The Last Post: Congo and Postcolonial Theory

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> What Wikipedia has to say:
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> "**Reveille**" [or 'First Post' -FDB] is a bugle call most often associated with the military; it is chiefly used to wake military personnel at sunrise. The name comes from "réveille" (or "réveil") the French word for "wake up".
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> "**Last Post**" was originally a bugle call used in British Army camps to signal the end of the day. The name derives from the practice of inspecting all the sentry posts around such a camp at the end of the day, and playing a bugle call at each of them. The "last post" was thus the last point of this inspection, and the bugle call signalling that this post had been inspected marked the end of the military day. [...] During the 19th century, "Last Post" was also carried to the various countries of the British Empire. In all these countries it has been incorporated into military funerals, where it is played as a final farewell, symbolizing the fact that the duty of the dead soldier is over and that they can rest in peace.

First Post: An Outpost of Progress

In 1896, some years before he publishes *The Heart of Darkness*, the novel for which he continues to be remembered, Joseph Conrad writes *An Outpost of Progress*, a short fiction story which may be read as a political statement undermining the very idea of empire.[2] In this psychological thriller, he offers an account of two white traders, Kayerts and Carlier, who are out-posted in Africa at an ivory trading station along an unnamed river, easily identifiable as the Congo river. The trading station's storehouse is called 'the fetish', 'perhaps,' as Conrad remarks, 'because of the spirit of civilization it contained.' Soon after the steamer that puts them ashore disappears beyond the horizon, Kayerts and Carlier begin to feel uneasy and alone. At first, they still enjoy discussing the few novels they brought along with them, and from time to time they receive the visit of Gobila, the chief of the surrounding villages, with whom they get along well. They also find some old copies of a home paper, left by the previous station master who died of a fever and lies buried in the yard...

> *"That print discussed what it was pleased to call "Our Colonial Expansion" in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, "In a hundred years, there will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and*

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warehouses, and barracks, and--and--billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue--and all. And then, chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!"

In spite of this comforting thought, it soon becomes painfully clear that Kayerts and Carlier are not really up to the job, and have no clue how to go about the heavenly mission of 'bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth'. Prefiguring in some respects Vladimir and Estragon, the famous tragi-comic characters from Beckett's play 'Waiting for Godot,' all Kayerts and Carlier seem to be able to do is sit there and wait for the steamer to return. A deep silence sets in, and they sense that they are out of their element, not in control of events, and totally dependent on their 'nigger' Makola (or Henry Price, as he himself maintains his name is), their very own Caliban or Friday, who, 'taciturn and impenetrable,' despises his two white bosses.

'They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like a great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither. It flowed through a void.'

And, foreshadowing the fate of yet another of Conrad's fictive characters, the infamous Mr. Kurtz, Carlier and Kayerts are overtaken by what they call 'the unusual', and, slowly, they go out of their minds, …

It is this Africa of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Congo of Joseph Conrad, of Carlier, Kayerts and Kurtz, of Stanley, Livingstone and Leopold II, of the Berlin conference and the Scramble for Africa, that has become the most powerful and emblematic topos in the western collective imagination and representation of the historical process of colonisation. As Kevin Dunn[3] has pointed out, it is the 'discursive landscape' of this nineteenth century Congo that has continued to haunt Western imaginings and re-imaginings of the Congo (and, I would add, of Africa as a whole). Through this discourse one can draw a straight line from the first post to the last post, from the beginning of the colonial era, when Congo is depicted as a hopelessly backward and savage 'Heart of Darkness', a ruthless colonial enterprise, a place where the rubber is soaked in blood[4], and where European travellers, explorers and administrative agents are 'out of their minds', to paraphrase Fabian[5], all the way down to the postcolonial present, in which Congo is still perceived as a country that continues 'in the footsteps of Mr. Kurtz'[6], still a place haunted by the ghost of King Leopold[7], still a violent land that is now defined as 'Africa's broken heart'[8], where blood

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[3] Dunn, K. C., 2003, Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
[4] Vangroenweghe, D., 1986, *Du sang sur les lianes*. Bruxelles: Didier Hatier.
[5] Fabian, J., 2000, Out of Our Minds. Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[6] Wrong, M., 2001, In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz. Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
[7] Hochschild, A., 1998, *King Leopold's Ghost*. Boston / New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
[8] Butcher, Tim, 2007, Blood River: A Journey to Africa's Broken Heart. Chatto & Windus.

continues to run through its many rivers, where the neo-colonial horror of a New Barbarism continues to thrive, and where the dead have become so numerous they can no longer be put to rest.

In many respects, the legacy of the nineteenth century discursive landscape about Congo, the strength of these stereotypical imaginings of Africa, is so powerful that it often renders the real physical reality of Africa invisible, making it as impossible for us as for Kayerts and Carlier to see 'the general aspect of all things' as they really are in contemporary Congo. In that respect, Conrad's *An Outpost of Progress*, and later on *The Heart of Darkness,* proved to be almost visionary and programmatic texts in which the author not only tells us about a specific historical moment of colonisation in Central Africa, but above all deals with a number of key themes that were not only crucial to the colonial encounter, but that have retained their relevance in the ambivalent postcolonial universe in which we all live today. Essentially, these themes circle around epistemological questions and touch on the (im)possibility of knowledge production and of representation when it comes to issues concerning identity, alterity and diversity; concerning the meaning of place and displacement; or the meaning of the margin, of difference, and of the authentic and the hybrid in the encounter between Self and Other. More generally, what is covered here are the conveniences and struggles, the ambiguities and paradoxes, the attractions, fears and fantasies, the hidden conflicts and the open clashes, the interplay between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices and discourses that punctuate and define the cohabitation between the West and the Rest.

The very same issues that Conrad's work announced will later also become central in the research agenda of what we now call 'postcolonial studies'. This refers to a field of knowledge within the Humanities that started to expand in the mid 1980s, and that emerged and continues to situate itself on the crossroads between philosophy, ethics, anthropology, social sciences, literary theory, history, social geography and cultural studies. Today, it is within this field in particular that some of the most inspiring and relevant endeavours are being made to answer the questions confronting our increasingly globalising world.

Whereas Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha[9], sometimes referred to as the 'Holy Trinity' of postcolonial studies[10], are certainly not Congolese, Congo itself occupies a prominent place within the postcolonial canon. Not only does Congo epitomize the brutal workings of nineteenth century colonialism, but the Belgian Congo that follows this period from 1908 onwards is in itself also a textbook example of what the formal colonial enterprise stood for. Thirdly, Congo does not only occupy a major position when it comes to the imaginings of (neo-)colonialism. For a brief while, it also becomes the most important icon of the decolonisation struggle. As such, it occupies a special place in the writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and other representatives of that first generation of African nationalists and intellectuals which is currently being

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[9] Said, E., 1978, *Orientalism.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Spivak, G.C., 1988, Can the Subaltern Speak? In: C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.* London: MacMillan. Bhabha, H., 1994, *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge.

[10] Werbner, R., 1996, Introduction. Multiple Identities, Plural Arenas. In: R. Werbner & T.O. Ranger (Eds.), *Postcolonial Identities in Africa.* London: Zed Books, p. 6.

considered as the foundational generation of the postcolonial theoretical corpus. The euphoric moment of Congo's independence, an historic moment which crystallized around the prophetic figure of Lumumba, presents a whole continent with the possibility to dream of alternative African futures, a possibility that continues to inspire many, even if the dream has often been converted into a nightmare since. But let us start with the period of formal colonisation first.

The Postman Always Rings Twice: From Leopold's Congo Free State to the Belgian Congo

In between its ominous Leopoldian beginning and its desolate present, between the emblematic image of a brutal comptoir economy in the nineteenth century, and the violent economies of extraction that were put in place by Mobutu's long and ruinous reign and that continue to mark life in today's postcolonial state, Congo went through fifty formative but, it can be argued, equally destructive years of formal Belgian colonisation.

It is perhaps Congolese writer and scholar V.Y. Mudimbe who succeeds best in dissecting the workings and methods of colonialism as applied in the Belgian Congo. He does this in a number of important publications such as *The Invention of Africa* and *The Idea of Africa*, or in his less well known earlier French work, such as *L'odeur du père* or his fascinating autobiographical *Le corps glorieux des mots et des êtres*.[11] Even though the formal colonial period was but a short moment in Africa's history, it created the possibility of radically new types of discourse about African traditions and cultures, and it are those discourses which are laid bare by Mudimbe. In what follows I will draw in particular from 'Discourse of Power and Knowledge of Otherness', the first chapter of *The Invention of Africa*.

In its very essence, colonising means organising, classifying and ordering (from the Latin *colere*: to design, to cultivate). The practice of colonizers (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority), says Mudimbe, was strongly marked by the tendency to redefine non-European societies and turn them into fundamentally European constructs. In a Foucauldian reading of the colonising effort, Mudimbe dissects that process by focussing on three elements which always play a crucial role in the colonising work: the acquisition, domination and exploitation of physical space; the domestication and reformation of the colonial subjects' mental space; and the transformation of precolonial modes of political and, above all, economic organisation along western lines (remember Conrad's 'fetish', the trading station's depot that embodies the spirit of civilisation).

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[11] Mudimbe, V.Y., 1982, *L'Odeur du père. Essai sur les limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique Noire.* Paris: Présence Africaine. Mudimbe, V.Y.,1988, *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge.* Bloomington & Indianapolis / London: Indiana University Press / James Currey. Mudimbe, V.Y.,1994a, *The Idea of Africa.* Bloomington & Indianapolis / London: Indiana University Press / James Currey. Mudimbe, V.Y.,1994b, *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres.* Montréal / Paris: Humanitas / Présence Africaine.

The three elements named above constitute the core of the structure of colonisation. Each of them is accompanied by specific technologies of domination and control. Obviously, these technologies often implied the use of brute force. It is no coincidence, for example, that the *chicotte*, a specific kind of whip, occupies a central place in the Congolese collective memory about the Belgian colonial presence. Even more importantly, though, the colonising technologies implied a much more covert, symbolic violence, through their use of different sorts of 'sequestrating' methods to control, punish and reward colonial subjects, and, in the process, redefine their minds and thoughts.

Most importantly, there is what Mudimbe elsewhere calls 'the colonial library'[12], i.e. the totality of western knowledge as produced and transmitted through the technology of the book (through the Bible as colonising tool, for example, or through the instrument of the map, or the totalising register of the census, which allows to capture a dominated nation into one document, thereby localizing, categorizing and ranking 'tribes', races, and belief systems, and ultimately redefining culture in terms of *gouvernance* and administration).

In this respect, more than a mere physical violence, colonial violence was essentially a mental violation, characterised by the alienating violence of the mimetic, inherent in the attempt to redefine Africans along western lines. This colonial violence manifested itself in the imposition of new modes of spatial organisation, new time frames (the time of the work floor, the church and the state), a new labour division and work ethics, and new moral matrices which intervened in the most intimate aspects of indigenous life, its social organisation, its belief systems and the moral economy of its body politics (in terms of hygiene, sexuality, clothing and diet). It was, in short, the violence of being turned into *évolués* and 'mimic men'[13], or of being forced into becoming black skins with a white mask.[14]

In an intellectual project that echoes Said's seminal *Orientalism*, Mudimbe thus lays bare the foundations of colonial discourse as an apparatus to define racial, cultural and historical differences and create a 'subordinate' space. This strategy is authorised by the western production of a certain 'africanist' knowledge concerning a stereotypical but antithetically defined relationship between coloniser and colonised. Such africanist discourse is marked by what Achille Mbembe has recently referred to as 'presentism'[15]: it defines the African continent by means of negative statements which lead to a definition of Africa as a pathological case and a figure of lack, thereby enabling the construction of a colonial master-and-subordinate relationship that allows the colonizer to define the colonized as inferior, or inadequate, and therefore in need of being colonized. Mudimbe thus reveals how Africa is 'invented' in the West. His work localizes the epistemological locus of that invention, and its continuing relevance for contemporary (Western and African) discourses about Congo in particular, and Africa in general.

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[12] Mudimbe, V.Y., 1994a, p. 213.

[13] Naipaul, V.S., 1969 (1967), *The Mimic Men*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.

[14] Fanon, F., 1952, *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil.

[15] Shipley, J.W., 2010, Africa in Theory: A Conversation between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe. *Anthropological Quarterly*, volume 83 (3), pp. 653-678.

The current use of words such as 'colonialism' or 'imperialism' continues to draw attention to specific forms of violence, to specific geographies of inclusion and exclusion, to major social inequalities, and to the immorality inherent in the political or economic domination of one country by another. But Mudimbe, and many postcolonial theorists in his wake, illustrates that colonialism is not only a political or economic relationship that is legitimated, masked, mystified or rationalised by ideologies concerning 'race' or 'progress'. Colonialism is also, and has always been first and foremost, a *cultural* process. That also means that it is far less monolithic than we usually tend to think.

First of all, there are many different historical forms of colonialism. Colonialism, therefore, is not transhistorical and global, but always plural, always localized, and therefore always in need of historicisation and contextualisation.

Secondly, it means that the project of colonialism was carried out by individual actors, and, like Kayerts and Carlier, these actors came with their specific cultural backgrounds and horizons, and were constantly caught in the manifold contradictions embedded within the colonial project itself: the contradiction, for example, between assimilationism (the 'heavenly mission to civilize' and 'evolutionize' blacks into whites) and seggregationism (which existed, for example, in a legally defined or a factually existing colour bar between the white rulers and the 'natives'); the contradiction between their own, often idealistic vision of participating in a progressive, necessary and highly laudable enterprise, and the invariably far less idealistic reality on the ground; or the tension between rational images of colonial power and rule, and their own, often unspoken longings and desires, their own doubts, uncertainties, and irrational anxieties and fears.

All these emotions constantly reveal to what extent the business of ruling, converting, sanitizing and reforming was a difficult and frustrating enterprise on an immediate experiential level. Far less rational than we tend to think, it was an enterprise in which one could easily go 'out of one's mind', as Fabian convincingly argues in his compelling analysis of the assumptions, prejudices, and dreams of early European explorers in Africa.[16] Again, Kayerts and Carlier fully illustrate this constant tension, this lack of overlap between ideology, language and reality, or between structure and experience: helpless and blind, they are unable to grasp and understand the world they are supposed to control and rule over. Far from home, colonizers are constantly experiencing a deep sense of displacement and dislocatory presence. That is also why the colonial project invests so much in the process of name-giving. By naming, claiming and territorializing places, by trying to define and capture them in language, the colonizer constantly endeavours to design an identifiable relationship between himself and the colonized place. But no matter how hard one tries, it is the very process of name-giving that constantly also reveals and widens the epistemological vault-line it is supposed to close.

As a consequence, the colonial project was far less effective than we usually imagine. Rather than being crushed and wiped out by a colonial machinery with a fatal impact, there always remained, for the colonial subjects, room for something else. Often, the very site of oppression opened up the

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[16] Fabian, J., op.cit.

possibility for the construction of alternative voices, practices and interpretations. Often, also, these did not take the form of explicit (armed) resistance but rather manifested themselves, then as now, through more submerged and implicit forms of contestation and opposition, such as parody, laughter, or caricature[17] which often proved to be more effective ways of subverting official meanings and interpretations. To return to the idea of the colonial library as colonising tool, let us take the example of missionaries' Bible translations into local Congolese languages. The Bible's translation inevitably opened up new political and cultural spaces in the very heart of the colonial representation. What does it mean, for instance, to use the indigenous notion of *Nzambi* to translate the Christian notion of 'God'? By using local words and concepts to translate Christian ideas, the translator unintentionally also contaminated the Divine Word with the –often radically different- meanings of the indigenous equivalents. Local cultural ambivalences and political ambitions inevitably nestled themselves in the slippage caused by this inevitable lack of overlap between signifier and signified. Therefore, as pointed out by Bhabha[18], the authority of the colonizer's word was constantly challenged, and its meaning rapidly hybridized in the everyday practice of colonial domination.

In summary: although the official colonial reality is constructed around a fundamental difference between ruler and ruled, between master and slave, between superior and subaltern, or between centre and periphery, the daily reality of the colonial encounter, however, often revealed something quite different. Daily life in the colony constantly perverted, and sometimes even transcended, these oppositions. This in turn continuously necessitated the opening up of a space to translate and negotiate meanings that always turned out to be far more hybrid and layered than was apparent at first glance. In this respect, the (often implicit) colonial articulation and negotiation of antagonistic or contradictory elements already prefigured the hybrid or 'palimpsestual',[19] in-between spaces of enunciation that postcolonial theory has brought to the fore since.

Reveille II: *Debout Congolais*?

As Fanon famously remarked in *The Wretched of the Earth*, a book that quickly became the bible of the decolonisation movement[20], Africa is shaped like a revolver, and Congo is its trigger; therefore, whoever controls the trigger controls Africa. For a brief while, more than Algeria, where the liberation struggle had turned into such a bloody nightmare, Congo became the hopeful icon of change for a whole generation of African nationalists. It epitomized the possibility of independence, and of the promises embedded in that magical word, *dipenda*: the promise of freedom, of a tabula rasa, of a totally new start. Independence materialised the longing for a 'post' in the literal sense of the word. It seemed to

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[17] Mbembe, A., 2000, *De la postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine.* Paris: Karthala.

[18] Bhabha, H., 1994, op.cit.

[19] In its original meaning, 'palimpsest' refers to a manuscript (usually written on papyrus or parchment) on which more than one text has been written with the earlier writing incompletely erased and still visible. In the same way, different layers of precolonial and colonial 'texts' blend and merge to constitute new meanings in the postcolonial context.

[20] Fanon, F., 1961, *Les damnés de la terre.* Francois Maspero.

offer a clear break with the past and with the project of colonialism as historical moment, as cultural practice and as mentality.[21]

Congolese political leaders such as Lumumba exemplified to the full the winds of change that swept through the continent half a century ago. Following in the footsteps of Ghanean leader Nkwame Nkrumah, the staunch promoter of Panafricanism and the first president of the first African country to successfully break away from its colonial masters, the charismatic Lumumba embodied the hopes which the decolonisation process brought to the African continent as a whole. The *dipenda* moment created such a powerful trope of hope that Laurent Kabila returned to it and put this defining moment in a loop when he took power in 1997, in an attempt to replay the past and to re-run history.

But together with these hopes and dreams, Congo also exemplified the shadow side, the disillusion, the tragedy and despair that accompanied the post-colonial dream right from the start. Aimé Césaire, one of the co-founders (together with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas) of the *négritude* movement, describes the tragic figure of Patrice Lumumba in *A Season in Congo*, a theatre play which premiered in Brussels (Anderlecht) in 1967.[22] In the play, Lumumba is portrayed as a poet-leader inspiring the African conscience, but failing to unify his own country and, therefore, to control the continent's trigger, as it were. In describing Lumumba's assassination, Césaire prophetically envisions all the failures and disillusions still to come: the dictatorship, the corruption, the ruin, the horror…

There are two ways to think about these failures. The first, darker, reading is offered by Mudimbe, the second, more optimisitic one by Homi Bhabha. I will deal with the latter below, but let us start with Mudimbe's interpretation. For Mudimbe, the structure of colonisation created a system of paradigmatic oppositions (between tradition and modernity, for example, or between oral and written culture, agrarian and industrial societies, or subsistence economies and capitalism) that inescapably continues to structure the way in which we reflect about processes of modernisation and progress, and thus about the place of 'Africa' in the world today.

In the Marxist theories that were so *en vogue* in Africa in the 1960s and '70s, or in today's mainstream development ideologies, a great deal of attention continues to be paid to this passage from past to future. But according to Mudimbe[23], this presupposed evolutional jump from one pole to the other is in fact misleading and does not provide us with an accurate picture of what actually goes on in the African continent today. Indeed, progress and development sometimes seem to lie buried in an irretrievable past rather than in a future full of promises. Consider, for example, the case of the Congolese and Zambian Copperbelt, and the fact that little now remains of the infrastructures generated

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[21] See Appiah, A. K., 1992, In my Father's House. Africa in the Philosophy of Culture. London: Methuen.
[22] Césaire, A., 1966, Une saison au Congo. Paris: Seuil.
[23] Mudimbe, V.Y.,1988, op.cit., p. 4.

by the industrial developments sweeping through this area during the '20s and '30s of the previous century.[24]

Faced with these post-developmental worlds, in which the usual horizon of the future has been replaced by something else, the conventional notions of 'development' and 'progress' no longer offer workable solutions. All they seem to do is to lock the here and now of African realities into a realm of impossibility, projecting classic ideologies and standardised forms of solution and teleology onto an imagined, but non-existent future. And that, for Mudimbe, seems to be where Africa has landed ever since the start of colonisation: in a diffuse, intermediary and marginalising space, a non-place, a paradoxical locus between a so-called African tradition that is often no more than a faint echo of an irretrievably distant past and a colonialist modernity that only offers the illusion of development. For him, this intermediary space is that of the slum, of poverty, of malnourishment and illiteracy, of demographic instability, of the breakdown of stabilising family and kinship structures, of sharp social and economic disparities, of dictatorial regimes operating under the flag of 'democracy', of lost religious traditions, and of new religious regimes that recolonize the African mind.

If colonialism generated a space of physical as well as cultural death[25], then Mudimbe's reading seems to suggest that Africa's postcolonial reality is best defined as an afterlife, a *post mortem* world that is situated beyond the grave of colonisation.[26] And the only possibility that seems to be left consists in picking up a bugle and playing the Last Post over this postcolonial graveyard, which is rotting away in the shadow of the neoliberal global world order.[27]

The Last Post: Urban Life and Popular Culture in the Postcolony

In Mudimbe's reading of the postcolonial intermediary space, the people actually inhabiting that space seem to be strangely devoid of agency and of the possibility to make themselves heard. Here, the answer to Spivak's famous question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' seems to be totally negative.[28]

As already indicated above, however, Bhabha's analysis offers an alternative, and radically different take on the inherent qualities of this intermediary or 'third' space.[29] For Bhabha, it is precisely the diffuse, palimpsestual, and hybrid character of the intermediary space that becomes the ground, not only of alienation and powerlessness, but also of enunciation, of creative potential, and of agency. In such a reading the slum, the very site of

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[24] See Ferguson, J. 1999, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

[25] See Taussig, M. 1992, Culture of Terror – Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture. In: N. Dirks (Ed.), *Colonialism and Culture.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

[26] De Boeck, F., 1998, Beyond the Grave: History, Memory and Death in Postcolonial Congo/Zaïre. In: R. Werbner (Ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony. African Anthropology and the Critique of Power.* London: Zed Books.

[27] Ferguson, J., 2006, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order.* Durham: Duke University Press.

[28] Spivak, G.C., 1988, art.cit.

[29] Bhabha, H., 1994, op.cit.

marginalisation to which 'excess humanity' [30] is relegated, becomes the locale for the realisation of this empowering postcolonial potential.

Once again, Congo, and especially its urban universe, occupies a prominent place in this theoretical reassessment of the history and legacy of colonialism. For Kayerts and Carlier were right about one thing. Their outpost of progress did become a town, Léopoldville, which in turn shape-shifted into one of the continent's largest urban conglomerations, the city of Kinshasa. What once was the pristine village of chief Gobila, has since become Beach Ngobila, the gateway to the megalopolis that Kinshasa is today. If the first post of colonisation was an outpost, its last post, and final legacy, was a city.

It is in cities such as Congo's capital that citizens have most successfully managed to mentally move away from the 'place' of colonialism (and this place is both a physical, architectural and infrastructural reality and a language, French). In these urban scapes, notions of community building are remade and reinvented in ways that can no longer be captured by the mimetic model of colonialist modernity. That is why Congo's urban worlds, and the specific popular culture they generate, have recently been given a such a central place in the writings of anthropologists, historians, sociologists, social geographers, architects and urban planners alike.[31] The lived worlds of these Congolese cities push them to question standard ideologies of development, and make them reconsider the very notion of colonialist modernity.

For five decades now, city dwellers have been reclaiming the urban space and its colonial roots, infusing it with their own praxis, values, moralities and temporal dynamics. Here, different realities exist side by side, often in surprising and unexpected ways which constantly force the urban dweller to be flexible, and to master the tricky skills of improvisation. Urban inhabitants seem to be very good at doing exactly that; at opening up to this 'unexpected', that often reveals itself outside the known pathways that constitute urban life in the West. They are highly skilled at discovering itineraries beyond the obvious, at exploiting more invisible paths and possibilities that lay hidden in and beyond the folds of urban domains and experiences. Often, city dwellers have trained themselves to

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[30] Davis, M., 2006, *Planet of Slums.* London / New York: Verso.

[31] De Boeck, F. & M.-F. Plissart , 2004, *Kinshasa. Tales of the Invisible City.* Gent / Tervuren: Ludion / Royal Museum for Central Africa. Fabian, J., 1998, *Moments of Freedom. Anthropology and Popular Culture.* Charlottesville / London: University Press of Virginia. Jewsiewicki, B., 2003, *Mami Wata. La peinture urbaine au Congo.* Paris: Gallimard. Kapagama, P. & R. Waterhouse, 2009, *Portrait of Kinshasa: A City on (the) Edge.* London: London School of Economics, Crisis States Research Centre, working paper 53 (2). Nlandu, T., 2002, Kinshasa: Beyond Chaos. In: O. Enwezor et al. (Eds.), *Under Siege: Four African Cities.* Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz. Simone, A., 2010, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar. Movements at the Crossroads.* New York / London: Routledge. Toulier, B., J. Lagae & M.Gemoets (Eds.), 2010, Kinshasa.Architecture et paysages urbains. Paris / Brussels: Somogy editions d'art / Arter. Yoka Lye Mudaba, 1999, *Kinshasa, signes de vie.* Paris / Tervuren: L'Harmattan / Institut Africain-CEDAF.

successfully tap into this imbroglio, and to exploit to the full the possibilities these juxtapositions offer. They are constantly busy to design new ways to escape from the economic impositions and excesses that urban life imposes on them. They often know where to look and what to look for in order to generate feasibility within what is seemingly unfeasible.

Inhabitants of this kind of urban contexts are also increasingly embedded in extremely complex and mobile networks of exchange and interdependence. These are often situated beyond the level of the city as geographical entity. Rather than being poor (pre- or post-) urban outposts outside of the globalised network of the new information age, the urban networks generated by these city dwellers interconnect various geographical spaces, and also find a concrete expression in diverse, often intersecting, associational networks, each with its own life span, its own functionality, and its own impact. Not necessarily anchored in any precise geographical location or territory, these networks are often open-ended sites of mobility, of flux, contact, transmission, circulation and migration. In constituting these networks, and in reconfiguring the standard constellations between culture and capital, or between politics and religion, urban dwellers 'world' their city[32] and secure a new place for Congo in Africa as well as in the global world beyond, from Brussels to the Chinese city of Guanzhou.

In conclusion, then, Congo is functioning as a powerful *topos* and topic within postcolonial studies, offering a reality that constantly forces scholars, writers, intellectuals, politicians and decision-makers to question and rethink standard paradigms, and to open up to alternative perspectives. Yet, within Congo itself, this growing body of postcolonial theory does not seem to impress anyone. Maybe this is because there people are too busy writing, talking, walking, dancing and living their own postscripts to their country's turbulent history, inventing glimpses of other possible futures beyond the broken dreams of colonialist modernity, the failed framework of the nationalist nation-state, or the hardships imposed upon them by the current neo-liberal moment. But as pointed out above, the future of that 'beyond' remains very difficult to grasp and define. Roadmaps and pathways to connect visions of future spaces of hope to the actual moment of the present often seem to be lacking, or are constantly replaced either by the specific eschatological temporalities embedded in apocalyptic visions of a final judgement and a second coming, or by the raw urgency of living in the moment of the immediate, where even tomorrow's future seems to offer nothing but uncertain and unsteady ground.

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[32] Simone, A., 2001, On the Worlding of African Cities. *African Studies Review* 44 (2), pp. 15-42.