Race Matters in Belgium: A Critical Exploration of the Belgian Post-racial Paradox

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Résumé :

Cet article a pour ambition d'interroger le faible intérêt porté à l'anti-racisme, et de manière générale, aux questions raciales en Belgique, y compris dans les études migratoires. Un tel questionnement permet d'explorer la place des questions raciales dans la société belge « post-raciale » et post-coloniale. L'article se penche également sur ce que l'anti-racisme peut nous révéler quant aux dynamiques de pouvoir à l'œuvre dans notre société.

Mots-clés : Race, Belgique, Anti-racisme, Paradoxe post-racial

Abstract :

The article's initial point is to question the limited attention devoted to anti-racism and racial issues more broadly in Belgium, including in the field of migration studies. This inquiry allows for a critical exploration of the status of racial issues in a 'post-racial' and post-colonial Belgian society. Moreover, it examines the insights that anti-racist activism may provide regarding the underlying power dynamics of our society.

Keywords : Race, Belgium, Anti-racism, Post-racial paradox

Introduction

Despite the long-standing mobilization of anti-racist activists in Belgium and the development of legislation aimed at combating racism and discrimination, there has been limited research on anti-racism in the Belgian context, including in the field of migration studies. In fact, for a considerable period, racial issues have rarely been addressed, and the sociological concept of race[1] has been largely overlooked. While research on discrimination and social inequalities has been conducted, relatively few studies have applied a racial perspective. Similarly, there has been limited engagement between critical race perspectives and migration studies.

As I began to identify this gap in the existing research, a cultural celebration attracted my attention. By the end of August 2023, the controversy surrounding the festivity known as *La Ducasse d'Ath* had taken on a new dimension. Notwithstanding the objections of certain anti-racist activists over an extended period, the organizers opted to retain the character known as *Le Sauvage*. The character in question is depicted with a 'black face', i.e., a white individual portraying a racialized character by adopting stereotypical and discriminatory traits. The character's accessories, including the nose ring, earrings, and chains, appear to evoke elements of the Belgian colonial imaginary.

Moreover, the character's name and demeanor appear to reinforce colonial stereotypes. Following the announcement of the character's continued presence in the festivities, jubilant cheers could be observed on social media. This response was characterized by a celebration of the respect for tradition and Belgian folklore, as well as a denial of the racial dimension of *Le Sauvage*. Those who supported the character maintained that it had no racial or racist connotations. This event prompted me to reflect on the relationship between Belgium and race.

Why do racial issues seem to be overlooked in Belgium, both in public and political discourses, and in academic knowledge? Starting from two specific events, this paper seeks to understand the racial power dynamics at play and therefore touch upon the issue of race and associated topics in Belgium. Accordingly, in the initial section, the Belgian post-racial paradox and the silencing of race, colonization, and its legacies will be addressed. Subsequently, the article will consider the insights that anti-racist activism can offer regarding the underlying power dynamics of Belgian society through two case studies: the cases of Black faces and of the Special Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past. The article will conclude with some reflections on the relevance of a dialogue between critical race approaches and migration studies.

Raceless Belgium?

A diverse and post-colonial country

The history and specificities of race, racism, and anti-racism in Belgium are inextricably linked to its migratory history and colonial past in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The Belgian population has become increasingly diverse, particularly because of past and ongoing migration processes. Indeed, Belgium can be defined as a traditional immigration country. The initial migration movements were associated with the country's industrial past and the necessity for workers in the aftermath of the First and Second World War. Consequently, immigrant workers primarily originated from Mediterranean countries, entering the country through the guest worker programs that were established following the Second World War[2]. Since the late 1980s, through post-colonial migrations, populations from former colonized countries have settled in Belgium[3]. More recently, there have been new arrivals of international migrants, coming from countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Palestine. Moreover, there has been a considerable number of immigrants coming from the European Union member states. This phenomenon can be attributed, at least in part, to the appeal of the European Union and international organizations based in Brussels[4]. These migrations and the colonial history have played a pivotal role in the formation of the Belgian nation-state, the perception of national identity, the relationship with those constructed as 'Others', and the establishment of social and racial differentiations.

Today, Belgium is regarded as a country with a rich linguistic, cultural, and ethno-racial diversity. Some cities can even be considered as 'superdiverse'[5], such as Brussels, where approximately 40% of the population is of non-Belgian origin and around 37% is non-Belgian. Recent statistical data indicates that approximately one in five individuals in Belgium is of non-Belgian origin[6].

A Belgian 'post-racial' paradox

Considering this diversity, a paradox emerges regarding racial issues in Belgium. The Constitution

enshrines formal equality in accordance with the principles set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in European legislation. Since 1981, Belgium has had in place a legislative framework designed to combat racism and xenophobia. This initial legislative measure – the anti-racism law – is based on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965). This legislation was designed to combat discrimination, public hate speech, and offenses based on *prétendue race* (alleged race), skin color, national or ethnic origin, or the publicization of heinous acts, discrimination or violence. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests the continued existence of discriminatory practices, including those based on racial prejudice, in a variety of contexts. In the contemporary era, as formal equality is a foundational tenet of European societies, discrimination manifests in more nuanced forms, primarily through the processes of selection and preference[7]. In Belgium, racial discrimination persists in all areas of society, including housing, employment, education, healthcare, politics, and the mainstream media. In recent times, instances of racism have been observed in different spheres, including political and public debates on migration, asylum, and refugees, as well as discussions related to religious diversity and the tense relationship with secularism. Islam has been the subject of particular stigmatization[8]. Moreover, recent reports have indicated that racism against Black populations[9] and against Jewish populations[10] has persisted and increased in Belgium in recent years. Instances of police violence are also pervasive and primarily affect racialized individuals, thereby demonstrating the existence of a structural and systemic racism in Belgium[11].

Despite the pervasiveness of discrimination and racism, there is still a lack of attention devoted to race as a structuring category of social life and to Belgium's colonial past and its enduring legacies. This phenomenon can be attributed to the 'post-racial paradoxes' that have emerged in Europe, as observed by Salman Sayyid. Despite Europe's condemnation of racist practices and espousal of the belief of being post-race, instances of racism persist but are more difficult to identify. Salman Sayyid posited that this post-racial assertion represents a contemporary reconfiguration of 'racism as politics'[12]. This conceptualization aligns with the observation by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva of the United States of a pervasive color-blind ideology, which he characterized as 'racism without racists'[13]. This ideology is predicated on the premise that we 'don't see any colors, just people'[14]. Scholars such as David Theo Goldberg and Alana Lentin have shown how race has been silenced in Europe since the aftermath of the Second World War and the atrocities of the Shoah, which is perceived as the epitome of racism in the European context[15]. This also resulted in the simultaneous obliteration of Europe's colonial legacy[16]. Subsequently, Europe has come to perceive itself as 'post-racial' and 'naturally' non-racist. This act of silencing race conceals the continued operation of racialized power relations in the present era[17]. The term 'race' has consequently been discredited and reduced to the belief in the existence of races that have developed in the European context since the sixteenth century. This encompasses the racialist theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in anthropology, as well as the biological dimension of race in the twentieth century, which began with the advent of genetics[18]. It was considered a scientific fallacy, which resulted in a de-racialization of discourses and institutions. Nevertheless, '[r]ace refuses to remain silent because it isn't just a word'[19].

It is evident that Europe is a continent of considerable diversity, which necessitates a detailed examination of the historical and socio-political contexts of specific societies. This article focuses on French-speaking Belgium. In this context, the discussion about race is further complicated by

the fact that the term has become taboo, delegitimized, and censored in the French language. This situation gives rise to the creation of new linguistic strategies to circumvent the topic. These strategies may include the use of euphemisms or substitutions, such as the term '*jeunes de quartier*' to refer to racialized youth or expressions related to diversity. Given that overt racism is considered immoral and deviant, the racial vocabulary is thus concealed in more subtle or coded discourses[20].

Additionally, in Belgium, there has been a relative lack of attention devoted to the subjects of colonialism and coloniality[21], and their interconnections with racism, diversity, and migration. This can be explained in several ways. On the one hand, populations from Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi arrived mainly as political refugees in the 1980's and 1990's. The initial limited presence of these populations may explain why the early discussions of diversity, migration, and even racism in Belgium did not focus on populations of Black African descent and post-colonial debates, but rather on European, North African, and Turkish migrants. On the other hand, the Belgian state and its monarchy have demonstrated a difficulty to engage with the country's colonial history[22]. This has resulted in silence and ignorance regarding colonialism, leading to colonial amnesia and a historical taboo[23]. The current dominant narrative in Belgium tends to acknowledge the country's colonial past, while minimizing the violence associated with it and cultivating a sense of nostalgia and idealism. It also tends to disregard criticisms pertaining to the country's colonial history[24]. Hence, as Sibo Rugwiza Kanobana has observed, the coloniality that permeates contemporary manifestations of racism has been largely overlooked[25]. He stated:

> Issues of inequality and racial discrimination are essentially understood in cultural, religious, and migratory terms, erasing the coloniality of power that informs the logics of racism (cf. Quijano 2000). As a consequence, Belgium suffers from a textbook example of 'white amnesia' (cf. Hesse 2002) in which Black resistance against colonialism is forgotten. Moreover, Belgians like to think of themselves as part of a small, insignificant, and powerless nation that has had little historical impact (Mincke 2016)[26].

In essence, discourses have been de-racialized, and there has been a collective amnesia regarding colonialism and a dearth of consideration for coloniality[27], including with respect to racism.

As Magali Bessone pointed out, '[o]ne must be able to name reality. Just as refusing to think about racial categories does not make them disappear, naming them does not mean creating or validating them'[28]. In so-called post-racial and egalitarian societies, racial categories that have been historically constructed continue to exist, are utilized in various ways, and have tangible consequences. But they are silenced. To understand and combat pervasive discrimination and racism, it seems necessary to acknowledge the influence of the category of race – as a mode of power – on the social order, as 'this lack of recognition of the race category hampers a general recognition and examination of racial hierarchies in Europe'[29]. However, not everyone remains silent on racial issues and discrimination.

From raceless to Race-Blind Belgium

According to Michel Foucault, an initial step in understanding the workings of power relations is to analyze the resistances inherent to them[30]. One such resistance can be observed in the continued existence of anti-racist mobilizations. As part of my doctoral research, I have been conducting a

multi-sited ethnography[31] on contemporary anti-racist mobilizations in French-speaking Belgium since 2022. I have been conducting interviews with activists and attending meetings, conferences, debates, demonstrations, and other public events. I have also been collecting documents related to anti-racism (activists' and associations' documents, legislation, media coverage, etc.) and online publications on social media.

Of course, I study issues of race, racism, and anti-racism from a specific position: I am a young White Belgian woman conducting doctoral research at a Belgian academic center focused on ethnic and migration studies. In Belgium, being White means belonging to the White majority, constructed as the norm, with whiteness representing 'the social, cultural and political hegemony'[32]. This standpoint shapes the production of knowledge, as whiteness influences how knowledge is constructed[33].

At the time of writing these lines, I am still at the beginning of my analyses, but my encounters with anti-racist activists have already revealed the heterogeneity of the anti-racist field in Belgium, and the multiple visions of race, racism, and anti-racism that are in tension.

A politicization of race and systemic racism

Resistance to racism and discrimination has a long historical precedent in Belgium. The initial association established to combat racism, currently known as MRAX, emerged in the period following the Second World War and was founded by Jewish resistants[34]. In addition, some of the activists I met asserted that migrants have protested against their lived experiences of racism and discrimination since their arrival and settlement in various regions of Belgium. For instance, in December 2023, I spoke with an anti-racist, Pan-African, and Lumumbist activist based in Liège for decades. He told me that upon his arrival in the early 1990's, he joined the pre-existing mobilization of Black African populations through associations for Black students and artists in Liège. These associations served as platforms for protesting racism and discrimination. However, these protests were not always framed as 'anti-racism', nor were they isolated from other social demands[35]. In the present day, it is possible to observe an anti-racist field in Belgium, comprising a diverse array of actors whose mobilizations explicitly refer to 'anti-racism'.

Some of these anti-racist activists protest against systemic racism and politicize the category of race. They place significant emphasis on the structuring nature of race and the pervasiveness of racism across all societal spheres, and they actively seek to effect change. In doing so, they challenge the dominant post-racial discourses in Belgium. Moreover, some activists continue to unite around their shared lived experiences of racism and discrimination, among other challenges they encounter in Belgium. Therefore, in the contemporary anti-racist field, a variety of anti-racist causes can be observed, linked to distinct forms of racism and racialization processes. These forms include, but are not limited to, Afrophobia, Islamophobia, Antisemitism, and anti-Asian racism. The plurality of these causes demonstrates that there is a generalized racism which manifests in various ways. Some causes also highlight how racialization intersects with other processes of social differentiation, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, administrative status, ability, and so forth. It is the case for Afro-feminisms, Asio-feminisms, and Muslim feminisms, as well as collectives that are specifically constituted by and for racialized members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, the decolonial approach appears to be prevalent among contemporary activists who politicize race and protest systemic racism.

As stated by Marco Martiniello and Nadia Fadil in their article '*Racisme et Antiracisme en Belgique*', shifts in leadership and political demands have been observed in the Belgian anti-racist field over time. Recently, they observed a notable shift with the advent of the decolonial turn[36]. Indeed, an increasing number of critical voices are questioning the persistence of colonial legacies and the way the colonial past is engaged with. Such analyses underscore the enduring impact of this past on contemporary Belgian society. Young people of Congolese descent and, more broadly, of African descent, are becoming increasingly vocal on these issues through their decolonial activism. The murder of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilizations, including the one in Brussels on June 7, have resulted in a renewed call for structural measures to combat racism and for decolonization. Decolonial activists also advocate for the Belgian colonial history to be addressed in the educational curriculum and in the public space, among other things[37].

It can thus be argued that anti-racist activists who politicize and mobilize around race expose and challenge the prevailing social order and representations. By articulating claims, they offer insights into the racial logics of society, including their manifestations and effects, as well as their ideological and historical foundations, racial blind spots, and, more generally, the processes of othering and minoritization by dominant populations. Two case studies will be presented to illustrate the extensive efforts made by anti-racist activists in recent years in this regard. The initial case study concerns anti-racist activism against the perpetuation of black faces in folkloric events. The second case study concerns the protest against the political treatment of the Parliamentary Commission on Belgium's Colonial Past.

The case of black faces: *La Ducasse d'Ath* and Black Pete

One example of a popular black face in Belgium is the character *Le Sauvage*, who features in a cultural celebration in Ath, as described in the introduction. Claims about the racist dimension of the character have given rise to numerous debates in public forums and mainstream media discourse. In the most recent controversies, in 2019, the anti-racist and decolonial collective *Bruxelles Panthères* asked the UNESCO institution to request the removal of *Le Sauvage* from *La Ducasse d'Ath* celebration. In the event of a refusal by the relevant authorities, they requested the removal of *La Ducasse d'Ath* from the list of cultural heritage sites. This complaint regarding *Le Sauvage* is part of a broader plea to end the practice of black face in Belgium, which is considered an inherently racist practice. In response to this complaint, signs of support for keeping *Le Sauvage* multiplied in Ath[38]. Despite the protests, the character was still present at the August 2019 festivities. Security protocols were even put in place to reduce the potential for conflict and political demands. In addition, the character was released from its chains for the first time to mitigate the controversy[39].

Consequently, in September 2019, members of the collective emphasized in a publication on their website that the continued existence of the practice of black face signaled a denial of the legacies of the colonial past, and reinforced Afrophobia in Belgium. Therefore, the anti-racist and decolonial collective protested against the 'complacency of the authorities towards manifestations of racism under the guise of folklore'[40]. They also condemned the defensive response of citizens and even politicians towards *Le Sauvage*. Their plea was widely disseminated and garnered many signatures. Due to the COVID pandemic, the celebration of *La Ducasse d'Ath* was unable to proceed in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, members of *Bruxelles Panthères* once again wrote to UNESCO, reiterating their

demand. In December of that year, the UNESCO institution opted to remove the event from its list of intangible cultural heritage. This decision was based on the observation that *Le Sauvage* character represented 'a form of racism and discrimination'[41]. In consequence of this decision, a commission of citizens was constituted in the city of Ath to design a new character. However, despite the continued demands and the promises of change, in 2023, the character – now designated as *Le Diable* (The Devil) – reappeared with black coloration on the face, and still wearing golden earrings, feathers on its head, remnants of chains, and a loincloth[42]. The modifications were intended to address anti-racist demands, yet the controversial elements inherited from colonialism, along with the practice of black face, remained intact. On August 25, 2024, the character was revealed with a revamped appearance, which was intended to finally resolve the controversy surrounding its previous appearances. The character's facial features have been modified, with a portion of its face now displaying a red coloration and the acquisition of horns. However, the character has retained the black coloration, chains, nose ring, and its costume. The continued presence of this character and the robust support for its preservation from part of the city's population – including authorities – indicate that it is still regarded as a valid element of Belgian popular culture. It is still not unanimously seen as racist, particularly in light of the alterations made to its name and appearance. Some arguments against the character's removal appeal to the respect due to Belgian or local traditions and identities, as well as the absence of racist intentions on the part of the organizers[43].

Beyond the appearance of this character, which displays a negative racialization of people of African descent inherited from the colonial imaginary, the attitude that it performs should also be questioned. *Le Sauvage* is depicted as a brutish and foolish character who shouts, strikes his club against the ground, and advances towards the crowd to bestow kisses according to its own whims. In essence, the character is uncontrollable and instils fear in children. The character plays with the stereotypes attached to the racialized black body, and here in particular, the masculine black body, by displaying a bestial masculinity. Despite the name change to *Le Diable*, the original designation of *Le Sauvage* serves as a reminder of the racist dichotomy between 'savages' – 'them' – and the civilized ones – 'us' – which has historically justified the oppression of Black populations. This dichotomy has been used to justify the relegation of Black people to the lowest rungs of social and racial hierarchies, portraying them as subhuman beings on the brink of the animal kingdom[44]. The change of name does not erase the controversial appearance and attitude; rather, it merely reveals an additional facet of the racialization of individuals of African descent in Belgium, namely their demonization.

The case of *Le Sauvage de la Ducasse d'Ath* echoes other cases of black face, such as Saint-Nicholas's companion. The character in question is known as Black Pete. In French-speaking Belgium, he is known as *Le Père Fouettard*, while in the Flemish region of Belgium and the Netherlands, he is referred to as *Zwarte Piet*. For years, activists and citizens have highlighted the racist stereotypes that Black Pete embodies, as the Saint Nicholas celebration takes place annually on December 6th in Belgium. In December 2019, the anti-racist and Afro-feminist organization Bamko published a special report entitled '*Père Fouettard. Ma couleur de peau n'est pas un déguisement*' ('My skin color is not a disguise'). It contains decolonial analyses of Black Pete from the perspectives of various authors and the findings of a study conducted with children in Belgium[45]. The findings demonstrate that the folklore associated with Saint Nicholas functions as an initiation into racial bias against individuals of African descent, impacting both Black

and White children. Indeed, children were able to identify several negative stereotypes related to Black populations, including those of subalternity, brutality, and foolishness, among others[46]. Furthermore, the controversies surrounding the character appear to be more pronounced, given that it is a highly contentious topic in the Netherlands. The Dutch judiciary has even gone so far as to declare it a vehicle for perpetuating negative stereotypes towards Black people[47]. Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned protests and analyses, Saint Nicholas and his companion Black Pete can still be seen in December in the streets and supermarkets. An argument in favor of this continued presence is that the black coloring of the face is believed to represent ashes, given its passage through the chimney: it is thus not perceived by all observers as a practice of black face.

Gloria Wekker conducted a study on the controversies surrounding the character of Black Pete in the Netherlands[48]. She asserted that the continued presence of this character is indicative of a denial of racism and a sense of white innocence, with the objective of safeguarding white privilege. By examining the character of Black Pete and the responses to its critics, she was able to elucidate the dominant self-representation of white Dutch people. This white sense of self can be characterized as follows: it is perceived as innocent, inherently good and tolerant, without bad intentions; it is color-blind and non-racist. This sense of self is also characterized by a perception of being under siege and defenseless against those who seek to reclaim their pleasures and traditional celebrations. Furthermore, she underscored that this white dominant self-representation occurs within a society that has convinced itself that four hundred years of colonialism have ‘not left any traces of racism, either in culture, history, language, representations of the self and the other, or in institutions’[49]. One might inquire whether Belgium, a neighboring country of the Netherlands and a former colonial power as well, employs similar mechanisms.

Considering the previous examples, the question of whether these traditions are racist or not depends on how racism is framed. The argument of lack of racist intent is linked to an individualistic and moral conception of racism, whereas the view of systemic racism holds that intentionality is irrelevant because it focuses only on consequences. The struggles to define what is or is not racist – and to recognize the relevance of race and coloniality – are thus strongly influenced by the dominant post-racial logic[50]. In this context, race and related issues have been erased from discourses: race can’t be said, but it can be seen and felt.

The Case of the Special Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past

An additional recent illustration of Belgium’s approach to issues of race, colonialism and coloniality is the case of the Special Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past, which gained significant attention in anti-racist circles. The inaugural session of this special commission was held in July 2020 under the impulse of anti-racist and decolonial activists, following the BLM demonstrations and debates after the death of George Floyd. The objective was to elucidate the Belgian colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, its consequences and what could be done about it. The special commission concluded its activities in December 2022, with a divergence of opinion regarding the formulation of political recommendations. In particular, the issue of reparations gave rise to considerable tension, with several right-wing and far-right political parties (MR, NVA and Vlaams Belang) refusing to publicly apologize. In the absence of a consensus, the commission was disbanded. A year later, despite calls for the publication of the commission’s report, such as those launched by the decolonial collective *Mémoire Coloniale et Lutte contre les Discriminations*[51], there was still no

official publication by the authorities. In January 2024, an open letter was published by members of various associations, academic institutions, and concerned citizens to question the absence of an official publication and to denounce the situation. The authors of the letter thus called into question the democratic institution, noting a lack of transparency on the part of Parliament. They eventually requested that the President of the Parliament Chamber should exercise their authority and disseminate the report[52]. However, this request was ultimately unsuccessful.

Some anti-racist activists have argued that the commission's failure illustrates that the Belgian authorities remain unprepared to formally acknowledge Belgium's colonial past and its continued effects. They act as if colonization was limited to the past, on another continent, and had no contemporary relevance in Belgium. Some even postulated that certain political parties may be employing a strategy of obstruction to such initiatives. In February 2024, I had a discussion with a long-standing activist who has dedicated a significant part of his life to combating Afrophobia in Belgium. In our discussion about the commission, he stated that it was a political decision and commitment to ensure that the commission would not succeed, due to concerns about reparations. He postulated that politicians of this trend anticipate that the public will eventually cease to be concerned about the matter and that it will consequently be relegated to the background. However, he observed that the younger generation appears to be more assertive, a consequence of the sustained efforts of activists. Furthermore, a larger proportion of the population is now seeking responses and engaging in anti-racist and decolonial initiatives. The issue is increasingly being discussed, including in political spheres, yet significant progress remains to be made.

The lack of transparency regarding the commission's findings and the inability to disseminate these insights impede the recognition and further examination of colonial and racial processes in Belgium, as well as their consequences. It tends to perpetuate the overlooking of 'the coloniality of power that informs the logics of racism'[53]. It is important to note that the decision not to disseminate the report is not unanimous among all political parties. Nevertheless, the absence of consensus has resulted in the absence of an official publication and official treatment of the issue. This situation may also be regarded as an effort to maintain control over the dominant narrative of national history by certain parties. As Charles W. Mills has shown with his conceptualization of 'white ignorance', the denial of race and white hegemony occurs through the management of memory[54]. He observed 'an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia, especially about nonwhites victims'[55]. The failure to publish the parliamentary report appears to be consistent with the historical treatment of the memory of colonialism. Historically, a variety of strategies have been employed to prevent the examination of these issues. For instance, during the colonial era, there was a systematic destruction of state archives, and there has been a notable absence of commemoration of the African victims. Such operations to erase the multifaceted and profound violence of colonialism from the official memory have resulted in a deliberate ignorance through omission, a lack of knowledge among the Belgian population, and the perpetuation of misrepresentations of the colonial era. The only visible aspect of colonialism that has been preserved is the erection of monuments and statues that reflect the national textbooks and maintain a positive, Eurocentric view of the collective memory[56].

The dissolution of the commission on the colonial past, which resulted from significant discord, and the non-publication of the parliamentary report have contributed to the avoidance of confronting the realities of colonialism, coloniality, and race in Belgium, as well as the question of how these issues might be addressed in the present day. This avoidance preserves the official memory, as well

as the dominant narrative[57] and post-racial ideology.

Race-Blind Belgium

To sum up, Belgium is not a raceless society, but rather a race-blind one. Considering the preceding cases, the term ‘racial blinding’ is suggested here to emphasize the active silencing and bypassing of racial issues whether deliberate or unconscious. This also includes the colonial history and its continuing effects.

These two cases, which engage with current controversies, highlight several racial power dynamics operating within the public and political spheres. In these cases, the anti-racist activists enable the identification of dominant ideologies and strategies through their protests and the presentation of counter-narratives. They reveal and challenge the pervasiveness of race and coloniality, including by shedding light on instances of racial blinding. In the context of Belgium, the term ‘racial blinding’ may prove useful for describing a strategy that is employed to silence or circumvent the structuring impact of race and coloniality, thereby maintaining dominant color-blind and post-racial logics. The two cases presented above illustrate the ways in which post-racial logics and racial blinding may influence the framing of racism, its manifestations, and the formation of both official memory and dominant self-representation. Besides, Gloria Wekker and Charles W. Mills, with their epistemologies of innocence and ignorance, emphasized the significance and influence of dominant whiteness in the silence and denial of racial politics[58]. In light of these considerations, it can be argued that the dominant racial logics in Belgium can be understood through the articulation of color-blind and post-racial ideologies, maintained by strategies of racial blinding, and the centrality of hegemonic whiteness.

In these cases, the anti-racist and decolonial activists denounce systemic racism in Belgium with a focus on Afrophobia, the racialization of Black people, and the historical legacies of colonialism. Of course, further examples could deepen the understanding of systemic racism and racial logics in Belgium. These activists challenge the dominant racial ideologies and strategies of silencing and avoiding racial issues by naming racism, its contemporary manifestations, and by bringing discussions on race, racialization, colonialism, and coloniality into public and political debates. These cases underline that race remains a significant system of power, and that the categories of race and coloniality are crucial for addressing and combating racism and experiences of discrimination. This analysis suggests the need to take into account racial issues in academic knowledge and leads me to believe that a dialogue between race studies and migration studies is necessary.

Hence, the race optic[59] emerges as a valuable tool for analyzing Belgium’s post-colonial and post-racial context. It allows for the identification and analysis of racial power dynamics and structures that shape society, as ‘race’ focuses on power, privilege, oppression, and socio-political organization. Yet, this concept is multifaceted and contested due to its controversial history. While there is a risk of misinterpreting it as a return to racist ideology, particularly in French-speaking contexts where it is taboo, the absence of the term does not eliminate racialization, stigmatization, and hierarchization[60]. As social scientists, we need concepts to address social realities, and ‘race’ can be critically used to understand how racialized hierarchical differences are constructed, perpetuated, and their effects, such as racial discrimination. It seems essential to consider this category while acknowledging the continued influence of other systems of power as well to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex and multifaceted social realities. However, in practice, this can pose

a significant challenge. Thus, the race optic[61] seems relevant when examining issues related to migrants and said minorities, as Othering processes, racialized hierarchies, and racism – and their resistances – are also inextricably linked to the diversification of societies such as Belgium's.

Conclusive thoughts: Race matters in migration studies too

Recently, there has been a notable increase in the number of works that draw from critical race approaches to examine migration-related issues. This includes the concept of the 'race – (im)migration nexus'[62], which emphasizes the co-constitution of racialization and migration. This tendency to bring race, racialization, and migration into dialogue also becomes evident in the IMISCOE network. In 2023 and 2024, two PhD Schools were dedicated to race and migration. A Standing Committee focusing on Race, Racism, and Discrimination has recently been established 'to engage in interdisciplinary conversations with an ambition to more adequately conceptualize and empirically study racial inequalities and racial exclusion, and to epistemologically and institutionally contribute to racial equity and justice'[63]. Additionally, an expanding body of literature explores the interconnections between colonialism, coloniality, and migration studies. One of the most notable works addressing this issue is Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner's 'Migration Studies and Colonialism', which presents a compelling argument for situating colonial histories at the core of the discipline of migration studies. Indeed, migration studies have tended to overlook the intertwining of colonialism and migration history. However, the legacy of colonialism continues to influence migration dynamics and state policies towards migrants to this day[64]. The recent emergence of these developments prompts me to question the power dynamics in academia: how do dominant racial logics in society and whiteness shape academic production?

Regarding Belgium, there has also been a rise in interest in subjects of race, racism, colonialism and its legacies, as well as critical approaches, in relation to the study of migration and diversity. There is a growing awareness of the colonial history, both within the academic community and in the public sphere, although Belgium displays a less critical stance towards its colonial past than other European post-colonial societies[65]. Belgian universities have not been spared from calls for decolonizing the university and the production of knowledge. Nevertheless, Sophie Withaeckx identified several challenges that may explain the relatively late emergence of these critical perspectives in the academic context, compared to other countries, which are linked to the Belgian context and university normativities[66]. The specific relationship between Belgium and race, as well as its colonial history – as discussed in the article – has led to ignorance, denial, and silence regarding race and colonization, as well as a lack of attention paid to critical voices. This is reflected in the production of knowledge. Furthermore, there is a paucity of 'critical scholars with postcolonial roots'[67] at the university, who often advance postcolonial critiques and analysis in other countries. In general, notable fields of study, such as gender, queer, and critical race theory, have encountered significant challenges to be integrated into the academic system in Belgium, with structural funding only becoming available relatively recently. Additionally, Sophie Withaeckx stressed the scarce attention devoted to the 'postcolonial subject' in the field of migration studies. According to her, this is closely linked to the relative invisibility of post-colonial populations within the academic community and the lack of critical debate on their experiences. A significant proportion of migration-related studies have also focused on issues such as integration, Islam, and radicalization within larger migrant communities, including Moroccan and Turkish labor migrants and their descendants. This focus reflects a broader trend in migration studies, where the effects

of racism and colonialism are often overlooked[68].

In recent years, however, a growing body of scholarship has focused on populations of African descent and Black political mobilizations[69], which are inextricably linked to post-colonial migration and the post-colonial Belgian context. Moreover, some scholars have critically addressed the issue of racism, and its manifestations, towards migrants. This has been achieved, for example, through the examination of institutional racism in Belgian migration governance[70]. These recent developments, among other works, appear to articulate questions of race, colonialism, coloniality, and racism (and their resistances) with migration and diversity-related issues. Further analysis is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of these interconnections and their effects within the specific Belgian context. This could provide new insights into several matters, such as the experiences of migrants and those perceived as such in Belgium, according to the different racialization processes and how they intersect with other social differentiations. It could also provide new insights into the history of migration policy, the formation of hierarchies between migrants, and the development of identity, community, and past and present movements. Regarding the latter, one perspective might be to investigate the (recent?) political identifications and mobilizations of populations of Asian descent[71], who seem to remain underrepresented in Belgian migration studies. It would also be worthwhile to further examine the role of race – and whiteness – in shaping the production of knowledge and what kind of knowledge it enables in academia.

In conclusion, despite the assertion of equality for all and the condemnation of racism in Belgium, racial discrimination persists in every social sphere. While it has been silenced, circumvented, or marginalized in discourses, race continues to structure society and knowledge, and its effects are manifest. Those engaged in anti-racist activism have been vocal on these issues, yet the prevailing strategy appears to be race-blind. The objective of this article was to critically explore some ways in which race has been overlooked in Belgium, including in knowledge production, by examining the Belgian post-racial paradox. These matters require further reflection. Such an examination highlights the necessity of critically engaging with the concept of race as a valid and pertinent analytical lens to understand Belgian society, despite the prevailing color-blind ideology. Of course, race should not be viewed as an immutable concept, nor should it be the sole lens through which social life is understood. It also becomes evident that the racial lens appears to be relevant for examining migration and diversity, as racialization, colonialization and migration have been historically intertwined: race matters in migration studies, but migration also matters in race studies.

Notes

1 The concept of race is employed in this article with a critical approach, recognizing race as a historically and socially constructed categorization and a mode of power. This concept is approached in its relationship to the notion of racialization, which can be defined as the process of creating differences based on characteristics that are considered significant. These characteristics may include, but are not limited to, skin color, origin, religion, ethnicity, way of speaking, way of living, and so forth. The result of this process is the construction of groups and individuals as subaltern ‘Others’ in a racially stratified society. For a general overview of the sociology of race (in French), see: S. Mazouz, *Race,* Anamosa, 2020; S. Brun and C. Cosquer, *Sociologie de la race,* Armand Colin, 2022; among others.

2 J.-M. Lafleur, M. Martiniello, and A. Rea, *Une brève histoire migratoire de la Belgique*, in *Dictionnaire des migrations internationales : Approche géohistorique*, Armand Colin, 2015, 24-29.

3 S. Demart, *Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives*, in *African Diaspora*, *6*(1), 2013, 1-20.

4 N. Fadil and M. Martiniello, *Racisme et antiracisme en Belgique*, in *Fédéralisme Régionalisme,* 20, 2020.

5 S. Vertovec, *Super-diversity and its implications*, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *30*(6), 2007, 1024-1054.

6 Statbel, *Diversité selon l'origine en Belgique,* online, https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/nouvelles/diversite-selon-lorigine-en-belgique-1, consulted on 23/10/2023.

7 R. Fibbi, A. H. Midtbøen, and P. Simon, *Migration and Discrimination: IMISCOE Short Reader*, Springer Nature, 2021.

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9 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Black people in the EU face ever more racism*, online, https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2023/black-people-eu-face-ever-more-racism, consulted on 11/03/2024.

10 UNIA, *Il faut mieux lutter contre l'antisémitisme en Belgique*, online, https://www.unia.be/fr/articles/mieux-lutter-contre-antisemitisme, consulted on 11/03/2024.

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13 E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists. Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America,* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

14 *Ibid.,* 1.

15 D. T. Goldberg, *Racial Europeanization,* in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *29*(2), 2006, 331-364.; A. Lentin, *Europe and the Silence about Race*, in *European Journal of Social Theory*, *11*(4), 2008, 487-503.

16 D. T. Goldberg, *op. cit.*

17 A. Lentin, *op. cit.*

18 M. Bessone, *Sans distinction de race ? Une analyse critique du concept de race et de ses effets pratiques*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2013.

19 D. T. Goldberg, *op. cit.,* 337.

20 M. Bessone, *op. cit.*

21 A. Quijano, *Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America*, in *International Sociology*, *15*(2), 2000, 215-232.

22 N. Fadil and M. Martiniello, *op. cit.*

23 J. Bobineau, *The historical taboo: colonial discourses and postcolonial identities in Belgium*, in *Werkwinkel – Journal of Low Countries and South African Studies*, *12*(1), 2017, 107-123; A. Van den Braembussche, *The silence of Belgium: taboo and trauma in Belgian memory*, in *Yale French Studies*, 102, 2002, 34-52.

24 I. Goddeeris, *Postcolonial Belgium*, in *Interventions*, *17*(3), 2015, 434-451.

25 S. R. Kanobana, *Chapter 2. Black Brussels,* in *Mapping Black Europe: monuments, markers, memories*, eds. N.A. Kelly and O. Vassell, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2023, 49-68.

26 *Ibid.,* 51.

27 It should be noted that a significant limitation of this article is the absence of engagement with the Dutch-language literature in Belgium, due to personal linguistic constraints.

28 Personal translation from French. 'Il faut pouvoir nommer la réalité. Tout comme s'interdire de penser les catégories raciales ne les fait pas disparaître, les nommer ne revient ni à les créer ni à les valider'. M. Bessone, *op. cit.,*12.

29 Z. Hellgren and B. Á. Bereményi, *Introduction to the Special Issue: Far from Colorblind. Reflections on Racialization in Contemporary Europe,* in *Social Sciences*, *11*(1), 21, 2022, 1.

30 M. Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer (8), 1982, 777-795.

31 G. E. Marcus, *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography*, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *24*(1), 1995, 95-117.

32 M. Cervulle, *La conscience dominante. Rapports sociaux de race et subjectivation*, in *Cahiers du Genre*, *53*, 2012, 37-54, 39.

33 M.-A. Paveau, *Comment pensent les chercheuses blanches ? Propositions épistémologiques et méthodologiques,* in *Itinéraires*, *2021-3*, 2022.

34 See MRAX, *Du MRAP au MRAX…,* online, https://mrax.be/archives/du-mrap-au-mrax/du-mrap-au-mrax-2/, consulted on 10/09/2024.

35 I still need to conduct further inquiry into the socio-historical dimension of resistance to racism and discrimination, including among migrant communities who arrived prior to the 1980s. To gain further insight into the historical 'struggles for dignity of the Maghrebi and Black diasporas in Belgium', see the platform 'First Waves': https://www.firstwaves.be/en/nodes/pages/first-waves/.

36 N. Fadil and M. Martiniello, *op. cit.*

37 R. Said Salem, K. Rutten, and L. De Wilde, *Dealing with a contested past: The Belgian decolonisation debate*, in *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 2023, 1-14.

38 See *Non, le sauvage de la Ducasse d'Ath ne périra pas !,* in *La DH*, online, https://www.dhnet.be/regions/tournai-ath-mouscron/pays-vert/2019/08/20/non-le-sauvage-de-la-ducasse-dath-ne-perira-pas-L4ZAOAABRNHYLKOY4BTTJ7YWBI/, consulted on 10/09/2024.

39 UNIA, *Le carnaval et les limites à la liberté d'expression. Analyse d'Unia*, online, https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/Carnaval_2019_FR.pdf, consulted on 19/02/2024.

40 Personal translation from French. '(…) La complaisance des autorités à l'égard de manifestations de racisme sous couvert de folklore'. Bruxelles Panthères, *Plaidoyer pour la fin du blackface en Belgique,* online, https://bruxelles-panthere.thefreecat.org/?p=4274, consulted on 19/02/2024.

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42 See *Début du cortège de la Ducasse d'Ath avec le Sauvage se muant en Diable* in *RTL info*, online, https://www.rtl.be/page-videos/belgique/societe/debut-du-cortege-de-la-ducasse-dath-avec-le-sauvage-se-muant-en-diable/2023-08-27/video/581949, consulted on 19/02/2024.

43 See *Ducasse d'Ath: 'Le Sauvage n'a rien de raciste'* in *La DH*, online, https://www.dhnet.be/regions/tournai-ath-mouscron/pays-vert/2022/08/26/ducasse-dath-le-sauvage-na-rien-de-raciste-Q2N2YOXNJFGKHD4OO4JQBNTVKI/, consulted on 19/02/2024.

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47 G. Wekker, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Duke University Press, 2016.

48 *Ibid*.

49 *Ibid*., 166.

50 S. Brun and P. Simon, *'Ceci n'est pas du racisme': Controverses publiques et scientifiques dans la qualification du racisme*, in *Mouvements*, *HS no. 2* (HS), 2022, 20-38.

51 See *Commission spéciale "passé colonial" : Une stratégie d'enfumage aux frais du contribuable, https*://www.memoirecoloniale.be/actualites/communique-commission-speciale-passe-colonial-une-strategie-denfumage-aux-frais-du-contribuable, consulted on 20/02/2024.

52 See *L'appel de plus de 200 personnalités pour la publication du rapport décolonisation*, in *Le Soir*, online https://www.lesoir.be/564645/article/2024-01-30/lappel-de-plus-de-200-personnalites-pour-la-publication-du-rapport?fbclid=IwY2xjawE0aRpleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHRkD31mXYmJW79BkjTKHsO24uer4ssT3ktV__D5O1uinedB
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53 S. R. Kanobana, *op. cit.,* 51.

54 C. W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism,* Oxford University Press, 2017.

55 *Ibid.,* 65.

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57 I. Goddeeris, *op. cit.*

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60 M. Bessone, *op. cit.*

61 N. Kibria, C. Bowman and M. O'Leary, *op. cit.*

62 U. Erel, K. Murji and Z. Nahaboo, *Understanding the contemporary race–migration nexus*, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(8), 2016, 1339-1360; N. Kibria, C. Bowman and M. O'Leary, *op. cit.*

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68 *Ibid.*

69 The following is a non-exhaustive list of references about Black mobilizations in Belgium: V. Clette-Gakuba, *An Attempt at Black Political Subjectivation in a White Institution: The Case of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium*, in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-nationalism. Rethinking the past for new conviviality*, eds. M. Gržinić, J. Pristovšek, and S. Uitz, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020; S. Demart, *Riots in Matonge and… the indifference of public authority?*, in *Brussels Studies,* n° 68, 2013; S. Demart, *L'épuisement des dynamiques de fédération des associations afrodescendantes : De la reconnaissance d'un sujet politique", Analyse n°31*, Kwandika de Bamko-Cran asbl, Bruxelles, 2018 ; N. Grégoire, *Identity Politics, Social Movement and the State: 'Pan-African' Associations and the Making of an 'African community' in Belgium*, in *African Diaspora*, *3*(1), 2010, 159-181; N. Grégoire and J. Mazzocchetti, *Altérité « africaine » et luttes collectives pour la reconnaissance en Belgique*, in *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, *29*(2), 2013, 95-114 ; N. Grégoire and M. Ntambwe, *Afro Women's Activism in Belgium: Questioning Diversity and Solidarity*, in *To Exist is to Resist. Black Feminism*

in Europe, eds. A. EMEJULU and F. SOBANDE, Pluto press, 2019, 63-75; S. R. KANOBANA, *op. cit.*; among others.among others.

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71 See, for example, the recent emergence of anti-racist and feminist mobilizations under the identification 'Asio-descendants', such as the collective '*Féministes Asio-descendant·e·s de Belgique*' in French-speaking Belgium and 'Untold Asian Stories' in the Flemish part.

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