

Narrating Violence Empathetically: a Narratological  
Investigation of the Slave Trade in David Van Reybrouck's  
*Congo: a History*

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

David Van Reybrouck's best-selling, multiple award-winning, and highly acclaimed *Congo: a History* has been described by both Van Reybrouck's critics and the Belgian author himself as an empathetic and bottom-up narrative written from a Congolese perspective. Starting from a contextual appreciation of both the author and his work, this essay attempts to get hold of the empathetic quality of the book through the lens of a narratological close reading of one violent event: the slave trade. Throughout the essay, Achim Landwehr's notions of *Vermenschlichung* (humanizing) and *Versinnlichung* (sensualizing) are used as the yard stick for measuring empathy. On a more concrete plane, the analysis is led by concepts such as the “story (space)”, “characterization”, and “symptomatic gaps”. Through these concepts, the lack of empathy of Van Reybrouck's account will be shown, as well as its biased distribution among the characters: slaves remain what they were – dehumanized goods. The essay concludes by reflecting shortly upon potential epistemological and Eurocentric reasons for Van Reybrouck's approach towards the slave trade.

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<sup>1</sup> The following writing sample is an essay completed for a textual analysis module in the 1<sup>st</sup> semester of the MA in Transcultural Studies.

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## 1. Introduction

Hardly any other Congo book written in the Benelux in the last decade has gotten as much media attention and has sold as many copies as *Congo: een geschiedenis* (*Congo: A History*). The facts of its commercial, critical and media triumph are downright impressive. More than 150,000 copies were sold within less than half a year (Geysels and Van Baelen), a remarkable amount for a monograph of 680 pages. Within weeks of its publication, the book received a number of major non-fiction prizes in the Benelux, including the highly prestigious *AKO Literatuurprijs* and *Libris Geschiedenisprijs* (Geysels and Van Baelen). The translation copyrights were sold within months to the major publishing house *HarperCollins* (Geysels and Van Baelen) and a large number of book reviewers, historians, and Congo specialist have written highly favorably about the work.<sup>2</sup> “I would describe [Congo: a History] almost as the ultimate book about the Congo, as a must read for all Belgians and foreigners who came into contact with colonialism”, wrote the famous photographer Carl De Keyzer in the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard*.

In this ongoing concert of critical acclaim, the supporters of *Congo: a History*, frequently emphasize the beauty of its language and composition (e.g. Hendrickx), systematically stress its progressive bottom-up perspective (e.g. Karel De Gucht, former Belgian minister of foreign affairs), and almost always highlight its “empathy” (e.g. Vidal). Coincidentally, the author himself often hints at these traits of “empathy and goodwill” (Recensieweb) in the numerous interviews on his book. “I try to avoid sentimentality”, Van Reybrouck stated in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, “but certainly not emotionality. What I write can be considered as an attempt for empathy: empathy for the hardly educated worker, the missionary, the tormented artist” (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”).

Taking this assertion of empathy as a starting point, the essay at hand attempts to analyze whether this emotion is narrated or not, and how it is distributed among its characters on the level of “story” and “discourse” in *Congo: A History*. As the just-used language register (story, discourse, narrated, characters) already suggests, this paper will have a “narratological”<sup>3</sup> take on the issue, particularly because narrative concepts and tools provide a tangible method of analysis to execute this task. In order to narrow down the field of investigation, this paper will focus on empathy within the context of violence, due to the latter's systematic depiction in the monograph as well as its ideological significance. Concretely, this essay will investigate the narratological fabric of one exemplary and significant violent event: the transatlantic slave trade. Before executing this analysis, the essay at hand will start with focusing on the central notions of violence and empathy, and by sketching contextual aspects of the book and its author. In the conclusion, the paper will shortly refer to possible explanations for the kind of empathy – and empathy distribution – displayed in the book.

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<sup>2</sup> Excluding the internationally acclaimed historian Ludo de Witte, who is the author of *The Assassination of Lumumba*. In his detailed critique on the lack of historical accuracy of Van Reybrouck's monograph on the Belgian progressive web portal *Apache*, De Witte criticizes Van Reybrouck of systematically neglecting Euro-American imperialism in the Congo.

<sup>3</sup> I follow Mieke Bal's definition of narratology, that is “the ensemble of theories of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events” which help to “analyze, and evaluate narratives” (3).

## 2. Situating the Author and His Work

Thirty-nine-year-old Belgian author David Van Reybrouck has come a long way professionally in the last decade. From his acclaimed work as an academic in the field of archeology in Belgian academia, via his debut as a novelist with *De Plag* (The Plague) in 2001 to his theater play *Missie* (Mission) about Belgian missionaries in Eastern Congo in 2007: Van Reybrouck has recently undergone remarkable transformations and achieved respective accomplishments as an intellectual, journalist, and historian. The monograph, *Congo: a History*, seems to be the synthesis of his skills to date. Merging the research qualities of an academic<sup>4</sup> and the language and writing skills of an acclaimed novelist – pervaded with metaphors and similes,<sup>5</sup> metonymies and literary structuring elements<sup>6</sup> – Van Reybrouck continuously mixes literary writing elements and detached scholarship in his work. As such, the monograph frequently wanders on the postmodern border of fact and imagination. Always attempting to break away from the “traditional narrative schemes” of historiography (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”), *Congo: a History* could be easily considered as an example of “creative non-fiction” (Munslow 104), which is overtly written for both aesthetic and explanatory reasons and which is consciously playing with its own fictive status. At the same time, however, Van Reybrouck does not shy away from fabricating more traditional “big stories” (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”) which counter postmodernism's tendency to stay “close to one self, to tell one's own little story, hoping that out of all these images and fragments some mosaic-like picture will emerge” (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”).

But there is more to be understood about Van Reybrouck in order to situate his book. Particularly crucial is the Belgian historiographical context in which the monograph is written and how the author seems to relate to that. In Belgium, the history of the Congo in general, and of the colonial period in particular, has always been predominantly written by journalists, civil servants, and family members of persons who were personally involved in the *colonial adventure*. Important historical advances by N'Daywel, Stenger, Vanthemsche, Ceuppens, and others went largely unnoticed: in the eyes of the Belgian public, the books of those close to colonialism told the history of the Congo as it really was (Vanthemsche 98). More often than not, these histories were framed within an apologetic “model colony discourse”, which, on the one hand, focuses heavily on the infrastructural and medical progress in the colony and, on the other hand, downplays its negative aspects (Van Hove, “Belgisch-Congo”). These apologetic

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<sup>4</sup> A twenty-page bibliography and an impressive footnote apparatus are overt witnesses thereof.

<sup>5</sup> The (negative) metaphors and similes of the introductory chapter are quite exemplary for the whole book and reminiscent of the immense corpus of tropes of “negation” (Spurr) to describe Africa in general and the Congo – as the “Heart of Darkness” (Conrad) – in particular. A best of: “From the air, Kinshasa looks like the queen of termites” (14); “[Congo's river embarking in the sea] looks like someone who has slit his wrists and who has put them under water – forever” (12); “[Manioc roots] remind me of the underground which shows its teeth, angry and afraid like a gorilla” (15); “[The river Congo] is not a straightforward river; it runs three quarters of a circle, against the clock, as if you turn back an analogous clock back forty-five minutes” (22).

<sup>6</sup> Exemplary is how the story of the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, 1959, the day of the massive civil unrest in Kinshasa, is structured: “It is the 4<sup>th</sup> of January in 1959 and it is hot in Brussels [...] It is the 4<sup>th</sup> of January in 1959 and it is hot in Leopoldville [...] It is the 4<sup>th</sup> of January in 1959 and a couple of kilometers further up the city, in Bandalungwa, Patrice Lumumba was asked to go to dinner in the house of a new friend [...]” (262-63).

discourses remained basically unchallenged until the eighties and nineties. In the latter periods, the publication of Adam Hochschild's critical bestseller *King Leopold's Ghost* and the similarly successful *Assassination of Lumumba* of Ludo de Witte made the crimes of Belgium's king Leopold II at the start of the century and those of the Belgian government in the the sixties finally known to a broader public.

Despite being closely related to the colonial project through his family history<sup>7</sup> and despite distancing himself ideologically from De Witte and Hochschild – who allegedly write in “an old school left wing engagement which brought a certain black-white thinking along” (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”) – the author seems to be reflective about the potential epistemological framework in which most Belgians are functioning by being socialized in a country which keeps remembering its colonial past via the crooked memories of former colonials. “In an attempt to at least challenge Eurocentrism, which will no doubt play its role”, asserts Van Reybrouck in the introduction of *Congo: a History*, “it seemed necessary to systematically look for the local perspective, or even better: a diversity of local perspectives” (13). Theoretically, the idea(l) of a both a bottom-up and anti-Eurocentric counter-perspective seems to be part and parcel of Van Reybrouck's project. It will be investigated to what extent this is the case in Van Reybrouck's representation of the slave trade.

### 3. Violence: Definition and Significance

“To have been colonized is, somehow, to have dwelt close to death“, Mbembe once stated (189). This remark finds its systematic reflection in the narrative choices of *Congo: a History*: the number of times in which institutional violence, personal violence, structural violence, black-on-black violence, and white-on-black violence are depicted, can hardly be counted. The monograph describes, for instance, the hundreds of thousands dead and wounded of Leopold II's Congo Free State, the horrors of forced labor in Belgian Congo, and the millions of victims of Mobutu and the Congo Wars at the turn of the century.

As such, *violence* constitutes a central aspect of Van Reybrouck's monograph, a concept which, even more so than others, defies *sui generis* categorization and therefore remains a “multifaceted, socially constructed, and highly ambivalent” notion (de Haan 29). Notably, judicial law and a range of scholars frequently define the concept in terms of intention, or, as Spierenburg writes, the “intentional encroachment upon a person's integrity” (13). Is the slave trade, the event under debate in this essay, violent according to this definition? One might start doubting that, as it is by no means clear to what extent slave traders were consciously being cruel to their cargo. Led by similar thoughts, Spierenburg's position is forcefully rejected by Hussein Bulhan and others. This is predominantly because the definition captures only a fraction of human violence – violence can be an unacknowledged, unintentional, and a silenced part of social relations and conditions, for instance (Bulhan 134) – and also because it focuses on the psychological processes of the perpetrator instead of on the consequences of the violence for the acted upon. As such, Bulhan favors a description which defines violence as “any relation, process, or condition” by which an individual or a group “violates the physical,

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<sup>7</sup> Van Reybrouck's father worked as an engineer in secessionist Katanga directly after the Congo's independence (Van Reybrouck, “Brullen”).

social, and/or psychological integrity of another person or group” which “inhibits human growth, negates inherent potential, limits productive living, and causes death“ (135). It is within the borders of this definition, rather than in Spierenburg's, that the slave trade can be discussed as an expression of violence.

Focusing on violence as a barometer for empathy is a particularly rewarding task, due to the fact that a number of scholars have rightly coined it as a significant “sign of crisis and collapse that requires the reconstitution and negotiation of new social relations and political forms of organization” (Gana and Härting 3; Chandra 2). How these highly relevant relations and happenings are narrated depends to a great extent on the “narrative violence” (Gana and Härting 2) performed on them by the historian and his/her ideological drive for coherency and form. As such, violent events truly tremble “on the edge of meaning and perception“, to quote Varadharajan at this point (138), and they will be more revealing than other happenings in terms of the imaginative and narrative choices, and empathetic preferences.

#### 4. Empathy: Definition and Narrative Expectations

Although David Van Reybrouck constantly refers to the notion of empathy, he has never explained his understanding of it, nor have his many interviewers ever asked him to do so. Given this knowledge gap and the rather esoteric trait of empathy, how may we describe this notion in such a way that it can be investigated? Definitions of empathy usually refer to the notion as the ability to “put oneself in another's shoes” and as a process of a “balanced curiosity” for the subjective experience of human beings by “imagining” how the other person might be feeling (all quotes by Hardee). What sets the emotion apart from its siblings *sympathy* and *pity* is that empathy can not be contemptuous (as pity is) and does not lead to trying to truly *feel* the pain of others (as sympathy does; Hardee). The ultimate goal of empathy is a better understanding of the person or group in question, as Hardee infers.

But how can authors in general perform and narrate empathy in the realm of historical events with respect to people they only know from written sources and who have potentially been dead for decades? For Darren Bryant, Penney Clark, and many other historians and educators, this is not just a matter of affectively identifying with the people of the past by “applying the understandings, beliefs, and experiences of their own worlds to interpret the experiences of historical agents and their worlds” (Bryant and Clark 1041). They oppose this kind of “emotive” empathy” and advocate the notion of “historical empathy” (Bryant and Clark 1042; Lee and Ashby 23), which is a deeply cognitive, creative, and inferential thinking through which the limited knowledge of the past is bridged by “evidence and imagination”, as Toni Boddington once stated (14).

Considering these thoughts as a starting point, producing an empathetic historical account constitutes a challenging task. The historian should be both knowledgeable about the available sources and creative in filling their gaps. The above-mentioned scholars, however, remain conspicuously silent on the subject of how to actually execute the task of producing (or evaluating) empathetic narratives. The discourse analyst Achim Landwehr and the novelist Toni Morisson are useful voices in this matter. The former hints at empathy regularly in his works, particularly by coining emotive mediation strategies in historical writings, such as *Vermenschlichung* (humanizing) and *Versinnlichung* (sensualizing; 114). These reveal themselves, according to Landwehr, via

a close examination of (sub-)themes, narratives, word choice, emphasis, and concrete descriptions in the history in question. Although “silences” also play a role in Landwehr's theorem, it is Toni Morrison who systematically hints at speechlessness and untranslatability as other narrative strategies of mediation, particularly within the historical domain of the slave trade (MacLeod 63). Finding words to bespeak “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (*Beloved* 62) constitutes “the full agenda and unequivocal goal of a novelist” (*Playing* 72), according to Morrison. Taking these strategies as a measuring stick and as a starting point for our examination, narratology can provide the tangible tools to examine the above-mentioned strategies in Van Reybrouck's history, via the concepts of “story (space)”, “time”, “characterization”, “discourse”, and by the focus on willful speechlessness and “symptomatic” gaps.

## 5. Empathy Case Study: The Transatlantic Slave Trade

### 5.1. *The Story Space*

The investigation of the empathetic quality and empathetic distribution in *Congo: a History* begins with sheer amazement about the insertion of the slave trade into the overall “story space”,<sup>8</sup> given that the time before colonization in general,<sup>9</sup> and the aspect of the slave trade in particular, have been neglected in the story spaces of many Belgian Congo histories. Starting from this amazement about the inclusion of this event – whose presence opens the potential to develop empathy in the first place – it must be investigated what “story” is being told about the slave trade. As such, this section examines the content blocks of the slave trade passage and their ordering.

A close reading of the slave trade excerpt shows that it contains at least three intertwined stories. The first one is the voyage of an imagined twelve-year-old boy who “has to take place in a canoe” (34) and who has to travel to the slave market in Kinshasa where his worth is determined (35). There, his story stops, and that of an anonymous “West African slave” (35) begins in the form of a longer quotation of a written recount of the slave's voyage which is introduced by the following phrases: “How the passage to the New World went, we do not know. But a rare witness of a West African slave who was shipped to Brazil in 1840 gives an idea” (35). Then, the story of the passage unfolds, in which the slave's quotation mentions how “we were thrown into the ship”, how they were being rubbed “pepper and vinegar” in their open wounds, how they “despaired”, both “because of the sufferings and exhaustion” and due to “the shortage of water”, and how they witnessed the “deaths of many slaves” (35).

After the longer quote, the story of the slave is abandoned and the focus shifts to a third set of story blocks which already started to unfold in the boy's story. It is the story of the traders, who are “coming from far and away” (35) to sell their goods on lively markets. Although trading and traders (in their regional and global roles) remain the

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<sup>8</sup> The story space is the part of the past with which authors are willing or able to engage (see Munslow 29).

<sup>9</sup> The monograph spans the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial period of Congo/Zaire, with a heavy emphasis on the Congo's history since the arrival of the Belgians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Van Reybrouck devotes a meager ten pages to precolonial Congo, his willingness to incorporate the precolonial time has been widely noted and celebrated by both journalists and academics as a major achievement (exemplary: Reynebeau).

central focus in their own story, the impact of the slave trade on Central Africa is hinted at too: “regions were uprooted, lives destroyed, horizons broadened”; 35). Consequences of the violent event, such as the threat of “anarchy” and “chaos” (36) due to the destruction of traditional authority, finish off the overall story space of the slave trade.

Overall, the story of the transatlantic slave trade is pervaded with “transgressions” (Messent 23) – ruptures, twists, and a constant shift of characters. It might be asked whether this kind of diffusion does not inevitably lead to a detached rather than empathetic storytelling which contributes to understanding the historical characters. Would the story not have been less impersonal, in the sense of *Vermenschlichung* and *Versinnlichung*, if it would have elaborated and expanded on the story of one of the actors – for instance the boy’s – by stretching historical imagination some more by means of merging his story with that of the anonymous slave?

### 5.2. Discourse: Time and Characterization

Similar to the story level of the transatlantic slave trade passage, there are numerous missed chances to incite empathy on the plane of “discourse” (Munslow 20-27) – meaning the aspects of time and characterization, amongst others, via which the story becomes more meaningful, colorful, and hierarchical. Time, for instance, is definitely out of joint in *Congo: a History*. Through ellipsis, the use of summaries, the condensing of 350 years of slave trading (Thomas) to two pages, and the single mentioning of the trade in the monograph despite its long-term impact on the Congolese “living time” (Bal 104), the work truly represents a model example of how discourse time is out of bounds with “reality time” (Munslow 56-57). There are only rare moments of slightly “stretched” descriptions (Munslow 57), which slow the rush of the story somewhat down. But they by no means come near to reflecting the length of the real “living time”. Particularly exemplary are passages within the context of the voyages of the kidnapped boy:

Then the voyage began, down the river. For months they rowed on the broad, brown river through the jungle, up until they reached the place where it was no longer possible to row any further. There, the huge and important market of Kinshasa came into being. [...] Not until then, our 12-year-old boy would see his first white. (35)

Along with time, “frequency”<sup>10</sup> also remains out of joint. In this light, the aspect of trade immediately attracts attention by virtue of being hinted at systematically – the “demand of slaves in the US” at the start of the passage (34), the focus on transportation and markets with their lists of traded goods (“fish, manioc, sugar, oil, wine, beer, tobacco, iron”; 36), and the emphasis of the uprooting experience of global trade on traditional hierarchies near the conclusion of the passage (“Fishermen became traders and fishing villages became market places [...] Global trade was booming, but deep in the interior of Africa it caused complete chaos”; 36). The heavy focus on the trade, instead of on the slaves, is exemplified by the use of the sole exclamation mark in the passage. In the description of the market in Kinshasha, it is the amazement at the fact

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<sup>10</sup> Which is the repetition of certain notions, conspicuous punctuations, story blocks with a particular language register (Landwehr 120; Munslow 57-60).

that “there was even salt!” that leads to punctuated amazement.

The lack of characterization of all major characters – most noticeably in the descriptions of the boy and the slave in the ship, however – is highly informative about the lack of engagement and empathy towards them. What do we know about the boy, really, who is more metonymy than a human of flesh and blood? We know his age and that he is probably a local from the interior,<sup>11</sup> in addition to the fact that he might have been “kidnapped in a raid or has been sold by his parents in times of need” (34). But as for the rest? In the same vein, there are no distinguishable traits about the anonymous slave in the ship: neither age, nor sex, nor personal details are hinted at. Also similar to the boy, who is referred to as a distanced “he” or who merges into the “they” of the slave party which canoes him to Kinshasa, the slave does not appear as a single person but as a group: “we were thrown nakedly in the ship”, “we were getting desperate of suffering and fatigue”, “a lot of slaves died” (35, my emphasis). In general, the most important characteristic of the slaves seem to be their numbers: “forty to seventy” (34) Congolese could be transported on the canoes of the traders, between “four and six thousands” slaves were shipped annually in the eighteenth century from the Loango coast (34), “estimated four million” (34) of former “fishers, farmers” (36) were shipped to the New World, and “one in four” (34) slaves were used on the tobacco plantations in the American South.<sup>12</sup> Although the traders and their businesses are not characterized in detail either, they are, however, referred to in designations which suggest singularity (e.g. “an important trader”; “a white man”; 34). If the traders appear in larger groups, they are either most probably Congolese “middlemen” (35) or they are somehow linked to human traits. The markets in Kinshasa, for instance, are discussed as lively trading places with “yells, bids, laughter, and fights” from the traders (35).

Although most characters suffer from a lack of characterization, it is hard to oversee the way they acted upon lack even more human traits than the traders and how they tend to be “thingified” (Césaire 33) or, to quote Memmi, “depersonalized” via the “mark of the plural” through which the colonized is “drown[ed] in an anonymous collectivity” (Memmi 687). As such, the discourse neither shows a particular curiosity towards the characters, nor a balanced, differentiated take on them. Instead, the slaves in *Congo: a History* seem to remain what they were: goods which are sealed into a “crushing objecthood” (Fanon 101). In the end, Van Reybrouck's slave trade passage boils down to a major omission of content, explanation, characterization, and the opportunity to develop empathy via a concrete coloration of the story. It also boils down to Van Reybrouck's disability of being silent about silences, because one first has to attempt to write about thoughts unspeakable, to paraphrase Toni Morrison, before one can be silent about them.

### 5.3. Symptomatic Gaps

The final step in the analysis of the passage about the slave trade is the examination of what is not told in the stories. These omissions reveal themselves by means of a “symptomatic reading” (Althusser and Balibar 32), a method which

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<sup>11</sup> This is suggested by his voyage through the jungle and the fact that he meets a white person for the first time in Kinshasa.

<sup>12</sup> This infatuation with numbers of dead and wounded in the context of Congo is also obvious in contemporary media discourses. See: Van Hove, “Kuifje” 20.

questions the narrative choices made on the level of story and discourse by uncovering the gaps and the ignored possibilities of the text in question. Within this framework, it remains quite striking that *Congo: a History* contains a passage on the slave trade altogether, as hinted at above. But this does not outweigh the immense gap that the passage itself represents in the story space of the monograph due to its elliptic, detached, and abstract qualities.

However admirable Van Reybrouck's effort may be to personalize the slave trade to fill alleged holes in the sources, the choices made within the context of the story of the twelve-year-old boy raise an awful lot of questions. Why is the boy a boy, and not a girl? Why does his story stop short of the boy's deportation to the New World? Why are there no story blocks hinting at violence against the boy, or indications of opposition on his part? Why does the language register never hint at him as a slave? Why do we not get information on him? Despite inserting descriptions which stretch certain moments within the fast-paced story (which might indicate an attempt to highlight the importance of the boy) the aforementioned questions indicate how much the story is lacking in the field of *Vermenschlichung* and *Versinnlichung* given its choice of flat characterization.

Similar comments must be made about the narrative choices for the anonymous slave, although one might add the component of a lack of cognitive knowledge about slave narratives as a source of narrative detachment and lack of historical empathy. "How the passage to the New World went, we do not know" (35), Van Reybrouck writes, for instance. This is not true, of course, as there is a (small) corpus of slave trade narratives which indicate how the voyage went (and felt): Olaudah Equiano's account immediately comes to mind, along with the stories of the slave traders via which the condition of the slaves can be deduced (Rice). As such, these personal slave narratives would have made a difference, because it does matter – empathetically – whether one hints at the fact that "a lot of slaves died" (35) compared to mentioning how children drowned in the disgusting latrines of the slave ships, as Equiano does (41).

The narrative choices made in the context of the traders and of the consequences of their jobs systematically ignore the immanent violence of the slave trade. As such, the connection between the slave trade and the emerging "chaos" – a trope well-known within the context of Congo discourses (Dunn) – remains unclear. At the same time, as vague and mechanical the story of the trade(rs) may be, their slightly more rounded characterization, do open the small possibility to put oneself in their shoes.

## 6. Conclusion and Open Questions

Starting from a critical context of the author and his claims for an empathetic history from below, this essay tackled the notion of empathy through the lens of a number of narratological concepts, such as "story space", "time", "characterization", and "symptomatic gaps". Led by the question of how empathy is constructed within the context of the passage on the slave trade, and led by the conviction that violent events are a meaningful barometer for measuring empathy, this essay hinted at the overall lack of the latter emotion throughout the section under scrutiny. On top of that, the paper at hand suggested that there is an unequal distribution of what little empathy there is towards the slave traders.

Time and space did not allow for an investigation of how systematic this pattern of ambivalence is, although the depiction of other events suggest a similarly biased

distribution of empathy among the characters. Within the framework of Belgian (neo-)colonialism, the one-sided depiction of Lumumba as a frantic narcissist (286-327) comes to mind, as opposed to the differentiated look at Leopold II (71-114). The detailed description of Maximilien Balot's lynching also serves as indicative for a structural and unbalanced distribution of empathy, particularly if the brutal murder of this young colonial administrator is opposed to how Van Reybrouck rushes through the 400 Congolese deaths caused by the Belgian reaction to that event (177-178).

Although the potential reasons for this bias could not be discussed in depth either, a number of aspects touched upon during the analysis clearly suggest a certain direction. One particularly telling aspect was Van Reybrouck's oversight of Equiano, as it could point to Van Reybrouck's latent tendency to grant hegemony to a particular sort of epistemology which, for instance, privileges passive slaves over active ones. The oversight of Equiano's major slave narrative – whose task, according to Keita, was to challenge the historical construction of conventional epistemologies of blackness centered on the negation or victimization of Africa and peoples of African descent (8) – might also hint at a lack of engagement with, and knowledge of, black history and black epistemology.

But even more so, Van Reybrouck's blind spots and biased empathy seem indicative for a discourse that “takes for granted and 'normalizes' the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism”: Eurocentrism, that is (Stam and Shohat, “Interview”). According to the latter scholars, Eurocentrism contains a recognizable set of standards, amongst others “the refusal of empathy” for “people caught up in the struggle for survival within the existing order” (Stam and Shohat, *Unthinking* 23). This seems to be happening in Van Reybrouck's slave passage and his book as a whole. Pervaded with refusals for empathy and with an immanent acceptance of the hierarchies of the transatlantic slave trade, the slaves remain what they were in the trade: dehumanized goods whose subjectivity is concealed, as Hortense Spillers once accurately stated, “under the mighty debris of the itemized account” (461). Van Reybrouck himself would certainly not deny the Eurocentric tendency within his writing. But maybe he fails to recognize how this runs completely counter to his original drive for a differentiated, empathetic history of the Congo.

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