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Imperial Fictions

Belgian Novels about Rwanda

Nicki Hitchcott

On 7 April 1994, the day after the shooting down of the Rwandan presidential plane, which triggered the genocide against the Tutsi, fifteen UN peacekeepers were stationed outside Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana's home when the house came under attack from the Rwandan Armed Forces. The prime minister and her husband were both killed trying to escape, and all the blue helmets were captured. Five of the peacekeepers were from Ghana, ten from Belgium. While the Ghanaians were released almost immediately, the ten Belgian paratroopers were taken to the Kigali Military Camp where they were brutally murdered in ways that mirrored the killings of the Tutsi in the genocide.¹ Belgium responded by withdrawing all its troops, leaving the UN peacekeeping forces in Rwanda (UNAMIR) seriously undermined. According to Danielle de Lame, the assassination of the blue helmets forced Belgium into a difficult confrontation with its colonial past:

The killing of the ten Belgian paratroopers on the very day the genocide started, and under gruesome circumstances akin to those of the other killings of the day, made Belgians suddenly discover the hatred felt for them by a people whose love they had taken for granted and from whom they expected gratitude.²

Two years later, the Belgian Senate's Foreign Affairs Commission launched a parliamentary inquiry into Belgium's role in the events in Rwanda in 1994 and into who was responsible for the deaths of the UN peacekeepers.³

Prepared by then Senate Vice Presidents Guy Verhofstadt and Philippe Mahoux, the report from the 1996–97 parliamentary inquiry points out that both the murder of the ten Belgian paratroopers and the genocide itself were perpetrated by Rwandans.⁴ According to the report, the motive for killing the soldiers was to destabilise the UN peacekeeping force, but it also acknowledges that the killings could have been a reaction to rumours that Belgium had been responsible for shooting down the presidential plane. While the report does conclude that 'with hindsight, the international community, and some of its

components, including Belgium, failed in April 1994', it presents Belgians as the victims, evidenced not only by the murder of the UN soldiers but also by the murder of Belgian citizens and what is described as the 'anti-Belgian climate' in Rwanda at the time. The 'anti-Belgian climate' is explained in the report as Rwanda's reaction to Belgium's refusal to deliver arms that Rwanda had paid for at the start of the 1990 Civil War, and the withdrawal of all Belgian troops in April 1994. The impact of Belgium's colonial past is examined only in relation to the failure of the peacekeeping forces to abide by the unwritten rule that, for reasons of neutrality, UN troops should not be deployed from former colonial powers.

Belgium's deep entanglement with Rwanda dates to World War I, when Germany lost control of the territory of Ruanda-Urundi in 1916. Formalised in 1922 by the League of Nations, Belgium's mandate to govern lasted forty years, ending in 1962 when Rwanda became independent. Yet reflections on the Belgian empire almost always overlook Rwanda, particularly in public discourse. While Belgium as a colonial power has increasingly been the subject of postcolonial scholarship, particularly in the last thirty years, this work has focused on King Leopold II and the former Belgian Congo.⁵ Indeed, Belgium's forty-year long colonial rule of both Rwanda and Burundi seems to have been, for the most part, conveniently forgotten. This is confirmed by Idesbald Goddeeris, for whom 'a decolonisation of the [Belgian] mind has yet to occur' because Belgium lacks the 'dynamic memory policy' and 'vivid postcolonial debate' of its European neighbours.⁶

Writing specifically about the Congo, Goddeeris explains Belgium's postcolonial exceptionalism partly by the fact that migration to the country from the former empire is much lower than in, for example, France or the United Kingdom.⁷ Yet, despite the small size of its migrant population, Belgium has become what Camilla Orjuela calls 'a center for Rwandan diaspora activism' over the past twenty-six years.⁸ In 2010, there were forty thousand Rwandans in Belgium, mostly in Brussels, many of whom had migrated there after 1994.⁹ Today, the Rwandan community in Belgium includes survivors, bystanders, opponents, and perpetrators of the genocide as well as children from each of these groups. This diversity, as Orjuela explains, generates contrasting, often highly conflictual versions of how the shared past is remembered.¹⁰ Most recently, in July 2020, following the rise of the Black Lives Movement in Belgium, the Belgian government announced its decision to set up a truth and reconciliation commission to investigate its colonial past. The only Rwandan member of the commission is Brussels-based lawyer Laure Uwase, whose father, Anastase Nkundakozera, was convicted of crimes of genocide in a Rwandan Gacaca court. Uwase is the former secretary general of Jambo ASBL, a Rwandan youth movement based in

Belgium and, according to Tutsi survivors, a platform for negationists. The very different versions of Rwanda's story in the Belgian diaspora are further complicated by the memory narrative constructed by the former colonial power and reproduced in different Belgian media. In this essay, I focus on how the Belgian colonial master narrative of colonial complacency and post-colonial silence has been translated into three fictional texts about Rwanda, all written by authors from Belgium and published between 1997 and 2018.¹¹

Since 1994, there has been a significant number of creative responses to the genocide from authors inside and outside Rwanda. The best-known novels are those produced by the team of writers who took part in the 1998 'Writing with a Duty to Memory' literary mission, but there are also twelve writers born in Rwanda who have produced important works of fiction about the genocide.¹² While much has been written about the texts produced by that project, and my own research has focused on fictional works by authors born in Rwanda, little attention has been given to creative writing about the genocide from inside the former colonial power.¹³ This essay makes a first attempt to address that critical gap by focusing on literary production by authors from Belgium, beginning with a discussion of the new edition of Joseph Ndwanaye's novel *La Promesse à ma sœur*.¹⁴ While Ndwanaye's novel is in a slightly different category of Belgian novel in that its author is originally from Rwanda, the new edition includes extensive paratextual apparatus by a Belgium-born writer and is accompanied by an online pedagogical dossier also compiled by a Belgian.¹⁵ The other two texts are both by Belgian writers born in Belgium: Huguette de Broqueville's *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant*, published in 1997, just three years after the genocide against the Tutsi, and Bernard Dan's more recent 2014 novel, *Le Garçon du Rwanda*.¹⁶ The conclusion will draw together what these rather different works of fiction tell us about Belgium's past and present relationship with Rwanda and reflect on the ethical implications of these fictional representations of Rwanda's postcolonial history. Underpinning the discussion is Madelaine Hron's important point that the key function of fiction about Rwanda in 1994 is an ethical one, which she defines as,

not only to represent genocide, but also to resist the exterminationist ideology which engendered it. In the case of Rwanda, this genocidal ideology, founded on ethnic divisionism between Hutu and Tutsi, again derives from a complex causality – be it the ethnographic Hamitic myth, Belgian colonial nepotism, the post-independence pogroms and exile of the Tutsi, or Anglophone and Francophone neocolonial interventions – which writers of *itsebabwoko* must somehow address, simplify and resist in their works.¹⁷

Joseph Ndwaniye, *La Promesse faite à ma sœur*

Ndwaniye's debut novel, *La Promesse faite à ma sœur*, in which the protagonist returns to Rwanda in 2003 to find out what happened to his family during the genocide, was first published in 2006 by Brussels-based publisher Les Impressions Nouvelles.¹⁸ In 2018, the publisher reprinted the novel as part of its 'Espace Nord' collection, defined as 'the Belgian heritage collection.'¹⁹ A link from the publisher's website takes you to the Espace Nord pages, where the collection is described as 'entirely devoted to the francophone literature of Belgium' and 'a useful tool for discovering and promoting Belgian authors.'²⁰

Among a list of over one hundred authors in this collection, Ndwaniye is one of only two writers of African origin.²¹ Yet, despite his Rwandan roots, the website presents him as a Belgian author, incorporated into the literary canon of the former colonial power.²² The decision to move Ndwaniye's novel into the Espace Nord collection suggests that the francophone administration has finally recognised the need for Belgian people, particularly secondary school children, to acknowledge and understand what happened in Rwanda, using fiction as an entry point for discussion.²³ Books in the collection are primarily aimed at Belgian schoolteachers and their students. In this case, the reprinted text of *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* is followed by a thirty-page dossier by Belgian poet and librarian Rony Demaeseneer. This includes an essay with a glossary of Kinyarwanda words, an interview with Joseph Ndwaniye, and a bibliography of French-language works consulted.²⁴ In addition to the materials provided in the published book, each title in the collection has its own pedagogical dossier that can be freely downloaded from the Espace Nord website.²⁵ The online dossier to accompany Ndwaniye's novel was published one year later than the new printed edition and coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi.

Although there is little academic scholarship on *La Promesse faite à ma sœur*, it is an important fictional response to the genocide against the Tutsi.²⁶ Written by an exiled Hutu author, it carefully illustrates the complex nature of Rwandan subject positions in relation to the genocide. While there is no autobiographical pact as such, there are many similarities between Ndwaniye's own story and that of his narrator-protagonist Jean Seneza. Rather than describe the horror of what happened in 1994, the novel focuses on before and mostly after the genocide, illustrating the difficulties faced by those who were absent witnesses in coming to terms with what happened.²⁷ When he returns to Rwanda, Jean finds out that his sister and her children have all been killed, but his twin brother, Thomas, is now in prison, accused of crimes of genocide. As a result of his journey home, Jean finds himself in an ambivalent position, associated with an alleged perpetrator who, as his twin brother, is the man who most resembles

himself, but Jean is also what some might see as a Hutu survivor by destination, since other members of his family were attacked and killed.²⁸ After revisiting his birth country, Jean finds himself wondering what he would have done if he had still been living in Rwanda during the genocide.

The ethical ramifications of this grey zone in which many Rwandans found themselves during and after 1994 inform some of the suggested activities in the book's accompanying pedagogical dossier, which tries to find a balance between reflecting on the universal questions raised by the novel (about guilt, forgiveness, and responsibility) and the need to educate secondary school students about the specific nature of the genocide against the Tutsi. While it does a reasonable job of presenting some of the key facts in Rwandan history, what is troubling about the contents of the pedagogical dossier is the way in which it underplays the role of the Belgian colonial administration in the history of the genocide. In this respect, it reflects the content of Ndwaniye's novel, in which the afterlife of colonialism is presented only in terms of the narrator's Belgian childhood friends in his home village and his eventual decision to leave Rwanda to study and later work in Brussels.

In the online dossier, racist ideas about Hutu and Tutsi are traced back to missionaries, explorers, and anthropologists. These racist ideas, the dossier informs us, included the infamous Hamitic hypothesis, which identified Tutsi as Caucasian outsiders who were closer to the Whites than the majority Bantu Hutu and therefore superior to them: 'The basis of the racist Hamitic ideology was quite simply invented by the White Fathers who wrote what became the official version of the History of Rwanda in line with their essentially racist points of view.'²⁹ While the Hamitic hypothesis does indeed have its roots in the scientific racism of the nineteenth century, and the Catholic missionaries (White Fathers) did play an important part in this, it was the Belgian colonial authorities who institutionalised the imagined ethnic categories that became so important in the genocide against the Tutsi, as René Lemarchand reminds us:

In its efforts to make more 'legible' the complex ethnic configurations of the [Great Lakes] region, the colonial state contributed significantly to formalizing and legitimizing the Hutu-Tutsi polarity. [...] Time and again historians have drawn attention to the perverse effects of the colonizer's recourse to Hamitic and Bantu labels, as if to impose its own normative construction on Hutu and Tutsi.³⁰

From the beginning of its period of colonial rule, and in collaboration with the White Fathers, Belgium began to draw up 'race policies' for Rwanda.³¹ Yet the dossier attempts to disculpate the Belgian colonial administration by emphasis-

ing that they were simply carrying on a system of division that was already in place: 'The Belgians were so impressed by this natural order of things that a series of administrative measures taken between 1926 and 1932 institutionalised the division between the two races'.³² To suggest that the implementation of Belgium's colonial reforms, which included the 1933 classification of the whole country's population based on physical characteristics, was simply following the 'natural order of things' is to repeat a colonial lie, as Mahmood Mamdani explains:

It is Belgian reform of the colonial state in the decade from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s that constructed Hutu as *indigenous* Bantu and Tutsi as *alien* Hamites. It is also Belgian colonialism that made for a political history in Rwanda different from that in standard indirect rule colonies, like Uganda and Congo, in tropical Africa.³³

Through their reforms, the Belgian colonial authorities racialised what had previously been a mobile socio-political distinction in Rwanda, thereby pitting Hutu against Tutsi. Later, Belgium's shifting support from the Tutsi minority elite to the dissatisfied Hutu majority played a key role in fomenting the anti-Tutsi ideology that drove the 1994 genocide.³⁴ Gérard Prunier notes that, from the very beginning of the 'Muyaga' or the so-called 'Social Revolution' of 1959, 'the Belgian authorities showed extreme partiality for Hutu, even letting them burn Tutsi houses without intervening'.³⁵ As Rwanda hurtled towards independence amid sporadic violence and waves of Tutsi emigration to neighbouring countries, the UN strongly encouraged Brussels to push for reconciliation in Rwanda.³⁶ Belgium responded by declaring a state of emergency and placing Rwanda under the command of Guy Logiest, a Belgian army colonel who had been working with the Force Publique in the Congo.³⁷ Alongside Grégoire Kayibanda, the leader of the Party of the Hutu Emancipation Movement (PARMEHUTU), Logiest managed to keep the UN at bay and establish what a UN Trusteeship Commission Report described in March 1961 as 'the racial dictatorship of one party' – the PARMEHUTU or 'Hutu Power'.³⁸

While the online dossier includes a sample of the Hutu ten commandments that served as a manifesto for Hutu Power, there is no mention that the 1959 'social revolution' was, as Lemarchand puts it, 'powerfully assisted if not engineered by the Belgian authorities'.³⁹ Instead, we learn that in 1946 Belgium signed an agreement with the UN for Ruanda-Urundi to become independent; this despite the fact that the 1950s was a time of massive Hutu unrest, encouraged by both Flemish-speaking missionaries and the francophone Belgian colonial authorities. Tutsi chiefs were replaced with Hutu, and many Tutsi were massacred in the run-up to the so-called social revolution. None of this

is mentioned. After independence, the pedagogical dossier moves swiftly on to the genocide itself, with no further mention of Belgium at all, not even the much-publicised killing of the ten Belgian peacekeepers that I used to open this essay, and which, according to de Lame, caused a sea change in the way Belgians thought about Rwanda. Suddenly, the 'self-confidence and paternalism', which, de Lame argues, had previously characterised Belgium's view of its colonial past in Rwanda, were shattered when Belgian lives were brutally taken.⁴⁰ This sense of betrayal on the part of the coloniser is strongly conveyed in the second novel under discussion: Huguette de Broqueville's novel *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant*, published in 1997, just three years after the genocide.

Huguette de Broqueville, *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant?*

De Broqueville was born in Rochefort, Belgium, in 1931 and died in 2015. Like Joseph Ndwaniye, she was a member of the francophone PEN club of Belgium, serving as the club's president for several years. She was a prolific and award-winning writer and journalist, with *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant* her most successful novel. *Uraho?* has been translated into Hungarian, Romanian, and Finnish and, although de Broqueville was not herself a Christian, won the Prix des Scriptorum Christiani (the Belgian association of Christian writers) in 1998 and the Prix Henri Davignon de l'Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique in 2000. *Uraho?* is also the only Belgian novel about the genocide listed in the literary works section of Colette Braeckman's entry on Rwanda in Prem Poddar, Rajeev Patke, and Lars Jensen's 2008 *Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures – Continental Europe and Its Empires*.⁴¹ Despite all this recognition, *Uraho?* has received relatively little academic attention outside Belgian literary circles. According to Pierre Halen, the lack of scholarship on de Broqueville's novel can be explained simply by the fact that it was published in Belgium.⁴²

Uraho? recounts a woman's relationship with her only brother, an unnamed Belgian priest posted in Rwanda before, during, and after the genocide against the Tutsi. Like Ndwaniye's novel, *Uraho?* can be categorised as auto-fiction.⁴³ Indeed, the preface by French writer and diplomat Pierre de Boisdeffre removes any ambiguity around the author and narrator as one and the same when he attributes lines from the first-person narration to de Broqueville herself.⁴⁴ My own research into de Broqueville's family tree has identified her brother as Ferdinand Drion du Chinois, a White Father who died on 25 November 1994, having spent twenty-eight years as a missionary in Rwanda.⁴⁵ Through its first-person narrative, *Uraho?* conveys both the author's grief for her dead brother, but also

Belgium's and the Catholic Church's mourning for the colonial territory of Ruanda-Urundi that, as de Lame implies, was only finally lost in April 1994, despite Rwanda having been independent since 1962.

Catholicism in Rwanda dates to the founding of the first mission in 1900, but Christianity did not really begin to take hold until the interwar period when Belgium took control.⁴⁶ The Catholic Church was an important part of the Belgian colonial apparatus, which drew on the White Fathers' knowledge of the country and its language to cultivate a Rwandan elite based on 'ethnic' differences that the churches helped to define. According to Timothy Longman, 'churches helped make genocide possible by making ethnic violence understandable and acceptable to the population.'⁴⁷ By 1932, the Catholic Church was the main social institution in Rwanda, and it controlled the education system, which clearly differentiated Tutsi from Hutu.⁴⁸ By 1994 around 90 per cent of Rwandans were Christian and 60 per cent Roman Catholic.⁴⁹ As the number of Rwandan Catholics grew in the post-war period, the church leaders simultaneously followed the colonial authorities in switching allegiance from Tutsi to Hutu and focusing on developing a new counter-elite (see Chantal Gishoma's chapter in this volume). As Longman notes, churches have always been 'important actors' in Rwanda's political struggles.⁵⁰ Much has been written about the roles of individual priests during the genocide, particularly those who colluded with the *génocidaires* in the execution of thousands of people who had fled to the churches for safety only to become victims of large-scale and bloody massacres.⁵¹ Whereas some priests were targeted as opponents of the genocidal government's policies, others were complicit in crimes of genocide. Two thirds of the Catholic priests working in Rwanda in 1994 were either killed or fled. Many of those who remained in the country openly condemned the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and voiced support for the interim genocidal government.⁵²

In his preface to de Broqueville's *Uraho?*, Boisdeffre presents Rwanda as a failed colonial project and, in doing so, points to the strong alliance between church and state in the colonial period. According to the narrator, 'What was astonishing was that these people had for a long time been patiently educated, trained and Christianised by a white coloniser.'⁵³ While Halen reads the colonialist exoticism of Boisdeffre as completely at odds with de Broqueville's writing, I find that de Broqueville's narrator continues the 'us and them' colonial racism that Halen identifies in Boisdeffre's preface.⁵⁴ The narrative switches from the benevolent paternalism towards Rwanda found in earlier imperial fictions, such as Ivan Reisdorff's 1978 pseudo-detective novel, *L'Homme qui demanda du feu*, to rage at what the narrator presents as ingratitude for the civilising mission performed by people like her brother.⁵⁵ In the closing pages of *Uraho!*, the narrator describes a photograph of her brother in the classic pose of a 'white saviour':

'An image of my brother surrounded by Rwandan children. And he is smiling. Wearing a sunhat, his eternal sunhat.'⁵⁶ Rwandan people are described first in generic, racist terms as 'magnificently brown or black Africans', in harmony with the earth (p. 24), polite and deferential to the White Father's sister, always smiling (p. 30), and then as oversexed, bloodthirsty killers for whom killing and sex have become inextricably linked (p. 96).

Uraho? is a novel filled with violence. Unlike Ndwanaye, de Broqueville does not seem to be prevented by her position as a secondary witness from providing often extremely graphic descriptions of acts of genocide. For example, one scene describes Antoine, a member of the *interahamwe* militia, slicing body parts from Alfred, a Tutsi man who was once his friend, in front of Alfred's wife and children. His fellow militiaman Cyprien then kills Alfred's wife with a blow to her carotid artery, at which point the narrator observes, 'the children see the blood gush out like a fountain in spring, a burst of red from a wild orchid as the mother lets out a scream' (p. 87). The poetic language used to describe this violent act is uncomfortable for the reader, but at the same time, the reference to an exotic flower reminds us of our comfortable distance from the horrific events described.

While de Broqueville makes some attempt to emphasise the universalism of genocide and our collective guilt in the case of Rwanda, the text falls repeatedly back into racialised differentiation. For example, in describing some Rwandan women watching acts of violence, the narrator compares their impotence with that of 'us', the readers, who also did nothing to stop the massacres:

If we were not able to do anything, if the world has criticised us for doing nothing, we feel guilty because we too are **capable** of those same atrocities. There lies the secret of our guilt. There lies the hypocrisy of those who bombard us with criticism. **Them and us, we are all capable of the worst.** (p. 91)⁵⁷

The suggestion that 'we' could not have done anything to stop the violence absolves Belgium and its people from any responsibility for what happened in Rwanda. Paradoxically, the text's insistence on the fact that there is something inherently human about crimes of genocide ('we are all capable of the worst'), reinforces the *Heart of Darkness* myth that has become a cliché in studies of the Great Lakes region and was the founding myth of the European colonial mission: 'No animal would do that. [...] Not animals, not savages, not monsters, we are human. Plain and simple' (p. 91). Ironically, the apparent dismissal of the language of colonial racism ('not animals, not savages') serves only to reinforce the distance between 'them' and 'us'. De Broqueville's Rwanda is stained with blood, with a 'black fury that can be described not as bestial but as human'

(p. 91). The reader infers that 'we' could not have done anything to stop the violence because 'we' are different from 'them' – this despite the repeated mention of our common humanity.

De Broqueville's reader sees Rwanda through the first-person narrator's imperial gaze, itself a vision refracted through that of her brother, the White Father. At the end of May 1994, her brother is evacuated to Belgium for his own safety, only to return in October 1994 once the genocide is over. When her brother finally dies of despair in post-genocide Rwanda, de Broqueville surrounds his death with an excess of Christian imagery. Rwanda under the RPF is compared to the garden of Gethsemane, the brother's return to the stations of the cross (p. 127), and his death is presented as a Christlike sacrifice: 'He offered up his suffering and his life for Rwanda' (p. 130). Furthermore, the brother's despair and subsequent death is closely linked in the novel to the victory of the RPF, the exiled Tutsi army who invaded Rwanda in October 1990, thereby launching the Civil War, and who fought the *interahamwe* and the Rwandan Armed Forces to end the genocide in July 1994. After listing a catalogue of RPF crimes against Hutu, which her brother apparently discovers (p. 127), the narrator concludes with a description of the RPF as a group of elegantly dressed liars: 'Immaculately groomed, the RPF categorically denies everything. Keep lying and something of the truth will always remain, as Voltaire said. My brother died because of it' (p. 128). By suggesting a causal effect between the actions of the RPF and the death of the White Father, the text reveals the political allegiances of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, which Mamdani describes as 'both the brains and the hands of the colonial state' (p. 99).

In August 1994, twenty-seven priests exiled in the DRC wrote to the Vatican presenting the genocide as an interethnic conflict and condemning the RPF:

To speak of genocide and to insinuate that only Hutus killed Tutsis is to be ignorant that Hutus and Tutsis have been each others' [*sic*] executioners. We dare even to confirm that the number of Hutu civilians killed by the army of the RPF exceeds by far the number of Tutsi victims of the ethnic troubles.⁵⁸

Immediately after the genocide, the relationship between the Belgium government and the RPF was, as Rachel Hayman explains, one of 'mutual distrust'.⁵⁹ For the RPF leadership, this lack of trust was based on Belgium's past support of Hutu Power and the genocidal regime in Rwanda as well as their withdrawal of UN troops during the genocide. Belgium, on the other hand, lacked confidence in the RPF's ability to stabilise Rwanda, a feeling that was strengthened when Rwanda become involved in massacres in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1990s.⁶⁰ In *Uraho?* Belgian distrust of the RPF is further

reflected in the text's descriptions of RPF soldiers as devils and snakes (p. 125). Whereas Halen reads the abundance of diabolical imagery in de Broqueville's novel as a manifestation of the self-proclaimed agnostic author's inability to contemplate tragedy caused by human actions,⁶¹ the association of these images with the RPF also suggests an internalisation of the Hutu Power mythology that the RPF were devils with long tails, cloven hoofs, and big ears, and that all Tutsi were snakes.⁶²

Focusing on the Congo, Georgi Verbeek identifies two central paradigms in Belgian colonial memory narratives: the first he describes as 'the loss of our Congo', characterised by nostalgia, heroisation, and a positioning of the colonial power as undeserved victim of the failure of its civilising mission; the second, the 'innocence thesis', presents Belgium as too small to have played a significant role in decolonisation and presents Belgian people as the targets of violence.⁶³ Both of these are played out in de Broqueville's novel in relation to Rwanda. Perhaps most problematic is the equivalence suggested in this text between the Tutsi and the Belgians as innocent victims in 1994. We see this in repeated scenes where the narrator's brother is threatened by the *interahamwe* for being *umubiligi* ['Belgian' in Kinyarwanda] and, of course, in his ultimate death, presented as an indirect result of RPF war crimes.

Bernard Dan, *Le Garçon du Rwanda*

Whereas in both the new edition of *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* and *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant*, the damage inflicted on Rwanda through forty years of Belgian control does not receive a mention, Bernard Dan's enigmatic novel *Le Garçon du Rwanda* does make reference to Belgium's role in Rwanda.⁶⁴ However, the genocide against the Tutsi is not the main focus of *Le Garçon du Rwanda*, which was published in 2014 by French independent publisher Les Editions de l'Aube. Although the author is Belgian and based in Brussels, where he also works as a paediatric neurologist, the novel is set in Paris, where the first-person narrator, Esther Lyon, spends much of her time in a sleep clinic, hoping to be cured of her extreme insomnia. In the clinic, she meets Camille Boulanger, the eponymous 'garçon du Rwanda', whom she had once met in a hospital waiting room in 1994, and who is now working as a polysomnographic technician, someone who specialises in the diagnosis and treatment of sleep disorders. The narrative unfolds around the friendship between the two characters, who end up spending nights together at the clinic exchanging stories and watching DVDs. Not until two thirds of the way into the novel is any real mention made of the genocide in Rwanda. It is then introduced by the author in a rather heavy-handed manner

when Esther randomly picks, as a DVD for them to watch, Sydney Pollack's 1982 feature film, *Tootsie*:

Quite by chance I pulled out a DVD with a title in the worst possible taste: *Tootsie*. Think about it! Camille hadn't yet told me that staggering Belgian story, the one about the identity cards identifying an individual as Tutsi from one generation to the next: tall, with a small nose, lighter skin or even the owner of at least ten cows. That arbitrary label, permanent and hereditary, was very useful to the colonial power in the collection of taxes and for organising the colonised people's society on its own terms, then reorganising it on a whim. It was also terrifyingly practical in helping the assassins in their selective carnage. As for the film *Tootsie*, it's a gentle comedy about a man hiding his identity. (p. 167)

Like the clumsy pun created by the film's title, the reference here to hiding one's identity is no coincidence: Camille's identity is also concealed, since he has been adopted by a French family and cannot even remember his birth name. He tells Esther very little about Rwanda, which he refers to as 'the land of evil' (p. 221) and 'the kingdom of mindless violence' (p. 182). More significantly, as the narrator notes here, Camille says nothing about Belgium's role in creating imagined identities (so-called ethnicities) in Rwanda – identities that eventually had to be hidden when in 1994 many Tutsi tried to pass as Hutu in an attempt to save their own lives.

This brief, yet significant mention of the history of ethnic identity cards, which allowed Belgium to organise and reorganise Rwandan society at will and then helped the killers identify their targets, is the only instance in the novel in which Belgium is explicitly implicated in the narrative of the genocide. Elsewhere the influence of Belgian colonial rule on Rwanda's history is alluded to only briefly and enigmatically. When Camille eventually returns to Rwanda to discuss possibly setting up a sleep clinic there, the local deputy director of the university hospital tells him he is sorry his country was once a Belgian colony, not because of Belgium's contribution to the genocide but, he says, because the Belgian empire was just too small. He adds that he would have preferred Rwanda to have been a colony of France (p. 230).

In other words, the 'staggering Belgian story' of colonial rule is a story that is couched in ambivalence. Dan's decision to set the novel in France with a French narrator-protagonist implicitly shifts responsibility for the genocide against the Tutsi from Belgium to France. This displacement of responsibility is reinforced in the novel by the metaphorical link between Esther's insomnia and the guilt of the French nation. Camille tells Esther that her illness is 'France's illness [...]

It's an illness that she caught because she closed her eyes to people like Kamou et Samembe [...] She can't sleep any more. She's afraid to dream' (pp. 179–80). Having first named him Oscar, Camille's adoptive French parents renamed him Camille when the previously mute child pronounced the word 'Kamou' on sight of a pack of Camel cigarettes (p. 98); Samembe is the name Esther gave Camille before she knew him and which she found in a library book about the *Bami du Rwanda* (p. 32). By accusing Esther and France of having closed their eyes on 'Kamou' and 'Samembe', Camille's words remind us of France's and the rest of the Global North's refusal to acknowledge the genocide against the Tutsi and to see Rwanda as it really was. The emphasis on naming and renaming also implicitly recalls the damaging effects of colonial classification, but not necessarily in relation to the history of Belgian rule. Esther receives Camille's description of her illness as if she is on trial: 'It was the result of a criminal trial. The guilty verdict and the sentence' (p. 180). Her sentence is a lifetime without sleep and a fear of dreams. At this point, Esther's first-person narration directly addresses the reader, wondering why she has become a scapegoat for the sins of France and asks, 'Is the story of Esther and Camille just a sinister "roman à clef" for you too; a painful allegory in which France chats with post-genocide Rwanda?' (p. 180) Here, the status of the text as a 'roman à clef' is explicitly confirmed in the narration. Although the allegorical nature of Dan's novel seems to emphasise France's rather than Belgium's role in the genocide, asking this question directly of the reader implicitly reminds us that France was not the only guilty party in the story of Rwanda.

Of course, France was deeply implicated in the genocide against the Tutsi and stands accused of training and arming the militia, widespread rape, and helping perpetrators escape during Operation Turquoise.⁶⁵ Moreover, France had gradually taken Belgium's place as what Prunier calls the 'tutelary power' in Rwanda in the years leading up to 1994.⁶⁶ At the start of the 1990 Civil War, then French president François Mitterrand was quick to send in troops and voice his support for Habyarimana's government. Brussels, on the other hand, withdrew its soldiers from Rwanda just one month into the Civil War, mainly for reasons of domestic politics.⁶⁷ In fact, it could be argued that it was Belgium more than France that 'closed its eyes' on Rwanda: Prunier writes that, during the genocide, 'among the countries with strong links to Rwanda, Belgium hardly reacted at all since it seemed that the government and the public had both been paralysed by the torture and death of their ten Blue Helmets in early April.'⁶⁸ This paralysis seems to have continued into the twenty-first century in the Belgian nation's unstated refusal to confront and acknowledge the impact of its colonial history in Rwanda.

Conclusion

Researchers tend to differentiate Belgium from the other European colonial powers, describing it as both a 'latecomer' to empire and a 'latecomer' to critically reappraising its colonial past.⁶⁹ While scholars such as Goddeeris and Verbeeck suggest that a critical re-evaluation of Belgian colonialism in the Congo is finally starting to gain momentum in the twenty-first century, Belgium's role in Rwanda is rarely mentioned. Indeed, the recently redesigned AfricaMuseum in Tervuren makes no mention at all of Belgium's role in the identity politics that culminated in the genocide against the Tutsi and focuses mostly on the Congo.⁷⁰ Even Belgian scholars such as de Lame, who recognise that in both Rwanda and Belgium 'dealing with the legacy of colonization remains fundamental to any attempt to determine the future',⁷¹ challenge the connection made by scholars such as Mamdani and Lemarchand between Belgian colonisation and the genocide.⁷²

Despite the 1996–97 parliamentary inquiry and Guy Verhofstadt's ensuing public apology, then as prime minister, to the people of Rwanda in April 2000, the silence around the genocide continues. It will be interesting to see the outcome of the 2020 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, since the Belgian cultural response to the country's role in Rwanda seems to be one of avoidance and denial. This was exemplified in the reaction of the Belgian government to the death of the ten UN peacekeepers in April 1994. More recently, we see this in what has become a somewhat controversial memorial to the genocide: Tom Frantzen's sculpture, *Under the same sky*, in the Woluwe-Saint-Pierre district of Brussels. For Orjuela, the sculpture 'invites a recollection of the historical bond between Belgium and Rwanda, highlighting brotherhood and renewal, while avoiding a direct reference to the past of colonialism and Belgium's pivotal role in the identity politics which eventually led to genocide'.⁷³

This same strategy of avoidance and denial seems to be reflected in Belgian fictional production. Over a period of almost twenty years, the three very different novels I have discussed reflect the people of Belgium's continued refusal to confront the afterlife of their country's colonial politics in Rwanda. It is surely no coincidence that only one of the novels is (partly) set in Belgium: the narrator-protagonist of *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* lives in Brussels, but most of the action takes place in Rwanda. In the final chapter of the novel, Jean bumps into one of his Belgian colleagues on his metro journey to work. She asks him if he managed to see the gorillas during his time in Rwanda. Jean thinks this is a stupid question but answers her anyway, wishing that she had asked him about people or politics rather than primates, and conceding that 'she probably no longer remembered what had happened less than ten years earlier' (p. 194). This

moment exemplifies the different responses between members of the Rwandan diaspora and those of the former colonial power. Whereas Belgians may choose not to remember Rwanda, even in the year of the tenth commemoration of the genocide, Rwandans like Jean cannot ever forget.

The fact that both Ndwaniye's new edition and Dan's novel were published to coincide with important anniversaries of the Genocide against the Tutsi (the twentieth anniversary for *Le Garçon du Rwanda* and the twenty-fifth for *La Promesse faite à ma sœur*) suggests that the genocide is not completely forgotten, even if it is only remembered as part of a publisher's marketing strategy. Yet, both Dan's text and the Ndwaniye paratext do little to challenge the Belgian version of its colonial history of Rwanda that we see in de Broqueville's earlier novel. Of course, the relationship between fiction and truth is a complex one, and as my previous work has shown, there are contesting versions of the 'truth' about the genocide against the Tutsi.⁷⁴ However, historical research has identified a strong and irrefutable connection between the Belgian colonial legacy and what happened in Rwanda. These three examples of Belgian imperial fictions serve to reinforce rather than challenge a colonial narrative that had devastating consequences for Rwanda and its people in 1994.

Notes

1. Journalist Scott Peterson, who was in Rwanda during the genocide, writes that the Belgian soldiers' Achilles tendons were cut to prevent them from running. They were then castrated and forced to choke on their own genitals. See Scott Peterson, *Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 292.
2. Danielle de Lame, '(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda', *African Studies Review*, 48.2 (2005), 33–43 (38).
3. As part of the investigation, Verhofstadt and Mahoux travelled to Kigali to better understand the circumstances of the paratroopers' murder.
4. Sénat de Belgique 1–611/7: Commission d'enquête parlementaire concernant les événements du Rwanda, rapport au nom de la commission d'enquête par MM. Mahoux et Verhofstadt', 6 December 1997. <https://www.senate.be/www/?Mival=/publications/viewPub-Doc&TID=16778570&LANG=fr> [accessed 24 July 2020].
5. See, for example, Martin Ewans, 'Belgium and the Colonial Experience', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 11.2 (2003), 167–80; Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Postcolonial Belgium: The Memory of the Congo', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17.3 (2015), 434–51.
6. Idesbald Goddeeris, 'Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space', *Postcolonial Studies*, 18.4 (2015), 397–409 (404).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Camilla Orjuela, 'Remembering Genocide in the Diaspora: Place and Materiality in the Commemoration of Atrocities in Rwanda and Sri Lanka', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2019) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1644529> [accessed 22 July 2020].
9. J. B., 'Bruxelles est la première ville rwandaise hors d'Afrique'. *La Libre.be*, 16 September 2010 <https://www.lalibre.be/regions/bruxelles/bruxelles-est-la-premiere-ville-rwandaise-hors-d-afrique-51b8c435e4b0de6db9bd7437> [accessed 22 July 2020].
10. Orjuela, 'Remembering Genocide in the Diaspora'.
11. My thanks to Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, Kate Mackenzie, and Charlotte Wirth for their comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
12. Nicki Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories: Fiction after 1994* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
13. Madelaine Hron, 'Itsembabwoko "à la française"? – Rwanda, Fiction and the Franco-African Imaginary', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 45.2 (2009), 162–75 (164).
14. Joseph Ndwanaye, *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* (Espace Nord, 2018), originally published in 2006 by Les Impressions Nouvelles (note that the new edition wrongly dates the original as 2007).
15. Ndwanaye has been living in Belgium where he works as a nurse since 1986.
16. Huguette de Broqueville, *Uraho? Es-tu toujours vivant* (Grâce-Hollogne: Éditions Mols, 1997); Bernard Dan, *Le Garçon du Rwanda* (La Tour d'Aigues: L'Aube, 2014).
17. Hron, 'Itsembabwoko "à la française"?...', p. 165. 'Itsembabwoko' is a Kinyarwanda word for the extermination of a people (Hron, p. 162) and is a term that did not exist before 1994 (see Olivier Barlet, 'Representing the *Itsembabwoko*', *Black Camera, an International Film Journal*, 4.1 (2012), 234–51 (234)).
18. Ndwanaye has published another novel: *Le Muzugu mangeur d'hommes* (Brussels: Aden, 2012), and *Plus fort que la hyène* (Ciboure: La Cheminante, 2018), an illustrated novella for young adults. His short story, 'Le Rêve' was published online by Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles in 2013: http://www.fureurdelire.cfwb.be/index.php?eID=tx_nawsecured1&u=0&file=fileadmin/sites/fdl/upload/fdl_super_editor/fdl_editor/documents/publications/Plaquettes_2013/9951_Reve_Ndwanaye.pdf&hash=9c8dc53f5f5ead49672f14cf7117552ec2029b5 [accessed 23 July 2020].
19. 'la collection patrimoniale belge'. All translations are my own.
20. <https://www.espacenord.com/a-propos/> [accessed 20 July 2020].
21. The other is Malika Madi, born in Belgium of Algerian origin (<https://www.espacenord.com/auteurs/>). Titles for the Espace Nord collection are selected by an all-White committee that includes Belgian writers and academics but is mostly composed of people employed by the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, which financially supports Les Impressions Nouvelles.
22. Ndwanaye is also a member of the Association des écrivains belges de langue française https://www.ecrivainsbelges.be/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=233&Itemid=154 [accessed 22 July 2020].
23. Les Impressions Nouvelles also organised a public discussion between Ndwanaye and Jacques Roisin, author of *Dans la nuit la plus noire se cache l'humanité. Récits de justes du Rwanda* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2017) on 20 May 2019 to accompany the exhibition of Bruce Clarke's exhibition, 'Les Hommes de

- bout' at the Bibliothèque de l'Université du Travail de Charleroi <https://www.espacenord.com/25-ans-du-genocide-rwandais/> [accessed 28 August 2020].
24. Unfortunately, Demaeseneer's essay on *La Promesse faite à ma sœur* contains a number of factual errors about writing from and about Rwanda: Yolande Mukagasana is wrongly credited with the authorship of the Groupov play *Rwanda 94* and is described as a writer of 'contes'; Pius Ngandu Nkashama's tale *Yolena* is wrongly identified as the first work of fiction about the genocide published in 1995 when it was in fact published in 2006 (in Ndwanaye, *La Promesse*, p. 214).
 25. For *La Promesse faite à ma sœur*, the dossier has been compiled by Valériane Wiot, a French and History teacher seconded to the Belgian Service de la Promotion des Lettres. It consists of extracts from documents mostly taken from the Didier-Hatier textbook series, 'Construire l'Histoire' alongside suggestions for classroom activities based on the text and its context. See Claude Allard, Coralie Snyers, Isabelle Van der Borgh and Viviane Van Liempt, *Construire l'Histoire. Tome 4: Un monde en mutation (de 1919 à nos jours)* (Namur: Didier-Hatier, 2008).
 26. Hron's article discusses *La Promesse* (pp. 169–70). See also Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, pp. 75–70 and 88–92. Another example of a Rwandan text that articulates the difficult position of the absent witness is Scholastique Mukasonga's short story collection, *L'guifou: nouvelles rwandaises* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).
 27. Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, p. 46.
 28. As a Rwandan Hutu, Jean is not, strictly speaking, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi.
 29. 'Rapport de l'OUA, Rwanda, le génocide qu'on aurait pu stopper' (2000), quoted in Valériane Wiot, *Joseph Ndwanaye, La Promesse à ma sœur, carnet pédagogique* (Brussels: Espace Nord/Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2019), p. 9.
 30. René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) p. 9.
 31. Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 88.
 32. Rapport de l'OUA, 'Rwanda, le génocide qu'on aurait pu stopper', 2000, quoted in Wiot, p. 9.
 33. Mamdani, *When Victims*, p. 16. Emphasis added.
 34. The colonial authorities shifted their allegiance to the growing Hutu counter-elite in the post-war period when their power began to be challenged and the Tutsi started to call for independence. See Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 43–44.
 35. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 49.
 36. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–53.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
 38. Quoted in Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 53.
 39. Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence*, p. 31.
 40. De Lame, '(Im)possible Belgian Mourning...', p. 39. Conversely, as de Lame notes, the positive image of Belgium promoted by the Catholic Church was shattered, not only by the role of priests during the genocide, but also when Belgium quickly withdraw its troops (p. 41).
 41. Colette Braeckman, 'The Rwandan Genocide of the 1990s', in Prem Poddar, Rajeev S. Patke and Lars Jensen (eds.), *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures – Continental Europe and its Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 49–51 (p. 51).
 42. Pierre Halen, 'De l'insurable imagerie du Cœur des ténèbres et de sa résurgence dans quelques représentations du génocide au Rwanda', in Isaac Bazié and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (eds.), *Violences postcoloniales: Représentations littéraires et perceptions médiatiques* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), pp. 65–87 (p. 82).
 43. Note that Halen describes it as a 'livre de témoignages' (p. 82); and Boisdeffre as a novel, essay, and testimony all in one (*Uraho?* p. 10)
 44. Pierre Boisdeffre, 'Préface', in de Broqueville, *Uraho?*, pp. 9–13 (p. 10).
 45. <https://gw.geneanet.org/nobily?lang=en&n=driion+du+chapois&oc=o&p=ferdinand> [accessed 5 January 2021].
 46. Mamdani, *When Victims*, pp. 95–96.
 47. Timothy Longman, 'Church Politics, and Genocide in Rwanda', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 31.2 (2001), 163–86 (166).
 48. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, pp. 32–34; Mamdani, p. 89–90.
 49. Julius O. Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 35.
 50. Longman, 'Church Politics...'; p. 168.
 51. See, for example, Tharcisse Gatwa, *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises 1900–1994* (Milton Keynes: Regnum Books, 2005); Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Carol Rittner, John. K. Roth and Wendy Whitworth (eds.), *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 2004).
 52. Mamdani, *When Victims*, p. 226.
 53. Boisdeffre, 'Préface', in de Broqueville, *Uraho?*, p. 12.
 54. Halen, 'De l'insurable imagerie...'; p. 83
 55. Ivan Reisdorff, *L'Homme qui demanda du feu* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1995).
 56. De Broqueville, p. 141. Hereafter page references will be in parentheses in the text. For a dis-

- cussion of the 'white saviour' paradigm, see Teju Cole 'The White Saviour Industrial Complex' <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/> [accessed 5 January 2021].
57. In bold in the original text
 58. Quoted in Longman, 'Church Politics', p. 181.
 59. Rachel Hayman, 'Abandoned Orphan, Wayward Child: the United Kingdom and Belgium in Rwanda since 1994', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4.3 (2010), 341–60 (343).
 60. Ibid.
 61. Halen, 'De l'insurable imagerie...', p. 82. The suggestion here is that, because de Broqueville is unable to accept that humans could commit genocide, she can only explain it in supernatural terms. In my reading, the use of such imagery is yet another example of de Broqueville's colonial racism towards the Rwandan people in general and the RPF in particular.
 62. Rwandan authors Camille Karangwa and Vénuste Kayimahe both evoke this same myth (See Karangwa, *Le Chapelet et la machette: sur les traces du génocide rwandais* (Pretoria: Éditions du jour, 2003), p. 53, p. 98) and Vénuste Kayimahe, *La Chanson de l'aube* (Toulouse: Izuba, 2014), p. 92)
 63. Georgi Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium', *European Politics and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/23745118.2019.1645422 [accessed 15 July 2020].
 64. Rony Demaeseeneer mentions Dan's novel in his postscript to Ndwanaye's *La Promesse à ma sœur* where he simply highlights the fact that Dan is also an author who practises medicine (Ndwanaye, *La Promesse*, p. 213).
 65. Hron, 'Itsembabwoko "à la française" ? ...', p. 163.
 66. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 89 (n. 87).
 67. Ibid., pp. 107–08.
 68. Ibid., p. 274.
 69. Verbeeck, 'Legacies of an Imperial Past...'
 70. Charlotte Wirth, 'Belgiens schweres koloniales Erbe', *Reporter*, 4 January 2019 <https://www.reporter.lu/neues-museum-fehlende-debatte-belgiens-schweres-koloniales-erbe/> [accessed 21 July 2020].
 71. De Lame, '(Im)possible Belgian Mourning...', p. 35.
 72. Ibid., p. 37.
 73. Orjuela, 'Remembering Genocide in the Diaspora', p. 3.
 74. Nicki Hitchcott, 'The (Un)believable Truth about Rwanda', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 56.2 (2019), 199–215.