

Johnny Van Hove

# CONGOISM

Congo Discourses in  
the United States from  
1800 to the Present

[transcript] Histoire

## **From:**

*Johnny Van Hove*

### **Congoism**

## **Congo Discourses in the United States from 1800 to the Present**

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To justify the plundering of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo, U.S. intellectual elites have continuously produced dismissive Congo discourses. Tracing these discourses in great depth and breadth for the first time, Johnny Van Hove shows how U.S. intellectuals (and their influential European counterparts) have been using the Congo in similar fashions for their own goals. Analyzing intellectuals as diverse as W.E.B. Du Bois, Joseph Conrad, and David Van Reybrouck, the book offers a theorization of Central West Africa, a case study of normalized narratives on the "Other", and a stirring wake up call for all contemporary writers on international history and politics.

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# Introduction

Shifting Perspectives on the Congo:

Re-Reading Central West Africa

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Congo: 2 different countries are named congo [sic] [...]; When u [sic] have dreadlocks, and they start to growtogether [sic] making a big fat dread then u [sic] call it congo [...]; A term referred to a black mixed white individual who is stubborn, irrational, arrogant, bipolar, and confusing to many people because of his/her attitude [...]; Congo can be best described as the unnecessary display of excessive aggression, severe lack of mannerly conduct or undeserved acts of enthusiasm [...]; Person of African descent (from heart of africa [sic]) [...]; A great nickname for any of your black friends [...]; The stern look of disapproval [...]; A racial slur targeting African Americans particularly those who have Portuguese and Angolian [sic] descent [...].

BEN E. HAMA, KATTIAA,

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## HISTORY IN “TRANS- MODE”

This is a work of history and a work about history. As a work of history, this book traces the historical trajectories of the word “Congo”<sup>1</sup> within the context of (Afri-

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1 Hereafter the Congo will no longer be emphasized through quotation marks. Readers should bear in mind the embattled and fluid meaning and status of the Congo, though.

can) American intellectual texts and milieus. To be more specific: The Congo is not merely a “word”, but also, as Reinhart Koselleck’s thoughtful distinction has it, a “term” or a “concept”. “Concepts” signify the socially entangled and historically loaded, malleable meanings of words (Koselleck 1972: XXI). In keeping with Koselleck’s distinction, “terms” like the Congo are based on single events which define the Congo synchronically (at the time when they happen), but also diachronically. As the meaning of these events return systematically in the texts under scrutiny over longer periods of time, they begin to reveal broader socio-political and structural dimensions (cf. Koselleck 2006: 24). This Introduction will constantly come back to this process, highlighting the malleability of the Congo as term. For now, it suffices to state that, as a work of history, this work discusses the term Congo in order to make broader claims regarding the history of the United States in general and Black<sup>2</sup> American communities in particular.

As a work about history, it examines how historians have written about the Congo by relying on particular sources, narrative techniques, and theoretical approaches, as well as by mobilizing and advocating a set of traceable ideological assumptions. “Historian” is a notion that is interpreted widely here: Histories of the Congo have never been created by trained historians alone. The primary and secondary sources taken up here, therefore, are written by scholars and intellectuals – of varying degrees of professionalism as historians – who have indelibly marked the image of the Congo throughout the last two centuries. To examine how history is produced and to investigate its function within certain contexts indeed “reveals”, as Ernst Breisach asserts in his *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, “that human life is subject to the dictates of time” (1983: 2). Discussing works of history through a historiographical lens is another means, in other words, by which one may discuss socio-political history itself. Historiography echoes the paradigms and political battles of the times in which history was written. In this book, a work of and about history, the Congo is not only discussed as a historically contingent discursive entity, but also in terms of how historical works and sources fashioned it as such.

This work is a history in the “trans- mode”, as it is called here, or a history that has been written along transnational, transtemporal, transdisciplinary, and transcultural<sup>3</sup> lines. History in a trans- mode has become quite fashionable in terms of

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2 Black(s) with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lower-case black is simply a color. The terms “Black” and “Black American” or “African American” are used interchangeably here.

3 Transcultural history, as taken up here, is in line with Madeleine Herren’s approach, i.e. a history that reflects critically on the way history is constructed, which refuses cultural es-

“space” (i.e. in the form of transnational history). Transnational history, or as Akira Iriye has defined it, “the study of movements and forces that have cut across national boundaries” (2014: 213), has been held an enduring attraction for many American scholars, even before the approach became fashionable. Theoretical reflections on transnational American history began appearing as early as 1916, with Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-National America”, and continued to appear throughout the following decades, for instance with Laurence Veysey’s 1979 “The Autonomy of American History Reconsidered” and Ian Tyrrell’s 2009 “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice”.

The trans- mode, however, is decidedly less popular when it comes to the temporal dimension: “Transnational history is all the rage. Transtemporal history has yet to come into vogue” (Guldi/Armitage 2014: 15). After its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, long-term history has steadily declined and has only hesitantly returned in the last few years, as Guldi and Armitage argue (*ibid*: 7-15). In this book, history is executed from the perspective of the “*longue durée*”, as Braudel famously described it in his seminal *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Departing slightly from Braudel, however, *longue durée* is understood here as the slow and partially cyclical change in “discourse” over time (*cf.* the discussion on “discourse” below), and not in the natural world, as Braudel originally intended it (1995: 19-21).

This book does take up Braudel’s three-tiered temporality, however. The discursive *longue durée* occurs in dialogue with the gently paced story of states, societies, communities (*lentement rythmée*; *ibid*: 20), and the more traditional history of events (*l’histoire événementielle*; *ibid*: 21). If this work had limited itself to a history of “events” (see discussion below), it would not have been able to develop an explanation for the particular attention paid by U.S. historians to the Congo. I initially focused exclusively on the 1960s and 1970s of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only to discover that the Congo discourse cannot be explained without a broad and deep historical investigation. Moreover, by writing a history in *longue durée*, this work situates itself in an approach to history written in order to influence public debate (Guldi/Armitage 2014: 8). This is a tradition worth preserving. My work is thus both descriptive and prescriptive: It attempts to describe American discourses on the Congo and, through an in-depth discussion of those agents opposing this dis-

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sentialism and asks who has formed history in the past and succeeded in shaping what can be called “the master narrative” (Herren 2012).

course, contemplates ways out of participating in a certain “rhetorically”<sup>4</sup> on the Congo.

Instrumental in grasping the Congo in a historical and historiographical sense, as well as in a “trans- mode”, was the lowering of the disciplinary drawbridge between the fields of history and cultural studies. This type of transdisciplinary approach itself has a long and fruitful history. Philology, economics, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics (among other fields) have entered historical investigations successfully in the past and with great gain, as Richard J. Evans points out (2000: 8-9, 195; cf. Iggers 2007: 101-110). In this spirit, a discourse analytic take will here complement rigorous and broad archival research, as well as critical discussions of a large corpus of primary sources. Bringing cultural studies and history together here is not merely a productive step, but also a necessary one. This has in part to do with the importance of works of “culture”, in the sense of “art” (e.g. Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*), but also with the importance of “culture” in the broad sense of the term as a network of negotiations and power relations across U.S. society, as will be discussed at length below. More effectively than anything else, cultural studies brings useful tools to the table that enable one to interpret these negotiations.

Discussing the Congo requires a methodological approach that goes beyond hermeneutics or source-criticism. Discourse analysis allows seemingly unrelated texts and utterances to be brought together and discussed at eye level through the term that ties them together: The Congo. Henry Highland Garnet’s 1843 “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” mentioned the “untutored African who roams in the wilds of Congo” (Garnet 2003: 117) to evoke a global, Black humanity. Why the Congo, and not the “Ethiopian” that “roams” the deserts, one may ask? In the same vein, of all the African places that witnessed colonial terror and bloodshed she might call upon, Ida B. Wells-Barnett compared the lynching of two colleagues in the American South in late 19th century to “a scene of shocking savagery which would have disgraced the Congo” (Wells-Barnett 1996: 112). Again, why the Congo? The same can be asked about the monkey brought to the U.S. by author Langston Hughes from his journey through Africa (Hughes 1988: 225), dubbed “Congo devil”, as described in his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea*. Finally, why did Martin Luther King reject the Congo in 1968 when he told his readers: “The American Negro is not in a Congo” (King 1968: 62). Through a discourse analysis, the details and precise methods of which will be explained extensively below, it is possible to approach the phenomenon of the Congo in an inter-

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4 Or how language is bound to be pervasively figurative, and, more often than not, compulsory rhetorical (Richards 2007: 125-133).

textual, socio-political manner. Discourse analysis, focusing on the communication and negotiation that happens between people through language (cf. Iggers 106), has far more potential for ascertaining the “Congo’s” significance in U.S. society than other approaches.

The trans- approach in this work has had an effect on how results are presented. Due to the attention to theory and theorization that cultural studies bring to this work, this book can be conceptualized as an empirically-led theorization and historicization of the Congo. Many concepts used to debate this theorization and historicization require extensive definition. These will be provided in the body of the text (not in footnotes), one at a time, and in a context that allows their background and necessity to be explained. At times, this means that the arrival of a clear-cut definition is delayed for some pages, and this is especially the case in the Introduction. This is done with the aim of allowing the reader to journey more informed through the maze of numerous concepts mobilized throughout this book. Another consequence of the trans- mode is enacted on the formal level: The style of reference here is that of American literary scholars. This style integrates references into the body of the text, which allows both for better readability and epistemic coherence. The “constructive and combative activity” usually found in the many footnotes in German works of history (through which these works subtly comment on the works of others; cf. Grafton 1997: 9), is thus transferred to the main narrative. The reason for this particular style of reference is that academics are no mere observers of the Congo: “Academics too have their biases and fads, their preferred topics, and their taboos”, as Jan Vansina reminds us in his *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (1990: 25). Contemporary academics, too, this work ultimately hypothesizes, are prone to be part of a particular discourse – i.e. the all-pervading existence of “Congoism”. The place to discuss this issue is in the body of the text, not in footnotes.

The trans-mode of writing history points to the “normalized” and “authoritative” discourses produced in scientific, activist, journalistic, and other kinds of communities and institutions – predominantly in the United States, but also beyond it (given the intertwining of these communities on an international level). Attending in more detail to the socially regulated Congo judgments turns the work at hand into a Foucauldian endeavor, the apparatus of which is already echoed in the title of this work. At this point, it may already be useful to spell out how Foucault is used, and not used, in this work. First of all, the early and theoretical Foucault will be incorporated, in terms of his 1969 *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It is here that Foucault comes closest to defining his particular take on “discourse” (Willaert 2012: 30), which renders the book useful for empirically-oriented histories like the one at

hand. “The purpose of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is to suggest how rhetoric can be studied and understood in its relationship with power and knowledge” (n.p.), the cover text of Foucault’s seminal theory goes, and it embarks precisely on this enterprise. However, this book is, at the same time, not as Foucauldian as it seems at first. The idea that autonomous rules govern the production of knowledge, as well as that the subject has “died”, are rejected in this work, for instance. Empirical evidence in the course of this work shows that subjects have conscientiously operated against the discursive grain.

This Introduction will return to this important topic in due time. For now, however, it is time to move to the question of what this Congo, the subject of our inquiry, actually designates.

## **TOWARDS THE CONGO: CENTRAL WEST AFRICA AS A U.S. AMERICAN REAL-AND-IMAGINED GEOGRAPHY**

### **The Real-and-Imagined Congo**

What does the Congo actually refer to in the American historical record? There can only be a very contextualized answer to this question, which depends on whose Congo we ultimately decide to take up. In this work, the answer is the Congo generations of American intellectuals who published from 1800 onward and whose works found sizable public audiences. Intellectuals are particularly interesting because, on the one hand, they are singular as independent thinkers: They often self-consciously “transmit[ed], modif[ied], and create[d] ideas” (Banks 1996: xvi) about the Congo. On the other hand, they are exemplary as plural entities, too: They are model examples, in other words, of the many voices on the Congo in their respective cultures and times.

Let us dig deeper into this notion of intellectuals in the plural. As such, these thinkers constituted, as Gramsci famously put it, an organic part of their social locus (i.e. their “class”, which is broadened to “race” and “gender” in what follows). These “organic intellectuals” are distinguished less by their profession, which theoretically could be anything, than by their function in developing and expressing the ideas and aspirations of their class (Gramsci 1999: 134-135). Gramsci saw, in his own day, the rise of a “new intellectual” (ibid: 141), an intellectual who he opposed to “the traditional and vulgarised type of the intellectual [who] is given by the man of letters, the philosopher, the artist” (ibid). Gramsci suggested that “the mode of being of the new intellectual” lies in “active participation in practical life, as con-

structor, organiser, ‘permanent persuader’” (ibid). Against the background of this “unprecedented expansion” of the role of the intellectual (ibid: 146), this thesis attempts to select wisely from, as well as understand and do justice to, the American intellectual scenes from the nineteenth century onward. As a consequence, intellectuals are examined through their various public roles: As, for instance, journalists, amateur and academic historians, artists, and political activists.

Through the paradigmatic lens of American intellectuals, a Congo will be unpacked that constitutes both a “real” and “imagined” entity, as Edward Soja terms it in his seminal *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. The real and the imagined are produced and maintained by one another simultaneously through their interaction, as is shown in this work. Although Soja argues that the real and the imagined are inseparable, he does divide them in the end. This begs the question: What is this “real” Congo? And what is its “imagined” counterpart? Soja’s answer might be that the “real” should be considered the “concrete materiality” of the Congo; the “imagined”, in turn, would refer to the “thoughtful re-presentations” of those same material spaces and peoples (Soja 1996: 10). The question remains as to what is meant by this concretely.

The quote at the beginning of this Introduction provides a fruitful entry point for exploring this real-and-imagined Congo in more concrete terms – bringing the real and the imagined together “on equal terms, or at least not privileging one over the other a priori” (Soja 1996: 68). The quote is taken from *urbandictionary.com* (Hama/Kattiaa/mojo12 et. al), an online slang database that itself constantly straddles the fine line between the imagined and the real.<sup>5</sup> “2 different countries are named congo”, claims the first definition – referring to today’s The Democratic Republic of the Congo and The Republic of the Congo. These countries are made tangible in the form of government representatives, national soccer teams, armies, embassies, flags, hymns, and, last but not least, official names that appear on the letterheads of official documents. All of these material signs turn the Congo into a very “real” place. However, the history of both nations also reveals how constructed, fluid, and imaginary these material markers of nationhood truly are. This is a trait they share with all other states, as Benedict Anderson points out in his influential *Imagined*

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5 Johnny Davis’s 2015 article “In Praise of Urban dictionaries” in *The Guardian* shows how *urbandictionary.com* undeniably reflects and shapes the real, despite the fact that the database is characterized by very little “intellectual rigour” (ibid: n.p.), it has been used, for instance, by the U.S. American Royal Courts of Justice, by the Department of Motor Vehicles, and by Fox News to help a judge in a music copyright case, to decide whether to grant certain requests for license plates, and to help determine whether or not to air episodes of *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*.

Communities. How did its status as imagined entity impact The Democratic Republic of the Congo, though, the country upon which this thesis focuses in order to discuss the Congo? And what does this imaginary Congo contribute to a discussion of the Congo as “real” entity?

The imagined Congo allows us to come to terms with The Democratic Republic of the Congo’s slightly alienating history (at least from the perspective of those who live in relatively stable Euro-American countries). With the stroke of a pen, or by the barrel of a gun, The Democratic Republic of the Congo was re-named and reconstructed at will (which does not mean without opposition) by those who happened to be in power. The name Congo derives from the pre-colonial kingdom of the Kongo, which had a river flowing through it by the same name (Kisangani/Bobb 2010: Iv-Ixi). Over the decades, the region has expanded and contracted, including and then excluding parts of historical and contemporary Angola (which explains in part why Blacks from the Congo are sometimes called Angolans in slave records – see discussion later on). Through the existence of the Kongo kingdom, inhabitants from that region began to be known by outsiders and insiders alike as Congo or Kongo, Bakongo, or (in colonial times) “Bantu”, just as their languages were called similar names, such as Kikongo (Turner 2013: xvi, 75).

In imperial times, the Belgian King Leopold II dubbed and marketed this vast region around the Congo estuary as the Congo Free State (1885-1908; Kisangani/Bobb 2010: Ixi-Ixii). This name promised free trade under the auspices of the king, but soon came to stand for a protectionist horror house of human rights abuse, described in Hochschild’s bestselling *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. The same region was then re-labeled the Belgian Congo (1908-1960), which reflected a power shift from the royal house to the Belgian state with regard to the Congo’s governance, as well as a shift from a rationale of trade to one of colonial possession and “paternalism”: The Congo became Belgian property and the Congolese its “children” (Gondola 2002: 18-19; Kisangani/Bobb 2010: Ixii).

On June 30th, 1960, the country became the Republic of Congo. Four years later, the Luluabourg constitution changed the name once again to the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kisangani/Bobb 2010: xv). Dictator Mobutu subsequently and unilaterally renamed the country Zaire (1971-1998), a change which was offered to internal and external backers as a means by which the country’s authentic past and resources might be reclaimed, but which was discredited soon enough as a huge personal confiscation of the country’s wealth (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007: 171-213). After Mobutu’s downfall, the country was re-dubbed The Democratic Republic of the Congo (1998-present), a name which evokes and promises democratic participa-

tion, but which can hardly camouflage that the regimes of Laurent and Joseph Kabila – given their track record of handpicked parliaments, unfair elections, and systematic repression of the opposition – constitute “democracy without democrats”, as the Congolese scholar and activist Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja described to me in a lengthy interview for the online Belgian magazine *rekto:verso* (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2010; cf.: Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007: 240-248).

While the official naming of The Democratic Republic of the Congo is pervaded with the imaginary, many of the designations of today’s The Democratic Republic of the Congo found in fiction are permeated with the “real”, too. The metaphor of “heart of darkness” is a prominent example, deriving from Joseph Conrad’s novella of the same title. Even without hinting at the Congo Free State explicitly, the novella was instantly linked to the well-documented “atrocities” committed by Leopold’s state and played a substantial role in the international human rights movement against Leopold II’s system of forced labor (Hawkins 2006: 373). Subsequently, the metaphor of “heart of darkness” embarked upon a remarkable career, entering the international lexicon as shorthand for crimes that went far beyond the Congo Free State. It came to stand, for instance, for the deplorable imperial appropriation of Africa as a whole (Achebe 2006), for claims of racial superiority (Hawkins), and for extreme human rights abuses in South Africa and South America, exemplified by book titles such as Jacques De Pauw’s *Into the Heart of Darkness: Confessions of Apartheid’s Assassins* and Shari Turitz’s *Confronting the Heart of Darkness: An International Symposium on Torture in Guatemala*.

Conrad’s text also imposed an enduring way of talking about the Congo itself that is still employed today. Journalists such as the African American veteran foreign correspondent of *The New York Times* Howard French (cf. Third Chapter, too) have criticized the tendency of many journalists to invoke “overworking clichés drawn from *Heart of Darkness*” (French 2005: 50). At the same time, French has admitted that he himself has struggled to escape from these same commonplaces in his well-researched *A Continent for the Taking*. On various occasions, French lapses into a language of blankness, randomness, and naturalness to debate Congolese disasters. Frequently, his rhetoric is reminiscent of Conrad’s: “But like nature, politics tolerates no vacuums”, French writes, “and politically speaking, Zaire was already becoming an empty pit in the heart of the continent – a pit waiting for someone, by yet another unforeseen process, to fit it up and make the earth level again” (ibid: 56).

An overview of The Democratic Republic of the Congo’s recent past thus shows to what extent the Congo has always been thoroughly real-and-imagined, produced through a nexus of material, discursive, and power-filled knowledge. It is

through this shift of perspective on Central West Africa (as a real-and-imagined entity) that this book pursues its task.

## **The U.S. American Congo**

The real-and-imagined Congo will be investigated here via a broad corpus of texts by U.S. American intellectuals. The United States was chosen for the following reasons. American intellectuals and political elites have “long insisted on the relevance of the Congo to the United States”, as Ira Dworkin observes (2003: 6). These American elites have exerted substantial political and economic influence on Central West Africa, and the Congo’s history, in turn, is indelibly marked by American involvement (cf. Turner 2013: 35-42). From the 16th to the late 19th century, with a peak from 1790 to 1803, today’s The Democratic Republic of the Congo and its contemporary neighbors The Republic of the Congo and Angola constituted “the single most important source of African slaves” for the New World (Littlefield 2005: 154; Klein 1999: 66-69). Imports from the Congo, many histories argue, accounted for about 40 percent of the slaves shipped forcefully to the Americas and for more than 50 percent of those shipped to British North America specifically (J. Miller 1976: 76; Klein 1999: 66; Gomez 1998: 33). Although this “numbers game” itself must be carefully investigated (cf. First Chapter), the scholarly accounts point unmistakably to the fact that a lot of slaves were presumably imported from Central West Africa to the United States.

America’s involvement cannot be underestimated in the colonial era either. Henry Morgan Stanley, for instance, was a Welsh-born U.S. American journalist who claimed territory for Leopold’s Congo Free State and who established the first infrastructure of exploitation in that state (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007: 15-17). Moreover, Stanley wrote bestselling travelogues for the Anglo-American market, such as *In Darkest Africa* and *Through the Dark Continent*, which decisively shaped the imagery and vocabulary of the Congo in the international arena (Edgerton 2002: 32). The colonial era also saw substantial lobbying by Leopold’s proxies in the U.S., which caused a serious scandal and drew skeptical attention to the king’s politics as a whole (cf. Second Chapter). Through this lobbying, the United States government was the first to recognize the king’s claims to the Congo in 1884 (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007: 266). The “plunder [...] slave labor and the crimes of rape, torture, body mutilation and murder” that followed (ibid: 23) were forcefully addressed and communicated in the early 19th century by American activists of the international human rights organization Congo Reform Association (cf. Second Chapter). In the U.S, this organization was aptly represented by both African American intellectu-

als, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as popular white fiction writers such as Mark Twain (Dworkin 2003: 70, 112; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2007: 24).

The story of American intervention in the Congo continued after the Congo Free State was re-branded the “Belgian Congo”. In the early 1940s, the Manhattan Project, the U.S. American research and development program that created the first atomic bomb, could not have been successfully executed without the vast quantities of uranium ore from Central West Africa (Hewlett/Anderson 1962: 85-86). On top of this, in order to secure ongoing access to mineral-rich Central West Africa, consecutive U.S. administrations have both actively undermined and consciously eliminated elected Congolese politicians (Patrice Lumumba, for instance), as well as supported American-oriented autocratic Congolese elites with no social base to hold them nationally accountable. The “America-sponsored coup by Mobutu” in 1965, who was eventually known as “America’s Tyrant” and “Our Man in Kinshasa” (Turner 2013: 1, 38), ushered in a regime that lasted decades due to the ongoing financial support of the United States, which bordered on a patron-client relationship (*ibid*: 38; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2010; Kisangani/Bobb 2010: Ixvii-Ixxvii). Finally, after the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, America turned against the dictator and actively supported those overthrowing Mobutu (and their Congolese proxies, such as Laurent Kabila), through “long-standing and unconditional support” of the invading countries Rwanda and Uganda during the worst episodes of the Congo wars from 1998 onward (Trefon 2011:13). In the transition from war to pacification, the U.S. was the dominant force in guiding The Democratic Republic of the Congo to a “quasi-trusteeship” through international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Committee in Support of Transition (Turner 2013: 40-41).

The constant meddling by the U.S. in Central West Africa, from slave-catching to coltan-grabbing, has rendered the U.S. the most decisive external power in the region up until today (*ibid*: 44). This assertion of power from across the oceans has left its material and discursive traces in both places. In this book, the traces of the real-and-imagined Congo in the United States will be focused upon.<sup>6</sup> One striking example of how material, discursive, and transnational semanticizations go together is Congo Square in New Orleans, officially known as “Beauregard Square” until 2011 (Evans 2011: 1-30). This locale originally took its famous unofficial name “from the Congo Negroes who used to perform their dance on its sward every Sunday”, to cite William Wells Brown (1880: 121; cf. Thompson 2005b: 285-286). Via

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6 Although the transnational Congo will receive some attention – the Congo in Liberia and Haiti, for instance.

the well-known cultural practices performed in Beaugard Square, the Congo came to stand in the following decades for dance performances of various kinds. This real-and-imagined relationship kept reproducing itself in the decades and centuries to come. William Wells Brown's 19th century white contemporaries enjoyed minstrel shows labeled the "Congo Coconut Dance" (Emery 1988: 194). They also performed the "Congo Minuet" themselves (ibid). Choreographers in the mid-20th century, such as Katherine Dunham and Talley Beatty, named parts of their performances or their dancing techniques after the Congo, such as "Congo Tango Palace" and "Congo Paillette (ibid: 271). In Claude McKay's 1928 novel *Home to Harlem*, "Congo Rose" is a cabaret singer in the Harlem "Congo Club", which was said to be "a real throbbing little Africa in New York" (1928: 29). Clubs and musical groups named after the Congo actually existed, according to the African American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, such as the "Congo Rhythm Band" and the "Congo Inn" (e.g. 1931c). The relationship between the Congo, dance, and music continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as demonstrated by the release of albums by groups like *Los Hombres Calientes* (New Congo Square), jazz saxophonist Donald Harrison (*Spirits of Congo Square*), and Wynton Marsalis (*Congo Square*).

My point of access to the American intellectual archive is the relatively recent history of African American text production. The choice to discuss the real-and-imagined Congo via epistemologies other than the one I was socialized and indoctrinated into constitutes an attempt to pursue a "cross-epistemological" approach, as Obeyesekere terms it (2005: 225). To consciously step inside American and Black American discourses signifies a stepping outside of the "epistemological ethnocentrism" of mainstream Belgian discourse, or a stepping out of the belief that "scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes from us" (Mudimbe 1988: 15). "Them" in this book points to both African American intellectuals and Congolese. Being raised in The Democratic Republic of the Congo's former colonizer entailed being exposed to an ongoing racist discourse of anti-Black rejection in general and anti-Congolese rhetoric in particular. The reason for this was that the history of the Congo has been dominated by and taught through those personally involved in the "colonial adventure", such as journalists, civil servants, and family members of colonials. In the eyes of large parts of the Belgian public, books written by those closest to the colonial project tell the history of the Congo as it really was, and important advances and works by scholars and intellectuals such as N'Daywel, Stenger, Ceuppens, De Witte, and Hochschild are often neglected (Vanthemsche 2006: 98). Guy Vanthemsche's observations can only be seconded by adding that Belgian discourses have often been framed within an

apologetic “model colony discourse”, as I labeled it in an online article within the context of the fiftieth anniversary of Congolese independence (Van Hove 2010).<sup>7</sup>

An awareness of Belgian discourses on the Congo, however, does not automatically enable one to fully depart from them. The fascinations of and solutions offered by this work are neither accidental nor incidental. The particular forays into the Black American archive made by this thesis are a reminder that writing hardly constitutes a neutral space and that geo-political, socio-historical, and institutional locatedness deeply mark even the most detached historical analysis (cf. Dirks 2001: 230). This work does not end by mere coincidence with an analysis of Congo: *The Epic Story of a People* by the Belgian author David Van Reybrouck. Telling as my Belgian infatuations may be, their self-conscious and limited presence also prove that a cross-epistemological approach is the right one: It promises a more detached take on the intellectuals in question. This work profits from the fact I am an “outsider”, in the sense of living and working outside of Belgium and the U.S., and these circumstances have helped to at least partially overcome the difficulties involved in metareflecting on one’s own “archive” (see discussion below on the term “archive”).

To step into a tradition that lies outside the trajectory of hegemonic groups will contribute, as Charles Mills tell us in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, to a more adequate, more accurate, more complete, subtler, and more “veridical picture” (1998: 28) of the discursive dynamics surrounding the real-and-imagined Congo. Moreover, by looking at Black discourses, the likelihood is higher that “a counterpoint to the myths promoted by the powerful” may be established, as Poletta suggests (2006: 3). Poletta’s assumption has proved to be only partly true, however. Accurate as it may be in the case of some intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, over large stretches of their history, African Americans were deeply entangled in dominant discourses of and histories by white intellectuals. This led to a systematic “complicity and syncretic interdependency of black and white thinkers”, as Gilroy asserts (1993: 31). The title of this work therefore specifies the “United States” instead of “African American”, as the processes at work in Black Congo discourse are very much white America’s. It will be shown, however, that the “entanglement” of Black and white thought tells more about white power, Black vul-

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7 This story operates on the assumption of the innate backwards state of the Congo and focuses exclusively on the positive infrastructural and medical “progress” that the Belgians “brought”. The popular model-colony story blatantly downplays anti-Black violence and abuse as “paternalism” and blames the Congolese in overtly behaviorist and deterministic terms for the instability and catastrophic political leadership in the post-independence era (Van Hove 2010).

nerability, and the centrality of categories of differentiation in the U.S. than it does about the motives or complicity of Black elites (cf. Gaines 1996: xv).

Allowing the categories of Black and white to bleed into one another in this way is to discuss “Black” and “white” as social processes that overlap and interact constantly with one another, both nationally and internationally. Recognizing the relational, “doubly conscious”<sup>8</sup> aspect of African American discourse matters greatly in trying to make sense of Congo discourses. Whose discourse are we actually witnessing in a context in which white Americans dominate both materially and discursively over their Black counterparts? Whose thirst for primitiveness is expressed through Congo discourses? These questions are relevant, as the white, transnational influence on African American intellectuals is readily apparent throughout the history of Black American intellectuals. In the 1830s, for instance, the abolitionist movement, dominated by white activists, provided a challenging new stage for African American political performance for a wider audience. While granting political agency, the abolitionist movement also curbed, directed, and restricted Black American intellectuals in what they could say (Banks 1996: 22-23). This Janus-faced situation of white gatekeeping repeated itself frequently in Black American intellectual history. The literary careers of major authors of the “Harlem Renaissance”, such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, show how dependent these authors were on rich white benefactors for long stretches of their careers, particularly those thirsty for depictions of “primitive” Black culture (ibid: 50-53, 83, 86). Black intellectuals have often acknowledged the effect of white American and European discourses and traditions on their own writing on Africa, and the Congo in particular. Alexander Crummell’s 1862 *The Future of Africa: Addresses, Sermons, etc., etc.* draws from the travel accounts of white African explorers such as David Livingstone and Mungo Park; in *The Story of the Negro*, Booker T. Washington builds on German-American anthropologist Franz Boas to tell the tale of Africa’s history from a diasporic perspective; Du Bois’s *The Negro* cites Leopold critic Edmund Dean Morel, abolitionist Wendell Phillips, and Congo explorer Henry Morgan Stanley; finally, Langston Hughes’s 1940 autobiography and travelogue, *The Big Sea*, mentions Joseph Conrad as a significant literary influence.

Given this entangled history, why should one then privilege African American texts over white American ones? The reason is that African Americans have communicated openly how they have been structurally affected by and systematically responded to white American and European discourses. They have done so in ways

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8 The often-cited “double consciousness” of many African American intellectuals signifies being both American and part of an African diaspora, as W.E.B. Du Bois famously explained in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1999: 11).

that non-Black intellectuals have hardly ever achieved, or have hardly ever admitted. As such, the African American archive constitutes a more complete, a more self-reflective, and an overall richer access point than that of white intellectuals. These aspects make a systematic investigation of the much-ignored term “the Congo” easier.

The African American intellectuals I investigate are not only deeply entangled with their white counterparts; they are also deeply engaged with one another. It is in this personal and epistemic sense that they constitute a “community”, and by no means in the sense of a homogeneous, unitary group of Black intellectuals. If anything, this book shows the internal divisions within Black American communities along class, gender, and racial lines. Despite this obvious heterogeneity, however, Black Americans do also constitute a community understood more traditionally. Their writings and activities form a network; they exist as a tightly connected group of intellectuals who knew each other personally and professionally. This community created a “vernacular” culture that was marked by continuously appreciating, critiquing, and building upon the texts of one’s contemporaries (Gates/Jarrett 2007: xi). A case in point is William Henry Sheppard (cf. Second Chapter), whose travelogues and speeches on Central West Africa, materialized most famously in his 1917 book *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo*, exerted considerable influence on African American intellectual circles. For instance, Booker T. Washington’s 1904 article “Cruelty in the Congo Country” quoted Sheppard extensively (who was a former student of Washington’s Hampton Institute; cf. Second Chapter). Novelist Pauline Hopkins, in turn, drew heavily on William Henry and Lucy Sheppard’s story in her serialized 1902-1903 novel *Of One Blood* (Dworkin 2003: 174). Finally, *The Chicago Defender* reported numerous times on Sheppard’s speeches on Central West Africa (cf. Third Chapter).<sup>9</sup>

Building on Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual”, African American intellectuals cannot be reduced to a particular list of occupations. Certain professions were more likely to allow for intellectual work than others, of course, depending on the *de jure* and *de facto* freedom these jobs provided. The available resources, incentives, and opportunities these occupations promised played a role, too. In times

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9 In 1918, for instance, Sheppard was said to have been the principal speaker on the thirtieth anniversary of the Grace Presbyterian Church, as discussed in *The Chicago Defender*, where he was celebrated as “one of the first men to launch Presbyterianism amongst the cannibals” (1918a: 10). In 1923, Sheppard talked to the students of the all-Black Hampton Institute, *The Chicago Defender* reported, where he “vividly described some of his experiences with African wild animals and strange peoples, including the cannibalistic Zappa Zaps”, and where he showed a valuable collection of “African curios” (1923a).

of slavery, for instance, the abolitionist movement and Black churches provided a secure intellectual working environment for activists and ministers (Banks 1996: 13-14). The rise of individual intellectuals like Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, and Frederick Douglass can be explained in this way (*ibid.*: 24). After the Civil War, general and specialized newspapers and magazines began to provide the infrastructure for the systematic development of a viable Black intellectual group. Thus, the African American intellectual landscape not only grew bigger, but also more diverse, because of the increasing influx of educators, scholars, Civil Rights activists, journalists, and authors (Hall 2009: 33-47). Despite the ongoing attempt to integrate marginalized works into this thesis, it undeniably reflects some of the dominance of certain professions, social circles, as well as class and gender biases throughout much of African American intellectual history.

Moving back and forth between widely discussed and “marginalized” texts (in the sense of being ignored by the intellectual gatekeepers of the time), this work discusses a real-and-imagined Congo that has long been a part of the African American intellectual tradition, albeit an overlooked one. This neglect is not due to a lack of traces. On the contrary: Traces are plentiful. As soon as slaves from the Congo entered the “New World”, they left their marks on the United States, particularly in regions with high numbers of them, such as South Carolina and Louisiana (Gomez 1998: 136). In these states, a variety of Congo naming practices emerged. Slaves and servants, for instance, were often identified through names that pinpointed their assumed ethnic roots, which they then passed on to their children (Hodges 1999: 53-54). In Louisiana, this practice led to names as “Louis Congo” or “François dit Congo”, the latter designating a second generation, “three quarters white”, four-year-old slave up for sale (*qtd. in* Hodges 1999: 53).

Some traces can be detected in the Northeast, as well. Among the first to arrive in New Amsterdam in 1626 were Black men and boys with names such as “Simon Congo” or “Manuel Congo”, who appear in the historical record because they were granted land (Hodge 1999: 9) or were punished (*ibid.*: 17). On a slightly different, rather more symbolic note, Joseph Cinque, the prolific leader of the Amistad ship revolt in 1839, was dubbed the “Congolesse chief” in Black American publications such as the article titled “Schooner Amistad” in *The Colored American*, despite Cinque’s well-known Sierra Leonean origins (1837). The issue of Congolesse captains will return in a discussion of postmodern Congo novels in the final chapter of this work.

Traces of Congo naming practices continued even after the abolition of slavery, as early 20th century obituaries in *The Chicago Defender* show. In this newspaper, deceased African Americans were mentioned named “C.H. Congo”, “Charles Con-

go”, and “Mrs. wn. Congo, wife of Edward Congo” (1931a; 1931 b; 1920a: 1). Many articles in *The Chicago Defender* show that the Congo was also a name that African Americans would give to themselves or to places in their immediate environment. The boxer Clarence Moulden dubbed himself “Congo Kid” at the turn of the 20th century. Imported gorillas were, moreover, called “Mr. Congo” (1914a; 1925c). These naming practices have continued until today: About 90 Americans are still listed under the surname Congo in the American telephone and address directory White Pages.

Congo naming frequently expanded into the public and geographical arena, too, both nationally and internationally. Near Liberia’s capital of Monrovia, a city decidedly shaped by (African) American elites with a self-declared civilizing mission (Beyan 2005: 49-106; Cf. Second Chapter), lies a township called “Congo Town”, a place that early 20th century American cruise ships visited on numerous occasions, as *The Chicago Defender* mentioned (1931: 13). Additionally, in the U.S. national arena, forty-five locations, both geographical and cultural, include the Congo in their official name, according to the Geographic Names Information System, the official repository of U.S. geographic names data (GNIS hereafter; cf. United States Board of Geographic Names). West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina, Alabama, and Arizona all contain at least one locale called Congo; there is a Congo creek in Alabama, a Congo Lake Dam in Arizona, and a Congo Island in Louisiana, to name but a few entries. Educational, cultural, and political institutions have also taken on the name Congo. According to the GNIS, there is a Congo school in Missouri, a Congo church in North Carolina, and a Congo Incline Mine in Wyoming. Other institutions that carried the name Congo included the Congo National Emigration Company, headed by the Black Baptist preacher Reverend Benjamin Gaston, which sponsored forty-two people’s emigration to Liberia (Finkelman 2006a: 317). In contrast, no locale is named after other important African geographies such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Gambia, Angola or Niger, and only two villages are called Liberia (in North and South Carolina). Which begs the question that drives much of this book, as well as this Introduction: Why the Congo?

## **TOWARDS CONGOISM: THE CONGO AS AN IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY**

To begin to answer the last question requires looking first at the only African geography mentioned more frequently than the Congo in the African American intellectual text archive: “Egypt”. The latter has been a central real-and-imagined geogra-

phy in the United States, according to Scott Trafton's important work *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-century American Egyptomania*. In contrast to Egypt, however, hardly any scholarly discussion has revolved around the Congo. This neglect is conspicuous, especially because most of the (African) American intellectuals considered in *Egypt Land*, to name but one work, are intellectuals who do mention the Congo at some point in their texts. Linda Heywood has a point when she states that the "general interest of the history and cultural impact of Central Africa in the Atlantic Diaspora lag far behind" that of other parts of Africa, especially the Western part (2002: 8). Neglecting the real-and-imagined Congo distorts the overall geography of the Black American intellectual arena. This is because the use of the Congo very often entailed a decision: A decision in favor of the Congo was also a decision against another geography. Thus, it is hypothesized here that whenever the Congo was invoked, a meaningful choice was made. The Congo possessed a set of traits with a particular logic, which may be scrutinized, but also demand specification: Why the Congo, and not another geography?

The Congo term was already recognizable in times of slavery, which is this work's point of departure. The presence of Congo slaves and their descendants led to a vast array of dismissive stories. Narratives about rebellious "Congoes" or "Angolas" – which were ethnic labels employed interchangeably<sup>10</sup> by slave owners to identify their "chattel" from the coasts of contemporary's Angola, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, and The Republic of the Congo (Gomez 1998: 135; Hall 2005: 153) – are numerous in the American historical slave record (Gomez 1998: 137-141). This happened most famously in the 1739 "Stono Rebellion" in South Carolina, one of the largest and costliest slave uprisings in the history of the United States, said to have been started by twenty "Angolan"<sup>11</sup> soldiers (Kolchin 2003: 455-456). One consequence of this violent and rapidly suppressed revolt was that the slaveocracy of South Carolina became even more hesitant in purchasing Angolans and "Kongoes" (Gomez 1998: 136). According to the historical record, these had already been ranked low on the scale of preferred slaves (Kolchin 2003: 19, 67). Slave owners in South Carolina depicted Central West Africans as docile and weak, and agreed that they were best used as house servants (*ibid*: 19; Littlefield 2005: 13). Others framed them as quite the opposite: rebellious, prone to abscond-

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10 Slaves from Central West Africa in particular were called "Kongo" in colonies that were originally French or Spanish – in Louisiana, for instance. British colonies, such as South Carolina, called the same slaves "Angola" (Hall 2005: 153; Gomez 1998: 135, 160).

11 Who, however, were most likely from the Kingdom of the Congo, as Thornton argues in his essay "The African Dimension of the Stono Rebellion" (1991).

ing, and preferably used as “field negroes” for heavy gang labor (Hall 2005: 160; Gomez 1998: 137-141).

These evaluations of Congo slaves from the historical slave record, a deeply biased corpus, cannot be taken at face value, of course, although it frequently is (cf. my discussion of Herskovits and my hypothesis of the existence of an “academic Congoism” in the First and Second Chapters). Ultimately, the supposed disposition of those called Congo is hardly decisive for the overall argument of this book. What matters is that Americans constantly constructed discursive mechanisms that reproduced a group of slaves who possessed negative characteristics. Oscillating between too docile and too rebellious, “Congoes” were caught from slave times onward between a series of binaries which rendered them somehow suspect. If they were perceived as too docile, it meant they could not properly participate in the abolitionist struggle; “too rebellious”, in turn, made them undesirable to their masters. Here too, Black and white potentially merged in the formation of a mutual discourse. As the assumptions of slave owners circulated widely amongst slaves and freedmen alike, Gomez reminds us, Black Americans frequently internalized “bits and pieces” of what the slave owners said (Gomez 1998: 215). The result was that no one had a thought to spare for the Congo slave, as is shown in the First Chapter.

The polarizing logic in which the Congo (its people, customs, and geography) was caught returns systematically in the texts of African American intellectuals. The rich corpus of derogatory and stigmatizing Congo utterances contains work by intellectuals as the back-to-Africa advocate Henry McNeal Turner, who stated offhandedly in his 1893 African Letters that the “Congo negro” should stay out of Liberia, since they belong to “the lowest of the African races” (1893: 52). Turner was staunchly opposed to the “Congo negro” – designating, at that point in time, in contrast to the honorable Blacks who should emigrate to Liberia, those slaves that were either freed or “degenerated” (i.e. lower class), or both. “Persons coming here ought to have a little money to start with, and a good-deal of self-reliance, a decent amount of race pride, and considerable common sense”, Turner asserted, clearly demonstrating a preference for Blacks with money (the Black “bourgeois”, as is shown and discussed in subsequent chapters) over those who have little or none (the majority). Turner continues: “Those who are here from the Congo are ignored by the native heathen, much more by the regular Liberians. They sustain the same relation to the higher African tribes that they do to us in the United States” (1893: 52). The “normative conclusion” (Poletta 2006: 9) of this passage, namely that Congolese (whatever was meant by that at that point in time) are worth less than nothing, will return constantly in the course of this book.