

Mapping the Colonial Past in the Public Space

A Comparison between Belgium and the Netherlands

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Both in Belgium and the Netherlands, the colonial past is currently fiercely debated. This review article discusses recent publications on colonial heritage in the public space in the two countries: an academic monograph on Belgian postcolonial memory written by Matthew G. Stanard, a Belgian walking guide authored by Lucas Catherine, and a series of Dutch slavery heritage guides set up by interdisciplinary authors' collectives. This review article also reflects on the different ways in which Belgium and the Netherlands deal with their colonial past. The decolonisation of the Belgian public space has recently shifted into a higher gear: in 2018, the first prime minister of Congo, Patrice Lumumba, was honoured in two street names for the first time, and in 2019 two cities decided to re-baptise their Leopold II Avenues. Yet, Belgium lags behind the Netherlands in this matter. There, several monuments for heroes and victims from the former colonies have been established and a handful of slavery heritage guides have been published. These guides uncover a past that deliberately had been silenced and assist diaspora groups in creating a memory, by marking significant sites and making slavery legacy visible. Several elements, both from the past and the present, can account for this gap between Belgium and the Netherlands.

Zowel in België als in Nederland is het koloniaal verleden het voorwerp van hevige debatten. Dit recensie-artikel bespreekt recente publicaties over koloniaal erfgoed in de publieke ruimte van beide landen: een academische monografie van Matthew G. Stanard over Belgische postkoloniale herinneringen, een Belgische wandelgids geschreven door Lucas Catherine, en een reeks van Nederlandse gidsen rond slavernij-erfgoed die zijn opgesteld door interdisciplinaire auteurscollectieven. Het artikel staat ook stil bij de verschillende manieren waarop België en Nederland

omgaan met hun koloniaal verleden. De dekolonisatie van de Belgische openbare ruimte is recent in een stroomversnelling geraakt. In 2018 werd de eerste Congolese premier Patrice Lumumba voor het eerst geëerd met twee straatnamen en in 2019 hebben twee steden besloten om hun Leopold II-lanen te herzien. Toch ligt België op dit punt achter op Nederland. Daar zijn verscheidene monumenten opgericht voor helden en slachtoffers uit de voormalige kolonies, en werd recent een handvol wandelgidsen rond slavernijverleden gepubliceerd. Deze gidsen leggen een verleden bloot dat voordien bewust was toegedekt en staan migrantengroepen bij om een geheugen te vormen door belangrijke openbare plekken aan te duiden en de erfenis van de slavernij zichtbaar te maken. Verschillende elementen, zowel in het verleden als in het heden, verklaren deze kloof tussen België en Nederland.

The colonial past is currently a fiercely debated topic in both the Netherlands and Belgium. In Belgium, the re-opening of the AfricaMuseum (the former Royal Museum for Central Africa) in Tervuren near Brussels in December 2018 coincided with resurgent debates about representation and restitution. Television programs, such as *Kinderen van de kolonie* ('Children of the Colony'), which for the first time extensively gave the floor to black voices, furthered these debates.¹ In April 2019 the Belgian prime minister Charles Michel apologised for the removal by the colonial authorities and the Catholic church of metis children from their black mothers. In the Netherlands, the book *Roofstaat* ('Robber State') by Ewald Vanvugt received ample attention after its publication in 2016, among other things due to the involvement of hip hop artists such as Typhoon and Fresku, and the support from the well-known author and television presenter Adriaan van Dis.² In 2017 the Dutch government commissioned a vast and independent research programme on the decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies, which will be presented in September 2021. Meanwhile, this topic leads to new historical research and media coverage such as the series *Onze jongens op Java* ('Our boys on Java'), which features interviews with fourteen Dutch war veterans. In its second issue of 2019 the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* published a forum on the dealing with the VOC archives and its decolonisation. The journal will present another forum on the use of violence during the wars of decolonisation in 2020.³

These debates, research projects and media coverage have also addressed the manifestation of the colonial past in public space. Both countries

1 Jan Raymaekers, *Kinderen van de kolonie* (Kalmthout 2018) collects the stories of fourteen children: four white children and ten black children.

2 Ewald Vanvugt, *Roofstaat. Wat iedere Nederlander moet weten* (Amsterdam 2016). About the context, see inter alia: Harm Ede Botje, "'Je moet de koloniale geschiedenis niet uitwissen maar uitleggen'", *Vrij Nederland*, 16 March 2016,

<https://www.vn.nl/moet-koloniale-geschiedenis-uitwissen-uitleggen/>, accessed on 8 December 2019.

3 Alicia Schrikker, 'Rethinking the VOC: Between Archival Management and Research Practice. Introduction', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 134:2 (2019) 96-102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-1chr.10686>.



Protest against colonial monuments in the Netherlands did not only take place during the last twenty years. This photograph made by Joop van Bilsen shows that in 1962 the text *merdekka* (sic) was painted on the Van Heutsz monument in Amsterdam. *Merdeka* in Indonesian means freedom or independence and was commonly used by Indonesian anticolonial and independence movements. In 2007 local authorities eventually complied with the protest against the monument. They removed all references to Van Heutsz and renamed it Monument Indië-Nederland. © National Archives, The Hague, photo archive of Anefo, photographer Joop van Bilsen, 28 March 1962, 2.24.01.04. <http://proxy.handle.net/10648/agff9202-dob4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>.

indeed have an abundance of material heritage, memorials, and street names celebrating the colonial past. As a result of public debates and sustained protests, two contested monuments in the Netherlands were modified. In 2007, local authorities neutralised the Van Heutsz monument in Amsterdam into the Monument Indië-Nederland (Monument Dutch East Indies-Netherlands), and in 2012, they added a disclaimer to the J.P. Coen statue in Hoorn. Two Dutch institutions changed their name because of its colonial connection: the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (2017) and the J.P. Coen School in Amsterdam (2018).⁴ In addition, various actors built new monuments, dedicated to different groups and themes, such as the veterans of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (for example Roermond 1988 and Leiden 1999) and the victims of the Japanese occupation in the Dutch East Indies (for example Enschede 1960 and The Hague 1988). More recently, monuments equally arose for enslaved persons (Amsterdam 2002, Middelburg 2005, Rotterdam 2013, Hoofddorp 2018), Moluccan migrants (Moordrecht 2006), and the Surinam anticolonial intellectual Anton de Kom (Amsterdam 2006).⁵

In comparison to the Netherlands, Belgium is dealing differently with its colonial memories, and clearly lags behind in adapting its colonial memorials. Since the broadcasting of Peter Bate's BBC documentary *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death* in April 2004, the approximately fifteen monuments for Leopold II spread all over the country have been regularly attacked with red paint and graffiti, and in Ostend a protester even sawed off the hand of the statue of a black person cheering the king's equestrian memorial. However, apart from this missing hand, all of the monuments were restored after these acts of 'vandalisation' and none of them were removed from the streetscape. Gradually, local municipalities decided to place interpretative plaques that contextualised the statues: first in Halle near Brussels (September 2009), later also in Blankenberge, Ekeren, Ghent, Hasselt, Ostend, St. Gilles, Wilrijk, Geraardsbergen, and, most recently (May 2019), in Mechelen.⁶

4 Gert Oostindie, *Postkoloniale beeldenstormen. Daendelslezing 2018* (Leiden 2018) 17-18. Other statues are regularly criticized, though. See for instance on the statue of Piet Hein in Rotterdam: Leon van Heel, 'Wat doen we nu met Piet Hein?', *Algemeen Dagblad*, 27 October 2017, <https://www.ad.nl/rotterdam/wat-doen-we-nu-met-piet-hein-a9137b6d/>, accessed on 1 July 2019, and "'Van mij mag dat beeld weg': Wat doen we met het standbeeld van Piet Hein?", *CBK Rotterdam*, 26 September 2018, <https://www.cbkrotterdam.nl/2018/09/26/van-mij-mag-dat-beeld-weg-wat-doen-we-met-het-standbeeld-van-piet-hein/>, accessed on 1 July 2019.

5 Gert Oostindie, Henk Schulte Nordholt and Fridus Steijlen (with pictures by Eveline Kooijman), *Postkoloniale monumenten in Nederland. Post-colonial monuments in the Netherlands* (Leiden 2011).

6 Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space', *Postcolonial Studies* 18:4 (2016) 397-409; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba? De Belgische (post)koloniale herinnering in de publieke ruimte', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 129:3 (2016) 349-372. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2016.3.GODD>. The list of plaques is based on Matthew G. Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock. Colonial Memories*

Yet, this has for a long time been the major concession to action groups aspiring for the decolonisation of the public space. One of the most iconic campaigns, namely the demand to name an anonymous little square in the Brussels municipality Ixelles after Patrice Lumumba, has not been complied with. As late as in 2018, the two city councils of Charleroi and of Brussels-City (another municipality in the Brussels Capital Region) named respectively a street and a square after the first Prime Minister of independent Congo who was assassinated in January 1961, and in this way were the first to honour a Congolese in the public space. In 2019, two city councils for the first time decided to rename their Leopold II Avenues: Dendermonde in March and Kortrijk in November.⁷

This review article reflects on the Belgian and Dutch decolonisation of the public space by discussing several publications that recently have appeared: a monograph on Belgian postcolonial memory written by Matthew G. Stanard, a Belgian walking guide authored by Lucas Catherine, and a series of Dutch slavery heritage guides set up by multiple authors' collectives. These books under review are highly diverse. The former is an academic study, the latter two are aimed at a broader readership. Yet, these publications allow for a comparison of how both countries currently deal with their colonial past and, more particularly, its reflection in streets, statues and other *lieux de mémoire*. The article first reviews Stanard's monograph on Belgium, in particular his analysis of Belgian (post)colonial memories and his presentation of colonial monuments. The article subsequently analyses the most recent developments in Belgium and wonders to what extent they can be seen as examples of a genuine decolonisation of the public space. Then, the article shifts to the Belgian and Dutch walking guides and discusses the Dutch dealing with colonial heritage. The last section examines the major differences between the two countries and the reasons that account for them.

Colonial memories in Belgium

Matthew G. Stanard is an American professor of history at Berry College in Georgia who spent part of his childhood in Belgium and has regularly returned ever since. In 2011 he published *Selling the Congo*, an important study on Belgian colonial propaganda. His most recent monograph examines the long-term effects and legacies of colonisation in Belgium after 1960, following the studies by John M. MacKenzie and Catherine Hall on Britain,

and Monuments in Belgium (Leuven 2019). Geraardsbergen added a plaque in January 2017, see: <http://www.collateral-journal.com/index.php?cluster=6>, accessed on 8 December 2019; Mechelen as recent as May 2019, so after the

publication of Stanard's book, see: 'Een bordje volstaat niet', *De Standaard*, 26 June 2019.

7 See the next section for a more extensive discussion of these latest developments.

Lora Wildenthal on Germany, Pascal Blanchard and others on France and Gert Oostindie on the Netherlands.

Stanard's study entitled *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock* – referring respectively to symbols of Congo, Flanders and Wallonia – consists of two parts. The bulk of the book is a chronological overview of the ways in which Belgium has dealt with its colonial past. Stanard touches on a wide field of areas: museums (obviously extensively about Tervuren, but also the Ethnographic Museum in Antwerp and the Musée Africain in Namur), monuments, literature, theatre, music, art, comics, magazines, television documentaries and series, photographs, films, newspaper reports, news agencies, stories from missionaries, classroom education and school textbooks, higher education and academic research, bilateral relations, official apologies, restitution, et cetera. The result is absolutely impressive. Stanard has succeeded in painting a many-coloured picture of the varieties and evolutions of the Belgian perception of its colony.

Of course, some fields are less elaborated upon than others. For instance, the part on bilateral relations especially focuses on the Congo travels of Belgian kings and other members of the royal family, and neglects the visits of Belgian prime ministers to the former colony. Yet, such lacunas are largely compensated by the great attention given to less evident topics, such as the collection, pillage, sale, and research of African art and ethnographic objects. Stanard's bibliography of twenty-seven pages is imposing and also comprises works in French and Dutch. He claims to have used secondary literature only, but actually includes thirty Belgian and international newspaper titles in his bibliography and regularly refers to them in the footnotes. On top of that, many observations of the Belgian public space are based on the author's visits between 2003 and 2018.

Stanard is not only thoroughly acquainted with a plethora of details, he also sees the forest for the trees and comes to several relevant conclusions. Pointing at dozens of temporary expositions in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, as well as small changes in its permanently exhibited collection, Stanard demonstrates that the museum had been subject to shifts way before its closure for renovation between 2013 and 2018, and argues that the recent restoration resulted in continuity rather than a great break with the past. He is critical of, what he calls, anti-colonial iconoclasts who often bracket Leopold II's monumental buildings and avenues together with his policy and profits in Congo, and points at the fact that Leopold began his urban planning shortly after he became king in 1865 and only used colonial profits to finance his architectural plans from the late 1890s onwards.

More broadly, Stanard convincingly shows that the decade of the 1950s had a disproportionately large impact on Belgians' postcolonial memories, among others due to the increased investments in infrastructure and the growing number of Belgian settlers. Moreover, since people tend to remember events that were salient during their childhood, memories from the 1950s

placing the king in a favorable light. This quote from Leopold also adorned a temporary bust of him displayed at a pavilion entrance at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair.⁷⁶ An unpopular monarch at the time of his death in 1909, Belgians were full of praise for Leopold a half century later.

Two major events in the 1950s reveal the degree to which people had embraced the colonial project. The first was a 1955 royal tour of the Congo

Leopold II (1835-1909)

Location: Arlon

Sculptors: Victor Demanet and Arthur Dupagne

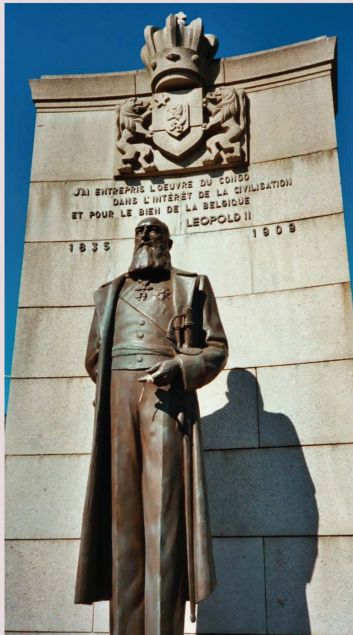
Architect: J. Ghobert⁷⁷

Inauguration: 17 June 1951

Funded/built by: public subscription and the Cercle colonial arlonais⁷⁸



Located outside Arlon at the carrefour de la Spetz, this monument is the work of Victor Demanet, the same sculptor behind Namur's statue of Leopold II. It is one of three colonial memorials in Arlon, the others being a 1931 plaque to colonial pioneers near Arlon's city hall and a 1937 plaque to Pierre Van Damme, who was killed in German East Africa in 1917.



Arlon monument to Leopold II and colonialism, 2003



"Before" plaque, Arlon monument to Leopold II, 2003



"After" plaque, Arlon monument to Leopold II, 2003



A page from Stanard's book, including the first part of the inset box dedicated to the Leopold II monument in the Belgian city of Arlon. Matthew G. Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock. Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven 2019) 59. © Leuven University Press, ISBN: 9789462701793.

continue to play a role today. Stanard also reacts against the common view that prior to 2000, Belgium suffered from a ‘Great Forgetting’ – as his fellow countryman Adam Hochschild phrased in his bestseller *King Leopold’s Ghosts* – and posits that instead, there were constant ebbs and flows in terms of remembering the colonial past.

As the title of his book suggests, Stanard’s most fundamental argument is about the differences between memories of the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and those of the French-speaking part. The former has maintained a great respect for missionary activities, the latter is especially positive about the monarchy and the administration. Following the arguments of scholars such as Nathalie Tousignant and others, Stanard also suggests a link between the loss of Belgian Congo and the political and cultural breakup of Belgium resulting into, for example, the constitutional reforms from 1970 onwards. Similarly, he connects the decline of the Belgian Catholic Church with decolonisation. It is indeed true that the Belgian Congo was a unifying, identifying and mobilising factor for the Belgian state and for the missions. However, other factors have played a more important role in the federalisation and the secularisation of the country. Stanard mentions these factors on the first pages of every chapter, in order to introduce the reader to general Belgian history. Still, these sections are the weakest part of the book, since these fragments are hardly integrated with the rest of the chapter and it is not always clear why some facts are discussed and other are not. For instance, the movie *Hector* (1987) and the Eurovision Song Contest winner Sandra Kim (1986) are mentioned, but the projects on Eurafrique in the 1950s or the major political conflicts concerning the language position of Voeren in the 1980s are omitted.

Colonial monuments in Belgium

The second part of Stanard’s book consists of more than fifty inset boxes, each presenting one Belgian colonial monument (see an example on the next page). To each colour photograph, detailed information is added about the subject (often with a bio of the depicted people) and the monument, such as the location, the sculptor, the year of inauguration, the initiators and financial contributors (mostly associations of pro-colonial enthusiasts and colonial veterans, but also often via public subscription), the image and style, the inscription, the changes in the monument (such as relocation and added texts). References to or comparisons with similar markers that for instance honour the same person are included to the photograph’s description as well. Almost all of these colonial *lieux de mémoire* are statues, busts, and plaques, but Stanard also pays attention to bus stops and street names. Next to these fifty entries, Stanard has included a link to an Excel sheet, which is available online and comprises the details of about 442 monuments. He could confirm the existence of 309 of them, and concludes

Koning Albertpark

Het park werd aangelegd op de plaats waar vroeger de zogenaamde 'Muinkmeersen' lagen, uitgestrekte drassige weidegronden die eigendom waren van de Gentse Sint-Pietersabdij. 'Muinkmeersen' betekent immers 'meersen van de monniken'. In 1837 kregen die Muinkmeersen een heel andere bestemming, toen men er een spoorwegstation bouwde. In 1850 werd het station gesloopt en kwam er een nieuw stationsgebouw, het Zuidstation, dat op zijn beurt afgebroken werd in 1931. Het Koning Albertpark is in Gent nog steeds beter bekend onder de naam het Zuidpark, naar het verdwenen Zuidstation.

Op de lange, rechthoekige vrijgekomen ruimte liet de stad een park aanleggen in een strenge, geometrische art-decostijl. Sinds 1934, het jaar van het overlijden van koning Albert I, draagt het park zijn naam. In 1935 werd een ruiterstandbeeld van de koning opgericht, dat ontworpen werd door de Gentse beeldhouwer Domien Inghels. In het park bevinden zich nog meer beeldhouwwerken en gedenktekens, zoals het gedenkteken voor de gesneuvelden van beide wereldoorlogen.

Een ander voorbeeld is de zogenaamde 'Congoster' uit 1936, die de namen vermeldt van de Gentenaars die gesneuveld zijn in Kongo-Vrijstaat, wat toen het persoonlijke domein van koning Leopold II was, vóór Kongo in 1908 een Belgische kolonie werd. In 1955 werd ook een borstbeeld van koning Leopold II geplaatst, een schenking aan de stad ter gelegenheid van de 10de jaarbeurs in Gent. Het bewind van Leopold II en het optreden van Belgische kolonisten onder zijn bestuur in Kongo roept vandaag vragen op, niet in het minst om de brutale, misdadige aanpak van de lokale bevolking en de onmenselijke uitbuiting ervan. Deze handelswijze lokte destijds heel wat protest uit, vooral in Groot-Brittannië, dat het rijke centraal-Afrika aan zijn neus had zien voorbijgaan, terwijl de Britten in hun eigen kolonies analoge praktijken nochtans niet echt schuwden. Het Stadsbestuur betreurt de vele Congolese slachtoffers omgekomen ten tijde van de Vrijstaat.

In 2006 kreeg het Koning Albertpark een grondige restyling, waardoor het vandaag een charmant stukje groen in de stad is geworden.



© Stad Gent, Patrick Henry



The plaque near the Leopold II Monument in Ghent. © Idesbald Goddeeris.

that at least 154 memorials and 170 street names have a direct connection with the colonial past.⁸

The fifty inset boxes are spread all over the book. They can be read independently from the rest of the monograph. This sometimes leads to repetition, since many of them are also discussed elsewhere. Another critique is that Stanard sometimes dilates upon the history of Congo instead of sticking to the monument. For instance, he concludes that many of the Belgian pioneers in Congo lived a short life (p. 55) and did not die a heroic death (p. 51) or that Leopold II's Congo Free State was a regime of conquest (p. 120) and that his forces were still exploring Central Africa well into the 1890s (p. 135).

Yet, this is just a minor criticism. Stanard's impressive list unshakably lays bare a Belgian colonial propaganda in stone and bronze that affected the entire country and reached small municipalities and lesser known places like Bonlez and Vezin. The topics of the monuments are of course highly selective, especially celebrating pioneers of Leopold II who were born in these locations. Most of them are Belgian men operating in the military, whereas female missionaries outnumbered male ones from the 1930s onwards, and whereas the Congo Free State was an international enterprise. Most monuments were inaugurated during the interwar period and the 1950s and sought to rehabilitate Leopold II's colonial project, but Stanard also smartly unravels other agendas, such as legitimising the monarchy during and immediately after its postwar crisis of the Royal Question or countering the criticism of the Belgian administration of the UN trust territory Ruanda-Urundi.

Decolonising the Belgian public space?

Stanard equally analyses how Belgians tend to deal with this colonial heritage during the past twenty years. Very few monuments were permanently removed and if this happened, it was due to road reconstruction, not because of postcolonial criticism. Stanard regrets this. He believes that some scholars exaggerate the monuments' importance, but also notes that they have turned into permanent and almost 'natural' indicators that for instance reinforce the image of so-called Arab viciousness (p. 131).

Stanard regularly demonstrates how more than a dozen of colonial monuments have become sites of protest and have been subject to 'vandalism' over the past twenty years, and how local authorities have been increasingly

8 In addition, he lists 133 *lieux de mémoire* that he found in sources (91 of them in an article in the *Cercle Royal des Anciens Officiers des Campagnes d'Afrique Bulletin Trimestriel* (CRAOCA) from 1985), of which he could not confirm the existence

by means of multiple sources and/or a visit to the memorial. The list is not complete and, for instance, misses the Leopold Ruelensstraat in Kessel-Lo, Leuven which has the caption 'Koloniaal 1867-1899'.



The Lumumba Street in Charleroi. © Idesbald Goddeeris.

adding plaques with explanatory texts. Still, it is a pity that he does not further elaborate on them. It would have been interesting to analyse the texts on these plaques, which often use a woolly language and avoid the core of the problem. Stanard only quotes two of them, namely from Halle and Wilrijk, and is too brief on others. Regarding the Leopold II monument in Ghent, for instance, he only writes that ‘in 2018 there was a substantial explanatory plaque’ but he does not discuss its content, whereas this raises the eyebrows, to say the least. The text dwells on the history of the park, the equestrian statue of Leopold’s successor Albert I, and only then touches upon the Leopold II monument. The plaque ‘deplores the many Congolese victims who died in the time of the Congo Free State’, emphasising discontinuity with Belgian Congo, and notes the ‘protest, especially in Great Britain, that had missed out on rich Central Africa, although the British did not really avoid similar practices in their own colonies’, by which the authors of the text return to an old and unjustified reproach, common in Belgian colonial discourse. The newly added text in Geraardsbergen from 2017 is even worse in presenting a one-sided view and does not explicitly take distance: ‘This monument was an initiative from the colonial cercle in Geraardsbergen and was placed as a memorial to the local inhabitants [from Geraardsbergen] who lost their life in Congo. It was made in 1948 from cement and metal and inaugurated on 10 July 1949’. Stanard also mentions the plaques in Ostend and in the Brussels Parc du Cinquantenaire that he observed in the early twenty-first century, but that have since been removed or replaced. It would have been interesting if he had given the texts of these first plaques, and the reasons why they disappeared. This would have made his book, which is now a beautiful synthesis and a work of reference, also a primary source of information.

Another important conclusion is that ‘there has never been a public monument to African victims of colonization’ or to Congolese opponents and freedom fighters (p. 100). Stanard notes some modest exceptions, such as the bas-relief for the Belgian Colonial Volunteers who defended Namur in 1914 (among whom were four Congolese soldiers; at least one face on the monument is recognisable as African), the Monument to the Troops of the African Campaigns that was set up in Schaarbeek in 1970 (and does not solely celebrate white officers), and the seven tombs in Tervuren for those Congolese who died during the Brussels International Exposition of 1897.

Stanard also observes some recent changes in this perspective. In December 2011, a plaque was affixed to the house where Paul Panda Farnana (1888-1930), the first Congolese to earn a higher education degree in Belgium, studied, ‘located on an out-of-the way, run-down building in Ixelles’ (p. 261). And, very briefly, Stanard adds that ‘[o]nly in 2018 did Brussels name a square after Patrice Lumumba’ (p. 151), which he deems ‘a landmark development considering some Belgians still saw him as a violent and radical antagonist who sabotaged the course of history’ (p. 261). As already mentioned, there are even more examples of recent commemorations



Roland Lumumba, the son of Patrice Lumumba, and Brussels-City mayor Philippe Close unveil the street sign of the Patrice Lumumba Square in Brussels on 30 June 2018. © Belga, photograph taken by Nicolas Maeterlinck.

of Lumumba. In December 2017 the city council of Charleroi decided to rename the small Paul Pastur Street into Patrice Lumumba Street and on 24 May 2018 – that is, a month before the square in Brussels-City – solemnly unveiled the new name plaque.⁹ In October 2017, the city of Mons announced plans to add a new plaque dedicated to Lumumba under the one honouring the nineteen locals who died in the Congo Free State, and eventually did so in October 2018.¹⁰

Yet, in contrast to what one at first sight could claim as a landmark development, one should not overestimate the scope of these first recognitions of Lumumba in the public space. So far, it only took place in the French-speaking part of the country. Moreover, the new Lumumba Street and Square can hardly be considered as *lieux de mémoire*. In Charleroi, it is a small street outside the ring road surrounding the city. Its former name, the Paul Pastur Street, caused confusion with the much bigger Avenue Paul Pastur, also located in Charleroi, which was not renamed. In Brussels-City, it was just a small and up until then anonymous section of a larger square that was turned into the Lumumba Square. The rest of the square belongs to the neighbouring municipality of Ixelles, which for more than ten years had been the target of campaigns for a Lumumba square in the African neighbourhood Matonge, located in Ixelles. The fact that Brussels-City approved the renaming in April 2018 was not so much an act of postcolonial recognition, but rather a tactical move in the build-up to the local elections of October 2018 and the result of the competition between the two neighbouring mayors, a liberal one in Ixelles and a socialist one in Brussels-City.¹¹

In 2019, two other Belgian cities were the first to rename a Leopold II Avenue. Interestingly so, they both are located in Flanders, which confirms Stanard's argument that the two major language communities have different attitudes towards the colonial past. Whereas the French-speaking community is closer to the demands of the Congolese diaspora, which until recently was predominantly French-speaking, some Flemish nationalist parties are receptive to criticism of the monarchy (rather than of the government) because this puts the Belgian dynasty – as one of the last

9 'Rue Patrice Lumumba: le PTB se réjouit', *L'Avenir*, 12 December 2017, https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20171211_01097513/rue-patrice-lumumba-le-ptb-se-rejouit, accessed on 1 July 2019, and 'Charleroi names street in honour of Patrice Lumumba', *The Bulletin*, 29 May 2018, <https://www.thebulletin.be/charleroi-names-street-honour-patrice-lumumba>, accessed on 1 July 2019.

10 Robbe Latré, 'Geen plein, maar een plak voor Lumumba', *Mondiaal Nieuws*, 1 November 2017, [https://www.mo.be/analyse/geen-plaats-maar-een-](https://www.mo.be/analyse/geen-plaats-maar-een-plak-voor-lumumba)

[plak-voor-lumumba](https://www.mo.be/analyse/geen-plaats-maar-een-plak-voor-lumumba), accessed on 1 July 2019, and Isabelle Palmitessa, 'Mons: Une plaque en hommage à l'indépendance du Congo', *Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française*, 21 October 2018, https://www.rtb.be/info/regions/detail_mons-une-plaque-en-hommage-a-l-independance-du-congo?id=10052586, accessed on 1 July 2019.

11 Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The Nazi and the Colonizers: Flemish debates on street names in 2017', *Zeitgeschichte* 46:1 (2019) 61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14220/zsch.2019.46.1.61>.

strongholds of the Belgian identity – in a bad light. However, for the rest, the northern and the southern part of the country do not fundamentally differ. Indeed, neither of the street name changes in Flanders can be considered as expressions of a genuine decolonisation. The motion in Dendermonde in March 2019 was submitted by the extreme-right and anti-Belgian party Vlaams Belang and led only to the change of Leopold II Avenue into Leopold Avenue. The decision in Kortrijk was preceded by a fierce debate on renaming the Cyriel Verschaeve Street honouring a Flemish priest who during the Second World War collaborated with Nazi Germany. This latter discussion was also more widely covered in the media than the discussion about the Leopold II Avenue. After having determined to remove the Verschaeve Street, the city council in one and the same breath decided to change the Leopold II Avenue, which had previously also been subject to motions and debate.¹²

A Belgian walking guide

These recent events demonstrate that the decolonisation of the Belgian public space has moved into a higher gear. Although this is not explicitly referred to in the introduction, this is undoubtedly the reason why Lucas Catherine decided to publish a revised version of a 2006 booklet about the ubiquitous colonial buildings and monuments in Brussels and the rest of Belgium, entitled *Het dekoloniseringsparcours. Wandelen langs Congolees erfgoed in België* (The route of decolonisation. A walking trail along Congolese heritage in Belgium).¹³ Unlike Stanard's monograph, this is not an academic study, but a book for a broader audience presented as a walking guide (albeit without maps and itineraries) by a prolific writer who has published more than twenty books, especially on Islam and Palestine, but also on colonial history and on Brussels. At first sight, his revised walking guide (251 pages) seems to be a substantial revision of the first version (139 pages). However, this is only partly true. Catherine rewrote text fragments, but kept the same structure, and apart from some exceptions, held on to the same topics.

The book is first and foremost a presentation of the visual traces of the Congo Free State in Brussels (covering almost half of the book: pp. 29-128), Ostend, and Antwerp. The author discusses the many parks and lanes

12 Nele Dooms, 'Gemeenteraad kiest voor naamswijziging Leopold II-laan', *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.hln.be/in-de-buurt/dendermonde/gemeenteraad-kiest-voor-naamswijziging-leopoldii-laan-a58279aa/>, and Marc Reynebeau, 'Cyriel Verschaeve: een doodlopend

straatje', *De Standaard*, 19 November 2019, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20191119_04725224, both accessed on 8 December 2019.

13 Lucas Catherine, *Wandelen naar Kongo. Langs koloniaal erfgoed in Brussel en België* (Berchem 2006).

that were built under Leopold II, the head offices of banks and institutions that ruled or exploited the colony, the monuments and legacy of Belgian pioneers exploring Central Africa and more. Unfortunately, Catherine is far more silent about the fifty years of Belgian Congo. Even the creation and inauguration of monuments for Leopold II and his collaborators are only marginally mentioned. Similarly, the most extensive, newly added chapters do not directly relate to Belgian colonial heritage, but equally dwell on the history of the Congo Free State, for instance on the replacement of porters by elephants (pp. 90-96) or on the wars and the destruction of local cultures (pp. 197-229). These texts have their merits, especially because they highlight Congolese agency. Another new chapter, a 'prelude' on the Southern Netherlands' involvement in the slave trade (pp. 233-238), is even connected to the Dutch dealing with the colonial past. However, all in all these new chapters do not turn the revised edition into an authoritative work on Belgian colonial heritage and rather derive attention from the core topic.

What is even more regrettable is the fact that Catherine has only partly made use of the abundance of academic historical studies on colonial memory in Belgium that have lately appeared. Both Stanard's first monograph from 2011 and his newest book are absent. He refers to Frans Buelens, Sarah Demart and John Everart, but does not mention Zana Etambala, Maarten Couttenier and Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse. Catherine, however, is not a trained historian, but a film studies graduate. This also affects his methodology. He uses footnotes for supplementary information rather than for references, and mentions 'author's archive' as the source of photographed written documents (for example p. 20 and 199). His assessment of academic historical research is wrong: 'Colonial history hardly pays attention to the fact that colonisation also included the destruction of local cultures because these constituted a threat to the white colonial project. Hence some examples in the next chapter' (p. 195).

As a result, Catherine's book contains numerous lacunas and mistakes. His walking guide includes a list of actions against and changes made to Belgian colonial monuments (pp. 178-180), but this list is incomplete, the author for instance ignores the regular protests at Leopold II's statue in Ekeren. Catherine mentions some recent events, such as the tributes to Lumumba in Mons, Charleroi and Brussels, but does not elaborate on evolutions after 2006 or 2010 in Diksmuide, Leuven, and Hasselt. He explicitly states that Geraardsbergen did not want to put a plaque at its colonial monument, which it in fact did. What is even more important than these details, is the fact that Catherine does not inquire the identity of the protesters or the texts of the plaques.

Still, at the same time, Catherine's walking guide has several merits and demonstrates innovative research. He attached a list of 58 street names in Brussels that refer to Congo (pp. 243-248) and therefor completes Stanard's

list of colonial monuments and my own list of colonial street names in the Brussels-Capital Region dating from 2015.¹⁴

All in all, one should thus certainly not downplay the importance of Catherine's work, because of his non-academic approach. On the contrary, he re-introduces forgotten colonial pioneers that are unconsciously celebrated in the public space, connects Belgian landmarks such as the Atomium or the Godfrey of Bouillon statue to colonial history, and explains the colonial origins of street names which at first sight do not seem to be linked with colonialism. For instance, the Sobieski Avenue is named after the Polish king Jan III Sobieski because he defeated the Ottomans at Vienna, just as Leopold II was crushing Muslim slave traders in Congo. Catherine also denounces the colonial origins and financial sources of several royal residencies, such as the Laeken Castle, the greenhouses, and the Belvédère Castle. As a result, his book convincingly reveals how the Belgian national past is closely knit with its colonial history, with a special focus on late-nineteenth-century businessmen. Being written for a larger audience, its impact may be as great as Stanard's contribution to historical research.

Dutch guides on slavery heritage

Whereas recently in Belgium a start has been made to contextualise or modify a limited number of colonial monuments, in the Netherlands different strategies have been adopted to deal with the colonial legacy in the public space. Initially, from the late twentieth century and especially in the early

14 Goddeeris, 'Square de Léopoldville of Place Lumumba?', 354. Catherine apparently has not read this and does not know all these street names (namely the Arnold Maesstraat, Leopold II-laan, Leopold II-laan, Leopold II-plein, Luitenant Lippensstraat, Majoor R. Dubreucqstraat, Ruandastraat, Scheutlaan, and Scheutveldstraat). But he also has many new streets that I did not know. Some of them refer to people who were active in Congo but are not directly celebrated because of their colonial engagement (namely capitalists [Baron Lambertstraat, Brugmannlaan, Generaal Baron Empainlaan], politicians [Auguste Beernaertstraat, Carton de Wiartlaan, Omer Lepreuxstraat, Renkinstraat], a diplomat [Lambertmontlaan, Lambertmontstraat], a military architect [Brialmontstraat], an aviation pioneer [Vlieger Thieffrystraat, Thieffrystraat], a race car driver [Jenatzystraat], a medallist

[Leopold Wienerplein], and a scientist [Robert Goldschmidtsquare]. The Masuisstraat and Masuisplein are named after railway engineer Jean-Baptiste Masui, who died in 1860; the Lumumba square is a new place that refers to the colonial past but is not an example of colonial propaganda, unlike all the other streets. Similarly, one can also question the colonial link of five street names in my 2015 list [Scheutlaan, Scheutveldstraat, Ruandastraat, Leopold II-plein, Leopold II-laan]. Others, however, indisputably have a colonial connotation (namely the Afrikastraat, André Ryckmanslaan, Charles Lemairestraat, Charles Ramaekersstraat, Kolonel Chaltinstraat, Kommandant Lothairestraat, Lisalastraat, Lusambostraat, Pater De Dekenstraat, and Tanganikastraat). In sum, we can conclude that there are at least 45 streets in the Brussels-Capital Region that honour a coloniser.

twenty-first century, new monuments for victims and for individuals from the former colonies have been erected. During the last decade, several Dutch authors' collectives published a series of guides interpreting the abundance of slavery heritage in Dutch cities.

The first of these guides dealt with Utrecht and was published in 2012 by two Dutch academic historians: Esther Captain (at that time employed at the National Committee for 4 and 5 May in Amsterdam and at Utrecht University) and Hans Visser (retired from the Hendrik Kramer Institute). In the middle of the festive climate on the eve of the tercentenary of the Peace of Utrecht in the following year, they pointed at another historical milestone to be celebrated in 2013, namely the 150th anniversary of the abolishment of slavery in the Dutch West Indies. Captain and Visser brought into remembrance that the Peace of Utrecht included the clause of *Asiento de Negros*, regulating the slave trade and thereby encouraging the capture and exploitation of Africans.¹⁵ The remembrance in 2013 triggered a whole series of other initiatives, such as slavery history routes in Middelburg and Haarlem, and a first concise atlas of Dutch slavery.

In this context, a partnership was created on the initiative of Dr. Diennek Hondius between the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Hondius), Kosmopolis Utrecht (a multimedia platform for arts and culture aiming at strengthening intercultural connections within the city, directed by Nancy Jouwe), the Amsterdam Museum (Annemarie de Wildt), Black Heritage Amsterdam Tours (Jennifer Tosch), and the Intercultural Museum and Heritage Projects (Dineke Stam), which in 2014 led to the publication of the *Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide*. Hondius, Jouwe, Tosch and Stam continued their collaboration and published two new guides: one on Dutch New York in 2017 and one on the Netherlands as a whole in 2019. Importantly, these books result from interdisciplinary collaboration between academics, museum conservators and heritage workers.¹⁶

Their initiatives inspired others. Historians in Groningen (Dr. Margriet Fokken and Dr. Barbara Henkes)¹⁷ and in Leiden (Prof. Gert Oostindie and Dr. Karwan Fatah-Black)¹⁸ combed through archival material and other primary

15 Esther Captain, with cooperation of Hans Visser, *Wandelgids sporen van slavernij in Utrecht. Hiking traces of slavery in Utrecht* (Utrecht 2012) 8-9.

16 Diennek Hondius, Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam, Jennifer Tosch and Annemarie de Wildt, *Gids Slavernijverleden Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide* (Volendam 2018; second extended edition, first published in 2014); Diennek Hondius, Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam and Jennifer Tosch, *Dutch New York Histories. Connecting African, Native American and Slavery Heritage. Bilingual*

Guide. Geschiedenissen van Nederlands New York. Tweetalige gids (Volendam 2017); Diennek Hondius, Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam and Jennifer Tosch, *Gids Slavernijverleden Nederland. The Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide* (Volendam 2019).

17 Margriet Fokken and Barbara Henkes, *Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Groningen. Gids voor Stad en Ommeland* (Groningen 2017; first published in 2016).

18 Gert Oostindie and Karwan Fatah-Black, *Sporen van de slavernij in Leiden* (Leiden 2017).

Koloniale waren: suiker en koffie | *Colonial Wares: sugar and coffee*

Veel gevelstenen verwijzen naar de handel in koloniale producten. Rietsuiker was door slaafgemaakten geoogst, geplet en gestookt en als vloeibare suiker in kegels van ongeveer een halve meter

gestold en in blauw papier verpakt, de zogenaamde Suikerbroden. Dit halffabrikaat werd verder in een suikerraffinaderij verwerkt. Rond 1700 waren er ongeveer honderd suikerfabrieken in

Amsterdam. Koffie was een ander populair luxeproduct, dat Amsterdammers van vroeger en nu graag consumeren.



5 In Drie Boonstruycke | *The Three Bean Bushes*

Sint Nikolaasstraat 38

Koffie was een belangrijke grondstof, afkomstig uit de koloniën. Hier werd de koffie gebrand en verwerkt | *Coffee, another luxury product, which was roasted and processed in this building, was an important colonial commodity*

De Jonge Saayer (1765) en De Saayer (1752) | *De Jonge Saayer (The Young Sower 1765) and De Saayer (The Sower 1752)*

39

Bloemgracht 77



40

Bloemgracht 81

In de achttiende eeuw was Suikerraffinaderij De Jonge Saayer hier gevestigd. De grondstof kwam van de suikerplantages in Brazilië, Suriname en Nederlands-Indië | *In the 18th Century the De Jonge Saayer sugar refinery was based here. Raw sugar came from plantations in Brazil, Surinam and the Dutch East Indies*

6 Gevelsteen 'T Sernaemse Koffivat | *Gable stone 'T Sernaemse Koffivat (The Surinamese coffee barrel)*

Sint Nikolaasstraat 58



Het origineel bevindt zich in het Tabaksmuseum van Joure, waarschijnlijk vanwege de Douwe Egbertsfabrieken aldaar waar koffie wordt verwerkt | *The original is kept in the Joure Tobacco Museum, in the Northern Netherlands, which is linked to the Douwe Egberts coffee processing plant there*

24

Handel en winst | Trade and profit

sources in search of traces of the slavery past and wrote similar guides on their cities. More research results are due to appear, both for provinces and for cities including Rotterdam and The Hague.¹⁹ Moreover, the authors also made sure to spread the research results among a wider audience via different channels, including maps, atlases, walking trails, apps, physical markers on route points, exhibitions, a YouTube serial (*Sporen van slavernij* – Traces of Slavery), and a website on traces of slavery for secondary school students designed by the Mapping Slavery NL-project (<https://edu.mappingslavery.nl/>).

The guides were conceived and developed in a number of different ways. Some are completely bilingual (the Netherlands, Amsterdam and New York), others are only in Dutch (Groningen and Leiden). The three bilingual ones, all edited by the aforementioned team, have the same format; Leiden is published in a handy pocket size; Groningen is something in-between. The five guides each have their own structure. Groningen has one walking trail and four bicycle tours. Amsterdam orders its *lieux de mémoire* in a geographical way. The Netherlands spreads 100 locations over seventeen chapters, some on a city or a municipality, others on a province. New York has four chapters on four different geographical entities, from Lower Manhattan to New York State and beyond, in which locations are presented in a chronological way. Leiden has grouped its locations in four thematic chapters, namely black and white people, administrators and entrepreneurs, universities and intellectuals, and collections and painters. This is undoubtedly the most comfortable format for the armchair reader: discussing one topic in one single entry while referring to different locations, it does not have repetition or cross references. An active tourist, however, will not mind the more practical format of the other guides.

The five guides also show many similarities. They all contain extensive introductions dwelling on the history of slavery and its relevance today. The Netherlands and New York guides additionally have theme pages elaborating on particular aspects, such as burial grounds and descendants. Most importantly, they all have dozens, even hundreds of entries and illustrations, presenting as many locations connected to the history of slavery.

These locations are extremely diverse. They include fortresses, wharfs, ships or replicas, warehouses, shops selling sugar, tobacco, coffee and other goods that had been produced by slave labour, façades of such shops that still have signs referring to these goods, house fronts and gable stones with so-called Moor heads (carved heads of black people), breweries and bead factories that provisioned outgoing ships, auction houses, banking companies that subsidised the slavery economy, churches where black people were baptised or slave owners have their final resting place, burial grounds, missionary

19 The best overview of these research projects, including the Mapping Slavery NL-project in: Hondius, Jouwe, Stam and Tosch, *Gids Slavernijverleden Nederland*, 15-16, with more

details on for instance 53 (Haarlem) and 85 (Gelderland).

congregations, botanical gardens, palaces where important treaties were signed (for instance in Breda in 1667 and in Utrecht in 1713) or meetings were held (for instance the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619), museums, places where people were displayed in the colonial era or where exhibitions were shown in the twenty-first century, principal seats of migrant organisations, monuments, and more. Even more numerous are the residences, country houses, and mansions that have been inhabited by people involved in slavery. These include white people: from a VOC chief petty officer to a WIC director, from a privateer captain to a governor, from a pastor defending slavery to a minister who preached against enslavement, from numerous abolitionist activists to as many slave traders, from well-known people such as Hugo Grotius, Abel Tasman, Michiel de Ruyter or Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer to less famous plantation owners who in the 1860s were compensated for the liberation of their slaves and can now be easily retrieved in the lists of these compensations.

Similar attention is devoted to black people in the Netherlands: abducted children, enslaved servants who had joined their returned owners, manumitted slaves, Surinamese slave owners, children of mixed marriages, et cetera. Some of them are quite well known, such as the aforementioned De Kom (who in 1934 published *We Slaves of Suriname*), Elisabeth Samson (a Surinamese businesswoman who in the mid-eighteenth century successfully sued the colonial administration for prohibiting her from marrying a white man), and Kwasi and Kwame (two Ashanti princes who in 1837 were gifted to the Dutch – a form of disguised slave trade which had been outlawed in 1814). Many more black people are difficult to identify or to find biographical details about. Yet, the authors made a great effort and came to surprising results, even if they only retrieved a name in Roman Catholic church registers or other sources (for example Quint Ondaatje or the seven year old Anthoine). They also regularly elaborate on the many anonymous black servants on painted portraits of dignitaries and aristocracy, that are now displayed in many Dutch museums, or on the inhabitants of the first black district in Amsterdam, who may have served as models for the portraits of black people by the nearby living Rembrandt.

All of these entries serve one overall purpose: to highlight the rich and varied Dutch heritage of slavery. Some of them may seem anecdotal at first sight. For instance, the Senate Room in the Academia Building – the main seat of Leiden University – is included because of its 140 portraits of professors, a couple of whom had connections with the WIC. Yet, this example, just as all of the other stories, demonstrates the omnipresence of slavery in the Dutch past. It is precisely the variety and abundance of entries that allows for an alternative version of the well-known story of the Dutch Golden Age history and heritage.

The authors go further by making links with the present. They argue that slavery keeps affecting present-day perceptions and customs, and react

against the view that slavery is part of a long gone past and only happened in faraway territories. The Amsterdam guide, for instance, discusses the statue of Kerwin Duinmeijer, a fifteen-year-old Dutch boy of Antillean descent, who was stabbed by a skinhead in 1983 and became the victim of what is being remembered as the first racist murder in the Netherlands since the Second World War. The guide on New York discusses 84 locations of which less than half date from the period before 1667, when the British took over New Amsterdam, and also pays attention to the protests of African Americans and Civil Rights activists in the periods following the abolishment of slavery in 1827. The guides equally reflect on the ongoing process of coming to terms with the past, of recognition and adjustment. The authors pay attention to the work of contemporary artists and to activities at putting slavery heritage on the map (for instance by organising a ritual meal at a 'dialogue table').

There is no doubt that the Slavery Heritage Guides make a paramount contribution to uncovering a past that deliberately had been silenced. These guides also assist diaspora groups in creating a memory, by marking significant sites, making slavery legacy visible and giving a face, not only to slave traders and abolitionists, but also to enslaved people. The guides indeed bring together a remarkable number of paintings and photos of black people in the early modern age and the nineteenth century. Last but not least, the authors contest dominant conservative takes on the history of slavery, without falling into one-sidedness and exaggeration. The Leiden guide explicitly puts slavery into perspective. Oostindie and Fatah-Black mention that slavery was the rule rather than the exception in world history, referring to Romans and Barbary pirates who also captured Leiden inhabitants, and emphasise that the Dutch prosperity of the past centuries cannot be explained in the first place by means of the profits from colonial trade, let alone from slave trade and slavery. This last point is prone to adaption as this statement has recently been countered by the historians Ulbe Bosma and Pepijn Brandon, who claim that slavery was much more important for the Dutch economy than previously thought: in 1770 slavery accounted for 5 percent of the Dutch and 10 percent of the province of Holland's GDP.²⁰

A comparison between Belgium and the Netherlands

The Dutch guides, websites and walking trails on slavery and colonial heritage also inspired Belgium. The latter had witnessed similar initiatives even before

20 Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma, 'De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij voor de Nederlandse economie in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw', *TSEG – Low Countries*

Journal of Social and Economic History 16:2 (2019) 5-46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/TSEG.1082>.

2010: Lucas Catherine published his walking guide in 2006 and in 2009 the musician and film maker Thierry Demey wrote a book on Leopold II's impact on Brussels.²¹ However, this interest has expanded during the last years, and this may be fueled by the Dutch guides. The artist Daniel Cabral created a tourist map of imperialistic sites in the Belgian capital in 2017.²² Several organisations, such as the alter-globalist Comité pour l'Abolition des Dettes Illégitimes (Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, CADTM) and the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations (Collective Colonial Memory and Struggle against Discriminations) initiated guided tours in Brussels. In 2017 two Dutch artists, Vesna Faassen and Lukas Verdijk, launched a tour exploring forgotten colonial traces in Antwerp, and in 2018 Pax Christi Vlaanderen (the Flemish branch of the international Catholic peace movement) hired the retired radio journalist and Congo expert Guy Poppe for a city walk along sites that symbolise the relation between Antwerp and Congo.²³

Compared to the multiple Dutch guides and walking trails, the Belgian initiatives remain marginal. They have not reached mainstream audiences so far, and did not absorb the many conclusions made by Stanard. In contrast to the Dutch guides, Catherine's books are poorly edited, and lack maps and coloured photos. The fact that the Belgian colonial space is examined by an American historian in an English-language monograph published by an academic publishing house, epitomises the huge difference with the here reviewed Dutch initiatives. But there is a second major difference. Stanard elaborates on a wide range of examples, but he does not include those elements that are numerous in the Dutch guides, such as the decorative adornments of buildings and the many private houses, public places and other landmarks that can be related to the colonial past. Catherine does discuss these traces, but only in a small selection of cities.

There are several reasons that can account for the gap between Dutch and Belgian initiatives. First and foremost, the colonial past itself fundamentally differs. The Dutch colonial history stretches four centuries back, was part of the growth of the Republic, considerably contributed to its rise, and consequently has often been looked at with national pride. Belgium, in contrast, only 'received' its major colony by circumstances, taking over its king's private property in 1908, and lost it after barely half a century. Congo was never that central to the Belgians as the Dutch East Indies were to the Dutch. Similarly, the role of slavery was different in both countries. While the Dutch empire was actively involved in the trade and employment of slaves,

21 Thierry Demey, *Léopold II. La marque royale sur Bruxelles* (Brussels 2009).

22 Stanard, *The Leopard*, 259.

23 <https://faassen-verdijk.com/atuur/> and <https://www.paxchristi.be/activiteit/congowandeling->

[antwerpen-1](#), both accessed on 9 December 2019. The other examples are mentioned in Stanard's book.

the Belgian colonial project came into being in the late nineteenth century when slavery was officially abolished. Even more, the colonisation of Congo was presented as a fight *against* Arab slave traders, an element that is visible in several monuments. This propaganda was effective and has eclipsed the role of forced labour both before and after 1908. This divergent past had an impact on the collective memory in both countries.

In addition, there are other explanations. Stanard rightly refers to the present-day Belgian identity crisis in which many Belgian politicians and opinion makers avoid to criticise Belgium's colonial policy, since this may also affect the Belgian identity, nation and, accordingly, state. Another element is the royal involvement in the most crucified chapters of colonial history, namely Leopold II's rule over Congo in 1885-1908, and king Baudouin's involvement in the Congo crisis in 1960-1961. Moreover, Belgium lost its colony suddenly, unlike other European powers whose colonial decline stretched over decades. In addition, there is, of course, the role of migration. Returning white Belgian settlers dominated public memories during the first decades after the Congolese independence. Only from the 1990s onwards Congolese were allowed to migrate to Belgium in more substantial numbers. In the Netherlands and other European countries, postcolonial diaspora groups have often taken the lead in debates on the colonial past. This is happening with a delay in Belgium, and certainly in Flanders, where especially a second generation of Belgians of Congolese and other African descent mastered the Dutch language and started to pitch in on the debate.

It is indeed remarkable how long Congolese voices have been absent in Flanders. As late as in 2017, a first volume on Belgian colonial history with contributions by Congolese historians appeared in Dutch. Until then, only one chapter by a Congolese historian had been translated into Belgium's largest language.²⁴ Some scholars with Congolese roots and publishing in Dutch are affiliated with the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren – for instance the historian Zana Aziza Etambala and the anthropologist Bambi Ceuppens – but they have only recently been joined by a wave of increasing agency by people of African descent. Importantly, a growing number of them speak from an institutionalised position: Landry Mawungu is director of the Minderhedenforum (Minorities Forum, the Flemish umbrella of organisations of ethnic-cultural minorities), Tracy Bibo Tansia was vice-president of the Flemish Women Council, Olivia Rutazibwa is senior lecturer at a university (a foreign one, though, namely Portsmouth), Nadia Nsayi is a policy officer at the peace movement Pax Christi, and Dalilla Hermans is a well-established writer with a weekly feature in a

24 Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, 'Leopold II gezien vanuit Congo: aanwezig in de geschiedenis maar afwezig in het geheugen', in: Vincent Dujardin et al. (eds.), *Leopold II ongekend genie? Buitenlandse politiek en kolonisatie* (Tiel 2009) 309-326.

The 2017 book was edited by the two above-mentioned Dutch artists Vesna Faassen and Lukas Verdijk, *Wanneer we spreken over kolonisatie* (s.l. [published on their own and printed by Stockmans], s.d. [2017]).

major Flemish journal *De Standaard*. Also ‘new Belgians’ from beyond Sub-Saharan Africa take the floor in postcolonial debates, such as the theatre maker Chokri Ben Chikha who, among others, organised human zoo actions and truth commissions that dealt with the Belgian colonial past.

As a result, the postcolonial debate in Flanders and in Belgium as a whole has recently become more nuanced and more vivid. This evolution, obviously, also accounts for the tentative steps that are being made in the decolonisation of the public space and the increasing consciousness of the white hegemony in the Belgian postcolonial memory and its effects on the present-day society. In this way, Belgium is catching up with the Netherlands. Yet, this does not mean that there is only one path to complete this process and that the Netherlands is the model country in all fields. On the contrary, other debates related to postcolonial heritage, such as the one on *Zwarte Piet* (Black Peter), are unfolding in different ways. While the discussion on *Zwarte Piet* has resulted into an annual polarisation in the Netherlands, Belgians initially observed their northern neighbours with much astonishment and little understanding, but over the last two or three years they took the sting out of the issue and accepted the claims of the opponents of *Zwarte Piet*. The so-called ‘Roetpieten’ and ‘Roetmieten’, male and female attendants of Saint Nicholas covered with soot marks instead of blackfaces, are now more widely accepted in Belgium than in the Netherlands (although this is also due to the fact that Saint Nicholas Day is a much more central holiday in the Netherlands than in Belgium).²⁵

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25 Eline Mestdagh, ‘Over Zwarte Piet, erkenning en historisch onrecht in “postkoloniaal” Nederland’, *Brood en Rozen* 23:4 (2018) 5-25, and Dalilla Hermans, ‘Al fan van de roetpiet? Zo overtuig je

de rest’, *De Standaard*, 20 November 2019, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20191119_04725845, accessed on 10 December 2019.