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**To cite this article:** Alice Urusaro Uwagaga Karekezi & Nicki Hitchcott (05 Oct 2023): Re-centring the Mothers of Rwanda's Abducted "Métis" Children, Journal of African Cultural Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13696815.2023.2262936](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2023.2262936)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2023.2262936>



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Published online: 05 Oct 2023.



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## Re-centring the Mothers of Rwanda's Abducted "Métis" Children

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### ABSTRACT

In April 2019, the Belgian prime minister publicly apologised for the segregation, deportation and forced adoption of thousands of children born to mixed-race couples during Belgian colonial rule in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. Known as the "métis", the children were rarely acknowledged by their white European fathers. The apology took place against a backdrop of increasing calls for accountability for colonial crimes as well as a small amount of emerging research on the métis' experiences. Yet, what is striking in both public discourse and academic scholarship is the lack of attention paid to the mothers of these children. Starting with a discussion of *Kazungu, le métis*, an autobiographical docudrama by Rwandan-born filmmaker Georges Kamanayo Gengoux, and moving through an analysis of Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's recent novel *Consolée*, this article uses a decolonial feminist approach to suggest that, although the missing mothers' voices have been silenced by colonial history, creative works by Rwandans can offer new spaces for repositioning the mothers at the centre of their own history.

### INCAMAKE (Abstract in Kinyarwanda)

Muri Mata 2019, Minisitiri w'Intebe w'Ububiligi yasabye imbabazi ku mugaragaro ku mpamvu z'ivangura, koherezwa mu mahanga ndetse no kureresha ku gahato ibihumbi by'abana bavutse ku babyeyi badahuje ibara ry'uruho (abera n'abirabura) mu gihe cy'ubukoloni bw'Ababiligi mu Burundi, muri Repubulika iharanira Demokarasi ya Kongo, no mu Rwanda. Abo bana bari bazwi ku izina ry'"abametisi" (metis) ntibigeze bemerwa binyuze mu mategeko na ba se b'Abera bakomokaga mu Burayi. Gusaba imbabazi byaturutse ku mpamvu z'uko abantu benshi basabaga ko abagize uruhare mu byaha by'ubukoloni babiryoze, ndetse n'umubare muto w'ubushakashatsi bwakozwe ku mibereho y'abametisi. Ariko ikigaragara cyane haba mu biganiro mbwirwaruhame, cyangwa mu bushakashatsi bwimbitse bwa za kaminuza, ni uburangare bwabayeho mu kwita kuri ba nyina b'abo bana. Tugendeye ku kiganiro ku nkuru mbaramateka, *Kazungu le métis*, yakozwe n'umukinnyi wa filimi wavukiye mu Rwanda, Georges Kamanayo Gengoux, kandi ukanasesengura

### KEYWORDS

Métis; mothers; Rwanda; colonialism; *Kazungu*; *Le métis*; *Consolée* Georges Kamanayo Gengoux; Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse

### AMAGAMBO-FATIZO

abametisi (metis); ababyeyi; abagore; Rwanda; Ububiligi; *Kazungu*; *le métis*; *Consolée*

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igitabo giheruka kwandikwa na Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse, *Consolée*, usanga muri ibyo bihangano harimo ingingo zibanda ku ndangagaciro zirwanya ingaruka z'ubukoroni ku gitsina gore, bikaba bivuga ko n'ubwo amajwi y'abo bagore bapfuye yapfukiranywe n'amateka y'ubukoloni, ibihangano by'abanditsi b'abanyarwanda bishobora gutanga umwanya mushya wo gushyira abagore mu isura ya nyayo y'amateka yabo bwite.

## Introduction

On 14 October 2021, five women born of sexual relationships between white fathers and Black mothers in the former Belgian Congo in the 1940s made the news when they sued the Belgian state for crimes against humanity. The women did so on the grounds that they had been forcibly removed from their Black mothers at a very young age and placed in a Catholic mission where they lived under the custody of nuns. One of the women explained that children like her were marginalised as “children of sin”.<sup>1</sup> Although the legal claim made by the five Congolese women hit the media headlines, there has been only a small amount of academic engagement with the experiences of métis children from the former Belgian trusteeship of Ruanda-Urundi, and even less with the experiences of their mothers.

Stories of the mothers of métis children are important for feminist decolonial studies since those children were removed from their mothers by a sovereign state, colonial Belgium, with the help of Catholic nuns in a transnational mission. However, the stories of these children and their mothers had scarcely been the subject of international commentary until April 2019, when the prime minister of Belgium presented a public apology on behalf of the Belgian state for the “segregation, deportation and forced adoption of thousands of children born to *mixed-race* couples during its colonial rule of Burundi, Congo and Rwanda” (Schreuer 2019).<sup>2</sup> Significantly, the apology was delivered in a context where a younger generation in the African diaspora is increasingly seeking accountability for colonial history as a way of addressing racism and segregation embedded in Western societies. The apology was also preceded by a small amount of emergent scholarship on the experiences of the métis in the former Belgian empire. Although these studies focus mostly on the former Belgian Congo, they offer useful contextual information for our discussion of the mothers of the Rwandan métis.

Historians such as Amandine Lauro (2005) and Lissia Jeurissen (2003) have produced ground-breaking research on sexual relationships between colonial men and indigenous women in the Belgian empire, but they have focused on the Belgian Congo, not on Ruanda-Urundi. The most wide-ranging current research project on the métis is the “Résolution-Métis” project, launched in 2018 in response to the Belgian government’s acknowledgement of the segregation of the métis that led to the 2019 apology.<sup>3</sup> While this project does cover the whole of the former Belgian empire and has created a database of métis family trees, it remains the case that, in most of the published scholarship on the métis, as Nicki Hitchcott (2022, 64) writes, “Belgium’s forty-year colonial rule of both Rwanda and Burundi seems to have been, for the most part, conveniently forgotten”.

This article addresses two forgotten stories: the Belgian state’s abduction of métis children from Ruanda-Burundi on the eve of independence; and the experiences of the

Rwandan mothers whose children were taken from them. Following the work of scholars working in other colonial contexts (e.g. Stoler 2002 on the Netherlands Indies; Jean-Baptiste 2014 on the French empire; Ray 2015 on the British empire), it highlights the fact that the voices of the Rwandan mothers of stolen children have been erased from official history. It also suggests that, although it is no longer possible to give the mothers themselves a voice because the majority are dead, creative narratives from Rwanda provide a space for the mothers to reclaim their place in the history of Belgian colonial rule.

In an attempt to retrieve the lost voices of the mothers of the métis, we explore stories by two people of dual heritage from Rwanda: Georges Kamanayo Gengoux's film, *Kazungu, le métis* (2000) and the accompanying testimony, *In-Between* (n.d.); and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's 2022 novel *Consolée*. The texts narrate the experiences of a métis child taken from their mother first to the Save mission in Rwanda, and then to the Bambino orphanage in Schoten, Belgium, where they are eventually adopted into Belgian families. While drawing on narratives written by and about métis children, this article shifts the focus away from the children themselves to examine what their stories tell us about their birth mothers. We discuss how these métis authors are making space in creative texts for acknowledging their mothers' and grandmothers' experiences.

Twenty-one years before the Congolese women's legal claim hit the Belgian headlines, Rwandan-born filmmaker Georges Kamanayo Gengoux released his autobiographical docu-drama, *Kazungu, le métis* (Kazungu, the métis). Since that time, he has also published his story in the form of a Flemish-language book (Kamanayo 2020) with an English-language version now in preparation (Kamanayo Gengoux n.d.). Both the film and the book tell the story of Georges ("Kazungu"), who, born in Rwanda in 1947 to a Rwandan mother and a Belgian father, was taken away from his mother by the Belgian colonial state.<sup>4</sup> Like many other métis children, Kazungu was forcibly taken to Belgium, where he was eventually adopted.<sup>5</sup> The two narratives trace the boy's long journey via the different institutions in which he was placed and then, later in his life, his quest to find his biological parents. He finally manages to reunite with his mother 35 years after his removal. The final chapter of the book names Georges's mother as Anastasia Nyiramata, who died on 28 May 2006 and is now buried in Kamanayo Gengoux's garden in Shyogwe, Rwanda. Her name is also spoken by the colonial administrator in the film when Georges and his mother visit the office of the colonial administrator who signs the papers for the boy's removal.

Born in 1947, Kamanayo Gengoux is just one of the many children of intimate relationships between colonial men and colonised women in Ruanda-Urundi under Belgian imperial rule. Because they had not been acknowledged by their colonial fathers, they were considered "abandoned", according to the definition of the 1947–1952 *Commission des Mulâtres* (Mulattoes Commission) (Budagwa 2014). However, their mothers did not abandon them. Rather, the colonial authorities considered the mothers "uncivilised" and therefore unsuitable for raising their métis children, who were subsequently removed and identified as properties of the Belgian colonial state (Ceuppens 2006). The scene in *Kazungu, le métis* where Georges's mother is seen signing away her son illustrates the way in which African mothers were pressured by the colonial authorities to send their children away for a better, more "civilised" education (Grégoire 2019). Children like Georges/Kazungu were transferred to missionary-run orphanages and boarding schools, such as the Save mission, run by Catholic nuns, located in southern Rwanda. When

Rwanda moved towards the point of independence, the children from Save were taken to Belgium because, as Emma Van Hooste (2019–2020, 8) notes, “it was believed that without the Belgian, civilized presence, the Rwandans, Burundese and Congolese would behave ‘primitively’ again and they would form a danger to the metis”. The métis children were transferred to Belgium, where they were fostered, adopted or sent to boarding schools (Millieux 2020).<sup>6</sup> Around 300 children were evacuated in total, including 124 from Save (Heynssens 2017, 79).

The Save mission is also at the heart of Franco-Rwandan author Beata Umubyeyi Mairresse’s second novel, *Consolée*. Umubyeyi Mairresse was born in 1979 in Butare, Rwanda. Having survived the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, she left Rwanda to study in France. *Consolée* tells the story of the eponymous woman, illegitimate daughter of an unnamed Greek trader and a Rwandan woman, who was taken from her mother to Save at the age of seven and eventually put up for adoption in Belgium. Sixty-five years later, she is now known as Astrida and, suffering from Alzheimer’s, is living in a care home in the south-west of France. The novel switches narrative point of view between the first-person voice of Ramata, a Senegalese-born art therapist working in the care home, and third-person accounts of Astrida’s present-day life in 2019 and her life before the care home, including her childhood (as Consolée) in Rwanda. The final chapter presents Ramata returning Consolée/Astrida’s ashes to Rwanda, accompanied by Ramata’s daughter, Ines, and Astrida’s childhood friend, Monique, also a métis adopted via Save.

### The Birth of the Métis in the Belgian Colonies

Interest in the topic of the métis in the former Belgian colonies is not a new concern, as demonstrated in the October 1935 “Congrès international pour l’étude des problèmes résultant du mélange des races” (International Congress on the Study of the Problems Resulting from Racial Mixing) (Dryepontd 1923; Cruyen 1935; Cornil 1947). In the early days of the Belgian empire, young white men transferred to the colonies were initially encouraged to take indigenous women as “*ménagères*” (concubines) (Lauro 2005). Nicole Grégoire (2019, 69) explains that, “at first, these relationships were indeed seen as a means to preserve the white settlers’ mental health in the absence of white females, and also as a way to better understand and control local populations”. However, Lauro (2005, 50) notes that *ménagères*, who for a while were regarded as an “institution”, did not benefit from any special privileges despite their close contact with Belgians (Lauro 2005, 10). Belgian colonial attitudes to *ménagères* changed in the 1920s when concubinage became positively discouraged. From then on, these women were regarded extremely negatively by both the Belgian state and the Catholic church, which viewed them as sexual predators needing to be controlled (Van Hooste 2019–2020, 43). Nevertheless, the relationships between white colonial men and indigenous women of colour continued, and, as Van Hooste’s (2019–2020, 42) research demonstrates, the number of métis children in the Congo increased in direct correlation with the increasing number of white people there.

Georges Simenon’s 1937 novel *Le Blanc à lunettes* (The White Man with Spectacles) describes a relationship between a 15-year-old Congolese *ménagère* named Baligi and her white colonial boss. While this relationship, like that of Consolée’s mother, is a fictional one, Matthew Stanard (2019, 250) reminds us that it very much reflected reality:

The practice of men having *ménagères* in the colony [the Belgian Congo] was well known, and not only in official circles, where it was a subject of grave concern lest mixed-race children detract from white prestige or create a group with anti-colonial potential.

Very few *métis* were acknowledged by their fathers (Grégoire 2019, 69). Moreover, since mixed-race people did not have any legal status under Belgian colonial legislation, the central issue was the so-called “*question mulâtre*” (mulatto question) that sought to determine the racial category of *métis* children: were they “white” or “Black”? “Native” or “European”? “Citizen” or “subject”? (Jeurissen 2002).

Over the last two decades, scholars have begun to ask questions about the children born of relationships between Belgian citizens in the colonies and colonised subjects. Most, but not all, of these scholars are Belgian women. As mentioned above, the best-known works on relations between white colonial men and colonised African women in the Belgian empire are Jeurissen’s (2003) published version of her undergraduate thesis on the “mulatto question” in the Belgian Congo in the inter-war period, and Lauro’s (2005) book. Although both explain the marginalised position of indigenous women in the colonies, they say little about the experiences of the women themselves, because, as Lauro explains, most of the available information comes from male-authored colonial sources (Lauro 2005, 14–15). She ends her book with a note of regret for the lack of space she has given to the lives of the *ménagères* (Lauro 2005, 210). Similarly, Jeurissen (2003, 23) highlights the male-centred nature of historical sources on the Belgian empire, including fiction, noting that “the psycho-sociological characteristics of ‘Black (woman) and white (man) relationships’ in the former Belgian Congo can be relatively well established through the contents of literary works from the period, albeit through the lens of the male gaze”<sup>7</sup> (see also Lauro 2005, 210). This male-centric narrative is also found in the historical documents Jeurissen draws on in her study, which illustrate the Belgian colonial view of African women as exotic objects to be conquered, or, in longer-term relationships, as low-cost “*animaux domestiques*” (household pets) (Jeurissen 2003, 27).<sup>8</sup> Neither Lauro nor Jeurissen provide information about the women’s relationships with their *métis* children, except to say that, although generally reluctant to do so because of social pressures (Jeurissen 2003, 31–32), many mothers did keep their children (Jeurissen 2003, 52).

Jeurissen has also published a number of articles on the Belgo-Congolese *métis* (2002, 2003–2004, 2004) based on the findings she presents in her 2003 book. Bambi Ceuppens (2003) has extended research on the *métis* by investigating the connection between how Black people were dealt with by whites during the Belgian colonial era in Congo and present-day segregation and racism in Belgium. Ghequière and Kanobana (2010), along with Assumani Budagwa (2014), have widened this examination still further by publishing *métis* testimonies about the Belgian Congo alongside those of colonial officers, Belgian foster parents and religious figures. Grégoire (2019) has mapped the mobilisation of *métis* activists in Belgium. Sarah Heynssens has carried out extensive research into the lives of Belgian *métis*, presented evidence to the Belgian parliament, along with Budagwa, and shed light on the central role of the Catholic church in stealing *métis* children from their mothers. She observes:

On the eve of independence, in the early 1960s, several hundreds of these children from the Ruanda-Urundi region were “evacuated” to Belgium. Many African parents and families

consider this “evacuation” to be a blunt kidnap. This displacement has incited public debate in Belgium. (Heynssens 2016, 3)

Given the silence surrounding the everyday and intimate lives of people in the former Belgian colonies, these studies are a welcome development. They have significantly advanced our understanding of how métis children from the Great Lakes region (Burundi, Congo and Rwanda) were taken from their mothers and grew up in Belgian foster families or orphanages, losing all contact with their maternal families. Grégoire (2019, 76) also notes a number of creative responses by and about métis that followed Kamanayo Gengoux’s film: a play, *Kwaheri*, by Estelle Marion, first performed at Théâtre Varia, Brussels, in 2012, a novel, *Sous le rideau, la petite valise brune* by Belgo-Burundian author, Françoise Thiry (2017); and the cultural festival, “Mixed 2010”, held in the Belgian city of Ghent. Yet, what is most striking in all the academic studies and policy responses is the lack of information about the key actors: the mothers of these children. Where scholars do discuss indigenous women, they confirm their absence from history. For example, Heynssens (2016, 4) rightly observes that “[w]omen involved in such inter-racial relationships have remained somewhat phantom-like entities, as written sources revealing their identity, motives and sentiments are scarce and rarely allow for in-depth analysis”. Lauro (2005, 14–15) notes that little is known about the daily lives of these women because most of the information about the period comes from (male) colonial sources. The emphasis on absence is compounded by the fact that many of the mothers are now dead. This article seeks to address this gap by looking for traces of mothers’ experiences in métis-authored texts.

### In Search of a Framework

To analyse the role of creative texts in recentring the mothers of Rwandan métis in the history of Belgian imperial rule, we need to find culturally sensitive and appropriate tools. Contemporary African feminist theories call for resistance to dominant discourses and the application of a transformative lens to show a way forward to a decolonial future (Tamale 2020), while also providing a space for the experiences of marginalised, non-Western women (Bhambra 2014; Lugones 2010; Schiwiy 2007). There is therefore a space within decolonial feminist theory for the silenced experiences of Rwandan women who had children with white colonialists outside marriage to be recognised, and for an improvement in our understanding of how they managed their personal lives.

As a team of two women – one from Rwanda, one from the UK – we feel it important to acknowledge our own positions in carrying out this research. In terms of the decolonial, African feminist theoretical framework for this article, Alice Urusaro Uwagaga Karekezi recognises herself in bell hooks’s (1984, 9) observation on the feminist movement and the search for wholeness: “We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both”. As a Rwandan woman born of refugee parents in exile in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who has lived and trained abroad in countries of the global South and North for many years, Karekezi’s interest in researching the mothers of métis children has grown out of her personal experience, her Pan-Africanist engagement, and her academic training in law and work in the field of peace and conflict. From these multiple subjectivities, she has asked herself questions to acquire a better understanding of the power



structures within which she was situated and of how to negotiate those spaces. Ultimately, like Rutazibwa and Shilliam (2018, 2), her intent is “to pluralise ... actors and narratives we deploy in order to make sense of global politics”.

Nicki Hitchcott was born in the UK to a father who was raised by his maternal grandparents because he was illegitimate. Her personal experience of having had no contact with her paternal grandparents and of watching manifestations of the trauma of illegitimacy in her father makes transnational connections with the stories of women such as Georges Kamanayo’s mother, who, like Hitchcott’s paternal grandmother, was erased from her family tree. At the same time, she remains conscious of her position of privilege in researching these women’s stories from her location in a former imperial power.

We hope that our combined positionalities bring a unique perspective to our research into the mothers of abducted métis children, which acknowledges existing scholarship in feminist methodologies on the question of how to place marginalised communities of women at the centre of research (Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006, 12). Here, we draw on Bina D’Costa’s (2006, 130–131) definition of marginalisation as a status linked to social groups that experience discrimination and exclusion based on identities such as gender, class, ethnicity or nationality. The following section identifies gaps in Western feminist theory as a tool for understanding the experiences of these women. We then propose decolonial feminist theory as a more hospitable framework for a project such as this and apply a decolonial feminist reading to the métis-authored texts.

Before further searching for tools that can be of use for a better understanding of the experience of the mothers of the Rwandan métis, a caveat is in order. Within the limits of this article, we will simplify the discussion of the vast bodies of knowledge that are postcolonialism, decoloniality and feminism. We nonetheless recognise their complexities. While this article attempts to house them in the same framework, we do not downplay their divergences – all the more so because important works have done much to highlight those differences. Theories of postcolonialism and decoloniality are located in distinct historical conditions, geographical locations, colonial temporalities, intellectual roots, political projects and current geopolitics of knowledge that, while they may share certain affinities, also differ in their interests. For example, Madina Tlostanova (2010) has called attention to the difference between decoloniality and postcolonialism, arguing that the latter is too closely related to Western postmodernist concepts, rarely rejecting the power matrix established in modernity. It is her view that decoloniality, by contrast, goes beyond and deconstructs the West, offering more fundamental challenges to new locales and epistemologies and reassessing the meaning of knowledge production (Tlostanova 2010, 24–25). Before further evaluating the usefulness of decolonial feminism as a tool, we begin with a brief discussion of Western feminism and what has been identified as a critical gap with regard to women in the global South.

### **Western Feminist Saviours**

Despite the feminist movement’s emphasis on international solidarity, the geopolitics of knowledge in Western feminist theory often portrays women in the global South as a homogeneous category requiring economic development and as oppressed figures



needing Western emancipation (Barker 2000; Mohanty 2003a; 2003b). In such representations, the global South is reified as a singular place and women in the global South as sexual-political objects whose subject position is already determined (Mohanty 2003a; 2003b; Spivak 1988). Global South women are identified as a homogeneous group of women with the same interests and desires, be they from a rural or urban area, educated or uneducated, and regardless of religion, class, ethnic and racial location. These women are assumed to be victims of particular cultural and socio-economic systems and are defined by their gender identity (Mohanty 2003b), their agency denied. Western feminist discourse is therefore based on an ethnocentric, universal theorising of all women on whose behalf Western feminists claim to speak (Mohanty 1988; 2003a; 2003b; Spivak 1988). In this way, Western feminists position themselves as the “saviours of their poor Third World sisters” (Mendoza 2002, 301).

As a result of the systematic appropriation of the identity and representation of women in the global South, a myth of these women has been created that emphasises their being “Third World”: that is, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimised, etc. (Mendoza 2002; Mohanty 2003a; 2003b; Spivak 1988). Chandra Mohanty (2003b) refers to this as the production of “Third World difference”: that is, a stable, ahistorical difference that oppresses most, if not all, non-Westernised women. In the production and perpetuation of “Third World difference”, Western feminists appropriate and colonise the constitutive complexities that characterise the lives of women in the global South.

In developing her postcolonial feminist theory of the subaltern woman, Gayatri Spivak (1988) broadens Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern – people whose political and social agency has been removed by denying them representation and a voice in their society. Subalternity refers to those socially, politically and geographically outside the dominant power structures. Spivak (1988) uses the notion of the subaltern as a space to question the subject positions of the marginalised, non-Western woman – a muted, gendered person beyond representation and inhabiting the margins of Western feminism.

## Decolonial Feminism

While important insights have been gleaned from postcolonial feminist theoretical developments such as Spivak’s, some have argued that, although the postcolonial feminist movement provides some space for the theorisation of non-Western, “Other” women, it nevertheless constructs “the Other” within “the Other” (Espinosa Miñoso 2009). As a result, we still know nothing or little about marginalised women because their voices are silenced. On the other hand, decolonial feminism engages with debates pertaining to coloniality/modernity and indigenous identity and gender, while also providing a space for the women’s experiences to be acknowledged (Bhambra 2014; Lugones 2010; Schiwy 2007). There is therefore space in decolonial feminist theory for the silenced experiences of mothers of métis children to be recognised, and for us to begin to understand how these marginalised women have managed their personal lives. In particular, decolonial feminism calls for the decolonisation of existing epistemes and the adoption of subjugated ways of studying and knowing the world, especially indigenous knowledges and practices.

European colonisation of Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean imposed a hierarchical distinction on colonised subjects in order to advance the interests of Western

invaders. This distinction included the differences between women and men. In the colonial narrative, only the civilised (advanced by modernity) are human. By contrast, the identity of the colonised was deemed animalistic and thus “non-gendered, promiscuous, grotesquely sexual, and sinful” (Lugones 2010, 743). The colonised subjects became the mythical “Others”, with colonised women the “Others’ Others”. The system in which the strong self produces the rules of the game for the weak “Other” is described as a “neoliberal imperium” by Agathangelou and Turcotte (2009, 15). Revealing the layers of subjugation is an important epistemic development in decolonial feminism. By exposing and illuminating the ruling system of gender oppression, it allows for a broader understanding of global affairs. With such an understanding of the consequences of the colonial legacy, violence against women and other subjugated groups can be analysed from a global perspective.

The coloniality of power manifests itself through the emergence of race, the control of labour, the domination of subjectivity (the introduction of gender) and the control of knowledge production (Agathangelou and Turcotte 2009, 20). The key concept introduced by decoloniality is the coloniality of power or the colonial matrix of power. Decolonial scholars insist on breaking away from postmodern and post-structuralist influences in postcolonial thinking, and moving beyond an association between colonial praxis and modernity. What matters in decolonial feminist theory is the locus of enunciation – that is, the geopolitical and body-political location of the subject that speaks.

Decolonial feminism forces us to question the connection between violence and specific geographical locations. Dominant discourses on violence link the oppression of women with the perceived backwardness of places such as Africa, Asia, Latin America or Eastern Europe. In such narratives, the USA and Western Europe emerge as territories of rights, where liberation is perceived to stem from the achievements of modern progress (Agathangelou and Turcotte 2010, 37). Moreover, the division of geopolitics affects the way in which social phenomena in the “global South” are addressed. The ensuing conceptual responses are shaped by colonial power relations. This is particularly strong in relation to Africa, which, as Maria Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen (2018, 58) argue, was constructed as located at the end of revolutionary progress and hence represents the least developed “Other”. This is an important epistemic and normative observation. The a priori understandings of certain geographical localities, shaped by colonial legacies, affect our attitudes and scholarly approaches. Decolonial feminism urges us to question universalist assumptions in order to truly experience and understand specific locations, thereby helping to liberate epistemologies from the limiting imperial barriers of geopolitics.

### **In Search of the Missing Mothers**

We chose to start with Kamanayo’s *Kazungu, le métis* because it is a pioneering work. It is, to our knowledge, the first documented testimony of the experiences of an illegitimate, métis child born of intimate relations between a colonised woman and a Belgian colonial settler in Rwanda. On one level, the film can be read as a “happy ending” to an intriguing family anecdote. After all, Georges tracks down both of his parents and is eventually reunited with them. However, the film leaves the viewer with more questions than answers: in particular, the viewer becomes acutely aware of the situation of women like his mother.

Female colonised subjects and their intimate relations are assumed to be apolitical and located at the margins of world politics. When women like Georges's mother are included in political discourse, this tends to be only in terms of their status as mothers of métis, which implicitly reduces them to their reproductive function and their position in relation to the child's white father. Kamanayo Gengoux's film, on the other hand, is loaded with references to the ways in which the Belgian colonial state and the Catholic church in Rwanda interfered in the lives of indigenous colonised women. For example, when "Kazungu" is finally reunited with his birth mother, their meeting is characterised by awkward silences. Georges wants to know whether his mother loved his father. She says she did but is clearly embarrassed by the question. Communication is not helped by Georges's inability to speak Kinyarwanda: he appears to have lost his mother tongue. The presence of an interpreter serves only to highlight the distance between the mother and her long-lost son. Furthermore, the mother's blindness functions as a literal reminder of her socio-economic marginalisation; Georges informs us that it is now too late to operate on his mother's eyes, implying that, had he been reunited with her sooner, it might have been possible to save her sight. But her blindness also serves as a powerful symbolic reminder of the fact that this mother has not seen her son for most of his life.

As autobiographical texts, Kamanayo's film and written testimony are recounted from his personal point of view; he is the writer, director and narrator of the story of his relationship with his mother. As such, the depiction of his mother's experience is very much under his control. While we learn a lot about the difficulties Georges experienced as a métis child, we find out very little about his mother, particularly in the film. As narrator, Kamanayo alludes to the fact that his mother's life was difficult, but he never says how, adding by way of explanation that the métis were known as the "children of sin". While the boy's grandmother is given a voice early in the film, telling Kazungu (Georges) in Kinyarwanda that they will always be together, his mother's words are initially recounted only in the third person. Kamanayo tells us that his mother forbade her son from seeing his father and that she arranged his departure for Belgium without telling him what was happening or why.

Georges's mother never speaks to him directly in the filmic narrative of his childhood and is given a voice only when she delivers him first to the Belgian priest and then to the Belgian colonial authorities. Each scene is presented as a brief formal exchange in which the actress playing the mother shows no emotion. The sequence in which Georges's mother signs the papers for her son to be taken away is followed by a scene where the filmmaker himself, sitting on a termite hill, watches the actors playing his younger self and his mother walking home from the colonial administrator's office. In his narratorial voiceover, Kamanayo remarks that he wondered why she let him go. Later, when Georges arrives in Belgium, he asks again, "*Pourquoi ma mère m'avait-elle abandonné?*" (Why did my mother abandon me?). What emerges from the film is that, although he loved his mother, he blames her for allowing him to be taken away.

In the written narrative, published 20 years after the film's release, Kamanayo Gengoux (n.d.) draws a more complex picture of his mother. He writes that "our mothers were treated with discrimination and willful neglect by our white fathers" (Kamanayo Gengoux n.d.). This is painfully illustrated in Chapter 2, when he describes his grandmother trying to comfort his mother over the fact that his father is not present at the birth. The child's name, Kamanayo, suggested by his grandmother, means "I accept life as it is". One day, when he returns

from school, he sees the man he knows to be his father leaving the house and realises that he is the one making Georges leave his family. Unlike the film, the written text also makes it clear that his mother did not completely agree with the document she signed authorising his adoption. Kamanayo Gengoux (n.d.) writes: “I try to imagine my mother’s courage in signing that heart-breaking document that would separate us forever”. When they are finally reunited, Kamanayo’s mother cannot understand why he was placed with an adoptive family rather than living with his father in Belgium.

In his written testimony, Georges repeatedly asks himself whether he was a child born of love. The reader wonders if this relationship, like many others, was “initiated without prior consent of the woman or girl involved” (Heynssens 2016, 5). How many of these children were born of gender-based violence? While gender-based violence against colonised women has been effectively silenced through colonial mythology and taboo, sexual relationships between a colonial man and a colonised woman always involved an imbalance of power whether consensual or not (Lauro 2005, 34–36). Drawing on Heynssens (2017), Van Hooste (2019–2020, 44) suggests that many mothers of métis were very young when they became pregnant, and some were not in a position to care for their child themselves. This is confirmed by Ceuppens:

Mothers often were very young, they had hardly reached puberty ... Young African women often had no choice than to accept the advances of an older European man, even though he was already married, or was a missionary. Some relationships ... were certainly affectionate. However, in the colonial context, they revealed domination rather than male equality. They [the African women] were considered a “possession”, a “male conquest”. (Ceuppens quoted in Grégoire 2019, 71)

The film, however, makes it clear that Georges’s mother did love his father, but she finds this difficult to talk about. Although initially her answer is ambiguous (“*Est-ce que j’aurais pu ne pas l’aimer? Est-ce que je devais le détester?*” Could I not have loved him? Should I have hated him?), she tells Georges that she did love his father, and the question provokes emotion, a combination of embarrassment and happiness. She giggles but says nothing more. Here, her self-censorship speaks of the wider challenge of repositioning the experiences of marginalised peoples at the centre of their own histories and the uneasiness of theorising difficult issues such as sexual relations between colonisers and colonised. In the written text, Georges’s mother explains that, although she and his father, Raphaël, loved each other, they had agreed that Kamanayo’s existence should be kept hidden from Raphaël’s wife (Kamanayo Gengoux n.d.). Thus, Kamanayo’s narratives confirm the unequal nature of relationships between coloniser men and colonised women, even when the relationships were consensual and based on mutual affection. Furthermore, the mother’s story is told only in relation to that of her son, another man. Because she was never asked to tell her story in her own words, we learn almost nothing about what life was like for her after her son was taken away to Belgium.

In Umubyeyi Mairesse’s novel, connections are made between the métis woman, Astrida (Consolée), and the Senegalese art therapist, Ramata, through their reflections on their dead mothers. Towards the end of the novel, when she is dying, Astrida confuses Ramata for her birth mother. As the only two women of colour in the French care home, both separately recall intimate memories of their mothers braiding their hair. However, the novel also reveals how the relationship between mother and daughter is damaged

by the nuns at Save: Consolée's mother is sent away when she tries to pay a visit on the wrong day. When she finally manages to visit her daughter, three years after their separation and now with a new baby daughter, Consolée's anger at being abandoned leads to rejection of her mother as "*cette femme désormais mère d'autres enfants*" (this woman who was now other children's mother) (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 217). Like Georges Kamanayo, she finds herself no longer able to speak to the woman who gave birth to her. Later, we learn that her mother visits only twice more, each time with a new baby. Consolée begins to feel ashamed of her mother, encouraged by the Belgian nuns to aspire to a life that is nothing like her mother's (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 254–255). Many years later, when she returns to Rwanda from Belgium to try to find her mother and the rest of her biological family, she discovers that they fled the country to escape the Tutsi massacres in 1959 and nobody knows where they went.

Negative memories of Consolée's childhood as a métis are triggered by experiences in the care home. For example, Astrida remembers being convinced she had "bad blood" when she is given a blood test. At the same time, Ramata works hard to unlock lost memories in the residents, using old photographs to help fill what the text describes as the holes and suspension points in their memory (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 69). Astrida is drawn to an image from the 1950s or 1960s by Roger Da Silva of two Senegalese women and, having been silent throughout the art therapy session, starts to speak in Kinyarwanda. Ramata wonders if Astrida misrecognised her as one of the women in the photograph, but the reader infers that this image reminds Astrida of her biological mother (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 70). The analeptic passages describing Consolée's childhood, interwoven between the present-day narrative, also serve to fill the holes and suspension points in Astrida's memory: through the point of view of her grandfather, we learn that her mother was abandoned by her white Belgian father, challenging the family gossip that the father was a cannibal who had created a blood-sucking métis daughter (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 115).<sup>9</sup>

Although Astrida's memories have become profoundly affected by her dementia, the italicised passages partially restore those memories for the reader with a particular focus on her unnamed mother. Indeed, the novel opens with a series of snapshots in which the incantatory repetition of "*la mère*" repositions Consolée's mother at the centre of her daughter's story (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 14–17). The trauma of what her mother describes as giving up her child to "them" (the white Belgians) also features in the memory narrative when an uncle tells her that Consolée has "their white blood" so must be returned to "them" (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 49).<sup>10</sup> Hearing this conversation leads Consolée to internalise an image of herself as other until she one day sees her mother bleeding from an injury and realises that they have the same blood (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 57).

Like her repressed mother tongue, Consolée's/Astrida's repressed memories of her mother are released through creative processes. Within the story world the author has created, tiny fragments of the mother's story are released through Ramata's art therapy sessions, allowing Ramata to piece together some parts of her patient's life, but the story is incomplete. When her memories do temporarily return, prompted by photographs of her time at Save, Astrida regrets that she knows nothing about her mother's life, which was one of resignation to the decisions of others (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 256). Yet, as we have shown, within the wider space of the novel, Mairesse provides glimpses, albeit fictionalised ones, of what happened to the mothers of the métis. Like

the psychologist in the novel, Claude Mouret, and Ramata's daughter Ines, two women who support Ramata with her investigation into Astrida's life story, which becomes increasingly urgent as Astrida's physical and mental health decline, the reader is encouraged to follow the trail of the women whose children were taken to the Save mission in Rwanda, fill in the holes and suspension points in their history and, through their imagination, reconnect the missing mothers with the children they lost.

## Conclusion

Our discussion has been concerned with the missing stories of the lives of Rwandan women who had children as a result of intimate but illegitimate relationships with white colonialists during Belgian colonial rule. We have highlighted the importance of asking the unanswered questions: where are the mothers of the métis children? What were/are their experiences? Why is it that their situation has almost completely escaped public and scholarly attention? How did the mothers live with the knowledge that they had been forced to abandon their children? How can their voices be acknowledged and heard when most of them are no longer alive to tell their stories? More specifically, we have asked how creative works can contribute to our understanding of the conditions of the mothers of métis children both as colonial subjects and as women. The following scene from *Consolée* goes some way towards answering this final question.

One day, when there were enough care staff to take residents for walks outside, Astrida was surprised to find a field of sorghum wheat not far from the home. The sorghum reminded her of the fields that grew on the hills around the Save mission and, on tasting the wheat, she was also reminded of her mother drying grains outside in the sun. Sometime later, finding a door left open, Astrida goes out for a walk alone, barefoot and in her dressing gown. Having lost her glasses, she can no longer see the sorghum field but, now ill with dementia, she believes that if she just keeps walking, she will reach her house, find her grandfather, and curl up in the arms of her mother (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 123). Although Astrida is soon discovered by a carer and taken back to the home, the scene serves a metaphor for the role of works of the imagination in rebuilding links between métis children and their mothers and repositioning the long-lost mothers at the centre of their children's lives. As *Consolée's*/Astrida's young mentor at Save reminds her, "*Nos mères ne sont pas ce qu'en disent les soeurs*" (Our mothers are not what the nuns say they are) (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 212).

Although *Consolée* and Kamanayo Gengoux's texts are presented as the stories of children born of relationships between white colonial men and indigenous women of colour in former Ruanda-Urundi, what emerges from a decolonial feminist reading of these texts are important traces of the absent stories of the mothers of these children. As such, these fictional texts become decolonial acts of witnessing, acts of resistance against the erasure of the mothers' stories from the history of the Belgian empire.

## Notes

1. "Métis des ex-colonies: la Belgique face à la justice pour 'crimes contre l'humanité'". France24. Accessed 20 October 2021. <https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20211014-métis-des-ex-colonies-la-belgique-face-à-la-justice-pour-crimes-contre-l-humanité>

2. Note that the Flemish parliament had publicly apologised four years earlier, on 24 November 2015. This was followed by a resolution by Brussels on 17 March 2017 that eventually resulted in the prime minister's apology in 2019 (Grégoire 2019, 73–74).
3. See <https://www.metis.arch.be/>, accessed 13 July 2023.
4. "Kazungu" means "little white person" in Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda.
5. The territory of Ruanda-Urundi was passed to Belgium under a League of Nations Mandate after Belgian and Congolese soldiers had conquered the Germans in Tabora (German East Africa, present-day Tanzania).
6. Millieux is president of the AMB/MVB (Association des Métis Belges), founded in 2015.
7. "[L]es tendances psycho-sociologiques des unions 'en noire et blanc' dans l'ancien Congo Belge peuvent être relativement bien reconstituées, bien que sous la loupe de l'oeil masculine, à partir du contenu des oeuvres littéraires de l'époque".
8. Here Jeurissen is quoting Picard (1909, 170–172).
9. Although she never finds her birth mother, Astrida does eventually meet her Greek father after her mother-in-law discovers his identity, quite by chance. During that meeting Astrida does not speak a single word (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 333) and concludes that her father is nothing more than "un salaud égoïste parmi tant d'autres" (just another egotistical bastard) (Umubyeyi Mairesse 2022, 335).
10. In Rwanda, filiation is traditionally patrilineal but Consolée's father has not recognised her as his child.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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