Decolonising Arts and Culture in Belgium
Some clues from the Black Out media

Axel Mudahemuka Gossiaux

ABSTRACT

This contribution gives insight into the decolonisation of thought by presenting Black Out, a transmedia initiative located in the city of Liège in Belgium. Black Out is a project designed for promoting black music and culture and fighting against racism, principally through information technology and social media. I highlight how Black Out may participate in efforts for decolonising arts and culture in Belgium and Europe. To do so, I present a few contextual elements about racism and the postcolonial debate in Belgium before giving examples on how the projects of Black Out are in line with some of the driving forces of the decolonial approach.

KEYWORDS

Anti-racism, arts, culture, decolonisation, Belgium

New Debates in Europe: Racism as 'A Threat Far beyond its Immediate Targets'

In a context where Western hegemony seems to be questioned in all its forms and fields of application, '[Europe] becomes an object of conversation and not the centre that organises the conversation'[1] (Bachir Diagne 2019: 107). Indeed, more and more diverse approaches and thoughts emerge or are updated in order to claim for the decentring and the end of the monopoly of the 'West' on production, representation, dissemination and, more generally, on our relationship to knowledge. It would be a matter of decolonisation of thought to 'propose a decentralised humanism that would have as its political quest inclusion, the common' (Hamidou 2019: 103).

The persistence of racism in modern societies cannot be understood without a historical contextualisation of it, or without highlighting the links between colonialism and racism. As Achille Mbembe points out, '[t]he end of doubt about the reality of racism and its structural character, as well as the conviction that racism poses a threat far beyond its immediate targets, constitute a virtual displacement at the imaginary,

cultural and political levels' (2020: n.p.). In Europe, debates around decolonisation are no longer in the hands of few academics, militants experts and associative circles but have spread to the whole society. While the different forms of mobilisation occurring around the world seem unprecedented in many ways, it remains to be observed to what extent they will open 'the way to new possibilities for action and reflection, and what these are likely to lead to' (Mbembe 2020: n.p.).

In Francophone Belgium, in the multicultural city of Liège, several anti-racist initiatives exist from the organic to the institutional levels and some of them focus specifically on decolonial issues. In the frame of this contribution for highlighting the relevance of projects that can suggest how to decolonise Europe and give insights in this aim, I propose then to focus on the transmedia project called Black Out located in Liège and founded by Afro-descendant people[2] living in Liège.[3] Black Out is online and on social media as well as on the radio, at 48FM, a free expression associative radio with a vocation of lifelong education (i.e. a platform for expression open to associations and collectives that wish to do so) from the students of the University of Liège (CSA 2018). As it is explained on its website, '*Black Out* is a magazine, at the same time, musical, thematic and of information, which aims at two main objectives'. The main first objective 'is the promotion of the music and the black culture of the past, but also, its current evolution' and the second is to be 'a way to fight against institutional and systemic racism by providing information and thus making our public aware of these issues' (*Black Out* 2019). Thus I would like to shed light on the work and projects of Black Out from the perspective of decolonising arts and culture in Europe through information technology and new social media.

A Few Contextual Elements of the
Postcolonial Debate in Belgium

Talking about racism, colonialism and decolonisation in Belgium involves presenting a few contextualising elements about the country's colonial past and the emergence of the postcolonial issue in public debate. Belgium testifies of a late emergence of the postcolonial debate because it eluded in some ways its colonial past in Central Africa (in Burundi, DRC, and Rwanda) from its collective memory and public debates (Colleyn 2021; Fadil and Martiniello 2020). As noted by Unia, an independent inter-federal public institution fighting discrimination and promoting equal opportunities in Belgium,

the country 'has a difficult relationship with its colonial past. Citizens know little about Congolese migration (and African migration in general)'. Yet, '"contemporary" racism is strongly influenced by its historical context' (2017: 8). While this 'repressed past' 'offers few opportunities to confront discriminatory issues, both sociopolitical and symbolic', it appears that 'different groups are calling for substantive debates about a shared history … as well as, their possibilities for success, recognition and dignity' (Mazzocchetti 2014: 19, 13).

A very brief chronology of the Belgian colonial project can begin at the Berlin Conference in 1885, when the second king of the Belgians was granted sovereignty over a territory that he had personally acquired, without ever going there. He governed this territory, called the 'Independent State of the Congo', with extreme violence. At the time, it was considered a private kingdom of Leopold II until 1908. When the Belgian parliament voted to annex it, it became the 'Belgian Congo'. Moreover, in 1919, Belgium successfully claimed a mandate to administer the territory of 'Ruanda-Urundi'. This former German colony was thus administratively annexed to the 'Belgian Congo' in 1925. In the early 1960s, the 'Belgian Congo' and 'Ruanda-Urundi' would become independent (Peltier 2018; Robert 2018).

Recently, from 4 to 11 February 2019, the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (WGEPAD), a group of experts mandated by the United Nations, came to Belgium for an observation mission. Following that, the WGEPAD delivered a statement to the media announcing the seventy-four points of its conclusions. The fifty-ninth point particularly concerns cultural issues about Afro-descendant people: 'We urge the government to promote greater knowledge, recognition and respect for the culture, history and heritage of people of African descent living in Belgium. This should include mandatory teaching of Belgium's colonial history at all levels of the educational system' (WGEPAD 2019: n.p.).

One year later, following large-scale protests in Belgium and Western Europe against racism and police violence in spring 2020, the Minister of Compulsory Education in Francophone Belgium recognised that the history of colonisation 'is too often ignored', adding that '[w]e can no longer tolerate this gap' (Burgraff 2020). It is also a matter of getting out of a Eurocentric vision in school programmes by partnership with the expertise developed by anti-racist organisations and Afro-descendant activist movements (Thibaut 2020: 17).

In the eighteenth point of the report regarding Belgium, the WGEPAD notes that 'Belgium often refers to intercultural, rather

than multicultural, objectives', before adding that '[i]nterculturality requires reciprocity, the rejection of harmful cultural stereotypes and the valuing of all cultures, including those of people of African descent' (WGEPAD 2019). Indeed, the experts claimed that 'clear evidence that racial discrimination is endemic in institutions in Belgium' existed and that 'people of African descent are confronted with discrimination in the exercise of their economic, social and cultural rights' (Thieffry and Blogie 2019).

Postcolonial and sub-Saharan African immigration in Belgium, has been attested to for a long time and illustrates a specificity with populations arriving from the former colony and the regions administrated by Belgium. While these populations do not constitute 'new migrations' (Martiniello et al. 2010), it is only in recent decades that this immigration has become significant (Mazzocchetti 2014: 7-11; Kagné 2008). Another particularity of the presence of people from sub-Saharan African countries in Belgium is that they constitute the vast majority of the category of individuals referred to as 'Blacks': 'This is why the designations "African" or "Sub-Saharan" are commonly used in the Belgian public space, both as a synonym and as a euphemism for the racial category "black"' (Mazzocchetti 2014: 12).

Talking about associations, collectivities, and non-profit structures of black African diasporas in Belgium, the 1980s and 1990s showed a multiplication and diversification of the migratory trajectories of sub-Saharan African populations in Belgium (Kagné and Martiniello 2001). The 1990s were characterised by a real 'proliferation of associations' in these communities. Indeed, the socio-political context allowed for the development of various initiatives and platforms based on pan-Africanism and the emergence of 'associative' spokespersons working for the recognition of the sub-Saharan African diasporas in Belgium by the public authorities in the same way as other immigrant populations.[4] Later on, this associative landscape would expand to include new issues related to the second generation whose struggle for the recognition of full citizenship focus on their country of birth (Ndiaye 2004; Grégoire and Mazzocchetti 2013).

Fighting Forms of Racism with Culture and Arts through Information Technology and Media

Indeed, 'one observation is common to all of these populations: . . . the discrimination and racism they experience in various situations,

and particularly in the cultural sphere, are frequent and widespread' (Dewitte 2017: 5). This confirms a conclusion of Unia about afrophobia: 'the Belgian colonial past still greatly influenced our perceptions of sub-Saharan people' (2017: 1). Thus, following the political scientist and decolonial activist Françoise Vergès, I consider that '[a]ttention to colonial history and its contemporary lives, in all their forms, is at the heart of the process of decolonization of the arts' because '[c]enturies of colonization – slavery and post-slavery – have left traces, fragments, prohibitions, images, and vocabulary contaminated by racism' (2018: 125). Then, by putting it in line with the few contextual elements presented above regarding racism and postcolonial memory in Belgium, I assume that Black Out may participate to efforts for decolonising arts and culture in Belgium and Europe. Indeed, the second main objective of Black Out presented above, the fight against institutional racism by raising awareness, seems directly linked with its first purpose of promoting black music and culture in Belgium.

Indeed, to concretise its main objectives, Laurenne M., the radio chief editor and co-founder of Black Out, explains that it disseminates information related to black music and culture, highlights '"blackouted artists" ["*artistes blackoutés*" in French] by the mainstream media', promotes people 'working for black music and culture in Belgium', and commemorates 'the genres and artists at the origin of black music that we know today' (Minon et al. 2020). Yves N., the web chief editor and co-founder, explains then the observation at the basis of the creation of Black Out: '[t]he program was born out of a need to talk about and address topics that need to be talked about and shared and to broadcast music genres that, although the most listened to in the world, are usually difficult to hear on mainstream media', before adding that '[t]he demand is real and important. Around us, few people recognise themselves in the media that are imposed on them' (Minon et al. 2020).

This helps then to confirm 'an undeniable fact' in Europe. For several years, racialised people in different sectors of activity like arts and culture 'have seized upon their personal experience, have searched through the archives, rediscovering buried stories and figures, exhuming memories, giving back to objects a biography that tells their wanderings and transformations' (Vergès 2018: 129). And when Black Out specifies that the finality of its actions is to 'make discover a history which concerns us all' (*Black Out* 2019), it is in line with one of the main features of decolonising and of the decolonial approach. According to S. L. Boulbina et al.*,* the decolonisation of thought can

be understood as an 'epistemological revolution' to designate a reversal, a subversion, of how 'knowledge' and 'scientific knowledge', as well as their productions, are considered (2012: 20). It is thus a necessity of acting 'beyond the inversion, and therefore the repetition, of colonial binarisms: white/black, good/bad, superior/inferior, etc.; beyond the "separatism" that is the perpetual inner threat of postcolonialism' (Renault 2011: 22).

The purpose of the project Black Out is therefore to confirm and to be in line with one of the driving forces of the decolonial approach, which allows 'to seize in all its historicity the racial fracture which . . . has divided humanity between peoples considered superior . . . considered inferior and robbed of their material resources as well as of their spirituality, their aesthetic, intellectual and moral criteria, and this, up to the very sacredness of their existence' (Senhadji and Obolensky 2021: 25). In a globalised world where information circulates at almost instantaneous speed and where the image of a message is becoming as important as its statement, Black Out explains that '[t]alking about black music and black culture is also a way of reminding us that black music gathers the most listened to musical genres today . . . , Black music is inseparable from the history and culture to which it is linked. It is also inseparable from its current actors. These actors, racialised or not, must be put forward'. Therefore, for example, the Black Out radio show offers diverse cultural, musical, artistic and historical reviews and chronicles. All these contents are accompanied '[w]ith a background of blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, rock'n'roll, soul, ska, rocksteady, reggae, funk, dancehall, ragga, hip-hop, rap, R&B, neo-soul, African music' (*Black Out* 2019).

As previously mentioned, Black Out is available in different formats, present on several social media and platforms and structures its activity around different projects and actions. One of the recent initiatives is a series of audio podcasts hosted on the YouTube platform aimed at encouraging listeners to express themselves and give their opinions and experiences about a pre-defined theme. Called 'What do you think?', the first edition of this concept is structured around the following question: 'Does the Afro-European identity exist?' and ask its audience: 'Do you define yourself as Afropean, Afro-descendant, African, European? Belgian? Liégeois? Bruxellois?'. This first episode is a conversation between the three founders of Black Out who explain their points of view on these questions by sharing their experiences. As Christian C., artistic director and co-founder, introduces in the podcast, it is about 'finding solutions for a more equal society'.

The podcast ends with a thought from Yves N. explaining that '[h]ere we are considered as Africans and there [in African countries] as Europeans, we often say that we have the ass between two chairs and that we are rejected from all sides, as a sacrificed generation, a wasted generation, but finally, I think that we are perhaps a generation that will make a bridge in fact' (*Black Out* 2021).

This thought seems to be in line with the purpose of Black Out presented above and which thus may concern not only racialised peoples but also everyone living in our globalised modern societies. Indeed, when relating that to decolonisation, we may point out that 'it is a multiple and complex process that cannot follow a single itinerary, it is multi-territorial, it seeks to respond to a diversity of sometimes conflicting memories, it must admit genders, sexualities, and many spatialities that intersect' (Vergès 2018: 124). Briefly said in the words of Frantz Fanon, 'decolonization is a historical process', it is thus a question of 'distinguishing the historicizing movement which gives it form and content' (2002: 40). At the end of this brief contribution, I think the Black Out transmedia is a project that fits relevantly into this history by focusing on cultural and artistic issues about black music and culture while aiming at fighting institutional racism through diverse projects and formats mobilising notably information technology and social media.

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Axel Mudahemuka Gossiaux, Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM), University of Liège, Belgium. E-mail: axel.gossiaux@uliege.be

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Notes

1. I translated all the quotations.
2. From Central African diasporas. From a methodological point of view, I would use the notion of 'diaspora' in order to observe 'the multiple practices, statements and social and political projects that work to construct it as such' (Grégoire 2016: 12).
3. Laurenne M., radio chief editor and co-founder, Christian C., artistic director and co-founder, and Yves N., web chief editor and co-founder. Maxime D. is also part of the team as web chief editor.
4. As Myria (the Federal Migration Centre in Belgium) explains, the general data on immigration and the population of foreign origin fall into two main categories: stock data and flow data (for 2019, see the Chapter 2, 'Populations

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and movements', of Myria's annual report). Compiled data are available in other works, such as the table 'Evolution of the main nationality groups at birth residing in Belgium on 1 January 1991 and on 1 January 2006' (Schoonvaere 2010). Regarding the evolution of the sub-Saharan African presence in Belgium, the works of Kagné and Martiniello (2001) and Schoonvaere and Schoumaker (2014) provides a detailed overview.

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