

Whose Congo?

**Understanding Diaspora-Homeland Perceptions and Transnational Political
Engagement in the Congolese (DRC) Diaspora in Belgium**

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Senior Thesis submitted for Honors in International Relations

May 16, 2019

Abstract

The scope of this project is to explore the intersection of diaspora-homeland perceptions and transnational political engagement. Research has already proven that the Congolese diaspora in Belgium is involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) politics, but little research has been done examining how the diaspora perceives the homeland. Analyzing studies of immigrants and other scholarship about the diaspora, this thesis suggests that the diaspora's perceptions of the homeland and engagement in the homeland are mutually enforcing, mirroring a Foucauldian image of knowledge and power. As a result, the diaspora is slowly drifting away from the DRC, as it actively seeks to create a specific version of the Congolese state. In an increasingly fluid and globalized world, examining how immigrants view and interact with the homeland can help better explain transnational phenomena.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Carla Barquerio, Dr. Janet Shope, and Dr. Lena Oweidat, for helping me set up the IRB survey. I would like to also thank Dr. Eric Singer and Dr. Antje Rauwerda for sitting on the committee and comforting me when the above survey fell through and was unusable. Above all, I would like to finally thank Dr. Amalia Fried Honick for advising me, affirming the new direction of this project, and all the edits along the way.

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1. Introduction

On December 4th, 2011, a group of Congolese-Belgian activists met outside the Socialist Party headquarters in Brussels, voicing criticism of a Socialist senator, who had just returned from the Democratic Republic of Congo.¹ Many activists (both inside and outside the DRC) felt that Joseph Kabila, president since 2001, had rigged the election to win reelection over his opponent Étienne Tshisekedi. The Belgian senator had affirmed that the November 28 elections had been conducted properly.

When the activists were barred from entering the headquarters, they decided to stay put and stage a protest, until driven away with police water cannons.² They then decided to move the demonstration to the Congolese Embassy, but found that the road was blocked by police cars. Frustrated, they returned to Matongé (the traditionally Congolese neighborhood of Brussels), smashing car windows and overturning trash bins along the way. Finally arriving at the Chaussée d'Ixelles (the main street in the neighborhood), they began singing and chanting. By 10pm, calm had returned, but only after shop windows had been shattered, cars damaged, and 30 people arrested.³ Participants used SMS and social media messages to organize another protest the next day at the Porte de Namur metro stop (located in Matongé).

Then, on December 5th, around 50 people gathered around the metro stop. They sang and socialized; spirits were high. The protest had not been authorized (probably because of the previous day's violence). Around 3pm, while demonstrators were peacefully occupying the public space, the police began to attack the participants. Batons and pepper spray were used against the

¹ Sarah Demart, "Émeutes à Matonge et... indifférence des pouvoirs publics ?" *Brussels Studies* (2013). <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1165>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

demonstrators, and other accounts of police brutality were recorded.⁴ Still, the numbers of participants continued to grow outside the metro stop, and the police could not contain them.

Protests by members of the Congolese diaspora would continue for another two weeks. Daily, demonstrators would congregate in Matongé, sometimes peacefully, sometimes not. On December 7th, around a hundred protestors met outside at Porte de Namur (seven were arrested). On December 8th, a group of one hundred Congolese students met outside the European Parliament, asking the EU to play a more active role in the DRC. On December 9th, the election results were made public - Joseph Kabila was declared the winner.

* * * *

While it may be easy to write these demonstrations off as protests or riots (as many in the press did), I am more interested in situating them in the history of the political engagement of the Congolese diaspora living in Belgium. It's little secret that this diaspora is unusually active, both in the country of origin (the DRC), and the receiving country (Belgium). The global Congolese diaspora also includes members in France, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, to name the largest diasporas. This study focuses on the diaspora in Belgium, because it is one of the largest and most active, but also because of the post-colonial ties between the DRC and Belgium.

At the same time, many of these ties and relationships are not unique to the DRC and Belgium. The roles that immigrants play in both the host country and country of origin are subject to interrogation in the rapidly globalizing 21st Century. Studying the ways that immigrants interact within the political structures of both country of origin and host country helps reveal the unique political agency that immigrants can hold. I chose to study the Congolese

⁴ Ibid.

diaspora living in Belgium because they are a prime example of how immigrants can work within different political opportunity structures, sometimes even molding these structures to best benefit them.

Therefore, this thesis adopts a single case study design. This entails an in-depth analysis of the Congolese diaspora living in Belgium. While this paper does not use a Foucauldian method, per se, it does make use of the Foucauldian image of knowledge and power. This image proves that the perceptions of the homeland, and transnational political engagement, are mutually reinforcing.

Michel Foucault understands power and knowledge, in short, to be two sides of the same coin. In a Foucauldian understanding, knowledge is known and understood through societal mechanisms - these mechanisms refer to power. Other forms of knowledge, which exist outside this system, become unintelligible, and are rendered mute.⁵ This has the effect of elevating the knowledges which enforce the power, leading to a sort of feedback-loop between the two. Normally, one would not separate the two, since they are reinforcing to the point that they are one-and-the-same. However, for the sake of analysis, I decided to push them apart into two separate chapters. The first addresses the *knowledges*, in this case study, the perceptions of the homeland. The second explores the *power*, the transnational political engagement. Each chapter thoroughly explains its topic, analyzes it, and then demonstrates how it reinforces the other.

This project draws on previously existing scholarship about the diaspora. Notably, two studies directly interview members of the diaspora, giving us first hand knowledge and verbatim quotes by Congolese immigrants living in Belgium.⁶ Additional secondary scholarship and

⁵ Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures" in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 82.

⁶ Henckes and Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw.

studies about the diaspora will be used. This will be buttressed by media (i.e. news stories) about the diaspora, to round out the analysis.

When studying the Congolese diaspora, the first thing one must admit is that the diaspora is a large, diverse group. It's difficult to say "the diaspora does X" when the diaspora is comprised of thousands of immigrants. It is imperative to understand the diversity of socio-economic class (which varies from working class to the upper crusts of society), the diversity of education levels, and perhaps most importantly, the diversity of geographic origin. The DRC today encompasses more than 200 ethnic groups, and is marked by ongoing conflict in the east of the country, which has produced intermittent violence since the 1990s.⁷

Despite the diversity of the diaspora, their actions warrant academic research. Scholarship on cross-border migrant activities is usually studied from two distinct approaches: diaspora studies and transnationalism.⁸ The former implies a more anthropological approach, examining the make-up of the diaspora, focusing on the culture, identity, and religious aspects of the diaspora. Transnationalism, by contrast, seeks to understand the mobility, connections, and linkages across borders.⁹ As this study seeks to analyze the political engagement of the Congolese diaspora community in Belgium with the DRC, a transnationalism approach is used.

To place the 2011 protests in the history of the diaspora's transnational political engagement sparks a series of subsequent questions: How are members of the diaspora acting within their conceptions of Congolese citizenship, if at all? What are the motivations for activity

⁷ Dr. Germain NGOIE Tshibambe & VWAKYANAKAZI Mukohya, "Country Paper, The Democratic Republic of Congo" (report prepared for the African Perspectives on Human Mobility Program, MacArthur Foundation).

⁸ Ruth-Marie Henckes, "Belonging Beyond Borders: Congolese Transnational Politics and Constructed Democratic Citizenship" Masters Thesis, KU Leuven, 2017. 8.

⁹ Thomas Faist, "Diaspora and Transnationalism: What kind of dance partners?" in *Diaspora and Transnationalism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2010). 9-17.

in homeland politics? What does it mean to be a Congolese citizen, and what does it mean to be Congolese but live outside the DRC? The question of *How* migrants interact with the homeland leads to the question of *why* do migrants interact with the homeland? Similarly, any study which seeks to ask *why* migrants engage with the homeland is then tasked with the question of proving motivations in a diverse diaspora, which no single answer can adequately explain.

Therefore, this paper does not seek to engage with “motivations,” instead, only with behaviors. When examining Congolese/Belgian connections, we see different forms of transnational ties. Owing to a poststructuralist approach, we will analyze the behaviors of Congolese immigrants living in Belgium, and then surmise conclusions based off these discussions. Being situated in transnationalism, this paper does not seek to answer questions along the lines of “is this a diaspora?” or “what percentage of Congolese immigrants are politically active?” Instead, we focus exclusively on observable behaviors, as we seek to better understand transnational phenomena.

The point of departure for this project was Benedict Anderson’s concept of *Imagined Communities*. While nation-states can be understood as an imagined community, I argue that a diaspora is also an imagined community. However, despite the diaspora living in one nation (Belgium) and looking towards another (the DRC), the diaspora exists as a sort of hybrid between the two. Not only does the diaspora straddle the line between the two countries, but it effectively stands out by itself, becoming a unique third imagined community. Anderson understands colonies as communities “moving in parallel” with the home country; one might imagine the diaspora seeing themselves as moving in parallel with Congo, even if spatially removed.

This is the subject of this study — how do the diaspora imagine the homeland? This project began seeking to answer a two pronged question: “What are the perceptions of the

homeland by the diaspora, and how do they inform the political engagement of the diaspora?” This question, in effect, has an independent variable (the perceptions of the homeland) and a dependent variable (the transnational political engagement). I expected to examine the different ways immigrants perceived the DRC, and then study how these perceptions informed the political engagement. I anticipated this to be a one-directional influence — the perceptions of the DRC affect the transnational political engagement.

However, over the course of research, I developed a slightly different hypothesis which I was then able to prove: that the perceptions of the diaspora inform the political engagement, but the engagement then reinforces these perceptions. This cyclical reinforcement mirrors the understanding of power and knowledge as proposed by Michel Foucault. In effect, thanks to the ways of imagining Congo created by the diaspora, the transnational political engagement creates a specific vision of the Congo, which often differs from the lived reality on the ground. The result of this process pushes the diaspora away from the home country, and causes a sort of drift away from the DRC.

2: Literature Review

Studies of diasporas, and transnational activity in general, tend to fall into two camps: Transnational Studies, and Diaspora Studies. While Diaspora Studies tend to concern the demographics of individual diasporas, Transnational Studies examine the linkages and connections between diasporas, immigrants, and homelands.¹⁰ The two are clearly connected, but this paper seeks to explore the relations between the diaspora and the homeland. Thus, this paper will mostly focus on the transnational approach.

The point of departure for this project is Benedict Anderson, and his seminal work *Imagined Communities*. In talking about diasporas and the transnational relation the diaspora has with the homeland, we directly implicate the concepts of nationhood and what constitutes a nation. Anderson suggests that nations are “Imagined Political Communities” of people, banded together, moving forward through time.¹¹

Anderson begins his investigation of nationalism in Western Europe, although he continues and gives ample examples of the different forms of nationalism which spawned every nation state today. The rise of nationalism corresponds entirely to the Renaissance, whose technological and theological advances elevated the nation to a higher meaning. For Anderson, nationalism was born out of three imperative movements: the movement towards local, vernacular languages; the diminution of religious prowess vis à vis the state; and a new understanding of time which equated nature and man together.¹²

A final point which Anderson concludes on is the idea of parallelism, that nations of people can send representatives to new lands, and that these estranged communities somehow

¹⁰ Henckes, 8.

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

continue in a parallel trajectory with the homeland. While Anderson only gives examples of Nieuwe Amsterdam, New England, and Nouvelle Orléans, we can extrapolate this to suggest that the Congolese diaspora in Belgium is attempting to live in parallel to the national narrative of the DRC itself. This opens the question: to what extent is the diaspora an imagined community in and of itself, and to what extent is it living in parallel with the DRC?

Two concepts of Anderson are notable for this project: the importance of journalism, and the non-linear concept of time. Journalism, to Anderson, was an imperative part of the nationalism process, because journalists and editors needed to conceive a national audience for their publications (grouping people geographically and based off their quotidian language). By manicuring articles for an audience, print journalism was able to create a certain identity for its readers. I hypothesize that we will see a similar dynamic among diaspora members, who stay informed about the homeland through diaspora-specific news sources, namely websites.

The second element of Anderson which we will address in this paper is the non-linear notion of time, first championed by Walter Benjamin's angel of history. Instead of seeing history as a linear chain of causal events, Benjamin suggests we view history as a "single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage until it reaches [our] feet."¹³ In this sense, time is not linear, it is fleeting, it crosses boundaries. We can look back upon history and see links and chains which seem to push us forward (and then superimpose them onto the future). The only thing which pushes us forward is time itself. A paradox arises: the future is not a linear progression of the past, yet, people's interpretations and memories of the past can influence their actions in the present.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 2007), 257.

Closely linked to this is Homi Bhabha's understanding of the present. Bhabha understands the present as "[no longer] a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities."¹⁴ Breaking away from traditional understandings of time is imperative, which he does by applying a post-modern lens to post-colonial studies. We do not have idealized understandings of the past which lead us to the present, we must strive to understand the present, including all its chaotic and unexplainable aspects, exactly as it is.

This notion of time is paramount to understanding one of the fundamental axioms of this project – that migration is both a geographic movement (from point A to point B), but also a temporal movement that accompanies this geographic jump. For example, an immigrant who immigrates from the DRC to Belgium in the year 2000 has experienced Congo only in the 20th Century, and Belgium in the 21st. We argue that these temporal changes have immense effects on the ways immigrants view the homeland. Thus, immigration must be understood both as geographic and temporal.

Yet, when we speak of geographic changes between Belgium and the DRC, we should not be caught up in the nation-state framework of each location. In both International Relations and Transnational Studies, there has been a drift to studying locations (including town, state, and nation-state level actors), instead of limiting analysis to the nation state as a whole.¹⁵

In the field of Transnational Studies, Rainier Bauböck has been successful in championing this approach, arguing that immigrants not only participate, but can often change

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

and manipulate the different institutions (national, state, and town level) of their host country as part of their transnational activity.¹⁶ Bauböck claims that transnational politics “transcend” the typical conceptions of politics, and for that reason, must be studied as an effect of migration.

In many ways, Bauböck stands in opposition to Anderson, devaluing the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis: “Transnational practices and structures in these social fields need not involve the state as an agent or the nation as an imagined political community.”¹⁷ Yet, I do not view Bauböck as a contradiction of Anderson, but as an extension of Anderson, as he uses the ideas of imagined communities, but outside the scope of the nation state. Bauböck presents many of the messy and complicated ways transnational politics are decided and carried out, and embraces their ambiguity.

Transnational studies is often posited against “methodological nationalism,” which refers to the tendency to place the nation-state at the center of analysis.¹⁸ A transnationalist approach posits non-state actors, usually immigrants themselves, as key actors.¹⁹ There is a transnationalism triangle between the country of origin, the country of arrival, and the immigrant.²⁰ The connections and interplay between these three form the subject of analysis of transnationalism studies. Again, we must be careful not to not overstate the state-level, since immigrants often work within political opportunity structures of local or inter-state governance.

¹⁶ Rainer Bauböck, “Towards a Political Theory of Migrant Transnationalism” *The International Migration Review* 37:3 (Fall 2003): 701-702.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 702

¹⁸ Faist, 27-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

There are no grand theories of transnationalism. Instead, there are general trends that the sub-field maintains. Firstly, transnationalism differs from globalism as it does not seek to connect border-crossing phenomena to any sort of global cosmopolitan study. Instead, it only seeks to better understand these border crossing activities and connections. Secondly, diaspora studies tends to have a multi-generational time frame (as diasporas generally have existed for many generations outside the homeland). This contrasts from transnationalism, in that transnationalism generally focuses on the contemporary, instead of the historical.²¹

It is dually important to understand that transnational phenomena, especially young diasporas (like the Congolese diaspora of Belgium), are not necessarily stable. They are fluid, changing, and malleable. There is a tendency towards “groupism,” which overstates the importance of the existence of the diaspora, and fails to analyze the links and connections between the immigrants, the country of origin, and the country of welcome.²² A true transnationalist approach seeks to interrogate these links and connections, and to ask what directions they flow. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyze the behaviors of the diaspora (and not necessarily the intentions), and then implicate these behaviors with the perceptions of the homeland.

Thus, our political framework has created several main takeaways: first, that diasporas often see themselves as living in parallel to the homeland, second, that migration has both a temporal and geographic change, and third, that migrants can (and often do!) work within and actively shape the political structures of the host-country. As this paper takes a transnationalist approach, we seek to interrogate the links and connections between the DRC, Belgium, and the

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Ibid., 28.

community of Congolese immigrants who live in Belgium. We are careful not to overstate the importance of the nation-state in our analysis (focusing instead on multi-tiered analysis), and we do not assume the diaspora to be homogenous and static. Instead, we seek to analyze the behaviors observed within the community, and to analyze the directions of the transnational connections.

2.1: The Congolese Diaspora

The second part of the literature review concerns the research done on the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the diaspora living in Belgium.

The Congolese Diaspora living in Belgium has been the subject of academic research already. Eva Swyngedouw and Eric Swyngedouw together published a report about diasporic citizenship of the diaspora living in Belgium.²³ They note that the diaspora is unique, in that it is neither refugees nor temporary laborers. The diaspora is instead a distinctive, hybrid, culturally rich group, which have a simultaneously local and transnational identity. Swyngedouw gives an in-depth history of Congolese immigration to Belgium, making reference to transnationalism and hybrid identities. Swyngedouw highlights the three sectors in which immigrants can be active in the homeland: economic, political, and socio-economic. Swyngedouw concludes that the diaspora, by virtue of existing between the Congolese nation and the Belgian nation, inhabit a certain in-between space, and create a hybrid identity for themselves; highlighting the global and local nature of the diaspora. The diaspora is global, in that its denizens are often members of multiple communities (both Brussels and Kinshasa, for example), and multiple states (Belgium and the DRC). At the same time, we should not conflate being a citizen of both Belgium and the

²³ Eva Swyngedouw and Eric Swyngedouw, "The Congolese Diaspora in Brussels and Hybrid Identity Formation: Multi-scalarity and diasporic citizenship," *Urban Research & Practice* 2:1 (2009): 68-90.

DRC as equally representing both nations, instead, Swyngedouw comes to understand that many members of the diaspora are specifically involved at the community level.

Swyngedouw's article raises many points which play into our transnational approach – primarily, by showing how members of the diaspora can be cultural hybrids, and can engage in both Congolese and Belgian politics. The paper features an original qualitative investigation involving members of the diaspora. In this sense, this paper is very helpful as it gives multiple quotations about members' hybrid identities, and relations to both the DRC and Belgium.

The diaspora can be additionally studied through a post-colonial lens, as done by Sarah Demart and Leïla Bodeux.²⁴ The two studied the Belgium/Congo relation in light of the 2011 protests in Brussels (in which members of the Congolese diaspora protested worldwide against the reelection of Joseph Kabila). While studying the spatial mobility of these protests, they show how it is closely related to political space.²⁵ These dynamics are all inherited from colonial mechanisms. Through this post-colonial lens, the two authors can better uncover the “politics from below,” understanding the narratives of the actors, the history of their demands, and what unites and divides them.²⁶ Demart and Bodeux conclude that the dynamic of Congolese people in Belgium still maintains a strong colonial legacy, and that many Congolese elites viewed Belgium as an extension of their (elite) Congo. Additionally, since many Congolese migrants were displaced by Congolese politics, the Congolese political narrative in Europe takes a firm stance against the Congolese state.

²⁴ Sarah Demart and Leïla Bodeux. “Postcolonial Stakes of Congolese (DRC) Political Space: 50 Years after Independence.” *African Diaspora* 6 (2013): 72-96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

This article, thanks to its unique approach, helps contextualize the diaspora in both Belgian and Congolese histories. The article is recent (2013), and pulls from recent scholarship in transnationalism studies. By answering how the diaspora arrived here today, we can better understand the direction that it is moving.

The linkages between the diaspora and the DRC have been additionally studied by Ruth-Marie Henckes in her Masters Thesis, “Belonging Beyond Borders,” a study of transnational connections between the diaspora and the homeland.²⁷ While firmly rooting herself in transnationalist thought, she uses the Congolese diaspora in Belgium as a case study, examining the different dimensions of citizenship (both Congolese and Belgian), and the ways that the diaspora works both within and outside of preexisting structures. Henckes concludes that the diaspora doesn’t “simply use institutions for transnational political participation, but actively shape these institutions and turn them to their advantage in the enactment of their deep sense of belonging to the home country.”²⁸

Henckes’s paper is of immense value, as it explicitly explains many of the connections between the Congolese diaspora and the homeland. This paper also features qualitative interviews with members of the diaspora, who explain their involvement and engagement in both Belgium and Congo. What Henckes’s paper lacks is an investigation into perceptions of the homeland. She cites that members of the diaspora are motivated from a sense of belonging to the home country, but does not give detail on this point. One of the aims of this project is to fill this void, and illuminate both the perceptions and motivations of transnational actors.

²⁷ Henckes, “Belonging Beyond Borders.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has been additionally studied as an object itself. In a seminal constructivist work, Kevin C. Dunn addresses how the world's perceptions of the DRC have impacted the ways other states interact with it.²⁹ Dunn traces the present instability of the DRC to these "heart of darkness" stereotypes, which marred the Congo basin from the 19th Century. The fundamental claim Dunn seeks to make is that these discourses, these ways of seeing the Congo, all affect the actions taken by policy makers and citizens both.

Dunn uses a discursive analysis in his book, which purposefully avoids discussion of *structures* and instead focuses on the *discourses* which inform and control knowledge of a subject.³⁰ While deeply rooted in Michel Foucault's concepts of power and knowledge, Dunn does not stray too far from international relations, and keeps the book rooted in the case study. This approach of discourse analysis pertains to this study, and in many ways, we can frame this study as a continuation of Dunn's analysis: how does the diaspora imagine the Congo?

Theodore Trefon et al. write about state failure in the Congo; additionally addressing perceptions, but also realities.³¹ The authors underline the war economy of the DRC, which caused the state's failure to regulate the economy. This is furthered by the international community, which has neglected to intervene, and in many ways, profits from the instability in the DRC.³² The authors cite the strong national identity created among those living through the political turmoil in the DRC.

²⁹ Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

³¹ Theodore Trefon, Van Hoyweghen Saskia and Stefaan Smis, "Editorial: State Failure in the Congo: Perceptions & Realities" *Review of African Political Economy*, 29:93/94 (2002).

³² *Ibid.*

Thus, we can understand the DRC today as a nation which is plagued by a corrupt and failed state, a war economy, and a commodity based economy in which outside players benefit from the turmoil in Congo. Trefon et al. write that while many Congolese are immensely critical of the state, they are additionally critical of outside aid. The idea of an international conspiracy against the DRC is prevalent, and will be touched on further in this study. The authors conclude that the Congolese are resilient in the face of turmoil, and continue to make do with what they have.

In conclusion, we come to understand the diaspora as a culturally hybrid group, which transgresses national boundaries, and often extends into specific communities in both Belgium and the DRC. The diaspora is firmly rooted in the colonial history between Belgium and Congo. Additionally, Congo has already been used as an example of the varying ways a nation can be envisioned. Many Congolese are critical of the state, but also critical of the international aid that comes into the country. While previous scholarship has already addressed the diaspora's political contributions and engagement in the DRC, no studies have been done linking the perceptions of the homeland to the engagement. This is the central undertaking of this study.

3. *Perceptions of the Homeland*

Author Salman Rushdie writes in his essay “Imaginary Homelands” that a faded photograph of his old family home in Bombay hangs in the room where he works.³³ The photograph predates Rushdie’s own birth, but he notes that it “reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.”³⁴ Rushdie occupies a unique space – born in British Colonial India, he was raised in Bombay, until moving to England during his childhood. Rushdie suggests that all writers in his position (being exiles, or emigrants, or expatriates), are “haunted by some sense of loss, to look back,” even if the past, that one left behind, is no longer existent.³⁵ The resulting images gleaned from looking back (because really, it’s human nature to look back) are fictions, invisible, imagined homelands, or for Rushdie, “Indias of the mind.”³⁶

The first part of this study must examine how the Congolese diaspora in Belgium views the DRC. In many ways, a diaspora is an extension of the homeland – Benedict Anderson suggests that diasporas often begin their trajectories as physically separate, but running in parallel with the homeland.³⁷ While this is accurate, the extent that both groups are moving in parallel is debatable. The diaspora contains diversity of political thought, but there are reoccurring themes in the scholarship on the diaspora. This chapter seeks to highlight this schism, by examining the different discourses through which the diaspora views the DRC.

³³ *Imaginary Homelands*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

Through research, I have found two primary perceptions of the homeland: Congo as the ancestral homeland, and Congo as somewhere that needs saving. These two perceptions are not mutually exclusive, quite the opposite, they often work together in discourse to paint an image of the DRC. This chapter will elaborate on these two perceptions, and then will show how they inform the political engagement of the diaspora.

3.1: Congo as the Ancestral Homeland

The first perception that we will examine is Congo as the ancestral homeland. This may be the most common reoccurring theme within diaspora studies, but the Congolese example may be additionally complex due to the particular nature of Congolese immigration to Belgium. Additionally, traditional Bantu understandings of citizenship implicate the relation of the diaspora to the DRC. These two factors play together to create the image of the DRC as an ancestral homeland.

The patterns of Congolese immigrants to Belgium are somewhat atypical.³⁸ While most immigration to Europe is normally marked by migrating labor or refugees, Congolese immigration to Belgium fits neither category well. Clearly, Congolese immigration to Belgium follows a colonial trajectory. Yet, during the colonial period, there was almost zero immigration northward from the colony to the metropole. After the Second World War, the Belgian government tried to attract labor from Southern Europe, Turkey, and Morocco, and notably did not incentivize Congolese laborers to come to Belgium.³⁹ This was done to contain local labor in the Congolese colony, but was also motivated by efforts to maintain the “racial homogeneity” of Belgium.⁴⁰

³⁸ Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw, 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The first Belgian residents of Congolese origin began arriving in Brussels after Congolese independence in 1960. Many were students, coming to Belgium for higher education (an effect of the Belgian education system put in place in the Congolese colony).⁴¹ Students, for the most part, were thought of as temporary residents, who would return home after their studies. Additionally, there existed a population of political elites from the Mobutu regime, who generally surrounded themselves with the highly-educated international community, and not other Congolese.⁴²

Starting the late 1980s, sparked by the political crisis in the DRC, there was a surge of political asylum seekers.⁴³ This was facilitated by Belgian immigration laws, which accept asylum seekers with ease. There is a pathway towards citizenship, so long as the immigrant lives in the country for 5-10 years, and is engaged in the workforce and community.⁴⁴ This resulted in a shift of immigrants being temporary guests (like students and businessmen), to active, permanent members of Belgian society. In turn, the diaspora gained a certain legitimacy as a permanent fixture in Belgium.

In sum, Congolese immigration is unique in that most migrants came to Belgium out of the choice to claim asylum, and not from labor or other post-colonial incentives.⁴⁵ As a result, the diaspora is made up by immigrants who actively chose to immigrate to Belgium (and not settle in a neighboring country, like Rwanda or Burundi). The motivations for many members of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Henckes, 16.

⁴⁴ Process of the Naturalization Procedure. Chamber of Representatives of Belgium.
<http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/showpage.cfm?language=fr§ion=|nat&story=procedure.xml>

⁴⁵ Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw, 71.

the diaspora are rooted in need (the need for higher education, the need to escape a conflict-torn country), coming to Belgium was less of a choice, and more of a necessity (i.e. *I don't want to leave Congo, but I must*). Many members of the diaspora, in turn, keep their Congolese identity dear, and often consider themselves *Congolese dans l'âme* (Congolese at heart) even after obtaining Belgian citizenship.⁴⁶ Henckes's study also found that many members of the diaspora wish to return home someday, but are currently unable to because of the ongoing conflict.⁴⁷ This may be another reason to join the political sphere.

Even while many migrants are able to obtain Belgian citizenship, there is still a component of Othering which occurs among the diaspora. Swyngedouw, in her study of cosmopolitan identities in the Congolese diaspora, highlights the foreigner identity which is placed upon all of her respondents.⁴⁸ Not only does this gaze isolate and separate the diaspora, it also homogenizes them as a group of outsiders. While they may be legal Belgian citizens, they are not always seen as ethnic Belgian citizens.

This becomes dually complicated when examining the post-colonial conceptions of citizenship in the DRC today. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja examines this dynamic in the essay, "Politics of Citizenship in the Democratic Republic of Congo."⁴⁹ Nzongola-Ntalaja explains the Bantu conceptions of membership, which differ from Western citizenship. For many Bantu societies, there is a great emphasis placed on the ancestral land, which informs man's connection to it: "the individual is fully human only through the complex web of relations that ties him or

⁴⁶ Henckes, 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁸ Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw, 81.

⁴⁹ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, "Politics of Citizenship in the Democratic Republic of Congo" in *Making Nations, Creating Strangers: States and Citizenship in Africa*, edited by Paul Nugent, Daniel Hammett, Sara Dorman (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

her to other vital forces, both dead and alive.”⁵⁰ Thus, citizenship in Bantu societies is not limited to legal standing (whether one can vote, or receive benefits from the state), but one must also be an active community member to fulfil their duty of being a “good citizen.”

Additionally, there is an ancestral component to Bantu citizenship. Similar to Belgian citizenship (you must be born to a Belgian parent to receive Belgian citizenship at birth), traditional African citizenship suggests that wherever you are born, you are the child of “the original soil or homeland of the parents through whom you trace your decent.”⁵¹ This results in a certain “ethnic” citizenship which runs parallel to the state-centric definition of citizenship.

As a result, the Congolese immigrants often feel connected to their ancestral homeland, even after having left. This conception of citizenship means that one is still “Congolese,” even if they do not have Congolese citizenship. This is notable, considering that it is technically illegal to have dual citizenship with Congolese citizenship (the DRC claims that Congolese citizenship is unitary and indivisible. This is rarely enforced, and even the Congolese embassy has advised Congolese immigrants to retain their Congolese citizenship while perusing Belgian citizenship for practical advantages).⁵²

In conclusion, the primary lens through which the diaspora sees the DRC is that of the paternal homeland. This is dually caused by need-based immigration to Belgium, and also by traditional Bantu conceptions of citizenship. As a result, many members of the diaspora see the DRC as somewhere they are still actively connected to. This active connection then becomes a primary motivation for engagement in the politics of the DRC.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Henckes, 19.

3.2: Congo as Somewhere that Needs Saving

The second lens I propose is seeing the DRC as a failed state. The extent to which the DRC functions as a failed state is up for debate, and I do not mean to bring this debate to the forefront of this paper. Indeed, the term “failed state” has a somewhat ambiguous definition, and often carries a charged connotation. Yet, many scholars have not shied away from referring to present-day DRC as failed state, so my terminology seeks only to reflect this.⁵³

The issue at stake, and the crux of this lens, is not that the Congo simply exists as a “failed state,” but rather, that Congo is “failed state” and the diaspora are the only ones who can fix it. This section seeks to present the different ways this lens is perpetuated through discourses in the diaspora, namely, immigration patterns, social remittances, and the freedom of speech to vocalize criticisms of the Congolese state.

That the DRC is often seen as a “failed state” in the Global North reinforces this lens. Dunn speaks at length about this lens in *Imaging the Congo*. Dunn highlights one instance of an ABC news program, broadcasted in 2002 (one year after the assassination of Laurent-Désiré Kabila), titled *Heart of Darkness*. Dunn writes that the program was intended to “shed light” onto the region; to investigate, report back, and make sense of the “chaos” that was unfolding in the DRC to a Western audience.⁵⁴ The title is extremely telling, as it reemployed a century old label, created by Joseph Conrad, to describe the region. By using this title, ABC sought to evoke preexisting images of the DRC in its audience.

Dunn proposes a paradox – that most Westerners know next to nothing about the actual history, politics, or happenings of the DRC (how many Americans could find the DRC on a

⁵³ Trefon et al.

⁵⁴ Dunn, 4.

map?), many feel that they know it well because of the images that represent it in the West.⁵⁵ These images include news reports, presenting the DRC (and Central Africa as a whole) as the location of HIV/AIDS outbreaks, Ebola, famine, or tribal warfare; but stretching all the way to cultural images, like National Geographic exposés, *Heart of Darkness*, and even Tarzan.⁵⁶ This discourse has the effect of painting the Congo as chaotic, backward, and uncivilized.⁵⁷ In short, someplace that needs saving.

From their Western base (in this paper, Belgium, but also France, the UK, the US, and Canada), this is the cultural image of Congo which the diaspora must navigate. Generally, as first-generation immigrants, they have first-hand experience of what life in the Congo is like; this would render them safe from perpetuating any misguided stereotypes about the homeland. While I am not trying to suggest that the diaspora falls into this trap, I argue instead that often, through their transnational political engagement, they perpetuate an adjacent image: that the Congo needs saving.

I want to make myself abundantly clear: this is not to say that the diaspora should not be involved in Congolese affairs. Many scholars suggest that the diaspora is uniquely suited to help in the DRC, usually in ways that Western states and non-governmental organizations cannot.⁵⁸ This often is simply because members of the diaspora know the nuances of local politics and other social or regional dynamics. Yet, the idea that Congo needs saving runs in parallel to the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸ Garbin & Godin, Trefon et al.

identical Western notion (insomuch as providing humanitarian support or other types of aid), motivating the diaspora to act and sometimes “correct” the West’s aid.⁵⁹

Firstly, political activism in the diaspora began rooted in opposition to Mobutu. During the nascent stages of the diaspora (in the 1970s and 1980s), it was primarily students who took the charge against Mobutu in Brussels, Paris, and eventually London.⁶⁰ These first protests were critical of Mobutu, claiming that he supported American/Western interests during the Cold War. Additionally, political activists opposed to the Mobutu regime would seek asylum in France and Belgium. These activists were often opposed to the authoritarian rule of Mobutu.⁶¹

This period was followed by the tumultuous 1990s and 2000s. During this period, the DRC was ravaged by war (namely, the First and Second Congo wars), which prompted a large exodus from Congo. It is logical to conclude that today, many members of the diaspora seek to fix the instability which motivated them to leave. It plays into the temporal aspect of immigration – that an immigrant leaves their country of origin, but these images of the homeland are frozen in the era they left. If a Congolese immigrant came to Belgium during the conflicts in the 1990s, their images of the DRC would be marred by the conflict, even ten or twenty years after the fact.

This lens is further perpetuated by dissatisfaction with the current state of Congolese politics. Henckes’s study found that many members of the diaspora engage politically because they are dissatisfied with the Congolese government. Henckes suggests this may be influenced by

⁵⁹ There exist large differences in between the diaspora’s image of Congo as someplace that needs saving and the West’s image as someplace that needs saving. This will be further addressed in Section 5.1.

⁶⁰ David Garbin & Marie Godin, “‘Saving the Congo’: transnational social fields and politics of home in the Congolese diaspora” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 2013 Vol. 6, No. 2, 116.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the immigrants' experience in Belgian democracy.⁶² In turn, they are more likely to be critical of Congolese politics, with many suggesting for a "new political class, a change in mentality, or an awakening of people's consciousness."⁶³ In addition, members of the diaspora also often participate in civic education, studying subjects like rule of law, fair elections, and human rights. These can be taught and communicated to friends and family back home in the DRC, exemplifying the phenomenon of social remittances. Money is not the only capital which can be sent across borders, ideas about democracy are another form remittances can take. Hidden in these actions, however, is the idea that the diaspora should help the DRC, or that they possess some capital (a knowledge of democracy) that must be spread.

It also should be noted that the diaspora has a key tool that many in the DRC do not – the freedom of speech. Henckes highlights that immigration to the global North can be "an opportunity for 'voice' through 'exit.'"⁶⁴ Many Congolese activists have lost their lives in pursuit of this 'voice' in the DRC, so the only opportunity for freedom of speech comes from leaving the DRC. Immigrants can play the role of an intermediary by voicing the complaints of unheard voices in the DRC for a wider audience.⁶⁵ Additionally, since the opposition political parties in the DRC are heavily censored, the only unfiltered opposition can come from abroad. The diaspora is therefore in a unique position of leverage over the Congolese state, and many political parties seek to send foreign representatives to be public figures in the diaspora as a sort of survival strategy (i.e. an opposition leader could be assassinated in the DRC with little consequence, an

⁶² Henckes, 28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

opposition leader could not be assassinated in Belgium without media coverage).⁶⁶ Again, this same dynamic carries within it a certain responsibility that the diaspora must act, because they are the only ones who can provide this service.

While the image of Congo as a primitive failed state is created by forces outside the diaspora, we see an adjacent image perpetuated within the diaspora itself. This self-contained image posits Congo as a place that needs saving, and the diaspora as the ones who are best suited to fix it. This is reinforced by immigration trends (and migrants usually being anti-Mobutu, and then again anti-Kabila), and again through social remittances critical of Congolese politics and espousing democracy.

3.3: How these perceptions influence Transnational Political Engagement

The two lenses discussed above are not mutually exclusive; they often play into each other. For example, the traditional African conceptions of citizenship might motivate someone to educate friends and family in the DRC about democracy. Alternatively, one may be dismayed with Congolese politics because they are so patriotic about their home country. These two lenses are merely the manifestations of the discourses created by the ways the diaspora talks about the homeland.

It's important to highlight that these lenses do not exist in a vacuum – they are slowly created, perpetuated, and reinstated by the engagement in the DRC that the diaspora does. They are informed by history, and appear in response to the history of the diaspora, and of the DRC.

What is most interesting about these two lenses is that they are both incomplete – that is to say, they both paint a picture of Congo that is unfinished. They then encourage members of

⁶⁶ Ibid.

the diaspora to contribute, to complete the image of Congo. When coupled with the current state of affairs in the DRC, it's difficult to escape the pressure within the diaspora to become engaged in some capacity or another. This third section seeks to explain how the images affect, inspire, and inform the transnational political engagement of the diaspora (the next chapter will address *what* the transnational political engagement is, this section only addresses motivation).

To begin, many active members of the diaspora claim to have a strong sense of responsibility to engage in Congolese affairs. In Henckes's study, she found that 18/26 of the participants interviewed said they were motivated to become engaged in response to the crises in the DRC.⁶⁷ In another question, 4/26 described their motivation as a civic responsibility.⁶⁸ 8/26 consider themselves to be a central part of the solution, even if removed from the DRC itself.⁶⁹ This all proves how influential these images are in motivating members of the diaspora.

Even if these images do not directly inspire all members of the diaspora to become politically engaged in the DRC, they play out in other ways which often have similar effects. For example, many Congolese immigrants in Belgium join Congolese religious groups. In the religious field of the diaspora, Pentecostal churches dominate. This is the effect of the revival movement which spread through the DRC in the 1990s, prompting many Congolese to convert from Catholicism to Pentecostalism.⁷⁰ Many Pentecostal churches in the diaspora have their own doctrines for development, which often include dispensaries and educational institutions in the DRC.

⁶⁷ Henckes, 19.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Garbin & Godin, 118.

Additionally, many members of the diaspora join women's groups as affinity groups. Some of these women's groups have political charge, and often advocate for women's rights both in the DRC and in the diaspora.⁷¹ The issue of women's rights has been widely connected to the widespread sexual violence against women during the conflicts of the 1990s and 2000s. In the diaspora, many women's organizations have come to be seen as part of civil society, partnering with local NGOs, stage agencies, and feminist networks.⁷² Some groups have even partnered across borders with other diaspora-women's-groups, linking the British, French, and Belgian diasporas together.⁷³ Many of these groups seek to change the narrative of the war in the Western media, and give victims a platform to share their message. As many of these groups are made up by women who witnessed the war themselves, they implicitly reinforce the idea of *if not us, then who?*, implying that it is only the diaspora who could correct the narrative.

Thus, we can see that these images permeate through the diaspora, and effect different spheres of political engagement. At the same time, these lenses can be problematized. I do not seek to make value judgments on these discourses, but I would like to point out some ways the lenses are implicated in their implementation.

Firstly, the diaspora's intervention in Congo can be seen as foreign intervention to the native Congolese population. The idea of an international conspiracy to undermine Congo is widespread in the DRC.⁷⁴ There exists great frustration that change has come from outside the state, but not within.⁷⁵ Diaspora contributions to the DRC toe the line between foreign and

⁷¹ Ibid., 120.

⁷² Ibid., 121.

⁷³ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁴ Demart & Bodeux, 93.

⁷⁵ Trefon et al., 384.

national engagement. This is not necessarily bad, and again, many scholars have suggested that the diaspora can (and should) play an active role in the development of the Congolese state.⁷⁶

This becomes further implicated as Brussels was formerly known as the playground for Mobutu-era elites.⁷⁷ This idea stems from the elites who inhabited Brussels during the 70s and 80s. Even though there has since been steady immigration to Brussels from all socio-economic classes, the city still holds social capital in Congo today.⁷⁸ However, Brussels no longer produces Congolese elites in the same way it used to. This counter-image (one created and maintained by those in the DRC) helps re-enforce that the diaspora is somehow connected to the homeland, by extension.

3.4: Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes apparent that many members of the diaspora see themselves, as Benedict Anderson would suggest, moving in parallel with the homeland. They maintain an essential Congolese identity, even if living outside the DRC itself. The two lenses proposed in this section (Congo as ancestral fatherland, Congo as someplace that needs saving) both motivate members of the diaspora to contribute to Congolese affairs.

Moreover, these perceptions of the homeland completely control and dictate the political action taken by the diaspora. These lenses result in groups and structures which only maintain this “knowledge” of the homeland. It is within this knowledge that the diaspora engages in the DRC. Much like Salman Rushdie, one could argue that these images create *Congos of the Mind*. The next chapter will fully explain the extent of the transnational political engagement, and then show how it reinforces the knowledge (and lenses) proposed here.

⁷⁶ Garbin & Godin, Trefon et al.

⁷⁷ Swyngedouw & Swyngedouw, 71.

⁷⁸ Demart & Bodeux, 93.

4. Transnational Political Engagement

One of the key inventions, according to Benedict Anderson, that sparked the birth of modern Nationalism, was the newspaper.⁷⁹ Beyond the temporal simultaneity it creates within the nation (a daily newspaper will be consumed across the nation on the same day), it also creates a community of readership. The birth of the printing press led to the standardization of language, and helped delineate national borders as linguistic borders as well.⁸⁰ In short - the news has a special way of creating community, by reporting on news events within a community, and then selling readership back to that same community, the lines of in-group and out-group are drawn.

While journalism itself is not explicitly “political engagement,” many members of the diaspora do a similar treatment about the DRC through their transnational political engagement. As previously stated, the Congolese diaspora is particularly unique in its contributions in the homeland. By no means are other diasporas un-involved in their respective homelands, but the Congolese diaspora in Europe (and North America) is unique for both the breadth and depth of their contributions in the DRC. This section seeks to explain the four main modes of transnational political engagement: lobbying, humanitarian support, political party support, and protesting, while also showing how these modes of transnational politics reciprocally inform the perceptions of the homeland.

4.1: Lobbying

The first type of transnational political engagement is lobbying. As the diaspora is centered around the city of Brussels, it is particularly well disposed to lobbying in both the Belgian federal government and the European Union (in addition to a plethora of NGOs, IGOs,

⁷⁹ Anderson, 25.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

and other institutions). Lobbying can take a variety of forms, stretching from formal lobbying (in state-level institutions) to informal lobbying, like sensitization of Congolese issues to the Belgian population.

The lobbying of the diaspora in the EU has brought some success. One example is the EU parliamentary session of the *Collectif des femmes congolaises pour la paix et la justice* (Collective of Congolese women for peace and justice), in which the collective met with EU representatives to advocate for action in the DRC.⁸¹ Many members of the diaspora become involved in organizations such as the *Collectif des femmes congolaises pour la paix et la justice*, whose primary goal is advocacy in Western institutions. In Henckes's study, she found that 6/26 respondents said they advise Belgian politicians about foreign policy towards the DRC.⁸²

It is interesting to examine the *Collectif des femmes...* website to examine how they view the homeland. On their "welcome" page, they depict the DRC as a chaotic laboratory for western powers.⁸³ They are very critical of Western intervention in the DRC, echoing the idea of a international conspiracy against Congo. This calls them to action, and they use language of a "crusade" to "present political advocacy" to Belgian and European governments.⁸⁴ Not only does this allude to the image of Congo as needing saving, it situates the diaspora as the only ones who can save it. Another web page on the *Collectif's* titled "context" paints an equally dreary picture of the eastern DRC: referencing the "illegal exploitation of natural resources and minerals in the name of profit," they suggest that the conflict in the DRC is not ethnic (as

⁸¹ Henckes, 24.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Accueil, Collectif des femmes pour la paix et la justice, <https://sites.google.com/site/collectifcp/edito>

⁸⁴ Ibid.

presented in the Western media), but instead motivated solely through economic gains.⁸⁵ Again, this narrative separates the diaspora from the rest of the West, and suggests that the diaspora truly knows what the situation on the ground is like. It is therefore their responsibility to inform Western politicians about this reality. This has the effect of not only motivating the diaspora, but also pushing them to perceive the DRC as someplace that needs the diaspora's help.

Less formal than lobbying governments (or international organizations) is the informal lobbying which many members of the diaspora do in their daily lives. Members of the diaspora are known to hold debates, theme nights, conferences, panel discussions, and maintain news websites.⁸⁶ They are also vocal through social media, namely Facebook and Twitter. Informal lobbying like this can serve to help reverse stereotypes that Belgians may have about the DRC, but can also help mainstream Congolese topics in the Belgian political sphere.

One notable example of mainstreaming a Congolese topic in Belgian politics came during the 2011 protests, when anti-Kabila *Combatants* called on the diaspora to vote for the Flemish nationalist party N-VA as a protest against the Francophone parties MR, cdH, and PS.⁸⁷ This is notable for multiple reasons. First, it shows the diaspora protest voting against the French left (*Parti Socialiste*, PS), center (*Centre Démocrate Humaniste*, cdH), and center-right (*Mouvement Réformateur*, MR) parties, in favor of a Flemish right wing party (*Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA). This is notable as the N-VA is, in short, a nationalist party, who has tough stances on immigration issues. Additionally, as a predominately French-speaking group, the diaspora is breaking across language lines by voting for the N-VA. In Belgium, there is a dual set of parties: a Flemish left,

⁸⁵ Contexte, Collectif des femmes pour la paix et la justice, <https://sites.google.com/site/collectiffcp/edito/Home>

⁸⁶ Henckes, 24.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

center, and right party, and a Walloon left, center, and right party. Protest voting for the N-VA demonstrates the diaspora breaking across both the political spectrum (left to right) and the language divide (French to Flemish). The N-VA happily accepted these votes, and even began actively speaking out against the Kabila regime, in an effort to garner even more votes from the diaspora.⁸⁸ This demonstrates the diaspora working within the Belgian political climate to make themselves heard. Not only were they able to mainstream Congolese issues to a national level, but they were effectively able to change the N-VA's platform on foreign policy.

Thus, we can see different methods of lobbying, either formal or informal. Formal lobbying, as performed by the *Collectif*, posits the diaspora as the only ones who can save the DRC, in addition to motivating them to act. Similarly, informal lobbying (like the *combatants* encouraging immigrants to vote for the N-VA) has the effect of suggesting that the diaspora knows more about the events in the DRC, and must vote to help save it.

4.2: Humanitarian Support

The diaspora is additionally active in humanitarian support in the homeland. In this study, humanitarian support includes working in conventional methods (such as NGOs), but also extends to non-financial remittances of different types.

The diaspora is active in improving the situation in the DRC. One facet of this is exemplified through members of the diaspora making non-profits (ASBL, *association sans but lucratif*), or even NGOs. In Belgium, it is easy to create and register a non-profit, but substantially more difficult to create a non-profit. For example, the CCAEB (*Conseil Des Communautés Africaines En Europe Et En Belgique*) is a NGO based in Brussels. The organization is made of smaller,

⁸⁸ Ibid.

member-organizations, most of which are non-profits. The CCAEB engages directly in socio-economic development in the DRC.

One example of this direct-engagement is the Mudishi project, created by the CCAEB. This project seeks to begin cultivation of a fortified strain of maize, aptly named “mudishi” (a Tshiluba term meaning “strongly nutritious”).⁸⁹ The project focuses specifically in the East-Kasai region of the DRC, where there is currently a large problem of malnutrition and poverty (72% of children in the region suffer from severe malnutrition).⁹⁰ Maize makes a staple of the diet, so substituting a fortified strain of maize has the effect of adding protein and other vitamins into the diet. Notably, the Mudishi-strain was already introduced to the region in 2006, but without much success, due to the weakness of local governmental institutions.⁹¹ Part of the Mudishi project includes working with local agricultural groups, to monitor the progress of the project. The CCAEB received funds from the InfoDev, a World Bank program.

This project is a strong example of the types of development and humanitarian support the diaspora engages in. There are multiple direct beneficiaries — particularly the young children and expecting mothers who receive imperative nutrition in the early stages of life, in addition to the general populations of the East-Kasai region. Additionally, the project gives funding for 30 paid agricultural-apprenticeships, training and paying a new generation of farmers and agricultural workers. There are also indirect beneficiaries, such as the estimated 47 jobs that will be created from the creation of the project in the DRC. The project is also a good example of the diaspora working within the frameworks of the Global North — this project in

⁸⁹ *Projet Mudishi*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

particular was funded through the World Bank, but the CCAEB has also received grants from the Belgian federal government, the Walloon and Flemish Governments, the Brussels City government, and from differing EU institutions. This highlights the unique position of the diaspora in Brussels to receive funding from different governmental institutions. It also shows how well the diaspora works within the Belgian (and European/International) political framework to acquire funds and resources.

In addition to directly providing humanitarian support, the diaspora is also active in indirect-humanitarian support. It is worth pointing out that many organizations, such as the *Collective des Femmes Congolaises pour la Paix et la Justice* advocate and lobby for humanitarian causes (such as acknowledgement / justice for gender-based war crimes during the First and Second Congo Wars). Other examples of this include AMUKA (“wake up” in Swahili, the language spoken in the areas most affected by the Congo Wars), and AFEDA (*Action des Femmes pour le Développement*), who campaign in Belgium to raise awareness on women in the DRC who are victims of sexual violence and other discrimination.⁹² Other groups, such as the FIREFEC (*Forum Interrégional des Femmes Congolaises*) or the CPPS (*Caravane pour la Paix*) seek to empower women to improve their social, economic, and political condition.⁹³

Women’s groups (such as those named above) often serve multiple roles. On the one hand, they are a sort of informal affinity group for migrant women, and sometimes include a regional affinity. On the other, they are politically motivated, and often have an elective nature (that is to say - you would not join one of the above organizations simply for affinity purposes, you would

⁹² Marie Godin and Made Chideka, “Congolese Women Activists in DRC and Belgium.” *Forced Migration Review* 36 (2010).

⁹³ *Ibid.*

join for the affinity aspect and you would join because you want to take action in the DRC). As in the DRC, political mobilization in the diaspora tends to be divided by gender.⁹⁴

One striking example of women's group activism can be seen in the World March of Women.⁹⁵ The closing action of the Third International Action of the World March of Women took place in Bukavu (South Kivu, DRC), in October 2010. Many women from the diaspora travelled to participate, supported by CPPS, becoming one of the most numerous international delegations (in sum, 42 national delegations participated, with almost 20,000 participants).⁹⁶

The humanitarian engagement of the diaspora is quieter than some of the other methods of political engagement, but it may be one of the most transnational. Members of the diaspora who participate in humanitarian engagement often travel back and forth between the DRC and Belgium to complete projects or build partnerships. Motivated both by perceived inequalities in the DRC (such as malnutrition or gender-based violence) and also a sense of patriotism (as demonstrated by the politically-active affinity groups), members of the diaspora work both inside and outside the Belgian political framework to accomplish their humanitarian goals.

4.3: Political Party Support

One of the more perplexing modes of political engagement with the homeland is through Congolese political party support. This is particularly complex because of Congolese citizenship laws: Congolese citizenship is seen as singular and indivisible, meaning it is impossible (in the eyes of the Congolese state) to hold dual citizenship between the DRC and another country.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Okechukwu C. Iheduru, "African states, global migration, and transformations in citizenship politics," *Citizenship Studies* 15:02 (2011): 181-203.

Congolese law stipulates that only those who can demonstrate an ancestral connection to the population residing in 1885 may claim citizenship. Such citizenship laws in the DRC have been used to exclude Kinyarwanda-speaking groups, since they are perceived as Rwandan and not Congolese (animosity dates back to the Congo Wars era). Citizenship in the DRC, therefore, has the tendency of being a group-phenomenon (ethnic Rwandans may not have citizenship!), and not an individual right.⁹⁸ This helps explain the strictness and aversion against dual citizenship.

Yet, in practice, many members of the Diaspora in Belgium have not given up their Congolese citizenship. Some of the respondents of Henckes's study say that they adopted Belgian citizenship simply to facilitate living in Belgium, since work and residence permits are more difficult to come by for Congolese citizens.⁹⁹ One respondent even said that the Congolese Embassy advises Congolese migrants to neutralize as Belgian to avoid that trouble, claiming that citizenship is not all that significant beyond the political advantages.¹⁰⁰ Tshomba Ntundu, former minister of Congolese abroad, echoed this sentiment.¹⁰¹ This suggests two differing modes of citizenship - that on one hand, citizenship is the passport you hold, on the other, it's the state and civil society that you participate in. Henckes argues that many members of the diaspora are changing Congolese citizenship through their transnational engagement in the homeland.¹⁰²

Despite not being able to vote in Congolese elections, many high level politicians from the DRC have been known to adopt foreign citizenships while abroad.¹⁰³ This was most notably

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Henckes, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 21.

displayed in 2016, when Prime Minister Samy Badibanga was confronted with evidence of his dual Belgian citizenship, meaning a Belgian citizen held the second highest position in the Congolese government (interestingly, he did not step down, and remained in office for six months).¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in 2007, several reports of members of the Congolese National Assembly holding dual citizenship came to light.¹⁰⁵ In response, the National Assembly imposed a moratorium to allow politicians to regulate their citizenships, but this moratorium was never lifted, permitting a sort of de-facto dual citizenship for elites.¹⁰⁶

Most of the Congolese political elite continue to see Brussels as the centerpiece of the global Congolese diaspora (no doubt, a remnant from the Mobutu era, when the Congolese living in Brussels were limited to the elite). It makes sense that many politicians have dual citizenship — many key opposition leaders have spent years in Brussels, including Etienne Tshisekedi, Moïse Katumbi, and current president Félix Tshisekedi.¹⁰⁷ One of Henckes's respondents explained, “in the collective mentality of even politicians, there is always this line that connects them to Brussels.”¹⁰⁸

As a result, Brussels becomes the center stage of Congolese political exchanges outside the homeland. Many politicians stop in Brussels or deliberately schedule layovers to meet with the diaspora.¹⁰⁹ In June, 2016, the opposition leaders met in Genval (near Brussels) to unite

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Iheduru., 189.

¹⁰⁶ Henckes, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

forces in one political platform against Kabila, marking the first time where all major opposition leaders met with such a goal.¹¹⁰

In addition, more than a dozen Congolese political parties have representation in Belgium.¹¹¹ This activism generally involves demonstrations and debates, while also advocating for their party's platform at Belgian and European institutions.¹¹² The *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social* (UDPS) collects funds for the party and also helps political refugees in their asylum applications. Additionally, they advocate for their party among the diaspora, with the aim of having migrants influence friends and family back home.¹¹³ This clearly demonstrates the transnational engagement of the diaspora — collecting funds and promoting party doctrine among the diaspora, despite members of the diaspora not being able to vote outright in Congolese elections.

For the UDPS, one of the main opposition parties, keeping presence in Belgium is fascinating to analyze. In actively helping process asylum cases, they promote obtaining Belgian citizenship. Yet, they also promote engagement in Congolese politics, through donations and democratic-remittances. As previously stated, many diaspora members educate friends and family in the DRC about democracy, influenced by Western and Belgian democratic norms. In encouraging this behavior, are they not thus perpetuating the idea that the Congo needs saving, and the diaspora are the only ones who can do it?

In all, we can see that despite traditional conceptions of citizenship, members of the diaspora create transnational connections to engage with Congolese political parties. The

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Demart & Bodeux, 83.

¹¹² Henckes, 27.

¹¹³ Ibid.

political parties reciprocate this, showing how the diaspora can affect the Congolese political structure remotely. Yet, there is frustration that politicians and kin of the government can maintain dual citizenship, while most Congolese immigrants cannot. As a result, many diaspora members seek to redefine Congolese citizenship as a lived experience, which extends beyond simply having a Congolese passport. This explains engagement in Congolese politics as engagement in the *patrie*, framing Congo as the ancestral homeland and perpetuating the image of Congo as homeland. Additionally, political parties like the UDPS play into the image of “Congo that needs saving” by encouraging donations and democratic education, pitting the diaspora against the “corrupt” Kabila regime which can only be overthrown by the diaspora.

4.4: Protesting

The final form of transnational engagement is through protesting. One of the most visible forms of participation, the diaspora has been known to take to the public sphere to criticize or support Congolese causes. As previously mentioned, the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in Belgium permit public demonstration by the diaspora. This section will focus on two forms of protest in light of the 2011 election: physical protests in Brussels (among other European cities), and digital protesting in online social forums. The 2011 protests are examined because they are the largest protests by the diaspora, and highlight the diversity of voices within it.

The largest example of protesting follows the 2011 elections. In the aftermath of the national elections (which reelected Kabila for another term), Congolese diasporas protested at a global scale.¹¹⁴ Both individuals and groups took to the streets, the latter being comprised of political parties, women’s organizations, religious groups, and youth organizations. In Brussels,

¹¹⁴ Garbin & Godin, 113.

protests lasted for more than two weeks and were labeled as “riots” in the press.¹¹⁵ To be clear: windows were smashed, cars were burned - and demonstrators were physically attacked by the police.¹¹⁶ Additionally, many protestors came peacefully, and practiced non-violent sit-ins around the Porte de Namur metro stop, blocking streets.¹¹⁷

The protests were led, in part, by *Combatants*, loosely organized militants who seek to violently oppose the Kabila regime in the diaspora.¹¹⁸ They lead demonstrations in Europe, and perform informal smear campaigns within the diaspora of pro-Kabila public figures.¹¹⁹ They have even gone as far as mugging Congolese politicians in Europe, filming the events then posting them on social media.¹²⁰ It is notable, then, that the call to vote against the Francophone parties and instead to vote for the N-VA was led by *Combatants*. While it is difficult to assume who acted violently at these protests, it is straightforward to assume that part of the violence could have been instigated by the *Combatants*.

After the police brutality was reported on, a greater crowd turned out to demonstrate. One cry of “Tshisekedi, Kabila who cares, we just want them to free our country” was heard, showing the non-political tone the demonstrations were beginning to take.¹²¹ Sarah Demart, a Belgian scholar, highlights the post-colonial nature of the protests. The protests were not simply calls for Kabila to step down (even if that’s how they began), but morphed into protests against

¹¹⁵ Demart.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Demart & Bodeux, 74.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Demart.

Western intervention in the DRC. Some demonstrators were motivated by a sense of reciprocity: that if Belgium could intervene in the DRC, then Congolese migrants would intervene in Belgium.¹²² I strongly maintain that demonstrations like these, even without a clear goal, exemplify political engagement. While this is clearly a statement of motivation for political engagement, it also shows the connection to the homeland.

Many young protestors (the second generation, born after 1990) were dissatisfied with the lack of opportunity in Belgium. One young demonstrator said that he would like to go home, but that in order to do that, the white man would need to leave [the DRC] alone.¹²³ The reoccurring theme of Belgian interference in Congolese affairs had both a historical and current component. This reflects the image of Congo that needs saving, presenting Belgian interference in the DRC as a major source of turmoil.

Some demonstrators were moved to violence, because they felt it was the only way their voice would be heard in Belgium. Demart presents one protester's quote:

Belgium is a reactionary country that only understands physical force, if we break things: 'Oh, so these people do exist, then something must be done for them'... Seeing the history that unites Belgium to the Congo, in none of the Belgian institutions, do you see any executives of Congolese origin, or else there are just two or three, that's definitely not enough. It's an admission of weakness by the institutions in Belgium that want to keep the Congolese issue shut.¹²⁴

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid. My paraphrasing.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

The idea that violence is a reparation for exploitive historical ties between the DRC and Belgium was not uncommon. That Congolese migrants do not have a voice in Belgian institutions raises a legitimate concern of diaspora members, and has the effect of placing them as second class citizens.

Moreover, many participants referenced this colonial history, drawing to the essential image of Congo as the ancestral homeland and as someplace that needs saving. The same protestor's quote continues:

For example, my son or my nephews don't understand why they are here. They don't know their history and their schoolmates don't know why there's just one Black in their class. It's completely unbelievable... Their parents shed their blood so this country could be stable and Belgium must acknowledge this...The Congolese community is an integral part of the history of Belgium.¹²⁵

This participant's stress that the history of Congo would be forgotten by future generations of the diaspora suggests that there is a collective history of the diaspora that must be remembered. This is framed around the loss of Congolese blood during the colonial period. I argue that this does, in fact, play into the image of Congo as the ancestral homeland — that there is a shared pain between all Congolese from the Belgian colonial period.

While the physical manifestations against Kabila lasted for two weeks, they continued for years online. The same freedom of speech that allows for public demonstrations like the 2011 protests also permits a variety of information online. The diaspora actively uses new technology (like the internet) to spread their social remittances to the DRC.¹²⁶ Demart and Bodeux call

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Henckes, 29.

attention to an “information warfare,” in which information is produced, circulated, and debated.¹²⁷ Much of the planning for the 2011 protests was created and distributed on social media platforms, such as Facebook.¹²⁸ The first public protest, on December 5th at Porte de Namur, was organized by SMS messages.¹²⁹

Many second generation immigrants, thanks to their youth, use social media as a platform to conduct transnational political engagement. For many, the 2011 protests represented the critical moment when they began exercising political engagement.¹³⁰ Yet, there was friction between the first and second generations. Some youth felt slighted that they are not included in community building, one saying “The older political leaders see things differently. They live here in Belgium but act if they were still in the DRC... For me, it’s the opposite; I’ve got a political activity to change things and not just to do something with my life.”¹³¹ This stresses the frustration with the previous generation, and seemingly pushes away from the first image of Congo (as the ancestral homeland). Still, it implicitly holds the idea that the second generation is the one that will actually “change” Congo from the outside, as opposed to the first generation, which remains too attached to old traditions. It will be very interesting to see how the diaspora’s political engagement changes after the first generation has passed away, and the political engagement is picked up by the second and third generations, most of whom have never lived in the DRC.

¹²⁷ Demart & Bodeux, 84.

¹²⁸ Garbin & Godin, 126.

¹²⁹ Demart.

¹³⁰ Garbin & Godin, 124.

¹³¹ Ibid., 125.

The divide between the first generation and the second help demonstrate the diversity of the diaspora, and the diversity of thought which emerges from this plurality. It's worth bringing up that because of the diversity, there are only two discernible images of the Congo which appear from the discourses of different diaspora actors.

Though the different forms of protesting (either physically or electronically) are thus both the manifestation of these two images; they also reproduce them. The sentiment of wanting to speak against rigged elections in Congo implies that the diaspora, thanks to Western freedom of speech laws is situated to raise global awareness, but also to stand up against Kabila. It therefore reinstates the idea that the diaspora is the one who can truly save Congo. Similarly, voicing frustrations with Belgian interference in the DRC evokes a certain essential Congolese identity, suggesting that all Congolese share the same colonial pain, whether in Belgium or the DRC. This helps reinstate the image of Congo as the ancestral homeland, and encourages the diaspora to seek justice for colonial dynamics that continue to the present day.

4.5: Conclusion

Despite only examining four types of transnational political engagement, I do not mean to say these are the only ways the diaspora engages with homeland politics. Through researching, the line between political engagement often becomes blurred with social engagement or economic engagement. One subject not examined in this study is the effect of financial remittances, which account for a large part of the Congolese economy. It seems easy to surmise that a steady Southern flow of money would imply that the diaspora are quite literally the only ones saving the Congo. Yet, I perceive this as an economic transnational phenomenon, as it occurs outside the political framework of both Belgium and the DRC. Therefore does not fit within the scope of this study.

Thus, through examining these four types of transnational political engagement, we can understand how the lenses both inform, and are recreated through the actions of the diaspora. Much like journalism creates metaphorical borders of communities, it also can have the impact of changing how community members see themselves, and the subjects of the reporting. The diaspora's transnational political engagement always carries within it hidden perceptions of the DRC, which govern and dictate the actions.

5. Conclusions

On December 30th, 2018, the Congolese people took to the ballot boxes to elect a new president. Kabila's term expired in 2016, but he refused to hold elections (citing instability in the East of the DRC) until 2018. Finally, under immense pressure, Kabila scheduled elections at the end of the year. Kabila himself could not run (constrained by a constitutional term limit), so he instead appointed a successor to run, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary. Étienne Tshisekedi's son, Félix, ran as head of the UDPS (Étienne died in 2017). A third candidate emerged as an alternate opposition candidate: Martin Fayulu, a former business executive for Exxon Mobil and Congolese Parliament Member since 2006.

Seven weeks previous, on November 10th, 2017, a group of opposition leaders (including Félix Tshisekedi) met to join forces and present a unified opposition leader in the upcoming elections. They decided on Fayulu, but the next day, Tshisekedi announced that he would be running on the UDPS platform (despite previously agreeing to support Fayulu). It's unclear why Félix chose to separate from the rest of the opposition.

So, when the election results were announced on January 10th, it shocked both the Congolese people and diaspora that Tshisekedi had won with 39% of the vote. Fayulu came in second with 35%. Shadary came in third with 24%. Tshisekedi pledged to work with outgoing president Kabila. Fayulu slammed the results as an "electoral coup."¹³²

Surprisingly, there were no grand-scale protests in Brussels, Paris, or London. At first glance, it might seem that the global Congolese diaspora was passively accepting the results, or was too apathetic to care. But a deeper look reveals the diaspora hard at work, organizing debates and lobbying, doing what they have always done. Diaspora journalists wrote about the

¹³² "DR Congo declares winner of presidential race, as runner-up denounces 'electoral coup,'" *France 24*, January 10, 2019. www.france24.com/en/.

elections, encouraging debate and education.¹³³ The CCAEB will continue to work on agricultural development projects, the members of the *Collectif des Femmes* will still advocate for women's issues in Belgium. One debate organized by the *Convention des Congolais de l'Étranger* was titled "The Post-Electoral Situation in the DRC."¹³⁴ Even if the diaspora imagines the DRC in certain ways, they always perceive themselves as moving in parallel with Congo.

* * * *

In conclusion, the diaspora, through its transnational political engagement, creates ways of seeing the Congo. These lenses, in turn, affect the engagement, creating a self sustaining cycle. Even though these lenses are based in reality, over time they become detached, and the diaspora begins seeing Congo as imagined. Using Anderson's understanding of nationhood, both the diaspora and the DRC are imagined communities, but I argue that the diaspora begins imagining the DRC differently than the population of the DRC imagines itself.

I think that Anderson's understanding of time and the nation is imperative here. If the diaspora sees itself as moving in parallel with the DRC, I believe they are actually drifting away. Echoing the ideas of Benjamin and Bhabha, it seems the diaspora sees itself situated as the linear continuation of Congolese history. This linear view of history makes it difficult to separate the diaspora from the DRC, as many within the diaspora see themselves as part of the Congolese trajectory. By contrast, the diaspora is working to create a specific vision of the DRC, maybe without even realizing it.

¹³³ Cheik Fita, "Billet. RD Congo : Législature 2018-2023, enfin le démarrage" Chiek Fita News, April 23, 2019. www.chiekitanews.net

¹³⁴ Fita, Cheik. "Bruxelles, la Convention des Congolais de l'Étranger tourne la page « élections »." Chiek Fita News, April 7, 2019. www.chiekitanews.net

This process of divergence is slow, of course, and will take generations to fully develop a cleavage between the two. At the present moment, thirty years after the first large wave of Congolese immigration to Belgium, we have the opportunity to see the first glimpses of this divergence. As generations pass, and the lived experiences of Congo fade, I imagine the connection to the DRC will remain strong. Yet, Congo will become little more than an imagined homeland, held in place by the post-colonial and post-immigrant discourses perpetuated by the diaspora (Congo as homeland and Congo as someplace that needs saving are two).

This is not to say, however, that the work done by the diaspora in the DRC is misguided. The images of the DRC do not create a Congo that does not exist. The lenses proposed in this study are not far removed from reality. For first-generation immigrants, Congo is quite literally the ancestral homeland. Additionally, most will agree that the DRC benefits from humanitarian aid and political remittances (as produced by the lens of Congo that needs saving). These two lenses are grounded in lived experiences by the first generation and only slightly modify how one understands the DRC. But over time, as the first generation passes away, and the lenses are passed from generation to generation, I think that these images (and any new ones that come along) will significantly alter the imagined DRC in the collective consciousness of the diaspora.

This study opened as many questions as it answered. Because of the scope of this project, and the resources available, there were certain elements that could be additionally researched. Firstly, regarding methods: I think this project would greatly benefit from Congolese voices. Having a survey or interviews would add value to the analysis. It poses the question if Congolese immigrants are aware of these lenses, and if they are not, if they agree or disagree with this analysis. Moreover, the inclusion of such voices might be able to speak to the intentions of transnational actors, instead of only commenting on the transnational behaviors (as this paper

did). Secondly, I think there are adjacent subjects of study that warrant their own analysis. Monetary remittances (from the diaspora to the DRC), for example, play a huge role in the economy of the DRC, leading one member of the diaspora to suggest that the diaspora should be entitled to legal citizenship rights.¹³⁵ I felt that such remittances fell slightly outside the scope of “transnational political engagement,” and therefore, were not pertinent to this project. Another topic that deserves further research is the way the diaspora uses social media, particularly the second generation and *Combattants*. Social media often plays a dual role of informal (and sometimes formal!) journalism, in addition to activism. While briefly touched on, further analysis could help explain the role that social media plays in contemporary, transnational politics. The last area that deserves more analysis is the news sources created by the diaspora. While the scope of this project analyzed political engagement, I am curious about the extent that the diaspora-media reinforces (or even rejects) the lenses I proposed. An in-depth content analysis could buttress this research, and add to the diaspora studies scholarship.

In conclusion, through transnational political engagement, the Congolese diaspora create two lenses (Congo as ancestral homeland, Congo as someplace that needs saving) that inform how they imagine the homeland. These lenses form a “knowledge,” or way of understanding a subject (the DRC). They inform the “power” (in this case, the political engagement), which reinforces the knowledge. This feedback loop legitimizes these ways of imagining the Congo. As a result, a slight cleavage is created in between the imagined community of the diaspora and the imagined community of the DRC, rejecting Anderson’s claim that related imagined communities move in parallel with each other. I expect that over coming generations, this cleavage will

¹³⁵ Henckes, 23.

broaden as the diaspora slowly drifts away, and the Congo will become little more than an imagined ancestral homeland.

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