Chapter 11

From Mobutu to Molenbeek: Belgium and Postcolonialism

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Recent events, such as the shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels (24 May 2014), the *Charlie Hebdo* killings (7 January 2015) and, most significantly, the Paris attacks (13 November 2015) and the Brussels bombings (22 March 2016), have drawn an increased attention of international media to Brussels as a migrant destination and postcolonial metropolis. More specifically, this attention has been focused on one of the Belgian capital's nineteen municipalities, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean/Sint-Jans-Molenbeek, or simply Molenbeek. This particular neighbourhood in the northwest of the city has become infamous as the home of those young men who are allegedly responsible for a number of violent attacks carried out in Europe over the past decade in the name of transnationally operating terrorist organizations, either al-Qaeda or the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Place and space thereby appear as central to these events, while they are circumscribed by intersecting transnational trajectories and multiple histories of violence: the diasporic routes between Morocco and Belgium, established through bilateral labour migration agreements between the two countries in the 1960s and subsequent family reunifications and, more recently, narratives of the refugee and returnee, the victims of war and its perpetrators. According to the Soufan Group report on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, by October 2015, 470 Belgian nationals had joined the war, while specifying that most of these fighters originate from Molenbeek (Barrett et al. 2015: 11). The report further states that, 'The secular nature of western European countries like France and Belgium, which top the poll for the highest number of fighters per capita, coupled with a sense of marginalization among immigrant communities, especially those from North Africa, appear to have played a role in the radicalization process' (Barrett et al. 2015: 12–13). In doing so, the authors ignore that, for example, Belgium was the first western European country to

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subsidize Islamic religious education in state schools (*Loi du 19 juillet 1974 portant reconnaissance des administrations chargées de la gestion du temporel du culte islamique* 2016). It is interesting to note in this context that, while, in 2012, the Constitutional Court held that the so-called burqa ban does *not* violate the Belgian Constitution, local police regulations, like the one in place for Molenbeek, had already prohibited covering the face in public places as of 2004 (*Règlement Général de Police: Zone de police Bruxelles-Ouest de 2 avril 2014* 2016). These discourses testify to anxieties surrounding immigration and alterity that are certainly not an exclusively Belgian problem but part of wider political developments in the West since 9/11 and expressed by the rise of the far right across Europe, 'Brexit' and the election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States.

At the same time, more than fifty years after the formal end of Belgian colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa, in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi, and seventy years after the first post-war labour migration agreements were signed, Belgium is today home to significant diasporic communities:

> In contrast with other European countries such as the United Kingdom, Belgium never opted to recruit migrant workers in its former colonies in Africa. . . . . The mid-1970s oil crisis led Belgium and other European countries to stop active recruitment of low-skilled workers. However, immigration continued through the right of family reunification which was granted to the migrant workers who opted to settle in Belgium. Turks and Moroccans are the first major Muslim groups to immigrate to Belgium (Gsir, Mandin and Mescoli 2015: 7).

Apart from this heterogeneity of its diasporic communities, what renders Belgium's postcolonial situation even more complex are the country's 'domestic' ethnic tensions and their connections to the colonial project in sub-Saharan Africa. Belgium was the youngest among the European imperial powers, having gained independence from the Netherlands only in 1830, fifty years prior to the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. The rise of the new nation as a colonial aggressor was thereby inextricably connected to the figure of Leopold II, the second king of an independent Belgium. From 1885 to 1908, the Congo Free State represented the largest privately owned colonial territory in history under his control. The enormous profits gained from the exploitation of natural resources enabled major construction projects in Brussels and other cities like Antwerp, while an estimated number of 10 million Congolese died in consequence of the brutal forced-labour system and diseases (Yervasi 2008: 14). Following extensive international criticism, Leopold's private property was turned into a colony in 1908 and renamed the 'Belgian Congo' until its formal independence in 1960. Following the

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defeat of the German Empire in World War I, 'Ruanda-Urundi' (today's Rwanda and Burundi) was turned into a League of Nations mandate under Belgian control from 1919 to 1962 (Fraiture 2008: 7). With regard to the way in which the Belgian colonial project can be considered an attempt of national consolidation, Pierre-Philippe Fraiture argues that, 'Leopold II had the ambition of using the Congo as a tool to strengthen the somewhat precarious basis of the Belgian nation and dispel the growing tensions between the ruling French-speaking upper middle class and the rising working class' (Fraiture 2008: 7). To the present day, however, Belgium has not been able to overcome the deep divide between its two major language communities: Flanders, the predominantly Flemish-speaking north of the country, and Wallonia, the French-speaking south. Fraiture further explains how 'after the collapse of the empire, the gap between French-speaking and Flemish-speaking communities widened . . . and after more than forty years of institutional dismembering of the former centralised state, it is debatable whether or not they still have a common future' (Fraiture 2008: 10).

In his landmark article 'Postcolonial Belgium', Idesbald Goddeeris mentions an inscription on the *Monument aux pionniers belges au Congo* (Monument for the Belgian Pioneers in the Congo) in Brussels's Parc du Cinquantenaire, which praises Belgium's military 'heroism' of 'annihilating the Arab slave trader'. Goddeeris observes that, 'It did not seem to occur to people that the message may be offensive for some Belgians, particularly the ones frequenting Brussels' largest mosque nearby, in spite of the fact that "vandals" had erased the word "Arab" before 2009 (and did again after restoration)' (Goddeeris 2015: 449). He considers the continuing presence of such monuments celebrating colonialism as symptomatic for Belgium's difficulties in coming to terms with its imperial past. Meanwhile, the specificities of the Belgian situation elucidate why it is problematic to use postcolonial theory that has been developed in different contexts. My approach in this chapter thus echoes Charles Forsdick's and David Murphy's call for an emancipated Francophone postcolonial studies instead of using frameworks that have been constructed in an Anglophone context (Forsdick and Murphy 2009: 7). I posit that coming to a better understanding of Belgium's postcolonial situation including, for example, the terrorist attacks of recent years, requires the contextualization of these events within both Belgian postcolonial history and globalization.

The urban space of Brussels and its diasporic communities, especially those originating from the DRC, have received ample academic attention from scholars in social sciences. For instance, Ural Manço, Mireille-Tsheusi Robert and Billy Kalonji have analysed the dysfunctional social care in Belgium for youth of Congolese origin, differences to other migrant groups

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and the mediatization of racialized neighbourhoods of Brussels and Antwerp (Manço, Robert and Kalonji 2013). Eva Swyngedouw and Erik Swyngedouw have examined transnational identity formation of the Congolese diaspora in Brussels (Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw 2009), while Nicole Grégoire's and Jacinthe Mazzocchetti's study focuses on the lived experience of a 'qualified' participation in citizenship outside the imagined community of Belgian majority society (Grégoire and Mazzocchetti 2013).

Meanwhile, the cultural production of these diasporic communities in Flemish or French has been examined far less frequently (Bekers 2009; de Mul 2014; Arens 2015, 2016). The focus on the fictional, however, enables us to tease out the intertwined connections between power relations, violence, globalization and their representation by concentrating on the intersections of mobility, language(s) and space in contemporary cultural production. It reveals the ways in which recent cultural representations perpetuate or problematize narratives of racialization within the urban space of the Belgian capital. I am less interested in depictions of terror as such, but rather in the ways in which recent filmic and literary representations of male bodies of colour in Belgium have already emphasized the anxieties surrounding them. I will focus on these bodies as sites of violence as depicted in Adil El Arbi's and Bilall Falah's 2015 film *Black*[1] and in Patrick François's 2011 novel *La dernière larme du lac Kivu* (*The Last Tear of the Kivu Lake*). While neither El Arbi and Falah, who are both Belgian-born and of Moroccan heritage, nor François, who left Haiti for Belgium in the early 1990s, originate from countries with a history of *Belgian* colonialism, their respective works address the intersections of the aftermath of the Belgian colonial project, post-war labour migration and globalized asylum-seeking. As Elleke Boehmer and Sarah de Mul argue:

> The postcolonial, let us not forget, emerged out of situations of resistance to colonial inequality, its core concepts born out of an anti-colonial struggle. And though our times may appear superficially post-postcolonial, unequal conditions analogous to those under empire, or stemming from them, continue to pertain in ex-colonizing countries like the Netherlands and Belgium today. (2012: 8)

Moreover, these works draw connections between different experiences of violence that produce a shared sense of marginalization that affects in particular the youngest generations of diasporic communities in a space that has always already racialized them. Both *Black* and *La dernière larme du lac Kivu* can be seen, at least to a certain degree, to be influenced by a certain European cinematic tradition of the 1990s and 2000s that focuses on young men of colour in marginalized urban spaces, such as *La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz (1995) or *Kurz und Schmerzlos* (*Short, Sharp, Shock*,

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by the German-Turkish director Fatih Akın 2008). In this context, I am, in particular, interested in the mobile nature of Kara Keeling's use of the term 'ghettocentrism', which she builds upon Ed Guerrero's notion of 'ghetto-centric' African American cinema. Keeling refers to an 'innovation [that] is a conception of the world consolidated by and circulating in gangsta rap and its related products and practices. I understand "ghettocentrism" to be a historically specific reaction to and articulation of a cinematic social reality (the postindustrial city's ghetto) produced at the juncture between globalizing capitalism and contemporary U.S. racism' (Keeling 2007: 120).[2] At the same time, and specifically for the Belgian context, I posit, the 'ghettocentrism' of both film and novel have to be considered within the context of what Bill Ashcroft describes as follows:

> Neither imperialism nor globalization can be described simply as a program of homogenization because their operations are characterized by multidirectional and transcultural interactions, operating rhizomically rather than hierarchally or centrifugally. The various transcultural interactions between imperial powers and colonial cultures have a correlation in one of the most interesting features of the present globalized world: the degree to which local modernities have come to characterize the global, in their adaptation of the principles and technologies of modernity to local cultural conditions. (Ashcroft 2009: 86–7)

While both *Black* and *La dernière larme du lac Kivu* use different adaptational approaches as we will see (and, implicitly, target different audiences), these 'principles and technologies of modernity' appear as multilingualism, mobility and use of visual media in these works. I will demonstrate how such a focus allows us to address questions such as how fictional characters experience and negotiate space and what visions of mobility are expressed. This will help in attaining a better understanding of the links between public discourses surrounding young male bodies of colour and the specificity of Belgium's complex postcolonial situation.

BRUSSELS AS BABEL: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND CONFLICT IN POSTCOLONIAL BELGIUM

Depictions of young men of colour in recent Belgian film and literature both precede and are arguably informed by discourses surrounding their bodies in western Europe and the United States. Across various national contexts, such rhetoric represents brown and black male bodies as what Peter Cherry calls, referring to the British context, 'prone to a pathological form of masculinity supposedly inculcated by their religio-cultural background' and/or as

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drug-dealing and engaging in gang warfare (Cherry 2017: 2). I am thereby particularly interested how film-makers and writers of colour in Belgium present discussions of space and language as central to the representation of these young men. This helps us understand the specificity of the Belgian situation where any domestic politics are inextricably connected to questions of territory and language/ethnicity. Brussels thereby assumes several, sometimes conflicting roles, being the *de facto* capital of the European Union, the national capital of Belgium and the regional capital of Flanders. Although surrounded by the Flemish Brabant province and officially bilingual, this is no longer the case in linguistic-sociological terms, as Rudi Janssens explains, due to the city's migrant communities and important political and cultural status: 'People simply do not live in a monolingual environment in Brussels and both in their personal relations and in their daily public life they are constantly reminded of that multilingual environment' (Janssens 2008: 2). Any questions surrounding group identities certainly differ depending on geographical and socioeconomic context. However, in postcolonial Belgium, navigating space through multilingualism is an everyday experience for the country's diasporic communities, both within the capital city and beyond. In this context, El Arbi's and Falah's film *Black*, based on Dirk Bracke's eponymous 2006 novel, emphasizes the pivotal role that spatiality and language play for young men of colour in postcolonial Brussels. The film tells the story of two teenagers, who are part of two opposing street gangs in the Belgian capital. Marwan's (Aboubakr Bensaihi) friends of Moroccan and white Belgian origin form '1080', which is Molenbeek's postcode, while Marie-Evelyne/Mavela (Martha Canga Antonio) is affiliated with 'Black Bronx' through her cousin. The territory of Black Bronx is set in a part of Brussels that is allegedly Matonge, a neighbourhood within Ixelles. Sarah Demart has demonstrated how Matonge has become a space that illustrates the racialization of social relations in Belgium, especially since the 'riots' of 2001 and 2011–2012, while the neighbourhood had already been subject to disproportional police surveillance since the 1970s (Demart 2013: 6). While Véronique Bragard supposes that Matonge is 'probably the only European neighbourhood to have an African name', it is indeed this very name that forms a transnational connection between the former imperial centre of Brussels and a homonymic neighbourhood of Kinshasa (Bragard 2011: 104), thus connecting multiple histories of violence in the capital of the former Belgian colonizer. The names of both gangs thereby adapt practices of appropriating urban spaces rooted in US-American hip-hop culture, such as using postal codes, as Murray Forman explains:

> Whereas blues, rock, and R&B have traditionally cited regions or cities . . . contemporary rap is even more specific, with explicit references to

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> particular streets, boulevards and neighbourhoods, telephone area codes, postal zip codes, or other sociospatial information. Rap artists draw inspiration from their regional affiliations as well as from a keen sense of what I call the *extreme local*, upon which they base their constructions of spatial imagery. (Forman 2002: xvii)

The identity formation of both gangs in *Black* is thus closely tied to their respective neighbourhood and sphere of action within the urban space of Brussels: Molenbeek and Matonge. The 'extreme local' thereby functions as a sort of authentication both within the narrative (as a spatial delimitation of each gang's respective territory) and towards the film's audience (by demonstrating the directors' intimate knowledge of the city and its different neighbourhoods). The name of 'Black Bronx', referring to the economically most disadvantaged borough of New York City in particular, evokes discourses of (white) anxiety surrounding neighbourhoods with high percentages of non-white inhabitants, racialized poverty and violence, such as the *banlieues*, certain suburbs of Paris or Brussels's so-called *croissant pauvre* (the poor croissant), a string of neighbourhoods, including Forest, Anderlecht, Molenbeek and Schaerbeek, that form a half circle around the city centre. The gang's name testifies to their recourse to a US-American imagery via a perception of the urban space of Brussels that is defined by race relations, ethnicity and language, as is Belgium as a whole. The 'extreme local' then becomes part of the global, in that it constitutes a practice that globalization has transported across the Atlantic. In the absence of any available identity frameworks in Belgium – Manço, Robert and Kalonji have highlighted the lack of discourse of what it means to be black in Belgium (Manço, Robert and Kalonji 2013: 29) – the gang's spatial practices do not translate into empowerment of its marginalized members. Instead, the film's representation of black male characters and its problematic gender politics tap into long-established and mediatized stereotypes thereof (Demart and Robert 2015: n.p.).

Through its adaption of the 'Romeo-and-Julia' narrative, the film features the common tropes of the so-called mob or gangster film genre, such as gang affiliation and group identification along ethnic and linguistic lines, as well as the rivalries between them, such as fighting over territory. Moreover, the Belgian context evokes ethnic conflict, both domestic and in the country's former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, the worst consequences of which resulted in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the less well-documented and ongoing armed conflicts in the DRC and Burundi.

At the same time, it becomes very clear which gang the audience is meant to sympathize with: 1080 are depicted in a much more amiable way than Black Bronx, which is part of the wider troubling gender and racial politics of the film. This juxtaposition in representation between the gangs is

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introduced right from the start. During the opening credits, the late Belgian-Congolese rapper Romano Daking's song 'Problème' is playing while all we can perceive is a mesh-wire fence in the foreground. The moving but blurred contours of people in the background are accompanied by screams and indiscernible exclamations, foreshadowing the two gang rapes that the male members of Black Bronx will perpetrate later in the film and further emphasized through the oppressive atmosphere, created through the menacing beats and sexualized violence that is evoked through movements and sounds in the background. The mesh-wire fence will return in the scenes at a local nightclub in Matonge with Mavela leaning against it, symbolizing her entrapment and inability to leave the gang.

Following the unsettling opening of the film, the camera cuts to Marwan walking through a sunny street in Brussels. We do not see his face until later in this sequence, since the camera focuses on his hand carrying a brick that he will use to break a car window to steal a handbag from the passenger seat, while the woman in the car is screaming. In contrast to the opening sequence and later depictions of Black Bronx, 1080's violence is banalized: as Freddy Sartor observes in his critical review, these robberies, which other reviewers have often rather euphemistically described as petty thefts, are displayed in the film as an amusing pastime, while they might constitute a traumatic experience for the victims (Sartor 2015: 12). Marwan, who successfully escapes a Flemish man chasing him, is dressed in an Adidas tracksuit and Nike AirMax sneakers, recognizable insignia of a fashion connected to the creation of a distinct youth culture surrounding migrant working-class neighbourhoods in western Europe. El Arbi and Falah thus solidify the film's contextualization within a framework of globalized references to US-American popular culture and their adaptation in a European environment.

On the other hand, the members of Black Bronx are one-dimensional caricatures of the black street gangster stereotype. They are involved in organized crime (as opposed to 1080's occasional stealing of handbags), sell and consume hard drugs and are depicted as sexual predators since they use gang rape as a means of subduing female members or to humiliate their rivals. There are volatile attempts of rendering the black male characters more complex, for example, when X (Emmanuel Tahon), the gang leader, is watching a documentary which seems to be about the ongoing paramilitary conflict in the eastern Congo. His emotional reaction when child soldiers appear on the screen suggests that his current violent behaviour in Brussels indeed constitutes a re-enacting of a traumatic past in his country of origin, similar Michaël/'MikeNike' in François's novel, a petty diamond trader from the same unstable border region between the Congo and Rwanda, who has become the leader of a street gang in Brussels (François 2011: 148). In *Black*, however, this narrative strand, which connects the postcolonial history of the

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Congo with contemporary violence in the streets of Brussels, is not taken up again and X, like all other black male gang members, remains in his stasis. His representation thus solidifies the film's recourse to a racist discourse of atavistic violence reverberating with the rhetoric of savagery and barbarism (Demart and Robert 2015: n.p.). While the depiction of both Marwan and X heavily relies on stereotypes, it is, after all, also informed by what Sarah Demart and Mireille-Tsheusi Robert have identified as a form of postcolonial racism, which has rarely been addressed critically: that of young men of Maghrebi/Arab origin directed at the black community (cf. Demart and Robert 2015: n.p.; Manço, Robert and Kalonji 2013: 30).

Significantly, Mavela and Marwan are the only characters in the film who are portrayed as being able to speak French, Flemish and Arabic or Lingala, respectively. Their multilingualism plays a central role to their first meeting at a police station where both have been brought after Mavela has stolen alcohol from a supermarket for the other gang members and Marwan and his brother Nassim went on a shopping spree with a stolen credit card: she provocatively responds to an offensive remark made by Marwan with, 'You think I don't understand Flemish?' Flemish, both as language and identity construction, is represented as synonymous with upward social mobility in the film. When Marwan's parents appear at the police station to pick up their son, their representation forms a clear juxtaposition to their son's petty-criminal persona: they are dressed in conservative middle-class attire and his father speaks to Marwan in Flemish. Their brief appearance complicates any stereotypical assumptions about neighbourhoods like Molenbeek and indeed emphasizes the community's heterogeneity. However, 'granting' heterogeneity to the Moroccan diasporic community, but not to the one of Congolese descent, further conforms to the film's asymmetrical representation and racialization of the two groups. While Marwan, at this point, responds to his father 'I'm not Flemish, Dad' in Arabic, his brother Nassim later sceptically assesses his disclosure to leave the gang and their criminal acts behind as wanting to 'become Flemish'. *Black* thus frames Flemish identity as exclusively white and imbued with a social and cultural capital that remains entirely out of reach and 'inauthentic' for someone like Marwan, Nassim or their father. In doing so, the film adds a dimension to what Wouter van Gent and Rivke Jaffe have called the 'normalisation of marginalisation' that is both linguistic and identitarian: 'Urban inequalities are rendered normal by spatial imaginaries that depict "natural" associations between space, race, class and gender, with dysfunctional family life, sexual immorality and danger projected onto "non-White" [*sic*] neighbourhoods' (van Gent and Jaffe 2016: 3). While most characters are represented as confined to their respective urban spaces and thus implicitly to their race, ethnicity and language, Mavela's and Marwan's multilingualism, at least temporarily, seem to enable them to form

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a connection across these boundaries. This is visualized through their mobility, linguistically, by being able to switch from one language to another, as well as physically, in scenes of them traversing the urban space of Brussels, not only underground on the train but also overground on foot or by observing the traffic of the city's main arteries from a rooftop.

MOBILITY AS A THREAT: POSTCOLONIALISM AND TRANSNATIONAL VIOLENCE

Marwan's and Mavela's mobility highlights and challenges, but eventually does not transcend racial and spatial boundaries in the city. However, it poses a (temporary) threat to the identity constructions of their respective gangs that they have developed based on difference and antagonism. Patrick François's 2011 novel *La dernière larme du lac Kivu* produces a vision of black (im)mobility in a broader framework of hegemonic power relations between male bodies of colour and the state that offers further insight into Belgium's postcolonial situation. The novel tells the story of nineteen-year-old Calixte Bien-Aimé who flees Haiti and arrives in Belgium in 1992, following the military coup that deposed of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. He meets three young men of Congolese origin – Karl, Anthony and Michaël/MikeNike – and quickly becomes part of their circle of friends, which consists mainly of young black and mixed-race men. On their way to party in what Calixte describes as 'a luxurious house of the Congolese bourgeoisie of Waterloo' (François 2011: 104, author's translation), once Napoleon's battleground and now a suburb of the Belgian capital, the young men are stopped by the police who demands they show their passports. It is here that Calixte, quite literally, meets his Waterloo. Aware of his legal rights, he refuses to hand over his documents:

> We're in Waterloo here! one of them shouts at me in a condescending voice and visibly irritated. – That's true, this is not Brussels! repeats another one maliciously and smiles self-righteously. – But is this still Belgium? Reassure me! is what I want to scream for my legitimate rights to be respected in a space that already appears as some sort of lawless 'no man's land'. (François 2011: 106, author's translation)

It is not within Brussels, but in its suburbs that Calixte is suddenly reminded of the police violence and arbitrary exercise of law he thought he had left behind in Haiti. In stating 'We're in Waterloo here!' the policeman clearly establishes a spatial opposition between Brussels and the suburb. The policemen are not only limiting the freedom of movement of Calixte and his friends but also setting a limit to their ability of exercising their civil rights. The condescending voice and the self-righteous smile express the unequal

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power relationship between the police and the young men. Indeed, the suburbs outside the capital appear as a veritable 'no black man's land', in which Calixte and his friends are shoved into a police van without even being told the reason why they had been stopped in the first place. Their race and gender seem to be the only decisive factors. Mark Anthony Neal's assessment of the disproportionate incarceration of black (and brown) male bodies in the United States finds a parallel in Waterloo, as 'some preemptive attack on the presumed criminality of those bodies', while 'the most "legible" black male body is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment' (Neal 2013: 4). What connects the representations in François's novel to the American situation that Neal describes, is the prevention of movement and mobility of black male bodies and their removal from the streets into the police van.

Earlier on in the narrative, when Calixte and his friends watch 'a videotape from the Congo that recounts the exploits of the dictator-president' (François 2011: 60, author's translation), they take part in the global circulation of a very limited scope of masculine identities that are available to young men of colour. Similar to the pedestrians filming Marwan's and Nassim's spectacular arrest by the police after their 'shopping trip' on their smartphones, ready to be posted to and shared via social media, the mediatization of Mobutu and the handbag thieves of Molenbeek heavily relies on staging male bodies of colour as violent masculinities. The transnational circulation of these images thereby connects disparate moments of anxiety surrounding these bodies in Belgian postcolonial history, while highlighting the very limits of what Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw have called 'forms of transnational identity formation and their local-spatial expression as embodied in and performed through the everyday urban life of local transnational communities' in Brussels (Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw 2009: 69).

Mobutu's rule, according to Priscilla Appama, 'remains one of the world's most notorious examples of dictatorship and kleptocracy', while his seizure of power in the Congo was 'supported . . . by the CIA and the Belgians – who wanted to remove Lumumba from power (considered pro-Soviet and thus, dangerous for them) and saw in Mobutu the figure of . . . an ally in the Cold War' (Appama 2008: 41). Meanwhile, other male bodies of colour in Belgium that are perceived, in Neal's words, 'in need of policing and containment', are put under state control. Hence, the police officers in François's novel erase the young men's presence in the public sphere and put them into an extremely confined space.

While being driven around in Waterloo, Calixte reacts somatically: 'In the police van, which is literally suffocating me, I've discovered a claustrophobia I had not experienced before. Is it a panic attack? In any case, I can barely breathe' (François 2011: 108, author's translation). Inevitably reminiscent of

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Eric Garner, who died at the hands of New York City police officers on 17 July 2014 while recorded on video gasping 'I can't breathe', the policemen in the novel immediately identify the young men as being from Brussels. They perform van Gent's and Jaffe's notion of the 'normalisation of marginalisation' mentioned earlier by collectively imagining Calixte and his friends to 'belong' to certain urban spaces and not to others, such as an affluent suburbia, which is why they emphasize that this is Waterloo, not Brussels. By establishing a racial geography of Brussels and its suburbs, they delimit the young men's mobility to the urban space of the capital, which they perceive as 'other', and not in the predominantly white suburb. While Teju Cole's novel *Open City* produces what Madhu Krishnan describes as 'a vision of space [in Brussels] in which the illusion of freedom of movement serves as a mask for the continuation of violence', François paints an even bleaker picture by presenting the only mobility of black male bodies that state power allows as them being driven around in a police van (Krishnan 2015: 675). The intersections of masculinity and race are thereby paramount to understand the relationship between the diasporic subject and the Belgian state, as the police officers' identification of the young men as not belonging to the suburban space demonstrates.

While sitting in the police van, Calixte struggles to understand his friends' apathy and calmness regarding the current events, which probably testifies to the fact that this is not the first time they have experienced such treatment. He is rebelling against the hegemonic discourses that force him to fit into the only recognizable, hence the only acceptable identity framework that will always posit him as other: that of the male black 'African' criminal. Michaël, the gang leader and the only black character in François's novel who *actually* engages in criminal activities, is significantly absent from this scene. With him, rage is absent and so even Calixte's panic and anger eventually develop into apathy and obedience.

CONCLUSION

Both François's novel and El Arbi's and Falah's film express visions of violence that connect the very local narratives set in Molenbeek, Matonge and Waterloo to the postcolonial legacies of Belgium in sub-Saharan Africa. X's and MikeNike's traumatic experiences of the armed conflict in the border region between the two former Belgian colonies Rwanda and the DRC complicate any easy assumptions about their status as violent gang leaders in the capital city of the former colonizer. *Black*, however, perpetuates mediatized stereotypes of black masculinity, which reverberate with old and new colonial and racist discourses of 'savagery'. At the same time, the ways in which

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Marwan, Nassim and Calixte experience police violence testify to Belgium's complex postcolonial situation: its ambiguous attitude towards Islam and the marginalization of migrant working-class communities, as well as hesitation towards acknowledging and confronting the country's colonial legacy in sub-Saharan Africa and diasporic presence in the former metropolis. Young male bodies of colour are imagined to 'belong' to certain neighbourhoods, like Molenbeek and Matonge, but not to others. These discourses have produced visions of spatiality and mobility in postcolonial cultural production that emphasize mobility between ethnic groups, languages, (urban) spaces and across borders. At the same time, current debates – in the aftermath of terrorist attacks by the so-called Islamic State militants in Paris and Berlin – about reintroducing border controls in the Schengen area rearticulate how young men of colour's mobility is perceived as a threat. In a Belgian context, it is multilingualism in particular, which appears as the key to the ability to traverse imagined boundaries. While it is important to highlight what Ravi calls the persistent problems of transnationalism and translatability of non-Anglophone postcolonial studies, works like *Black* and *La dernière larme du lac Kivu*, as well as media narratives surrounding the figure of the terrorist, require us to move towards a multilingual, postcolonial approach to investigate the intersections of colonial legacies, global migration and the state in the twenty-first century (Ravi 2011: 216).

NOTES

1. All translations from English subtitles.
2. For Ed Guerrero's (1993) original use of the term, see his *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*, 182.

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