[448]

As described above, during the activist discussion on 1 June 2018, it became evident that each actor projected meanings onto Lumumba that aligned with their own political or self-presentation. In my conversations with Change members Kasidi and Mutuakashala, they emphasized, much like Njall in the quote above, the challenges they faced in convincing their audiences of the relevance of the Lumumba Square campaign. These difficulties were not only tied to Lumumba's image itself, but also to the campaign's perceived overly 'intellectual' focus on memory in public space – an approach considered distant from anti-racist struggles taking place 'sur le terrain' (cf. Chapter 6). Yet, from this vantage point, Kasidi also recalled how Lumumba – remembered as someone who bridged the gap between Congolese 'elites' and the 'masses' – remained a powerful symbol to him.[449] In Change's mission to empower Belgo-Congolese youth by encouraging the development of a positive self-image, role models and heroes play a central role in the organization's mnemonic repertoire (cf. Chapter 6). Within this context, Lumumba's dual identity as both 'martyr' and 'hero' enabled connections to be made between memory activists presenting their demands in a *duty to remember* framework, centered on the recognition of victimhood, and those focused on role models, agency, and resistance.

Intal Congo's activism has focused on anti-imperialism, as part of Intal's, closely connected to the Parti du Travail de Belgiue (PTB), broader anti-capitalist narrative. The language used by Intal representatives reflects these emphases in relation to the figure of Lumumba. As a 'white ally', Intal positions Lumumba as an example for all progressive mobilizations:

> This is not simply a neighbourhood fight, nor a struggle concerning just one community. It is a struggle for all progressives, for all those who want to denounce racism in Belgium. It also concerns those who contest the current North-South relations, which remain largely unjust and marked by the stamp of neocolonialism.[450]

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[448] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[449] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double-interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[450] 'Statement INTAL: La Place Lumumba Est Le Résultat de Nombreuses Luttes Contre Le Néocolonialisme', 29 May 2018. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. https://www.Intal.be/la-place-lumumba-est-le-resultat-de-nombreuses-luttes-contre-le-neocolonialisme, 3.

> The forces defending neocolonialism have understood that they should no longer openly oppose a tribute to Lumumba. Instead, they now present Lumumba as a representative of Africa and/or the Congolese community, essentially saying that 'each community should have its representatives in the public space.' (…) Lumumba Square represents a tribute to the struggle of the Congolese leader, a struggle against imperialism, against colonialism, but also against the neocolonialism that still persists today.[451]

Regarding the alliance with Intal Congo, Njall emphasizes that 'Lumumba was also an appealing symbol for white citizens who were anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist'.[452] The aura of communism that has surrounded Lumumba since his lifetime, and which is also present in international memory traditions, meant that the campaign also found resonance with militants from the left-wing Parti du Travail de Belgique.[453]

3.3.2.3 Anti-Institutional Solidarity

The coalition between these three organizations for Lumumba Square emerged in the context of a growing conflict between Afrodescendant activists and artists, and the Brussels cultural institution Centre for Fine Arts – Bozar. The conflict surfaced in early 2015 when Bozar launched the Afropean+ (later Afropolitan Festival).[454] Some Afrodescendant artists proposed including a commemoration of Patrice Lumumba – an event that had already been taking place annually since 2013 – within the festival program. Bozar's board rejected the proposal, deeming it too politically sensitive. This refusal was widely perceived by activists as a form of institutional censorship, especially given that Etienne Davignon, then president of Bozar's board and a former colonial official named in the 2011 criminal complaint filed by Lumumba's family, symbolized elite resistance to decolonial critique.[455] In response, artists began organizing independent and parallel initiatives free from institutional constraints. Among them, artist Pitcho Womba Konga launched the *Congolisation* festival 'to inject references to Congo in the Belgian social and cultural landscape', while Rachida Aziz opened her artivist cultural center *Le*

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[451] 'Statement INTAL: La Place Lumumba Est Le Résultat de Nombreuses Luttes Contre Le Néocolonialisme', 29 May 2018. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. https://www.Intal.be/la-place-lumumba-est-le-resultat-de-nombreuses-luttes-contre-le-neocolonialisme/, 5.

[452] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[453] Author's Conversations with Christian Lukenge between January 2019 and June 2022, Brussels.

[454] Ayoko Mensah, 'Afropolitan Festival,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bozar.be/en/watch-read-listen/afropolitan-festival.

[455] Collective of signatures, 'Qui a peur de Lumumba?', Le Soir, 24 February 2015, https://www.lesoir.be/art/803443/article/debats/cartes-blanches/2015-02-24/qui-peur-lumumba.; Ludo De Witte, 'Etienne Davignon en de laatste uren van Patrice Lumumba', Apache, 20 June 2011, https://apache.be/2011/06/20/etienne-davignon-en-de-laatste-uren-van-patrice-lumumba.

Space on the border of Brussels and Molenbeek, 'to contest the legitimacy of the big cultural institutions'.[456] Nearly a decade later, this moment is still referenced as a defining rupture that exposed the limits of collaboration with mainstream cultural institutions and deepened the general sense of distrust among Afrodescendant artists and activists.[457]

3.4 Patrice Lumumba as a Symbol of Enduring Colonial Injustice in Belgium

This section analyses how 'activist memory work' surrounding Lumumba established him as a shared reference point. Originally coined by Karen Till, Ann Rigney and Samuel Merrill define 'activist memory work' as 'the active production of memory as an integral part of activism itself to amplify its impact and hence advance a political cause'.[458] During and after the Lumumba Square campaign, this took the form of commemorative events, a mediatized re-enactment, and the creation of images, artworks, and objects centred in Lumumba.

Two aspects of this activist memory work stand out. First, Lumumba is commemorated in an 'open' way, allowing for a broad range of ideas and identities to be associated with him. Second, there is a clear memorialization of earlier mobilizations around his figure and death. Events such as Lumumba's speech, the above-mentioned Bozar-conflict, the restitution fight for his remains, and negotiations with Brussels mayor Philippe Close are woven into a collective narrative of enduring colonial injustice and institutional failure in Belgium. Situating the Lumumba Square campaign within this broader history reinforces a sense of activist continuity across mobilizations and legitimizes the campaign's initiators.

3.4.1 Commemorating Lumumba

Since 2013, CMCLD has organized an annual Lumumba Day on 17 January, the date of Lumumba's assassination alongside Joseph Okito and Maurice Mpolo. From the beginning,

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[456] Ben Yakoub and Abrassaert, 'La chasse aux spectres monumentaux dans la Belgique congolaise', 137.; Benjamin Tollet, 'Congolisation Zet Congolese Diaspora in de Kijker', *BRUZZ*, 14 January 2015, https://www.bruzz.be/culture/event/congolisation-zet-congolese-diaspora-de-kijker-2015-01-14; Michaël Bellon, 'Rachida Aziz: "Le Space Heeft Levens Beïnvloed"', *BRUZZ*, 31 January 2020, https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/rachida-aziz-le-space-heeft-levens-beinvloed-2020-01-31

[457] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.; Author's Field Notes, 'Workshop: Mémoire/Histoire – La Puissance de la Décolonisation' (event organized by LeSpace), 3 May 2018, Brussels.

[458] Merrill and Rigney, 'Remembering Activism', 1001.

Lumumba Day has combined commemoration with public debate on colonial memory and justice. In keeping with CMCLD's knowledge-driven approach, the events feature academics and experts discussing themes related to Lumumba's legacy. These gatherings attract large, diverse audiences, particularly from Congolese and African diasporas, and serve as moments of identity formation and political engagement. They offer space for reflection and interaction while providing CMCLD militants with a platform to share their strategies. The commemorations thus act as rallying points for building a broader movement. In addition to Lumumba Day, CMCLD also organizes an annual celebration of Congo's independence on 30 June. Since its founding, CMCLD has turned formerly fragmented commemorative traditions into a new 'invented tradition' aimed at addressing wider publics as well.[459] As part of this doctoral research, I attended the Lumumba Days in 2019, 2020, and 2023.[460] Although the events I attended took place after the inauguration of Lumumba Square and the conclusion of the campaign, the discourse surrounding these moments illustrates how these events contribute to shaping and deploying the memory of Lumumba in the contemporary Belgian context. Each of these three Lumumba Days focused on paying homage to Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Okito, and Maurice Mpolo. At the same time, it is notable that in doing so, parallels were drawn between Lumumba's historical political project and strategies for combating contemporary (neo)colonial injustices. For contemporary anti-racism in Belgium, Lumumba's death, in the words of decolonial tour guide Aliou Baldé, is not 'an end to a story, but the beginning of a story of struggle that continues'.[461]

In 2019, Lumumba Day was held at the Université Saint-Louis in central Brussels and revolved around what lessons the African continent and its diasporas can draw from Patrice Lumumba's political ideas and strategy today. In addition to Kalvin Soiresse Njall, French sociologist Saïd Bouamama also spoke. In 2020, Lumumba Day took place in the historic L'Horloge du Sud (cf. Chapter 4), where CMCLD militants, historian of Pan-Africanism Amzat Boukari Yabara, and political scientist Louise Ngandu focused on 'the panafrican and universal dimensions' of Lumumba's struggle. Announcing the event, CMCLD presented Lumumba as source as political inspiration across time and continents:

> Patrice Emery Lumumba is not only the symbol of the political independence of Congo, achieved on June 30, 1960. His work and his person go far beyond that. He is also a bearer of ideas, of a timeless thought across all domains (political, economic, social,

[459] Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2019: Conference' (event organized by CMCLD, Investig'Action, and Kilimandjaro), 17 January 2019, Brussels.
[460] Due to the global pandemic, no Lumumba Days were held in 2021 and 2022.
[461] Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Extérieur Musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD), 1 November 2018, Tervuren.

cultural, identity-related, etc.). A thought that still resonates today, as Lumumba's ideas remain highly relevant – both in Belgium, in Congo, and across the African continent. [462]

Notably, during the commemorations, Lumumba's multi-applicability was emphasized. Rather than being remembered as a concrete historical figure, Lumumba was portrayed as an inexhaustible source of inspiration for political ideas that remain relevant and applicable 'sur tous les plans' today. The speech of Stéphanie Ngalula, panellist at the event for CMCLD, further illustrates that beyond Lumumba's contemporary relevance, various identities and socio-political struggles are attributed to his image:

> Some of us believe that we are here to pay homage to the death of Patrice Émery Lumumba, but nothing could be further from the truth, for he is alive. He has never been as alive as he is today. Some of us believe that we are here to pay homage to Patrice Émery Lumumba and that he was Congolese. But once again, I must say that this is not the case. Lumumba was not only Congolese; Lumumba was South African, Lumumba was Algerian, Lumumba was Ghanaian, Lumumba was Malian, because above all, Lumumba was a humanist and a pan-Africanist.
>
> Some of us also believe that we are here to pay homage to a man. But again, this is not accurate. Lumumba was not merely a man; he was a statesman who, above all, was a feminist, who had a deep knowledge of the history of African societies and was fully aware of the role of women and their position as the cornerstone of African societies.
>
> Some still think we are here to pay tribute to a statesman, but that too is not correct, because Lumumba was not merely a statesman. He was a man of the people, a man who knew that any true politician, any worthy political leader, draws their legitimacy and support from the people – and the people alone. And that is why his dignity, and integrity could never be bought by anyone.
>
> Some among us still believe that we are here to honour a memory. But we are not here to pay homage to the memory of Patrice Émery Lumumba. We are here to honour a method, a path, a way of thinking, to honour selflessness, dignity, and the pursuit of freedom – spiritual, physical, mental, monetary, and cultural freedom for African peoples.
>
> And as such, the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations calls upon all men and women of goodwill, all humanists, all those committed to justice, to demand – as Belgians, Europeans, or European residents – a real and effective change,

[462] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations, announcement for Lumumba Day 2020, accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/events/556971668480816/

not only in African countries but right here, where we live, where our children go to school, where we pay our taxes. We are entitled to demand true social justice.[463]

This narrative highlights Lumumba as simultaneously a humanist, Pan-Africanist, feminist, and man of the people. He becomes a stand-in for a method, a political path, and a broader quest for dignity and liberation. Emphasizing Lumumba as both 'un homme du peuple' and 'un féministe' is especially important in coalition-building within the Afrodescendant associational field: class and gender are lines of division along which activists position themselves and attempt to distinguish themselves from one another. Later chapters in this dissertation analyse how Change emphasizes its identity as an organization 'for the streets', in opposition to the elitist and intellectual character of CMCLD (cf. Chapter 6), while BAMKO-CRAN highlights its explicitly Afro-feminist identity in an associative field dominated by men (cf. Chapter 7).

3.4.2 Re-enacting Lumumba

Two years after the first Lumumba Day, in 2015, the newly established alliance CMCLD–Change–Intal Congo was in charge of jointly organizing the commemorations on 30 June for the first time.[464] In an event that attracted over two hundred onlookers,[465] a public re-enactment of the speeches of both Patrice Lumumba and King Baudouin during Congo's independence ceremony fifty-five years prior served to demonstrate their ongoing relevance. Behind the Saint Boniface church, Kalvin Soiresse Njall recited the speech that Lumumba gave as the first prime minister of independent Congo during its independence ceremony in 1960. The first to speak that day was the Belgian king Baudouin, who lauded Belgian colonialism as the accomplishment of Belgium's 'finest sons', applauded the 'genius' of his ancestor King Leopold II – calling him 'not a conqueror, but a civilizer' – and expressed his hopes for the continuation of close relations between Belgium and the DRC.[466] When Congolese president Joseph Kasa-Vubu followed with a rather short address to thank the king for his presence, Patrice Lumumba unexpectedly requested the opportunity to talk. His by now internationally famous speech recognized Congolese independence as a result not of Belgian concessions but of the persistent struggle of the Congolese and the nationalist movement. He emphasized the suffering of the

[463] Discours de Stéphanie Ngalula on Lumumba Day, January 17, 2020. Author's Field Notes. Commémoration Patrice Lumumba (event organized by Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations at L'Horloge du Sud, 17 January 2020, Brussels).

[464] Julien Rensonnet, 'Lumumba (Presque) En Chair et En Os à Ixelles', *L'Avenir*, 30 June 2015, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/2015/06/30/lumumba-presque-en-chair-et-en-os-a-ixelles-APAKW57SY5AFDPCON2RMZHYFSQ/

[465] 'Près de 200 Personnes Assistent à La Reconstitution Du Discours de Patrice Lumumba', *L'Avenir*, 30 June 2015, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/bruxelles/bruxelles/2015/06/30/pres-de-200-personnes-assistent-a-la-reconstitution-du-discours-de-patrice-lumumba-XPJHKLMDLRB4RFXLTUSE63F53M/.

[466] 'Patrice Lumumba. Speech on June 30, 1960, Zaire's Independence Day,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/lumumba/1960/06/independence.htm.

Congolese under Belgian colonial rule, strongly condemning the violence, racial discrimination, and forced labour.[467] In response to King Baudouin's wish to maintain a close relationship between the two countries, Lumumba asserted the importance of Congolese sovereignty and self-determination. His speech clearly marked his reputation, both nationally and abroad.[468] For his supporters, he became a charismatic hero, 'representing the hope of the Congolese people for liberation after an age of slavery, colonialism, and humiliation'.[469]

The speech became a defining moment in Lumumba's reputation, casting him as a charismatic leader representing the hope of liberation after colonial oppression. Its bold denunciation of Belgian colonialism, especially in contrast to Baudouin's paternalistic tone, remains a touchstone for activists today. The 2015 re-enactment aimed to show the continued relevance of Lumumba's message 55 years later, emphasizing that justice had yet to be served and discursively connecting Congo's struggle for independence and self-determination with Afrodescendant struggles for racial justice in Belgium today. The event began with Intal Congo's Antoine Moens delivering Baudouin's apologist speech, followed by Kalvin Soiresse Njall's performance of Lumumba's address. The re-enactment reignites attention to the demand to name the nearby square after Lumumba. Immediately after, the coalition launched a petition, collecting over 1,200 signatures intended to overturn the 2013 municipal council decision in Ixelles. [470]

3.4.3 Visualizing Lumumba

Finally, artistic productions and the circulation of varying representations of Lumumba further made his image a common reference point for Belgian decolonial movements. Since their inception and rapid development from 2010 onward, decolonial memory movements in Brussels have been closely connected with artistic circles in Brussels's African diasporas and in Congo.[471] Building on a longer history of artistic representations of Lumumba in film, rap music, *peinture populaire*, and comic books, and on the circulation of Lumumba's image online,

[467] Julien Traddaïu shows the importance of media coverage in the shaping of the negative public perception of Lumumba in Belgium and abroad. Truddaïu, 'Representing Lumumba (1956-1961): The Twists and Turns of Belgian Colonial Propaganda', 388–407.

[468] Truddaïu, 'Representing Lumumba (1956-1961): The Twists and Turns of Belgian Colonial Propaganda', 394.

[469] Verbeeck, 'The Haunting Past of Colonialism in Belgium', 91.

[470] 'Statement INTAL: La Place Lumumba Est Le Résultat de Nombreuses Luttes Contre Le Néocolonialisme', 29 May 2018. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. La Place Lumumba est le résultat de nombreuses luttes contre le néocolonialism. https://www.Intal.be/la-place-lumumba-est-le-resultat-de-nombreuses-luttes-contre-le-neocolonialisme, 4.

[471] Clette-Gakuba's doctoral dissertation delves into the interconnections between activists and artists in the scene in Brussels: Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de Colonialité Dans l'art et La Culture. Faire Exister Un Monde Noir à Bruxelles. Thèse Présentée Par Véronique Clette-Gakuba En Vue de l'obtention Du Grade Académique de Docteur En Sciences Politiques et Sociales'. Other works analyzing decolonial artivism in Belgium include: Yakoub, 'PeoPL's Bursting Light'. And DeBlock, 'Contemporary African Art and Artists in Belgium'.

Congolese and Afrodescendant artists produced 'memorable images' of protests around Lumumba in the Belgian context.[472] A full analysis of the surge of cultural productions around Lumumba would go beyond the scope of this research, and others have already attempted such an overview.[473] For the purpose of this chapter, I limit myself here to showing that 1) a central theme in these productions is the linking of various contemporary decolonial claims to the symbol of Lumumba, and 2) Lumumba came to symbolize, above all, the failure – the unachieved goal – of racial justice in Belgium.

3.4.3.1 T-shirts and Plays

Following the conflict with Bozar over the censorship of tributes to Patrice Lumumba during the Afropolitan Festival, Belgo-Congolese artist Pitcho Womba Konga launched his African art festival called Congolisation, as mentioned above.[474] As a rapper, Womba Konga was part of hip hop communities where references to Patrice Lumumba had been common for much longer.[475] The controversy surrounding some members of the board of directors of Bozar prompted Pitcho to place Lumumba at the centre of the Congolisation project, which he intentionally scheduled for 17 January 2015.[476] He developed a collection of T-shirts with Lumumba's image and the phrase 'Lumumba Still Alive, 17/01/∞'. In subsequent years, these T-shirts could be seen at various events around Lumumba, particularly during Lumumba Day on 17 January and the Independence Day celebration on 30 June.[477] As part of the festival, several cultural productions saw the light that directly linked Patrice Lumumba and the postcolonial debate in Belgium – echoing the 2015 re-enactment. One example is Konga's theatre and dance performance *Kusikiliza*, which presents Lumumba's independence speech as a universal ode to 'freedom' in the broadest sense. According to Matthias De Groof, the performance does not represent 'expresses the current relevance of his message of decolonization and its incompleteness'.[478]

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[472] Rigney and Smits are mainly interested in photography yet I believe their analysis can be extended to include other works of visualization as well. Rigney and Smits, 'The Visual Memory of Protest', 14.
On the history of *peinture populaire*, see: Johannes Fabian, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (University of California Press, 1996). On Lumumba in *peinture populaire*, see: Didier Gondola, 'Prophète et profit : La résurrection de Patrice Lumumba dans la peinture urbaine', *Revue d'histoire contemporaine de l'Afrique*, no. 5 (2023): 111–30.

[473] Groof, *Lumumba in the Arts*.

[474] Ben Yakoub and Abrassaert, 'La chasse aux spectres monumentaux dans la Belgique congolaise', 131–39.

[475] Gert Huskens and Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Lumumba in the Hood : The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba in Rap Music since 1990', in *Lumumba in the Arts* (Leuven University Press, 2020), 298–327.

[476] Benjamin Tollet, 'Congolisation Zet Congolese Diaspora in de Kijker', *BRUZZ*, 14 January 2015, https://www.bruzz.be/culture/event/congolisation-zet-congolese-diaspora-de-kijker-2015-01-14.

[477] The T-shirts bearing Lumumba's image were also distributed during the inauguration of the square on 30 June 2018. Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

[478] De Groof, 'The Iconography of Patrice Lumumba', 7.

3.4.3.2 Paintings and Travelling Statues

Philippe Buyck's Lumumba Library has also contributed to the portrayal of Lumumba in contemporary decolonial movements in Belgium. The collection includes not only many books related to Lumumba's death but also replicas of Congolese paintings featuring Lumumba as a central figure.[479] Among these are works by Congolese painter Moke Fils, including his 2016 painting *La Place Lumumba à Matongé*. In vivid colours, the work shows a street sign with 'Place Lumumba' and a figurative statue of Patrice Lumumba, located in the centre of Matonge next to 'Bibliothèque Matonge', or Lumumba Library. The work was exhibited on several occasions in Belgium, extending the visibility of the Lumumba Square campaign.

As part of the *Kongo Poker* exhibition at Halles Saint-Géry in central Brussels,[480] a large number of posters at the original scale of the painting was printed, which then took on a life of their own among different audiences, reaching white associations elsewhere in Belgium (LABO) and academic institutions.[481] But perhaps the most visible cultural product I saw during the Lumumba Square campaign and afterward was a metre-high papier-mâché tooth. This sculpture refers to the tooth that general Gerard Soete took from Lumumba's body after his death. Titled *REWIND-BLOW UP*, Buyck created the piece for the 2016 exhibition *Boulevard Lumumba* in Antwerp, organized as part of a university workshop titled 'The Iconography of Lumumba in the Arts and the Work of Raoul Peck'. Since then, this 'travelling sculpture' has gone on a long journey. In 2017, it was exhibited in Kinshasa and travelled to the location where the mausoleum for Lumumba's tooth is currently situated.[482] During my fieldwork, I saw the papier-mâché tooth pop up during various commemorative activities. On 19 January 2019, after a public debate on Lumumba's political ideas in Matonge organized by Intal Congo and Change, the tooth was carried, in a procession-like manner, by Ludo De Witte and activists of Change from Mundo b to the Square du Bastion, next to Lumumba Square, for a commemorative ceremony.[483] On 30 June 30 and 2020, the tooth was used during the commemorative events that took place on the same Square du Bastion. Next to the activist's speeches, its presence served as a visual reminder in public space that Lumumba's actual tooth had, despite demands since 2011, not yet been released to his descendants in Congo. Like the re-enactment, the statue's presence during commemorations visually highlighted the ongoing failure of the Belgian authorities to take the claims of decolonial movements, in this case the

[479] Jérôme Duval, 'Décoloniser l'espace public', ZIN TV, 10 July 2018, https://zintv.org/ludo-de-witte-il-faut-changer-les-mentalites-et-decoloniser-completement-lespace-public/.

[480] 'Kongo Poker' was an art exhibition held in 2018 at Halles Saint-Géry, a cultural center in Brussels. The exhibition aimed to explore and critique Belgium's colonial history in the Congo through contemporary art. See: 'Exposition Kongo Poker,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://samapass.com/en/events/kongo-poker.

[481] Posters were also handed out during the inauguration of the square. Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

[482] Zian, Groof, and Mangole, 'L'odyssée de Lumumba', 30.

[483] Mundo B, on the Rue d'Edimbourg in Ixelles, is a meeting room and workspace for non-profits organizations in the area and offers room to a wide variety of civil society organizations, not only Afrodescendant or decolonial ones. See: *'Mundo Matonge',* accessed 28 April 2025, https://mundo-lab.org/centres/mundo-matonge/.

claims for the repatriation of human remains, to heart, underscoring the importance of continued mobilization.

On the day of the inauguration of Lumumba Square in 2018, another 'travelling statue' served the same purpose. During political negotiations for the square (cf. Chapter 5), activists had demanded the erection of a figurative statue of Patrice Lumumba at the same location. Despite strong opposition from the MR party, Brussels mayor Phillipe Close reportedly promised to discuss such a statue.[484] In a context where trust in the Brussels city administration was already low, activists referred to this promise and to whether the mayor would keep it as the ultimate test to determine whether Close's intentions were trustworthy and went beyond mere electoral interests.[485] The question of a statue was also raised in various speeches during the inauguration ceremony. Hinting at the need for a statue, historian Elikia M'Bokolo said that while the informational plaque on the square represented 'une révolution', Lumumba's figure still clearly lacked sufficient public visibility.[486] In the collective speech by the activist groups that led the campaign for the square, Close was immediately and very publicly reminded of his promise: 'Our next project with Major P. Close will certainly be to erect a figurative statue of Lumumba here with inscriptions translated into an African language'.[487]

Meanwhile, BAMKO-CRAN chose not to wait for decisions by the Brussels city administration and instead presented its own figurative statue of Patrice Lumumba. Chairwoman Mireille-Tsheusi Robert had been travelling around with the statue, created by a befriended artist, Rhode Makoumbou, since January 2018. Planting it in various places, she set up temporary 'Lumumba Squares' in Brussels to pressure the city.[488] By bringing the statue to the official inauguration on 30 June 2018, activists showed the city administration and policymakers everywhere that they would continue to mobilize for a statue of Lumumba and that the creation of the square was but one of Afrodescendants' multiple demands.[489]

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[484] Lismond-Mertens, 'Une Place Lumumba à Bruxelles', 79.

[485] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, 'Square Lumumba : Décoloniser Les Espaces et Les Esprits', *Politique. Revue Belge d'Analyse et de Débat*, 9 July 2022, https://www.revuepolitique.be/square-lumumba-decoloniser-les-espaces-et-les-esprits/

[486] Speech of Elikia M'Bokolo during the inauguration of Lumumba Square on June 30, 2018. Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

[487] For the full speech, see: Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Discours des associations en hommage à Lumumba, Okito et Mpolo', CADTM, 14 August 2018, https://www.cadtm.org/Discours-des-associations-en-hommage-a-Lumumba-Okito-et-Mpolo. In the meantime, we know that Close never kept his promise. See: Bettina Hubo, 'Geen Standbeeld Voor Lumumba', *BRUZZ*, 23 June 2020, https://www.bruzz.be/stedenbouw/geen-standbeeld-voor-lumumba-2020-06-23.

[488] 'Tijdelijk Lumumbaplein En Standbeeld in Ravensteingalerij', *BRUZZ*, 21 January 2018, https://www.bruzz.be/politiek/tijdelijk-lumumbaplein-en-standbeeld-ravensteingalerij-2018-01-21.

[489] The presence of the statue during the official inauguration resulted in visually striking press photos, showing Mayor Philippe Close unveiling the square's nameplate, with the travelling statue right beside him in the picture. See: 'Plus de 300 personnes à l'inauguration du square Patrice Lumumba à Bruxelles', Le Soir, 30 June 2018, https://www.lesoir.be/165696/article/2018-06-30/plus-de-300-personnes-linauguration-du-square-patrice-lumumba-bruxelles.

3.4.3.3 Linking different memory campaigns

Activists later visualized the inauguration of Lumumba Square in 2018 to use its memory in other decolonial campaigns. During the official inauguration ceremony, unrest arose when Mayor Philippe Close took the stage. Distrust of his intentions, dissatisfaction with the final location of the square, the lack of public acknowledgement of Belgium's responsibility for Lumumba's death, and the slow handling of the repatriation issue reached a peak among the audience. Just after Close announced that the inauguration of the square could contribute to 'reconciliation' between Belgium and Congo, some people in the audience interrupted his speech by shouting 'vous avez assassiné Lumumba'. Frustrated by his inability to continue, Close lost his patience and ordered one of the people shouting to stop disrupting an important event for 'la communauté congolaise.'[490]

The incident was captured that same year in a short comic by Léa Grégoire and Lou Dufournet featured in the underground activist magazine *KUMBUKA: Zine Décoloniale.* Curated by Lili Angelou, Jeann Coppens, Léa Grégoire and Arshia Azmat, *KUMBUKA* ('to remember' in Swahili) was published on 23 November 2018 in anticipation of the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren.[491] The magazine gathered numerous critical essays on restitution and on the museum, unified by a desire to 'reappropriate, politicize and reinvent the colonial heritage and images so deeply rooted in our countries' collective consciousness', and with contributions analysing the museum's failure to denounce Belgian colonialism or include Afrodescendant voices.[492] In activist discourse, this failure of the museum was framed within a broader failure of 'white institutions' and political authorities to achieve meaningful change, relegating colonialism to the past and avoiding contemporary responsibility.[493]

The comic about the inauguration of Lumumba Square presents the conflict with Close as representative of this broader narrative by concluding, in the final panel: 'The representatives of the state keep on repeating that colonialism and its crimes are distant events and that the Belgian state has nothing to do with that past anymore'.[494] Much like the T-shirts evocative of the conflict with Bozar, the tooth reminding of the restitution struggle, and the re-enactment of Lumumba's speech, the comic demonstrates how moments from one campaign are memorialized and mobilized into the next, contributing to the discursive construction of a

[490] Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.
[491] Author's Field Notes, 'Présentation Kumbuka Zine Décoloniale: Repenser le Musée' (event organized by LeSpace), 23 November 2018, Brussels.
[492] Lili Angelou et al., 'Introduction: Kumbuka', *KUMBUKA. Zine Décoloniale. Repenser Le Musée / Rethinking the Museum*, 2018, 5
[493] Anissa Boujdaini, 'Koloniale Rouw En "Wachten" Als Macht', *KUMBUKA. Zine Décoloniale. Repenser Le Musée / Rethinking the Museum*, 2018, 11.
[494] Léa Grégoire and Lou Dufournet, 'Le Musée Indécolonisable', *KUMBUKA. Zine Décoloniale. Repenser Le Musée / Rethinking the Museum*, 2018, 30-32.

unified struggle. They exemplify how activist memory work can, in the words of Merill and Rigney, not only mobilize existing narratives but also archive 'the present moment to create a future-proof memory that extends the lifespan of a movement and its associated ideals'.[495]

Figure 1: Léa Grégoire and Lou Dufournet, 'Le Musée Indécolonisable', KUMBUKA. Zine Décoloniale. Repenser Le Musée / Rethinking the Museum, 2018, 30.

[495] Merrill and Rigney, 'Remembering Activism', 1001.

3.5 Conclusions

This chapter examined the role of memory in activism during and after the campaign to create a square named after Patrice Lumumba in Brussels. It shows that Rigney and Merrill's proposed distinction between memory as a 'means' and memory as an 'end' for social mobilization is not always clear-cut.[496] While activists sought to change public memory by the establishment of square (an end), the grassroots commemorative practices they organized also serve to unite a highly diverse field of actors around shared political claims (means).

Differences in backgrounds, identities, migration trajectories, and personal visions have historically made it difficult for Afrodescendants in Belgium to emerge as a collective political agent. This has been complicated by ethnic, class, gender and personal differences as well as an institutional context that favors formal recognition and thus funding of Afrodescendant organizations under a generalized 'African' label. Actors who aim to bring demands for racial justice to the public agenda therefore face a complex struggle for legitimacy, both towards the authorities from whom change is demanded and towards their own diverse constituencies. Between 2010 and 2021, memories of colonialism as an enduring injustice gradually functioned as a common historical reference point from which to assert a collective voice. In this context, Lumumba emerged as a central symbol uniting a coalition of organizations mobilizing against colonial continuities in Belgium.

The chapter situates this strategic choice within the history of Belgian public debates about the colonial past, where the murder of Patrice Lumumba and the figure of Leopold II had served as catalysts for public reckoning. Yet Lumumba's prominence also derives from the transnational circulations of 'travelling memories' that have attached multiple, often contradictory meanings to his figure over time. Precisely because of this flexibility, Lumumba could function as an 'empty signifier', a container for various narratives. As François Makanga put it back in 2019: 'There is no consensus on the relevance of Lumumba, but there is a consensus that he is the appropriate figure [for the struggle]'.[497] The counter-hegemonic commemorative activities around Lumumba's figure organized by activists since 2013 should be understood as a form of 'activist memory work', translating Lumumba's legacy in such a way that it could speak to Afrodescendant actors mobilizing against colonial injustice in Belgium's present. In this process, different identities were ascribed to Lumumba, while he was simultaneously inscribed into a broader narrative: the continued struggle for justice for the colonial past. Furthermore, activists deployed Lumumba's speech as a precursor to today's struggles and 'memorialized' contemporary actions around Lumumba's figure, integrating them into new activist campaigns. This practice of creating a memory of action – the collective

[496] Merrill and Rigney, 'Remembering Activism', 999.

[497] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.

writing of a narrative of their own activism – also contributed to the formation of their collective identity as an activist community and their legitimacy in leading the fight for racial justice in Belgium.

Despite manifold activist critiques of the eventual creation of Lumumba Square (cf. Chapter 5), some activists describe the campaign as at least a partial victory precisely because during the campaign different groups were able to work together despite internal divisions:

> As part of this struggle, we have already achieved what Lumumba always sought to establish, namely to unite around this cause to claim that square. We organized ourselves, we learned to mobilize, to organize. And that is how Lumumba also moved forward: always making sure that his troops were organized to advance and stay informed about how things were evolving. And we managed to do this despite our differences, our origins, and our sensitivities.[498]

Yet this fragile unity was continually under strain. Differences persisted within the chain of equivalence. The following chapters will examine the memory practices and repertoires of three key actors in the coalition – CMCLD, Change, and BAMKO-CRAN – to explore how they articulate racial justice in relation to memory.

[498] Kalvin Soiresse Njall on 1 June 2018. In: Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.

Chapter 4 Decolonizing Memory with the Tools of History: CMCLD's Decolonial Guided Tours

4.1 Introduction

Can memory activists still be called memory activists when they mobilize the language, tools, and authority of historical scholarship? Conversely, can professional historians who advance partisan narratives of the past – perhaps in service of the state – be considered memory activists? Since the onset of the 'memory boom', scholars have interrogated the conceptual boundaries between 'memory' and 'history' as distinct modes of engaging with the past.[499] 'Memory' has typically been understood as affective, embodied, subjective, and presentist – conflating past and present –whereas 'history' is cast as critical, distanced, objective, and methodologically rigorous. In this respect, the rise of memory as vernacular, public, and political past-oriented practices has been read as a challenge to the authority of professional historians, whose epistemic role as 'guardians of historical truth' appeared to be under pressure.[500]

Of course, this dichotomy has long been questioned. Following post-structuralist critiques in historical theory, historians now know that representations of the past – whether produced by historians or by activists – are always interpretive, contingent, and shaped by narrative

[499] Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (Yale University Press, 2006).
[500] Wulf Kansteiner, 'History, Memory, and Historical Theory: Five Ideas for Good Memory Management', in *Dynamics, Mediation, Mobilization: Doing Memory Studies with Ann Rigney*, ed. Astrid Erll et al. (De Gruyter, 2024), 18.

frameworks.[501] Rather than treating 'memory' and 'history' as mutually exclusive domains, it is therefore more productive to view them as overlapping and interwoven in practice.[502] Still, the common-sense distinction between the two continues to influence how engagements with the past are judged in both epistemological and political terms. In his review of the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, for instance, Alexander Karn voices the familiar concern that memory activism might contribute to a 'post-truth' climate, 'where memory trolls weaponize the past, muddy the intellectual waters, and claim an absolute right to history and memory, irrespective of any professional or empirical standard'.[503] Such anxieties reflect not only the analytical but also the political stakes of categorizing past-oriented practices as either historical or mnemonic – stakes that some 'memory activists' are well aware of.

This chapter analyses the campaign of the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD) for the decolonization of public space, approaching 'history' and 'memory' as co-constitutive and strategically mobilized modes of relating to the past. Officially founded in 2012, the Pan-African CMCLD has emerged as a prominent activist actor in Belgium's decolonial moment. Drawing on its intellectual capital, the organization aims to stimulate public awareness of colonial history, racial stereotypes, and structural racism and fight against anti-Black racism in Belgium.

First, I argue that in developing this campaign, CMCLD activists mobilize academic 'history' as a central register to advance their claims. The decolonial counter-memory presented by CMCLD appeals to historical expertise, is embedded in a language of 'facts', and claims to be grounded in the procedures of professional historiography. Activists present their narrative of colonialism as 'history', and partisan narratives in older colonial historiography in Belgium are 'unmasked' as memory – framed as shaped by subjective, emotional, and politically informed positions in the present. While professional historians are typically tasked with critiquing, deconstructing, or contextualizing all forms of public memory, here we see memory activists critiquing, deconstructing, or contextualizing professional historiography with their own disciplinary tools. Even though its members are emotionally connected to the colonial past and its legacies, CMCLD strategically mobilizes a fact-based, 'objective' register, employing academic history as a powerful memory device for political transformation and societal change. CMCLD's core belief in historical knowledge's importance for political transformation thus

[501] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (JHU Press, 1975).
[502] Alon Confino, 'History and Memory', in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing: Volume 5: Historical Writing Since 1945*, ed. Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (Oxford University Press, 2011); Chris Lorenz, 'Blurred Lines. History, Memory, and the Experience of Time', *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2, no. 1 (2014): 43–62.
[503] Alexander Karn, 'Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (Eds) with Irit Dekel, Kaitlin M Murphy, Benjamin Nienass, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Kerry Whigham', *Memory Studies* 17, no. 5 (2024), 1231.

complicates Alison Landsberg's claim that 'modern historical discourse cannot be mobilized in the service of political change in the present'.[504]

Second, I argue that the notion of 'historical truth' plays a central role in the public articulation of the link between memory and racial justice evident in the association's name. Memorial justice is conceived as the 'uncovering' and public recognition of the truth about the colonial past – based on 'objective' historical research and contrasted with the remnants of 'colonial propaganda' still visible in Belgium's public sphere. The analyses in this chapter are based on multiple in-depth interviews with four key members of CMCLD – Billy Kalonji, Kalvin Soiresse Njall, Aliou Baldé, and Yves Lodonou – activist publications and public statements, conversations during events, and participant observation in seven decolonial guided tours and multiple public 'conferences' and debates between 2018 and 2024. The chapter demonstrates that in this decolonial memory activism, the lines between history and memory are blurred and become themselves the sites of political contestation. Activists both draw on and challenge historical authority, strategically positioning themselves in relation to historiography in ways that enhance their broader struggle for racial justice in Belgium.

4.2 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD)

This first part of the chapter introduces the CMCLD. I begin by situating its emergence within a broader historical context marked by growing discontent with the failure of political and cultural institutions to adequately confront Belgium's colonial past and recognize Afrodescendant voices as equal interlocutors in public discourse. Building on Sarah Demart's suggestion, I then explore how CMCLD builds on the legacy of 1990s Afrodescendant Pan-African activism while simultaneously marking a shift toward a new mode of mobilization. Finally, I trace how the organization's activism is historically rooted in dialogues with academic actors and earlier generations of white activists and intellectuals. Together, these three points highlight the intergenerational and intellectual nature of the organization's formation.

[504] Landsberg advanced this argument building on Berber Bevernage's critique of modern historical discourse in the context of state-sponsored truth commissions, whereby its conception of time as linear and progressive performatively enacts a break between past and present, obstructing the recognition of enduring injustices. Alison Landsberg, 'Memory vs. History: The Politics of Temporality', in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (Routledge, 2022), 43.

4.2.1 Continuities and Ruptures with 1990s Afrodescendant Mobilizations

CMCLD, commonly referred to as 'the Collectif' or as 'Mémoire Coloniale', took its current form officially in 2012, though preparations for its creation date back to at least 2010.[505] It can be understood as a successor to the Pan-African mobilizations of the 1990s that sought to unite actors across Belgium's African diasporas (cf. Chapter 1). At its inception, the CMCLD operated as a loose federation of over 140 associations from across the country – an organizational model that Demart aptly describes as 'at once the culmination of and the rupture' with earlier Pan-African platforms.[506] In response to recurring challenges to its legitimacy as a representative voice for such a diverse field of actors, the CMCLD gradually evolved into a more autonomous and consolidated organization. While CMCLD engages in a broad spectrum of political claims and activities, it is publicly best known for its sustained lobbying efforts and political advocacy around two key issues: the decolonization of public space and the integration of colonial history into French-speaking Belgian education.[507] A core tenet of its work, exemplified in its name, is the insistence on recognizing the connection between dominant public narratives of the colonial past ('mémoire coloniale') and the persistence of structural anti-Black racism in the present ('et lutte contre les discriminations'). This emphasis on the historical roots of contemporary racial injustice followed from a growing focus on colonialism and decolonization among the Pan-African associations CCAEB and MOJA and the association Observatoire Ba Ya Ya, even though publicly the debate still revolved around 'discrimination, civic rights, and representation' (cf. Chapter 1).[508]

4.2.2 Intellectual Roots in earlier Pan-African Mobilizations

4.2.2.1 A Return of the Organized Struggle for Decolonization

The CMCLD emerged in the aftermath of the fiftieth anniversary of Congo's independence in 2010. As shown in Chapter 1, many of the cultural productions, literary works, exhibitions, and public discourses commemorating this anniversary were marked either by colonial nostalgia or by outright apologetic and revisionist narratives, prompting a wave of counter-mnemonic initiatives in the years that followed.[509] Yet, the origin story of the CMCLD dates back much

[505] As explained by founding member Moïse Essoh in CECONG, 'Moïse Essoh Se Présente,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_gDvouGuHM&ab_channel=CECONG.
[506] Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge*, 14.
[507] Among its other activities can be counted the lobbying to install a federal action plan against racism and the struggle for the restitution of human remains from the collections of Belgian scientific and cultural institutions.
[508] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations', 42.
[509] Goddeeris et al., 'Het Koloniale Verleden'; Demart and Abrassart, *Créer En Postcolonie 2010–2015*.

further. In Chapter 3, I explained how CMCLD (ex-)members Geneviève Kaninda, Tony Kokou Sampson, and Njall themselves cite the 'failure' of the parliamentary Lumumba Commission of 2001–2002 as 'the first premise[s] of the organized return of the popular decolonial struggles in Belgium'.[510]

In 2003, around the same time as the public debate on the outcome of the Lumumba Commission, the Comité de concertation Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale – Associations Africaines (COMRAF) was founded at the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA), now AfricaMuseum, in Tervuren.[511] Bringing together museum staff and representatives of African associations in Belgium, COMRAF functioned as a 'consultative committee' for the museum's management that could submit 'proposals on any aspect related to the functioning and activities of the RMCA, in particular (but not exclusively) concerning the content and programming of exhibitions and educational or cultural activities'.[512] The committee was created in the context of the museum's upcoming renovation – its first since the 1950s – of its permanent exhibition, which was originally designed as colonial propaganda under Leopold II, as outlined in Chapter 1.[513] For over twenty years, Afrodescendant communities in Belgium have fiercely contested the relationship between COMRAF and the museum, the ambiguous and poorly renumerated status of COMRAF members, and the lack of institutional recognition of the expertise they brought to the table.[514] As Bambi Ceuppens wrote, the museum treated the very people it aimed to represent as 'guests' rather than 'insiders'.[515] The charter outlining COMRAF's objectives stated that the museum's management was merely to consider the committee's opinions only 'within the limits of what is possible', thereby creating uncertainty about the impact of the COMRAF members' voluntary work.[516] This distinction between 'science' – as claimed by the museum – and the 'activism' of Afrodescendants collaborating through COMRAF or, later, through the advisory group Groupe des Six (G6), typifies the institution's 'racial paternalism'

[510] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations', 43.

[511] Bevernage and Mestdagh, 'Elephant in the Room', 222–23.

[512] At the time of its founding, the committee was composed of four members from the RMCA, nine delegates from African associations based in Belgium, three co-opted reference figures, and a smaller executive body made up of a director, a vice director, and a secretary. See Royal Museum for Central Africa, 'Charte Du Comité MRAC - Associations Africaines (COMRAF)', internal document, 17 September 2007, 1.

[513] For more information on how the museum functioned as a colonial propaganda tool, see Vincent Viaene, 'King Leopold's Imperialism and the Origins of the Belgian Colonial Party, 1860–1905', *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 4 (2008): 741–90; Stanard, *Selling the Congo*, 85-120.

[514] Clette-Gakuba, 'Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation', 48-66.

[515] Bambi Ceuppens, 'From Colonial Subjects/Objects to Citizens: The Royal Museum for Central Africa as Contact-Zone', in *Advancing Museum Practices*, ed. Francesca Lanz and Elena Montanari (Umberto Allemandi & C., 2014), 95. The lack of diversity among the permanent staff of the museum was also the subject of criticism in an external evaluation of the institution in 2015, see Bevernage and Mestdagh, 'Elephant in the Room', 222–23.

[516] COMRAF members were said to be paid 15 euros per meeting. Royal Museum for Central Africa, 'Charte Du Comité MRAC', 1.

towards African diasporas in Belgium.[517] The expertise of these individuals was at times explicitly or implicitly devalued – either by dismissing them as 'just activists' or by categorizing their contributions as limited to an 'expertise de sensibilité' (expertise of sensibility), thereby drawing an implicit contrast with the so-called 'true expertise' of the museum's own research staff.[518]

The accumulated experiences of dismissal of Afrodescendant associations' narratives during this period – by the Lumumba Commission and by the AfricaMuseum – form the backdrop against which the CMCLD emerged. Recalling the origins of the CMCLD, Kalonji, a founding member of both COMRAF and the CMCLD, recounted the conflicts with the museum as necessitating the establishment of an independent body to discuss colonial history and memory:

> We realized that we couldn't do everything within the museum, so at a certain point, it became necessary to create an independent body outside the museum to allow for deeper reflection. That's how we created the Collectif, with university researchers, etc. We held debates with people like Sarah Demart, Jacinthe [Mazzocchetti], and others. But we prioritized collaboration with the museum, at least for the first two years, I think. And during the museum's closure, we ensured continuity at Bozar with conferences and all that, alongside Change, the Collectif Mémoire, and the museum.[519]

4.2.2.2 Intergenerational Transmission

Alongside Kalonji, other activists who were foundational in the creation of CMCLD include Moïse Essoh, Malamine Fadiaba, Lodonou, Omar Ba, Njall, and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert.[520] Most had long been active in Afrodescendant associations preceding CMCLD or were involved in Pan-African efforts to federate various organizations – as described in Chapter 1.[521] From its inception and until today, CMCLD presents itself as explicitly Pan-African, including members with not only roots in former colonies but also diverse backgrounds, including people with roots in Togo, Cameroon, and Guinea.[522] The organization also presents itself as 'une organisation intergénérationnelle' – an intergenerational organization – bringing together the experiences and knowledge of individuals who have long been engaged in activism, such as

[517] The 'Groupe de Six (G6)' was established in 2014 with the explicit mission to 'support all the work involved in the design of a new permanent exhibition' and consisted of Anne Wetsi Mpoma, Gratia Pungu, Toma Luntumbue, Ayoko Mensah, Billy Kalonji, and Emeline Uwizeyimana. See Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de colonialité', 373.

[518] Author's Field Notes, 'Radio Emission: 'Décoloniser le Musée' (Radio Campus, 3 February 2019, Brussels).

[519] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

[520] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence. Lutte contre les discriminations au regard de l'histoire et de la mémoire coloniales: Etats des lieux' (Koto Panther Print, 2012), 11, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/data/2017/10/Actes-de-la-conference-.pdf.

[521] Kalonji and Ba had been involved in the creation of the AfrikaPlatform in Antwerp, and Moïse Essoh had been the spokesperson for MOJA. See Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019; Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 8.

[522] CEC ONG, 'Moïse Essoh se présente'.

Essoh, Kalonji, Lodonou and Fadiaba, and younger generations, including at the time of CMCLD's founding figures like Njall (who later became president), Tsheusi Robert (who became vice president but stepped down after a year), Ba (who also helped found the AfrikaPlatform in Antwerp), and Sonia Mutesi Hakuziyaremye (who took over Robert's role as vice president).[523] While I was carrying out this research, younger activists – including Baldé, Kaninda, Tony Kokou Sampson, and Stéphanie Ngalula –joined the Collectif and took on roles as tour guides and public spokespeople. The notion of 'activist generations' is a recurring theme in activist self-representation, with someone like Njall describing himself in 2019 as 'in between generations', and it is also a key driving force in CMCLD's operations.[524] Essoh, for example, cites the transmission of experience and knowledge from older to younger generations as one of the reasons for creating the collective.[525] For Kalonji, the recognition of CMCLD's work as a product of the efforts of previous generations is important:

> Before [the creation of CMCLD], the associative world had formed out of necessity: people were trying to come together as Congolese. But then, in the face of the problems we were encountering, we realized that we needed to unite. One of the major initiatives, created in Antwerp, was the AfrikaPlatform, which was officially recognized in 2001. And it was only once we were recognized that we were able to take part in the debate. So there's a clear line in all of this. It's thanks to MOJA, the CCAEB, and the AfrikaPlatform that we were able to create the Collectif.[526]

Grown out of Pan-African networks, which – as Nicole Grégoire has shown – were led by a highly educated 'associational elite', CMCLD today still consists of members with university degrees, well connected to Belgian academic and political elites and providing the organization with significant political capital.[527] In the associational field in Brussels, activists from other organizations often referred to the Collectif as 'the intellectuals' when speaking to me, which lends the organization legitimacy but also provokes contestation (cf. Chapter 6).[528] Yet, as argued by Demart, the experience and networks of its older members continue to give it a form of enduring 'representational capital'.[529] As such, despite ongoing challenges, it continues to be seen as one of the key mobilizing forces in the contemporary struggle for memorial justice in Belgium.[530]

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[523] On Robert's departure, see Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge,* 14. For a list of CMCLD members at the time of its creation, see Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 4.

[524] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019.

[525] CEC ONG, 'Moïse Essoh se présente'.

[526] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

[527] Petit and Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics', 151.

[528] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 6 June 2019.

[529] Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge*, 17–18.

[530] During my interviews with Ludo Segers and Stella Nyanchama Okemwa, for example, they pointed to CMCLD as a prime example of the development of their Flemish campaign on the decolonisation of public space since 2017. Ludo Segers and Stella Nyanchama Okemwa, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Antwerp, audio, 1 March 2018.

4.2.3 Intellectual Roots in the 'Collectif Mémoire Coloniales'

4.2.3.1 Collaboration with Researchers and White Allies

In Njall's account of the origins of CMCLD and, in particular, its later focus on the decolonization of the public sphere, the organization's roots must be situated both in the activism and memory work of earlier generations of Afrodescendants and in the interactions of these networks with scholars and white intellectuals.[531] He noted that the public focus on colonial memory – advanced by CMCLD from 2012 – built upon more private practices of preserving anti-colonial memories and, importantly, the 'intergenerational transmission' of these memories within Afrodescendant communities.[532] This created fertile ground for younger generations to engage with these intellectual and mnemonic traditions and translate them into demands specific to the Belgian context.[533] He described the gradual evolution from Congolese 'homeland politics,' through struggles centred on the recognition of the isolated figure of Patrice Lumumba, to eventually a broader struggle to decolonize the public sphere as follows:

> In the 1970s, there were Lumumbist families here, as well as activists who had fled the Mobutist dictatorship. They preserved the memory through small-scale activities, but I think that in the beginning, it was really a matter of justice [for his murder]. Things gained momentum with the parliamentary commission in 2000 and Ludo De Witte's book, and then with the criminal complaint and the conflict with Bozar and Davignon. So each time, a current event would reignite the struggle. In the 1990s, people were not yet thinking about public space. It was only near the end of the 2000s, and in the early 2010s, that we began to collectively reflect on it.[534]

In the gradual translation of Afrodescendant memories into a public campaign that links remembrance to the fight against anti-Black racism, interactions with white activists initially played a role. These activists included Ludo De Witte, whose book on the murder of Lumumba sparked a public debate and a parliamentary commission (cf. Chapter 1 and Chapter 3), and

[531] A high school teacher by training and a former journalist, Njall has become a prominent political figure in francophone Belgium: he serves as a municipal councillor for the Ecolo party in the Brussels municipality of Ganshoren, as a deputy in the French-speaking Brussels Parliament, and, since September 2023, as president of that same parliament. Originally from Togo, Njall arrived in Belgium in 2004 to pursue his studies at the Université Saint-Louis. Having long admired the political legacy of Patrice Lumumba, he was surprised to find, upon his arrival, that Lumumba's memory occupied a far less prominent place in Belgian public discourse than he had anticipated, fuelling his later activism to 'restore' Lumumba's memory, both among Afrodescendants and the wider Belgian public.

[532] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019.

[533] In their 2017 sociological study of Belgian citizens of Congolese, Rwandan, and Burundian descent, Demart et al. show that, overall, successive generations of Afrodescendants in Belgium tend to become increasingly oriented toward Belgian political life. Demart et al., *Burgers met Afrikaanse roots*, 152.

[534] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

Lucas Catherine, a self-identified 'Historian of Forgotten Affairs' who, out of personal interest, began focusing on colonial monuments and street names in public space.[535]

4.2.3.2 The Collectif Mémoires Coloniales

In recounting the history of these interactions, Essoh, Kalonji, Baldé, and Njall consistently refer to the succession of two different collectives: a 'Collectif Mémoires Coloniales' in the plural, and their own collective, 'Collectif Mémoire Coloniale', in the singular, linked to the 'struggle against discrimination'.[536] The initiative for the creation of the first was taken in 2008 by the Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes Illégitimes (hereafter CADTM), an international organization advocating for 'the cancellation of illegitimate, unsustainable, and odious debts' of formerly colonized countries.[537] Gathered around a shared concern about the 'persistence of colonial myths' in the public sphere, the collective united a variety of associations, writers, historians, journalists, and citizens, including white Belgians and Afrodescendants.[538] The first members, besides CADTM and some civil society associations (such as Oasis N'Djili and Casa Nicaragua), consisted of a significant number of intellectuals, some affiliated with academic institutions at the time, including De Witte, Karel Arnaut, Ceuppens, Guy De Boeck, Christine Pagnoulle, Antoine Tshitungu Kongolo, and Theophile De Giraud.[539]

To grasp the connection between this Collectif Mémoires Coloniales and the activism of CMCLD, Njall qualified his own activist trajectory as a product of his interaction between the Pan-African intellectuals 'from the older generations' and study groups and meetings that took place in the context of this first Collectif.[540] During his student years, he became a leading figure in the Cercles d'étudiants panafricains at Université Saint-Louis and joined the Mouvement

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[535] This is how he describes himself, for example, in the author bio on the book's cover. Lucas Catherine, *Het dekoloniseringsparcours. Wandelen langs Congolees erfgoed in België* (EPO, 2019).

[536] In his work on colonial memories in Belgium, Matthew Stanard also briefly cites the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales; see Stanard, *Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 197.

[537] This Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debts was founded in Belgium in 1990, has chapters in several countries, and works to promote economic justice and sovereignty by addressing the impacts of unfair debt on impoverished nations and vulnerable populations. CADTM is part of a broader network of civil society organizations and activists focusing on debt justice, social equity, and sustainable development, engaging with both local and global issues through a mix of grassroots activism and policy advocacy. See: CADTM, 'About CADTM,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.cadtm.org/About-CADTM; Robin De Lobel, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 16 September 2020.

[538] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations', 41–42.

[539] Among its members were the CADTM, Barricade, Oasis N'Djili ASBL, Casa Nicaragua, L'Horloge du Sud, Macedoine ASBL, Lucas Catherine, Madeleine Ploumants (ATTAC Liège), Laurent d'Ursel (Collectif Manifestement), Christine Pagnoulle, Antoine Tshitungu Kongolo, Guy de Boeck, Ludo De Witte, Jacquie Dever, Jamal es Samri, Theophile de Giraud (who in 2008 covered the equestrian statue of Leopold II in Brussels in red paint), Kasongo Maloba Dickens, and Karel Arnaut. Listed in Collectif Mémoires Coloniales, 'Manifeste pour une relecture de l'historie coloniale', 27 September 2008, https://www.cadtm.org/belgique-le-collectif-memoires, 2.

[540] The Collectif Mémoires Coloniales has also been publicly cited as CMCLD's predecessor, for example when Njall explained CMCLD's history to the audience attending Lumumba Day 2023. Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.

contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX), which, as explained in Chapter 1, functioned as a mainstream and state-sponsored anti-racism organization in francophone Belgium. Through these parallel engagements, Njall came into contact with Essoh, Ken Ndiaye (founder of L'Horloge du Sud and former president of the CCAEB, cf. Chapter 1), as well as Catherine, Tshitungu Kongolo, and Isabel Binon of Intal Congo. Over time, Njall became increasingly involved in the network surrounding the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales, forging particularly close ties with Catherine, who would become a key intellectual interlocutor and mentor. Rather than a strongly organized social movement, Kalvin refers to the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales as an 'intellectual circle':

> The first Collectif Mémoires Coloniales was more… It was purely intellectual. It was an intellectual circle made up of different people (…) So, it was a purely intellectual circle that carried out some field actions, but it wasn't fully invested in on-the-ground activism. It was really intellectual.[541]

The main activities of this 'purely intellectual' circle were gathering historical information about colonial monuments by organizing discussion groups, study days, and 'reflection meetings'.[542] Yet, ideas also arose about how to put the demand for decolonization on the public agenda. The strategy devised was to raise public awareness about colonial history by organizing decolonial city tours around colonial heritage. This strategy first materialized for a wider public on 17 January 2011, on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, in a tour guided by historians Catherine and Tshitungu Kongolo. Because the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales was mainly an intellectual group and had little experience in organizing larger social mobilizations, Njall recalls how he, then still a member of MRAX, helped co-organize a march against racism in Brussels on the same day of the guided tour, as MRAX had a larger mobilizing capacity. Later, on 30 June 2011, on the fifty-first anniversary of Congolese independence, MRAX – through Njall – invited Catherine and Tshitungu Kongolo to organize another guided tour. According to Njall, this year marked a pivotal transformation in the trajectory of the Collectif. What had begun as an intellectual circle gradually evolved into a more formally structured organization with its own distinct identity and agenda, led by Afrodescendants. This shift was catalysed by a desire to equip a younger generation of Afrodescendant activists with the tools to lead campaigns themselves.[543] A symbolic moment often cited in this transformation occurred during the decolonial walking tour on 17 January, when Catherine expressed the hope that Afrodescendants would take ownership of colonial history.[544] Inspired by this call, Njall recalls how Catherine trained him to become a historical tour guide. Baldé,

[541] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.
[542] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.
[543] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations', 42.
[544] This moment is for example also cited by the CMCLD on its website: Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Historique', accessed 14 April 2025, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/visites-guidees/historique.

who would later take over Njall's role as tour guide, also refers to Catherine's role as the inspiration for the decolonial guided tours that became central to CMCLD's action repertoire:

> So, the guided tours started with a Fleming, Lucas Catherine, who personally trained Kalvin. Lucas Catherine is the author of *Promenade au Congo*, a book I highly recommend on the decolonization of public space, because it is, in my opinion, one of the first works produced on this subject. It offers a concrete mapping of the links between Belgian public space and colonization. Lucas Catherine trained Kalvin, and Kalvin, in turn, trained me.[545]

Simultaneously, growing disillusionment with mainstream anti-racist organizations such as MRAX and institutions such as the AfricaMuseum gave rise to the idea of building a new movement – one that could both connect the intellectual effort of rewriting colonial history with the struggle against anti-black racism *and* unify the diverse array of Afrodescendant associations in Belgium around this agenda.[546] This moment of reorientation signalled the departure from the plural Collectif Mémoires Coloniales – a loose umbrella for various actors – to the singular Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations. With Njall as coordinator, the new organization quickly established itself as both an intellectual and an activist force. In partnership with the CADTM, CMCLD continued to co-organize annual commemorations for the Congolese soldiers who fought during the World War I, an initiative originally launched by Catherine in Schaerbeek.[547] Today, CMCLD has evolved into a Pan-African, intergenerational, 'horizontally organized' association that continues to expand its reach through historical education, political advocacy, and anti-racist mobilization. Essoh said that CMCLD has 'perfected' what Catherine started.[548] Like many Afrodescendant organizations in Belgium, CMCLD relies largely on volunteers and receives only limited project-based funding, with no structural subsidies.[549] Its flagship activity – the decolonial guided tour – has become a fixture in both activist and academic circles. Since its inception, CMCLD has developed more than fifteen distinct tours, primarily in the Brussels Capital

[545] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

[546] Njall has spoken about the desillusionment with MRAX in conversations with me, but he also cites it during his address on 7 December 2012. See Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 12.

[547] This commemorative activity has a much longer history and has also been put forward by Georgine Dibua. See Sarah Demart, 'L'armée Coloniale Belge et les commémorations du centenaire de la Ière Guerre Mondiale: Georgine Dibua Athapol', *Analyse 31* (Brussels: Editions Kwandika de Bamko-Cran ASBL, 2018), 1. See also Jean Illi's upcoming dissertation: 'La "décolonisation"'.

[548] CECONG, 'Moïse Essoh Se Présente,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_gDvouGuHM&ab_channel=CECONG.

[549] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

Region but increasingly also in cities across Wallonia and Flanders.[550] These tours exemplify the collective's core belief that historical knowledge can serve as a transformative political tool.

4.3 Tackling Colonial Propaganda with Historical Knowledge and Education

This section argues that CMCLD strategically mobilizes academic history as a key register through which to legitimize its activism and articulate its demands. I begin by showing how members frame their decolonial work as a 'historical correction' to colonial narratives that are ideologically troubling and factually flawed and that continue to obstruct a truthful and critical public understanding of Belgium's colonial past. This appeal to historical expertise functions as a claim to legitimacy not only vis-à-vis political and cultural institutions but also in relation to other groups within the broader ecosystem of decolonial activism. I then examine the organization's internal emphasis on historical literacy, exemplified by a programme of political education and even formal assessments for new members. Finally, I show how CMCLD positions itself as a public educator, linking historical consciousness to democratic responsibility and assuming the task of knowledge dissemination, an area in which academic historians in Belgium have often remained lacking.

4.3.1 Scientific Facts, Objective History, and the Tools of Professional Historiography

A key starting point in the discourse of CMCLD activists – and in that of their predecessors – is the observation that public narratives about Belgium's colonial past remain deeply informed by 'colonial myths' and 'propaganda'.[551] Chapter 1 already demonstrated how from the outset, Belgium's colonial project was accompanied by a propaganda campaign orchestrated by Leopold II and how, in the decades that followed, successive colonial memory circles successfully lobbied local authorities to commemorate the so-called 'pioneers of the Congo'

[550] These include routes through central Brussels (Palais Royal, Grand Place), the Matonge neighborhood, and the vicinity of major institutions like the European Commission and Parliament and Université Libre de Bruxelles. Additional tours explore different Brussels municipalities – including Schaerbeek, Saint-Gilles, Watermael-Boitsfort, Uccle, Forest, and Anderlecht – as well as the RMCA in Tervuren and its surrounding grounds. Beyond the capital, CMCLD has created tours in Walloon cities such as Charleroi, Quaregnon, Namur, La Louvière, and Liège, and more recently in Flemish cities, including Ostend (2022) and Ghent (2024). See Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Nos parcours - Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations', 2022. https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/visites-guidees/nos-parcours.

[551] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

and Belgium's 'civilizing' mission in Congo. Consequently, Belgium's public space is still saturated with monuments and street names that reference the colonial past.[552] Chapter 1 also highlighted how colonial historiography in Belgium remained long dominated by apologetic narratives, how cultural representations of colonialism continued to be marked by nostalgic tones, and how public knowledge about colonialism continues to fall short in both depth and accuracy.[553] Against this backdrop, CMCLD presents its memory work as a historical corrective intervention: an effort to unmask dominant colonial narratives in the public sphere as ideological constructs – 'myths' in need of dismantling, to be replaced with objective historical knowledge.

4.3.1.1 The Collectif Mémoires Coloniales' Rereading of Colonial History

This approach can already be observed in the language used by CMCLD's predecessor, the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales. The collective was formed with the explicit purpose of challenging the prevailing narratives of colonial history – 'pour contester la lecture de l'histoire coloniale'. [554] Its diverse membership was united by a shared discontent with the dominant representation of Belgium's colonial past, which they viewed as steeped in nostalgic iconography and all too often shaped by revisionist discourse – 'empreint d'images d'Épinal et de discours trop souvent révisionnistes'. [555] The group's central aim was to deconstruct the civilizing myth and dismantle the notion of colonialism's 'positive aspects'. [556] For the collective, 'la question du patrimoine public colonial' functioned as an entry point – a tangible site through which larger political conversations could be initiated. In the months following its formation, the group organized a series of meetings, study days, and guided tours through various colonial heritage sites in Brussels. These tours were led by intellectuals such as Catherine, and Tshitungu Kongolo, a Belgo-Congolese scholar and author who had previously guided memory walks through Matonge with the association Observatoire Ba Ya Ya. [557] Later that year, on 27 September 2008 and following a study day attended by over seventy participants, the collective published an open letter in the Belgian press calling for a 'relecture globale de l'Histoire' for Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, and advocating for a historical narrative grounded in scholarly rigour – 'une écriture de l'Histoire soumise à la rigueur de la recherche historique'.[558]

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[552] Stanard, *Selling the Congo*; Stanard, *Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*.

[553] Vanthemsche, 'Historiography of Belgian Colonialism', Azabar et al., 'Dekolonisering, erkend maar onbeantwoord'.

[554] Pauline Imbach, 'CADTM. Promenade anti-coloniale', 17 September 2008, https://www.cadtm.org/belgique-le-collectif-memoires.

[555] Imbach, 'CADTM. Promenade anti-coloniale', 1.

[556] Pauline Imbach, 'CADTM. Compte rendu', 29 September 2008, https://www.cadtm.org/belgique-le-collectif-memoires.

[557] Demart, 'Histoire orale à Matonge (Bruxelles)', 145.

[558] Collectif Mémoires Coloniales, 'Manifeste pour une relecture', 1.

4.3.1.2 Assessing the Facts First

Kalonji cited a similar motivation when he situated the creation of CMCLD against the backdrop of COMRAF's conflict with the AfricaMuseum – an institution itself a historical product of colonial propaganda. For him, the need to establish an independent body in collaboration with academic researchers to critically reflect on the colonial past became imperative in a context where the museum held a near-monopoly on historical education about colonial and African histories – yet did so with insufficient expertise:

> We realized that the knowledge held by the museum is not sufficient to speak either about the objects or about us. We must complement this knowledge with the knowledge found outside the museum.[559]

Reaching out to intellectuals within the diasporas and to white scholars was thus considered crucial in the collective's démarche to reclaim historical authority and produce a more accurate, inclusive account of the colonial past. On 7 December 2012, the CMCLD organized a conference in the AfricaMuseum titled 'Luttes contre les Discriminations Au regard de l'Histoire et de la Mémoire Coloniales: Etat des Lieux'. The conference was the outcome of a year of attempts to gather different associations in Belgium and a series of intense discussion groups held in L'Horloge du Sud, Ndiaye's restaurant.[560] This conference explicitly aimed to bring together a variety of scholars to reflect on the state of the art of existing research on colonial history, memory, the history of Afrodescendant migrations to Belgium, and the history of the struggle against racism and discrimination.[561] Scholars such as Ceuppens, Tshitungu Kongolo, Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, Demart, Bonaventure Kagné, and Elikia M'Bokolo presented their analyses, followed by four thematic workshops. Discussions from these sessions were synthesized by CMCLD members and compiled into conference proceedings. Later referred to as the organization's 'founding text', this fifty-page report was published on CMCLD's website to ensure public accessibility.[562]

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[559] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

[560] This restaurant in Ixelles is owned by Ken Ndiaye, a former scholarship student, former president of the Pan-African CCAEB (cf. Chapter 1) and former deputy mayor for culture in Ixelles for the Green Party, Ecolo (cf. Chapter 5). In 1994, he founded L'Horloge du Sud, a café, restaurant, and cultural hub in the heart of Ixelles' Matonge district. From its inception, the space became a vital gathering point for Afrodescendants, serving as a platform for cultural exchange, community engagement, and political dialogue – a role it continues to play today. See First Waves, 'Ken Ndiaye', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.firstwaves.be/en/nodes/people/ken-ndiaye/?items=1143,1145.

[561] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence'.

[562] See Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence'. The younger generation of CMCLD members has over the course of the years 2022–2024 been discussing the organization of a follow-up conference to update the work and discussions presented ten years earlier, but they have struggled to find financial support to organize such an event. Geneviève Kaninda, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, written notes, 1 November 2023.

Bringing together experts on this theme was essential for CMCLD to understand the origins of anti-Black racism in Belgium today and the influence of public representations of colonialism on the perception of racialized Belgians as inferior citizens. As Essoh explains:

> When the 'Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations' set out to (re-)address the age-old problem of discrimination in general, and racism in particular, along with contemporary solutions to combat them, a pressing and unavoidable question arose for the group: given how long these forms of discrimination have endured, have we ever truly asked where they come from, what their foundations are – that is, the elements that must be addressed in both the short and the long term? Why do they persist so strongly in society?
>
> Such a vast question is not easy to answer. It can, in fact, be approached from many angles and in many contexts. Therefore, the group needed to define the scope of the first answer it intended to offer. The choice fell on analysing the roots of the discrimination suffered by Africans, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, in Belgium. Following this choice, the group quickly focused on the link between persistent discrimination and the Belgian collective imagination inherited from the colonial era – on the societal and political remnants of that colonial time, and on the impact of colonial memory on current representations that continue to confine Africans to a category of humanity, which, despite what they say, is still considered inferior to that of Europeans.[563]

He immediately adds that the aim of CMCLD's discussion groups and the conference on 7 December 2012 was to have this conversation based on objective scientific 'facts' rather than 'emotions':

> But before charging ahead with what we believe we understand simply because we are its victims, before asserting what we believe to be 'truths' just because we feel them to be such, before confusing emotion with fact, it became clear that a scientific pre-analysis and the most objective possible assessment of the situation were necessary.[564]

The founding members of CMCLD viewed the establishment of a factual foundation as essential to shaping their later pedagogical campaigns. Anticipating criticisms that their work would 'obscure the debate', the collective articulated its endeavour as 'to lay out the facts, the scientific and social findings, even if they are open to debate'.[565] As Essoh concludes, these facts were not ends in themselves but tools in a broader effort toward the 'non-ideological restoration of colonial memory': a representation of the colonial past rooted in objective historical knowledge and purged of the colonial ideologies that still shape public historical consciousness and racial stereotypes.[566]

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563 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 7.
564 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 7.
565 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 7.
566 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 7.

4.3.1.3 Establishing an Objective History of Colonialism

In his speech on that same day, Tshitungu Kongolo – a historian, key figure in the development of the colonial walking tour format, and holder of a PhD in literary studies – posed a central question to both scholars and activists engaged in the project of this 'non-ideological restoration of colonial memory': 'How can we construct an objective historical memory of colonization, free from clichés about Africans?'[567]

At the heart of this project lies not only the commitment to independent research but also the use of that research to unmask colonial sciences, including colonial history itself, as ideologically driven disciplines. As Tshitungu Kongolo states:

> Colonial science was a discourse with scientific pretensions, designed to define the Black person, to devise strategies to dominate them, and to domesticate African space for its optimal exploitation in the interests of the North – that is, of those who saw themselves as superior.[568]

Colonial science, according to him, was not only ideologically motivated but also failed to meet scientific standards – he refers to it as a 'hazardous, bitter, and obsolete fifty-year-old science'.[569] For Tshitungu Kongolo, historical scholarship – which he considers 'one of the most demanding professions there is' – represents a vital tool to deconstruct partisan narratives about the colonial past.[570] When carried out with academic rigour, it becomes a crucial instrument for Afrodescendants in the struggle against racism and prejudice:

> I believe the issue of discrimination is real in this country; it stems from the colonial legacy, and we must dismantle it – not through irresponsible, romanticized discourse (and I will give an example of this shortly), but through a process of deconstruction, through a solid understanding of history, a civic understanding of history as a tool to fight prejudice.[571]

As I will demonstrate later, the language surrounding the importance of historical knowledge and the scientific project of 'deconstructing' colonial narratives continue to shape how CMCLD guides present their narrative to the broader public today. During her speech at the commemoration of Patrice Lumumba on 17 January 2020, CMCLD member Ngalula stated:

> Lumumba tells us: 'One day, we will write another history of Africa. It will not be the history as we live it today'. We must undertake what is called an epistemological break – a break away from the vision imposed on us by the West, which says, 'You cannot

[567] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 21.
[568] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 21.
[569] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 27.
[570] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 27.
[571] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 23–24.

> succeed. In any case, you Africans will never be able to'. To do this, we must arm ourselves with the tools of the West. We attended the same universities as they did, we have the same intellectual abilities.[572]

Ingrained in CMCLD's activities then is exactly this idea to 'arm oneself with the tools of the West', with the tools in this case being 'the methodological tools specific to history'.[573] As a result, even though its individual members can have emotional and/or more therapeutic relations to the past, in its public discourse the CMCLD mostly attempts to mobilize a relatively 'detached' cognitive and academic register for speaking about the colonial past. Characteristic of this is a genuine interest in historical facts, close attention to methodology and source criticism, and a familiarity with existing historiography.

4.3.1.4 Collaboration with Academic Historians and Activist Legitimacy

This close relationship with the discipline of history is reflected not only in CMCLD's rhetoric but also in the personal and professional networks of its members. Rooted in a politically grounded Pan-Africanist tradition, the collective has embraced a strategy of selective openness toward white allies whose intellectual and political commitments align with its own, drawing on their contributions in ways that strategically strengthen its broader agenda for memorial and racial justice. Since its foundation, CMCLD has maintained regular and sustained contact with academic historians. As a decolonial memory activist organization, it is connected not only with the local governments responsible for shaping public memory (cf. Chapter 5) but also with academic circles that have advised the collective in its campaigns and public engagements.[574] It would therefore be inaccurate to portray CMCLD's activism as operating in strict opposition to professional historiography. On the contrary, the organization actively collaborates with historians, frequently drawing on their expertise, research, and methodological tools. Historians are consulted for references, asked to review materials, and at times directly involved in the development of CMCLD's educational programmes. During my research, for example, CMCLD guide Baldé regularly reached out to me – seeking access to scholarly publications, requesting assistance with specific historical topics, refining texts for use in guided tours, and, most recently, providing translation and commentary during a tour in Ghent. Such interactions underscore the strategic and intellectual value CMCLD places on scholarly collaboration as part of its broader political and educational mission.

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[572] Author's Field Notes. Commémoration Patrice Lumumba (event organized by Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations at L'Horloge du Sud, 17 January 2020, Brussels).

[573] Kongolo, Antoine Tshitungu. 'Balises Pour Une Mémoire Historique Plurielle', 2008. https://www.cadtm.org/IMG/pdf/Texte_Antoine_Tshitungu_Kongolo.pdf.

[574] The CMCLD has at various moments collaborated with, among others, historians Amandine Lauro Benoit Henriet, Romain Landmeters, and also me.

Among white intellectual audiences and some leftist policymakers, CMCLD has over the years garnered substantial legitimacy. Its growing public visibility – especially between 2017 and 2020, when the debate on decolonization increasingly entered the mainstream public discourse – resulted in a surge in demand for the collective's members. It also positioned CMCLD as a key actor capable of achieving tangible political outcomes within a relatively short period. Through its strategic entanglement with political networks and memory administrations at multiple levels, CMCLD was instrumental in effecting symbolic changes to the urban landscape in cities such as Mons, Charleroi, and Liège, culminating in the official naming of Lumumba Square in Brussels.[575] These achievements amplified the collective's public profile and set precedents for other decolonial organizations across and beyond Brussels. The invocation of the 'devoir de mémoire' (cf. Chapter 5) and the format of guided historical tours as a pedagogical tool have since been adopted – and, in some instances, institutionalized – by other activist groups and local governments.

CMCLD's appeal to historical expertise not only serves to legitimize its narrative for the public but also plays a strategic role in the politics of its presentation vis-à-vis other activists. In interviews and conversations, both Njall and Baldé positioned CMCLD as the intellectual architect of decolonial guided tours in Belgium, emphasizing the organization's knowledge capital as a feature distinguishing it from similar initiatives within the African diasporas. Njall explicitly stated that in the development of CMCLD's political lobbying campaigns, the organization often had 'to convince' other diaspora collectives to join the effort.[576] Kalonji referred to other activists as having been 'educated by CMCLD' or having 'passed the CMCLD school', signalling both pride and an assertion of epistemic authority.[577] Baldé likewise pointed to a former CMCLD member as 'a product of the Collectif'.[578]

However, CMCLD's role has also drawn criticism from other actors in Brussels' activist landscape. Founding member Tsheusi Robert left, citing a lack of space for women's voices and a male-dominated internal culture as well as a disagreement with CMCLD's emphasis on 'symbolic questions'.[579] The organization's Pan-African orientation, with activists of Togolese, Guinean, and Cameroonian descent taking on public roles, also generated friction with activists who argued that only Congolese voices should speak on Congolese history and memory.[580]

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[575] Grégory Fobe and Daniel Barbieux, 'Première en Belgique: une rue Patrice Lumumba bientôt à Charleroi', RTBF, 28 May 2018, https://www.rtbf.be/article/premiere-en-belgique-une-rue-patrice-lumumba-bientot-a-charleroi-9929877; Ugo Petropoulos, 'Patrice Lumumba aura sa plaque commémorative à Mons', lavenir.net, 7 November 2017, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/mons-centre/mons/2017/11/07/patrice-lumumba-aura-sa-plaque-commemorative-a-mons-3H6DEJGMOVB5HCN7F4YTDMAGT4/.

[576] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

[577] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

[578] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

[579] Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge*, 14.

[580] This has occasionally led to conflicts on social media, including in June 2020, when Njall openly critiqued the composition of the Congo Commission's expert panel on the francophone radio broadcast RTBF and received online criticism for speaking on the matter as someone with Togolese roots.

François Makanga, at the time a guide for the AfricaMuseum, moreover questioned CMCLD's openness to white allies, a strategy that other collectives have viewed as compromising.[581] Linked to this, Kalonji himself acknowledged generational divides within anti-racist movements, noting that 'younger activists increasingly reject' the institutional advocacy and alignment 'advanced by older ones', preferring more direct or radical ways to 'voice their frustration'.[582] Others have critiqued CMCLD for being overly intellectual and detached from the lived experiences of marginalized communities without access to higher education (cf. Chapter 6), questioning CMCLD's legitimacy to speak for constituencies it may not fully represent.[583] These tensions have contributed to the proliferation of alternative decolonial guided tours in Brussels, developed independently of CMCLD during this research. In response, CMCLD has made efforts to address internal and external critiques, such as establishing a dedicated 'women's group' in its organization and doubling down on its commitment to Pan-African solidarity as a principle that transcends national or ethnic boundaries (cf. Chapter 3). These adaptations reflect the organization's responsiveness to both its influential position and the contested terrain of decolonial memory activism in Belgium.

4.3.2 Intergenerational Transmission and History Education for CMCLD Members

CMCLD's emphasis on historical knowledge and education is embedded in the very structure of the organization. From its inception, the collective has viewed historical literacy as a cornerstone of its activist work, with the belief that effective political action requires a grounded understanding of the past. As mentioned above, Kalonji, Njall, and Baldé cited the notion of intergenerational transmission as a foundational principle within CMCLD. According to Baldé, 'we often tend to think that we have to reinvent the world, that nothing was done before us – but that's not true. We are, of course, the heirs of the struggles and battles fought by our elders, and we must build on what they achieved. Otherwise, we risk wasting a lot of time'.[584] The organization has deliberately structured itself to ensure continuity between generations, creating different 'cells' to reflect the roles of older and younger members. As Baldé explains:

> The collective is made up of three main bodies. So you have the *comité de pilotage*, which is made up of the older activists. We have militants who've been working on issues of racism, decolonization, etc., for over thirty years. People who were part of guerrilla movements, people who were in the maquis [reference to underground political

[581] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.
[582] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.
[583] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[584] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

> resistance]. And so you have these people who are in charge of strategic matters, ideological questions, and training. Then there's the permanent secretariat, of which I am a part, which is mostly made up of younger members – young people trained by the elders – who are active on the ground, like in actions such as the public space, and engaging in public discussion. And there's also the training cell. It was established about a year or two ago, I think, to train people before they join the collective.[585]

While the *comité de pilotage* gathers the intellectuals and elders who laid the foundations for the collective's decolonial work – many of whom were instrumental in designing the early guided tours – and political campaigns, such as Essoh, Lodonou and Kalonji. In parallel, the *cellule d'éducation* or training cell consists primarily of younger members who are responsible for developing public-facing educational materials and leading campaigns. In recent years, and amid broader debates within Brussels' activist circles around gender equity, CMCLD created a dedicated women's cell to foreground Afrofeminist perspectives. As the training cell exemplifies, joining CMCLD requires more than ideological alignment – it demands a commitment to study and training. Prospective members must complete an educational programme on colonial history, Black intellectual traditions, and the history of Afrodescendant mobilizations in Belgium before 'they are able to concretely invest themselves in the struggle'.[586] As Kaninda pointed out to me during an informal talk, those who wish to become guides must undergo additional specialized instruction led by senior members of the *comité de pilotage*. The training process typically spans several months and concludes with an exam, earning CMCLD its abovementioned intellectual reputation in activist circles. Many of its younger members are university students at the francophone universities of Brussels and Louvain-la-Neuve. Together with CMCLD's Pan-African commitment, this dynamic has contributed to an organization whose membership is defined not by national origin but by historical knowledge, intellectual engagement, and political literacy. Founding member Kalonji reflected on this intergenerational transmission work with a sense of pride: 'Today, Collectif Mémoire is in the hands of the young. Yes, we [the elders] are almost forgotten. It's the young people who do everything. You saw the Lumumba Square, Geneviève, who spoke there, and so on. Already. And for us, it's beautiful – it's the dream, the dream'.[587]

4.3.3 History Education as a Tool for Political Transformation

4.3.3.1 Educating the (White) Masses

CMCLD's emphasis on education and training extends well beyond its core Afrodescendant constituencies. From its inception, the collective has consciously positioned itself as a public educator, addressing broader audiences – including white publics – as part of its commitment to decolonize society as a whole. To stimulate public historical awareness of colonialism,

[585] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
[586] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
[587] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.

memory education has become a cornerstone of CMCLD's activism. Through publications, educational programmes, and especially its decolonial guided tours, the collective seeks to popularize its critical reading of colonial history. For its founding members, decolonization cannot be achieved without engaging wider publics in a broader civic project of historical re-evaluation and societal transformation. Co-founder Essoh cites this growing outward-facing approach as part of the evolution away from the group's intellectual precursor, the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales. While previously doing work 'among militants', CMCLD now aimed at 'decolonizing society in general'. As he explains: 'We started to realize that we needed to speak to ordinary citizens, to so-called "everyday people"'.[588] Kalonji likewise stated that bringing knowledge to the public was the very reason behind CMCLD's establishment:

> It is only by bringing all of this [knowledge] out into the open that people will understand the true value of our struggle. We are not just talking about the past for the sake of bothering people – no, it is really about societal transformation. We have to understand. If we do not understand the past, we cannot build the future. (…) And that is why I say there is a terrible lack of knowledge out there, and we have to pass it on – to the museum guides, to others, really to everyone. (…) That is why we created the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale, etcetera. It was out of the need to transmit – but really, to transmit.[589]

CMCLD's orientation toward public education is rooted in the understanding that colonial propaganda, perpetuated through educational curricula, the media, and public monuments, not only distorts understandings of the colonial past but also shapes how racialized minorities are perceived and treated today. As Essoh articulates:

> To decolonize society, we first carried out an analysis which led us to understand that racism, rooted in colonization, has been reinforced through education, the media, and public space (…) We realized that street names, public spaces, and monuments play an enormous role in shaping the collective imagination (…) So it is actually a form of constant advertising [for colonialism].[590]

Similarly, CMCLD guide Baldé underscored the societal imprint of colonial narratives and the need for a conscious effort of historical unlearning:

> How can one say that a system of colonial propaganda that had an impact for decades didn't affect people? That people didn't internalize those things? So the work of deconstruction must happen… by acknowledging: 'Yes, I had internalized this, and here is how I'm deconstructing myself today'.[591]

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[588] CECONG, 'Agir: Des balades décoloniales'.
[589] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.
[590] CEC ONG, 'Agir: Des balades décoloniales'.
[591] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

As part of this mission, the collective has prioritized educational reform – particularly advocating for the inclusion of colonial history in secondary school curricula in francophone Belgium, a project long championed by former teacher and CMCLD co-founder Njall.

4.3.3.2 Doing Public Historians' Job

CMCLD activists tie the necessity of their work to the shortcomings of academic historians, who, despite advancing deeper understandings of colonial history, have often failed to translate these insights into accessible narratives for the broader public. As discussed in Chapter 1, despite a growing critical consensus among professional historians, public knowledge of Belgium's colonial history continues to be shaped either by silence or by long-standing nostalgic and apologetic narratives.[592] Already two decades ago, historian Geert Castryck suggested that historians failed not so much to properly investigate colonialism but largely to translate their insights into accessible public discourse to significantly influence public debate.[593] At times, CMCLD members have presented their work as an answer to this void left by historians. As co-founder and former coordinator Njall put it: 'If historians don't do the work, then we have to do it ourselves'.[594] He later acknowledged, much like Castryck, that indeed, 'scientific research on the subject exists, but in our view, it has not been popularized enough. It is not sufficiently used as a tool to deconstruct the prejudices'.[595] According to Baldé, the fact that colonial history is not taught properly in schools is the product of insufficient interaction between academic research and the broader public, positioning CMCLD's educational work as a bridge between historians and the public:

> In my view, we cannot blame teachers for not teaching this if it is not mandatory in their curriculum. Some already do it, in fact. So we also cannot say that nothing is being done. There are teachers who make the effort. But then there's the problem: the lack of connection between universities, academic research, and school curricula and textbooks – and that is something we have tried to address.[596]

In sum, this section has shown how CMCLD strategically mobilized historical knowledge, both as a means of legitimizing its anti-racism activism and as a tool for education and broader socio-political transformation. Through its appeal to academic rigour, an internal culture of education and historical literacy, and an outward-facing commitment to public education, CMCLD seeks to confront the lingering effects of colonial propaganda, and to cultivate a more critical and inclusive public narrative of the colonial past. By doing the work that professional historians left unfinished – the translation of their work for accessible, civic-oriented education – CMCLD positions itself as an authoritative and corrective memory agent in Belgium's postcolonial memoryscape.

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[592] Azabar et al., 'Dekolonisering, erkend maar onbeantwoord'.

[593] Castryck, 'Whose History Is History?', 72.

[594] Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.

[595] Bossé, 'L'histoire coloniale', 11.

[596] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

4.4 Decolonial Memorial Justice as the Recognition of Shared Historical Truth

This third and final section of the chapter explores how CMCLD's decolonial guided tours function as a central strategy for reclaiming public space and reshaping collective memory. I first briefly outline the origins and scope of the tours as tools of public education. Second, I examine how guides in the tours aim to dismantle colonial myths using 'historical facts' and academic references. Third, I analyse how CMCLD publicly conceives of the tours as the promotion of a shared, objective vision of historical truth as a basis for civic reconciliation and democratic engagement. Finally, I show how CMCLD's tours blend scholarly authority with emotional and ritual performance, revealing how intellectual, affective, and spiritual modes of engaging with the past can coexist and reinforce one another.

4.4.1 Decolonial Guided Tours

The ethos of transmission and history education underpins CMCLD's guided tours of colonial heritage sites in Brussels. Members Kaninda, Sampson, and Njall describe these tours as 'an essential operational tool' in the organization's broader effort to decolonize the public sphere.[597] In this respect, their activism aligns with the broader social movement of decolonial memory activists in Europe rewriting the 'stories the continent tells about itself' through the format of public guided tours.[598] Building on the foundational work of historians Catherine and Tshitungu Kongolo, CMCLD launched its first tour on 27 April 2013. Over the past decade, it has expanded this initiative, developing approximately twenty distinct tours across Belgium. Content-wise, the tours remain deeply anchored in Catherine's intellectual legacy, with his book *Promenade au Congo* still serving as an essential resource in the training of new guides. [599] As Baldé, now the lead guide, explained, Catherine's work remains 'a central source of inspiration' for how CMCLD frames and delivers its critical readings of the colonial past.[600] These tours are offered at regular intervals and promoted through the collective's mailing lists

[597] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations', 42.

[598] Ashifa Kassam, '"Hidden in Plain Sight": The European City Tours of Slavery and Colonialism', *Guardian*, 2 April 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/02/hidden-in-plain-sight-the-european-city-tours-of-slavery-and-colonialism.

[599] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

[600] Lucas Catherine, *Promenade au Congo. Petit guide anticolonial de Belgique* (Aden, 2010); Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024. Matthew Stanard, writing on colonial monuments and propaganda in Belgium has criticized Catherine's work, however, for being "explicitly anti-colonial, falling into the unhelpful good-bad dichotomous interpretation of hisory that has attracted so many". He adds that Catherine's work conflates all colonial monuments in the public sphere with Leopold II's propaganda project, while many traces of empire are "very small-scale, such as the colonial bric-a-brac for sale in various stores and markets". Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock*, 197.

and social media platforms. They can also be organized on demand for schools, civil society organizations, and institutions. University departments frequently book them for students, researchers, and international conference participants. Given that many of CMCLD's members are themselves students or affiliated with African student associations, the tours often attract a high number of university students of African descent.

4.4.2 Deconstructing Colonial Myth with Historical Facts

In alignment with the intellectual groundwork laid by their predecessors, CMCLD guides Njall and Baldé approach their public guided tours as a concrete example of what Tshitungu Kongolo described above as the 'non-ideological restoration of colonial memory'. Central to these tours is the concept of 'deconstruction'. As Essoh explains, 'the technique for constructing a guided tour is always the same': a two-step argumentative format in which the guide first presents the 'colonial myth' associated with a particular monument and then proceeds to deconstruct that myth.[601] As Baldé put it:

> When a statue is erected, it sends a political message to the public. The public space in Brussels, and in Belgium more broadly, is an apologia for colonization. What we want is to present a parallel message alongside these traces – one that deconstructs both the propaganda they carry and the actions of the figure they commemorate.[602]

Each tour's preparatory documents include a dedicated section titled 'points de déconstruction', highlighting key falsehoods or narratives that need to be 'subjected to the rigour of historical research'.[603] This deconstructive project derives its credibility from CMCLD's abovementioned insistence on grounding its critique in historical fact. The guides draw a sharp line between 'myth' and 'fact', challenging colonial propaganda not only on ethical grounds but also by exposing its inconsistency with historical evidence. To build this case, guide Baldé, for example, draws on established historiography and scholarly literature during his tours. Guides are familiar with the work of Belgian historians such as Ceuppens, Guy Vanthemsche, Benoît Henriet, and Amandine Lauro and cite their work. On two occasions, Baldé carried the 2020 volume *Congo Colonial*, edited by historians Lauro, Vanthemsche, and Idesbald Goddeeris with him during the tour – to show audiences that recent historiography no longer supports the colonial narratives promoted by some monuments and street names.[604] In gathering information for tours, Baldé also conducted research himself, consulting local

[601] CEC ONG, 'Agir: Des balades décoloniales'.
[602] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
[603] Kongolo, 'Balises pour une mémoire historique plurielle'.
[604] Amandine Lauro et al., *Le Congo Colonial: Une histoire en questions* (Renaissance du Livre, 2020); Author's Field Notes, Visite Guidée 'Parcours à l'éxtérieur du musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD) (1 November 2023, Tervuren); Author's Field Notes, Visite Guidée 'Parcours Gand' (event organized by CMCLD) (8 September 2024, Ghent).

museums and city archives and reaching out to professional historians for feedback or clarification.

To illustrate what this process of 'deconstruction' looks like during a tour, let us take the example of the narrative that colonialism was simply a product of a certain zeitgeist – a historical era in which colonial practices were considered normal and acceptable within the moral standards of the time. To this day, this view continues to be invoked as a way of downplaying or even legitimizing the violence, racism, and exploitation of the colonial era.[605] In this framing, anti-colonial discourse is often dismissed as inappropriate presentism or the imposition of today's moral standards on a past to which they supposedly do not apply. To 'deconstruct' this 'myth', some tours devote significant time to providing historical evidence of anti-colonial resistance during the colonial period itself, including within Belgian political circles. This historical 'evidence' is treated in an objective way, in that the historical source material is presented as reflecting a single, verifiable historical truth about colonialism – factual, unbiased, and conflicting with partisan narratives unable to rely on the historical record. For instance, during a tour, Baldé directly quoted from Belgian parliamentary debates in 1908.[606] In that context, as the Belgian state prepared to take over the Congo Free State from King Leopold II, prominent figures from both liberal and socialist parties voiced strong opposition to the annexation. Quoting directly from a 1908 parliamentary source here served to challenge the myth that colonialism was universally accepted at the time, invoking the quotes as objective proof – as concrete, historical facts that undermine the myth by showing that it is not supported by historical evidence. This example also shows that 'deconstruction' not only serves to dismantle persistent colonial myths but also at times to historicize coloniality itself – exposing it as the outcome of contingent, power-laden political processes rather than an inevitable historical reality, thus opening up a space for imagining alternative political futures.

4.4.3 An Objective Truth for Reconciliation

Building on the intellectual work that preceded it, the educational cell defines the mission of the tours as 'to contribute to an epistemological break in the treatment of colonial history and to bring about a paradigm shift in the way it is approached, starting from a decolonial perspective'.[607] While this acknowledges the existence of multiple historical perspectives, including a decolonial one, guides simultaneously invoke the notion of an objective 'historical truth' as the most legitimate way to publicly engage with the colonial past. As guide Baldé asserted, the aim of dismantling colonial myths through public history is ultimately to 'foster a version of the past that is closer to the

[605] Simona Lastrego et al., 'An Unfinished Chapter: The Impact of Belgian's Social Representations of Colonialism on Their Present-Day Attitudes Towards Congolese People Living in Belgium', *International Review of Social Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2023), 1–12.
[606] Author's Field Notes, Visite Guidée 'Parcours Gand' (event organized by CMCLD) (8 September 2024, Ghent).
[607] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, "Collectif Mémoire Colonoale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations. Nos Formations', n.d. https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/education/nos-formations.

truth'.[608] During a decolonial tour in Tervuren on 1 November 2018, he underscored this point: 'The demand to decolonize public space is, in reality, simply a call to tell the truth – and it's absurd that such a basic demand still fails to resonate'.[609] In that respect, the tours developed by CMCLD from the 2010s onward can be seen as a continuation of Pedro Monaville's observation that "memorial developments in the 2000s have presented themselves as the unfolding of truth against biased views of the past".[610]

This emphasis on historical truth as a cornerstone of decolonial memory work is important in the context of recurring criticisms, often heard on the right side of the political spectrum, that decolonizing public space equates to an 'erasure of history'.[611] CMCLD has consistently asserted that its efforts are not about removing history but about 'making history visible' – bringing to light a historical reality that was previously omitted or suppressed.[612] This logic extends to the broader treatment of colonial traces in public space. CMCLD has repeatedly been mischaracterized as a group seeking to remove colonial monuments altogether. In reality, some of its members argue for critical contextualization or artistic intervention, not necessarily removal. As Baldé explained:

> We are not in favour of removing statues or broadly erasing traces of colonization, or even the pride once attached to it. We simply want another message to be placed alongside those traces – a message that deconstructs what colonial propaganda once was.[613]

Some exceptions might apply – such as the statues of Leopold II – but in general, CMCLD's approach is to turn colonial monuments into tools for public awareness. In Njall's words about the AfricaMuseum:

> For me, or for the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale, we should not demolish the museum: it is a tool. The guided tours, especially the ones designed for students, are useful – on the condition that the guides and teachers are well trained.[614]

This commitment to historical education reflects, as explained above, CMCLD's broader public philosophy. Here, the notion of historical 'truth' takes on a dual meaning. On the one hand, it denotes an objective ideal rooted in historiographic evidence and source criticism; on the other, it carries a political recognition of multiple stories – linking historical education to the demand for recognition and equal belonging within the Belgian nation. As Njall explains, CMCLD 'introduced

608 Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
609 Author's Field Notes, Visite Guidée 'Parcours à l'extérieur du musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD) (1 November 2018).
610 Pedro Monaville, 'A Distinctive Ugliness: Colonial Memory in Belgium', in *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations: The Aftermath of Decolonization, 1945–2013*, ed. Dietmar Rothermund (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 72.
611 This criticism was for example raised during the proceedings of the parliamentary Congo Commission by commission members Tomas Roggeman (N-VA) and Nathalie Gilson (MR, Mouvement Réformateur, the francophone liberal party). Author's Field Notes, 'Special Parliamentary Hearing on Local Initiatives for Congo Commission', 21 February 2022, Brussels.
612 Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
613 Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.
614 Bossé, 'L'histoire coloniale'.

the decolonial perspective to raise the issue of citizenship here in Belgium'.[615] By asserting that 'colonial history is a Belgian affair', CMCLD aims to simultaneously claim a place for Afrodescendant communities in the national story and position white Belgians as 'implicated subjects' in that shared past.[616] In doing so, the tours appeal to a collective historical consciousness and reimagine public space as a site of democratic responsibility. As the collective stated during the inauguration of Lumumba Square:

> What happened to the Belgian political authorities, who once vilified Lumumba and his companions, to now agree to honour them by naming this square after him? What happened is that the descendants of those patriotic Congolese – Lumumba's sons and grandsons and those of his peers – are today fully-fledged Belgians, and the glorious history of the Congolese struggle for freedom has, in this context, become part of the history of the now multicultural Belgian people. It has become 'our history', for us Belgians born in Belgium, both native and Afrodescendant.[617]

Here, the construction of a shared historical story becomes linked to a shared political responsibility. On its website, CMCLD defines the memorial component of its broader anti-racist mission as the effort to construct 'a reconciled memory based on an objective history in which all citizens can see themselves'.[618] The collective understands the persistence of structural racism—whether in schools, the labour market, or housing—as tied to a collective failure to reckon with the colonial past. Hence the need to speak directly to citizens. As Essoh put it during a public debate in Brussels in 2019:

> These different issues [racism in education, racism on the job market] – that's why it's so important for the collective to speak to citizens. Because we still live in a relative democracy where, in the absence of better options, citizens still have the power to influence policy. Politicians will always try to distance themselves or avoid responsibility, but in a democracy, the citizen still holds that power. And we – the collective – believe that is part of the solution.[619]

The role of the citizen as both a recipient of history and an agent of democratic change is thus central to CMCLD's vision. For them, decolonial history is not about historical truth for its own sake – it is a means of fostering civic engagement, accountability, and shared responsibility. In this sense, CMCLD's memory activism aligns with what Kate Temoney and Berber Bevernage have

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615 Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019.

616 Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019; Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.

617 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations, 'Discours des associations en hommage à Lumumba, Okito et Mpolo'. CADTM, 14 August 2018. https://www.cadtm.org/Discours-des-associations-en-hommage-a-Lumumba-Okito-et-Mpolo.

618 Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations, 'Collectif Mémoire Colonoale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations. Nos Objectifs', n.d. https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/a-propos/nos-objectifs.

619 Author's Field Notes, 'Conférence: Décolonisation de l'Espace Public Belge' (event organized by MRAX and CMCLD), 4 May 2019, Brussels.

described as the 'cognitive recovery of truth' model for justice, which 'relies upon the efficacy of objective historical knowledge and the indispensability of a single and shared reality'.[620] By advancing an academically grounded and politically mobilizing 'shared' version of historical truth, CMCLD seeks to unite diverse audiences – Afrodescendants and white Belgians alike – around a reconciled, democratic memory, claiming, as Njall stated in front of an audience of scholars, activists, and AfricaMuseum staff, that CMCLD's approach is 'universalist, and rejects all forms of communitarianism'. [621]

At the same time, this emphasis on reconciliation and shared history diverges from other forms of decolonial memory activism in Belgium, which argue that justice lies not necessarily in constructing consensus but in recognizing irreconcilable differences – fundamentally divergent experiences and truths. For such actors, communitarianism may be a more emancipatory framework than (performative) universalism. As explored in Chapter 7, this debate speaks to broader questions about how historical injustice is remembered, politicized, and repaired.

4.4.4 Coexisting Relations to the Past

CMCLD's activities mobilize an academic register of 'facts' and 'truth', illustrating that different relationships to the past – emotional, spiritual, intellectual – can coexist and complement one another. The external critique that CMCLD's academically grounded tours leave little room for affect does not apply uniformly. On the contrary, guides often convey sorrow, pride, and resilience alongside factual exposition, expressing both the pain of colonial injustice and the dignity of anti-colonial resistance. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the tour developed in the park surrounding the RMCA in Tervuren.

This particular tour has, for many years, been paired with a commemorative ceremony honouring the seven Congolese individuals who died after being forcibly exhibited in the 1897 world's fair (Brussels International Exposition) – Mama Sambo, Mama Ngemba, Mama Mpemba, Papa Ekia, Papa Zwao, Papa Kitukwa, and Papa Mibanga.[622] Their graves, located just behind Tervuren's church and in proximity to the RMCA, have become the site of a variety of invented traditions and commemorative practices for different actors in the African diasporas. Mama Sambo, Mama Ngemba, Mama Mpemba, Papa Ekia, Papa Zwao, Papa Kitukwa, and Papa Mibanga are remembered not only as victims but as *ancêtres* (ancestors) whose lives continue to play a role in the present, with the use of familial titles such as 'mama' and 'papa' underscoring a sense of kinship and reverence. During these commemorative moments, the affective dimension becomes central. One member, Tony 'Sam' Sampson,

[620] Berber Bevernage and Kate Temoney, 'Historical Understanding and Reconciliation after Violent Conflict', in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 227.
[621] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence', 11.
[622] Pascal Blanchard and Maarten Couttenier, 'Les Zoos Humains', *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 32, no. 1 (2017): 109–15.

temporarily assumes the role of guide and leads a ritual that, as CMCLD claims, draws from Congolese tradition, involving the offering of palm wine. He explains to the audience that 'in many African cosmologies, the dead are not gone – they remain present among the living, accessible for counsel and spiritual guidance'.[623] Walking among the seven graves, Sampson greets each grave in Lingala, pours libations, and speaks directly to 'the ancestors', asking for 'wisdom to guide the ongoing struggles against racism and colonial legacies'.[624] He reassures them that 'their struggle continues'. Through this ritual, the boundaries between past and present blur, as the pain and dignity of the past are woven into the identity and political action of today's Afrodescendant activists. This ceremonial practice, said to be rooted in the work of CMCLD's senior members (*les ainé·e·s*), is a vivid expression of intergenerational transmission.[625] The younger generation, while carrying forward the collective's intellectual mission, also preserves and renews these spiritual traditions. In doing so, it embeds the organization's work within a larger genealogy of resistance and remembrance.

Such publicly performed affective relationships with the past surface in other tours as well. Key historical figures such as Patrice Lumumba and Paul Panda Farnana are frequently referred to not just as icons but as 'fathers', 'brothers', and 'ancestors'.[626] Similar language is used for Congolese soldiers commemorated during the Schaerbeek tour and even for human remains, such as Lumumba's tooth or the dozens of Congolese skulls held in Belgian scientific institutions – referred to as 'fathers' rather than 'objects' or 'remains'.[627] This vocabulary articulates a connection to the past that is more embodied than academic, affirming not only historical continuity but also familial solidarity across generations.

Private conversations with CMCLD members, both younger and older, often reveal the personal and emotional roots of their engagement. Lodonou, Kalonji, and Baldé trace their activism to the intergenerational trauma of colonialism and migration and to racism encountered in Belgium's schools, housing markets, and job sectors.[628] Yet, CMCLD typically does not foreground these personal narratives in its public-facing discourse. Instead, it performs a more distanced, scholarly posture, emphasizing academic credibility and historical rigour. In short, CMCLD's engagement with the past operates in multiple registers: emotional,

[623] Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Extérieur Musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD), 1 November 2023, Tervuren.
[624] Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Extérieur Musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD), 1 November 2023, Tervuren.
[625] Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Extérieur Musée de Tervuren' (event organized by CMCLD), 1 November 2023, Tervuren.
[626] Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Matonge' (event organized by CMCLD), 20 August 2017, Ixelles. Author's Field Notes, 'Visite Guidée: Parcours Grand-Place' (event organized by CMCLD), 1 November 2018, Brussels. (in both tours, Kalvin Soiresse Njall was the guide).
[627] On this language, see also Zian et al., 'L'odyssée de Lumumba'.
[628] Yves Kodjo Lodonou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 23 November 2023; Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.; Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

ritualistic, intellectual, and political. While it publicly foregrounds historical expertise, it does not exclude other forms of relations to the past. Rather, it strategically mobilizes them in ways that reinforce one another. The emphasis on objectivity and expertise functions as a claim to legitimacy – particularly in a landscape where Afrodescendant voices have been excluded from shaping national memory on the premises of not having the proper epistemic authority.

4.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined how the CMCLD articulated its decolonial memory activism in a cognitive-academic register centred on historical expertise, particularly through the medium of guided decolonial tours. Drawing from its intellectual origins, CMCLD developed an intergenerational practice of alternative knowledge production that responds to, and seeks to dismantle, hegemonic and nostalgic representations of the Belgian colonial past in the public sphere. Since around 2010, historiography has become not only a methodological tool but the principal memory device through which CMCLD activists assert political claims and profile themselves.

First, I illustrated how historical education lies at the core of CMCLD's mission and structure. The principle of intergenerational transmission – enshrined through a committee of elders that trains and examines prospective members – positions historical literacy and political consciousness as prerequisites for participation in the collective. This internal infrastructure reinforces the group's broader objective of transforming public understandings of colonial history into a shared civic responsibility.

Second, I analysed how CMCLD's guided tours mobilize a fact-oriented and historiographically informed mode of remembrance. In these tours, historical truth becomes both an object and a method of critique. Tour guides consistently distinguish between colonial myths and verified historical facts, frequently referencing scholarly sources and drawing on historical detail to 'disprove' apologetic or revisionist public narratives. At the same time, the tours highlight the contingency and contestation inherent to history and history-writing, emphasizing past resistance to colonialism and the enduring relevance of those struggles today. In this dual use of historical truth – as both a deconstruction tool to politicize dominant narratives and an objective standard to ground counter-memory in academic credibility – CMCLD navigates the tension between history and memory as not a binary but a productive interplay. In fact, CMCLD's activism effectively blurs the lines between history and memory: history is not confined to professional scholarship, nor is memory limited to affective or embodied experience. Instead, memory is mediated through historiographic practice, and history is mobilized as a political act. Ultimately, this chapter has shown that CMCLD's strategic embrace of historical expertise functions as a means of shaping public discourse and a source of political

legitimacy. The next chapter will examine how CMCLD's cognitive-academic register has been linked to the notion of 'devoir de mémoire' to lobby political institutions and municipal administrations in Brussels, both enabling and constraining the mobilization of memory for racial justice.

Chapter 5 Appropriation and Contestation of the Duty to Remember: Memory Activists and Local Governments in the Struggle for Lumumba Square

5.1 Introduction

How do decolonial memory activists engage with political institutions and local governments? And how do policy discourses around remembrance shape and constrain the articulation of decolonial memory claims? Some scholars have conceptualized memory activism as a practice that seeks to 'achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels', positioning state-sponsored narratives as top-down and oppositional to grassroots counter-memory 'from below'.[629] This chapter challenges these assumptions through an in-depth case study of the campaign to establish Lumumba Square in Brussels. It does so in three steps.

First, I show how decolonial memory activists involved in this campaign – particularly those affiliated with the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations (CMCLD)

[629] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9; Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Challenging the Meaning of the Past', 1-3.

– became deeply entangled with local governments over time, rather than operating in strict opposition to them. These activists' campaign strategy included political lobbying and the strategic use of personal political networks. Activists moreover often had overlapping roles as activists, policymakers, and cultural intermediaries, posing questions for memory activism scholars as to their definition of the figure of the 'activist'.

Second, I examine how activists mobilized the policy framework of moral remembrance and its language of the 'duty to remember' to legitimize their claims. Indebted to Holocaust remembrance, 'moral remembrance' refers to a globally dominant model of public memory that links recognition and commemoration of historical injustice to civic values such as reconciliation, inclusive citizenship, and human rights.[630] Building on Chapter 4's discussion of CMCLD's stated mission to construct 'a reconciled memory based on an objective history in which all citizens can find themselves',[631] I show how some CMCLD activists framed the demand for Lumumba Square as a universalist project of shared history and civic inclusion, resisting portrayals of Lumumba Square as a particularistic or divisive demand.

Third, I explore how the activists in this chapter simultaneously appropriated and critiqued the discourse of moral remembrance. While invoking the 'duty to remember' as a discursive resource helped them gain visibility and institutional traction, they also condemned the selective application of this duty – especially Belgium's willingness to memorialize the Holocaust while continuing to overlook its colonial past. Moreover, I contrast CMCLD's reconciliatory framing of decolonial memory work with other decolonial activisms in Belgium, in which some activists later expressed disillusionment with state-led memory initiatives that failed to translate into meaningful anti-racist policies beyond 'symbolic' gestures. These tensions expose both the possibilities and the limits of the strategic use of hegemonic memory frameworks.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that it would be too limiting to conceive of the campaign for Lumumba Square as a case of grassroots memory being mobilized in opposition to 'the state'. The campaign entailed a complex and continuous negotiation process among activist groups and institutional actors, in which a variety of ideas about memory's role in the broader quest for racial justice and postcolonial belonging both conflicted and converged. By tracing these dynamics, the chapter offers a more nuanced understanding of how memory activism, at least in this case, operates not merely in opposition to the state but through dynamic and ambiguous entanglements with it.

[630] David, *Past Can't Heal Us*, 41.

[631] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Nos Objectifs.'

5.2 Decolonial Memory Activists and 'Administrations of Memory'

In this section, I detail the political history of the Lumumba Square campaign to show how this campaign illustrates a form of decolonial memory activism that strategically engages with political institutions rather than rejecting them. To advance their claims, activists deliberately cultivated relationships with local governments and political actors, leveraging lobbying, personal networks, and institutional access. I show, first, how these ties were considered central to the campaign's momentum. Activists themselves emphasized that the personal relationships they developed with policymakers were essential to pushing their demands forward. In their view, the campaign's success relied not only on broader political opportunity structures but also on long-standing interpersonal connections with political figures, which enabled them to enter institutional spaces and co-shape memory policy from within. This blurs the conventional boundary between activism and institutional politics. Finally, I argue that this 'generative relationship' between activists and local governments invites a broader reflection on how the literature understands the figure of the 'activist' – suggesting a more nuanced account of memory activism that moves beyond the binary of resistance versus co-optation to illuminate activists' agency to productively combine the various roles of activist, politician, and policymaker.[632]

5.2.1 From the Streets to Ixelles' Municipal Council: The Lumumba Square Demand in 2013

The proposal to name a square behind the Saint Boniface church in Ixelles after Patrice Lumumba first entered the municipal council of Ixelles in 2013. In that year, activists significantly intensified public pressure. On 17 January 2013, CMCLD organized its first 'Lumumba Day' – a commemorative event that marked the beginning of a new wave of public mobilizations around Lumumba's legacy (cf. Chapter 3). In the wake of these actions, Flemish socialist Maïté Morren, then (the only Dutch-speaking) alderwoman in Ixelles, publicly voiced her support for the proposal in July 2013.[633] Her endorsement sparked a heated debate in the municipal council, revealing divisions between the francophone socialist party Parti Socialiste

[632] McQuaid and Gensburger, 'Administration', 142.

[633] In her words: 'I think it's a beautiful initiative. (…) It's important to have a tribute to an icon like Lumumba, especially in an international city like Brussels, and given Belgium's colonial past. I've already presented it to the municipal executive, and I haven't heard any negative reactions so far. Of course, it may still take some time to go through the administrative procedures, but it's an important signal'. See 'Krijgt Elsene een Lumumbaplein?', *BRUZZ*, 31 July 2013, https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/krijgt-elsene-een-lumumbaplein-2013-07-31.

(PS) and the francophone liberal party Mouvement Réformateur (MR).[634] Morren's position also demonstrates that by 2013, activists were not only exerting external pressure on local authorities but also beginning to influence decision-making from within. Crucial to this development were the personal relationships between activist networks and local governments, and the political careers of activists themselves.

During the 2013 negotiations in Ixelles, Ken Ndiaye played a pivotal role. As briefly noted in the previous chapter, Ndiaye – alongside Suzanne Monkasa – was one of the founding members of the Conseil des Communautés Africaines en Europe et en Belgique (CCAEB), a Pan-African federation established in the 1990s to unite Afrodescendants and advocate for their rights (cf. Chapter 1). He is also the founder of L'Horloge du Sud, a restaurant on Rue du Trône in Ixelles that has been central to political and social mobilization in the Matonge neighbourhood since 1996. Conceived as a 'convivial space for diverse publics', L'Horloge du Sud functions not only as an African restaurant but also as a meeting place.[635] The intellectual gatherings of the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales and the development of the first decolonial tours in Matonge discussed in the previous chapter took place in the upstairs meeting room, which still hosts debates organized by various collectives.[636] The restaurant has been a vital hub for Afrodescendant grassroots actors and, crucially, for the intellectual networks that gave rise to CMCLD (cf. Chapter 4). Ndiaye remains a respected member of CMCLD's *comité de pilotage* to this day and has also developed a political career.

On 19 September 2013, Ndiaye was sworn in as a municipal councillor in Ixelles for the francophone Green Party Ecolo.[637] His presence on the municipal council made it possible to connect activist demands with formal political processes, and created an opportunity for intervention as discussions about Lumumba Square began to unfold in the council. Indeed, during Ndiaye's very first council meeting, the issue of Lumumba Square appeared on the agenda when Assita Kanko, an MR councillor, raised questions about Morren's public endorsement in the media.[638] Kanko opposed the idea of naming a square after Lumumba, arguing that Matonge already acknowledged its Congolese presence and warning it could provoke 'violence' and 'insecurity'.[639] Her remarks echoed racialized stereotypes and framed Afrodescendant communities as a threat, reinforcing existing stigmas around Matonge at the time.[640] Although Ixelles' mayor Willy Decourty (PS) countered her claims and clarified that no

[634] Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba?: De Belgische (Post)Koloniale Herinnering in de Publieke Ruimte', *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis* 129, no. 3 (2016), 367.
[635] As explained by Ndiaye himself during an interview, see First Waves, 'Ken Ndiaye', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.firstwaves.be/en/nodes/people/ken-ndiaye/?items=1143,1145.
[636] Njall's public talk during Lumumba Day 2023. Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.
[637] Ixelles, 'Compte rendu sténographique. Séance du conseil communal du 19 Septembre 2013', 19 September 2013, https://www.ixelles.be/uploads/conseil/steno/74.pdf.
[638] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 19 Septembre 2013', 63.
[639] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 19 Septembre 2013', 63.
[640] See Chapter 2 of this dissertation but also, for example, Demart, 'Émeutes à Matonge'

formal request for a Lumumba Square had been made, Kanko's comments highlighted the depth of political opposition activists faced.[641] For campaigners, her intervention underscored the broader societal denial of Afrodescendant presence and the urgent need for public recognition. Lumumba Square thus became a symbolic but also concrete demand for citizenship and visibility in public space (cf. Chapter 4). Following Kanko's intervention, the recent appointment of Ndiaye to the Ixelles municipal council enabled his formal submission of a motion in support of Lumumba Square. He did so in collaboration with Julie De Groote, a representative of the francophone Christian Democratic Party CdH.[642] To this day, former CMCLD coordinator Kalvin Soiresse Njall and CMCLD guide Aliou Baldé emphasize that Ndiaye's presence – 'one of us' – in the political heart of Ixelles was instrumental in advancing the Lumumba Square campaign.[643]

5.2.2 Political 'Friendships' as an Activist Resource

De Groote's support and collaboration with Ndiaye in preparing the motion for Lumumba Square also demonstrates that activists strategically built and mobilized relationships with political authorities. While De Groote was not as closely aligned with CMCLD as Ndiaye, decolonial activist networks had developed sustained ties with her over the years and had used her political roles to support several of their initiatives. As a member of the opposition in Ixelles, she consistently advocated for the creation of the square alongside Ndiaye. Beyond the local level, De Groote played a role as president and member of the French-speaking Brussels Parliament (Commission Communautaire Française - COCOF) in later years. She facilitated a citizen's interpellation on 8 October 2015 under the banner of Les Jeudis de l'Hémicycle ('Thursdays in the hemicycle'), focused on the question, 'Quand la Belgique va-t-elle faire face à son passé colonial?' (When will Belgium confront its colonial past?)[644] The session had been initiated by members of the Ecolo, most notably Zoé Genot, who later, together with Eva Brems, proposed a resolution on the 'duty to remember of the Belgian State regarding its colonial past in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi' in

[641] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 19 Septembre 2013', 63.

[642] The full text of the motion can be found here: Ken Ndiaye and Julie De Groote, 'Article 825. Motion pour une Place Lumumba à Ixelles', 24 October 2013, https://www.dumortier.eu/associations/spipview.php?action=view&objet=article&id=825.

[643] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019; Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

[644] 'Les Jeudis de l'Hémicycle', which can be translated as 'Thursdays in the Hemicycle' or 'Parliamentary Thursdays', have been a feature of COCOF since 2011. Conceived as a tool of participatory democracy, it offers citizens the opportunity to present specific issues to members of parliament, supported by input from experts and relevant stakeholders. For a full overview of all interpellations held within this framework, see Parlement Francophone Bruxellois, 'La brochure des Jeudis de L'Hémicycle 2011–2019', ed. B. Vanleemputten, March 2019, https://www.parlementfrancophone.brussels/activites/evenements/actions-citoyennes/annexes_ac/la-brochure-des-jeudis-de-lhemicycle-2011-2019. To consult the programme of the session on 8 October 2015, see page 76.

Belgium's federal parliament in 2014.[645] The event brought together civil society organizations – such as Observatoire Ba Ya Ya, the newly founded Change ASBL, and CMCLD – and academic experts, including sociologist Sarah Demart, to examine the state of colonial memory policy in Belgium.[646] De Groote continued to support similar initiatives in her role, facilitating more Jeudis de l'Hémicycle sessions on the forced displacement of métis children in 2016, which spotlighted the advocacy work of Métis de Belgique, and on the restitution of African objects in 2018, offering a platform to the BAMKO-CRAN association.[647]

While activists often maintain a publicly critical stance toward institutional politics, many have emphasized the strategic importance of cultivating and sustaining relationships with political institutions, particularly through personal connections with elected officials. Baldé, for example, argued that 'building contacts with politicians' is essential to CMCLD's mission to 'decolonize the public sphere', since it is through 'motions and resolutions' that concrete progress can be made.[648] Similarly, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert highlighted the importance of nurturing 'friendships' with political figures, asserting that 'we get more done through friendships than through professional relationships'. [649] This fluidity is further underscored by activists referring to certain politicians – such as Genot – not merely as institutional allies but as fellow activists.[650] The interchangeable use of terms like 'activist' (*militant*) and 'politician' in such contexts demonstrates the ambiguity of these categories, as individuals frequently combine these roles and self-identifications, depending on the political moment and strategic necessity.

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[645] This work was instrumental as a precursor to the resolution that, in 2020, enabled the creation of the parliamentary Congo Commission (cf. Chapter 6 of this thesis). This 2014 resolution was the draft for a similar resolution by Green Party deputies Benoit Hellings, Wouter De Vriendt, and Dirk Van der Maelen in 2017. This resolution subsequently formed the basis for the 2020 one that was eventually adopted. Chambre des Représentants de Belgique. 'DOC 53 3570/001. Proposition de résolution concernant le devoir de mémoire de l'Etat belge à l'égard de son passé colonial au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi (déposée par Mmes Zoé Genot et Eva Brems)', 23 April 2014, https://www.lachambre.be/flwb/pdf/53/3570/53K3570001.pdf.; Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 54 2307/001. Proposition de Résolution Concernant Le Travail de Mémoire à Mener En Vue de l'établissement Des Faits Afin de Permettre La Reconnaissance de l'implication Des Diverses Institutions Belges Dans La Colonisation Du Congo, Du Rwanda et Du Burundi (Déposée Par MM. Benoit Hellings, Wouter De Vriendt et Dirk Van Der Maelen)', 14 February 2017, https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/54/2307/54K2307001.pdf. Green party deputees drafted these resolutions in consultation with CMCLD, and CMCLD formely openly endorsed their initiatives. See: Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations, 'Soutien à la proposition de résolution pour un travail sur la mémoire coloniale', 30 October 2016, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/actualites/soutien-a-la-proposition-de-resolution-pour-un-travail-sur-la-memoire-coloniale.

[646] 'Les parlementaires bruxellois face au passé colonial', *La Libre*, 6 June 2015, https://www.lalibre.be/regions/bruxelles/2015/10/06/les-parlementaires-bruxellois-face-au-passe-colonial-YAKU3KK4A5HUNED4CQVWG5KQH4/.

[647] Parlement Francophone Bruxellois, 'La brochure des Jeudis de L'Hémicycle'. For the session on the métis-question, see page 88. For the session on restitution, see page 136. I also attended the session on restitition in the context of this research, see: Author's Field Notes, 'Restitution des Biens Culturels Africains: Question Morale ou Juridique?' (event organized by BAMKO and COCOF), 16 October 2018, Brussels.

[648] Aliou Baldé, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, audio, 15 March 2019.

[649] Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 30 June 2019.

[650] See for example this piece on Zoé Genot, with the running head 'Portrait of an Activist': Arnaud Lismond-Mertens, 'Zoé Genot: "Ne Lâchez Rien!"', *Ensemble* 112 (2023/2024): 63–85, https://www.ensemble.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Ensemble_112-militant_063.pdf.

5.2.3 Unexpected Allies in the Municipalities of Mons, Charleroi, and Brussels

The importance of personal relationships between politicians and activists becomes even clearer when considering the continuation of the campaign for Lumumba Square. As previously mentioned, following Kanko's intervention in Ixelles' municipal council, Ndiaye and De Groote submitted a formal motion to name the square behind the Saint Boniface church after Patrice Lumumba. This was accompanied by a citizen interpellation on 24 October 2013, during which activists, through the figure of Gia Abrassart, stressed the square's significance for not only Afrodescendant communities but also Belgian democracy more broadly.[651] Despite these efforts, the municipal council ultimately rejected the request. Opponents of the motion argued that Lumumba was too divisive of a figure and lacked the 'consensus' deemed necessary for public commemoration. Instead, some council members suggested alternative figures, such as Nelson Mandela, whom they described as 'a figure who today provokes no controversy and around whom everyone can rally in recognition of his image, his role, and the values he promoted'.[652]

After this rejection and the absence of a meaningful political response to activist commemorative interventions, such as the 2015 re-enactment of Lumumba's speech (cf. Chapter 3), activists adopted the 'deliberative strategy to create pressure on Ixelles by securing victories elsewhere', turning to other municipalities across Belgium first.[653] The first success occurred in the Walloon city of Mons in 2018.[654] When Baldé later recounted the story of that victory to me, he again cited personal relationships with local councillors as central to the success.[655] In this case, the political ally appeared to be a highly unlikely one. On 12 September 2017, Georges-Louis Bouchez (MR), now president of the French-speaking liberal party, submitted a motion to install a commemorative plaque for Lumumba, arguing that 'Belgium

[651] Ixelles, 'Compte rendu sténographique. Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 24 October 2013, https://www.ixelles.be/uploads/conseil/steno/75.pdf, 8–12.
[652] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 38.
[653] About this re-enactment, see Julien Rensonnet, 'Lumumba (presque) en chair et en os à Ixelles', *L'Avenir*, 30 June 2015, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/2015/06/30/lumumba-presque-en-chair-et-en-os-a-ixelles-APAKW57SY5AFDPCON2RMZHYFSQ/. Njall openly described this strategy in his talk on Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.
[654] Ugo Petropoulos, 'Patrice Lumumba aura sa plaque commémorative à Mons', *l'Avenir*, 7 November 2017, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/mons-centre/mons/2017/11/07/patrice-lumumba-aura-sa-plaque-commemorative-a-mons-3H6DEJGMOVB5HCN7F4YTDMAGT4/.
[655] Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.

must take responsibility for its history, in both its good and its bad moments'.[656] This move came as a surprise to many, given MR's well-known overall resistance to policy initiatives critically addressing Belgium's colonial past – a stance some activists, including François Makanga and Christian Lukenge, attribute to the party's supposed alignment with the financial interests of elite Belgian families historically involved in colonial ventures.[657] The political opposition to Lumumba Square in Ixelles had primarily come from the MR, with Kanko being a member of the party. Between 2016 and 2018, while the MR was part of the Ixelles majority under MR mayor Dominique Dufourny, the party continued to consistently oppose Lumumba Square.[658] Given this context, Bouchez's initiative in Mons appears rather odd.

Speaking with a sense of pride at having outsmarted the MR, Baldé explained how Bouchez maintained 'a long-standing friendship' with Njall, then president of CMCLD, and how the two had studied law together at the Université de Saint-Louis in Brussels.[659] Njall himself clarified that they had both led student organizations – he as president of the African student association Kilimanjaro and Bouchez as head of the liberal student association – and how they organized political debates together from time to time.[660] According to Baldé, this personal connection enabled the CMCLD–Intal Congo–Change coalition to secure Bouchez's support, who was then part of the opposition in Mons and 'saw an opportunity to pressure the local majority led by Elio Di Rupo (PS)'.[661] On the day Bouchez presented the motion in the council, activists from Change, CMCLD, and Intal Congo staged a demonstration at the statue of Leopold II on Rue des Fossés in the city, holding photos of victims of colonialism and declaring: 'We are here to remind everyone of the deaths caused by the colonial process, and we will then, in a peaceful manner, proceed to the Mons City Council to support the motion'.[662] While media coverage suggested the activists were simply supporting Bouchez's initiative,

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[656] Mons, 'Proces-verbal du conseil communal de la ville de Mons du 12 Septembre 2017', 12 September 2017, https://www.mons.be/fr/ma-commune/vie-politique/conseil-communal/ordres-du-jour-et-proces-verbaux/archives-proces-verbaux/fichiers-archives-1/fichiers-archives-2017/archives-2017/pv-12-septembre-2017.pdf, 81.

[657] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019; multiple conversations with Christian Lukenge between January 2019 and July 2020, Brussels. At the national level, the MR was one of the most obstructive parties during the 2020–2022 parliamentary Congo Commission, opposing even the minimal demand for an official apology from the Belgian state for its colonial past. Upon the commission's conclusion, MR rapporteur Benoît Piedboeuf – alongside his N-VA counterpart – objected to the public release of the final report. See Belga, 'Passé colonial: le rapport de la commission parlementaire ne sera pas publié - RTBF Actus', *RTBF*, 26 January 2024, https://www.rtbf.be/article/passe-colonial-le-rapport-de-la-commission-parlementaire-ne-sera-pas-publie-11318410.

[658] BRUZZ, 'Dufourny: "Il n'y aura pas de place Lumumba. Point à la ligne"', 6 December 2017, https://www.bruzz.be/fr/samenleving/dufourny-il-ny-aura-pas-de-place-lumumba-point-la-ligne-2017-12-06.

[659] Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.

[660] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 13 November 2019.

[661] Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.

[662] Belga, 'Les mouvements décoloniaux soutiendront une motion pour une plaque commémorative à Mons', *l'Avenir*, 8 September 2017, https://www.lavenir.net/regions/mons-centre/mons/2017/09/08/les-mouvements-decoloniaux-soutiendront-une-motion-pour-une-plaque-commemorative-a-mons-TQYJRVPJZFBTRJLXOGLQ6OWV2A/.

Baldé suggested that it was their behind-the-scenes lobbying that had made the motion, and its eventual adoption, possible in the first place.[663] In this respect, in 2023 Njall recalled the victory in Mons as an example of how CMCLD 'turned the power of its opponent [MR] against itself'.[664]

Regardless of how we should interpret Bouchez's motivations or activist recollections of his role, the victory in Mons in September 2017 gave new momentum to the Lumumba Square campaign. Two months later, in December 2017, the Walloon city of Charleroi followed suit, with the governing coalition of the PS, MR, and CdH under Mayor Paul Magnette (PS) deciding to rename a street after Lumumba.[665] Eventually the Ixelles majority, still resistant to renaming the original square, agreed to form a 'special committee' to explore the installation of a commemorative plaque on the municipal border with the city of Brussels.[666] Shortly after, on 22 January 2018, Ecolo councillor Zoubida Jellab formally submitted a question to Brussels mayor Philippe Close (PS), urging the city to assume responsibility for its colonial past and establish a proper memorial policy.[667] In response, Close proposed installing a commemorative plaque for Lumumba – mirroring decisions taken in Mons and Ixelles.[668] With the situation in Ixelles still stalled, activists redirected their efforts from Ixelles to Brussels. Once again, political figures with ties to the activist network played a vital role, with Lydia Mutyebele, a PS councillor in Brussels at the time, serving as an intermediary between the associations and the mayor's office. On 8 February 2018, the city of Brussels, governed by a PS–MR majority, officially decided to rename a public space in honour of Patrice Lumumba, with the inauguration scheduled for 30 June of that same year (cf. Chapter 3).[669]

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[663] Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.

[664] Njall's public talk during Lumumba Day 2023. Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.

[665] Fobe and Barbieux, 'Première en Belgique'.

[666] BRUZZ, 'Une plaque commémorative pour Lumumba à Ixelles ?', 7 December 2017, https://www.bruzz.be/fr/samenleving/une-plaque-commemorative-pour-lumumba-ixelles-2017-12-07. The CMCLD–Intal Congo–Change coalition responded positively to the municipalities' proposal to install a 'commemorative plaque', yet insisted that its original demand for a Lumumba Square remained 'intact'. See their official statement: Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations, 'Bientôt une plaque commémorative en région bruxelloise en l'honneur de Lumumba: un premier pas sur la longue route pour une place Lumumba.', 26 October 2017, https://www.memoirecoloniale.be/communiques/bientot-une-plaque-commemorative-en-region-bruxelloise-en-lhonneur-de-lumumba-un-premier-pas-sur-la-longue-route-pour-une-place-lumumba.

[667] Bruxelles, 'Compte rendu. Conseil communal de Bruxelles. Séance publique du lundi 22 janvier 2018', 22 January 2018, https://www.bruxelles.be/sites/default/files/2.-_Compte_rendu_-_Conseil_communal_22_janvier_2018.pdf, 40–41.

[668] Bruxelles, 'Séance publique du lundi 22 janvier 2018', 42.

[669] Bruxelles, 'Compte Rendu. Conseil Communal de Bruxelles. Séance publique du lundi 22 janvier 2018', 13.

5.2.4 'Stay Vigilant': Navigating Local Governments Between Resistance and Co-optation

In shifting their demand for Lumumba Square from the municipality of Ixelles to the city of Brussels, activists said they strategically capitalized on the momentum of the upcoming 2018 local elections, intensifying the political rivalry between the PS and MR parties.[670] However, CMCLD's approach – marked by close engagement with local governments and active participation in institutional processes – does not necessarily signal trust in those institutions as arbiters of racial justice. On the contrary, mayor Close's outspoken support for the square in the run-up to the elections was met with suspicion by some activists, who had long advocated for the project without receiving any institutional support.[671] For them, Close's sudden enthusiasm appeared more opportunistic than principled.[672] Moreover, the shift from Ixelles – where Matonge is located – to Brussels came at a symbolic cost: rather than the square behind the Saint Boniface church, the new Lumumba Square was planned near the Porte de Namur metro station, on a narrow strip of sidewalk just outside Ixelles' municipal boundaries.[673]

This outcome sparked a critical debate about whether the inauguration on 30 June 2018 could be considered a genuine victory – even if only in symbolic terms.[674] As Billy Kalonji noted, the strategy of lobbying from within the system, while effective in certain respects, was met with scepticism by segments of Belgium's Afrodescendant communities – particularly younger generations, according to him – who regarded it as 'too slow, too cautious, and too compromised'.[675] For those who claim activist legitimacy through grassroots presence or 'street authority' (cf. Chapter 6), CMCLD's institutional affiliations are sometimes framed as signs of 'co-optation' or of 'corruption by politicians'.[676] These internal debates and contestations also reveal the stakes involved in self-identifying as an 'activist', a 'politician', or a 'policymaker' to be perceived as a legitimate actor – whether in the eyes of local governments or among fellow

[670] This was Njall's take on it, for example, during the discussion on 1 June 2018. Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.
[671] See, for example, the discussion with which I opened Chapter 3. Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.
[672] Speaking in September 2024, Baldé again voiced the overall impression that Close's intentions were opportunistic and that he was not 'morally committed' to the cause, but he also wondered whether the politician's moral agreement should be considered necessary when the outcome is the same. Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.
[673] Arnaud Lismond-Mertens, 'Une Place Lumumba à Bruxelles', *Ensemble* 97 (2018): 79, https://www.ensemble.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Ensemble_097_racisme_078.pdf.
[674] See the discussion that opened Chapter 3. Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2023: Commémoration Patrice Lumumba' (organized by CMCLD), 17 January 2023, Brussels.
[675] Billy Kalonji, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 19 June 2019.
[676] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

grassroots actors. Yet CMCLD activists claim to be fully aware of these tensions. They describe the campaign as a continuous balancing act that has characterized the work of so many Afrodescendant associations in Belgium, both in the past and the present: investing time and energy in political relationships while simultaneously guarding against manipulation, symbolic concessions, and watered-down outcomes. As both Baldé and Njall emphasized, working with political institutions requires 'a particular vigilance' – encapsulated in the refrain I heard repeatedly in the lead-up to the inauguration and long after: 'Restons vigilants!' – Let us stay vigilant![677]

To illustrate the strategic agency of decolonial memory activists navigating the roles of activist, politician, and policymaker, consider the recent political trajectories of several CMCLD members. The most prominent example is Njall, who, after leading CMCLD, was elected as a deputy for Ecolo in both the Brussels francophone Parliament and the municipality of Ganshoren. Since 23 September 2023, he serves as president of COCOF.[678] Other long-time CMCLD members, such as Sanchou Kianshumba and Stéphanie Ngalula, also entered politics through Ecolo, while many others involved in the Lumumba Square campaign became politically active or took up positions in Brussels' institutional bureaucracies. This 'shift' from activism to political office challenges dominant definitions of 'memory activism', which, as explained, typically frame it as oppositional to state power.[679] Do activists cease to be activists once they assume public office? What about figures like Ndiaye, De Groote, or Genot, who helped put grassroots memory demands on the political agenda – were they activists in those moments? And, to push the question provocatively, can Bouchez or Close, who eventually pushed for public remembrance of Lumumba for reasons that may not have been ideologically driven, also be seen as memory activists? As this chapter shows, one of the (many) defining strategies of decolonial memory activism in Belgium has been precisely this fluid or even simultaneous inhabiting of activist and policymaker roles. This multimodal positioning enables activists to build alliances within institutional structures and to claim political legitimacy for their demands.

[677] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.
[678] 'Parlement Francophone Bruxellois, 'Kalvin Soiresse Njall,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.parlementfrancophone.brussels/deputes/kalvin-soiresse-njall.
', Député, accessed 17 April 2025, https://www.parlementfrancophone.brussels/deputes/kalvin-soiresse-njall.
[679] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9; McQuaid and Gensburger, 'Administration', 142.

5.3 *Devoir de Mémoire* as a Register for Decolonial Memory Claims

To assert political legitimacy, this second part of the chapter argues, certain activists engaged in the Lumumba Square campaign strategically aligned their arguments with the established policy discourse on remembrance. Specifically, they invoked the language of *devoir de mémoire* – the presumed moral and civic obligation of societies to publicly acknowledge and commemorate acts of violent injustice. First, I outline the origins and institutionalization of the duty to remember as a normative paradigm rooted in Holocaust memory. Second, I show how activists in the Lumumba Square campaign mobilized the duty to remember, linking their demands for racial justice to historical justice and recognition. Third, I argue how in this process, activists also invoked the ideals underpinning the duty to remember: reconciliation, inclusive citizenship, and social cohesion. Finally, I suggest that activists simultaneously adopted and challenged the duty to remember, anticipating the discussion in the third and final part of the chapter.

5.3.1 Moral Remembrance as an (International) Opportunity Structure

The notion of *devoir de mémoire*, or 'duty to remember', has a long intellectual and political history.[680] Roughly, it can be defined as pertaining to the idea that 'remembrance is morally imperative, non-optional, or not morally elective, and that omitting to remember whatever it is that one is obligated to remember is strongly morally criticizable'.[681] In post-war Europe, it emerged as a normative imperative for societies dealing with the legacies of the Holocaust.[682] Since Holocaust memory emerged as a 'paradigmatic case'[683] for societal remembrance, the duty to remember has been transported to a variety of contexts and historical injustices.[684] In this form, the duty to remember rests on several key assumptions: first, that remembering – rather than 'forgetting' or 'silencing' – historical injustices prevents their repetition, as

[680] Sébastien Ledoux, *Le devoir de mémoire. Une formule et son histoire* (CNRS Editions, 2016).
[681] Jeffrey Blustein, 'A Duty to Remember', in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, ed. Sven Bernecker and Kouken Michaelian (Routledge, 2017), 352. For a philosophical argument for remembrance as an ethical imperative, see, for example, Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2004).
[682] Blustein, 'Duty to Remember', 351.
[683] Sznaider and Levy, 'Memory Unbound', 88.
[684] Lea David, 'Against Standardization of Memory', *Human Rights Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2017): 296–318.

encapsulated in the phrase 'never again'.[685] Second, that remembrance enables citizens to 'learn from the past'.[686] Third, that remembrance is a duty to, first and foremost, victims of historical injustice and their descendants, prompting survivors and resistors of violence to appeal to the category of historical victimhood in their struggle for recognition, even if they do not necessarily see themselves as victims.[687] Fourth, that remembrance leads to the recognition of historical truth: through remembrance, societies aim to set the record straight and ensure that historical truth is 'widely known or publicly acknowledged'.[688] Fifth, that remembrance is a vehicle for citizen education, disseminating not only historical knowledge but also certain civic attitudes: it is assumed that shared historical narratives foster democracy, responsibility, reconciliation, and social cohesion.[689]

Over the last few decades, this framework has transformed the duty to remember into a powerful policy tool. From transitional societies grappling with the legacies of conflict to consolidated democracies confronting the legacies of exclusion and inequality, the duty to remember has underpinned official apologies, educational reforms, public monuments, and memorial initiatives.[690] Sociologist Lea David has referred to this constellation of practices as 'moral remembrance', which she defines as:

> (…) the standardised ways, promoted through the human rights infrastructures of world polity, in which societies are supposed to deal with legacies of mass human rights abuses. It is based on three grounded principles: 'facing the past', 'duty to remember' and 'justice for victims'.[691]

As such, moral remembrance not only refers to an ethical obligation but also to a globalized policy framework that institutionalizes the supposed 'proper way' of engaging with the past, legitimizing some and delegitimizing other relations to the past.[692]

In France, the language of the duty to remember gained considerable policy traction in the 1990s and was invoked to implement memory laws criminalizing Holocaust denial.[693] French state efforts have often been prescriptive, with centralized interventions into how history is taught and commemorated. Belgium, by contrast, has adopted a more decentralized and less

[685] Gensburger and Lefranc, *Beyond Memory*, 31.
[686] Sarah Gensburger and Sandrine Lefranc, *À quoi servent les politiques de mémoire?* (Presses de Sciences Po, 2017), 17.
[687] Huyssen, 'Memory Culture and Human Rights', 34. See as well: Eva Willems, *Open Secrets, Hidden Heroes: Contesting Transitional Justice in Peru* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).
[688] Jeffrey Blustein, 'How the Past Matters: On the Foundations of an Ethics of Remembrance', in *Historical Justice and Memory*, ed. Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 75.
[689] Gensburger and Lefranc, *À quoi servent les politiques de mémoire?* 17–30.
[690] A good introduction to both the intellectual and political histories of memory policies after historical justice is Neumann and Thomspon, *Historical Justice and Memory*.
[691] David, *Past Can't Heal Us*, 41.
[692] David, *Past Can't Heal Us*, 13.
[693] Gensburger and Lavabre, 'Entre "'devoir de mémoire"' et " 'abus de mémoire"', 76.

coercive approach to collective memory, in part due to its federalized political structure.[694] Nonetheless, the influence of the 'memory duty' is evident across the country's regions. Public memorials to the Holocaust, commemorative initiatives, and educational programming have proliferated, linking historical awareness to democratic citizenship.[695] Belgium has also enacted legal measures against Holocaust denial, reflecting a commitment to preserving memory as a bulwark against injustice.[696]

While rooted in Holocaust remembrance, the duty to remember has been increasingly invoked in the struggle against racial injustice – especially since the 2001 United Nations (UN) World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, whose landmark document explicitly acknowledged the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and colonialism as crimes against humanity.[697] Calling for reparatory justice and financial reparations, the document also positioned remembrance as central to the fight for racial justice. Its final declaration, particularly 'Point 106', emphasized that 'remembering the crimes or wrongs of the past (…) and telling the truth about history are essential elements for international reconciliation and the creation of societies based on justice, equality, and solidarity'.[698] The declaration further highlighted that 'lessons can be learned through remembering history to avert future tragedies'.[699]

In the years following Durban, remembrance became a key pillar in international anti-racist policy efforts to implement its agenda. The UN's 2011 launch of the International Year for People of African Descent (IYPAD) cited memorial practices as essential tools in the struggle for equality.[700] The year was a catalyst for a more sustained global focus on the rights of people of African descent, leading to the UN Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024) (UNDPAD), adopting the same themes of 'Recognition, Justice, and Development', but with a longer timeline and a declared deeper institutional engagement.[701] The IYPAD and UNDPAD internationally proclaimed the importance of memory – particularly remembrance of the slave trade and colonialism – as a tool for anti-racist education and reconciliation. On 21 March 2011, shortly after the launch of IYPAD, the Centre for Equal Opportunities and

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694 Geoffrey Grandjean, 'Official Memories and Legal Constraints: A Classification of Memory Instruments in France and Belgium', *Memory Studies* 14, no. 2 (2021), 501–20.

695 Marie-Sophie de Clippele, 'Does the Law Determine What Heritage to Remember?', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue Internationale de Sémiotique Juridique* 34, no. 3 (2021), 628.

696 Grandjean, 'Official Memories and Legal Constraints', 507.

697 Daniel Butt, 'Historical Justice in Postcolonial Contexts. Repairing Historical Wrongs at the End of Empire', in Neumann and Thompson, *Historical Justice and Memory*, 168.

698 United Nations, *Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* (Durban, 2001), https://www.oas.org/dil/afrodescendants_Durban_Declaration.pdf (accessed 20 April 2025), 24.

699 United Nations, *Report of the World Conference Against Racism*, 17.

700 United Nations, 'A/RES/64/169. Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2009. International Year for People of African Descent', 19 March 2010, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/64/169, 1.

701 United Nations, 'A/RES/68/237. Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 23 December 2013. Proclamation of the International Decade for People of African Descent', 7 February 2014, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/237.

Opposition to Racism,[702] Belgium's most important institutional actor on issues related to anti-racism at the time, stated that Belgium has a 'difficult relationship with its colonial past' and that 'a reconciliation of memories' is a necessary part of the broader agenda to combat racism.[703] The idea that recognition of historical injustice through remembrance is a prerequisite for racial equality thus gained legitimacy, not only as a moral principle but also as a public policy instrument. In this broader context, activists have both appropriated and contested the notion of the duty to remember and its underlying ideas as part of their political lobbying efforts and their struggle to gain public support for a Lumumba Square.

5.3.2 The Memory Duty and Moral Legitimacy

In the long history of the campaign for a Lumumba Square in Brussels, citizens and social movements advanced diverse and at times conflicting arguments in support of the initiative. As demonstrated in the Chapter 3, 'Lumumba' has functioned as a powerful symbolic anchor, enabling a wide range of political demands to coalesce around a single figure over the course of two decades. For some, Lumumba Square represents a way to commemorate the 'victims of gentrification'.[704] Located near the headquarters of the European institutions, Ixelles has become a desirable district for expats and bureaucrats, making it one of the most expensive areas in the Brussels-Capital Region and in Belgium more broadly (cf. Chapter 2). In this context, activists framed the square as a symbolic act of territorial reclamation by the Afrodescendant residents and daily visitors of Matonge, some mentioning the slogan 'Gentrification is the new colonialism'.[705] Others emphasized the importance of honouring and 'restoring the memory' of Lumumba himself – as either a way to remember a heroic historical figure or a means of pressuring Belgium to acknowledge its responsibility in his assassination.[706]

[702] Belgium's Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism was established to combat racism. It later expanded its mandate to broader anti-discrimination efforts before becoming an interfederal institution in 2013 and being split into two separate institutions: the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities (UNIA) and the Federal Migration Centre (Myria). See UNIA, 'Geschiedenis,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.unia.be/nl/over-unia/geschiedenis.

[703] UNIA, 'Discrimination envers les personnes d'origine subsaharienne: Un passé colonial qui laisse des traces', May 2017, https://www.unia.be/files/Rapport_n%C3%A9grofobie_FR_Layout.pdf, 2.

[704] Sara De Sloover, 'Actie voor Lumumbaplein én tegen gentrificatie Matonge', *BRUZZ*, 30 June 2016, https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/actie-voor-lumumbaplein-en-tegen-gentrificatie-matonge-2016-06-30.

[705] Martin Vander Elst, 'Le "Quartier des continents", stade suprême de la gentrification', Bruxelles Panthères, 17 June 2016, https://bruxelles-panthere.thefreecat.org/?p=2904.

[706] As Njall stated. Author's Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels.; Jérôme Duval and Ludo de Witte, 'Ludo de Witte : 'Il faut changer les mentalités et décoloniser complètement l'espace public', CADTM, 5 July 2018, https://www.cadtm.org/Ludo-de-Witte-Il-faut-changer-les-mentalites-et-decoloniser-completement-l.

For many, the square's significance lies in its potential to break the public 'silence' and 'forgetfulness' surrounding Belgian colonialism.[707] During the lobbying process, activists predominantly invoked policymakers' 'duty to remember' and acknowledge colonialism as a foundational part of Belgium's national history.[708] When the proposal for Lumumba Square was brought before the Ixelles municipal council on 24 October 2013 – thanks to the abovementioned motion by Ndiaye and De Groote – 'representatives' of the heterogeneous activist coalition behind the demand were invited to present their case in a citizen interpellation. Speaking on behalf of the recently formed CMCLD and its allied organizations, Abrassart delivered a speech that outlined multiple arguments for Lumumba Square. She based her central argument on the notion of a societal duty to acknowledge historical injustices and their enduring legacies. To reinforce her claim, she cited the unfulfilled institutional promises made in the wake of the Lumumba Commission, such as the federal government's commitment to support 'multidisciplinary and international historical research into the colonial and postcolonial period'.[709] With these pledges, she argued, 'the political world' had promised to enable historians to 'exorcise' the colonial past on the basis of 'objective and scientifically established facts'.[710] The failure to deliver on these promises, as mentioned in Chapter 3 – including promised support for civil society organizations focused on Lumumba's memory – was presented as a breach of this responsibility. Abrassart went further, questioning whether it was truly the role of historians alone to undertake this work of memory:

> One may ask whether it is the task of historians to exorcise this past, or whether it is your responsibility, dear politicians, to build a coalition, a majority, so that we can finally carry out the memory work that, even now in 2011 [2013], fifty years after Congo's independence, remains unfinished.[711]

To legitimize the Lumumba Square campaign, activists like Abrassart thus drew not only on the authority of historical knowledge, as shown in Chapter 4, but also on the moral force of the concept of the duty to remember. As she put it:

> Why a Lumumba Square in Matonge? Because of a duty to remember: a recognition of the historical relationship between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Belgium, and a recognition of the Congolese presence in Ixelles, including Paul van der Panam [Paul Panda Farnana], the first Congolese to study at the Athénée François Rabelais, just across from the Bar l'Athénée. Also, two committed Congolese artists: Freddy Tsimba, whose

[707] Robin Delobel and Jérôme Duval, 'Patrice Lumumba à Bruxelles, une place contre l'oubli', *Politis*, 9 May 2018, https://www.politis.fr/articles/2018/05/patrice-lumumba-a-bruxelles-une-place-contre-loubli-38801/.
[708] Kaninda et al., 'Colonial Denial and Mutations of the Colonial Propaganda in Belgium. Struggles, Strategies, and Impacts on Society', 42.
[709] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 8.
[710] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 8.
[711] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 8.

> statue stands on Chaussée d'Ixelles, and Thierry Tsamba [Chéri Samba],[712] whose work marks the entrance to the Porte de Namur metro station. We also want a Lumumba Square here in Matonge to support the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales, which organizes monthly guided tours exploring Congolese heritage; to support CRDCB, the Research Centre on the Decolonization of the Belgian Congo,[713] which has for years been based at 69 Rue de la Tulipe; and to support essential local institutions like the Pan-Africa bookstore, the Lumière d'Afrique gallery, the Nisia [Inzia] restaurant, Coumba [KUUMBA],[714] and the Maison Africaine – a meeting place for Africans and a student residence founded in 1958.[715]

Through Abrassart's words, the call for a Lumumba Square becomes a call for official recognition – of Congo's historical relationship with Belgium, of Congolese and Afrodescendant communities as integral to Belgian society, and of a local network of cultural institutions and memory work in Matonge. She concludes with a line attributed to Jacques Derrida: 'We will no longer accept to live in a world that not only tolerates unlawful violence but also violates memory and organizes the amnesia of its crimes'.[716]

5.3.3 Lumumba Square as a Tool for 'Reconciliation' and 'Inclusive Citizenship'

In invoking the memory duty as an argument for Lumumba Square, activists not only highlighted the claim to recognition of Afrodescendant communities but more broadly presented Lumumba Square and the decolonization of the public sphere as an improvement of Belgian democracy in general.[717] To make this case, activists drew on several ideas that underpin the memory duty, such as the ideal of remembrance as a path to reconciliation, inclusive citizenship, and social cohesion. For example, Moïse Essoh stated, for a predominantly white audience, that 'memory and history are important tools for social cohesion'.[718] Baldé stated, also in front of a predominantly white audience, that the

[712] The stenographer at the council was not listening very well; this is supposed to be Chéri Samba (cf. Chapter 2).
[713] This is Phillipe Buyck's research centre on the memory of Lumumba, also known as the Lumumba Library.
[714] The stenographer again made a mistake here: this should be KUUMBA (cf. Chapter 2).
[715] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 8–9.
[716] The stenographer was clearly not having their best day (or exhibits a general lack of familiarity with the people and places cited by Abrassart), as they wrote 'Jacques Guerita' instead of 'Jacques Derrida'. Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 9.
[717] Julien Truddaïu et al., 'Décoloniser l'espace public, un enjeu démocratique', *Bruxelles Laïque Échos*, no. 120 (2023): 20.
[718] Moïse Essoh in Author's Field Notes, 'Conférence: Décolonisation de l'Espace Public Belge' (event organized by MRAX and CMCLD), 4 May 2019, Brussels.

decolonization of the public sphere serves to improve 'living together' in Belgium.[719] As explained in Chapter 4, CMCLD publicly describes its memory mission as the construction of 'a reconciled memory based on an objective history in which all citizens can recognize themselves'.[720] This emphasis on a reconciliatory narrative stands in stark contrast to political representations of decolonial memory activism as inherently divisive or polarizing – misrepresentations exemplified by some of the reactions in Ixelles' municipal council, where Patrice Lumumba was framed as a 'polarizing' figure. In private conversations, CMCLD guide Baldé even described himself as a 'reconciler', responsible for facilitating dialogue and managing tensions that occasionally arise between participants during CMCLD's guided tours.[721]

> All of these examples reflect an articulated belief that a shared narrative of the colonial past is foundational to a more just and cohesive society, closely aligned with moral remembrance's theoretical underpinnings. CMCLD activists, with Njall upfront, brought this emphasis on unity and shared historical accountability to the advocacy for Lumumba Square. Njall framed Lumumba Square as speaking not only to Afrodescendant interests but to those of all Belgians, arguing that both white and racialized Belgians are victims of colonial propaganda:

Located behind Porte de Namur metro station at the entrance to the Matonge district, the symbolism of the square and the words inscribed on the truncated pole are not addressed solely to Congolese people, Black people, Afrodescendants, or tourists. Patrice Lumumba, positioned across from Leopold II [a reference to the equestrian statue a few hundred meters further], also speaks to white citizens, who, like Black citizens, are victims of colonial propaganda and its destructive effects.[722]

When the square was finally inaugurated on 30 June 2018, media coverage and official remarks – such as those by Brussels mayor Close himself – frequently framed the event as one of symbolic importance 'for Afrodescendants'.[723] CMCLD spokespeople, however, pushed back against this narrow framing:

> Some stakeholders in the process revealed their unconscious colonial denial through their language: we were often told, 'This is your event'. And we had to correct them: 'This is an event that concerns Belgium – it's our event, for all of us'. It is in the name of Belgian

[719] Aliou Baldé, TAPAS: Decolonial Discourses and Practices in Belgium, audio, 19 March 2019.
[720] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Nos Objectifs'.
[721] Aliou Baldé, conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Ghent, written notes, 3 September 2024.
[722] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, 'Square Lumumba: Décoloniser les espaces et les esprits', *Politique. Revue Belge d'Analyse et de Débat*, 9 July 2018, https://www.revuepolitique.be/square-lumumba-decoloniser-les-espaces-et-les-esprits/.
[723] Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

> society, and the shared history between Belgium and Congo that this decision was made.[724]

The significance CMCLD assigns to this 'shared history' is not only rooted in moral remembrance's understanding of memory's connection to shared political responsibility but also, in Njall's words, to Aimé Césaire's understanding of colonialism as a system that dehumanizes both colonized and colonizers.[725] From this perspective, portraying changes to colonial memory in public space as serving the interests of only one (imagined) 'community' is an evasion of the broader, shared political and civic obligation to reckon with historical injustice. This is why, in the quote above, the dismissal of the event as 'your event' is linked to the perpetuation of 'colonial denial'. For CMCLD, memory work is addressed to all Belgians. Recognizing oneself as an heir to a painful history also implies a duty to act in the present. Accordingly, CMCLD activists reject the notion that Lumumba Square should be viewed as 'a gift given to the associations that fought for it'.[726] Instead, they argue, it is 'a tool for inclusive citizenship, aimed at contributing to the decolonization of Belgian society'.[727] This reconciliatory framing has earned CMCLD support among progressive (white) policymakers, though it has also led to criticism from other decolonial activists, who see such conciliatory gestures and the alignment with dominant liberal-democratic ideals as insufficiently radical. I will explore these tensions in Chapters 6 and 7.

5.3.4 Appealing to Existing Policy Instruments

In making their case for public memory policies around the colonial past, activists not only drew on the register of moral remembrance but also emphasized that their goals align with already existing, institutionally endorsed frameworks. They legitimized their demands by pointing to the abovementioned Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism's policy statement, highlighting how their objectives were compatible. As Njall stated during CMCLD's conference in December 2012:

> The Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Fight Against Racism has officially emphasized the need to reconcile different memories and to foster a better understanding of African migration in Belgium in order to effectively combat prejudice and discrimination (…) Our objectives align, and the Centre responded favourably to our project.[728]

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[724] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.
[725] Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 41.
[726] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.
[727] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.
[728] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Actes de la conférence,' 12.

Despite resistance by parts of the political spectrum, the language of the duty to remember ultimately proved effective for activists campaigning for Lumumba Square and was echoed by policymakers. During Ixelles' municipal council meeting on 24 October 2013, for example, De Groote, who had been engaged in World War II memory politics earlier, said that the council had to consider the proposal because of its *devoir de mémoire*, while Ndiaye likewise emphasized the municipality's 'duty' to respond to the concerns raised by Abrassart.[729] De Groote would later draw on the same framework to justify the abovementioned COCOF session on colonial memory in 2015, and Brussels mayor Close employed its vocabulary during the square's 2018 inauguration. To me, these examples reveal two key things. First, the moral language surrounding colonial remembrance central to the Lumumba Square campaign did not emerge solely from an activist appropriation of a pre-existing discourse. Rather, it was co-produced through ongoing interactions between grassroots movements, intellectuals, and political institutions, as outlined in the first part of this chapter. The duty to remember thus became 'a shared element of language through which state and activists engage with each other and compete to defend interests and resources'.[730] This finding speaks to an emerging call in memory studies that urges scholars to move beyond rigid 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' binaries and instead examine how memory discourses circulate and evolve in a 'slow assemblage' across these domains, ultimately shaping dominant understandings of memory's importance to racial justice.[731] Second, shared language does not necessarily signal shared meaning. Although activists and officials may reference the same ideals, their interpretations often diverge – as seen in activists' abovementioned rejection of Close's framing of Lumumba Square as solely 'for Afrodescendants', but also in Ixelles' municipal council debates over what the memory duty entails exactly: remembering figures around whom a relative 'societal consensus' already exists so as not to provoke 'division', or actively constructing a new consensus around figures that had hitherto been considered 'polarizing'?[732] The campaign thus illustrates that moral remembrance is not merely adopted but continually negotiated, contested, and transformed.

[729] Ixelles, 'Séance du conseil communal du 24 octobre 2013', 9 and 39.

[730] McQuaid and Gensburger, 'Administration', 146.

[731] Sara Dyrbis McQuaid in 'dMSA Spring 2024 Session 1: When Memory Activism Meets Politics: The Bureaucracy of Commemoration, Moderated by: Thea Bladt', Memory Studies Association, 28 February 2024, https://www.memorystudiesassociation.org/event/when-memory-activism-meets-politics-the-bureaucracy-of-commemoration-1-dmsa-2024/.

[732] In both scenarios, however, the idea seems to persist that collective memory needs to be shared for a democracy to function well.

5.4 Contesting Devoir de Mémoire

This third section of the chapter analyses how activists have contested the duty to remember and the promises attached to moral remembrance. I first show activists, in mobilizing the duty to remember, drew comparisons between colonialism and the Holocaust to legitimize their demands for recognition and solidarity. Yet, as I go on to show, these comparisons also reveal what activists perceive as the hypocrisy and double standards in how Western societies selectively apply the duty to remember – commemorating some histories of violence while marginalizing others. The section then, finally, turns to the limits of this memory framework as a vehicle for racial justice by pointing to activist doubts and disappointments around and following the inauguration of Lumumba Square.

5.4.1 Multidirectionality and Holocaust Memory

The ways in which the duty to remember can lend legitimacy and intelligibility to the claims of decolonial activists become complicated when activists draw comparisons between the painful histories of colonialism and World War II, around which a more established memory consensus already exists.

In the lead-up to the inauguration of Lumumba Square, and amid lobbying efforts for the installation of a statue of Patrice Lumumba at that location, one anonymous activist drew a striking parallel between (neo)colonial occupation and the German occupation of Belgium during World War II during a public debate:

> African peoples have been crushed under 50 or 60 years of totalitarian regimes. I said the other day at university: what the Belgians endured for six years under the Nazis… imagine Hitler being in power in a country for 50 years. And so, for 50 or 60 years, there have been Hitlers in power across Africa.[733]

Shortly after this debate, in an opinion piece aimed at convincing the wider public of the importance of Lumumba Square, Njall posed a rhetorical question. He asked whether the words of an anti-colonial resistance hero like Lumumba should not be valued and remembered as much as those of a European resistance fighter against Nazism:

> For a long time in Belgium, and some still believe this today, it was considered that the words and struggle of an African resistance fighter against imperialism and colonialism could not be placed on the same level as those of a European resistance fighter against Nazism. Do some peoples deserve barbarity, massacres, crimes against humanity, the

[733] Author's Field Notes, 'Un Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: Quel Bilan?' (event organized by Intal Congo and GFAIA), 1 June 2018, Brussels..

> negation of their humanity, while others do not? This is the question that captures Patrice Lumumba's anger and incomprehension in the face of colonial violence.[734]

Later in my research, I observed how activists continued to invoke comparisons with the Holocaust, particularly with how that history is commemorated today, as a strategy to underscore the urgency and legitimacy of their demands, especially for white audiences. Baldé made such a comparison during a seminar at Ghent University on 'Decolonial Discourses and Practices in Belgium', when he challenged the notion that colonialism had 'positive effects' – a stance often referred to in international scholarship as the 'balance sheet' approach to colonialism (cf. Chapter 1).[735] In his lecture, he questioned the paradigm of the singularity of the Holocaust:[736]

> To return to this idea of the 'positive effects of colonization': all of that was devised in a way to alienate people. Even the discourse reproduced today, especially by former colonialists, is a continuation of that propaganda in a different form. And so, resultingly, we still talk about these 'positive effects'. We are told to 'relativize'. But we notice something peculiar: on some issues, relativizing is simply not allowed. No one relativizes Nazism. No one would ever dare to say there were 'positive effects' of Nazism. Even something like Volkswagen? No, that's not a discourse you often hear. So there you go: double standards.[737]

According to Katrin Antweiler, this dynamic, whereby minority groups who are less visible in collective memory invoke the suffering of more prominently remembered groups – most often Jewish Holocaust victims – is 'less an attempt to belittle the experiences of the victims of other histories of violence' and more 'a result of the narrative order that credits some and ignores many other histories of violence'.[738] This narrative order, she writes, leaves decolonial memory activists 'with hardly any other option than the turn to comparison'.[739] For those marginalized by this hierarchy of memory, comparison becomes one of the only available rhetorical strategies to legitimize demands for recognition. Comparisons between colonialism and the Holocaust have a longer history in Belgian postcolonial discourse. Works such as Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* famously referred to the atrocities committed in Congo as a 'Holocaust

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[734] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.

[735] Gerits and Mathys, 'Laat die gevallen engelen maar liggen', 62.

[736] The paradigm of the 'singularity' of the Holocaust refers to the widely held belief, predominantly in Western Europe, North America, and Israel, that the Holocaust is a 'unique' and 'incomparable' historical event, distinct in its causes, scale, methods, and moral implications. It has been heavily criticized, not only by the activists cited in this dissertation but also by scholars such as Ariella Azoulay, who has argued that the idea of Holocaust singularity reproduces imperial amnesia and reinforces a Eurocentric understanding of historical justice. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019).

[737] Aliou Baldé, TAPAS: Decolonial Discourses and Practices in Belgium, audio, 19 March 2019.

[738] Antweiler, 'Why Collective Memory Can Never Be Pluriversal', 1536.

[739] Antweiler, 'Why Collective Memory Can Never Be Pluriversal', 1536.

committed in Central Africa'.[740] As Sarah De Mul has argued, in the subsequent public debate in Belgium over whether Leopold II's regime constituted a genocide, 'the Holocaust paradigm' functioned as 'a strategy of commitment to exposing the humanitarian disaster in the Congo Free State, and to assessing the ethical and political repercussions of this portrayal of colonial history in contemporary commemorations of the colonial past'.[741] In the campaigns for Lumumba Square and for the decolonization of public space more broadly, such 'multidirectional' (in the words of Michael Rothberg) evocations of Holocaust memory have served to attach moral and political legitimacy to decolonial memory claims and invite public solidarity.[742]

5.4.2 The Moral Hypocrisy of the Memory Duty

Comparisons with the Holocaust and Holocaust memory also serve a second, more subversive purpose: to challenge the very 'narrative order' that prompts activists to make these comparisons in the first place. Activists use the public memory of World War II to expose the selective application of moral remembrance. The quotes above sharply highlight the double standards with which Western societies have applied the idea of the memory duty. In this view, the so-called duty to remember becomes a selective duty, where certain historical victims are deemed more worthy of remembrance and recognition than others. These critiques echo Césaire's famed denunciation of Europe's 'hypocrisy' and 'moral relativism': a Europe that portrays itself as the guardian of universal human rights while systematically violating those rights, particularly in the context of colonialism and racial inequality.[743]

This critique remains deeply relevant today. Extending Césaire's decolonial critique to the realm of contemporary memory politics, many activists in the Lumumba Square campaign pointed to the gaps between proclaimed values and actual practice. Njall articulated this tension clearly in one of his public statements:

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[740] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost,* 252.

[741] Sarah De Mul, 'The Holocaust as a Paradigm for the Congo Atrocities: Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*', *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (2011), 588. For more information on this genocide debate, see Georgi Verbeeck, 'Vond er in de onafhankelijke Congostaat een genocide plaats?', in *Koloniaal Congo. Een geschiedenis in vragen*, ed. Idesbald Goddeeris et al. (Polis, 2020), 47–63.

[742] Michael Rothberg coined the notion 'multidirectional memory' in 2011 to denote the idea that collective memories of different historical injustices do not necessarily compete with one another (a suggestion that has at times been invoked by commentators fearing a 'competition of grievances' when minority groups or historical victims strive for public recognition). Instead, Rothberg argues, collective memories of, for example, the Holocaust and colonialism can mutually reinforce and inform each other, across cultural and national boundaries. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory,* 9.

[743] Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 31 and 12.

> It is to fight against this vicious hypocrisy, this insidious moral relativism, that intellectuals and activists of all origins, African associations, and decolonial and Pan-African movements have engaged – over the past fifteen years – in a struggle long considered utopian: obtaining a street, a Lumumba Square. The goal was to force Belgian institutions to apply the values they constantly proclaim.[744]

Statements like these point to a productive ambiguity in activist discourse. On the one hand, activists appeal to the language and values of moral remembrance – values such as human rights, democracy, inclusion, and the civic imperative of memory – to support their claims. On the other, they question the very credibility of those values, highlighting how they often fail to translate into action when applied to the legacies of colonialism and racism. In this tension lies the political force of the campaign: activists invoke the rhetoric of moral remembrance not only to demand recognition but also to expose the inconsistencies of Belgium's moral self-image. In doing so, they challenge the state and broader society to live up to the very standards they so proudly uphold in other historical contexts.

5.4.3 'The Struggle Continues': The Limits of the Memory Duty as a Register for Racial Justice

Criticisms on and doubts of moral remembrance's ability to achieve racial justice have also been voiced in other ways. As I already hinted at in Chapter 3, the inauguration of Lumumba Square on 30 June 2018 was hailed by some as a historic moment, but many activists behind the decades-long campaign expressed frustration with both the process and the outcome. The decision to locate the square in the municipality of Brussels rather than in Ixelles, where the demand originated, and the modest dimensions of the square – a narrow strip of sidewalk without official addresses bearing its name – diminished the symbolic weight of the square for some. Activists mockingly referred to it as 'un bout de trottoir' (a piece of sidewalk) or 'un parking taxi' (a taxi stand), highlighting their disappointment.[745] Adding to the frustrations was the unfulfilled demand for a figurative statue of Patrice Lumumba, which Close had promised in negotiations.[746] During the inauguration, historian Elikia M'Bokolo emphasized that while the square's plaque with historical information on Lumumba was 'a revolution', Lumumba's visibility in public space remained insufficient.[747] Activists used the occasion to publicly remind

[744] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.
[745] Lismond-Mertens, 'Une Place Lumumba à Bruxelles', 79.
[746] Bettina Hubo, 'Geen standbeeld voor Lumumba', *BRUZZ*, 23 June 2020, https://www.bruzz.be/stedenbouw/geen-standbeeld-voor-lumumba-2020-06-23.
[747] Elikia M'Bokolo's speech, in Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

Close of his promise to install a statue with inscriptions in African languages.[748] In a symbolic act of protest, Afro-feminist collective BAMKO-CRAN brought its own statue of Lumumba to the event – a statue they had been placing in various locations across Brussels to pressure the city.[749] This visual protest was meant to underscore that the square alone did not fulfil the broader set of Afrodescendant communities' demands.[750] Compounding the contradictions was the proximity of a still-standing equestrian statue of Leopold II, located just a few hundred metres away. In his inauguration speech, M'Bokolo challenged the state to confront this inconsistency: 'Can we accept that only this square carries the name of Lumumba, while not so far from here, there is a square with a statue of a murderer?'[751]

The build-up to the inauguration was also marked by controversy. A debate scheduled the night before the event was meant to feature Ludo De Witte, author of *The Assassination of Lumumba*. Mayor Close, citing concerns about De Witte's profile, blocked his participation. De Witte called this an attempt to 'suppress inconvenient truths about Belgium's colonial past'.[752] Activists, including Michel Bouffioux and Njall, decried the decision as political 'censorship' and a sign of the administration's lack of understanding of Afrodescendant political culture.[753] 'Behind this decision', Njall remarked, 'one can also perceive a form of ignorance about the functioning and history of activist structures within African communities. Indeed, if the mayor had been aware of the influence and significance of Ludo De Witte's work within these communities, he would not have taken such a risky path'.[754]

Others cautioned against symbolic politics that do little to improve the living conditions of Afrodescendants. Tsheusi Robert's allegedly left CMCLD over a disagreement about the collective's engagement with mere 'symbolic' politics.[755] Njall himself emphasized that the square was 'un premier jalon' (a first milestone) in a much larger process that includes demands for the restitution of Lumumba's remains, the repatriation of human remains from Belgian institutions, and reforms to the national education curriculum to include critical colonial history. 'This is not the end of the struggle', Njall said, 'but a call for progressives to intensify the fight'.[756]

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[748] Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre Les Discriminations, 'Discours des associations en hommage à Lumumba, Okito et Mpolo', CADTM, 14 August 2018, https://www.cadtm.org/Discours-des-associations-en-hommage-a-Lumumba-Okito-et-Mpolo.

[749] BRUZZ, Tijdelijk Lumumbaplein en standbeeld in Ravensteingalerij', 21 January 2018, https://www.bruzz.be/politiek/tijdelijk-lumumbaplein-en-standbeeld-ravensteingalerij-2018-01-21.

[750] Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

[751] Elikia M'Bokolo's speech, in Author's Field Notes, 'Inauguration Place Lumumba', 30 June 2018, Brussels.

[752] Michel Bouffioux, 'Square Lumumba à Bruxelles: le sociologue Ludo De Witte censuré', *Paris Match*, 28 June 2018, https://www.parismatch.be/actualites/politique/2018/06/28/square-lumumba-a-bruxelles-le-sociologue-ludo-de-witte-censure-ZFWCY6M3KVB2BJB33TQIL5GDCM/.

[753] Bouffioux, 'Square Lumumba à Bruxelles'.

[754] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.

[755] Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge*, 14.

[756] Njall, 'Square Lumumba'.

In the following years, 'decolonization of the public sphere' became an increasingly institutionalized policy focus across Belgium. Local authorities in Ghent, Etterbeek, and Schaerbeek launched participatory processes and commissioned expert reports to address colonial monuments and street names in the public sphere (cf. Chapter 1). This rapid institutional uptake of 'colonial memory' sparked a debate in activist circles. Many warned that local governments were co-opting and diluting the political significance of decolonization to fit into superficial policy gestures – removing a monument, adding a sign – while ignoring more profound structural inequalities.

Activists began describing this phenomenon using the term *encommissionnement* (cf. Chapter 1): a strategy in which authorities delegate politically sensitive issues to commissions or working groups, effectively neutralizing grassroots demands by outsourcing decisions to 'experts'. This, activists argued, masks political inaction and allows governments to claim progress under the guise of memory work while simultaneously avoiding meaningful reforms. In many cases, commissions remain opaque, underfunded, and detached from the activist communities they claim to represent. As a result, cumulative fatigue and frustration have led newer generations of activists to question the efficacy of lobbying governments and participating in formal memory politics altogether. Such tensions reflect deeper questions about the instrumentalization of memory in the struggle for racial justice. While moral remembrance – rooted in the language of recognition, duty, and reconciliation – has enabled activists to gain visibility and political traction and secure symbolic victories, its advancement by governments risks repeating the very exclusions it seeks to remedy. Looking back on the Lumumba Square campaign in 2023, Njall repeated his belief in the duty to remember as a political tool:

> The duty to remember remains a tool for transforming society: there is still a great deal of ignorance, misinformation, and manipulation of history. The duty to remember is therefore a tool for combating racism, raising awareness, and a political instrument. If the commemoration of the First and Second World Wars is political, then colonial remembrance is political too.[757]

Yet, he immediately added that the institutional translation of the memory duty that followed the Lumumba Square campaign showed a largely cosmetic and depoliticized engagement with colonial memory:

> These municipalities are afraid. They just do something just to calm the movements. But they don't want to implement real decolonization policies.[758]

His critique, echoed by many others, underscores a growing scepticism of memory politics as anti-racist politics and signals a call for strategies that go beyond symbolic gestures – a call that the next chapters explore more fully.

[757] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.
[758] Kalvin Soiresse Njall, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 30 March 2023.

5.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have tried to show that the campaign for Lumumba Square cannot be understood simply as a case of grassroots memory activism confronting state power. Rather, it reveals a complex interplay between activists and political institutions in which the lines between opposition, co-optation, and collaboration blurred. Activists strategically engaged local governments, cultivated political alliances, and operated across institutional and activist spheres to bring the demand for Lumumba Square into the public and political mainstream.

Central to this strategy, I have argued, were the appropriation of the policy language of *devoir de mémoire* and the comparison with remembering the Holocaust. By doing this, remembrance of the colonial past could, in front of policymakers and the public, be framed as a moral, civic, and democratic imperative – thus rendering the Lumumba Square demand legitimate and intelligible in a political context where colonial memory remains highly politically contentious.

However, while the language of moral remembrance enabled activists to gain traction, it also became a site of critique. Activists highlighted the selective and often hypocritical application of the memory duty, especially Belgium's tendency to commemorate the Holocaust while neglecting its colonial past. Comparisons between colonialism and Nazism, and between Lumumba and European resistance figures, were used both to legitimize decolonial memory claims and to expose the moral inconsistencies in existing commemorative hierarchies.

The eventual inauguration of Lumumba Square – while celebrated by many as a historic achievement – also laid bare tensions. In the years that followed, the rapid institutionalization of the 'decolonization of public space' through commissions and participatory processes triggered concerns about the dilution of activist demands into mere 'symbolic' reforms. As the term *encommissionnement* entered activist vocabulary, it captured a growing frustration with the limits of institutional memory politics. These critiques point to a deeper ambivalence: *devoir de mémoire* offers a powerful legitimizing opportunity but simultaneously risks amounting to no more than symbolic gestures that leave structural injustices untouched.

Ultimately, this chapter has argued that decolonial memory activism in Belgium has operated through dynamic entanglement with the state, navigating both opportunities and constraints. The case of Lumumba Square reveals how the language and ideas of moral remembrance can be mobilized both to gain political ground and critique the state's failure to fulfil its own proclaimed values. Yet this chapter also points to the risk that institutional adoption of decolonial memory work may mask, rather than resolve, deeper struggles for racial justice. As such, the chapter sets the stage for the next two chapters, which explore, first, the resistance of members of the organization Change to what they perceive as an 'intellectual' and 'institutional' mode of decolonial memory activism (Chapter 6), and second, the resistance of

BAMKO-CRAN to memory being used in the service of reconciliation or an 'objective narrative' according to rules of Belgian institutions – highlighting instead the acknowledgment of lived experiences tied to different subject positions (Chapter 7).

Chapter 6 'We were born to be heroes': Memory in the Service of Decolonial Repair and the Claim to Grassroots Legitimacy

6.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters showed how, during Belgium's 'decolonial moment', a specific form of decolonial memory activism gained public visibility and traction within political institutions. As I argued, this activism is characterized by its strategic focus on historical knowledge about the colonial past, public education – including of white audiences – and political lobbying for the decolonization of public space, framed in the language of the 'duty to remember'. This chapter explores the activism of the organization Change ASBL as a counter-point to supposed 'institutional' narratives that centre on moral remembrance, academic expertise, and historical victimhood, insisting on the urgency of addressing the material and psychological realities of young people growing up in Brussels in postcolonial conditions of institutional neglect, exclusion, and disorientation.

Change was founded in 2013 by Kasidi Makasi Malilutila and Dieudonné 'Dido' Lakama, two Belgo-Congolese men, with the aim of supporting youth connected to urban 'gangs' – a social phenomenon that emerged in Brussels during the 1990s and 2000s. The chapter opens with my first encounters with two of the organization's key figures, Malilutila and Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, in early 2019. These conversations quickly revealed the complex positioning of Change within Belgium's increasingly institutionalized decolonial moment. While Change

publicly aligned with campaigns such as Lumumba Square and the AfricaMuseum debates, its leaders expressed profound doubts about what they saw as the overly intellectual and symbolic nature of such memory work. I unpack their ambivalence in this chapter by asking how they reflect on memory's transformative potential in their campaign for racial justice.

First, I situate Change and its racial justice work in the historical and social context of the 'bandes' urbaines (urban 'gangs'). Change's core objective of empowering racialized youth builds on the earlier efforts of Afrodescendant organizations – most notably Observatoire Ba Ya Ya. More than providing community support, Ba Ya Ya has been crucial in publicly foregrounding an emic understanding of the 'gang' phenomenon as stemming from a deep postcolonial identity crisis in which racialized youth attempt to build a positive image of themselves in a society that systematically assigns them to a position of 'second-class citizens'.

Second, I argue that Change positions its memory work as a remedy to this identity crisis. Here, memory is not mobilized to establish historical truth or improve a shared public understanding of the past, but because of its practical and existential value in a process of self-transformation. Historical narratives serve to cultivate pride, belonging, and recognition of Black excellence and achievement. Change draws on a heroic memory regime, foregrounding Congolese, Pan-African, and Afro-American heroes and cultural references to foster a sense of strength and self-worth.

Third, I explore how this emphasis on pride and empowerment leads to an ambiguous relationship with the moral remembrance paradigm, which centres historical trauma and victimhood. While colonialism and colonial ideology feature prominently in Malilutila and Mutuakashala's analysis of their everyday realities, the Belgian colonial past does not serve as a primary reference point in the mnemonic registers invoked to deal with those realities. Moreover, being concerned with a strong identity that signals pride and agency, Malilutila and Mutuakashala expressed how, in their circles, people struggle to publicly present themselves as 'victims' of colonialism – a category they associate with passivity and weakness. Malilutila and Mutuakashala's frustrations about this, I argue, point to the discursive and institutional frameworks governing which postcolonial identities are considered legitimate for recognition and the exclusions these frameworks generate.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that Change's identity as an organization 'from the street' is part of a strategic performance. Its founders mobilize personal histories – of incarceration, of 'gang' affiliation, of surviving state violence – not only to educate peers but also to claim legitimacy in an activist field that, according to them, prioritizes academic credentials, institutional collaboration, and professionalized advocacy. Their memory work and political position are messy, layered, and often ambivalent. Yet I think it is precisely this ambivalence – the tensions between institutional resistance and collaboration, heroic pride and moral victimhood, action and reflection – that makes Malilutila and Mutuakashala's reflections revealing of the dilemmas and constraints imposed by dominant postcolonial memory politics in Belgium.

6.2 Change's Historical Background: 'Bandes' Urbaines and Internalized Colonialism

This first part of the chapter situates Change in its broader historical and social context. I begin by detailing my initial encounters with the two men who led the organization in 2019, focusing on the tensions and doubts they voiced during Belgium's decolonial moment and how these shaped the understanding of their activism. I then trace Change's emergence to the 'bandes' urbaines phenomenon in Brussels, showing how the organization emerged as a response to youth delinquency with the aim of supporting and educating Belgo-Congolese youth. Finally, I examine how Change's mission has been shaped by the work of Observatoire Ba Ya Ya, a Belgo-Congolese organization founded in 2002. By reframing youth delinquency through the lens of not only socio-economic exclusion but also fractured identity and internalized racism, Ba Ya Ya advanced a community-based sociological perspective that both challenged and expanded dominant public and academic narratives about 'gangs'. Considering Ba Ya Ya its mentor, this self-analysis is key to understanding Change's particular approach to history and memory, which I explore in the next part of the chapter.

6.2.1.1 Ambiguities in Belgium's Decolonial Moment

Change is an association 'founded as an ASBL out of necessity' in 2013 by Lakama and Malilutila in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode.[759] I first encountered the organization during my doctoral research, when it had been a key actor in the coalition for Lumumba Square since 2015 and a partner of both the CMCLD and the AfricaMuseum. Together, they organized a series of debates at Bozar in 2017, during the museum's closure, when some Afrodescendant organizations were granted a platform to organize events in collaboration with museum staff member Isabelle Van Loo.[760] I attended a few of these events early in my research, in fall 2017, and had seen Change activists speak at public debates, but I did not properly meet Change's key figures until early 2019. Until then, I had mostly heard about the organization from others. As a woman, I had been warned by several female activists I met about 'toxic masculinity'[761] among Change members and had been advised not to engage with them, because I would be 'seduced'.[762] Beyond these warnings and the assumptions about Change they conveyed, I knew very little.

[759] I quote Malilutila here. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[760] Author's Field Notes, 'AfricaMuseum@Bozar. Conférence-Formation: La Dette Coloniale' (event organized by CMCLD and Change) 21 October 2017, Brussels.

[761] Lili Angelou, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 1 November 2018.

[762] Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, when I met her in 2018 in the context of a workshop she organized with BAMKO. Author's Field Notes, 'Formation Anti-Racisme Noirs' (event organized by BAMKO), 18 April 2018, Brussels.

In 2019, Change was led by Malilutila, one of its founders, and Bakafua Mutuakashala – known as Sébastien in activist circles before his conversion to Islam – who had joined Change in 2015 and become its main spokesperson around the time the organization entered the Lumumba Square coalition with CMCLD. I first met both on 19 January 2019 in the small hall of Mundo-b in the Matonge neighbourhood. On that day, Change, together with Intal Congo, had organized a conference on the intellectual legacy of Patrice Lumumba, with Ludo De Witte as a panellist.[763] Afterwards, Bakafua Mutuakashala approached me, saying he had seen me at CMCLD events and was curious about my work. I told him I was interested in the connection between memory and anti-racism and how that link had gained visibility in Belgium in recent years. At the time, I was working on an article with my supervisor Berber Bevernage about the AfricaMuseum and organizing a conference on restitution, so I added that I was also researching those topics. He immediately said he wanted to speak to me and needed 'my help': he claimed that, even though he understood why Afrodescendant organizations in Brussels were concerned with these topics, he was struggling, as an organizer within Change, to mobilize 'the youth' around them.[764] That meeting set off a series of one-on-one interviews and double interviews with Bakafua Mutuakashala and Malilutila, the first of which took place on 29 January 2019.[765] They invited me to Change's office, then located on Rue de Palais – one of the busy arteries of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, near Brussels-North train station.[766]

This first conversation lasted nearly five hours and left me deeply confused. On one hand, I noticed a strong alignment with CMCLD's public discourse: a focus on historical education, truth-telling, and decolonizing public space. Both Mutuakashala and Malilutila made connections between Belgium's colonial past and its present-day structural racism, called Lumumba an inspiration for the present, and expressed frustration with what they described as 'denial and bad faith' from politicians and the general public. Change was also actively participating in public debates, including those surrounding the reopening of the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren and those surrounding restitution, voicing arguments similar to those I had heard elsewhere.[767] On the other hand, our conversations were marked by doubts, tensions, and frustrations, and both men insisted that Change had a 'unique' character compared to other organizations and possessed deep, grounded knowledge of 'le terrain' (the

[763] Author's Field Notes, 'Hommage à Patrice Lumumba 1961–2019' (event organized by INTAL Congo and Change Asbl), 19 January 2019, Brussels.
[764] Author's Field Notes, 'Hommage à Patrice Lumumba 1961–2019' (event organized by INTAL Congo and Change Asbl), 19 January 2019, Brussels.
[765] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[766] Their office was back then located in 'Brussels M-Village', Art Deco building and formerly a hotel of the Telegraph and Telephone Administration (RTT), repurposed to house various small companies and non-profits. Their modest 10-square-meter office, simply furnished, overlooked the dome of the Eglise Royale Sainte-Marie – a view I would later often gaze at during our long conversations.
[767] Author's Field Notes, 'Radio Emission: 'Décoloniser le Musée' (Radio Campus, 3 February 2019, Brussels).

reality on the ground).[768] Mutuakashala voiced irritation with and fatigue over their core audience – young people of Congolese descent in Brussels – not being interested in 'decolonization'.[769] As Mutuakashala said, 'many young people left because they did not understand what we were talking about'.[770] Malilutila questioned whether 'the restitution of African objects in Belgian institutions' should be a priority for Afrodescendant organizations, asking, 'What will it change in geopolitical inequality?'[771] He continued by stressing that while some politicians now agreed 'there is a problem with history', they were still reluctant to acknowledge 'the continuities of history', adding that 'while there have been reparations for Jews, there have been none for Congolese'.[772] 'Decolonization', stressed Mutuakashala, 'is not only about monuments and schools, but it is about economic justice'.[773]

In these early conversations during the first half of 2019, I developed a strong sympathy for Mutuakashala and Malilutila and their portrayal of Change as a kind of misunderstood activist underdog – so maybe in that sense I was, indeed, seduced.[774] I became increasingly intrigued by their complex relationship with moral remembrance – publicly participating in memory campaigns yet heavily criticizing them 'behind the scenes' – and by the registers in which they evoked the past. As a professional historian, I found their historical narratives less linear or coherent than CMCLD's narratives in the guided tours, and more like a patchwork – collage-like reflections connecting diverse historical periods, events, figures, and inspirational quotes. They were also more drawn to precolonial histories than to Belgian colonialism, frequently citing the great African empires as evidence of historical African achievement. We agreed to frame the purpose of our ongoing double interviews – always at their office in Saint-Josse – as a kind of 'research project' to understand why they struggled to mobilize their audiences. They emphasized the importance for me to understand that they were 'a particular actor' in the field and were themselves still 'searching'. Mutuakashala asked me to enter into a prolonged

[768] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[769] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[770] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[771] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[772] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[773] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[774] These conversations took place on 29 January 2019, 3 February 2019 and 1 April 2019. In between I met them at multiple events, both their own and events organized by CMCLD, in which we informally continued our conversations. While writing the first draft of this chapter, I did two follow-up interviews, one in December 2023 and one March 2024 in which we discussed some of the theses presented in this chapter.

'reflection' with him, to record and share our sessions, and even to analyse their Facebook page, so that Change could 'understand themselves'.[775]

For Change, 2019 was, as Mutuakashala said, 'a difficult year': a time of both high public visibility and existential crisis.[776] Afrodescendant organizations in Brussels had seemingly gained a number of 'victories': Lumumba Square had been inaugurated, discussions were ongoing with the Brussels-Capital Region about adapting school curricula, and organizations such as CMCLD and BAMKO-CRAN were gaining increasing media attention and institutional traction. Meanwhile, co-founder Lakama (at the time of writing once more Change's spokesperson) was absent, working to establish a Congolese branch of the organization in Kinshasa. In his absence, Malilutila and Mutuakashala were steering the organization forward, yet were facing a low turnout among their own communities and struggling with how to respond. Caught between admiration for CMCLD's activism and the reality of their own organizational roots and audiences, they said they found themselves at odds with the dominant, supposed intellectual, registers through which decolonial memory claims were publicly articulated. Along with them, I started to interpret their expressed doubts as revealing a tension between trying to fit into the kind of decolonial memory activism advanced by CMCLD while staying true to their own context and audiences. Or, as Mutuakashala put: 'We had to learn how to position ourselves. Sometimes, we acted more impulsively, and then sometimes we tried to be wiser. So we had to learn how to maintain a new image, yet trying to stay "real", so as not to become hypocrites'.[777] I argue that the dilemmas they grappled with present a valuable window onto other, less publicly visible ways in which memory has been mobilized for racial justice, and onto the frictions that can arise when activists feel pressure to conform to an increasingly institutionalized form of counter-memory when it does not fully resonate with the realities of the communities they claim to represent.

6.2.1.2 Change's Historical Roots in the Phenomenon of 'Bandes' Urbaines

Who are the communities Change claims to represent? Change's origins are closely intertwined with the social phenomenon of 'bandes' urbaines that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s in Brussels, particularly in communities of sub-Saharan African – primarily Congolese – descent. Around 2009, Brussels police identified approximately twenty-five such 'gangs', largely composed of Congolese youth between the ages of 15 and 19. These groups were reported to

[775] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[776] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[777] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 2 December 2023.

carry knives and machetes and be involved in violent incidents and drug-related offences.[778] Drawing on eight years of research, criminologist Elke Van Hellemont traced the phenomenon of the 'urban gang' in Brussels back to Congolese youth in precarious neighbourhoods such as Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, who according to her, originally formed 'Congolese community aid groups' to navigate intergenerational conflict, socio-economic precarity, and structural anti-Black racism faced by their families.[779] Over time, some of these groups became entangled in petty crime and low-level street dealing, primarily of marijuana. Occasionally, tensions between groups escalated into intra-community violence. Police estimates that between 2002 and 2009, eleven young adults lost their lives.[780] According to youngsters who were involved themselves, this number is much higher, up to thirty.[781] Both the term 'bande' urbaine itself and its definition as a social reality have been the subject of ongoing contestation in the media and among political actors, academics, and Afrodescendant voices, posing considerable challenges for scholars seeking to write about them in nuanced and responsible ways.[782] Before discussing Change's activism, I will briefly discuss how scholars and community organizers have interpreted the phenomenon of 'gangs' in Brussels.

6.2.1.2.1 Myth-Making and Racist Stereotypes

The phenomenon of the 'bande' urbaine has been difficult to grasp, because its emergence has been accompanied by both myth-making and racist stereotyping. Urban 'gangs' gained notoriety in police narratives that linked them to racist stereotypes of Black masculinity and violence, often overestimating their level of organization and the threats they posed.[783] Popular media further entrenched this portrayal, with Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah's 2015 film *Black* as a notable example.[784] These racist representations reinforced the stigmatization of so-called

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[778] Annick Hovine, 'Ça va Péter Grave, Comme Ils Disent', *La Libre*, 5 May 2010, https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/2010/05/05/ca-va-peter-grave-comme-ils-disent-MIOCE7LEKZGNNIGKUAUCUURJAE/; Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 31.

[779] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 136.

[780] Annick Hovine, 'Ça va Péter Grave, Comme Ils Disent',

[781] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 31.

[782] As Mireille-Tsheusi Robert explains, the term 'gang' is 'particularly ill-chosen. In everyday language, it refers to an organization whose purpose is to commit unlawful or criminal acts, often with the aim of financial gain. Such a gang is typically structured hierarchically and recruits its members based on delinquent skills. Moreover, its members usually choose their victims according to the loot they seek to obtain. In contrast, groups of young Belgo-Africans do not form primarily out of economic hardship – though this may be present – but rather out of a shared sense of identity-related distress'. In: Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, '"Bandes urbaines africaines" : un produit made in Belgium', 6 January 2012, https://www.revuepolitique.be/bandes-urbaines-africaines-un-produit-made-in-belgium/

[783] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 62.

[784] The film depicting racialized youth in Brussels as dehumanized figures defined by a supposed innate propensity for violence – a representation 'not far removed from colonial imageries of savagery and barbarism'. See: Sarah Demart and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, 'Le film "Black": un cocktail de racisme postcolonial!', La Libre.be, 23 November 2015, https://www.lalibre.be/debats/opinions/2015/11/23/le-film-black-un-cocktail-de-racisme-postcolonial-GJVV4DUBSBEQNDXDIZBM5RBTEE/

'quartiers populaires' in Brussels and perpetuated harmful racialized images of youth as inherently dangerous (cf. Chapter 2).[785] Simultaneously, as Van Hellemont has shown, myth-making occurred among racialized youth themselves, with the cultural image of the gang – with its associations of masculinity, power, money, and status – offering a way to craft an identity for some.[786] For many youth, 'the gang' functioned as an identity 'performance' – a practice Van Hellemont terms 'the gang game' – while they simultaneously point out that 'there are no gangs'.[787] The phenomenon of the 'bande' urbaine is thus difficult to define not only because of the mythologization and racialized representations that surround it but also due to its informal and shifting nature.

6.2.1.2.2 Struggles over the Sociological Meaning of the 'Bande' Urbaine

For scholars trying to make sense of the urban 'gang' phenomenon, these partial and stereotyped portrayals obscure the complex socio-political realities that underpin it and the multiple roles these groups have played in the lives of youth. Limited academic literature on the topic presents a variety of interpretations, including Van Hellemont's 2015 ethnographic study, marking a critical departure from state and police narratives. She argues that so-called 'gangs' in Brussels were not rigidly structured organizations but rather fluid, spontaneous groupings of youth seeking identity, solidarity, and meaning. These formations initially had protective functions in environments many perceived as hostile or threatening.[788] She also highlights the influence of popular culture – particularly Hollywood films like *New Jack City* (Van Peebles, 1991) – in shaping how youth imagined and enacted these group dynamics.[789] What might appear externally as merely criminal behaviour often involved performative, even playful group identification shaped by marginalization and exclusion.[790]

Other scholars have emphasized the political dimensions of this phenomenon. Ural Manço, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, and Billy Kalonji interpret 'gang formation' as a form of self-defence against structural and state violence.[791] Sarah Demart frames intra-community violence and

[785] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 179.

[786] Which is why Demart and Robert also argue that films like *Black*, both stereotyping and romanticizing 'gang violence', are particularly dangerous, in terms of not only the public image they shape but also the psyche of young people mirroring themselves to the portrayed characters in the film. In: Demart and Robert, 'Le film "Black"'.

[787] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 147.

[788] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 136.

[789] This reference to New Jack City has been prevalent also in Mireille-Tsheusi Robert's work, as well as in the recollections of the people cited in this chapter. The appeal of cultural imaginaries, including Hollywood films, is not unique to the context of 'gangs' in Brussels, but has also been well-documented in the Congolese context, both in the more distant past (Gondola) and closer to the present (Hendriks). See Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Indiana University Press, 2016).; Maarten Hendriks, 'Street Authority and the Politics of Everyday Policing: (Anti-)Gangs, the State, and Martial Arts and Action Movies in Goma, DRC', *Afrika Focus* 34, no. 1 (2021): 167–71.

[790] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 121.

[791] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 27.

confrontations with the police as an infra-political form of resistance – a desperate call for recognition from communities lacking institutional access to voice their grievances. Reflecting on the 2011–2012 anti-police brutality protests in Matonge, she notes that, despite fears of further stigmatization, some youth believed that 'in order to be heard, you have to break things'.[792] Similarly, Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti describe violence associated with 'gangs' as infra-political articulations of postcolonial demands, expressed by individuals who lack other means of political expression.[793] Regardless of theoretical lens, some Afrodescendant communities in Brussels have been deeply affected by cycles of violence primarily targeting Belgo-Congolese youth themselves. Local governments' responses were typically characterized by heavy policing and repression, deepening mistrust between youth and law enforcement and fostering a persistent atmosphere of tension,[794] which intensified after the deaths of unarmed young men during police interventions, especially in 2001 and 2010.[795]

6.2.1.2.3 Collective Memories of 'Bandes' Urbaines

By the time I began my doctoral research, tensions around 'gangs' had largely receded, but collective memories of this era remained vivid. As Malilutila noted in 2019: 'Everyone knows someone who has lost a family member'.[796] François Makanga remembered parents' anxieties, with some attempting to send their children to 'white schools' to avoid them getting into contact with 'gang networks'.[797] The founding members of Change themselves lived through this period, and Malilutila remembered how he saw 'many boys' in his neighbourhoods 'becoming involved in gangs'.[798] Both founding members were born in Kinshasa but raised in Brussels, in the area surrounding Résidence Pacific – a prominent apartment complex in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode that Malilutila still referred to as 'les ponts du 1230', referencing the neighbourhood's postal code.[799] Van Hellemont observes that many so-called 'gangs' were tied to specific urban areas. In Saint-Josse, for instance, the Kung Fu Clan (KFC), one of Brussels' oldest 'gangs', was associated with

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[792] Demart, 'Émeutes à Matonge et… indifférence des pouvoirs publics ?', 9.

[793] Grégoire and Mazzocchetti, 'Altérité « africaine » et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique', 110. ; These readings align with analyses of similar phenomena in other European countries, such Achille Mbembe's analysis of the 2005 banlieue uprisings in Paris as manifestations of racialized frustration in postcolonial Europe. Achille Mbembe, 'The Republic and Its Beast: On the Riots in the French Banlieus', in *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France*, ed. Charles Tshimanga, Ch Didier Gondola, and Peter J. Bloom (Indiana University Press, 2009), 47–56.

[794] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 66.

[795] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 109.; Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 285-294.

[796] Kasidi on 1 April 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

[797] François Makanga, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Tervuren, audio, 19 May 2019.

[798] Kasidi on 1 April 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

[799] Kasidi on 1 April 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

the area around the Pacific.[800] Lakama is still known as a former key figure within KFC, an image earning him both awe and suspicion. Both Lakama and Malilutila served prison sentences between 2008 and 2012 due to their involvement and would later frequently cite their experiences to position themselves. According to Malilutila, in 2012, upon reflecting on their lives, they decided to become a 'positive force' in their environment and no longer 'contribute to division', which led to the founding of Change in 2013.[801] Lakama saw his prior standing within KFC as an opportunity 'to promote peace' between youth groups.[802] This chapter is not concerned with reconstructing the history of urban 'gangs'. Rather, I provide this background because, as I will show, this past continues to shape Change's collective identity and ideas about memory in postcolonial Belgium. The following section further explores the origins of Change before turning to its activist practices and the memory registers through which it operates.

6.2.1.3 Community Responses to Intra-Communal Violence

6.2.1.3.1 Change's Big Brother: Observatoire Ba Ya Ya

In the contested struggle over the sociological and political meaning of the 'bande' urbaine phenomenon – particularly in response to stereotypical representations – several Belgo-Congolese organizations began to speak up in the early 2000s. One of the most prominent among them is Observatoire Ba Ya Ya, led by Tsheusi Robert before she went on to form BAMKO-CRAN and by Ngyess Lazalo Ndoma. While earlier initiatives existed as early as 1987, the organization was formally established in 2002, a year marked by a spike in 'gang'-related violence.[803] In response, parents of affected youth joined forces to create a structure for the 'prevention and the fights against delinquency among young people of sub-Saharan origin, by restoring social dialogue and developing tailored support strategies'.[804] The name 'Ba Ya Ya', which means 'elders' in Lingala, colloquially refers to older siblings or 'big brothers', who are expected to lead by example.[805] In line with Van Hellemont's idea of 'gangs' as 'substitute families', the organization's name reflects its mission to provide guidance and positive role

[800] KFC was one of the earliest groups in Brussels, known for its rivalry with others like the New Jacks, Black Wolves, and Black Faces. In: Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 117

[801] Kasidi on 29 January 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[802] Peter Sallas et al., 'Cultural Institutions as Sites of Representation and Resistance: Claiming Change in Brussels' (Unpublished Research Paper, KU Leuven, 2017), 58.

[803] Arnaud Lismond-Mertens, 'Bayaya Contre l'aliénation', *Ensemble*, 2016, 16.

[804] 'Observatoire Ba Ya Ya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://observatoirebayaya.wixsite.com/observatoirebayaya/lasbl-bayaya/.

[805] 'Observatoire Ba Ya Ya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://observatoirebayaya.wixsite.com/observatoirebayaya/lasbl-bayaya/.

models for young people, particularly in contexts where institutional – and at times parental – support is lacking.[806] With funding from the French Community and Brussels municipalities such as Molenbeek and Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Ba Ya Ya has spent the past two decades organizing initiatives to empower racialized youth in Brussels, claiming to be the only organization to have addressed 'gang violence' through non-repressive means.[807] Its work has focused on preventing youth from dropping out of school and addressing the specific challenges faced by Congolese families in Belgium – especially the generational tensions that arise when children grow up in different cultural contexts than their parents.[808] Both Lakama and Malilutila have been involved in Ba Ya Ya's activities, and in 2024 Malilutila still referred to Ba Ya Ya as 'his family'.[809] Change's activities from 2013 onwards have been heavily influenced by the ideas behind Ba Ya Ya's work.

6.2.1.3.2 A Sociological Interpretation from Below: Intra-Communal Violence as Expressions of Inferiority and Internalized Colonialism

In addition to offering community support, Ba Ya Ya has been active in reshaping public perceptions of both 'bandes' urbaines and their perceived root causes. Building on and challenging the analyses offered by white scholars, Ndoma and Robert have contributed a sociological perspective grounded in their community work and the lived experiences and self-analyses of the youth they encountered.[810] They interpret violence between racialized youth as expressions of deeply rooted self-hatred, itself the consequence of racist stereotypes and institutional racism, which systematically excludes these youth and reduces them to a position of 'second-class citizens'.[811] To understand the situation of Afrodescendant youth – particularly Belgo-Congolese youth in what anthropologist Mazzocchetti calls the 'quartiers défavorisés' (disadvantaged neighbourhoods)[812] of Brussels – Ndoma and Robert have put forward the notions of 'social rupture', 'double absence', and 'internalized inferiority'.[813]

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806 Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 117.; 'Observatoire Ba Ya Ya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://observatoirebayaya.wixsite.com/observatoirebayaya/lasbl-bayaya/.

807 Lismond-Mertens, 'Bayaya Contre l'aliénation'.

808 'Observatoire Ba Ya Ya,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://observatoirebayaya.wixsite.com/observatoirebayaya/lasbl-bayaya/. On these generational tensions, see: Kawaya Meya and Mazzocchetti, 'Tensions intergénérationnelles au sein de familles belgo-congolaises. Transmissions entre rupture et continuité', 197.

809 Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

810 Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 28.

811 Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 21-45.

812 Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, 'Sentiments d'injustice et théorie du complot: Représentations d'adolescents migrants et issus des migrations africaines (Maroc et Afrique subsaharienne) dans des quartiers précaires de Bruxelles', *Brussels Studies. The Journal of Research on Brussels*, no. 56 (2012), https://doi.org/10.4000/brussels.1064, 4.

813 Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 23, 28, and 33.

First, Manço, Robert, and Kalonji use the term 'social rupture' to describe how many Belgo-Congolese youth grow up in unstable or single-parent households – a reality confirmed by other scholars as well.[814] Sociologist Manço traces this to Belgian immigration policies: lengthy family reunification procedures resulting in the delayed arrival of fathers and in some families being dispersed across Europe, leaving children in the care of extended relatives.[815] In some cases, familial dislocation is coupled with intergenerational tensions, with young people seeing their parents struggle in a new context and carrying deep grievances, blaming their parents for their physical and emotional absence.[816] Older generations have also been criticized for political passivity, especially in the face of ethnic profiling and institutional racism, and for failing to properly transmit African identity, history, and culture.[817] Resultingly, Manço et al. write, Belgo-Congolese youth often feel doubly lost: rejected by Belgian society and disconnected from their African roots.[818]

Second, Robert argues that this reality can be understood through Abdelmalek Sayad's notion of 'double absence',[819] which describes the condition of being physically present in a country yet feeling psychologically and socially absent from both home and host country.[820] Ba Ya Ya has linked this notion to Belgo-Congolese youth's experiences of alienation from both their ancestral homeland and Belgium, where they face daily exclusion. Speaking to the alienation from Congo, Manço et al. have highlighted how the 'territorial rupture' following migration was coupled with a 'symbolic rupture', isolating youth from the historical and cultural references of their families.[821] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti have highlighted how young people of sub-Saharan African and Moroccan descent in Brussels describe their experiences as 'living in exile', stemming from systemic racism and discrimination on housing and labour markets.[822]

Third, and crucially, Ba Ya Ya has pointed to Belgo-Congolese youth's internalization of inferiority, stemming from colonial ideology. Reflective of Frantz Fanon's thesis that colonialism's 'galaxy of erosive stereotypes' brings with it an 'epidermalization of inferiority' – the psychological process through which racist perceptions of the dominant white society are written into the skin of the colonized person[823] – Ba Ya Ya has stated that Belgo-Congolese youth have 'internalized the prejudices and racial stereotypes conveyed by Belgian society through the media, advertising and

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[814] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)'. 23; Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 93 – 120.

[815] Ural Manço, Affaires d'identité ? Identités à faire ! Travail social et 'vivre ensemble'. Expériences Bruxelloises (L'Harmattan, 2012), 29–34.

[816] Speaking to this sentiment, Van Hellemont encountered Belgo-Congolese youth labelling themselves as belonging to a 'microwave generation' that must fend for itself. In: Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 116.

[817] See as well: Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil*, 99.

[818] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 25.

[819] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 28.

[820] Abdelmalek Sayad, *La Double Absence. Des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré* (Paris: SEUIL, 1999).

[821] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 28.

[822] Jamoulle and Mazzocchetti, *Adolescences en exil.*

[823] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), 129, 13

folklore'.[824] Following this analysis, Robert says, it is no coincidence that violent incidents occur among racialized youth themselves. Presenting her thesis of 'community self-mutilation', Robert claims that, because of this internalized inferiority complex, young people direct their frustration toward those who resemble the image of Blackness they have learned to despise.[825]

In short, this perspective interprets the phenomenon of 'urban gangs' as symptomatic of much deeper crises of identity formation in Belgium's postcolonial context. In a society where Blackness is continually devalued – both symbolically and materially – some Belgo-Congolese youth come to experience themselves through the very stereotypes that exclude them. Gang affiliation, in this light, becomes both a mode of survival and a misguided strategy for reclaiming visibility, respect, and agency in a public space that denies them recognition.

6.2.1.3.3 The Creation of Change in 2013

When Lakama and Malilutila founded Change in 2013, they extensively built on the groundwork laid by Ba Ya Ya – both in terms of the latter's analyses and the activities it had developed to support young people. Malilutila recalled the founding of Change as follows:

> At the root of it, there was an alarming observation that Dido and I made, which was mostly related to urban gangs. And we are not necessarily talking about drug trafficking, but at least about all the consequences that came with it, notably intra-community murders – that is, rival gangs attacking each other with knives. And often – very often – brothers were losing their lives. In our culture, we have something called the *matanga*. It is the entire period before the body is placed in the coffin. So, when someone dies, before they are buried, the whole mourning period is called *matanga*. And we began to realize, oh wow, this person killed that person. But at the *matanga*, we then realized that the families knew each other. There were shared connections. So we would say, wow, okay now I have to go support my brother, because my son killed his son. You see that situation? And everyone has to keep their cool – it is not easy.
>
> So we had already made that observation, and of course, we had also taken note of issues related to discrimination, police violence, state xenophobia, institutionalized xenophobia. And so, the ASBL Change was created to respond to all these different realities. Because within this ASBL, there were people who had been actors in all of this too – all that's related to urban gangs. And there were also people who had been victims of police violence, and so on. So we said: you are suffering, I am suffering, they are suffering – let's come together so that we don't suffer anymore, and let's make sure our community

[824] Manço, Robert, and Kalonji, 'Postcolonialisme et Prise En Charge Institutionnelle Des Jeunes Belgo-Congolais En Situation de Rupture Sociale (Anvers, Bruxelles)', 33.
[825] Lismond-Mertens, 'Bayaya Contre l'aliénation', 16.

suffers as little as possible. That was the goal of ASBL Change, and it still is to this day, by the way.[826]

Much like CMCLD's claim that its decolonial guided tours respond to the vacuum left by historians and politicians, Change presents its community support work as a response to the 'institutional apathy'[827] that has left its communities to fend for themselves – without any meaningful support to address 'the enormous work that is needed for our youth'.[828] As Malilutila put it: 'We are well aware that we don't count for anything. We count for nothing, so if we don't take matters into our own hands, we will never make it'.[829] When I met Malilutila and Mutuakashala in 2019, they told me that the organization officially had twelve members, though 'in reality only three people'[830] made the decisions: Lakama and the two of them. The demographic Change claimed to address was Belgo-Congolese youth 'between the ages of 6 and 30'.[831] Change organized Congolese gala events, dinners, homework support, and youth activities. In the public arena, it held actions around police violence and supported families affected by it.[832] Simultaneously, it organized a range of activities aimed at making 'African history' more accessible to Afrodescendant youth. According to Malilutila, this focus on historical education is what distinguishes Change from its predecessor, Ba Ya Ya.

Mestdagh: So, what was the link between Change and Ba Ya Ya?

Malilutila: We, we were the members. We were the ones being coached. So now, what we have become… we have also learned our lessons. We also have the experience of Ba

826 Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.
827 Kasidi on 29 January 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
828 Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.
829 Kasidi on 29 January 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
830 Muamba on 29 January 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
831 Muamba on 29 January 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
832 Various actors, including Change and CMCLD, have mobilized around justice for individuals who have died at the hands of the police, including Moïse Lamine Bangoura, Mehdi Bouda, Sabrina El Bakkali, Ouassim Toubi, Ibrahima Barrie, Adil Charrot, Mawda Shawri, and, most recently, Baudouin Pandikuziku. Research into 'police violence' – which in this context should be defined as the unlawful, unwarranted, or disproportionate use of force – is extremely scarce in Belgium. As a result, racialized communities and anti-racist activists can barely rely on scientific research to support their claims. However, human rights reports show that victims of police violence are numerous in Belgium, most of them belonging to racialized minorities (as well as other marginalized groups, including individuals with psychological vulnerabilities). See: Ligue des Droits Humains (LDH), État des Droits Humains en Belgique. Rapport 2023 (ed. Edgar Szoc, 2024), 32, available at https://www.liguedh.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/EDH_2023_WEB.pdf; and A/HRC/42/59/Add.1: Visit to Belgium – Report of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, 14 August 2019, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/42/59/Add.1, 10. Several researchers have stressed the urgency of studying police violence in Belgium against racialized minorities. In response to this gap, several organizations, including the Ligue des Droits Humains and the Observatoire des Violences Policières en Belgique (https://obspol.be/), are actively mapping and documenting cases of police violence.

> Ya Ya, who were the first to do the work. And by the way, that means 'big brothers'. So it is our way of saying: 'We are the big brothers now. We are going to try to guide the younger ones now, because they are doing just about anything'. You see?
>
> Now, what Ba Ya Ya did not do back then is this historical work, because that is what we are missing. I promise you – that is the substance right there. Without it, we will never be complete. It is like a download – the download will never be complete as long as we do not know enough and have not absorbed our own history. And when I talk about knowing our history, it is not to show off or to go flirt with girls and act like some big guy, no. It is so that your brain can wake up. You know, the brain is a muscle and it is important. And this is also a bit the slogan of Change: 'The change starts with oneself'. You see? So we are very coherent in what we do. We start our work by starting with ourselves.[833]

For Change, if Belgo-Congolese youth are to emancipate themselves, it is crucial that they know the past to better understand their own situation and improve the conditions in which they grow up. The next section delves into the kind of memory that Malilutila and Mutuakashala considered important within this project and why.

6.3 Practical and Existential Uses of Memory

This second part of the chapter explores how Malilutila and Mutuakashala frame Change's struggle for racial justice and the specific role memory practices play in it. Drawing from both heroic historical figures and personal life narratives, I show that Change mobilizes memory as a tool for empowerment, self-education, and self-transformation. This makes me understand their memory activism as an example of what Sunneva Gilmore and Luke Moffett describe as practices of 'informal repair' after historical injustice – initiatives that do not prioritize formal institutional redress but instead develop civil society practices focussed on individual and communal healing.[834] Central to Change's approach is a belief in history as a practical and therapeutic resource: a way to (re)build dignity and agency in the face of structural institutional marginalization. Their memory work emphasizes pride, strength, and positive identification, positioning Black heroes as not only subjects of commemoration but contemporary models

[833] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

[834] Sunneva Gilmore and Luke Moffett, 'Finding a Way to Live with the Past: "Self-Repair', 'Informal Repair', and Reparations in Transitional Justice', *Journal of Law and Society* 48, no. 3 (2021), 476.

for Afrodescendant youth. In the last part of this section, I explore how this relation to memory and postcolonial identity puts the organization at odds with a supposed oppressive notion of historical victimhood as 'passive' and 'weak'. I suggest that these tensions reveal a broader political critique of public postcolonial discourse in Belgium and how it defines the terms of remembrance and legitimacy.

6.3.1 Change and Memory Work

The analysis presented above – of racialized youth grappling with a 'double absence' , 'social rupture' but also 'identity suffering' rooted in internalized colonialism – resonates strongly in the discourse of Lakama, Mutuakashala, and Malilutila when they spoke about the motivations behind Change's educational work. As Lakama has emphasized, educating young people is crucial to help them 'stabilize' their 'double culture' by teaching them 'their history and customs'.[835] Like CMCLD, Malilutila and Mutuakashala stressed the lasting impact of colonial propaganda and racist stereotypes on the mentalities of those living in Belgium, particularly the internalized feelings of inferiority among Belgo-Congolese youth. Malilutila recalled how he first became aware of this at age 17, during his time with Ba Ya Ya:

> Through all the books, conferences, and discussions I had with my elders, I eventually realized that we had all been deceived – and even more so, that the colonizers, through colonial propaganda, had deceived not only us, but their own populations. And today, we're confronted with that betrayal, and how it plays out in our daily lives is that the heirs of colonial ideology still believe everything they were told through that same propaganda, namely, that the Black man is a subhuman, because there was a classification of races, and Black people ended up at the very bottom. That Black people didn't have a soul. So, on a spiritual or religious level, we didn't count either. And from that point on, it became easy on the one hand, to plunder our resources, and on the other, to ensure that in the eyes of others, we are always seen through this lens of inferiority. It's really impressive… so hats off to the colonizers, but for us, it's a nightmare, because now, there's enormous work to be done with our youth, and there's also a lot of work to do with our elders. And when I say elders, I mean more our parents, even our grandparents, because they are still deeply steeped in the colonial reality.[836]

[835] ACP, 'Satisfaction du coordinateur de « Change ASBL » de l'arrivée à Kinshasa des jeunes de la diaspora', ACP, 8 April 2021, https://acp.cd/genre/satisfaction-du-coordinateur-de-change-asbl-de-larrivee-a-kinshasa-des-jeunes-de-la-diaspora/.

[836] Kasidi 1 april 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

Much like Fanon's analysis of internalized inferiority and the need for Black role models to counter negative self-images shaped by systemic racism and cultural devaluation,[837] Change pursues a project of educating young people to foster a 'positive' Black identity. Moreover, its understanding of the importance of memory is very much rooted in the idea of the everyday practicality and usefulness of knowing the past. According to Mutuakashala, history must be taught to Belgo-Congolese youth, because it serves like 'road map' to survive:

> So in the end, the way to make it in this society is by knowing your history. History is like a user manual for life in a way, it's one of life's instruction manuals. If life had a guidebook, I would say that history would be one of its key chapters. Because in order to know how to position yourself, but I mean to really position yourself, you need to know a bit of history, really. And we realize this in everyday life. We are confronted with certain situations. But when you don't really care about anything, you don't pay attention to what's happening to you because it doesn't matter. But when you start to take an interest in what's going on around you, when you begin to feel affected by certain things, or even when you experience things firsthand, you realize that you *have* to position yourself. In order to be independent, to have a certain kind of freedom, to decide your own path and so you have to take a stand. But in order to take a stand, you need to know how to take a stand.[838]

Central to Change's mnemonic repertoires are African histories, narratives of Black resistance, and celebrating Black heroes and role models that young people can take pride in. Although colonialism features prominently in Malilutila and Mutuakashala's analyses of both their lived realities and their work, Belgium's colonial past is not the primary historical reference point, or, in the words of Mutuakashala, 'not a priority', in their memory work.[839] What is more, Malilutila at one time even stated that talking about colonialism is counterproductive: 'We, in the ASBL Change, have taught the children, the youth, and we have learned ourselves, that we do not have to talk about colonization. Colonization is a smokescreen, it is a masquerade, it is the tree that hides the forest, hiding who we really are'.[840]

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[837] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 223-232.

[838] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[839] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[840] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

6.3.2 Roots, Heroes, and Role Models

6.3.2.1 Reconnecting with One's Roots

Much like Ba Ya Ya, Malilutila and Mutuakashala connected the issue of 'bandes' urbaines to a deeper sense of rootlessness among Belgo-Congolese youth. As Mutuakashala explained:

> So we linked this, in particular, to the issue of a lack of rootedness and a lack of knowledge about one's own history. By connecting the two, we decided to create something that addressed these concerns together: how to deal with the problem of urban gangs, and how to help young people learn about their history. That's how Dido and Malilutila came to create the organization, with the aim of valuing the history of African communities and helping young people of African descent reconnect with their roots.[841]

During the period of this research, Change's activities primarily focused on celebrating Congolese cultures – for example, through the annual organization of the Gala Lipanda on 30 June, by hosting communal dinners, and by organizing film screenings and accessible events on history. As Mutuakashala explained, this history was initially 'very local. We were just interested in Congolese history, and in the Kingdom of Kongo. Only later did we start to embrace Pan-Africanism, and now, when we talk about history, it is more global'. In our conversations in spring 2019, both Malilutila and Mutuakashala emphasized that when speaking about roots, it is crucial for young people to understand that the African continent, as 'le berceau de l'humanité' (the cradle of humanity), was a great continent long before colonialism and something Afrodescendant youth should learn to take pride in.[842] The importance of cultivating pride in one's roots is reflected in how Malilutila described Change's educational mission:

> All we can do is raise awareness, do prevention work: talk, talk, talk, talk. If Africa is to be liberated, Africans must be educated. You need to put that in your piece. Yes, quote me on it. Yes, that's exactly it. If we want to liberate Africa, we absolutely have to educate Africans – not by telling them who Napoleon was. We don't care about that. We need to explain to them who Thomas Sankara was, who Toussaint Louverture was, who Anténor Firmin was, who Cheikh Anta Diop was. That's what we need to instil in them. And once they are armed with that knowledge, then we can build something.
>
> We can do this through games, board games, through theatre performances, through video clips, through small scenes – you get it? Because we're aware that our audience isn't necessarily the kind to sit through four hours of lectures taking notes. That's just not it.

[841] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 6 June 2019.
[842] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

So we have that aspect… [pauses] we won't call it 'playful', but let's put it that way. Still, for me, the need for cerebral activity is foundational. It's the basis. Your brain needs to work. Your brain needs to function, and what fills your brain has to align with who you are – that's what we believe. That's it. And that's why other nations are strong. In schools here, we barely learn the history of Congo – or if we do, it's just to glorify the genius of Leopold, for example. Otherwise, there's very little said about Congo. They teach us the history of Belgium, the history of Europe – and that reinforces the Westerner's sense of belonging to a strong identity.

But us, Black people – what are we always shown as? Africa, always through a humanitarian lens. It's always about aid. Development, development, development – you see? But there are neighbourhoods in Africa you will never see here in Europe. Never. Beautiful neighbourhoods you'll never find here. Natural resources – a mango tree, for example – you'll never see that here. But that's wealth, you see?

So when I talk to you about mental content, if all we're fed with is Tintin, we'll only produce more Tintins.[843] But if we're taught about all the figures I just mentioned, we'll reconnect to that powerful nation we once were – because we were strong. And that is what we explain to our youth: we were strong. And personally, talking with you now, I actually believe the West was heavily inspired by the best of Africa – by what they saw there. They did two things: first, they took inspiration from the great African empires, they appropriated our reality. Then, after taking everything, they destroyed it all. And we had to start again from scratch – and now we're struggling to start again. Why? Because in our minds, we're thinking about Beyoncé. You see, instead of thinking about who Vita Kimpa[844] was, we are thinking about Rihanna.[845]

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[843] *Tintin* is a popular Belgian comic book character created by Hergé (Georges Remi) in the early 20th century. One of the earliest and most controversial albums in the *Tintin* series is *Tintin au Congo* (*Tintin in the Congo*, 1931), which depicts the young reporter's journey through the then-Belgian colony. The book has been widely criticized for its overtly racist portrayals of Congolese people, who are caricatured as childlike, unintelligent, and subservient. The album reflects and reinforces colonial-era stereotypes and has become a symbol of Belgium's colonial blind spots and the persistence of racist imagery in popular culture. See, for example: Nancy Hunt, 'Tintin and the Interruptions of Congolese Comics', in *Images and Empires. Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin (University of California Press, 2002), 90–116.

[844] Kimpa Vita was a prophet and political leader who founded the Antonian movement in the Kingdom of Kongo Claiming to be possessed by Saint Anthony, she challenged colonial and missionary rule and sought to reunify the Kongo Kingdom. She was executed by Portuguese authorities but is remembered as a symbol of early African resistance and spiritual autonomy. See, Didier Gondola, 'Verzet in Belgisch-Congo: Op Welke Manieren Gaf de Congolese Bevolking Uiting Aan Haar Koloniale Frustraties?', in *Koloniaal Congo. Een Geschiedenis in Vragen*, ed. Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro, and Guy Vanthemsche (Polis, 2020), 228.; Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila*, 48.

[845] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

Several elements characteristic of Change's relation to memory converge in this quote. Historical figures from Congolese and Pan-African histories are presented as an important counterweight to the inferiority and misrepresentation imposed by colonialism. The idea that the content in young people's minds does not align with who they truly are echoes Fanon's concept of internalized colonialism and his notion of black skin, white masks in the book of the same name.[846] The quote also reflects the belief that to develop a strong and positive identity (for memory to function that way in the present), emotions such as 'pride' and 'strength' are more productive ways of relating to the past than, for instance, 'shame' or 'weakness'.

6.3.2.2 Remembering Black Heroes

Pride and strength recur in Change's engagement with 'heroes'. According to Malilutila, the appeal of 'le gangstérisme' (gangsterism) for Afrodescendant youth stems not only from a lack of knowledge of and acquaintance with their African roots, but also from their desire to, in a context where racial stereotypes confine them to a position of 'irreducible otherness'[847] and inferiority, affirm themselves as strong people, even as 'heroes'. Because of this desire, he stated, young people tend to compare themselves to the images and characters about gangsterism and toughness they consume through popular media:

> Malilutila: We have watched too many movies, you see. There are tons of movies… I will send you some titles so you can watch and tell me what you think. And I am telling you now, those movies – they blew the minds of our big brothers. You see, in Belgium, if there were urban 'gangs', it is because there was this movie.
>
> Mestdagh: New Jack City?
>
> Malilutila: Exactly. It is not the only one, but it was the first. Yes, it was the first. And it is like that because in that movie, the hero is a Black man. Yes, that's it: he stands up to the Italians, who have had the mafia established for years. And he comes in, kind of wild. It is madness. (…) But really it is frustration. It is frustration. That is the problem – it is frustration. We are really suffering. We are frustrated, we are frustrated. But actually, we know we were born to be heroes. That is what we tell ourselves. We know that the end of the film is when we become the heroes. But before we get there, there is a whole journey. And sometimes, the small ones ['les petits'] do not want to face that journey.[848]

[846] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

[847] Mazzocchetti, 'Sentiments d'injustice et théorie du complot. Représentations d'adolescents migrants et issus des migrations africaines (Maroc et Afrique subsaharienne) dans des quartiers précaires de Bruxelles', 4.

[848] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

Malilutila here simultaneously signalled the experience of a structural lack of recognition and the need for 'positive identifications' for the young people Change seeks to engage.[849] This form of memory activism, focused on transmitting the legacy of Black heroes, is not unique in the history of Afrodescendant activism in Belgium. It fits into a longer tradition of initiatives that aim to construct 'a kind of hagiography revisiting historic achievements of Black people' – efforts often framed in relation to youth delinquency.[850] For instance, in 2004, the CCAEB (cf. Chapter 1) received funding from the Brussels-Capital Region and local authorities to launch a youth delinquency 'prevention project' in which it, together with MOJA, organized the first 'African Day of Black Heroes' in 2006.[851]

While CMCLD closely aligns its memory work for the broad public with the historiography of Belgian colonialism, Change takes a more eclectic approach in its mobilization of heroic memories. The past here functions as a container of empowering – mostly male – role models in many shapes and sizes, from African anti-colonial figures like Sankara and Lumumba to global icons such as Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and even fictional (super)heroes like Dragon Ball Z characters, the main character in the 2017 Transformers film *The Last Knight*, or the 2019 *Black Panther* film character Erik Killmonger.[852] On social media, Mutuakashala explained, Change aims to encourage 'les changeurs' (the change-makers – as Malilutila and Mutuakashala called Change's members) to share inspirational quotes and images accompanied by hashtags such as #lesherosnemeurentjamais (heroes never die), cultivating a culture of identification with figures symbolizing resistance, resilience, and strength.

Thus, Change's mobilization of memory for racial justice is less concerned with historical research and factual accuracy and more by the direct, practical functions that references to the past can have in the everyday lives of Afrodescendant youth grappling with themselves. The focus on heroes is thus a way of offering young people examples of what success, pride, self-confidence, and strength can look like outside the context of delinquency. Malilutila's earlier analysis, that young people in Belgium are easily drawn to the cultural repertoires surrounding

[849] The need for 'positive identification' is a recurring theme in many of the work cited in this chapter. See in particular Mazzocchetti's formulation: Mazzocchetti, 'Sentiments d'injustice et théorie du complot. Représentations d'adolescents migrants et issus des migrations africaines (Maroc et Afrique subsaharienne) dans des quartiers précaires de Bruxelles', 6.

[850] Petit and Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics within a Changing Context: Belgian Pan-African Associations in a Comparative Perspective', 158.

[851] The motivation MOJA gave for this, is highly similar to Ba Ya Ya's and Change's discourse: 'The hero is the one whose life has been a ceaseless struggle for the liberation of Black people from the yoke of an image and a false history within which those who dominate them try to maintain them. (…) To inform the disillusioned Africans about the capacity of their own people, about the life of these heroes, is to give them back self-confidence and hope for their future. (…) To tell the story of those heroes to the young Africans of Belgium or Europe, is to try to break, at least in their minds, the spiral of self-destruction, of the lack of self-confidence and of the society's rejection' (MOJA, cited in: Petit and Grégoire, 'Communitarian Rhetorics within a Changing Context: Belgian Pan-African Associations in a Comparative Perspective', 159)

[852] Muamba gave this list of figures while talking to me on 1 April 2019. Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

'gang' identities, must therefore be linked to a political critique of the fundamental lack of positive Black role models for racialized youth in Belgium's public space. This absence is felt both in everyday life – in the scarcity of Black teachers, politicians, or entrepreneurs that youth can look up to – and in the realm of popular visual culture.

6.3.2.3 'Acteurs de Changement': Life Narratives of Change Members as Exempla

When Malilutila and Mutuakashala spoke about the importance of knowing the past, they also referred to their own lives – the personal experiences of Change members within the context of 'bandes' urbaines. The life narratives of Change's founders are themselves mnemonic tools to raise awareness among young people. As Malilutila explained: 'The young ones always look up to and imitate the grand-frères, so that is why we as grand-frères must give the good example'.[853] In its search for positive role models, Change therefore draws not only on historical and fictional characters but also on its founders themselves. Co-founder Lakama has positioned himself, on the basis of his own experiences, as a source of inspiration for youth: 'I went through the same journey as those young people who don't feel at home (…) Someone who struggles to express their frustrations. I had a difficult path and went through the bandes urbaines and incarceration. I later realized that this wasn't the best way to express myself'.[854]

When Mutuakashala and Malilutila recounted Lakama's life story to me on 29 January 2019, they emphasized the virtues of resilience, strength, and perseverance: 'Dido, he is someone who lived through les bandes urbaines and who has, against all odds, built a life. This is what we want to show the youth: that survival and other choices are possible'.[855] In this narrative, Lakama himself becomes a charismatic hero – an example for younger generations. When I met Malilutila and Mutuakashala in 2019, they were clearly proud of this. At the same time, they linked Lakama's influence to the shared frustration that, without his presence (he was in Kinshasa), they struggled to mobilize people for activist efforts linked to decolonization. As Mutuakashala put it: 'A lot of people come here for Dido, because they still know him and respect him, but as easy as it is to gather people for Dido, as difficult it is to gather people for "the cause"'.[856]

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[853] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[854] ACP, 'Satisfaction du coordinateur de « Change ASBL » de l'arrivée à Kinshasa des jeunes de la diaspora', ACP, 8 April 2021, https://acp.cd/genre/satisfaction-du-coordinateur-de-change-asbl-de-larrivee-a-kinshasa-des-jeunes-de-la-diaspora/.

[855] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.

[856] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.

6.3.3 Ambiguity Towards the Category of Historical Victimhood

Because of its emphasis on pride, strength, resilience, and heroes, as well as Change members' own historical and social backgrounds, the emancipatory postcolonial identity that Malilutila and Mutuakashala seek to articulate through Change sits uneasily with moral remembrance, particularly with the notion of historical victimhood that is often considered necessary for political claims to memorial justice to be recognized.

At times, Mutuakashala and Malilutila described their work with young people as, in Malilutila's words, a way to help them 'get out of a victim position to become an actor of change'.[857] Mutuakashala drew a sharp contrast between victimhood and agency, suggesting that empowerment begins with refusing to remain in a passive state:

> Someone who doesn't complain about racism, who doesn't complain about poverty, about unemployment, about the conditions they're subjected to – such a person doesn't need to know history. Well, someone who doesn't experience these things, someone who isn't aware, doesn't need to know history. But then that person will remain a victim their whole life. They'll be a victim of their own destiny, unless they become someone who wants to take control of it.[858]

As I previously described, in our first conversation, Malilutila and Mutuakashala expressed deep frustration with the position they found themselves in: as leaders of Change, they participated in public campaigns and commemorative coalitions such as the Lumumba Square initiative, but they struggled to mobilize their own base. Reflecting deeply on this, Malilutila suggested that this difficulty may be linked to the reluctance among some youth to publicly embrace an identity as victims of colonialism:

> We would really like some form of reparation. We would like Belgium to say, 'Alright guys, we get it – Black Lives Matter and all. Here is a million. Go back to Congo. Build your schools, do what you need to do'. But for that to happen, we need to be recognized as victims. Now, the thing is – we're proud. We're the bad boys. You see? We're out there, on the ground. In our language, in our jargon, in our environment, being a victim is seen as weakness. You see, if you're a victim, it means you're weak. It means you're the weakest among us – and the aggressor always wins.[859]

In the same breath, he adds that this rejection of victimhood is linked to pride:

[857] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[858] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[859] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

> But you see, the way we are, not really arrogant but let's say… we are proud, yes, we are too proud, let's say. We tell ourselves: 'They already looted us, we are not going to also play their game and play the victim'. You see, once again, we have a problem with the word victim. We also have a problem with it because, you know, we are *urban guys*, so to speak, and at the end of the day – not me personally, but in a way – it is us who create victims, you see? In our everyday lives, for example. Since we are the so-called gangsters, when someone annoys us, we beat them up, and so we created the victims. You see? But that is really only because we are living in this Hollywood mindset, Rambo, all that stuff, that is why we do not want to be seen as victims.[860]

I began to see Malilutila and Mutuakashala's reflections on victimhood as revealing of the broader contours of the public debate on memorial justice for colonialism in Belgium and of the implicit conditions this discourse imposes on actors who seek to articulate postcolonial demands. What Malilutila expressed in these citations is not so much a rejection of victimhood itself but a rejection of its association with weakness and passivity. His discourse clearly articulates experiences of victimization through institutional racism, police violence in Belgium, and the legacy of colonialism, yet it simultaneously resists their articulation in notions of victimhood imposed from the outside ('play their game'), which he and Mutuakashala saw as incompatible with their pursuit of dignified, active resistance:

> And now I will also tell you that the term *victimization*, well, it is a term that was stuck on us by the colonizers. It is the very people we are complaining about who tell us, 'play the victim'. So once again, it is *they* who define us. And they trap us within *their* paradigm (…). So they said: 'Oh, a victim – that's a loser, a dumb guy'. So if you complain too much, you become that victim. You become that dumb guy.[861]

Change's ambivalence toward the category of victimhood underscores a broader dilemma: how to seek legal, cultural, and material recognition and reparation for systemic injustice when the discursive conditions for achieving these are part of the injustice itself? In the context of postcolonial Belgium, this complexity around victimhood is increasingly recognized. For example, Simona Lastrego, Pauline Grippa and Laurent Licata show that while narratives of victimhood are common in public and institutional postcolonial discourse, they often clash with how decolonial activists perceive and position themselves.[862] In the context of Belgian media, Emma-Lee Amponsah has likewise critiqued the restrictive tropes assigned to Black activists, particularly the image of the 'perfect victim', which she defines as someone cast to recount personal experiences of racism and colonial violence in a way that generates sympathy but not disruption; pity but not

[860] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

[861] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 6 June 2019.

[862] Simona Lastrego, Pauline Grippa, and Laurent Licata, 'How and Why Decolonial Activists Mobilize or Challenge the Victim Status: The Case of Belgium's Afrodescendants', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2023): 824–34.

critique; empathy but not confrontation.[863] Mutuakashala and Malilutila directly poked at these constraints when Mutuakashala stated that 'the only way for us to access our rights is through *victimization*',[864] raising a fear that they must surrender an identity rooted in pride and strength to make their claims legible for institutional recognition. Comparing their approach to that of CMCLD, Malilutila suggested that the latter has better understood this public game he calls 'playing the victim':

> We want to be strong. But what have we actually done to show our strength? We were attacked. And the people who attacked us, especially the police, were never convicted. That's because we didn't want to be seen as victims. That's why they weren't convicted. It's because we rejected the victim status. We wanted to be seen as militants. We went to the police station, we threw stones, eggs, we protested. But no one filed a complaint, for example. No one said, 'Let's get a lawyer and see what can be done legally'. And that's where Mémoire Coloniale is so strong. No one among us thought of that. Why? Because we don't want to be victims.[865]

Mutuakashala and Malilutila's reflections challenge the binary between passive suffering and active resistance, offering instead a political perspective on victimhood not as a marker of weakness but as a position that, in order to subversive, should be able to coexist with dignity, leadership, and empowerment. Their frustrations reflect the ongoing difficulty of affirming such a position within the institutional and discursive frameworks they navigate.

6.4 Activist Self-Presentation and the Struggle for Legitimacy

So far, I have emphasized the differences in how activists of Change and of CMCLD mobilize memory for racial justice. I have shown how Change's approach is rooted more in practical self-transformation, pride, and strength, while CMCLD's public campaign for the decolonization of public space centres more on historical facts, shared narrative, and reconciliation. However, reducing each mnemonic register to a single actor or distinct political ideologies would be reductive and inaccurate. As I noted earlier in this chapter, Malilutila and Mutuakashala's discourse is marked by ambivalence: they, too, articulated memorial recognition claims in a duty-to-remember terminology and emphasized the importance of the

[863] Emma-Lee Amponsah, 'Black Women in and beyond Belgian Mainstream Media: Between Opinion–Making, Dissidence, and Marronage', *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 8 (2021): 1285–1301.
[864] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[865] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

decolonization of public space. Conversely, CMCLD activists also highlighted the role of personal transformation, the celebration of Black heroes and the struggle against police violence. Yet in my conversations with Mutuakashala and Malilutila, they consistently insisted on distinguishing themselves from CMCLD and for me to understand that 'they were different'. This final section reflects on how these articulated differences might not only be tied to different understandings of memory's role in racial justice but also to an internal struggle over activist legitimacy and recognition in an institutional landscape that validates certain memory frameworks and claims while sidelining others.

6.4.1 Navigating Institutions: Between Resistance and Collaboration

A central element of Change's self-presentation is its emphasis on institutional independence. Drawing from a longer history of 'deep hate toward the Belgian state'[866] and lived experiences of institutional neglect in their communities, Malilutila and Mutuakashala defined Change as an actor more resistant to 'co-optation and appropriation'.[867] Their scepticism extended not just to cultural institutions and political administrations but also fellow activists who, in their eyes, became too closely involved with the former. As Mutuakashala put it: 'You think someone is in it for the cause, but then they want to become a city councillor'.[868] This anti-institutional stance and critique of actors with whom they share ideological ground but whom they perceived as politically hijacked, extends for example to Ba Ya Ya, when Muamba claimed the organization was 'co-opted by politics'.[869] They also distinguished themselves from CMCLD, whom they described as 'very institutionalized, very academic'.[870]

Change's claimed anti-institutionalism must be seen as part of a broader, strategic positioning. Like Ba Ya Ya, Change was approached by the municipality of Saint-Josse to act as mediators between Afrodescendant youth and policymakers.[871] Change, too, collaborated with the AfricaMuseum and participated in the Lumumba Square coalition alongside CMCLD and BAMKO-CRAN. In 2020, co-founder Lakama joined the Brussels-Capital Region's commission on public space decolonization (cf. Chapter 1) – though Mutuakashala later stated that Lakama had, through no fault of his own, been 'seduced by politicians'.[872] This reflects a dilemma between resisting the institutions they criticize and trying to work within them to secure small victories and gain public visibility. Yet these comparisons to actors who have been

[866] Van Hellemont, 'The Gang Game: The Myth and Seduction of Gangs', 106.
[867] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[868] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 2 December 2023.
[869] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 2 December 2023.
[870] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 2 December 2023.
[871] Muamba, in this respect, presents Change's work with youngsters as a form of 'deradicalisation work'.
[872] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 2 December 2023.

'appropriated' serve another purpose: they enable Change to perform an anti-institutional identity to claim a particular activist legitimacy and signal loyalty to its grassroots base.

6.4.2 Street Authority

Malilutila and Mutuakashala frequently asserted that Change is an organization 'from the street', characterized by its 'raw', 'anti-conventional', and 'subversive' approach grounded in real, on-the-ground action. As Mutuakashala explained:

> You see, Mémoire Coloniale, they're all about intellectual, academic stuff. Change is a movement made up of people from all walks of life. And we're out there – on the ground. That's where the real work happens. We're not into long speeches and theories. And I'm not saying that to be negative – just explaining how we operate. We're not big on research or statistics. We don't need to know how many Black people experienced this or that and when. If one Black person suffered it – that's already too much for us.[873]

They also emphasized their different backgrounds:

> The others all come from ULB [Université Libre de Bruxelles], from Université Saint-Louis, and all that. But we don't come from there. We come from 'les quartiers' [the neighbourhoods]. We are here a hundred percent. And I say that because maybe my brothers will hear this and think I'm belittling them – but no, it is just the truth and people have to know that.[874]

These quotes show that this is not merely about a difference in method or strategy, but also about a claim to a different activist identity, connected to a different kind of knowledge – street knowledge – and thus a different form of activist expertise that should be considered in its own right. Claiming this 'street authority' involves complex relationships with collective memories of the urban 'gang'. On the one hand, Mutuakashala and Malilutila expressed frustration that other activists still 'see us as those guys from the gangs', stigmatizing them as 'machos' or failing to take them seriously.[875] In those instances, they insisted they had evolved and shared values with supposedly more 'intellectual' actors, such as those involved in the struggle for Lumumba Square and those emphasizing historical education, albeit in different ways. On the other hand, they deliberately invoked their pasts as sources of legitimacy and authenticity, claiming it gave them access to audiences they thought CMCLD was unable to reach. Their lived experience in

[873] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[874] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 29 January 2019.
[875] Author's Field Notes, 'Lumumba Day 2019: Conference' (event organized by CMCLD, Investig'Action, and Kilimandjaro), 17 January 2019, Brussels.

the context of 'gangs' became a form of moral and epistemic capital. Contrasting Change to CMCLD, which Malilutila said lacks 'legitimacy on the ground',[876] Mutuakashala asserted:

> We're out there, and that is why we have the people with us. Yes, we have the people with us. CMCLD, they're too intellectualized. They have been to university. We could go to ULB, but they could never come to the street.[877]

Their critique of intellectualized approaches is, in some instances, pure anti-intellectualism,[878] but in other instances also a political critique of priorities:

> We are more about action and reaction. If someone's in danger – we go save them and then talk later. Mémoire Coloniale, maybe they would first analyse what happened but by then it is too late.[879]

This critique also extends to what they saw as the ineffectiveness of the institutional outcomes of the 'symbolic' campaigns they associated with CMCLD's activism – even if CMCLD activists are equally concerned with police violence. Malilutila here sharply pointed to the selectiveness with which political administrations engaged with some claims and not others:

> Several brothers have died in police cells. We also carried out more direct actions, protests and all that. But in those cases, we didn't get anything at all. Absolutely nothing. (…) No authority has the courage to deal with these cases. So what did they come up with? The decolonization of public space. Changing street names. Giving us Lumumba Square so we calm down for the next twenty years. But that's not what we want.[880]

These articulated differences are not just expressions of different relations to memory or different ideological frameworks. They belong to 'registers of dissent' through which activist groups like Change claim legitimacy to speak in the public arena and in front of different audiences. Change asserts this legitimacy not through historical facts or institutional alliances but through the authenticity of lived experience – the authority of 'the street'. I interpret its ambivalence toward moral remembrance and intellectual activism not as a rejection of those registers per se but as a protest against policymakers' assumption that such registers represent all Afrodescendant voices or all Afrodescendant memory claims. Distinguishing themselves and highlighting different accents is to me, fundamentally, a call for the recognition of a

[876] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.
[877] Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[878] This is again, ambiguous, because as I have shown in this chapter, Change in fact does value intellectual labour. Their critique of what they perceive as overly academic or institutionalized approaches to history, rather shows that they also value forms of knowledge rooted in lived experience, and practical application, and that they see those as important to be able to reach less educated youth.
[879] Kasidi in: Muamba Bakafua Mutuakashala and Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, double interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 1 April 2019.
[880] Kasidi Makasi Malilutila, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, audio, 8 March 2024.

multiplicity of dissident voices and the different kinds of experiences and knowledge on which these are based – and for institutions to take all those voices seriously on their own terms.

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the activism of Change ASBL as a distinct and often overlooked form of decolonial memory work, shaped by its roots in the lived experiences of Afrodescendant, Belgo-Congolese youth in the neighbourhoods of Saint-Josse-ten-Noode in Brussels.

First, I have shown how Change mobilizes memory in existential and therapeutic ways, rather than as a tool for civic education or political lobbying. Unlike memory activisms centred around the decolonization of public space or aimed at broader audiences – as practiced by, for example, CMCLD – Change claims to engage with the past to, first and foremost, support the psychological well-being and identity formation of racialized youth. While Change members also engage in campaigns that seek to change public memory of the colonial past, they prioritize memory's transformative function in helping individuals rebuild a sense of pride and self-worth in the face of structural marginalization, racial stereotyping, and what they call 'identity suffering'.

Second, I argued that this inward-looking, therapeutic approach is connected to a mnemonic register that highlights heroes and role models, which can stimulate pride, strength, resilience, and resistance. I have suggested that this might be partly rooted in the gendered legacy of 'gang repertoires', in which notions associated with masculinity – power, toughness, self-reliance – continue to shape the ways memory and identity are imagined. While trauma, historical injustice, and victimhood are omnipresent, they are reframed as obstacles to be overcome rather than as identities to be claimed. According to Malilutila and Mutuakashala, this presents challenges in a political context where they feel asserting a victimized identity is a prerequisite for advancing decolonial claims.

Third, I highlighted Change's ambiguous relationships with political institutions and the broader activist field. Deeply distrustful of state actors, Change presents itself as a proudly independent, anti-institutional force. While it occasionally engages with institutional processes or funding opportunities, it strives to maintain a public identity as a grassroots, 'streetwise' actor that stands apart from what it perceives as an elitist and overly intellectual memory movement.

Finally, I explored how these tensions are not necessarily a reflection of opposing political ideas but rather a result of self-presentation and the quest for legitimacy within a fragmented and

competitive activist network. Even though some members have similar educational backgrounds as members of CMCLD, Change strategically claims a working-class and street-rooted identity to distinguish itself from other organizations. It thus asserts its authority not in historical expertise but in the authenticity of lived experience.

Taken together, these findings invite a broader reflection on the diversity of decolonial memory claims in Belgium, encouraging future scholars to critically assess how institutional developments during Belgium's decolonial moment have (partly) legitimized certain narratives while marginalizing others.

Chapter 7 Reparative Truth Telling from Below: Les Assises Décoloniales, Epistemic Impeachment, and Belgium's parliamentary 'Congo Commission'[881]

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 The Creation of the Congo Commission

On the 17th of June 2020, the Belgian federal parliament accepted a resolution to install a special parliamentary commission – colloquially known in the public debate as the 'Congo Commission' or the 'truth and reconciliation commission' – to investigate Belgium's responsibility in Belgium's colonial rule in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, and its effects until

[881] Note to the jury: This chapter was drafted in 2022, shortly after the activities of Les Assises Décoloniales. I am aware that subsequent developments concerning the Congo Commission are not yet incorporated here, and that the chapter could benefit from some serious polishing to improve its structure and better align it with the overall narrative of the dissertation. This chapter is also the only one in the dissertation that has not yet been sent for revision to the people represented in them. I commit to updating and streamlining this chapter in the final version of the dissertation before the public defence.

today.[882] The resolution was drafted by Benoit Hellings, Zoé Genot and Wouter De Vriendt of Groen and Ecolo, Belgium's green parties. Earlier attempts to decide upon a similar resolution in 2014 and in 2017 were never accepted by the majority in parliament.[883] In this instance, following the heated momentum of George Floyd's death and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests in Belgium, the resolution passed, and plans were made to install the parliamentary commission and to create a panel of 'experts' to support the parliamentarians.

Many of the activists who put the issue on the agenda at first considered the parliament's decision proof that Belgium had finally heeded the call of years of activism to confront its colonial legacies.[884] This initial optimism changed quickly, however, and in the following months, even before the start of the commission's activities, some started to openly oppose its mandate and the process of the selection of experts.[885] While some continued to hail the commission as 'historic', 'a great opportunity', and already a form of recognition in the sense that the federal parliament finally decided to take the colonial past 'seriously', many started considering the commission to be a lost cause from the start, and 'a change without a real change'.[886]

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[882] Bart Brinckman, 'Kamer bestudeert koloniale erfenis van België', De Standaard, 17 June 2020, https://www.standaard.be/nieuws/kamer-bestudeert-koloniale-erfenis-van-belgie/47769380.html.

[883] For these earlier resolutions, see: 'DOC 53 3570/001. Proposition de résolution concernant le devoir de mémoire de l'Etat belge à l'égard de son passé colonial au Congo, au Rwanda et au Burundi (déposée par Mmes Zoé Genot et Eva Brems)', 23 April 2014, https://www.lachambre.be/flwb/pdf/53/3570/53K3570001.pdf.; Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 54 2307/001. Proposition de Résolution Concernant Le Travail de Mémoire à Mener En Vue de l'établissement Des Faits Afin de Permettre La Reconnaissance de l'implication Des Diverses Institutions Belges Dans La Colonisation Du Congo, Du Rwanda et Du Burundi (Déposée Par MM. Benoit Hellings, Wouter De Vriendt et Dirk Van Der Maelen)', 14 February 2017, https://www.lachambre.be/FLWB/PDF/54/2307/54K2307001.pdf.

[884] As Christian Lukenge said in June 2020: 'After Black Lives Matter, Belgian politics could no longer afford to lag behind. We forced them to take position, and this is a good development'. In: Justice Now Podcast (ed. Liliane Umubyeyi and Amah Edoh), Righting historical wrongs: Belgium's colonial past and the quest for justice, 2020, in: https://justicenowsymposium.wordpress.com/resources-2/

[885] My overall impression of this mixed reception is heavily shaped by my interactions with Christian Lukenge, who was my neighbour in Schaerbeek between May 2020 and June 2022. In June 2020, we daily went on walks in Schaerbeek's Parc Josaphat to talk about the Congo Commission. As a member of PTB, he was actively lobbying during the political process negotiating the format and expert composition of the commission. He also co-initiated the creation of the Collectif d'Associations Congolaises, Burundaises et Rwandaises de Belgique (CaCoBuRwa) (cf. infra). In: Author's Conversations with Christian Lukenge between January 2019 and June 2022, Brussels.

[886] As Véronique Clette-Gakuba summarized both the positive aspect and the issues with the commission: 'The positive effect of the commission is that it will motivate us, I think, because there's already some work (…) it's already proof that efforts at raising awareness and politicizing the issue have succeeded. We know that it is ultimately the result of a victory'. And later: 'The postcolonial problems that mark Belgium arise at a time when Belgium is losing moral authority, when it is in crisis, and when there is a need to adopt a different kind of politics, both internally within Belgium and in its relations with African countries. When the Belgian state is facing a crisis of legitimacy, it commissions the problem, but this does not lead to real change – only to change without change' In: Justice Now Podcast (ed. Liliane Umubyeyi and Amah Edoh), Righting historical wrongs: Belgium's colonial past and the quest for justice, 2020, in: https://justicenowsymposium.wordpress.com/resources-2/

7.1.2 'From Truth to Reconciliation, What is Missing are Reparations'

A notion resurfacing in the various critiques in opinion pieces, on social media and in activist meetings is that of 'reparations'. Although the resolution describing the objectives of the parliamentary commission clearly employs a language of 'repair', activists critiqued the absence of an explicit framing of the parliament's work as an attempt at 'reparation'. In her reaction to the commission's instalment, Mireille Tsheusi-Robert, president of the Afro-feminist collective BAMKO-CRAN publicly stated that from truth to reconciliation, what is missing is the question of reparations.[887] An open letter initiated by BAMKO-CRAN and Change addressed to Patrick De Wael, member of the Flemish liberal party and then president of the chamber of representatives, demanded that the 'truth and reconciliation' commission be reoriented so as to include the question of 'reparations'.[888] An report spearheaded by the Collectif d'Associations Congolaises, Burundaises et Rwandaises de Belgique (CaCoBuRwa) [Collective of Congolese, Burundian, and Rwandan Associations of Belgium] asked the commission to not only concentrate on 'symbolic' measures, and stressed that no justice for colonialism could ever be obtained without reparations – understood as financial compensation and the restitution of African objects and human remains.[889] On September 24, 2020, a collective of voices led by Change presented a report in the Brussels francophone parliament directly demanding that the word 'reparation' would be explicitly included in the description of the commission's objectives.[890] This public articulation of reparation claims among Afrodescendant decolonial activists in Brussels is rather new.[891] In contrast to France, where there has existed an organized

[887] Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, paraphrased from a Facebook post, dated 14 September 2020 (no longer accessible as of 28 April 2025), in which she argued that 'from truth to reconciliation, what is missing is the question of reparation'.

[888] 'Lettre Ouverte: Pour une nouvelle orientation de la Commission "Vérité et Réconciliation"', Mediapart, 7 July 2020, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/plis/blog/070720/pour-une-nouvelle-orientation-de-la-commission-verite-et-reconciliation.

[889] CaCoBuRwa is a body established after the creation of the Congo Commission to bring together the diversity of demands among different Afrodescendant communities in Belgium and to form a united front towards the Congo Commission. It drafted this report – at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – in collaboration with BAMKO and two law firms with expertise in the field of transitional justice (Avocats Sans Frontières and Jus Cogens). In: ASF - BAMKO - CaCoBuRwa - JusCogens, 'Mesures de Justice Transitionnelle Pour Faire Face Aux Séquelles Des Graves Violations Des Droits Humains et Du Droit Humanitaire Commises Dans Des Contextes Coloniaux : Le Cas de La Belgique', 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Truth/CallLegacyColonialism/CSO/ASF-BAMKO-CaCoBuRwa-et-JusCogens.pdf.

[890] As Dido Lakama stated: 'We also ask them to immediately rename this commission by including the word REPARATION – after all, isn't it said that a confessed fault is half forgiven???' In: Dido Lakama, 'Remerciements', *Rapport de La Société Civile Afrodescendante En Preparation de La Commission de Vérité Au Parlement Fédérale*, 24 September 2020, 2.

[891] As the previous chapters in this dissertation have shown, public claims revolved around 'recognition', 'citizenship', and later, colonial memory (mobilized in political negotiations in a 'duty to remember' discourse). Reparation claims for colonialism – understood as financial compensation – have concentrated on specific aspects of colonial injustice,

social movement for financial reparations headed by Louis-Georges Tin for years, no such public movement concentrating on the demand for reparations for colonialism – or at least not in that terminology – developed in Belgium.[892] The question of why the Belgian case differs in this regard from its neighbouring countries dealing with the legacies of empire is a question beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, I will investigate in this chapter the interpretation of one aspect of 'reparations' among decolonial activists since 2020.

In October 2020, the Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes illégitimes (CADTM), picked up on these critiques and wrote a twenty page report on financial reparations to send to Wouter De Vriendt, the Congo Commission's chair, to advice the commission's experts.[893] According to the report, the issue of financial compensation for colonial crimes had to be explicitly included as an objective for the commission in order for it to be able to ever arrive at '*real* reparations'.[894] Yet, while also welcomed, some Afrodescendant activists criticized CADTM's report, arguing it promoted 'the wrong kind', instead of the 'real' kind, of reparations.[895] CADTM's approach to reparations in financial terms was reproached not only for not sufficiently taking into

but never on colonial injustice in general. As Chapter 1 briefly mentioned, five women sued the Belgian state for crimes against humanity in 2020, each demanding a financial compensation of 50.000 euros for the forced displacement of métis children during colonial rule. In: Sébastien Giron and Aline Wavreille, 'Cinq métisses assignent l'Etat belge en justice pour crimes contre l'humanité - RTBF Actus', RTBF, 24 June 2020, https://www.rtbf.be/article/cinq-metisses-assignent-l-etat-belge-en-justice-pour-crimes-contre-l-humanite-10528232.

[892] Louis-Georges Tin, *Esclavage et Réparations. Comment faire face aux crimes de l'histoire* ... (Stock, 2013). Tin co-founded France's Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France (CRAN) [Representative Council of Black Associations in France] in 2005. This umbrella organization brings together Black associations across France to advocate against racial discrimination and for the recognition of colonial and postcolonial injustices. CRAN has been particularly active in calling for financial reparations for slavery and colonialism. Together with Mireille Tsheusi-Robert, Tin has also established the 'État de la Diaspora Africaine' (State of the African Diaspora, or SOAD), a transnational initiative aimed at uniting Africandescendant populations globally into a cohesive political and cultural entity. Building on the African Union's recognition of the African diasporas as a 'sixth region' of Africa, SOAD seeks to provide a structured platform for individuals of African descent living outside the continent to contribute to Africa's development and to address shared challenges faced by diaspora communities worldwide. SOAD is not an official governmental body – though it employs the terminology of 'state', 'president' and 'ministers' to denote its leaders – but it functions as a symbolic and organizational framework to mobilize the African diaspora's resources and influence in support of continental and global African interests. See 'State Of African Diaspora | Africa', accessed 28 April 2025, https://thestateofafricandiaspora.com/.

[893] As a reminder, the CADTM (established in Belgium in 1990) is an international network of organizations fighting against 'illegitimate debt' of countries in the 'Global South', linking these debts to colonial and neocolonial economic injustice. It has in Belgium also been active as an actor working around colonial memory and co-created the Collectif Mémoires Coloniales (cf. Chapter 4). While I was carrying out this research, its legitimacy to carry forward decolonial claims was at times questioned, because of the organization's composition of mostly white people as well as its strong focus on financial reparations, insufficiently connecting it to psychological repair, but also to questions of representation – focussing on the outcome (reparations) rather than on the process (who can speak?). My understanding of CADTM is heavily shaped by my repeated interactions with Robin De Lobel, who was an active volunteer – and also helped draft CADTM's report for the Congo Commissions – between 2018 and 2021. In: Robin Delobel, interview by Eline Mestdagh, Brussels, written notes, 16 September 2020.

[894] CADTM, Rapport sur les réparations des crimes coloniaux et des dettes illégitimes (2020), 17.

[895] Author's Field Notes, 'Conférence: Comptoir de la Dette – Dettes Coloniales, Reconnaissances et Réparations' (organized by CADTM), 10 March 2021, Online.

account the 'loss' and pain many Afrodescendants experience on a personal level[896], but also for speaking on behalf of Afrodescendant communities in Belgium, while being written by an organization primarily consisting of white people.[897]

The controversies that followed both the installation of the Congo Commission itself – due to its lack of commitment to reparations – and the work of NGO's lobbying for monetary reparations – due to their limited view of reparations – raise the question of how Afrodescendant decolonial activists understand the elusive concept of 'reparations'. Various factors can account for the tensions between the commission and some Belgian decolonial organizations, among which one can cite the lack of trust in Belgian institutions after decades of seeing good intentions gone bad or promises not kept (cf. previous chapters). In this chapter, I argue that for some organizations, the stakes extend beyond a mere lack of trust. The tensions surrounding the Congo Commission's mandate and composition can, at least in one crucial instance, be traced to fundamentally different conceptions of the relationship between truth-telling and reparations. Beyond calls for financial reparation, what emerges is a parallel and equally vital demand for epistemic reparation: a demand for the recognition and validation of Afrodescendant knowledges and experiences as legitimate sources of truth in their own right. Thus, the critique directed at the commission was not only about material justice, but also about the need to repair epistemic injustices rooted in the colonial past and reproduced in the present.

7.1.3 Truth Telling *as* Reparations?

In the wake of the creation of the commission, a variety of discourses have developed about the concept of 'reparations'. Although these cannot be condensed into a single narrative, some tacit understandings of what aspects are essential to speak of reparations came to the fore. This chapter focuses on one aspect of this tacit understanding of reparations. It does so by zooming in on one initiative launched by decolonial activists shortly after the announcement of the instalment of the parliamentary commission. Doubting that the Congo Commission could ever sufficiently consider the concerns and reparatory needs of the African diasporas BAMKO-CRAN launched its 'counter-truth commission' on June 30, 2020. BAMKO-CRAN called this initiative Les Assises Décoloniales, thereby appealing to a strong judicialized discourse. Gathering over a hundred participants living in Belgium, Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, the objective of the working group of Les Assises was to write its own, community-based, report

[896] Aymar N. Bisoka, 'L'absence et ses masques.', Mediapart, 9 October 2020, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/plis/blog/091020/labsence-et-ses-masques.

[897] Criticism voiced by several audience members during this conference: Conférence "Comptoir de la dette: Dettes coloniales, reconnaissances et réparations", *CADTM Belgique*, 10 March 2021, with Anaïs Carton, Aymar N. Bisoka , and Eline Mestdagh.

on the truth of Belgium's colonial past, its relation to the present, and the steps necessary to work towards reconciliation and reparation.[898]

To make sense of this initiative and why the initiators deemed it necessary to install a counter-truth-commission even before the group of experts of the parliamentary commission presented its report, this chapter draws on Margaret Urban Walker's understanding of 'truth telling as reparations'.[899] With the international rise of the principle of the 'right the truth' after violent conflict and historical injustice, truth telling has often been seen as an important first step towards reparations, and an attempt to first determine the facts about what happened so that the necessary reparative measures can be defined and executed accordingly.[900] According to Walker, however, one can also look at the processes of 'truth finding' and 'truth telling' as reparative in itself. Whereas in the first conceptualisation, there is an obvious role for historians and scientific 'experts' to determine the 'facts' of the violation, in the second account the structural consultation and participation of victims, descendants, and other citizens becomes crucial for the project to succeed. Walker's account of truth telling *as* reparations, can, I argue, help us understand, first, the ongoing and wide-spread scepticism of Afrodescendant activists towards the Congo Commission, and second, some aspects of tacit understandings of 'reparations' present in this scepticism. As I will show, instead of calling on a 'right to truth', activists in Les Assises Décoloniales in first place call on a 'right to be taken seriously'. While interrelated at times, these are in essence two different political demands that have different implications for the composition of 'truth telling' commissions and the kind of legitimacy they can claim.

Walker cautions scholars and policymakers that they 'need to keep a clear sense of what it is that reparative measures are attempting to repair'.[901] Based on fieldwork with BAMKO-CRAN during the activities of Les Assises Décoloniales from June 2020 until May 2021, this chapter argues that, for the activists involved, one important aspect of that which needs to be repaired is the 'epistemic impeachment', or the non-recognition of epistemic legitimacy, of decolonial activists specifically and African an Afrodescendant communities in general. As such, this chapter confirms and illustrates Christina Pauls' thesis that some decolonial memory activisms not only challenge public representations of memory, but 'fundamentally challenge and transform the epistemological foundations of collective memory itself'.[902]

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[898] BAMKO, 'Assises Décoloniales,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bamko.org/assises-d%C3%A9coloniales.

[899] Margaret Urban Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', *Metaphilosophy* 41, no. 4 (2010), 525–45.

[900] Yasmin Naqvi, 'The Right to the Truth in International Law: Fact or Fiction?', *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 862 (2006), 249.

[901] Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

[902] Christina Pauls, 'Struggles over Memory? Decolonial Memory Activism as Epistemic Struggle against Eurocentrism', *Zeitschrift Für Friedens- Und Konfliktforschung* 13, no. 2 (2024), 437.

7.2 Belgium's Congo Commission and Truth telling

7.2.1 Truth Telling and Reparations in their Historical Contexts

The concept of reparations is notoriously broad and lacks 'a systematic effort to define' it.[903] Consequently, as scholars have noted, proponents and opponents often understand the term 'very differently', making it difficult to determine what exactly is at stake in demands for reparative justice.[904] In its classical Aristotelian formulation, reparations simply imply 'setting things right': restoring victims to the condition they would have enjoyed had the injustice not occurred. Justice is seen as achieved when 'perpetrators' return what was unjustly taken.[905] Following this view, it is unsurprising that discussions around reparations for colonial injustice often highlight their perceived impossibility.[906] Colonial harm, after all, involves in most cases deceased perpetrators and victims, deep structural injustices that defy easy financial valuation, and enduring forms of inequality. As a result, it is difficult – both morally and legally – to imagine a full 'return' to a pre-injustice state in an Aristotelian sense.[907]

It is the context of such 'impossibility arguments'[908] that scholars have over the past decades advocated for a broader understanding of reparations.[909] Rather than a singular act of compensation, reparations are increasingly conceptualized as part of a broader repertoire of measures aimed at acknowledging harm, tackling contemporary inequalities, and rebuilding societal trust. These measures include restitution, material compensation, public apologies, truth-telling initiatives but also memorial initiatives such as commemoration.[910] One crucial development in this broader repertoire has been the rise of truth-telling initiatives in the second half of the twentieth century. Emerging from human rights discourses of the 1970s and 1980s,

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[903] John Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: On Reparations Politics* (Harvard University Press, 2006)
[904] Alfred L. Brophy, *Reparations: Pro and Con*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.
[905] Janna Thompson, *Should Current Generations Make Reparation for Slavery?* (Polity, 2018), 8.
[906] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Comprendre Les Réparations: Une Réflexion', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 44, no. 173/174 (2004), 25–40.
[907] On the legal difficulties of obtaining reparations for colonial injustice, see: Larissa van den Herik, 'Addressing "Colonial Crimes" through Reparations?: Adjudicating Dutch Atrocities Committed in Indonesia', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 10, no. 3 (2012): 693–705. And: Kato Van der Speeten, 'Reparations for Colonialism: What Does Belgium Owe Its Former Colonies? An Exploration of the Possible Belgian State Responsibility to Make Reparation for Its Colonial Past with an Assessment of Different Reparation Forms', *Jura Falconis* 57, no. 2 (2021): 499–570.
[908] Margaret Urban Walker, 'Making Reparations Possible: Theorizing Reparative Justice', in *Theorizing Transitional Justice*, ed. Claudio Corradetti, Nir Eisikovits, and Jack Volpe Rotondi (Routledge, 2015), 212.
[909] Daniel Butt, 'Repairing Historical Wrongs and the End of Empire', *Social & Legal Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 227–42.
[910] Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

the 'right to truth' affirms that victims of grave human rights violations – and their communities – have a right to know the full facts of what occurred.[911] Closely linked to the state's duty to investigate and prosecute serious abuses, truth-telling initiatives have as such become the cornerstone of transitional justice.[912] Their forms vary widely, from public acknowledgments and memorials to educational programs, the declassification of archives, and formal investigations.[913] Truth-telling is in that respect often seen as a necessary first step: a means to lay the groundwork for more concrete or material reparative measures.

7.2.2 The Congo Commission

The Congo commission that was launched in June 2020 places itself, at least rhetorically, in this broader international tradition.[914] It made Belgium 'the first former colonizer to establish a truth commission dealing its overseas colonial legacy'.[915] It was a special parliamentary commission, composed of parliamentary representatives of all parties, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right. At the beginning of August 2020, a team of ten experts were appointed to write a preliminary report that would guide the work of the commission. This institutional arrangement, consisting of a combination of a politically composed commission and a sub-commission of external experts, was in fact similar to the Lumumba Commission from 2000-2001.[916] In its composition, the commission thus differed significantly from the (variety of) Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC) we know from the examples in South American countries, and in Sierra Leone, or South Africa.[917] Yet, the Congo Commission

[911] Naqvi, 'The Right to the Truth in International Law', 251 and 255.

[912] Transitional justice refers broadly to both the field of study and the policy practice concerned with how societies address the legacies of human right abuses, violence or repression after a period of (civil) conflict, dictatorship and, increasingly (settler) colonialism. The notion refers to the period of 'transition' when societies are moving toward peaceful coexistence and democracy. Ruti Teitel, whose seminal work Transitional Justice remains a reference in the field, defines it as 'the conception of justice associated with periods of political change, characterized by legal responses to confront the wrongdoings of repressive predecessor regimes'. In: Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69.

[913] Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations*.

[914] The commission was officially called the 'Special Commission tasked with examining Belgium's colonial past in the Congo Free State (1885–1908), Belgian Congo (1908–1960), and its administration of Rwanda and Burundi (1919–1962), its impact and the consequences that must be drawn from it'. In the public debate, the commission came to be known as the 'Congo Commission' or the 'truth and reconciliation commission'.

[915] Tine Destrooper, 'Belgium's "Truth Commission" on Its Overseas Colonial Legacy: An Expressivist Analysis of Transitional Justice in Consolidated Democracies', *Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 3 (2023), 158.

[916] The Lumumba Commission equally consisted of a commission with members of parliament, composed according to the rule of proportional representation, assisted by a panel of 'experts'. In Bevernage, 'Geschiedenis in overheidsopdracht', 83-84.

[917] In these cases, TRC commissions were usually mandated by the state, but their work was designed to be carried out independent from direct government control to ensure their impartiality. An enormous body of scholarly literature has tackled TRC commissions, but I refer readers to this limited selection of works discussing their political mandates, compositions, work, but also impacts: Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*

explicitly employed a language similar to these historical examples. In its resolution, the mandate of the Congo commission consists of two large tasks: on the one hand 'truth telling' and on the other hand working towards 'reconciliation'.

7.2.2.1 Truth Telling, 'but We Already Know Everything'

Regarding 'truth telling', the parliament defines the task of the commission as follows:

> 1) to provide clarity about the Congo Free State (1885-1908) and about the Belgian colonial past in Congo (1908-1960) Rwanda and Burundi (1919-1962) and draw lessons from this for the future; 2) to examine the role and the structural impact that the Belgian State, the Belgian authorities and non-state actors (such as the monarchy, the Church, the operators of colonial economies, ...) in the broad sense have had on Congo Free State and in the Belgian Congo, Rwanda and Burundi (1885-1962); 3) to examine the economic impact of colonization on Belgium and on the colonized countries, including the ways in which the benefits of the exploitation of Congo have been transferred to Belgium, as well as the persons, companies and institutions that are the beneficiaries of those benefits.[918]

Directly after the publication of the resolution, this truth telling language struck some activists as peculiar, some stating with scorn that 'we already know everything'.[919] The 'right to truth' usually stems from contexts in which, shortly after massive human rights violations, there often remains uncertainty about what really happened, for example because archives were destroyed, because people were afraid to speak, or because historians have not yet been able to do their jobs. The context of the Congo Commission in Belgium differs in that there already existed an important consensus among historians about Belgian colonialism – even if, as I have shown in previous chapters, this consensus is not necessarily adopted by the larger public. With minor exceptions aside, historians also collective acknowledge colonialism's long-term structural consequences – a collective of Belgian and Congolese historians reiterated this point in an open letter around the time parliament voted the resolution.[920]

The 'truth telling' objective in this context thus appears to relate less to achieving historical consensus than to fostering political consensus. During an online information session on 2

(Psychology Press, 2002); K. Ainley, R. Friedman, and C. Mahony, *Evaluating Transitional Justice: Accountability and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone* (Springer, 2016); Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*, First Edition (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003).

[918] Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 55 1462/001. Bijzondere Commissie Belast Met Het Onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) En Het Belgisch Koloniaal Verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda En Burundi (1919-1962), de Impact Hiervan En de Gevolgen Die Hieraan Dienen Gegeven Te Worden', 17 July 2020, 3-4.

[919] Author's Field Notes, 'Congo 60: Hommage Artistique avec Bram Borloo, Eddy Ekete & Precy Numbi', 30 June 2020, Brussels.

[920] Gillian Mathys et al., 'Gebruik historici niet als excuus in de discussie over excuses aan Congo', De Morgen, 16 June 2020, https://www.demorgen.be/meningen/gebruik-historici-niet-als-excuus-in-de-discussie-over-excuses-aan-congo~ba839572/.

February 2021 — held during the global pandemic — between representatives of Congolese, Rwandese, and Burundian communities in Belgium and members of the parliamentary commission, commission chair Wouter De Vriendt repeatedly emphasized that the commission's primary task was to construct a 'shared historical discourse' about the colonial past, building on the existing consensus among historians.[921] In his view, the postcolonial debate in Belgium had become 'so polarized' that society lacked a 'common language' to engage with the past. Parliamentary recognition of an official, consensual narrative, he argued, would be a crucial first step toward creating a shared public understanding of colonial history and, ultimately, toward enabling societal acknowledgment and the possibility of an apology.[922]

7.2.2.2 Reconciliation, but Who is in Charge?

Concerning 'reconciliation', the parliament defines the Congo commission's mandate as follows:

> 4) to formulate recommendations on how to deal with the past in the Congo Free State and with the Belgian colonial past in Congo (1908-1960) Rwanda and Burundi (1919-1962); 5) to develop proposals for reconciliation between Belgians (including Belgians of Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian origin), and to optimize relations between Belgians and Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians; 6) to formulate recommendations on how to stimulate and facilitate academic research on colonialism, post-colonialism and the Belgian colonial period, including recommendations regarding the opening and making available of archives in Belgium, Congo, Rwanda and Burundi and making an inventory of these, further develop concrete proposals to save and preserve our collective history by better protecting the archives of colonization.[923]

It is clear that though 'reparations' is mentioned nowhere, there are nevertheless elements in the text that point in that direction, or that could be understood as 'repair': the resolution, for example, asks 'to what extent symbolic actions – such as the removal or contextualization of monuments that venerate colonial protagonists, offering public recognition and apologies, building memorials for Congolese, Rwandans, Burundians, and other victims of colonization, providing financial support for public initiatives by Afrodescendant communities, restitution

[921] Author's Field Notes, 'Webinar: Congo Commission 'Conversation between Wouter De Vriendt and Congolese, Rwandese, and Burundese Communities" (Online event), 2 February 2021.
[922] Author's Field Notes, 'Webinar: Congo Commission 'Conversation between Wouter De Vriendt and Congolese, Rwandese, and Burundese Communities" (Online event), 2 February 2021.
[923] Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 55 1462/001. Bijzondere Commissie Belast Met Het Onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) En Het Belgisch Koloniaal Verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda En Burundi (1919-1962), de Impact Hiervan En de Gevolgen Die Hieraan Dienen Gegeven Te Worden', 4.

of heritage, and actions in the fields of development cooperation and foreign policy – might help foster reconciliation'.[924]

In the beginning of August 2020, the commission appointed a team of ten experts, five of whom were historians, to draft a first preliminary report that would provide 'a general stated of the scholarship about Belgian colonialism', and that would define the route to follow for the commission in the year after that.[925] The original deadline of that report was 1 October 2020, and then later postponed to 30 June 2021. Eventually, it was only on 26 October 2021, that the final report was published on the website of the Belgian parliament.[926] The main reason cited by the experts for this delay was the difficulty of accessing archives during a pandemic.[927] At the same time, however, the assignment was also an enormous task: the guiding questions were so broad, the time frame so short, and the differences among the experts so great that it would have been an enormous challenge to submit a shared report within the allotted term.[928] On 7 January 2021, one of the appointed experts, the Burundian historian and former member of Burundi's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Jean-Louis Nahimana, passed away, placing additional strain on the Congo Commission's work.[929] This left four experts of African descent among the commission's expert team: Congolese historian Elikia M'Bokolo, historian Zana Etambala, art historian and curator Anne Wetsi Mpoma, and lawyer journalist Laura Uwase. The full panel of ten experts appointed by the commission further included historians Pierre-Luc Plasman, Gillian Mathys, Sarah Van Beurden, political scientist Valérie Rosoux, and legal scholar Martien Schotsmans.[930] Meanwhile, the many Afrodescendant associations that had been instrumental in bringing the issue of colonial memory onto the political agenda were involved only from a distance. In addition to the panel of experts, the commission appointed four 'representatives' of 'the African diaspora' – Geneviève Kaninda (CMCLD), Suzanne Monkosa (Platforme des Femmes de la Diaspora Congolaise de Belgique, and former CCAEB-member, cf. Chapter 1 and Chapter 5), Tracy Tansia (Black Speaks Back), and a 'representative'

[924] Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 55 1462/001. Bijzondere Commissie Belast Met Het Onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) En Het Belgisch Koloniaal Verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda En Burundi (1919-1962), de Impact Hiervan En de Gevolgen Die Hieraan Dienen Gegeven Te Worden', 5.

[925] Mathys and Beurden, 'History by Commission?', 335.

[926] Belgische Kamer der Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'DOC 55 1462/003. Bijzondere Commissie Belast Met Het Onderzoek over Congo-Vrijstaat (1885-1908) En Het Belgisch Koloniaal Verleden in Congo (1908-1960), Rwanda En Burundi (1919-1962), de Impact Hiervan En de Gevolgen Die Hieraan Dienen Gegeven Te Worden – Verslag van de Deskundigen.', 26 October 2021, DOC 55 1462/003, https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462003.pdf.

[927] Mathys and Beurden, 'History by Commission?', 335.

[928] Mathys and Beurden, 'History by Commission?', 334-335.

[929] Dorine Niyungeko, 'Funérailles de Mgr Jean-Louis Nahimana : « Un Homme Juste et Humble »', *IWACU*, 20 January 2021, https://www.iwacu-burundi.org/funerailles-de-mgr-jean-louis-nahimana-un-homme-juste-et-humble/.

[930] 'Dit zijn de experts van de bijzondere Kamercommissie koloniaal verleden', De Standaard, 6 August 2020, https://www.standaard.be/binnenland/dit-zijn-de-experts-van-de-bijzondere-kamercommissie-koloniaal-verleden/41176274.html.

of IBUKA[931] to be consulted at the discretion of the experts.[932] This dual structure introduced an apparent hierarchy between 'experts' on the one hand and 'representatives' on the other, exacerbating concerns about whose knowledge and experience would be considered authoritative within the commission's work.

7.3 Truth Telling as Reparations

The hierarchy established between 'experts' and 'representatives' was heavily contested by scholars and activists in the months following the commission's instalment.[933] These tensions reveal fundamentally different visions of the commission's role in relation to reparation. In her discussion of 'truth telling as reparations', philosopher Margaret Urban Walker distinguishes two models for understanding the relationship between truth telling and reparative justice.[934]

The first – and more conventional – view sees truth finding as a necessary preliminary step: facts must be established before appropriate reparative measures can be determined. Here, uncovering historical injustice and addressing its legacies are treated as distinct tasks, reflected in the very formulation 'ruth *and* reconciliation'.[935] In this model, commissions tend to rely on academic experts, privileging notions of objectivity and scientific authority. The second view treats truth telling itself as a reparative act. In this framework, the collective process of narrating the past helps rebuild trust, recognize victims' experiences, and address the moral damage inflicted by injustice – thereby transcending the distinction between 'symbolic' and 'material' forms of reparation.[936] Consequently, representation – rather than detached expertise – becomes central: legitimacy derives from a diverse and participatory composition that reflects the affected communities.[937]

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[931] IBUKA Belgium is a branch of IBUKA International (meaning 'remembering' in Kinyarwanda), active around the preservation of the memory of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. See: 'Ibuka,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.ibuka.be/.

[932] Their work as aslo not compensated. In: Mathys and Beurden, 'History by Commission?', 339-340.

[933] Olivia U. Rutazibwa, '"Congo" Commissie – Why I Will Not Participate in the Expert Group', // *Olivia U. Rutazibwa* (blog), 21 July 2020, https://oliviarutazibwa.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/congo-commissie-why-i-will-not-participate-in-the-expert-group/

[934] Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', 525 – 545.

[935] Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', 535.

[936] Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', 536.

[937] On legitimacy, Adam Ashforth has, for example, argued that 'truth and reconciliation' commissions are not just 'fact-finding bodies' but are involved in processes of legitimizing some historical narratives at the expense of others – a project for which they themselves have to claim legitimacy – which is mostly done by relying, precisely, on scientific expertise, thereby deflecting or depoliticizing dissent (cf. infra). In: Adam Ashforth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation: On Commissions of Inquiry as Power/Knowledge Forms', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 3, no. 1 (1990): 1–22.

From this perspective, I understand decolonial activists' critiques of the Congo Commission as stemming from a mismatch between its proclaimed aim of building a shared societal narrative and its reliance on a narrowly academic panel focused on establishing historical facts. Commission chair Wouter De Vriendt's emphasis on fostering a 'shared social narrative' sits uneasily with the commission's structure, which mirrors the first model of truth finding. I will illustrate these dynamics through one counter-initiative that emerged in response: Les Assises Décoloniales.

7.4 Les Assises Décoloniales

7.4.1 Reclaiming a 'Stolen' Debate

On 30 June 2020, the sixtieth anniversary of Congolese independence, BAMKO-CRAN, an Afro-feminist association based in Brussels, launched Les Assises Décoloniales. BAMKO-CRAN is an Afro-feminist collective, formally founded as ASBL in 2015 by Mireille Tsheusi-Robert, but building on the work she earlier did with Observatoire Ba Ya Ya (cf. Chapter 6) and, like other actors in this dissertation, the work of Pan-African organizations starting from the late 1980's. As stated on its website, the organization focuses on popular education around racism and interculturality in Brussels and Wallonia, through training sessions, guided tours, and the online publication of accessible articles and books.[938] In this work, BAMKO-CRAN has frequently collaborated with academics who provide feedback, review articles, or share research on race and racism in Belgium.[939] As an anti-racist feminist organization, BAMKO-CRAN actively shapes public debate – particularly through the prominent media presence of its spokesperson and president, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert – on issues 'relating to the defence of the rights of people of African descent and victims of racism, the decolonization of the public space and the 'work of memory' on Congolese and Belgian colonial history'.[940] As I briefly explained in previous chapters, BAMKO became widely known to the broader audience for

[938] BAMKO, 'Bamko asbl | féminisme,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bamko.org.
While revising the footnotes of this chapter on 28 April 2025, the website is no longer online. BAMKO has over the course of this writing process reïnvented itself as Fémïya, roughly carrying out the same activities. See: 'Formations', accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.femiya.org/formations.

[939] BAMKO has particularly maintained a close collaboration with sociologist Sarah Demart, who, alongside scholars Nicole Grégoire and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, has played a key role in pioneering research on Afrodescendant anti-racism and (post)colonial injustice in Belgium. Demart's perspective on Brussels' associative landscape has been deeply shaped by her long-standing collaboration with BAMKO and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, a partnership that began around 2010. She reflects on this positionality in the first chapter of her forthcoming book La Fiction Postraciale. In: Demart, *La Fiction Postraciale Belge: Antiracisme Afrodescendant, Féminisme et Aspirations Décoloniale,* 1 – 31.

[940] 'BAMKO, 'Bamko asbl | féminisme,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bamko.org. (no longer available)

launching and leading the campaign for the restitution of African cultural objects from Belgium in 2017.[941] BAMKO's creation has to be seen in the context of gender politics in the wider associational in Brussels, as Robert has stated repeatedly that other leading organizations CMCLD and Change tended to silence women's voices.[942] Thus, BAMKO explicitly presents itself as a decolonial Afrofeminist organization, centring racialized and female voices. [943]

This same drive to reclaim silenced voices informed the creation of Les Assises Décoloniales. I had been in contact with Robert sporadically for some time when she reached out to me in June 2020 about the necessity of developing an alternative project on 'truth and reconciliation' that would centre Afrodescendant voices, since the Congo Commission was not planning on doing that. Over the course of June and July 2020 we regularly called, and Robert asked me to take on the role of 'secretary' of the project and a position as one the project's Steering Group's members (cf. infra). Robert conceived of Les Assises as a large working group, with the aim to draft a report 'to analyse the consequences of the colonial period, to define the minimum conditions for a 'reparation' in relation to the colonial past, to seek the modalities of historical justice measures, and to reflect on the type of 'memory work' to be carried out, notably in the public space but also in education and in the media'.[944] Central to the project was the commitment to giving 'a voice to the descendants of peoples colonized by Belgium', allowing them a platform to determine for themselves what reparative actions were needed, and on whose terms.[945]

In the charter outlining the project, BAMKO explained:

> After the assassination of George Floyd, the media coverage of numerous racist acts and comments in Belgium, the debates launched around the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence and the start of a Congo commission at the federal level, it seems relevant to us to allow people who suffer the past and current consequences of colonization to speak on their own behalf and to speak outside the political framework of the former colonizing country. In other words, 'do black people have the right to express themselves outside a white agenda? Can they decide when and how they can talk? If the answer to these questions is 'yes', then les Assises Décoloniales are an ideal setting.[946]

[941] Demart, 'Resisting Extraction Politics', 154 (see also Chapter 1)
[942] We have, for example, had a long conversation about the position of men in Belgian antiracism during a dinner we had at her home on 9 November 2019. Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, Conversation with Eline Mestdagh, Brussels. Written notes, 9 October 2019.
[943] Françoise Vergès, *Un féminisme décolonial* (La fabrique éditions, 2019).
[944] BAMKO, 'Assises Décoloniales,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bamko.org/assises-d%C3%A9coloniales.
[945] BAMKO, 'Assises Décoloniales,' accessed 28 April 2025, https://www.bamko.org/assises-d%C3%A9coloniales.
[946] BAMKO. 'Assises Décoloniales - Charte', 18 February 2021, 2.

Most significantly, Robert explicitly framed the project as an attempt to 'decolonize reparations'.[947] Faced with a parliamentary commission that restricted the epistemic profiles eligible for its expert group and sidelined non-academic Afrodescendants, BAMKO-CRAN perceived a serious exclusion – an act of 'institutional appropriation of the post-colonial debate'. In motivating the launch of Les Assises Décoloniales, Robert declared:

> We will not let go until the Belgian, Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian associations are finally respected by the former colonial power. No avoidance of postcolonial face-to-face: the victims of Belgian colonialism have things to say today, and no one will steal this debate from us. It's time we looked each other straight in the eye! If we say return, you must return. If we say reimburse, you must reimburse. Period.[948]

7.4.2 Epistemic Impeachment

This acute sense of moral and epistemic disqualification must be situated within the broader public debate that unfolded alongside the launch of Les Assises Décoloniales, centred on the composition of the Congo Commission's expert group. In June 2020, two experts who had been invited to join the commission publicly declined the offer, citing the structural marginalization of Afrodescendant expertise in the commission's structure and mandate. In a public letter explaining her decision, Nadia Nsayi wrote:

> To my surprise, I see that the four representatives of diaspora organizations are on a separate list. I see no reason not to give them a full place in the expert group. The existence of a 'list of experts' and a 'diaspora list' is a form of segregation. This indicates an uneven view of what expertise is. The unequal treatment of diaspora organizations is an important reason for me not to accept your invitation.[949]

Similarly, Olivia U. Rutazibwa stated:

> The traditional understanding of expertise as 'academic' knowledge is incredibly problematic, given that those who have been asking for this conversation for half a century and are the expert witnesses of the consequences of colonization in their daily

[947] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Conférence Inaugurale' (organized by BAMKO-CRAN), 2 October 2020, Brussels.
urale (Brussels, 2 October 2020).
[948] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Conférence Inaugurale' (organized by BAMKO-CRAN), 2 October 2020, Brussels.
[949] Nadia Nsayi, Facebook post, 21 July 2020, https://www.facebook.com/nadia.nsayi/posts/10222732812345678 (link no longer accessible as of 28 April 2025).

> lives (both in Belgium and in the former colonies), have been robbed of their right to give this Commission substance and direction.[950]

Both were responding to a preparatory note drafted jointly by the Royal Museum for Central Africa (AfricaMuseum) in Tervuren and the Belgian State Archives, advising Belgium's federal parliament on the commission's mandate and composition of the expert panel, following the June 17 resolution.[951] Though intended to remain confidential, the note was leaked to the media, sparking instant consternation among Afrodescendant associations, their allies, and scholars.[952] One source of outrage was the fact that the parliament tasked, of all institutions, the AfricaMuseum with this advisory role – an institution long contested for its colonial entanglements, as discussed in previous chapter. But the note also drew criticism for its narrow focus on the colonial past at the expense of ongoing injustices and 'the colonial present'. Most crucially, the note proposed a racialized hierarchy of expertise in its advise on the panel of experts: on one side, a list of 'experts' – overwhelmingly composed of academically trained, predominantly white individuals – on the other, a list of 'opinion makers' ('voix d'opinions'), populated by activists but also by Afrodescendant academics who, despite their qualifications, were relegated outside the category of 'expert'.[953] Following the leak of the preparatory note, BAMKO-CRAN spearheaded an open letter to then-President of Parliament Patrick Dewael, denouncing the artificial distinction between 'experts' and 'diaspora representatives' and demanding a structural inclusion of Afrodescendant voices in the commission's work.[954] Although the composition of the expert panel was subsequently revised, allowing each political party to nominate experts, the underlying structure remained unchanged: 'experts' would draft reports, while 'diaspora representatives' could be consulted at the discretion of the commission (cf. supra).[955]

This struggle over who should be mandated to carry out the Congo Commission's truth telling tasks is not unique to the Belgian case but can be situated within a broader critique of the

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[950] Olivia U. Rutazibwa, '"Congo" Commissie – Why I Will Not Participate in the Expert Group', // *Olivia U. Rutazibwa* (blog), 21 July 2020, https://oliviarutazibwa.wordpress.com/2020/07/21/congo-commissie-why-i-will-not-participate-in-the-expert-group/.

[951] Royal Museum for Central Africa. 'Avis MRAC/CE 'Commission de la vérité et de la réconciliation passé colonial belge' (leaked note in author's possession)

[952] Simon Grymonprez, 'Diaspora zet Congocommissie meteen onder hoogspanning', De Standaard, 13 July 2020, https://www.standaard.be/nieuws/diaspora-zet-congocommissie-meteen-onder-hoogspanning/47780099.html.; 'Lettre Ouverte: Pour une nouvelle orientation de la Commission "Vérité et Réconciliation"'.

[953] Among them were Nicole Grégoire, Olivia U. Rutazibwa, and Véronique Clette-Gakuba. In: Royal Museum for Central Africa. 'Avis MRAC/CE 'Commission de la vérité et de la réconciliation passé colonial belge' (leaked note in author's possession), 10.

[954] 'Lettre Ouverte: Pour une nouvelle orientation de la Commission "Vérité et Réconciliation"'

[955] The composition of the expert panel was also the subject of debate among historians, with some arguing the commission should focus solely on historical truth-finding, leaving the task to professional historians, and others warning against reducing memorial justice to a matter of historical accuracy alone, emphasizing the need to include broader forms of expertise (cf. Chapter 1). See: Bevernage et al., 'De Verlammende Angst van de Historicus'; 'Eerst Het Onderzoek, Dan Het Debat'.

mechanisms through which official commissions define expertise and confer legitimacy. As Adam Ashforth has argued, commissions of inquiry seldomly are 'neutral' instruments of truth-finding; rather, they are inherently power/knowledge forms, deploying specific configurations of authority to 'stabilize' contested narratives.[956] According to Walker, such regulating the 'truth' prompt us to understand truth telling initiatives as not only 'discovering or 'archiving' facts, but as instruments that 'create conditions under which it is reasonable and remains reasonable to believe what is in fact true about episodes of violence or oppression'.[957]In this respect, Astrid Jamar and Aymar N. Bisoka have suggested that the Congo Commission served to 'pacify' dissident voices by 'neutralizing' postcolonial tensions in Belgium.[958] According to Ashforth, commissions of inquiry create what he calls 'schemes of legitimation': mechanisms through which particular voices are authorized to speak credibly about past wrongs, while others are marginalized or silenced.[959]

In this light, the artificial separation between 'experts', 'voices of opinion' and 'diaspora representatives' can be read as a paradigmatic instance of Ashforth's insight: the very structure of the Congo Commission instantiated a racialized hierarchy of credibility, privileging academic expertise (typically white and Eurocentric) over, not only the lived experiences of Afrodescendant communities, but also the academic expertise of racialized scholars.[960] Here, we can again bring in Marget Urban Walker, who referred to such systematic discrediting of victims' and oppressed groups' authority to speak credibly about their own histories of injustice with the concept of 'epistemic impeachment'. Epistemic impeachment, she writes, is the 'the condition of living under a diminished status of epistemic authority' where one's testimony about lived oppression faces pervasive scepticism.[961] After historical injustice, she writes elsewhere, 'victims, or oppressed people often have to labour under extreme burdens of proof and are deprived of a status of credibility to hold others accountable'.[962] Within the context of the Congo Commission, Afrodescendants in Belgium found themselves once again subjected

[956] Ashforth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation', 2-3.

[957] Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', 539.

[958] Astrid Jamar and Aymar N. Bisoka, 'Pacification du passé colonial belge : auto-érotisme et décentrement décolonial', Mediapart, 10 February 2022, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/plis/blog/100222/pacification-du-passe-colonial-belge-auto-erotisme-et-decentrement-decolonial.

[959] Ashforth, 'Reckoning Schemes of Legitimation', 10.

[960] As I have shown in the previous chapters, this dynamic is not limited to the Congo Commission. The interactions between Afrodescendant communities and Belgium's political and cultural institutions, including the AfricaMuseum and BOZAR, have been marked by struggles over legitimacy (cf. Chapter 1, Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Chapter 5). These accumulated collective experiences of being discredited and marginalized shape any ongoing and future institutional interactions, including those with (white) academics like myself. See: Clette-Gakuba, 'Epreuves de Colonialité Dans l'art et La Culture. Faire Exister Un Monde Noir à Bruxelles. Thèse Présentée Par Véronique Clette-Gakuba En Vue de l'obtention Du Grade Académique de Docteur En Sciences Politiques et Sociales', Clette-Gakuba, 'An Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation in a White Institution: The Case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium', Demart, 'Resisting Extraction Politics', Demart, 'Afro-Belgian Activist Resistances to Research Procedures'.

[961] Walker, *Moral Repair*, 92.

[962] Walker, 'Truth Telling as Reparations', 536.

to such impeachment: despite decades of activism, scholarship, and first-hand experience, they were relegated to the margins of the truth-telling process.[963]

Seen together, Ashforth and Walker thus reveal how the Congo Commission's structure not only perpetuated existing colonial epistemic hierarchies but also actively impaired the reparative potential of its truth-seeking mandate. In failing to recognize Afrodescendant knowledges as equally authoritative, the Congo Commission re-enacted the very injustices it claimed to redress. Long-standing denials of grave historical wrongs thus not only perpetuate the original harm but also compound it with enduring moral and epistemic injuries.[964] It was against this backdrop that BAMKO-CRAN launched Les Assises Décoloniales. Since the Congo Commission lacked proper representation of the relevant expertise, its legitimacy and moral authority to carry out any truth telling project related to the colonial past was in the eyes of Mireille Tsheusi-Robert heavily undermined, prompting the need for a counter-project.[965] Within this context, the very notion of reparations was reinterpreted. It was no longer solely about material compensation or historical recognition, but also about two critical demands: (1) acknowledgment of the continuity of epistemic injustice, and (2) acknowledgment of the knowledge claims and epistemic status of those who have long borne its burden.[966]

7.4.3 Les Assises Décoloniales as a Repair for Epistemic Impeachment

The truth telling initiative of Les Assises Décoloniales can be seen as an attempt at overcoming epistemic impeachment. Robert explained that les Assises would allow the 'victims of Belgian colonialism' to speak their minds about truth, reconciliation, and reparation without being silenced by the 'old colonial and the new neocolonial powers'.[967] To compose its working group, BAMKO-CRAN launched an online call for applications on 6 July 2020, and received

[963] In a simiar vein, Miranda Fricker, from a feminist perspective, has theorized epistemic injustice as 'a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower'. She differentiates between two types of 'epistemic injustice': 'testimonial injustice', wherein a speaker is discredited through the prejudice of the listener, and 'hermeneutical injustice', wherein inequality in access to resources disadvantages someone to make sense of their experience. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 1, 16-17, 147.
[964] Walker, *Moral Repair*, 92-95.
[965] Robert on 31 August 2020. Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 31 August 2020, Brussels.
[966] In the report Afrodescendant associations presented to advice the Congo Commission, earlier experiences of being epistemically impeached were explicitly stated and drawn from as examples for the commission on how not to do it. Monique Mbeka Phoba, Desti Kahuka, and Papa Wetshi, 'Analyse et Leçons à Tirer Des Expériences Précédentes de Négociations Paritaires Dans La Relation Pré et Post-Coloniales Entre Belges et Africains Anciennement Colonisés Par La Belgique, Hier et Afrodescendants de Belgique, Aujourd'hui', *Rapport de La Société Civile Afrodescendante En Preparation de La Commission de Vérité Au Parlement Fédérale*, 24 September 2020.
[967] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Conférence Inaugurale' (organized by BAMKO-CRAN), 2 October 2020, Brussels.

hundred and twenty one resumés of people willing to participate.[968] The candidacies predominantly came from people living in Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo, but also from people living in Brussels and Paris. The work of Les Assises started in September 2020. As an enormous undertaking, involving writing a report together with over hundred twenty people from various backgrounds living in four different countries, the work initially started off rather chaotically. A small team of volunteers formed a 'steering group' which met up several times to divide all participants in different sub-groups according to loosely defined themes and selected members for each group based on the backgrounds and expertise that was mentioned on the curriculum vitaes. Overall, twenty five sub-groups were created to work on themes as diverse as 'gender', 'environment', 'politics', 'health', 'racism', 'colonial injustice', 'language', 'culture', 'arts', 'economics', 'energy' and even 'sports'.[969] The plan was for each group of experts to meet regularly and produce a report of twenty-five to thirty pages on their assigned theme, guided by a central question: 'what would it mean to 'decolonize' your field?'[970] Every three months, all groups would convene with the steering group to identify overlaps, divergences, and emerging patterns across the different themes. I served as a member of this steering group, acting as its 'secretary' – taking detailed notes during meetings and reporting back to Robert through a shared Google Drive we made. The aim was to have Les Assises publish its own 'counter-report' by June 2021 – coinciding with the initial expected release of the preliminary report by the expert panel of the Congo Commission – synthesizing the work of all subgroups into a collective document.

However, things did not unfold as planned. The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the fact that many participants lived outside Belgium, made in-person meetings impossible. After a brief lockdown-free window over the summer of 2020, starting from November/December onwards all of our interactions moved online. Poor internet connections – particularly for participants based in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi – frequently disrupted meetings, with participants dropping in and out, resulting in chaotic discussions.

At the same time, the steering group, composed entirely of volunteers, including myself, began to feel the strain of coordinating such an ambitious project without any institutional support or enough manpower to keep the project going. Participants online increasingly raised the urgent need for a budget – to fund more stable internet connections for participants on the African continent, to provide modest stipends for volunteers dedicating their time, and to

[968] Launch of the call: Mireille-Tsheusi Robert, Facebookpost, 6 July 2020, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3401787699851963&set=pob.1208531866. We discussed the resumés during our first meeting on 31 August 2020 in a steak restaurant on the Avenue de la Toison d'Or in Brussels, close to Porte de Namur. Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 31 August 2020, Brussels.
[969] We drafted this list together on 26 October 2020 in the lobby of the hotel Motel One on the Rue Royale in Brussels. In: Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 26 October 2020, Brussels.
[970] As Robert explained on 26 October 2020, and as mentioned as well in the charter we created to streamline our work. Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 26 October 2020, Brussels.; BAMKO. 'Assises Décoloniales - Charte', 18 February 2021.

finance translation and editing services for the drafting of the report. In our online crisis meetings, Robert often stressed – sometimes half-jokingly – that this situation precisely illustrated why financial reparations are so necessary: to support grassroots initiatives that allow African and Afrodescendant communities to articulate their own perspectives on their own terms.[971] By May 2021, after almost a year of enormous work and a struggle to find new volunteers to assist us, the steering group eventually decided that the work would be too complicated to complete under these conditions and we agreed to halt the proceedings. Although the initiative ultimately ended prematurely, I think the initiative still is revealing of both the political demands vis-à-vis the Congo Commission as well as of some grassroots understandings of what a decolonial 'truth and reconciliation' commission should entail. Based on my work for Les Assises between June 2020 and May 2021, in the remainder of the chapter I will zoom in on two features of Les Assises that have informed my understanding of it as a grassroots attempt at reparatory truth-telling. First, the emphasis placed from the outset on the long-term nature of the process; and second, the careful attention devoted to ensuring that the working group responsible for guiding and drafting the report was genuinely 'representative'.

7.4.3.1 Reparation as a Long-Term Process

From the very beginning, les Assises Décoloniales made it clear that they considered the project to be 'long term', that the truth telling project had to be one with 'a longue halaine'.[972] The initiative was presented as a ten-year-project, in which many different actors would operate and rotate. As Robert explained, this rotation was necessary for the project to be carried by communities rather than by individuals.[973] At the same time, the steering group was asked to closely monitor the process: Robert drafted strict deontological codes to make sure that no micro-aggressions would take place throughout the discussions and the writing of the report, and she paid much attention the methodology of the meetings.[974] Each sub-group of experts had to appoint two spokespersons - both had to be of African descent, and it was considered important to appoint one female and one male spokesperson to avoid 'men taking up all the space'.[975] When moderating the conversations in which the representatives had to provide feedback to the steering group on their ongoing research, strict rules applied about who could speak and how much time each person was allotted, in order to guarantee a balance between different speaking positions.[976] Robert explained to us that such as approach was necessary to

[971] Robert reiterated this point during an online presentation of Les Assises's proceedings to inform Belgian Afrodescendants. Author's Field Notes, 'Conférence: Les Assises Décoloniales' (Online event), 21 December 2020.
[972] Author's Field Notes, 'Conférence: Les Assises Décoloniales' (Online event), 21 December 2020.
[973] Les Assises Décoloniales. 'Communiqué de Presse', 14 September 2020.
[974] BAMKO. 'Assises Décoloniales - Charte', 18 February 2021
[975] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 26 October 2020, Brussels. 2020).
[976] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 26 October 2020, Brussels.

combat the risk of one particular group speaking for a very diverse group of Afrodescendents living in Belgium and Africans living on the continent.[977]

This strong sensitivity to a broad-based legitimacy has to be seen in the context of earlier debates among activists concerning BAMKO's legitimacy to lead the project, given that it is primarily composed of individuals of Congolese descent, with limited Rwandan and Burundian representation, and predominantly socialized in Belgium, resulting in relatively little familiarity with the lived realities of the African continent – an issue that also came up when Achaïso Ambali (another steering group member) and I met with the representatives of the subgroups on 25 February 2021.[978] These debates quickly revealed not only the absence of a shared vision of what 'reparations' for Belgium's colonial past should entail but also how divergent historical experiences posed challenges for unanimity. The deliberate effort to include multiple perspectives and to balance speaking opportunities can thus be understood as an attempt to mend internal fractures within the and foster more cohesive relations over the course of the truth telling process itself. In her discussion of truth-telling as reparations, Margaret Urban Walker highlights the importance of precisely such process-oriented, interactive approaches for repairing damaged relationships. [979]

7.4.3.2 Representation, Legitimacy and the 'Evidence of Experience'

In response to the perceived lack of legitimacy and moral authority within the Congo Commission's expert panel, les Assises Décoloniales worked to position itself as an alternative and credible truth-telling body for the colonial past. From the outset, representation was a central concern. During our meetings, Robert was less preoccupied with participants' specific areas of expertise than with the symbolic legitimacy of the group as a whole. To establish such legitimacy, she insisted that the steering group include members of Congolese, Rwandan, Burundian, and Belgian backgrounds – indeed, my own inclusion as a white Belgian woman was motivated largely by the need to embody this representational principle.[980] Interestingly, this commitment to representational diversity did not apply equally across all axes: despite several men of Rwandese descent volunteering when Robert was in the process of establishing the steering group, she kept the search going for a woman of Rwandese descent, stressing the importance of an all-female guiding team.[981] Ultimately, the steering group consisted of five women: two of Congolese descent, one of Rwandan descent, one Burundian descent, and one

[977] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 26 October 2020, Brussels.
[978] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Meeting with Subgroups' (Online event), 25 February 2021.
[979] It is also in this context that we must understand the critiques to CADTM's solo slim. Besides putting forward "the wrong" conception of repairs, a purely financial one, the report also skipped this process of listening to a variety of voices in order to arrive at some kind of consensus, denying particular experiences that were not taken into account.
[980] (As well as my willingness to put in free labour) Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 31 August 2020, Brussels.
[981] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Steering Group Meeting', 31 August 2020, Brussels.

white Belgian (myself). In shaping the broader expert sub-groups, the emphasis again fell on ensuring representational legitimacy, particularly by involving participants based in Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo.

In the selection of participants, little attention was paid to the academic credentials of the people who applied. Instead, emphasis was placed on ensuring a representational balance of different speaking positions, reflecting an implicit assumption that expertise stems from 'the evidence of experience' – from belonging to a particular group, growing up in a specific context, or inhabiting a certain gendered position.[982] Drawing on Sheila Jasanoff's distinction, les Assises thus pursued a 'view from everywhere' in its truth telling project, foregrounding the importance of bringing together an ensemble of different historical experiences and knowledges, seen as opposed to the Congo Commission's 'view from nowhere', privileging the establishment of an objective narrative of the colonial past based on the idea of detached academic expertise.[983]

Along the way, however, it became clear that there were limits to the 'view from everywhere' approach if Les Assises was to come up with a report intelligible to audiences beyond its own members. In the steering groups, concerns were raised about the 'expertise' of some participants, as many lacked the skills to draft policy recommendations. During a meeting of the steering group in January 2021, one member openly voiced concerns about the 'expert' status of some participants, noting that several were not sufficiently familiar with the Congo Commission, decolonial theory, or even colonial history.[984] At the same time, she expressed strong sympathy with Robert's intentions in bringing African and Afrodescendant voices together to speak on their own terms – thus poking at a dilemma that would resurface repeatedly in the months that followed.

In seeking to claim legitimacy for Les Assises among different diasporas, BAMKO placed a strong emphasis on representativeness. Yet it was also clear that other forms of legitimacy were necessary if they were to be taken seriously by the Belgian institutions they sought to challenge. Although Les Assises Décoloniales operated independently, outside of established institutional frameworks, the initiative ultimately sought recognition from precisely those institutions it distanced itself from. This 'paradox of recognition' reveals the persistent dependency on external acknowledgment to overcome epistemic impeachment: the final report, scheduled for publication in June 2021, needed to be taken seriously by the federal Congo Commission.[985]

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[982] Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991), 773–97.

[983] Sheila Jasanoff, 'The Practices of Objectivity in Regulatory Science', *Social Studies of Science* 22, no. 4 (1992): 673–708, cited in: Dietlinde Wouters, 'Who Are the Members of Truth Commissions?', in *Knowledge for Peace*, by Briony Jones and Ulrike Lühe (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 149-150.

[984] Author's Field Notes, 'Les Assises Décoloniales: Online Steering Group Meeting',13 January 2021.

[985] This paradox is what has led Glen Coulthard to, in the context of settler colonialism, claim that (state-driven) politics of recognition 'entrench the very power relations that recognition was supposed to transcend', when communities

This requirement gave rise to internal tensions over who should be considered the appropriate 'experts' to carry out the work of Les Assises.

On the one hand, Les Assises needed to demonstrate that Afrodescendant communities possessed the right to speak on *other* grounds of legitimacy than those foregrounded by the Congo Commission; on the other, they needed to appeal to conventional understandings of 'expertise' to secure institutional recognition. The choice of Robert to frame Les Assises as a 'truth and reconciliation commission', drawing on the internationally recognized framework of transitional justice framework and mobilizing the language of 'truth', should be seen in this light.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter analysed the emergence and trajectory of Les Assises Décoloniales as a counter-initiative to Belgium's federal Congo Commission, through the lens of Margaret Urban Walker's notion of 'truth-telling as reparations'. I argued that Les Assises illustrates a conception of truth-telling and reparations as inherently interconnected: truth-telling is not merely about establishing historical facts but about repairing epistemic injustices experienced by Afrodescendant communities in Belgium. The main criticisms voiced by decolonial activists against the Congo Commission focused on the absence of a commitment to 'reparations' (though understandings of what that entails varied) and the lack of Afrodescendant voices in the Commission's design, composition, and operations. This exclusion was seen as a continuation of epistemic injustice — an 'epistemic impeachment' of Afrodescendants as legitimate speakers on colonial injustice.

In response, Les Assises Décoloniales sought to reclaim epistemic authority by centring Afrodescendant perspectives, emphasizing the importance of process over product, and striving for a representative and participatory truth-telling initiative. The activists' focus on the diversity of voices and the representativeness of the process reveals two things. First, it illustrates an awareness of the situatedness of knowledge and knowledge practices.[986] 'Truth' here is thus not achieved through the tools of historiography but through the bringing together of the historical experiences of different racialized and cultural groups in their own right. Second, the emphasis on representativeness was also a way for Les Assises to claim its own

have to cater to the state's predefned conditions for recognition. In: Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 24-27.

[986] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partical Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

legitimacy as a carrier of the truth-telling project vis-à-vis a heterogeneous constituency of Afrodescendant and African voices. The chapter further showed that the ways in which legitimacy was claimed varied depending on whom Les Assises sought to address. The focus that Les Assises placed on drafting a substantial report aimed to lend epistemic authority to the voices assembled in Les Assises in relation to the Congo Commission. The mobilization of an internationally established transitional justice framework of 'truth and reconciliation' likewise served to legitimize the project.

Ultimately, this chapter showed that Les Assises viewed 'reparations' not solely as material compensation for past harms but as the restoration of epistemic dignity in the present. As such, it illustrates how memory activism during Belgium's decolonial moment not only tackles the representations of colonial memory but also the epistemic rules structuring who is allowed to speak – and on what grounds. In doing so, Les Assises Décoloniales also exemplifies how truth-telling initiatives can become grassroots acts of epistemic resistance.

Conclusions

The central questions of this study were how and why Afrodescendant anti-racism activists have articulated the link between 'memory' and racial justice during Belgium's decolonial moment (2010 – 2021). These questions are meant to intervene in the burgeoning literature on 'memory activism'. I situated the scholarly interest for 'memory activism' in a broader debate concerning the relationships between memory and social transformation. Alongside the growing focus on memory activism, scholars in memory studies have increasingly questioned whether memory can truly fulfil its promises of fostering recognition, empathy, and democracy in the aftermath of historical injustices. These critiques arise against the backdrop of the collapse of 'cosmopolitan memory', the resurgence of far-right movements across Western societies, and concerns that memory studies may be losing its political edge by examining memory processes in overly depoliticized ways. By shifting their attention to activists – actors by definition committed to social change, whether for progressive causes or otherwise – scholars seem to be searching for ways to respond to these urgent challenges, seeking to demonstrate once more how 'memory is transformative in and of itself'.[987] Speaking to this problematic of the relation between memory and transformation, I asked how activists themselves conceive of memory's promises and limitations in their quest for justice.

[987] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 9.

Memory Activist Campaigns

To investigate how Afrodescendant activists articulated memory's transformative potential, this study zoomed in on three particular memory activist campaigns between 2010 and 2021: 1) the campaign for the decolonization of Belgium's public space, including the lobbying for Lumumba Square since 2015 and the development of guided historical tours since 2010; 2) the campaign to emancipate Belgo-Congolese youth by providing stories of pride and resistance since 2013; and 3) an activist truth and reconciliation commission 'from below' established in 2020 in response to Belgium's parliamentary commission to investigate the colonial past. For each campaign, I asked how the involved activists talked about the importance of history and memory and why they did so. I based myself primarily on participant observation and oral history. Conducting research in a context marked by systemic racism, discrimination, and a history of institutional neglect was far from straightforward. Colonial memory remains highly politicized, and many activists I encountered along the way approached academic research with resistance, wary of having their political demands treated as mere objects of inquiry. As this conclusion will show, in any discussion of colonial injustice participants – knowingly or not – engage in a political struggle over the authority to speak, and historians are no exception to this rule. Research in this field thus necessarily involves a time-consuming and never-ending balancing act between the demands of scholarly rigor and the imperatives of social justice.

Since this study examines how mnemonic claims are articulated across only three memory campaigns, it is not an ethnographic account of the Belgian 'decolonial movement' intended to be representative. First, diversity among actors makes it difficult to speak of a singular decolonial movement at all. Attempting to present them as a cohesive whole risks reifying 'diaspora activism' into a uniform narrative – an essentializing move that is both scientifically flawed and ethically unjustifiable. Second, my own positionality shaped this research's scope. As a white woman affiliated with an academic institution and unfamiliar with African languages, I had access to certain spaces and stories while others remained closed to me. This study thus narrates a story from the vantage point available to me, leaving room for others to correct, challenge or complement it. Because my aim was to investigate how specific campaigns articulated memory's transformative potential, the voices of a few key activists behind these campaigns are overrepresented in this work. This is a deliberate choice, intended to shed light on their political strategies and the ideas about memory that inform them. I do not claim these voices are representative of an entire activist field. Indeed, this ever-evolving field encompasses other many perspectives that remain yet to be heard and understood.

Three Registers for Claiming Decolonial Memorial Justice

The first research question guiding this study was how Afrodescendant memory activists viewed the importance of memory. The answer to this question is: in a variety of ways. In all three campaigns, history and memory played a central role, yet they manifested in distinct forms. Writing this dissertation thus became a process of finding the right language to interpret these differences analytically. Were the different mobilizations of history and memory related to distinct mnemonic regimes or belonging to different 'historical cultures'?[988] Were they expressions of different individual or cultural relationships to the past? Could they be understood as falling into different ideal-typical practices of memory activism?[989] While writing, I found that these divergent mobilizations of history and memory were not necessarily tied to clearly distinguishable sets of political goals or demands, but rather inherently connected to processes of claiming legitimacy. This section of the conclusion therefore proposes to understand the different mobilizations of history and memory by Afrodescendant memory activists as belonging to three registers for articulating the link between memory and racial justice, or three 'registers of dissent'. I call them: a cognitive-academic register, an existential-therapeutic register, and an identity-based representative register.

I understand these 'registers of dissent' as different modes and styles of communication that activists use to express their political claims across different activist positions, memory campaigns, institutional contexts, and audiences. Each register consists of specific vocabularies, tones, narrative strategies, and rhetorical frameworks that allow activists to communicate their demands for racial justice in ways that correspond to shifting audiences and discursive environments. Thinking of activist articulations of memorial justice as 'registers' helped me to avoid interpreting the differences between campaigns as fundamental political disagreements. Instead, it foregrounds how similar political ideas are strategically adapted to different contexts and audiences to claim legitimacy.

Analytically distinguishing these registers is hermeneutically valuable for two reasons. First, it highlights the plurality within Afrodescendant decolonial mobilizations, revealing different ways activists think and speak of the relationship between memory and racial justice. Second, it helps to demonstrate that the struggle for memorial justice is inherently intertwined with a struggle for legitimacy. Below, I first identify the three registers before examining how their composition, in the quest for legitimacy, is shaped by the discursive and institutional contexts in which they are deployed. Although I distinguish these registers for analytical purposes, I do

[988] Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, 'Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited.', in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Maria Grever, Stefan Berger, and Mario Carretero (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 73–89.

[989] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Challenging the Meaning of the Past from Below'

not suggest that they represent rigid, fixed categories. On the contrary, my point exactly is that activists move fluidly between registers, adapting to different contexts and strategic needs – underlining their political agency. Distinguishing registers, then, is not about mapping separate activist identities or political camps, but about providing a heuristic tool to better understand the strategic, relational, and context-dependent dynamics of Afrodescendant decolonial memory activism in Belgium's decolonial moment.

Cognitive Academic Register

A first register can be called a cognitive-academic. Memorial justice is here presented as the public acknowledgement of the 'historical truth' about the colonial past. In this register, the existence of anti-Black racism in Belgium is inherently linked to a lack of historical understanding among the Belgian population about the colonial past. Developing and disseminating historical knowledge is seen as important to deconstruct and historicize apologetic and justificatory narratives. Historical 'knowledge' in this register is closely intertwined with 'historical consciousness': enhancing citizen's understanding of the historical reality of Belgian colonialism and colonial propaganda is considered crucial to developing their awareness of its legacies in contemporary society. The register is therefore closely connected to memory activities oriented towards educating a broader, often also white, audience. 'Historical consciousness' in this register not only entails an understanding of the continuing effects of colonial injustice, but also of colonialism's contingency. By mobilizing historical thinking, activists speaking in this register emphasize that colonial power relations are not timeless realities but the products of historical, political, cultural, and economic processes – and thus open to change. This understanding carves out space for political action: recognizing that colonial power relations are products of history creates the possibility for agency to change and dismantle them. Linking contemporary injustice to a lack of public recognition of 'historical truth', activists here mobilize the work of academic historians and emphasizes the importance of independent and 'objective' historical research. 'Facts,' 'truth,' and 'evidence' run as central threads through this register, invoked to lend historical authority to activist claims. Here, legitimacy is grounded in proximity to the norms and credibility of scientific historical expertise.

I have shown how Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte Contre les Discriminations has shaped their struggle for the decolonization by mobilizing a cognitive-academic register (Chapter 4). Developing and organizing historical guided tours on colonial heritage is a core component of the collective's action repertoire. Both in the language of tour guides and activists' meta-reflections, there is a strong emphasis on historical truth and the scientific rigor of professional historiography. Guides consistently differentiate between 'colonial myth' and 'historical fact' at each site, countering apologetic or colonial narratives with historically grounded deconstructions. They frequently cite historians and reference specific sources to substantiate

their claims, using the language of 'fact' often through detailed listings of dates, figures, and events. At the same time, guides emphasize historical contingency by highlighting political debates and resistance movements that illustrate how colonialism – as a political, economic, and ideological system – was always contested and open to change.

The guided tours are presented as an intervention in the hegemony of colonial narratives in the public space with the tools of the historiographical discipline, 'unmasking' their historical untruthfulness. They are also positioned as efforts to foster historical consciousness among the public, linking memory education to a broader project of citizen education. A recurring theme here is the language of 'shared history'. Colonial history is presented as a history belonging to all Belgian citizens, framing everyone as a responsible agent in the political project of addressing colonial legacies. In doing so, activists resist narratives that confine Afrodescendant memory activism to the concerns of Afrodescendant communities alone. Activists dismissed, for example, Brussels mayor Philippe Close's assertion that Lumumba Square's inauguration is historic to Afrodescendant communities by instead declaring the inauguration historic 'for all Belgians' (Chapter 5).

This way of articulating memory's importance to justice is, as I showed in Chapter 6 closely linked to the language of the duty to remember. I have showed how activists have, next to an insistence of historical truth also mobilized the duty to remember in their political lobbying process for Lumumba Square. I showed how activists' personal relationships with politicians served as key resources in this mobilization and how internationally resonant ideas about the moral imperative to commemorate injustice created discursive opportunities for their cause. In their lobbying, activists invoked the moral responsibility of policymakers to acknowledge the colonial past – recognizing 'what actually happened', the historical relationship between Belgium and Congo, and Afrodescendants as equal Belgian citizens. Again, a cognitive-academic register was central: activists insisted on the shared nature of colonial history to claim a shared political responsibility. They further claimed their legitimacy by referencing international academic consensus on commemoration practices and, in some instances, by drawing comparisons between colonial injustice and the Holocaust.

Existential Therapeutic Register

A second register can be described as existential-therapeutic, linking memorial justice to the public availability of historical narratives that help Afrodescendants form an identity of self-worth and pride. In this register, anti-black racism in Belgium linked to a lack stories in public space that enable racialized minorities to form a stable and positive identity for themselves. Unlike the academic-cognitive register, this register concentrates on the individual emancipation of Afrodescendants, rather than on the project of transforming society through education of a broader audience. In this register, the colonial past is not necessarily the key

historical reference point in activist memory practices. Central to the register is the emphasis on the search for black role models who can serve as contemporary positive examples for black youth. These role models can have a historical link to the colonial past, but they can also be figures from pre-colonial histories, Pan-African history, the civil rights movements, or Belgian Afrodescendant activists themselves. The choice of a particular story is not based on the parameters of 'historical truth' or motivated by reference to historiographical procedures. Instead, it is informed by the contemporary existential and therapeutic functions of the story in the process of self-development in the present.[990] Rather than engaging in a project of deconstructing grand narratives by historicizing them, the register adopts new grand narratives of black pride and resistance. Legitimacy in this register is based on a proximity to lived experiences of Belgo-Congolese youth and insistence of having 'street expertise'.

I demonstrated in Chapter 6 how Change's mobilized memory for racial justice in this register. Founded with the aim of protecting and supporting young Belgo-Congolese people in the context of Brussels' 'gangs' and intercommunal violence, memory played a central role for Change. While the colonial past is not the central reference point in the existential-therapeutic register, it does play a central role in Change's own explanation for the emergence of 'gangs'. I showed how the creators of Change understood youngster's seduction by the tropes of 'gangness' and strong masculinity stemming from a deep-rooted sense of worthlessness and identitarian confusion. Echoing Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonialism's provocation of internalized self-hatred, colonial injustice and contemporary structural racism are seen as the main reasons for Belgo-Congolese youngster's negative self-image. Memory is crucial to Change's project because it seen as resource that can help overcome this sense of identitarian alienation. I showed how the languages of heroism, pride, and resilience are the main threads running throughout Change's mobilization of memory. Because these narratives aim to foster positive reconnections with African roots, I describe this register as 'therapeutic' – a term I borrow from Ronald Niezen and Rafael Verbuyst.[991] Here, memory serves as part of a personal and psychological process of existential 'informal repair' in the face of both historical and ongoing racial injustice.[992] Change's mobilization of memory thus emphasizes psychological repair and pride rather than historical victimhood, channelling memory into a practical and psychological resource for community empowerment. While activists acknowledge the structural legacies of colonial injustice, they prefer to frame their struggle in terms of agency and resilience, prioritizing tangible anti-racist reforms over abstract commemorative policies.

[990] This register can therefore also be understood as leaning more closely to Hayden White's notion of the 'practical past', with the cognitive academic register leaning closer to White's understanding of the 'historical past'. See: Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[991] Ronald Niezen, *The Rediscovered Self: Indigenous Identity and Cultural Justice*, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 149.; Rafael Verbuyst, *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town* (Brill, 2022), 279.

[992] Gilmore and Moffett, 'Finding a Way to Live with the Past'.

The chapter demonstrated how in the case of Change, the existential-therapeutic register is a deeply one, confirming Gutman and Wüstenberg's insistence that 'memory activism is shaped by gendered notions of what deserves to be remembered and represented publicly'.[993] While memory activist literature has specifically concentrated on women and LGBTQ+ activists mobilizing memory, this chapter illustrated that memory can also play a role in male activists' search for 'positive' masculinities. Change's existential-therapeutic register – celebrating strength, resilience and an independence from established institutions emphasizing 'street authority' – remains one informed by the masculine tropes of 'gangness' that have informed its history. Yet by decentring 'gangness' and instead centring anti-colonial heroes, Change's, memory work can be understood as an exercise in reframing masculine values in positive ways, mobilizing them for the objectives of racial justice and strengthening one own's community.

Identity-Based Representative Register

A third register is what I call an identity-based representative register. In this register, memorial justice is framed as the recognition of cultural and racialized groups' lived experiences as distinct and as legitimate sources of a particular historical expertise. Rather than focusing on universal historical truth or shared history, colonial injustice and structural racism are linked to the denial of difference. This contrasts with the cognitive academic register's rhetorical emphasis on universality, humanism, and historical objectivity. The language here instead centres on particularity and the evidential force of lived experience.

An identity-based representative register strategically essentializes cultural and racial identities, assigning the categories of victim and perpetrator across time and social collectives. It tends to be more ahistorical than a cognitive academic register. This ahistoricism serves to highlight colonial continuities and to claim political recognition based on historical victimhood. Strategically amplifying and contrasting distinct historical experiences of different groups functions to illuminate power imbalance and colonial injustice in contexts where too much historicism or historical nuance is seen as obfuscating a clear identification of structural inequality. 'Truth', in this register, is not approached through detached scientific inquiry or the tools of historiography but is understood through a positionalist epistemology – acknowledging that knowledge production is culturally and socially situated.

This register shares the existential-therapeutic register's caution towards Belgian cultural and political institutions as arbiters of racial justice, questioning the authority of historians, policymakers, and officials who are not considered as belonging to the right group or as having the right historical experience. It challenges universalist assumptions embedded in some commemorative and truth-telling initiatives, emphasizing that both the outcomes and processes of memory work must address the needs and voices of different groups in their own

[993] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 14.

right. In this register, the politics of representation is thus central: legitimacy stems from being part of a specific cultural or gendered identity group, and activism aims to secure a seat at the table to assert these perspectives.

I examined in Chapter 7 how BAMKO-CRAN motivated the need for Les Assises Décoloniales – its 'truth and reconciliation' commission in opposition to Belgium's parliamentary Congo Commission – through this register. Afrodescendant activists' initial hopes that the commission would validate their perspectives were quickly dashed when Afrodescendant voices were included as 'representatives' or 'opinion makers', not as 'experts'. This exclusion exposed deep frustrations over the epistemic impeachment Afrodescendant voices have faced in Belgium, in which their activist and intellectual work has been institutionally sidelined. I examined how BAMKO-CRAN formulated this critique on the Congo Commission in an identity-based representative register by developing its own counter-commission. I showed how central to Les Assises Décoloniales was a sensibility to the representational composition of the working group and an effort to balance different speaking positions. This sensibility followed from the instigator's understanding of expertise as following from lived experiences of belonging to a particular group, growing up in a certain place, and having a certain gender. To outside audiences and online, the initiative claimed its legitimacy precisely by highlighting its representative composition. I argued that in the reparative truth-telling attempt of Les Assises Décoloniales, the central claim was less the recognition of some previously unacknowledged historical truth about the past than the recognition and reparation of epistemic injustice – confirming Christina Pauls' suggestion that decolonial memory activisms tackle not only memory's representation but also its epistemic foundations.[994] Mobilizing a transitional justice framework of truth and reconciliation, Les Assises Décoloniales framed 'truth' as arising from the representative involvement of different groups rather than from adherence to the scientific procedures of historiography. In sum, the identity-based representative register frames memorial justice as a struggle over who is authorized to narrate history and claims political legitimacy through representational authenticity rather than universal historical consensus.

The Struggle for Legitimacy

The second question informing this research is *why* Afrodescendant memory activists mobilize memory the way they do. This question can now be reformulated as: why and in what context do activists speak in a particular register?

[994] Pauls, 'Struggles over Memory? Decolonial Memory Activism as Epistemic Struggle against Eurocentrism', 437.

While writing, I first tried to explain the rhetorical differences I encountered based on the educational, socio-economic and personal backgrounds of activists. For example, I illustrated how the campaign of CMCLD grew out of earlier work of Afrodescendant highly educated elites and their close interactions with white intellectuals (cf. Chapter 4). I also hinted that the audiences Change claims to address generally have a different socio-economic profile than this intellectual group. But this explanation is not sufficient, and the reality is more complex. The two key figures of Change I have cited are themselves highly educated, and their activist careers are tied to the same Pan-African intellectual circles that formed the basis for CMCLD (cf. Chapter 6). Similarly, the founder of BAMKO-CRAN has been closely involved in the early years of both CMCLD and Change, belonging to the same social circles (cf. Chapter 7). It would thus be both incorrect and reductive to attribute the choice of a particular register solely to differences in class, education, or gender.

Rather, this section of the conclusion argues that the adoption of a register is intrinsically tied to the assertion of a distinct domain of expertise, serving to secure a legitimate speaking position within the broader societal debate on colonial injustice. Across the memory campaigns studied, the pursuit of memorial justice runs parallel to a struggle for legitimacy in a public sphere in which Afrodescendants have historically been denied such recognition. Each register for articulating memorial justice must be understood in this context of claiming authority, shaped by the specific audiences it addresses and the institutional and discursive environments it navigates. I think that this conclusion nuances the often-invoked binary between 'countermemories from below' and hegemonic narratives imposed from above, instead highlighting the importance of an integrated analysis that sees memory activist claims as emerging from the dynamic interaction between activist ideas and the societal contexts in which they must be made comprehensible and convincing.

Seen through this lens, Afrodescendant memory activism aims not only at reconfiguring public memory of the colonial past, but also at contesting who is authorized to speak about it, and on what grounds. In Ann Rigney's distinction between memory activism aimed at mnemonic change and that aimed at political change, the activisms discussed here seek to achieve both simultaneously. [995]

Different Audiences, Different Registers

Legitimacy must be acquired not only from Belgian authorities and the broader public, but also from other Afrodescendant organizations. Chapter 3 demonstrated how the articulation of a shared

[995] Ann Rigney, 'Afterword: The Multiple Entanglements of Memory and Activism', in *Remembering Social Movements*, ed. Stefan Berger, Sean Scalmer, and Christian Wicke (Routledge, 2021), 229.

narrative of enduring colonial injustice around the figure of Patrice Lumumba was important for the leaders of the Lumumba Square campaign to legitimize the campaign for a highly heterogeneous base. Chapter 4 showed that CMCLD's mobilization of a cognitive-academic register in its guided tours – with its insistence on truth, shared history and shared responsibility – is tied to their audience consisting of both Afrodescendants and white Belgians. Emphasizing that their critique of colonial propaganda is not a claim belonging to a particular interest group but is supported and carried by an academic community of historians is a way to lend more authority to their claims. Framing demands in such a way also facilitates alliance-building and secures the support of influential stakeholders. Chapter 5 showed how activists reformulated the older claim for Patrice Lumumba Square in terms of a duty to remember in their lobbying process for an audience of political figures, mobilizing an internationally recognized policy discourse on the importance of commemoration after historical injustice. Chapter 6 explained how the leaders of Change's ambiguous relations to duty to remember is related to Change's base of Belgo-Congolese youth for whom the deemed 'intellectual' language of commemoration is less tangible or meaningful, and for whom the category of 'historical victimhood' is not necessarily transformative. The chapter showed how Change's leaders grappled with the dilemma of, on the one hand, aligning with the activists of CMCLD in their coalition for Lumumba Square and, on the other hand, maintaining legitimacy for their own audiences. Although individually they at times aligned with the cognitive-academic register – whether from personal convictions or strategic considerations – it was clear to them that this register was not the way to engage young Belgo-Congolese in Brussels. By positioning themselves in opposition to 'abstract' academic language and its close ties with established academic and political institutions, the leaders of Change instead claimed legitimacy based on having 'knowledge of the field' and on 'being streetwise'. Thus, across all chapters, activists frame the relationship between memory and justice in ways that resonate with the specific expectations, priorities, and identities of their audiences – illustrating my point that activist articulations of the relationship between memory and racial justice are tied to the strategic, relational, and context-dependent endeavour of claiming legitimacy.

Memory Activists, Memory Policies and 'the State'

The chapters of this study – especially Chapter 6 – show how Afrodescendant activists often accentuated differences between themselves and other actors within the associational field. Despite substantial ideological overlap, activists distinguished themselves and asserted distinct areas of expertise. These internal dynamics become more intelligible when situated in the broader institutional context.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Afrodescendant mobilizations in Belgium have historically struggled to align diverse associations, a difficulty shaped both by internal divergences and by national and regional policies requiring Afrodescendant organizations to federate before they are

deemed eligible for official recognition and funding. Although many activists in this dissertation emphasized financial and institutional independence, all relied at times on state recognition and temporary funding to support their memory campaigns or eventually sought external recognition. Because access to funding demands framing activities in state-legible language and competition is high, these policies generate tensions among associations, prompting them to differentiate their contributions. Thus, on the one hand, Brussels's Afrodescendant organizations are expected to be able to 'represent' a heterogeneous field – and are cast as such in policy initiatives around the colonial past – while on the other hand, policy-requirements for recognition and funding leads them to differentiate themselves and compete for a seat at the table. Seen like this, we can understand Belgium's civil society funding policies as an example of what Sara Dybris McQuaid calls 'adjacent policies' for memory – policy frameworks not explicitly targeting memory yet significantly shaping how the past is publicly addressed and how 'memory communities' relate to each other.[996] This competitive landscape underscores the need to critically examine how broader civil society policies influence Afrodescendant memory work. Considering the growing political pressures in Belgium attacking the idea of an autonomous, pluralistic civil society, I also think it is urgent for further research to investigate how such trends impact the community-building efforts and the mobilizations around colonial and racial injustice pioneered by activists in this dissertation.

This study also demonstrated that the state plays an undeniable role in shaping so-called 'non-state' activism. These findings contribute to ongoing debates in memory studies about the relationship between memory activism and the state. The *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (2023) catalysed scholarly discussion around Jenny Wüstenberg and Yifat Gutman's definition of memory activism as necessarily 'working outside state channels' – a distinction, I explained, intended to separate activism from broader practices of memory politics.[997] Yet the question of how to define activism in relation to 'the state' remains unsettled. Beyond a mere conceptual matter, this is also a normative issue, raising questions about the authority of scholars to determine who counts as an activist and on what grounds.

Rather than imposing an external label, this dissertation considered 'activist' as a category of self-identification. However, close attention to self-identification reveals the complexity of activism's relationship to state structures. As shown in Chapter 5, several key figures in the Lumumba Square campaign simultaneously embodied the roles of activist, civil servant, and elected official, illustrating the deep entanglement between memory activism and municipal politics in Brussels's local governments. Activists strategically navigated between these roles, again demonstrating their flexibility and agency in combining different positions and languages to advance their cause. Moreover, existing memory policies and policy discourses served as political opportunity structures. Activists strategically adopted 'the duty to remember' (Chapter

[996] Sara Dybris McQuaid, 'Explosive Aftermaths: Reassembling Transnational Memory- and Policyscapes of Victims and Terrorism in the United Kingdom', *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1437.
[997] Gutman and Wüstenberg, 'Introduction', 5.

5) and the transitional justice framework 'truth and reconciliation' (Chapter 7) but also altered their meanings (Chapter 7). Following Sara Dybris McQuaid and Sarah Gensburger, this dissertation argues that memory activism's relationship to the state should be treated as an open, empirical question, to better understand how institutional dynamics and conceptualizations of memory's transformative potential shape, enable, or constrain activist counter-memories.[998]

Some Final Reflections

In the preceding sections, I summarized the key conclusions of this study into three overarching points. First, I demonstrated how Afrodescendant memory activists connect memory and justice through different registers of dissent, identifying three distinct modes in which activists voice their demands. Second, I argued that analysing memory activism through this lens reveals that the struggle for legitimacy is key to understanding how and why activists mobilize memory in their campaigns. Third, I showed how this struggle for legitimacy unfolds within a context shaped by broader policy frameworks, and how both memory policies and adjacent policies influence activists' rhetoric and strategies. In this final part of the conclusion, I would like to offer some reflections – open to debate – on the broader implications of these findings for the scholarly agenda of memory activism, particularly its aim to reinstate or reimagine memory's transformative potential. I summarize these reflections as a call for embracing a radically pluralistic understanding of memory's transformative possibilities in postcolonial societies.

As analytical tools, the registers I identified shed light on the multiple ways in which 'memory' and 'justice' are intertwined in postcolonial Belgium. By revealing the diversity of articulations, this study highlights the pluralism that characterized Afrodescendant decolonial memory activism and its claims between 2010 and 2021. Emphasizing this diversity is crucial, both academically and politically, in a landscape where Afrodescendant memory activism is still too often stereotyped, flattening complex social movements into a singular, monolithic demand. Although academic work on Afrodescendant communities and their activism for memorial justice in Belgium has expanded during the period of this research, there remains much to be done to unpack the multifaceted nature of these movements. Overlooking the diversity of voices and claims risks sliding into essentialism, where memory policies are framed as serving 'the African diaspora' as a unified bloc – thereby inadvertently establishing hierarchies in

[998] McQuaid and Gensburger, 'Administration'.

activist memory claims and marginalizing, or even erasing, certain positions and political demands.

This risk is not merely theoretical. Recognizing Afrodescendant plurality is equally critical in the political arena, particularly in the gradual institutionalization of 'decolonization'. In local government initiatives to address material colonial heritage, a cognitive-academic register often prevails, sidelining alternative approaches to memory and other visions of what transformative memory could entail. Meanwhile, in the polarized political debates surrounding these policies, Afrodescendant demands for memorial justice are frequently caricatured – particularly by (far) right-wing and, at times, also by left-progressive voices – into a reductive and damaging portrayal of the identitarian-representative register. A sharper awareness of the plurality of memory claims and their underlying motivations is thus essential to responding to the core political demand at stake: the recognition of Belgian Afrodescendants as legitimate experts and interlocutors in the societal conversation about the colonial past and its ongoing legacies.

These findings directly contribute to ongoing debates within memory studies about rethinking memory's transformative potential. Scholars such as David, Lefranc, and Gensburger, but also decolonial writers such as Antweiler, Mwambari, and Adebayo, have critiqued the shortcomings of memory models for justice precisely on the grounds of their proclaimed universality and their failure to acknowledge the socially and culturally situated nature of memory claims. They argue that universalizing frameworks risk silencing forms of remembrance that do not conform to dominant models, rendering them epistemically invisible. Building on these critiques, Katrin Antweiler recently advanced an 'abolitionist critique' of memory studies' epistemological tendency to treat collective memory as a monolithic, unified entity. [999] She contends that such conceptualizations inhibit the inclusion of minorities in memory politics and instead advocates for recognizing 'radical plurality' when studying collective memories in superdiverse, postcolonial, and post-migrant societies.

I would like to conclude this dissertation by echoing and reinforcing her call, emphasizing the need to extend this recognition of plurality to our analysis of memory activism as well. To fully grasp what is at stake, we must resist applying assumptions of coherence or homogeneity to activist movements and avoid presuming that memory is inherently transformative. Instead, we must critically examine which mnemonic practices are regarded as transformative, under what political conditions, in what ways, and, most importantly, for whom.

[999] Antweiler, 'Why Collective Memory Can Never Be Pluriversal'.

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