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## Riots in Matonge and... the indifference of public authority?

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Twenty years after the first 'North African' riots, in the winter of 2011-2012 Brussels was the scene of 'Congolese' demonstrations which some media and political officials qualified as riots. The idea that political conflicts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) had been transposed to Belgium took hold, while the material damage, despite especially heavy riot suppression measures, seemed to have solidly entrenched the image of the violent demonstrator who only understood the language of the nightstick. Based on an ethnographic study of these demonstrations and research in Congolese communities over the past 10 years, the author takes another look at these two weeks of urban violence to ask, on the one hand whether these demonstrations could be actually qualified as riots, and on the other whether the differential treatment by the State compared to the North African riots may be the expression of a significant ethnicization of public policies.

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## Introduction

1. Twenty years after the first 'North African' riots [Brion and Réa, 1992], in the winter of 2011-2012 Brussels was the scene of 'Congolese' demonstrations which some media and political officials qualified as riots. Despite this representation, the idea that political conflicts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) had been transposed to Belgium took hold, while the material damage, notwithstanding especially heavy riot suppression measures, seemed to have solidly entrenched the image of the violent demonstrator who only understood the language of the police baton. From there to seeing a certain continuity with the colonial repertory of the *chicotte*,<sup>1</sup> was a step that some took, demonstrators and observers alike.

2. Since then the fear and bewilderment over the uprising of a population 'that caused no problems' have given way to a symptomatic invisibility [Stavo-Debaugé, 2007; Martiniello, 2011; Mazzocchetti, 2012]. A closer look, however, at the demands made and the shape these 'Congolese' demonstrations assumed reveals a true post-colonial malaise which merits a cool-headed examination. For, although the two weeks of urban violence could indeed be called riots - an expression which, in the West's migratory context, basically refers to the racialization of the global society [Solomos, 1988; Fassin and Fassin, 2008], how can one explain the differential treatment by the State compared to the North African riots in the 1990s which led to specific social and policing policies [Cartuyvels and Hebberecht, 2001; Rea, 2006]?

3. Based on an ethnographic study of these demonstrations (from December 2011 to March 2012) and research in Congolese communities over the past 10 years (in Belgium, Canada and France) we aim to take account of the view of the Congolese minority and the *local* causal

logics that were neglected in the media coverage. This social group, moreover, is not well known and misunderstood by public authority (Demart 2013a; Manco et al, 2013) and academics as well [Martiniello et al., 2007; Jamoule and Mazzocchetti, 2011; Schoonvaere, 2010]. This is despite their longstanding presence in Belgium [Etambala, 1993; Mayoyo, 1995 ; Kagné, 2000; Kagné and Martiniello, 2001; Cornet, 2004; Demart, 2013b].

4. For this reason our commentary, developed in five different sections, will shift from one type of writing to another - from academic to ethnographic. In the first section, we will summarise the backdrop of these demonstrations. In the second, we will look more closely at the day which in our view was the turning point for the future development of events. The third section will trace the chronology of the demonstrator-police confrontations, and the fourth will discuss the diversification of the participants in the light of the growing intensity and racialization of the conflict. Lastly, we shall examine the political responses in a historical perspective, comparing them with policies introduced in the 1990s following the 'North African' riots.

### 1. Placing the demonstrations in context

5. The politicising of the Congolese coincides with their presence in Belgium and from the 1970s took the form of demonstrations denouncing the policies of their homeland [Tshimanga; 2003; Bodeux and Demart, 2013]. During the period of transition (2001-2006) in the aftermath of President Laurent-Désiré Kabila's assassination, the demonstrations intensified and spread to the transnational sphere of emigrants under the impetus of the 'Combatants' [Godin and Garbin, 2013]

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<sup>1</sup> The *chicotte* is a leather whip made of strips used regularly in colonial times. Applied to the indigenous people of the Belgian Congo, it was associated with the domestication of individuals and bodies through the public example of flogging imposed as a sentence.

whose intention was to exert pressure on the power in Kinshasa and on the international community whose (in)action was collectively perceived in Congolese circles as the result of the West's designs on the wealth that lay beneath the Congo soil.

6. A pressure group formed in the UK in the early 2000s and now found throughout the diaspora, the 'Combatants' express the need to take up arms to liberate the country. They are often dressed in military fatigues, and are in open conflict with representatives of the Congolese state who reside in or visit Europe. With the help of the electoral calendar, from 2011 their calls for demonstrations to change the regime in Kinshasa multiplied first in Brussels and then throughout the world wherever there were large Congolese communities. The people of this diaspora neither have the right to hold dual citizenship, nor can they vote from abroad.<sup>2</sup>

7. In Brussels the demonstrations took the form of demands submitted to the Belgian government following remarks by a Socialist Senator who, on her return from an observation mission in the DRC, affirmed that the election process was going about correctly. After this announcement, on 4 December the militants, some holding Belgian citizenship, gathered before the Senator's party headquarters, demanding an explanation, but were barred from entering. They refused to leave, but were chased away by police water cannons. They then decided to move the demonstration to the DRC Embassy, only to find the street there blocked by patrol cars. Angry, they returned to Matonge and on the way they shattered car windows and overturned rubbish bins. There were also skirmishes with local businesses who would not let the demonstrators throw their tables and chairs.

8. When they reached Matonge and the chaussée d'Ixelles, they began to chanting slogans and singing, in a demonstrators-police face-off. Around 6:30 pm the situation worsened as the group moved towards the chaussée de Wavre. Calm was restored around 10:00 pm

after shop windows were shattered, cars damaged and about 30 people arrested. The next day the demonstrators arranged via sms and social media to meet at 2:00 pm at the exit of the Porte de Namur metro. Due to the journalists' late arrival it was not possible to report on and record a violence that can be considered as the turning point for the outcome of later demonstrations.

## 2. A violent turning point that happened off camera

9. A group of about 50 people had gathered by 3:00 pm. One man shouted to the passers-by *'You don't want us here, but we'd like to leave and go home too! We're fed up with debt collectors and bills!'* while a woman tried to convince the (North African) employees of the nearby Quick (fast food restaurant) of the need to change the regime in the Congo, drawing inspiration from recent developments in the Arab world. Some demonstrators, young girls and 'mommias', chose to stay out of the cold and watched the demonstration take shape from inside the Quick. One woman yelled at me:

*'Are you here to observe? Are you a journalist? 'Cause if you have a camera we'll break it!'*

*'No, I'm a researcher. I've already participated in several marches.'*

*'Well said, Aunty!'* continued a young woman in perfect French. *'Yes indeed, Madame, because the journalists don't tell the truth! They take pictures, but afterwards they don't show anything and we end up looking like idiots! Our country is so rich. It's OK if the West wants a part of it, but they have to share, and first let us take what we need to get by!'*

10. We talked for a while, then one of the demonstrators called on us to join the group to make the movement more visible. Outside several

<sup>2</sup> On the political issues at stake in these demonstrations, see DEMART S. ' 'Kabila est rwandais': une accusation sorcière. Transitions politiques en République Démocratique du Congo, diaspora and pentecôtisme.', to be published.

people were talking to one of the plain clothes policemen. The demonstration had not been authorised. Because of the violence the day before? For the demonstrators *'it's always like that for the Congolese: they never let us demonstrate during the week.'* Negotiations were underway, the atmosphere was friendly and the demonstrators continued to sing. Most of them seemed to be of recent migrations (1990s and 2000s). Two young men made their way into the group. The way they spoke and their clothing were discretely different from the others. You could tell that they were born here. One of them pointed to the police lorries parked along the Boulevard de la Toison d'Or: *'those over there, we'll ... direct'*.

11. It was icy cold outside. A few minutes passed, and then members of the police force ran up and in a single row surrounded the group of demonstrators. It was impossible to escape and several women began to panic. A demonstrator called on everyone to sit down, but only part of the group did so. *'Don't worry, they can't do anything.'* one of the demonstrators said while another handed a traffic sign over to a policeman, who took it. Not one word was exchanged during these interactions. Suddenly a young woman was shoved into the circle, she asked to have her camera back. This militant of Panafrican socialism had been filming. The only visual trace of this incident, which was loaded on YouTube, is an extract showing policemen who forbid her from filming *'either you stop, or you get in [the circle]'*.

12. Suddenly blows of truncheons rained down on arms and on heads. The police clubbed women as well as men. The demonstrators attempted to escape and tried not to fall. Something stung my face, and it was impossible to breathe or open my eyes. A few steps away a group of young girls, scandalised, whose accents identify them as Belgians, cried out *'We'll be back!'*

13. During the police chase that followed the circling described above several incidents of police brutality occurred, the most mediatised concerned that of a man of Angolan origin who worked at the Theatre Molière in the galerie of the Porte de Namur. He was chased back to his workplace and beaten by several police officers. Two weeks later the marks left by the blows were still visible on his back and legs (scars,

cracked ribs, gashes on his legs), and images were posted on the Internet.

14. Throughout the afternoon the police attempted to get the demonstrators to disperse. The size of the group was growing and could no longer be contained in the small meeting point, nor on the pavement across the street in front of the bank. During this tense face-off, the group were not so much forbidden to demonstrate as they were to step off the pavement. On several occasions the police would surround the demonstrators to contain them then after a short while, retreat. Each time the demonstrators then invaded the street crying victory. And the police would return. A bizarre state of affairs clearly destined to lead to a stalemate.

15. The journalists arrived near the end of the day, some almost at nightfall. The demonstrators did not welcome the presence of some of the French-speaking journalists and they were not given direct access to the events. This day was only partially reconstructed in the media, even though it initiated a confrontation that the press retransmitted daily for the next two weeks. Images of this day were mainly those of the destruction along the chaussée de Wavre after the demonstrators retreated again to Matonge's main street. Windows of shops run by Rwandans, but not exclusively, were shattered, rubbish sacks were torn apart, cars burned. The following week it was reported that some fifty complaints had been lodged concerning the police practices that night. According to their testimonies, men were 'clubbed' and 'gassed' in their gaol cells when they refused to stop singing. *'You're savages,'* they heard someone say. At the end of this day, the commune of Ixelles forbade all assemblies of over ten people until the next Monday, punishable by a fine of 250 €.

### 3. From a demonstration to a riot?

16. Despite the commune's injunction the demonstrations continued, on a daily basis and spontaneously. In turn tolerated, negotiated, re-prohibited, these gatherings spurred by the 'Combatants' often after a night spent in the Etterbeek police barracks, affected an ever larger

public. Filmed and posted the same day on social media, these instances of demonstrations and confrontations with the police, occasionally hidden from the 'public' fed the demonstrators' enthusiasm and their speech. On 7 December, about a hundred demonstrators gathered at the Porte de Namur and by the end of the evening seven had been arrested. The next day a group of 100 Congolese students arranged to meet before the European Parliament to submit a memorandum asking Europe to play an active role in the DRC. They were quickly surrounded by the police. The black people were forced to stay inside the circle unlike the whites who were free to come and go. This racial demarcation, a constant feature of the police control - to the point of calling out to if not pushing to the ground mere passers-by - was perceived as a form of 'racism' and police 'provocation', then quickly came to be seen as the proof of Belgium's involvement in the crimes perpetrated in the DRC. This drew non-politicised people, youths and middle-aged women, to join the movement, saying '*Tshisekedi, Kabila who cares, we just want them to free our country.*' At the same time a growing number of people alternated between watching and participating, moving from one attitude to another or both at the same time in the space of several days.

17. From day one, the question of destruction was debated, with the observers also sharing in the dialogue: *Should one damage property and risk being further stigmatised, or not damage anything and risk once again not even being heard?*

18. On 9 December the results of the election were announced: Joseph Kabila was proclaimed the winner. 192 demonstrators spent the night in the federal police barracks in Etterbeek and Molotov cocktails were hurled at the Ixelles police station by two 'unidentified individuals'. But it was mainly the growing number of demonstrators that rendered so complex the territorial organisation of this conflict, the centre of which remained the Porte de Namur metro exit. At the end of the afternoon, one could see youths (so called 'second generation') flee down the streets off the avenue de la Toison d'Or. A bit later another group of youths escaped the police circle and, before dispersing, crossed the Petite Ceinture intersection in a single file, forcing cars to brake sharply as they exited the tunnel. The police, both in uniform and plain clothes,

ran after them. Some of the youths were arrested. At the Porte de Namur roundabout some observers were afraid when they saw the police arrive. A few fled, but others stopped them '*Don't ever run, if you do they might arrest you.*' Others protested the police actions, especially when the arrests were heavy handed with several officers dealing with just one person.

19. On Saturday 10 December the demonstrators (a group of 400) were authorised to gather near the DRC Embassy, although the street itself (Marie de Bourgogne) was closed off. They were not able to place the portrait of Etienne Tshisekedi who, the day before, had proclaimed himself 'President elected by the Congolese people'. The group was furthermore unable to take advantage of their proximity to the European institutions for the relatively deserted rue Montoyer gave them no visibility. That evening 'only' one car was burned and there were two administrative arrests.

20. The following Monday, after the Sunday truce, the day was calm, and the media were able to take stock of the situation: 500 administrative arrests, 20 tried and 50 complaints lodged. An authorised demonstration was planned for the following Saturday. It mobilised over 2,000 people (1,200 according to the police, 3,000 according to the organisers), escorted by an armada of police officers.

21. A few hours later, Matonge once again looked like a battleground with the territory of this latest conflict reorganised around the chaussée de Wavre. After several hours, the results were 144 arrests, 40 to 50 vehicles damaged, dozens of windows broken on the rue Belliard, chaussée d'Ixelles, chaussée de Wavre and the Place St Boniface. Sixteen police officers were wounded. The next day, the damage was imputed to 'gangs' on the basis of police files. The interpretation was adopted by the media and then by politicians. All gatherings were once again prohibited and police presence was doubled. There were numerous police controls, especially by plainclothesmen, during the day.

22. The number of demonstrators wounded was not reported, despite a particularly heavy handed repression, including incidents involving very young adolescents. On 17 December, last day of the large demonstrations in Brussels, the French-speaking television viewers were



shocked to demonstrators calling on people to vote for the N-VA (New Flemish Alliance). Draped in the flag of Flanders, the man interviewed explained: *'The NVA tells the truth: they say they don't like the Congolese, they don't like Blacks... the PS, MR and CdH just pretend they do.'*<sup>3</sup> In addition to a convergence of nationalist goals, threats of sanctions via the ballot box also expressed the notion of reciprocity (*'You're destabilising our country? We can also destabilise yours!' 'You want to keep Belgium for the Belgians? Well, we want the Congo for the Congolese!'*). This instrumentalisation of Belgian ethnicity yielded results in the end for after the 'riots' in Brussels several authorised demonstrations were organised in Flanders without incident. Following this, demonstrations were once again authorised in Brussels, outside Matonge, on condition of discrete police supervision, without horses, dogs, helicopters or water cannons. No clashes were reported. And still today, marches have been regularly organised in Brussels, but Belgian State Security Service has henceforth classified the 'Combatants' movement as a 'threat'.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Postcolonial demands

23. Over time and as the confrontations became more heated, the population of demonstrators, it is said, became more diversified, showing a certain racialization of the conflict. Young people became more visible, most often together with others of the same age group, occasionally with their parents. Their motivations? A group of young girls explained that *'The Congo is our future.'* This was a recurring theme, explicitly linked to the lack of prospects in Belgium for black people and 'especially' for Congolese. Another group of young boys went even farther: *'We're fed up, we'd like to go home too at a certain time. But what does that mean? That means that Mundele should get off our backs, Mundele that means White Man, he should let us be! Stop interfering in what's not his business, because his curiosity sometimes leads to this type of consequence. Because we're fed up we are, and*

*now the people are rising and they want to try to build something. So you have to let the people build...'* And his friend continued in an angry tone: *'White Man has to leave us be! Didier Reynders, Louis Michel and all that - look at the police force they've set up here. They let the Congolese cry like animals from 2 to 7. So White Man should let us, that's it. A white bloke looks at me because he's surprised at what I'm saying, Yes! Let's be frank! Yes, the White man must let the African, because Reynders, while we our here demonstrating, is eating - feeding his face and getting as fat as Bart De Wever! Huh, so leave us be, White man! One day we'll get revenge, so don't talk about diversity now! Let Congo get its stuff together...'*

24. Asked about his nationality, he refused to say he was Belgian (although his ID shows that he is) - *'look at my skin'* and his friend points out that for Belgians does not change a thing *'when a Belgian is in the Congo and he speaks Lingala and eats pondou, is anyone going to ask if he's Belgian?'* A passerby wanted to take a picture, he waved him off angrily. *'No pictures, no pictures, I'm no animal! Go take a picture of Leopold (the statue of Leopold II across the boulevard), I'm no animal!'*

25. The participation in the march of many leaders among the diaspora (from associations, religious leaders and, to a lesser extent, politicians) was noted. These people did not make any media statements nor did they try to place their own organisation to the forefront. They were there in the wish to be part of this collective movement and voice their demands. As one occasional demonstrator said, *'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. Well, I'm not going to go on and on about the Belgium-Congo disputes... For example, my son or my nephews don't understand why they are here. They don't know their history and*

<sup>3</sup> N-VA: New Flemish Alliance, PS: (French speaking) Socialist Party, MR: (French speaking) Reformers Movement, cdH: (French speaking) Humanist Democratic Centre

<sup>4</sup> cf. Press conference by Alain Winants, general administrator for the State Security Service, 21 November 2012.

*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.'*

### **5. Racialization of social relations and ethnicization of riots in Belgium?**

26. The escalation of the clashes with the police, the damage and the loss of control by the organisers fostered a form of collective action that could indeed be qualified as rioting. This could be said for youths but also for those less young who took advantage of the situation to 'settle' [Rea, 2001] their disputes with the police and 'society', and also get back at the Belgian state, even if in the end the targets were individuals. If some actors came forward to express a political discourse to the media [Martiniello, 1992], they did not do this as leaders. At the same time the membership of some of spokespersons in established (Belgian) parties came to a clamorous end.

27. Aside the mediatised looting on 17 December of a jewellery store on the chaussée d'Ixelles, no robberies were reported in the local 'youth' stores like 'Zara', 'H&M' or 'Sportsworld' which were the targets on several occasions of volleys of stones. The destruction was the work of individuals acting alone and/or coming together by spontaneously. It was definitely not caused by group action that could be qualified as 'urban guerrilla' by 'gangs' and 'organised plunderers'.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand the idea that *'they (the police) purposely push us back towards Matonge so we'll only tear up our own places'* fed a desire to 'fight back' and to destroy property outside the 'African' neighbourhood. It also deepened more 'structural' frustrations that spurred rioters less young to throw stones.

28. Holding particular groups to blame for urban violence does not stand up under empirical evidence and ends by avoiding two basic questions: what where the demands of this (plural) minority? Were there

shortcomings in the police and political response? In addition to the material destruction seen from the angle of individual property, it would also be interesting to look at the question from a more global angle, relating to the public interest, about the cost of this police riot suppression mechanisms and lastly on how effective it actually is. This is for two basic reasons: the 'Congolese' riots were not the first of the sort, and additionally the policies they generated in the follow-up were far from having the same structural impact as those that followed the 'North African' riots. Without entering into a discussion on the ethnicization of social policies suggested by this remark, we would nevertheless like to point out that the process of marginalisation that arose from this differential treatment helped amplify this urban unrest.

29. In 2001, following the death (at the Porte d'Anderlecht) of a young man, presumed to be a dealer, at the end of a police chase, riots broke out in Matonge in a context which, since the 1970s, was one of constant police controls in the neighbourhood in the streets, bars and shops. Announcement of the young man's death sparked four days of conflicts between the police and Matonge regulars (customers, businesses, youths): objects, paving stones and rubbish bags thrown, cars burned, businesses vandalised, etc. Once the calm returned, the newly elected communal government introduced a policy of 'friendly overtures', focused more on prevention, yet relying heavily on the local associations and their volunteer work. This was quite different from the social and public safety policies aimed at minorities of North African origin, one feature of which was to associate (hire) people coming from these neighbourhoods, in particularly young graduates experiencing discrimination in their search for jobs [Cartuyvels and Heberrecht, 2001; Réa, 2006].

30. In Matonge the paltry subsidies granted maintained the associative actors in uncertain work conditions for several years until they were let go once social ties had nevertheless been re-established (between those who frequented the neighbourhood and the police and the commune, between the adult business owners or local residents and youths, etc.). Their missions were supposedly transferred to the com-

<sup>5</sup> 'Emeutes à Matonge : une technique de guérilla urbaine' - Willy Decourty, Burgomaster of Ixelles, interviewed by RTL-TVI, 19 December 2012.

municipal agents (supervising 'urban gangs', 'emergency' intervention methods, techniques of management and mediation integrating the neighbourhood's or the diaspora's urban sub-culture, implementing projects that integrated the local population, and so on). The withdrawal of the associative actors and closing of the community policing unit in 2009 were facets of this dynamics that undermined years of preventive work during which, according to the police commissioner responsible for the neighbourhood, the crime rate dropped 42% (2005-2009).

31. So is that why, when cars were burned that December, public authority did not call on this associative mediation, which in the past had dealt with much broader demonstrations? The question remains open. In the meantime, the entrenched marginalisation of this population is palpable in view of the institutional policies for co-optation and integration available for other minorities and which proved their worth in eradicating everyday urban unrest [Rea, 2006]. One can obviously discuss the methods and relevance of the 'occupational' approach [Cartuyvels, 1996] to which moreover the Congolese public (both youths and associations) do not adhere [Manço et al, 2013]. One can also certainly question the public safety-based paradigm which, as several studies have shown, is incapable of fighting against discrimination, stigmas associated with certain groups and neighbourhoods, and even against the fear of crime [Campenhoudt et al, 2000; Cartuyvels and Hebberecht, 2001; Schaut, 2000]. In a comparative perspective, however, one cannot help but note that the Congolese and more generally minorities of sub-Saharan African origin have not been able to benefit from socio-professional integration and recognition policies.

## Conclusion

32. If at the start the 'Congolese' demonstrations of the winter of 2011-2012 revolved around political change in the DRC and involved a part of the population that did not entirely represent the whole diaspora, it must be concluded that as the days went by more diversified political expressions made themselves heard. Even amidst the growing racialization of the conflict the somewhat widespread idea that one 'had to

destroy to be heard' was, despite appearances, counterbalanced by the fear of bringing more stigma on the community. The police, media and political hypothesis of 'gangs' was validated by some organisers as well when the revolt got out of hand, and this even when they had been the ones to publicly call on the community to demonstrate.

33. As regards the ethnicization of social integration policies expressed in the differential management of urban unrest, the State's reaction, in the very temporality of the riots and on the scale of their repetition a decade later, raises questions. Various factors could explain this lopsided policy approach: the size of the communities (about 60,000 Congolese compared to 300,000 Moroccans), the rhythm, scale and location of the riots (Matonge in 2001 and 2011 compared to Forest in May 1991 and Molenbeek in April 1995, and Anderlecht in November 1997). Another factor may well be the residential logics of the groups; on the one hand the 'North African' or even strictly 'Moroccan' neighbourhoods and on the other the spatial dispersion of Congolese throughout Brussels (and Belgium as well). This said, the history shared between Belgium and the Congo in which this differentiated approach takes root appears to the associative actors of Congolese origin, permanently relegated to a volunteer status, as the expression of a racialization of social policies. This is because the institutions have recognised the efficiency of their practices in terms of eliminating urban unrest and violence as re-establishing a social link with the State (commune, police, etc.). What raises a problem is the continuation of this socio-educative work and what it requires of these actors in terms of sustainable and autonomous integration, particularly from the financial point of view.

34. In addition to the 'inter-community' tension this ethnicization of policies may provoke (in the area of cultural centres for example) it is the anger and the frustration felt towards a separate way of treatment, postcolonial, which was expressed well beyond the political context of the demonstrations in December 2011. The racial and racist undercurrents that emerge, once the narrations of the actors are taken seriously, clearly highlight the social invisibility of the Congolese and more generally black people in Belgium, and provide a key for understanding the genesis of postcolonial riots in Brussels.



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